

Dreaming, sleep and awakening

(Mandukya Upanishad -- stanzas 3-7)

[Why do we dream and sleep?](#)

[What is the use of dreaming?](#)

[What is reached, as world and dreams dissolve in sleep?](#)

[How does deep sleep affect our living in the world?](#)

[Where is one truly awake?](#)

Why do we dream and sleep?

According to the Mandukya Upanishad, we need to dream and sleep because our bodies are never fully awake.

When our bodies wake from sleep, they see a world outside. This is their waking state. It is described (in stanza 3) as outward-knowing (bahish-prajnya), gross (sthula) and universal (vaishvanara).

In this waking state, our perceptions are partial and inadequate. We live in a large universe; but our senses see only 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 world outside is seen by looking through our bodies. But their senses 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: leaving many things unclear, and missing 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 need to dream and sleep.

What is the use of dreaming?

In the Mandukya Upanishad (stanza 4), the dream state is described as inward-knowing (antah-prajnya), subtle (pravivikta) and burning (taijasa). In this state, perception is turned back in. Attention 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 our minds in wishful fantasies, that is a kind 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. That 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: thus giving us different and changing pictures of the world. 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 changing conceptions are called 'tajasa' or 'burning'.

What is this changing process for? Where does it lead? In answer to these questions, the Mandukya Upanishad goes on to describe deep sleep.

What is reached, as world and dreams dissolve in sleep?

In the experience of deep sleep, 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 Mandukya Upanishad doesn't see it like that. Instead (in stanza 5), it describes the deep sleep state as having come to unity (eki-bhuta), as filled with consciousness (prajnyana-ghana), as made of happiness (ananda-maya), and as knowing in itself

(prajnya). 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.

For that happiness, all acts are done.

How does deep sleep affect 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.

In the Mandukya Upanishad (stanza 6), that inner ground is called the Lord of all (sarv'-eshvara), the knower of all (sarva-jnya), the inner controller (antar-yami), the source of all (yonih sarvasya), the origin and dissolution of created things (prabhav'-apyayau hi bhutanam).

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 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.

This expression and reflection takes place at every moment of experience. Each moment is a passing experience, which is replaced by the next. At each moment, some perception, thought or feeling passes by. As it appears, it expresses consciousness and is immediately absorbed back into consciousness again. Then, just after that absorption, consciousness is all alone: with no appearance overlaid on top of it. This happens momentarily, before the next experience occurs. But while it happens, there is a state with no appearances in it, just the same as in deep sleep.

Thus, in between each moment and the next, there occurs a state without appearances. From a waking or dreaming point of view, this state is momentary. But in the state itself, no time appears. From its own point of view, there is no time. In its own right, that state is identical with deep sleep.

Seen in this way, the deep sleep state is quite essential to our waking and dreaming lives. To make up for our physical and mental limitations, we keep returning every moment to deep sleep. It's there that we refresh our actions with new energy, with living meaning and with undistracting light.

Where is one truly awake?

According to the Mandukya Upanishad, 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, 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 'turiya' or the 'fourth'. It's called the 'fourth' because it is beyond the three states of waking, dream and sleep. The Mandukya Upanishad (stanza 7) describes it 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'-atma-pratyaya-sara). 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 (shanta). 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 (atman), 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.

Ananda Wood
anandawood@yahoo.co.in