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RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE SHORTEST UPANISHAD WITH THE DEEPEST TRUTH: EXPLORING *THE MANDUKYA*

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ABSTRACT



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Among the principal Upanishads of the Vedic tradition, the *Mandukya Upanishad* occupies a unique and extraordinary position. Comprising only twelve mantras, it is the shortest of all the major Upanishads, yet it has been celebrated by philosophers, monks, and spiritual seekers as one of the most profound expositions of consciousness and ultimate reality. Revered especially within the Advaita Vedanta tradition, the *Mandukya Upanishad* presents a concise but comprehensive analysis of the nature of the Self (*Atman*), the Absolute (*Brahman*), and the mystical significance of the sacred syllable *Om*. This article explores the historical background, philosophical structure, metaphysical insights, and enduring relevance of the *Mandukya Upanishad*. Through a detailed examination of its teachings on the four states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and *Turiya*—the paper argues that the Upanishad provides one of humanity's most sophisticated explorations of consciousness and non-dual reality.

Keywords: Advaita Vedanta, Atman and Brahman, consciousness, Gaudapada, *Mandukya Upanishad*, Om, turiya.

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INTRODUCTION

The Upanishads represent the philosophical culmination of the Vedic tradition. Often referred to as *Vedanta*—the “end of the Vedas”—they seek answers to the deepest questions concerning existence, consciousness, death, and liberation. While many Upanishads employ narratives, dialogues, and symbolic rituals to communicate their wisdom, the *Mandukya Upanishad* stands apart because of its remarkable brevity and philosophical precision. Consisting of only twelve verses, the *Mandukya Upanishad* belongs to the *Atharva Veda* and is regarded as one of the ten principal Upanishads commented upon by Adi Shankaracharya. Despite its short length, it contains a complete framework for understanding the non-dual reality. According to S. Radhakrishnan, the *Mandukya Upanishad* is “one of the most profound of the Upanishads” (Radhakrishnan 693). The text is so highly esteemed that the *Muktika Upanishad* declares that the *Mandukya* alone is sufficient for liberation if properly understood. The central concern of the *Mandukya Upanishad* is the nature of consciousness. Rather than discussing cosmology or ritual, it examines direct human experience and reveals that behind all states of awareness exists a transcendental reality known as *Turiya*, the fourth state. This teaching has attracted not only spiritual practitioners but also philosophers, psychologists, and modern consciousness researchers.

HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

The *Mandukya Upanishad* is believed to have been composed during the later Vedic period, though precise dating remains uncertain. Scholars generally

place it between the fifth and second centuries BCE.

The text emerges within a broader intellectual movement in ancient India that questioned ritualism and sought inward knowledge as the means to liberation. The Upanishadic sages shifted emphasis from external sacrifice to internal realization. Instead of asking how humans may appease gods through rituals, they explored concepts such as the nature of the self, the eternal reality underlying the universe, the unchanged amid changing experience and transcendence of suffering and rebirth.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* explores these concepts through the analysis of consciousness itself. Its teachings later became foundational to Advaita Vedanta, especially through the philosophical elaborations of Gaudapada, the grand guru of Adi Shankaracharya in his *Mandukya Karika* and Adi Shankaracharya's commentaries. Gaudapada's interpretation is particularly significant because he develops the doctrine of *Ajativada*—the theory that the world is ultimately unborn and non-dual. This radical non-dualism influenced the entire course of Indian philosophy.

STRUCTURE OF THE MANDUKYA UPANISHAD

The text may be divided into four major sections: The nature of Om as the symbol of reality of this world and God, everything including the self is God, the four states of consciousness in us (*jagrat*, *swapna*, *sushupti* and *turiya*) and the identity of Atman and Brahman.

The Upanishad begins with a declaration of universality: “Om, this syllable is all this. All that



is past, present, and future is indeed Om. And whatever is beyond the threefold time is also Om" (Mandukya Upanishad 1; Radhakrishnan 695). This opening statement establishes Om not merely as a sacred sound but as the symbolic expression of the totality of existence. One of the central teachings of the *Mandukya Upanishad* is the metaphysical significance of Om (AUM). The syllable is treated as both a sound and a map of consciousness. The Upanishad explains that Om consists of three phonetic components: A, U and M. These correspond to the three ordinary states of consciousness. "A" sound corresponds to the waking state (*jagrat*) and has external awareness. "U" sound corresponds to dreaming state (*swapna*) and has internal awareness. "M" sound corresponds to deep sleep state (*sushupti*) and has undifferentiated awareness. The silence after Om symbolizes *Turiya*, the transcendental state beyond all dualities. "The Self, such as It is, is possessed of four quarters" (Mandukya Upanishad 2; Gambhirananda 175). This symbolic framework demonstrates the genius of the Upanishadic sages. Rather than treating spiritual truth as abstract speculation, they connect metaphysics directly with human experience.

Mandukya Upanishad proclaims that everything including the self is God. It contributes a great utterance (*mahavakya*) among the four mahavakyas of the Upanishads.

The four *mahāvākyas* ("great utterances") from the principal Upanishads express the essence of Advaita Vedanta and the identity of the individual self (*Ātman*) with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). The *mahāvākya* associated with the *Mandukya Upanishad* is "*Ayam Ātmā Brahma*" — "This Self is Brahman." (Mandukya Upanishad 2; Gambhirananda 175). It teaches that the true Self within every being is not separate from the universal consciousness. The *Mandukya Upanishad* explains this through the four states of consciousness: waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and *Turiya*, the transcendental state beyond all experience. By realizing the Self as Brahman, one attains liberation and inner peace. The other three *mahāvākyas* complete this vision of non-duality. From the Aitareya Upanishad comes "*Prajñānam Brahma*" — "Consciousness is Brahman," emphasizing pure awareness as the ultimate reality. The *Chandogya Upanishad* gives "*Tat Tvam Asi*" — "Thou Art That," a teaching by sage Uddalaka to Śvetaketu that the individual soul is identical with the supreme truth. From the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* comes "*Aham Brahmasmi*" — "I am Brahman," expressing the direct realization of one's divine nature. Together, these four *mahāvākyas* form the philosophical foundation of Advaita Vedanta, guiding seekers toward self-realization and unity with the Absolute.



Mandukya Upanishad talks about the four states of consciousness. The first state described in the *Mandukya Upanishad* is the waking state, known as *Jagrat*. In this condition, consciousness is outwardly directed toward the external world. The Upanishad refers to the experiencer in this state as *Vaishvanara*. "The first quarter is Vaishvanara whose sphere is the waking state" (Mandukya Upanishad 3; Gambhirananda 176). Here the self identifies with the physical body and perceives multiplicity through the senses. Characteristics of the waking state include sensory perception, physical interaction, logical thinking, ego-centered identity and awareness of space and time. The Upanishad does not deny the practical reality of the waking world. However, it suggests that waking consciousness is limited because it depends upon dualistic perception: subject versus object. Human beings ordinarily assume the waking state to be absolute reality. Yet *Mandukya* questions this assumption by comparing waking life to dream experience. Just as dreams appear real while experienced, the waking world may also be relative rather than ultimate.

The second state is the dream state, called *Svapna*. In this state, consciousness turns inward and creates its own mental world. The experiencer here is known as *Taijasa*, meaning "the luminous one." "*Taijasa* is the second quarter whose sphere is the dream state" (

Mandukya Upanishad 4; Gambhirananda 180). Dreams are generated not by external objects but by impressions, memories, desires, and subconscious processes. The dream state demonstrates several philosophical insights and can create experiential worlds. Mind can construct partly reality, subjective experience can appear objectively real and identity is fluid and unstable in this state. *Mandukya Upanishad* uses dream analysis to undermine naïve realism. If dreams feel real during dreaming, then certainty regarding waking reality becomes philosophically questionable. Modern psychology and neuroscience have found this aspect of the Upanishad remarkably sophisticated. The text anticipates later inquiries into the nature of perception and consciousness.

The third state is deep sleep, or *Sushupti*. In this condition, there are no dreams, desires, or differentiated experiences. The experiencer in deep sleep is called *Prajna*, meaning "undifferentiated consciousness." "That state is deep sleep where the sleeper does not desire any enjoyable thing and does not see any dream" (Mandukya Upanishad 5; Gambhirananda 181). Deep sleep is characterized by absence of mental activity, absence of duality, absence of desire, peaceful unawareness and potential consciousness. *Mandukya Upanishad* considers deep sleep philosophically important because it reveals a state in which individuality temporarily



dissolves. Yet ignorance remains because the sleeper is not consciously aware of this unity. Unlike waking and dreaming, deep sleep lacks division. However, it is not liberation because it remains unconscious and temporary. The Upanishad thus distinguishes between unconscious unity and enlightened realization.

The climax of the *Mandukya Upanishad* is its teaching on *Turiya*, literally “the fourth.” *Turiya* is not simply another state alongside waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. Rather, it is the underlying reality that supports and transcends all three. The Upanishad describes *Turiya* through negation: neither inwardly conscious, nor outwardly conscious, nor both, neither conscious nor unconscious, beyond sensory perception, beyond thought and beyond language. *Turiya* is peaceful, non-dual, infinite, unchanging, pure consciousness and true Self. The famous description states:

“It is unseen, beyond empirical dealings, incomprehensible, uninferable, unthinkable, indescribable; the essence of the consciousness of the Self; the cessation of the world; peaceful, auspicious, non-dual—this is the Self, and it is to be realized” (*Mandukya Upanishad* 7; Radhakrishnan 701).

Turiya is pure awareness itself, not an object of awareness. It cannot be grasped intellectually because it is the very ground of knowing. This

teaching represents one of the most radical philosophical insights in world thought. Reality is not fundamentally material, psychological, or conceptual; it is pure consciousness. Robert Forman argues that mystical consciousness may involve a state of “pure consciousness without content” (Forman 8), a concept often compared with the Upanishadic description of *Turiya*.

The final section of the *Mandukya Upanishad* results in the doctrine that Atman (the individual self) and Brahman (ultimate reality) are identical. This identity forms the core of Advaita Vedanta. Eliot Deutsch observes that Advaita Vedanta presents reality as “a unitary consciousness in which all distinctions are ultimately overcome” (Deutsch 31). *Mandukya* states that the true self is not the body and not the mind. It is pure consciousness and is universal and indivisible. Ignorance (*Avidya*) causes humans to identify with limited individuality. Liberation (*Moksha*) occurs when one realizes the non-dual nature of existence. Unlike dualistic traditions that separate God and soul, the *Mandukya Upanishad* asserts absolute unity. The apparent multiplicity of the world arises from ignorance and misperception. This perspective profoundly influenced Indian philosophy, spirituality, and meditation traditions.

**GAUDAPADA AND THE MANDUKYA KARIKA**

The philosophical influence of the *Mandukya Upanishad* expanded greatly through the work of Gaudapada. His *Mandukya Karika* is a commentary on *Mandukya Upanishad*, consists of 215 verses and is one of the earliest systematic expositions of Advaita Vedanta. Gaudapada introduced highly sophisticated arguments concerning the unreality of multiplicity, the dream-like nature of experience, non-origination (*Ajativada*) and absolute non-duality. He argued that from the highest standpoint, nothing is ever truly born or destroyed. "No creature is ever born; there is no origination whatsoever" (Gaudapada, *Mandukya Karika*, III.48). Creation itself is ultimately an appearance within consciousness. Chandradhar Sharma notes that Gaudapada's doctrine of *Ajativada* represents "the most uncompromising form of non-dualism in Indian philosophy" (Sharma 238). Some scholars have noted parallels between Gaudapada's philosophy and Mahayana Buddhism, particularly Yogachara and Madhyamika traditions. However, Gaudapada firmly roots his conclusions within the Upanishadic doctrine of Atman. His work became foundational for Adi Shankaracharya, who later established Advaita Vedanta as one of India's most influential philosophical systems.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Mandukya Upanishad continues to attract modern interest because of its analysis of consciousness. Contemporary psychology recognizes multiple states of awareness, including waking cognition, dreaming, and unconscious states. Neuroscience investigates how the brain generates subjective experience. Philosophers of mind debate the "hard problem" of consciousness. *Mandukya* contributes uniquely to these discussions by treating consciousness as primary rather than secondary, distinguishing awareness from mental contents, exploring subjective states phenomenologically and suggesting a transcendental dimension beyond ordinary cognition. Meditation research has also drawn inspiration from the Upanishadic model. Advanced meditative states often involve experiences of non-duality, ego dissolution, silence, and pure awareness that resemble descriptions of Turiya. While scientific methods cannot directly verify metaphysical claims, the *Mandukya* remains intellectually relevant because it offers a systematic phenomenology of consciousness.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AND MEDITATION

Mandukya Upanishad is not merely theoretical philosophy; it also serves as a guide for spiritual realization. Meditation on Om is one of its principal practices. The practitioner



contemplates “A” as waking consciousness, “U” as dream consciousness, “M” as deep sleep and silence as Turiya. Through sustained contemplation, the seeker gradually disidentifies from transient states and realizes pure awareness. This process aligns with broader Vedantic disciplines such as self-inquiry (*atma vichara*), meditation (*dhyana*), detachment (*vairagya*), ethical living and discernment (*viveka*). The aim is liberation from ignorance and suffering.

COMPARATIVE EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

The *Mandukya Upanishad* may also be examined in relation to global philosophical traditions. Both Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism critique ordinary perception and emphasize non-duality. However, Buddhism generally denies a permanent self (*Anatta*) whereas Advaita affirms an eternal Self identical with Brahman. Despite these differences, both traditions employ meditation and introspection to transcend egoic illusion. Several Western thinkers explored themes similar to the *Mandukya Upanishad*: Plato distinguished appearance from ultimate reality. Descartes questioned sensory certainty. Kant argued that reality-in-itself transcends perception. Schopenhauer admired the Upanishads deeply. Phenomenology investigated structures of consciousness. Yet *Mandukya* differs by insisting

that ultimate truth is directly realizable through inner awareness.

MANDUKYA UPANISHAD, THE DEEPEST UPANISHAD

Mandukya Upanishad is often called the deepest Upanishad due to its extreme Philosophical Compression. In only twelve verses, it presents a theory of consciousness, a metaphysics of reality, a psychology of experience, a symbolic theology of Om and a path to liberation. Rather than relying on mythology or ritual, it is a direct experiential approach which examines universal human experience. Its declaration of the unity of Atman and Brahman remains among the boldest metaphysical claims in world philosophy. *Mandukya* has timeless relevance as questions concerning consciousness, identity, and reality remain central in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and spirituality. The Upanishad combines metaphysical insight with contemplative discipline.

CRITIQUES AND INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

Despite its influence, *Mandukya Upanishad* raises important philosophical challenges such as Whether consciousness can exist independently of the brain, Whether Turiya is verifiable, whether non-duality negates individuality and ethics and whether mystical experiences justify metaphysical conclusions. Different schools of Hindu philosophy also interpret the text differently. Dualistic Vedanta



traditions reject the strict non-dualism of Advaita. Nevertheless, the enduring power of the *Mandukya* lies in its ability to provoke profound inquiry into the nature of self and reality.

CONCLUSION

Mandukya Upanishad stands as one of the most extraordinary achievements of human philosophical reflection. Though it contains only twelve mantras, it offers a complete vision of consciousness, reality, and liberation. Its analysis of waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and *Turiya* reveals a sophisticated understanding of human awareness that remains relevant even in contemporary discussions of psychology and neuroscience. Its declaration that the Self is identical with ultimate reality forms the heart of Advaita Vedanta and continues to inspire seekers around the world. The genius of *Mandukya Upanishad* lies in its ability to compress vast metaphysical insight into a concise spiritual teaching. It invites humanity not merely to think about truth but to realize it directly through introspection and meditation. In a world increasingly dominated by external distractions, the *Mandukya Upanishad* reminds us that the deepest mystery is not outside us but within consciousness itself. "Peaceful, auspicious, non-dual—this is the Self, and it is to be realized" (*Mandukya Upanishad* 7; Radhakrishnan 701).

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