

SLEEP AS  
A STATE OF  
CONSCIOUSNESS  
IN ADVAITA  
VEDĀNTA

ARVIND SHARMA

# Sleep as a State of Consciousness in Advaita Vedānta

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Arvind Sharma

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## Preface

Advaita Vedānta is a well-known philosophical system of India. One of the well-known doctrines associated with Advaita Vedānta is that of *avasthātraya*, or of the three states of consciousness: waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*svapna*), and deep sleep (*suṣupti*). Out of these three states of daily experience, Advaita Vedānta often draws on that of deep sleep to validate an argument, point a moral, or even adorn a tale.

Despite this heavy reliance on the phenomenon of deep sleep in Advaita Vedānta, no broad-based study of it seems to have been undertaken from an Advaitic point of view. (If such an investigation has indeed been undertaken, I am not aware of it). This monograph is an attempt at such an analysis. As it tries to bring together several viewpoints under one cover, it is also an attempt at synthesis.

There are, I believe, good reasons for undertaking this exercise. It might be of interest to those who work within Advaita Vedānta. It might also be of interest to those who work more broadly in the field of Vedānta. The doctrine of *avasthātraya* and the associated *catuspāda* doctrine, although important for Advaitic thought, are not confined to it. They are shared by other schools of Vedānta. The monograph may also be of interest to those who work even more generally in the field of Hindu philosophy, for some of the differences among these schools turn on their analysis of deep sleep. The system of Yoga, for instance, speaks of *nīdrā* or sleep as one of the five *cittavṛttis* or cognitive mental states.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the



argument it employs for postulating some form of continuous consciousness is also similar to the one employed in Advaita.<sup>2</sup> However, while in Advaita the argument ultimately points to the reality of *ātman* (or more precisely the *ātman* as *sākṣī*), which is ultimately “without a second,” in Yoga it points to the reality of the *puruṣa*, of whom there are many.<sup>3</sup>

The relevance of a work such as this on Advaita Vedānta may even extend beyond the confines of Hindu philosophy, to those of Indian philosophy. The apparent cessation of consciousness in sleep serves to illustrate Buddhist ideas of a discontinuous but connected flow of consciousness, while it points in an opposite direction in Advaita. It is illuminating that some Buddhists even consider this difference a minor error (*alpāparādha*) on the part of Advaitins, apparently something not worth losing sleep over.

Beyond Indian philosophy, this exercise may interest those who work in philosophy in general, as well as those who don't work within it but attend to it. For it lifts up for consideration the relationship between philosophy and physiology. One might propose, for instance, at the risk of sounding reductionistic, that all, or most, of philosophical speculation has a physiological basis, that philosophizing about death is based on *fear* of death; that *thirst* for knowledge is merely the philosophical expression of a psychological drive, or that the concept of objectless consciousness is only the philosophized version of sleep. Alternatively, one might turn the tables and maintain, like the Advaitin, that the phenomenon of sleep is only a physiological earnest of a metaphysical reality. After all, empirically one cannot hope for absolute intimations, only intimations of the Absolute.

The exercise may also not be without relevance for the comparative study of religion. An investigation of the nature of sleep, and deep or dreamless sleep in Advaita Vedānta may

also illumine prevalent Western assumptions about consciousness states and “reality”. To our “common sense”, it seems absurd to argue that sleep reveals the true nature of things while waking is at bottom delusive. To

advaitins, however, the blurring of inner (“psychic”) appearance and outer (“physical”) appearance in dream (and the total collapse of such distinctions in sleep) reveals a fundamental truth (non-duality), not a lessened grasp on reality.

From a different “common sense”, dreams suggest a “reality” (taken to be the external physical world) which is merely a mental creation. As dreamers believe their dreams are real (and not merely their mental creations), we now believe waking is real, and not such a creation. From waking state, we “know” dreams aren’t real; in the same way, once we become *brahman*, we will know waking is not real. Thus, one should not aim for waking’s critical self-awareness, but for “awakening” from the “dream” (or nightmare!) of daylight vicissitudes.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the exercise may even be significant in the study of psychology, as offering another perspective on ‘altered states of consciousness.’<sup>5</sup> After all, sleep is a ‘state of altered consciousness’ that occupies a third of one’s life!

Enough said. This is the spirit in which the monograph is being offered, and I hope will be welcomed as such.

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## *Introduction*

### I

This monograph deals with the question of sleep in Advaita Vedānta. But the theme presupposes that the phenomenon of sleep is an issue of some kind for Advaita Vedānta in particular, or Indian philosophy in general. For the reader who does not share this presupposition, such questions as the following will naturally arise: 'Why should philosophers be concerned with sleep as an epistemological or religious problem? Why are the Indian philosophers concerned with it? Why do Advaita philosophers view sleep as an important philosophical dilemma, and why are they losing sleep over it?'

### II

The question as to why philosophers in general should be concerned with the phenomenon of sleep can be answered in two ways, one reductive and the other nonreductive.

According to the reductive view the superstructures of thought raised by philosophers have physiological bases, and one cannot avoid this issue by retreating into intellectual loftiness and claiming that our powers of intellection are immune to such influences. If this reductive line of reasoning is pursued further, it will lead to the suggestion that the philosophical idea of a nondual reality may be rooted in the physiological phenomenon of deep sleep, wherein such a

nonduality is actually experienced by human beings. The other, nonreductive approach will also hark to the same point but this time use the phenomenon of sleep not to *account for* the claim of a nonduality reality, but as an everyday *illustration* that might reinforce its philosophical credibility.

### III

Any attempt to answer the other questions raised earlier in section I above, must involve a brief account of the doctrine of three states of consciousness, or *avasthātraya*, as it is formally known, within the school of Hindu philosophy called Vedānta, and more particularly, within Advaita Vedānta. For sleep (or more accurately 'deep' or 'dreamless sleep') is identified as one of the three states of consciousness. Hence the kind of detailed discussion that this monograph purports to carry out must commence with a description, if only in outline, of the broader schema within which the phenomenon of sleep is lodged in Hindu Vedantic thought.

Any comprehensive system of thought begins by reducing the complexity of the data it must tackle to manageable categories. Physics, for instance, reduces the material world of everyday life, with all its buzzing, blooming confusion, to the categories of matter and energy. Chemistry reduces the various substances it must deal with to a table of elements. In the same spirit, Advaita Vedānta, when faced with the problem of bringing the confusing multiplicity of human experiences within manageable limits in preparation for further analysis, tried to encompass the entire range of human experience within the schema of the three states of consciousness.

Were anyone asked to list all the items in consciousness experienced by him or her, he or she is bound to fail in carrying out so enormous an exercise on account of the sheer richness and diversity of the contents of experience. One could even barely commence such a vast undertaking without faltering. It is, however, possible to circumvent the problem by sidestepping it and claiming instead that, irrespective of the specific contents of our experiences, they are *all* experienced

by us in one of three states of consciousness—that of waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*svapna*), and deep sleep (*suṣupti*). This classification provides us with a handle, as it were, for grabbing hold of that immense vessel of our rich, varied, and ever-growing experiences. Small wonder then that this classification caught on in Hindu philosophical circles. It is also worth noting that this classification is eminently rational. Although the classification is developed within the body of literature considered revelational in Hinduism, the classification itself is not revelational but rather rational in character, for it does not derive its cogency by an appeal to scriptural authority, but from the support it seems to derive from our experience of life itself. In that sense it may be described as philosophical rather than religious in nature.

#### IV

The following features of this trichotomy deserve special attention as a propaedeutic to the study of consciousness.

(1) From the point of view of everyday life, one tends to accord primacy, if not supremacy, to the waking state, viewing deep sleep as a phase of rest and dreaming as the working out of psychic latencies generated during the state of waking. From the point of Vedantic philosophy, however, such a view would be considered unsatisfactory, as it begs the question. Sleep cannot be merely a period of rest as “even the lazy people get sleep, while the old people [who need more rest] get less sleep at night.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, “dream is not the mere result of the unnatural change of the nervous system because even those who are very frugal in their eating and enjoyments and who are in a healthy state get dreams.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed—

Because both deep sleep and dream keep on coming to us even if we do not want them also and because they come to us quite naturally without being subject to our desire to have them in a particular manner only, we will have to say that they also, like the waking, are

very essential to us. Therefore, it will be proper to opine that deep sleep and dream are independent states created for some good purpose for our sake alone, instead of considering them as dependent states which cause or create facilities or difficulties or hardships required by the waking state.<sup>3</sup>

(2) It may well be that from the point of view of daily living, the waking state holds the key, but philosophy claims to deal with ultimate reality. Therefore,

However much in our daily transactions we may be very highly benefited by waking, but if there is an ambition to determine the Ultimate Reality, then it is clear from this that we have to practise, first of all, considering the experiences of all the three states which are our own with a common vision (dispassionately), *i.e. with equal importance given to all the three states which are universally everybody's experiences.*<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, when the matter is probed, we realise that

we can never perceive with our waking senses the dream and the deep sleep; if it is so, where is the justification for imagining that those two states occur in this waking world alone? In each dream we perceive a different set of objects which seem to us as a world. Do we ever believe that that world has engulfed within itself the world of this waking state or this waking state itself? No. Day to day we experience many different dreams; do we ever believe that one among the worlds of those dreams exists somewhere even when its respective dream does not exist? Not at all. If it is so, what evidence is there to imagine that the waking world alone can exist independently apart from the waking state?<sup>5</sup>

(3) To the extent that Advaita Vedānta emphasizes the role of 'experience' as a datum for philosophizing, let us:

... investigate or deliberate upon the question—"Through which senses or instruments of knowledge do we know or experience the waking state?"—then we realize that, unlike the objects being known through the senses and the happiness and grief being experienced through the mind, we have no other instruments of knowledge whatsoever for 'the experience or knowledge of the waking state'. Just as we experience our dream and deep sleep directly (i.e. intuitively) without the help of any instruments of knowledge like the senses, the mind, etc., in the same manner we experience the waking directly without the need for any instrument of knowledge. Is it not? This is a very important fact. For, in the other schools of philosophy more importance is given to the instruments of knowledge (like the senses, mind) alone; but in the method of the three states of Consciousness which is followed in Vedanta, this Intuitive experience, which is the substratum for the instruments of knowledge, is itself considered as the highest among all the instruments of knowledge that we possess.<sup>6</sup>

That it to say, our experience of the senses and the mind follows upon our being in a waking state and not vice versa.

(4) It could be objected that there are many other states of consciousness beyond those of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, such as those of intoxication, insanity, swoon, delirium, somnambulism, etc.<sup>7</sup> All of these, however, can be understood as experiences within one of the three states, whose basic feature is their mutual exclusivity: "the world is included within the state and not in the world the states occur."<sup>8</sup>

(5) It might be claimed that "Observed naturally, all the three states belong to the category or species of '*Avasthā*,' or a state of Consciousness; as dream is caused by the latent impressions of the waking and deep sleep is the rest or respite caused to the body, the senses etc., it can be said that among them there is a temporal as well as a cause-effect kind of relationship. Therefore, to many people the statement that there is no relationship among the states seems to be invalid."<sup>9</sup>



This argument compromises the point regarding the mutual exclusivity of the states. However, in Advaita these connections arise not on account of the interconnectedness of the states, but on account of the same person and the same *antaḥkaraṇa* or internal organ of the person being involved in the states of consciousness.

(6) According to Advaita the three states of consciousness also involve a 'fourth' (*turīya*). This is supposed to be the ultimate and true state which underlies the three.

Beyond *susṛpti*, both quantitatively and qualitatively different from it, is the bliss of *samādhi* which is called the *turīya* state. Though literally *turīya* means the fourth, it is not to be understood as in any sense numerically different. For example, when speaking of a coin from the first quarter to the last, with the first quarter, we say one quarter of the rupee, with the second we say half of the rupee, with the third quarter we say three quarters of the rupee. But when we come to the last quarter of it, we do not speak in terms of 'quarter'; but we say One or whole Rupee. Even so, the *turīya* is a comprehensive whole and it is not to be expressed in terms of the fourth of the four fractions.<sup>10</sup>

(7) The three states of consciousness involve change, as one state is replaced by another. Change *of* or *in* consciousness can only be perceived, according to Advaita, by something itself not subject to such change, which can bear witness to this change. This Advaita identifies as the true subject, often referred to as the Self, which itself cannot be known in the usual empirical manner, for then it would become an object and cease to be the subject. "The self is never known. It only knows. It illumines all things, including the states of deep sleep, dream and wakefulness."<sup>11</sup> Further analysis discloses that the essence of this self or subject is pure consciousness in the following manner according to Advaita Vedānta:

If again we compare the three states, namely of waking, dreaming and sleeping without dreams, which

the human self experiences daily, we can reach the same conception. The essence of the self must remain in all these or the self would cease to be. But what do we find common to all these states? In the first state there is consciousness of external objects; in the second also there is consciousness, but of internal objects present only to the dreamer. In the third state no objects appear, but there is no cessation of consciousness, for otherwise the subsequent memory of that state, as one of peace and freedom from worries, would not be possible. The persistent factor then is consciousness, but not necessarily of any object. This shows again that the essence of self is pure consciousness without necessary relation to object.<sup>12</sup>

## V

Sleep becomes an issue in Advaita Vedānta for reasons which are philosophical both generally and in a specifically Advaitic sense.

It is an issue generally because although Advaita claims to treat all the states on par, the fact remains that “just as in the case of empirical transactions, in the *same way in the case of scriptural transactions* also the waking viewpoint is extremely essential”<sup>13</sup> and the issue of the primacy or otherwise of a waking state keeps asserting itself. This general point also possesses an Advaitic dimension, as scriptural authority (*śabda*) is sometimes accorded great significance in the formal articulation of Advaita.

From a specifically Advaitic point of view the experience of sleep poses several problems. For one, in the plenary Advaitic experience the subject-object distinction vanishes. This also happens in sleep, yet sleep is not normally considered identical with the plenary experience. From the point of view of the plenary experience sleep presents another paradox. The plenary experience, wherein the subject-object dichotomy disappears as in sleep, is supposed to consist of happiness par excellence. People upon awakening from sleep also testify to having slept happily. In sleep, however, they

are also in a state of ignorance about themselves whereas the plenary Advaitic experience is also said to be one characterised by total awareness rather than utter ignorance.

Thus the fact that both sleep and Realization represent non-dual forms of consciousness and yet the former is not considered soteriological in the same sense as the latter raises tantalizing issues, and generates a debate if the views of Śaṅkara and Gauḍapāda are placed alongside. Thus Śaṅkara arguably claims, at least on occasion, that deep sleep is a form of Brahman experience (on account of the association of sleep with bliss) but his predecessor Gauḍapāda is more inclined to look upon sleep as just another manifestation of *avidyā* or ignorance, (on account of the association of sleep with nonawareness).

This consideration is further complicated by the fact “there is one more significant instance where there is awareness because of the witness”—despite ignorance—“without the instrumentation of the cognitive mode—the awareness of the absence of objects as in deep sleep.”<sup>14</sup> This point may be elaborated as follows:

What really happens when one goes to sleep? There seem to be intermittent periods of lapsing into total unconsciousness. Had there been a break in the flow of consciousness one could not on waking resume the threads of personal identity. On waking up one says “I slept soundly, I didn’t know anything”. Paradoxically this not knowing of anything is itself known. Consciousness does not remain ignorant of its own ignorance. The sleeping self is thus revealed as revealing the darkness (*Ajñāna*) which is a kind of loose embodiment for the self, and which is the matrix of all distinctions and differentiations of the waking life. Therefore revelation is absolute and timeless, depending in the adventitious fact of there being something to be revealed. Advaita makes a basic distinction between consciousness and knowledge. Knowledge is the revelation of objects by means of modifications (*Vṛttis*), while consciousness is the principle of revela-

tion itself, without their being a principle of revelation the entire world would be plunged in darkness (Jagad Āndhya Prasaṅga).<sup>15</sup>

The relationship of the experience of deep sleep to the experience of *brahman* in a sense constitutes the crux of the matter. Both possess a non-dual character and yet both are distinct. To the extent that the two are indistinguishable sleep can be used to illustrate the experience of Brahman. To the extent that the two, though indistinguishable in some ways are not identical in all respects, some daylight between the two must be allowed. It is within this light that the role of sleep in Advaita Vedānta needs to be investigated.