

*Three states and one reality –  
a reflective psychology from the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad*

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**Waking to an outside world**

In the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad (stanza 2), our experience is described as ‘catuṣ-pāt’. Literally, this Sanskrit phrase means ‘fallen out in four’. And we may interpret it as telling us about four stages in our knowledge of experience.

The first three stages correspond to the three states of waking, dream and sleep. The first stage is described in stanza 3.

jāgarita-sthāno bahiṣh-prajnyah sapt’-āṅga ekonavimshati-mukhah sthūla-  
bhug vaishvānarah prathamah pādah

The outward-knowing waking state  
has seven limbs and nineteen mouths:  
experiencing gross things.

That is the first stage:  
of universality.

This stanza tells us of a waking state that is described as outward-knowing (bahiṣh-prajnya), gross (sthūla) and universal (vaishvānara).

In this state of waking, we look out through our bodies, at an external universe which is made up of many things. This is our state of bodily awakening. Here, attention goes out through our bodies and their external senses, to see a world of things outside.

But there is something missing here. Our bodies never wake up fully, to a full awareness of what they see. In their waking state, we live in a large universe; but our perceptions of it are partial and inadequate. Through our senses, we only see a small few of the many things that the universe contains. Even when we look at one particular object, our senses do not see it properly. They only see an outward appearance, from one of many different points of view.

The problem here is that our bodily perceptions are both narrow and gross. They tell us only a small part of the story. And even that small part they tell very roughly and crudely. What they show leaves many things unclear; and it misses out on many important details.

So, in what we call the ‘waking state’, our bodies are not properly awake. They are awake only to small and superficial appearances. That leaves us with many gaps, and many frustrations, in our experience of the waking world. It is to fill these gaps, and to resolve these frustrations, that we make use of our minds. Through thoughts and

feelings in our minds, we interpret bodily perceptions, thus conceiving rather more than our bodies have perceived.

To fill the gaps between our limited perceptions, our minds conceive their pictures of a world, in which our partially seen objects are located. This is a world of space and time and causality, relating different objects and events.

### **Dreaming in the mind**

But how does mind fill in the gaps between our outward sense-perceptions? It does so by turning back from outside things, into a state of inner dream. This is a second stage of our experience, which the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad goes on to describe in stanza 4.

svapna-sthāno 'ntah-prajnyah sapt'-āṅga ekonavimshati-mukhah pravivikta-  
bhuk taijasa dvitīyah pādah

The inward-knowing state of dream  
has seven limbs and nineteen mouths:  
experiencing subtlety.

That is the second stage:  
of burning energy.

In this stanza, the state of dreaming is described as inward-knowing (antah-prajnya), subtle (pravivikta) and burning (taijasa). This state is one of mental picturing. In it, our perceptions are reflected inwards. They are then turned back, into their own picturing. Attention then does not go out through the body's five senses, to a world of objects outside. Instead, perceptions are imagined, thought and felt within a person's mind.

The dream state occurs most obviously at night: when the body is asleep, and its senses have been physically shut down. But we also dream while our bodies are awake. When we indulge in wishful fantasies, or when we are entertained by imagined fictions, those are kinds of dream. And further, we enter into a kind of dream state whenever we use our imaginations: as we describe and interpret what has been perceived in the past, or as we look into the future and make plans for it. All of these are states of dream: in the sense that we are then imagining and thinking and feeling in our minds, instead of looking out through our physical senses at objects outside.

In this way, the dream state may be associated with our mental faculties – of imagination, thought and feeling. We use these mental faculties to compare and to coordinate our physical perceptions. By putting different perceptions together, we make finer distinctions and build fuller pictures of the world.

Thus, where the gross perceptions of our senses fail, we fill the gaps with subtler faculties of conception in our minds. These mental faculties have a pervasive influence. As they fill in the gaps between perceptions, we make assumptions and build conceptual pictures of the world. This affects our understanding and our attitudes; and so it has a subtle and pervading effect upon the way we see things and interpret them.

In the process of experience, our pictures of the world keep getting built, destroyed and built again. This gives us different and changing ways of looking at things and thinking about them. As we learn from experience, old conceptions get burned up. In that burning, new experiences become illuminated and new conceptions are formed. That's why the dream state and its mental transformations are called 'taijasa' or 'burning'.

In fact, as we experience the world, it is always known through a series of mental states, which keep replacing one another in our minds. In this process of experience, each moment is a passing state, showing some particular appearance in the mind. And each appearance comes and goes. As it comes, it replaces past appearances, which have preceded it. As it goes, it will be replaced by more appearances, which will follow later on.

That passing stream of changing states is the experience of our minds. When we conceive a world outside, it is made up of space and time, in which its objects are located. But, when we look back, into our minds, we find no differentiated space: where different things can co-exist, at any given time. Instead, within the mind, there's only passing time, to differentiate the momentary experiences that come and go.

And yet, as our perceptions, thoughts and feelings keep producing momentary experiences, we somehow learn from them. As they pass by, at the surface of appearance, they are somehow taken into knowledge, which continues underneath. Thus, there must be a depth of mind, where knowledge carries on, assimilating what we learn.

### **Dissolving in deep sleep**

But then, what is the depth of mind, where what we learn is taken in? In the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad, that depth is described as a third stage of our experience, associated with deep sleep. Hence stanza 5 goes on to say:

yatra supto na kan cana kāman kāmayate na kan cana svapnam pashyati tat  
suṣhuptam, suṣhupta-sthāna ekī-bhūtah prajnyāna-ghana ev' ānanda-mayo hy  
ānanda-bhuk ceto-mukhah prājnyas tṛitīyah pādah

Where one who sleeps does not perceive  
the slightest dream, nor feels desire  
of any kind, that is deep sleep.

This deep sleep state has come to oneness:  
filled with consciousness alone.  
It's made of happiness itself,  
experiencing that happiness.

Its gateway is the mouth of mind.

That is the third stage:  
of knowing in itself.

Here, in this stanza, deep sleep is identified at that state of experience where no desires are felt, no objects are conceived, no mental or physical appearances are seen. Viewed through our minds and bodies, the depth of sleep seems blank and dark and empty.

But the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad carries on from this negative appearance to something more fundamental. The negative description is followed immediately by a positive affirmation of our deep sleep experience: as having come to unity (ekī-bhūta), as filled with consciousness (prajnyāna-ghana), as made of happiness (ānanda-maya), and as knowing in itself (prājnya). Here, deep sleep is seen from its own point of view, as a positive experience in its own right.

In the waking and dream states, body and mind see differing and changing things. But in deep sleep, body and mind have disappeared. There are no different objects, no conflicting activities. In order to experience anything, body and mind need difference and action. So, from a physical or mental point of view, there is nothing in deep sleep. It seems to be a blank, without experience.

And yet, in actual fact, we do experience deep sleep. It is just that state where our experience is neither physical nor mental. We experience it where all differences and conflicts are dissolved in peace. In its own experience, it is just peace: with no difference or conflict to disturb its unity.

In the peace of sleep, there are no appearances that partly cover knowledge, leaving gaps of ignorance. There is just pure experience: in which no cover up, nor any gaps are known. In that pure consciousness, no desires are frustrated, no dissatisfactions are found. Its essence is unclouded happiness: which all beings seek, through their actions in the world.

From that point of view, deep sleep is described as showing us a depth of experience, where all differences and conflicts of appearance are dissolved into a quiet unity and harmony of underlying consciousness.

### **Guidance from within**

But how does dissolution at the depth of mind enable us to learn? As the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad describes it, that dissolution takes us back into our inmost source, from where all knowing and all guidance come. Thus, stanza 6 goes on to say:

eṣha sarv'-eshvara eṣha sarva-jnya eṣho 'ntar-yāmy eṣha yonih sarvasya  
prabhav'-āpyayau hi bhūtānām

This is the Lord of all.  
This is the knower, of everything.

It is what guides and  
keeps control, from within.

It is the source of all:  
at once the basic origin  
and the dissolution  
of created things.

This stanza tells us how our deep sleep consciousness affects our living in the world.

In waking life and dreams, as we interpret what we see, our perceptions get absorbed into understanding, at the background of experience. There, at the depth of understanding, consciousness continues quietly: undistracted by the changing appearances that come and go at the surface of attention. At that underlying ground, consciousness is independent of body and mind, beneath the limitations of their physical and mental acts.

That is the same consciousness which deep sleep shows. It is the knowing ground from which all mental and physical experiences arise. As they appear, they all express it and depend on it. As they disappear, they are absorbed back into it.

That inner ground is called the Lord of all (sarv'-eshvara), the knower of all (sarva-jnya), the inner controller (antar-yāmi), the source of all (yonih sarvasya), the origin and dissolution of created things (prabhav'-āpyayau hi bhūtānām).

In the course of our lives, we learn through a repeated cycle of expression and reflection. As we engage in any act, a current state of understanding is expressed, from the ground of consciousness within each one of us. Then, as this expression is experienced, there is a reflection back. We perceive what happens and interpret it, thus absorbing the experience back into the ground of consciousness. A new state of understanding results, now having learned from what has taken place. As we act further in the world, the new understanding is expressed. So the cycle keeps repeating: reflecting back and forth between the changing world of action and the changeless ground of consciousness which is expressed. That is always how we learn, by expressing consciousness and reflecting back to it.

In everyone's experience, all appearances thus rise from underlying consciousness. It is their source, which they express and where they are absorbed again, assimilated back into experience. It is their start, where they begin; and it's their end as well, where they return to dissolution.

All happenings and actions are thus guided from within, as they arise, expressing consciousness. From it, they get their living meaning and their inspiring energy. Inspired by that energy, our living faculties spontaneously express what has been learned from past experience.

It's thus that learning is applied: through taking it back into underlying consciousness, beneath all pictures in our minds. Once learning is assimilated there, beneath the mind, its application is unforced and natural. The application then comes naturally, guiding actions quite spontaneously from inner understanding, in response to whatever situations may arise.

### **Awakening to reality**

But then, what is that depth of underlying consciousness, to which all learning must reflect? It cannot be a passing state: of waking world or dreaming mind or dissolution into sleep. It is a changeless ground, beneath all differences, continuing unchanged through all the changing states that come and go. That ground is a fourth and final stage of our experience. That is the conclusion reached in the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad, as described in stanza 7.

n' āntah-prajnyam na bahiṣh-prajnyam n' obhayatah-prajnyam na prajnyāna-ghanam na prajnyam n' āprajnyam, adṛiṣṭam avyavahāryam agrāhyam alakṣhaṇam acintyam avyapadeshyam ek'-ātma-pratyaya-sāram prapanc' opashamam shāntam shivam advaitam caturtham manyante sa ātmā sa vijnyeyah

Not knowing inward, nor outside,  
nor knowing both; it is not something  
filled with consciousness; not something  
that may know or may not know.

Unseen by any faculties,  
it cannot be transacted, grasped,  
nor pointed out, conceived by thought.  
It cannot be determined thus.

It is the one self-evident  
reality, where all the world's  
appearances are laid to rest.

It is just peace and happiness,  
where no duality is found.

That is conceived as the 'fourth'.

It is the real self.  
Just that needs to be known.

In effect, this stanza tells us that no passing state can amount to a true awakening. Not the waking state, which gives way to dreaming. Nor the dream state, which dissolves in depth of sleep. Nor even the deep sleep state, which reveals a depth of mind whose latent potency gives rise to waking and dream experiences.

To be truly awake, all states must be taken into account. That is only possible from a changeless reality, which stays present in all states. That reality is called 'turīya' or the 'fourth'. It's called the 'fourth' because it is beyond the three states of waking, dream and sleep. As they pass by and change, it stays the same, as their unchanging ground. To take attention down to it, it is described in two ways: negative and positive.

Negatively, it is contrasted with the three states. It is not the outward knowing of the waking state; nor the inward knowing of the dream state. Nor is it even the background knowing of deep sleep, whose quiet witnessing knows both our outward and our inward experiences.

Outside and inside do not apply to it. Nor does any distinction of knowledge and ignorance. It is not knowing as opposed to ignorant. It is not seen or transacted as an object that can be grasped or pointed out or thought or determined in the physical and mental world.

More positively, it is described as the one self-evident principle (ek'-ātma-pratyaya-sāra). In other words, it is the self-illuminating principle of consciousness that is shared in common by all experience. In that consciousness, knowing is not an act which may or may not be done. Instead, consciousness illuminates itself by its essential nature: just by being what it always is. That is not a state of knowing which may alternate with ignorance. There, knowing is not a passing state; but the ground reality of consciousness, which does not change.

Where that reality is reached, all appearances turn out to be its expressions. Throughout the world, all things perceived just manifest that one reality. It's what they truly show, each one of them. It's that in which all of the world's appearances get laid to rest (prapanc'-opashama), dissolved into its changeless unity.

When conflicts end, we come to it as peace (shānta). When desire is satisfied, we come to it as happiness (shiva): where we are no longer at odds with the experience that we know.

In it, subject and object are the same. The 'consciousness' that knows and the 'reality' that's known are found identical. They are two words for one same thing. That is its non-duality (advaita).

It is each person's real self (ātman), where each of us lives truly. It's only there that anyone is properly awake. That, we are told, is what we need to know.

### Levels of expression

In sum, the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad tells us of a four-stage journey: from waking world, through dreaming mind and depth of sleep, into a non-dual consciousness that is the sole reality of everything that's known.

This is a journey inward: from different-seeming things outside, to an inmost centre where no differences remain. And it is also a journey downward: from changing appearances seen superficially, to an unchanging ground from which all contrasts and comparisons are known.

But then, what is the purpose of this journey? Why seek to know that inmost ground? How does knowing it apply to persons living in the world? The answer is that the world and all persons in it are expressions of that ground. The expression rises up spontaneously, through the same stages that we pass through on the journey down.

So above the ground of non-dual consciousness, its expression rises through the silent assimilation of experience in deep sleep, then through the subtle process of conception in our dreaming minds, and thus into the gross perceptions of our waking bodies. Accordingly, there are three levels of expression, overlaid upon an inmost ground of consciousness supporting them. This is illustrated in the accompanying table.

- Uppermost, there is a world of differentiated objects, seen through our bodies in external space. That world is our experience in the waking state.
- However, the world of objects out in space is seen through passing time. Thus it appears through a process of manifestation, in which a succession of appearances keep passing by, perceived and thought and felt in our conceiving minds. That manifesting process is what we experience in the dream state.
- In its turn, the passing of time requires an underlying continuity, of prior cause producing subsequent effects. That causal continuity is shown to us by our experience of deep sleep. It is a state of quiet assimilation, experienced through a silent, background witnessing. Here, manifest experiences are taken into an unmanifest potential that gets manifested later on.

<i>Passing state</i>	<i>Perceiving instrument</i>	<i>Perceived appearance</i>	<i>Locating order</i>
Waking	Gross body	World of objects	Space
Dream	Subtle mind	Process of manifestation	Time
Deep sleep	Silent witnessing	Unmanifest potential	Causality

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Non-dual consciousness

- And finally, all continuity through changing states implies the support of an unchanging ground, beneath all differences. That ground is a non-dual consciousness, whose knowing is its own identity with the reality that's known.

That non-dual consciousness is fully present in each one of its expressions. So they are each inspired by it from within. They always rise from it spontaneously, always of their own accord, never driven from outside.

Returning back to it, from its expressions, one comes to clarity of direct knowing in itself. That direct knowing is unmixed and unconfused, beneath the confusing interventions of our partial minds and bodies. The purpose of returning there is purely educational. It's just to know the source from which expression comes.

That knowledge then applies itself. In course of time, it gets applied spontaneously, through a process of expression that's inspired from within. From the source of inspiration, all expression is unforced and natural. It arises of its own accord, into appearances of mind and body in the world.

This is why the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad shows a journey to the source, and says that's all we need to know. For, reaching there, all techniques of application are superfluous. Where knowledge of the source is sought, it's not for application through technology.

Nor can technology achieve the source; for it is not a physical or mental object in the world. In order to return to source, ideas aren't technically used, to show or to achieve some object that is technically defined. Instead, all thoughts of world and mind are used to leave such thoughts behind. The mind is used to turn back in, to where it disappears entirely. Psychology is here applied reflectively, in order to dissolve all mental picturing into a ground where no such mind or picturing remains.

Such use of mind is not directed towards any physical or mental gain. It's just to know; not for some object wished by mind, but only for the sake of knowing truly. There all technology and artifice are at an end. From there, all application is completely natural.