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Relative and Absolute: States of Consciousness and Turiya

Jenna McDonald ¹

Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the phenomena of dreaming, waking, sleeping and the witness-consciousness that exists in and through all three states. It draws from current and past literature about consciousness, helping to build a framework for both psychological and spiritual development. It correlates the pause between the inhale and exhale to the self-evident junction between dreaming, sleep and waking states.

Keywords: Turiya, sleep, witnessing-consciousness, kumbaka, Thuriya-Brahman, Patanjali.

“When you awaken, you will realize your whole life is a shadow.”

Swami Tattvavidananda

As each human being is perfectly unique, each path through life and death *or* path to deathlessness will also be such. By exploring consciousness as self-evident and unchanging, we can begin to reflect upon the phenomena of dreaming, waking and sleep. In his work *On the Nature of Consciousness* Feuerstein notes that Jean Gebser qualifies consciousness as both “wakeful awareness” and that which “excludes a contradiction of any kind of future-oriented finality” (2018). Essentially, consciousness is that which has no psychological time and exhibits a wakeful presence. In coming years, it will become evident how vital centering consciousness studies may be to the survival of our planet and our wellness as a species.

Remembering might be equated with an expansion of consciousness to include that which we previously could not perceive or innate wisdom we forgot in the process of becoming cultured, civilized persons. As we

remember our true nature as inter-being or witness-consciousness (Feurstein, 2018) we naturally begin to incorporate what we once deemed apart from ourselves—we recall how connected systems and beings really are. In the Yoga Sutra 2.2 of Patanjali, it is written that Ignorance (Avidya) is the primary affliction of the mind which reminds us that our suffering originates from not-knowing, forgetting or misapprehending (Tigunuit, 2017)

By discussing dreaming, waking and sleep states without paying homage to the junction or pause between these states, I would be bypassing the truth of an ever-present reality for a fixation on either dreaming, waking or deep sleep (which are transient states even by the lay persons admission). “In the works of Vedanta, the witness-consciousness is, significantly, referred to as the “fourth” (turiya), because it is held to transcend the three states of waking, dreaming and sleeping. This witnessing consciousness is said to

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continually apperceive the mental contents of all three states” (Feurstein, 2018, p. 2). It is this Turiya or 4th state, our already healed and perfectly actualized self, that I wish to highlight as a regularly bypassed reality.

My intention in this paper is not to encourage myself or others to struggle towards enlightenment or to fix a broken world or self-image for salvation, but to begin to unearth a Supreme Reality that is present and available to us regardless of the mystical and mundane experience of living.

Freeing Consciousness from Psychology

I recall hearing Swami Tattvavidananda share that when we truly awaken, we will come to appreciate that our whole life has been a shadow of the truth. Whenever I approached shadow work or the unconscious in academia or otherwise, I would hear this echo in the backdrop—hinting at a perspective we cannot even fathom while we invest in our back and forth of duality. We are reminded by great seers that what we engage in mentally may not have the qualities which lead to a higher vision in the first place. “You may feel intellectually convinced that the Thuriya-Brahman alone is real and that the world of the other three states is not really created and hence is a long, long dream. But to realize the Reality as “I am Thuriya-Brahman” and to experience It, and to get established in It is quite far, far away, from a mere academic understanding of the Vedanta” (Chinmayananda, 1953, p. iv).

For instance, in the case of spiritual bypassing, we apply unity consciousness within contexts where it does not belong. In doing so, we cause harm and alienate people with our spirituality by failing to attune to our impact or proper context. We have created normalcy around bypassing Supreme Reality (brahma), and in doing so create never ending cycles of “sick and getting better” mentalities that are

destined to consume self-development work, anti-aging serums and therapy ad infinitum.

The simple fact is that we live in a world of conflict and opposites because we live in a world of boundaries. Since every boundary line is also a battle line, here is the human predicament: the firmer one’s boundaries, the more entrenched are one’s battles. The more I hold onto pleasure, the more I necessarily fear pain. The more I pursue goodness, the more I am obsessed with evil. The more I seek success, the more I must dread failure. The harder I cling to life, the more terrifying death becomes. The more I value anything, the more obsessed I become with its loss. Most of our problems, in other words, are problems of boundaries and the opposites they create (Wilber, 1981, p. 18-19).

In the relative sense, it has been widely accepted through Carl Jung’s work that we all have a shadow or elements of ourselves that we cannot see directly, that are often playing the role of saboteur in our growth. The unconscious takes the unintegrated material of the self and projects it into the world. However, “consciousness makes it possible to retract projections that once took place. In more exact terms, the reintegration of a projection is itself an act of awakening consciousness” (Feuerstein, 2018, p. 3).

Since Jung’s time, many integral philosophers have expounded upon human development as it relates to consciousness. Gebser, for example, distinguishes contexts for consciousness which he calls structures: “These are the archaic, the magical, the mythical and the mental-rational modes of consciousness. A fifth such structure the arational-integral consciousness is in the process of emergence” (Feuerstein, 2018, p.

3). It seems this fifth structure has been lived for millennia by great saints and yogis but has made its way into research with the language of structures. In *A Secret History of Consciousness*, Lachman defines this fifth structure by stating that “With the arational-integral structure, the actual originally presence, the primal uncreated light is made apparent. The spiritual will be *seen* not as an object among other objects but as the inner radiance that has hitherto invisibly supported all objects...which is not itself a being, but allows all beings to be” (2013, p. 257).

What if Swamiji is right, and all of what I feel is “conscious” now will transform in an instant into more variations of shadow from a higher perspective? “Mircea Eliade rightly observes in his classical study of Yoga that the idea of “consciousness as witness, a consciousness freed from its psychophysiological structures and their temporal condition, is one of India’s greatest discoveries and one that cannot possibly be disregarded” (Feuerstein, 2018, p. 2). And yet we do just that, we seem to disregard this discovery due to its lack of worldly relatability. We would rather shrink spirituality to fit into our lives than grow our lives to meet the largest callings of spirituality.

Gebser’s work would suggest that indeed Swamiji’s words are accurate, that “consciousness always has a reintegrative capability because it can reveal a lesser-dimensioned structure whose events can be realized by us only through the directive ability gained from an additional dimension” (Feuerstein, 2018, p. 3). As we grow in awareness, we can retract projections by reintegrating them into our *Fullness (Ananda)*, which in Vedanta is defined as *one without a second*.

What if there is only one truth and the rest is a shadow? What if all perspectives are just projections after all? And furthermore, what if waking life is no different than dream state as some Upanishads reveal (Chinmayananda,

1953), implying that all these projections are exactly similar to the dream world full of its projections from within? What if every positive *and* negative attribute I can affix to myself is a projection, pinning me to duality? It would appear after bridging modern research and ancient texts that this is exactly the case.

Breath as a vehicle

for realizing Turiya

Breathe as the inhale, exhale duo is a passionate study of yogis and doctors alike while the pause, *kumbaka*, is easily passed over as a non-state rather than an ever-present reality to be held in presence. I was just sent an article from a student this week from the Wall Street Journal on breathwork and its impact on immunity post-pandemic. If the value of breathing is just now being accepted medically by the mainstream after almost fifty years of compelling research to suggest it’s healing capacity, I ponder how many generations it might take until the pause between the inhale and exhale is a legitimate study. It seems that we are on track to bypass the truth for quite a while, though I hope this paper might pique the interest of readers to search for what may be direct access to *Turiya* or *Ananda* through Vedanta and the proper practice of Pranayama, with attention on *kumbhaka*.

In Yogic texts and in many of the worlds mystical and religious traditions, it is said that the breath holds the key to the kingdom of God, via the breath there is a path to the present, future and past all at once. In his work on pranayama, Mahle writes “The yogi in *kumbhaka* (retention of breath) is in a timeless and hence deathless state” (2010, p. 58). This is reminiscent of the definition of *turiya* as being a timeless reality equivalent to non-creation.

It is worth mentioning that certain yoga texts

also say that if one's love for God is true enough, that no technique is needed. That devotion is all that it takes. But that requires a kind of fiery devotion that few humans have ever maintained. Sri Ramakrishna is one such example of realization of turiya through devotion alone as portrayed in *Great Swan*. He was witnessed by his devotees as being "visibly on fire with Divine Love" (Hixon, 1996, p.43) after reciting this hymn to the Divine Mother Kali:

O Kali, why should we make
the arduous journey
to distance sites of pilgrimage?
simply permit this child, O Mother,
to breath your name with every breath
as though each breath were the last.
what need will then exist
for eternal rites
or study of scriptures?

Blissfully repeating,
KALI KALI KALI
at dawn, noon, sunset and midnight
will be entirely sufficient
the conventional forms of religion
may chase after the ecstatic lover,
but they will never apprehend him.
conventional giving in charity
and conventional ascetic vows
no longer appeal to my heart,
since the delicate lotus feet
of Your Presence, O Mother
have become my only study,
only prayer, only delight.

Even for Ramakrishna, breath becomes an intricate way to touch the Supreme Reality firsthand. Most people need a technique to access the pause between inhale and exhale, in order to render awareness capable of perceiving Supreme Reality. As Mahle shares about subtle breath in the body, "The middle

Svara acts as a junction (sandhi) between the ida (left channel) and pingala (right channel). Like junctions between inhalation and exhalation, waking and sleeping, day and night, dream and deep sleep, life and death, this junction also suspends for a moment the mind, which casts a fabric of appearance over reality. During this moment of suspension, we might be able to look through the coarse texture of the fabric and see the underlying deep reality (brahman)" (2010, p. 55).

Conclusion

If indeed our afflictions and sufferings originate from a misapprehension, or a forgetfulness of the truth, then the use of breath to mitigate the distortions of the mind in order to see things as they are, and not as we are, holds incredible promise.

Increasing consciousness equates to an increase in complexity (Wilber, 2008) and therefore the ability to see more intricately into the nature of the world, self and God. Centering consciousness studies and breath practices within academia and education would be of great benefit as it could help us look upstream for the origin of our issues, rather than at the overwhelming change before us.

I imagine that prioritizing these practices of purification of the body and mind could be a path forward for anyone wanting to relinquish suffering or contribute to addressing the problems of an increasingly complex world. Whether we are looking for total liberation or increased clarity, attuning to that which does not change, such as in turiya or kumbhaka, helps us to reintegrate our projections and serve all living beings.

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