

## Consciousness: Scientific and Philosophical Perspectives

Consciousness has remained an enigma even after close scientific and philosophical scrutiny. Lack of consensus about the nature, definition and taxonomy of consciousness and need of convincing evidences about the adequacy of the reductionist methodology have directed scholars from different disciplines to study this multidimensional phenomenon from perspectives of their own. This dimension focusing on ontological, epistemological, semantic and methodological debates on consciousness from scientific and philosophical perspectives. The volume comprises of articles highlighting consciousness relation with Exploring Scientific Perspectives, Representations in Indian Philosophical Systems, Intentionality and Reflexivity - East and West, Phenomenological Perspectives - East and West etc. in English, Sanskrit and Hindi media. Rich content and information of the volume will particularly be useful to students and researchers in science and philosophy of world and consciousness studies.



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# CONSCIOUSNESS: SCIENTIFIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES



**Consciousness:  
Scientific and Philosophical Perspectives**  
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**Printing:**  
Appoos Offset, Perumbavoor

**Cover:**  
Jishnu Suresh

**First Edition**  
© 2017

**ISBN : 978-81-935487-0-7**

**Price: ₹ 300**

## FOREWORD

I have been watching with enthusiasm the efforts done by my colleagues in the Department of Vedanta, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, to take their department to the forefront of activities in the University. As the University has been established in the name of the greatest philosopher of India who stands out unique among the philosophers of the world with his universal philosophy of Advaita, the foremost branch of Vedanta, they have the right and responsibility to make his ideas intelligible to the modern society. The seminars conducted by the Department are mostly directed to fulfill this expectation. The present book, *CONSCIOUSNESS : SCIENTIFIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES*, is the compilation of research papers presented at such a seminar.

Philosophers and scientists have been engaged for a long period to find out the fundamental reality of the world. The origin of the Universe is still an enigma, though there are different theories put forth by scientists. The nature of the Universe is ever changing with gradual evolution. We observe two kinds of entities in the world - the living and the non-living. The Upaniṣads declared in the prehistoric past that there is only one Reality, which was called Brahman by the Ṛṣis. The schools of Vedānta have retained the name, but interpreted its nature in different ways to suit to their views. The traditional view properly examined points towards the oneness of the living principle in animals including human beings and the plants, but keeping out the non-living separately. The living principle is Life which is characterized by Consciousness. The Upaniṣads and the philosophers following them declare that Brahman is *Sat* (Real), *Cit* (Conscious) and *Ānanda* (bliss). Taking consciousness as the characteristic of Life, it is strongly argued that it is the only reality which transcends all the transient things. This consciousness was considered by some to pervade only the human

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## CONSCIOUSNESS AS EXPOUNDED IN VARIOUS UPANIṢADS

Dr. B. Chandrika

The main characteristic employed in the Upaniṣads is that it is dominated by the methodological ad-hocism by not having a coherent and distinctive structure. Another nature is that the facts are illustrated in a suggestive manner; a reader should have to find out the actual sense using his own interpretive skill. The facts cannot be tested or attested by any independent witness. The facts based on empirical data are combined with the ethical values and never viewed separately. Another quality is that all those ideas expressed in the Upaniṣads rely on individual intuition and imagination. Thus all those passages of the Upaniṣads carry this quality. This characteristic of Upaniṣads has its own limitations and advantages. The advantage is that these have made the interpreters for the evolution of numerous theistic and atheistic philosophies. The ethical statements incorporated in these passages made these work transcend time and space. Hence even today these passages enlighten the masses and the philosophy like Advaita got the status of ever relevance.

Consciousness being the very essential nature of the Self, almost all the famous Upaniṣads dealt with this idea. In this paper I would like to deal with certain Upaniṣads, the very nature of this consciousness is being explained, in different ways. Here the Upaniṣads which I have selected for this purpose are Aitareyopaniṣad, Maṇḍūkyaopaniṣad, Chāndogyaopaniṣad and Taittirīyopaniṣad. There is a specific reason for me to choose these Upaniṣads. Aitareyopaniṣad is the Upaniṣad which explains the very nature of the self as 'प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म' ie Consciousness - as the very essential nature of the Self. In Maṇḍūkyaopaniṣad the Brahman is explained as having four Pādas and also the explanation of the Vācaka of Brahman as Omkāra is seen deliberated. In Chāndogyaopaniṣad the detailed

description of the very same Brahman and its passage from the mundane to the celestial is very experimentally portrayed. In the Taittirīyopaniṣad we would feel as if astonished to hear that the soul is advised to be contemplated as the food and the nature of the self is being explained by the gross to subtle method. On seeing such peculiarities I have chosen these four Upaniṣads for writing my paper for extolling the very nature of the Supreme as Consciousness.

### Aitareyopaniṣad

This Upaniṣad forms the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> chapters of the Aitareya Brahmana. This Upaniṣad contains four Chapters. Totally there are twenty five passages. The key teaching of the Upaniṣad is the essential nature (*Svarūpalakṣana*) of the self ie Knowledge or *Prajñāna* or Consciousness. As all of us are aware of the fact that almost all the Upaniṣads deal with the origin of the Universe, the Aitarēyopaniṣad also deals with the origin of the Universe. It begins as 'आत्मा वा इदमग्र आसीत्' In the beginning before creation this was nothing but absolute self alone. It thought let me create the protector of the worlds and gathered up a huge form from the water gave a shape to that. After molding this form he made it fall into the ocean of birth and death. He subjected it to hunger and thirst and it said to him to provide it with food. It said to him to provide it with somebody to stay where it can eat food. Actually all our bodies are nothing but for the *Prajāpati* - to eat food. The very word *Ātman* is derived from the root 'अद् भक्षणणे' Then on hearing the words *Prajāpati* created man for them to enter into which as an abode and eat food. Then the fire entered into the mouth taking the form of organ of speech into the eyes as the sense of sight, the directions entered into the ears to becoming sense of hearing, the herbs and trees entered into the skin in the form of hair ie., the sense of touch. The moon entered into the heart in the shape of mind. Death entered into the naval in the form of *Apāna*. The very illustration shows that all the five elements entered into the body of human beings for consuming their respective foods. After that the creator created food for them. On seeing the human body the food began to run off. No part of the

the devourer of food. The vital energy which is well known as dependent on food and for the sustenance for this vital energy we consume food. After explaining the three births of the *Ātman*, the Upaniṣad ends by saying that the self of each person is deputed by father for the performance of virtuous deeds. Thus the other self having got his duties fulfilled and having advanced in age departs. As soon as he departs he takes birth again and that is his third birth.

The third part of the Upaniṣad begins thus- on which that we worship as the self? Which of these two, the third one should worship as the Self? The Upaniṣad says it is the heart [intellect] and the mind that were stated earlier. It is senescence, ruler ships, secular knowledge, presence of mind etc. All these are the names of consciousness. This is the self. Here the very nature of the self is explained. This is the gist of the Upaniṣad. (*Koyamātmēti vayamupāsmāhe katarah sa ātma, yena va paśyati, yena va śṛṇoti yadetadhrdayam sarvānyaivaitāni prajñānasya nāmadheyāni bhavanti*).<sup>1</sup>

### Chāndogyopaniṣad

In Chāndōgyopaniṣad, the story of *Āruni* and *Śvetaketu* is seen described. Here too the origin of the Universe is being explained as- in the beginning this was existence alone, one without a second. That thought let me become many and it created water etc. and after explaining the whole cosmology that *Sat* (deity) thought let me enter into these whole beings as individual self. The food that is eaten turns into three parts and the subtle forms the mind, likewise the fire that is eaten turns into three, of these, the subtle part turns into speech- Finally it is said that mind is composed of food, *Prāṇa* is composed of water and speech is composed of fire. After these explanations of the three fold nature of the individual the status of *Ātman* as *Svapiti* is being explained. When a person is sleeping, then he becomes united with *Sat* and attains his own real nature. Here an analogy is seen described. As a bird fastened to a string wishes freedom from the knot flying from one direction to another and finding no shelter anywhere, take refuge at the place itself where it is fastened. So does the mind wandering from one direction to another and finding no shelter anywhere, take refuge in

*Prāṇa* itself, for the mind is *Prāṇa*-bound (*Sa yathā śakunih sūtreṇa prabaddhah..... Prāṇabandhanam hi somya manah*)<sup>2</sup>. Here *Prāṇa* is nothing but the source of Consciousness. Later the Upaniṣad explains certain contemplatory methods as 'मनोब्रह्मेत्युपासीत' etc. The seventh chapter begins like this Knowledge is greater than meditation. By means of Knowledge alone a man understands the Vedas etc. So worship knowledge. He who worships knowledge as Brahman attains the worlds of those possessed of the knowledge of scriptures. There is nothing greater than knowledge. Here the knowledge is nothing but *Prajñana* ie., Consciousness<sup>3</sup>.

### Māṇḍūkyopaniṣad

*Māṇḍūkyopaniṣad* is the smallest Upaniṣad having only twelve passages which explains the consciousness through various stages of life ie., *jāgrat* - waking stage, *svapna* - dream stage, *suṣuptih* - dreamless stage and *Turiya* stage ie., the fourth stage where there is not even the dreamless stage. There is a saying regarding this Upaniṣad. *Māṇḍūkyamekamevālam mumukṣūṇām vimuktaye* ie., this only Upaniṣad is enough for those who are desirous of Liberation. In the waking stage we experience the gross elements through our Sensory and motor organs; in the dream stage we experience the subtle objects through our Mind; in the *Suṣupti* stage a kind of happiness which is somewhat similar to that of the Bliss or *Ānanda*, the very essential nature of the Supreme is being experienced. After enjoying this stage, the individual feels some kind of relax. It is explained as 'यत्र सुप्तो न कञ्चन'.<sup>4</sup> The very name of the individual soul in this state is *Prajñā*. That is called *Suṣupti*, or deep sleep, where - 'न कञ्चन कामं कामयते' - one desires nothing, because the mind has withdrawn itself from both the physical and subtle objects. 'न कञ्चन स्वप्नं पश्यति' it does not dream also, because even psychic activity has ceased. 'तत् सुषुप्तम्' - this is complete absorption of the mind into itself. But this absorption is of an unconscious nature. The mind, while it appears to be a little conscious in dream, and more conscious in waking, is not conscious at all in deep sleep. This has given rise to an erroneous school of philosophy which concludes that consciousness is possible only when there is contact of the mind with objects. This is *Prāñā*, the consciousness which is in its own

pristine nature, knowing everything and not being associated with anything external. This is the transcendent state in relation to waking and dreaming, the cause of all experiences in waking and dreaming, the *Kāraṇa Avastha*, in relation to which waking and dreaming are affected, *Kārya Avastha*. In correspondence with this *Prājñā*, or the causal condition of *Ānandamayatva* of the *Jīva*, there is a Universal Causal Condition, known as *Īśvara*. While the waking consciousness, individually, is called *Viśva*, it is called *Tajasa* in dream and *Prājñā* in the deep sleep state. Correspondingly, from the cosmic level, we have *Virāt* in waking, *Hiraṇyagarbha* in dreaming and *Īśvara* in deep sleep. While we, ordinarily, hold that the impressions of waking create dream and an adjournment of all the activities of these impressions is sleep, thus deducing dream from waking and sleep from both, in the cosmic level we cannot make such deductions, because a reverse process takes place there which seems to be a prior condition to the individual state. *Īśvara* being the cause of *Hiraṇyagarbha* and *Hiraṇyagarbha* being the cause of *Virāt*. The relationship between the individual and the cosmic, between *Viśva* and *Virāt*, *Tajasa* and *Hiraṇyagarbha*, *Prājñā* and *Īśvara* is one of organic integrity, and a realization of this organic connection of being will and the *Jīva* in *Īśvaratva* and make it at once omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. Consciousness enjoys bliss. Who enjoys bliss? Consciousness alone is the answer. It is '*Cit*' that experiences '*Ānanda*', not the Indriyas or the *Manas*, the senses or the mind. In deep sleep there is only *Ānanda* experienced by *Cit*. you experience *Satccitdānanda*, here, Consciousness Being, as such. But something else happens there, a very intriguing factor starts working, which covers the consciousness, and makes you come back to the waking life with the same foolishness with which you entered the state of sleep.

### Taittirīyopaniṣad

Taittirīyopaniṣad is the Upaniṣad in which more ethical statements are seen depicted. Man being a social animal should keep certain social ethics otherwise the life in this world will not be possible. In the first part named as *Śikṣāvalli*, certain such elements are seen portrayed. One of the major characteristics of the

traditional teachings is that it contains some sort of ethical statements. It is because they believed that man being a social animal should follow certain rules without which co-living will not be so easy. The importance of food is well established in this. Here food is described as the Supreme soul. Anna being the prime factor for the very existence of human kind, it is described as a synonym of the Supreme. As it is the practice of all other Upaniṣads, this Upaniṣad too explores the origin of the Universe. Here the origin of the Universe is described as '*Tasmādva etasmād ātmanaḥ ākāśaḥ sambhūtaḥ*'<sup>6</sup> i.e., from this *Ātman* the space is born first. In the Chāndogyopaniṣad, it is said as '*Sadevasomyedamagra*'. *Tadaikṣata bahusyām prajāyeya*' *Tattejoṣṛjata*<sup>6</sup> i.e., from that *Tejaḥ* is born i.e, from that Fire is born. Here Fire is said as born first, i.e, in Taittirīya *Pañcīkaraṇa* is explored and in Chāndogyopaniṣad *Trivṛtkaraṇa* is explored.

The peculiarity of this Upaniṣad is that it extols the knowledge of Brahman as Kośaviveka model gross to subtle style.

### Consciousness and the Psycho-physical System

Also in the Upaniṣads, we find the classic Vedāntic model of the three fold body, or five fold sheath, which elucidates the nature of the gross and subtle layers of consciousness that exist within our psycho-physical being. *Vedānta* explains that every human being is comprised of three bodies: the gross, the subtle, and the causal, which are the respective mediums of experience for our waking, dream and dreamless sleep states. The gross body (*Annamayakośa* or 'sheath of food') is born; it grows, transforms, decays and dies. The subtle and causal bodies are what reincarnate from birth to birth.

The subtle body is composed of the vital sheath (*Prāṇamayakośa*), mental sheath (*Manomayakośa*), and sheath of the intellect (*Vijñānamayakośa*). The vital sheath is the life force that operates the autonomic nervous system, thus controlling respiration (*Prāṇa*), excretion (*Apāna*), and digestion (*Samāna*), and also various functions of the cerebro-spinal system such as exertion (*Vyāna*) and growth. The vital sheath, moreover, mediates the soul's departure from the body at the time of death (*Uddāna*) The

*Manomayakośa* comprises the volitional, or deliberative mind, as well as the five organs of perception; whereas the *Vijñānamayakośa* (Buddhi) is the cognitive or determinative mind, along with the five organs of perception.

Human cognition exemplifies how the various mental faculties function together within the mental and intelligence sheaths. According to Vedānta, cognition is a four fold operation. First, the deliberative faculty of the mind (*Manas*) asks: 'What is this object'? The memory (*Citta*) attempts to recall similar objects. Then, the determinative faculty (*Buddhi*) is able to ascertain: 'It is a desk'. Finally, the sense of egoism (*Ahamkāra*) makes the association: 'I am sitting at the desk'. Throughout the cognitive process, however- whether we know it or not- the light of the self, shining through the *Buddhi* to the organs of perception, reveals everything that we experience.

How can a *Sādhaka* Attain the Consciousness?

How, then, can we attain pure consciousness, the light of the *Ātman*, by which we obtain the clearest perception of reality? The Advaita Vedāntins prescribe four traditional methods (*sāadhanacatuṣṭaya*) that, when perfected, mark the qualifications of a Ṛṣi:

1. Discrimination between the eternal and non-eternal;
2. Renunciation of the tendency towards sensual enjoyment;
3. Cultivation of the six treasures [tranquility, self-control, mental poise, forbearance, faith and self-surrender]; and
4. Desire for liberation

Through all four qualifications work together as methods for refining, stabilizing, and elevating one's mind, for the sake of brevity, we will focus only on the first two.

Vedānta scriptures exhort aspirants to first hear the truth, then contemplate on it, and finally meditate upon it (*Śravaṇa, Manana, and Nididhyāsana*).

Consciousness being a less explored concept in scientific field, I feel in this aspect our sages can contribute much. They have contemplated much on their conscious. As modern yogic practice

assets if one contemplates on something that object of concentration will reveal itself before him. This may also be applied in this case too. As you know the study of brain remains in its initial only. There will be one day when modern scientific excavations will prove scientifically that what our sages realized through their meditation is hundred percentages correct.

The major problem in the Upaniṣadic statements is that it cannot be tested or attested by any ordinary independent witness. Even then it is something can be experienced by a few who are so dedicated and had the said four qualifications. The teachings set forth by those passages i.e. the core teachings which transcends time and space, can be utilized in any situation. This happens so because all those revelations are the products of the sages on their consciousness and the same consciousness acts as the basis of one's view on the other. If one can see the same consciousness on the other there is no action of any kind of adversity on the other. So this philosophy transcends time and space as the saying goes [*yatra tvasya sarvam ātmaivaivabhūt tat kena kam paśyet kena kam vijānīyat*]. This may be one of the reasons for this stands as unquestioned and ever fresh. This is the philosophy which resets on consciousness and all the experiences of an individual reset on the concept of one's own consciousness, by clearing our concept of consciousness one can become a *Sthitaprajña* and naturally a *Sthitaprajña* can contribute much to the society.

#### Notes:

1. *Aitareyayopaniṣad* 3/1/1&3/1/2
2. *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6/8/2
3. *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6/7/2
4. *Māndūkyopaniṣad* 5
5. *Taittirīyopaniṣad* 2/2
6. Sadananda Yogindra, *Vedāntasāra*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda [Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006] 48.
7. *Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, 1.3.4, in 'The Upaniṣads: Breath of the Eternal', 28-29.