

States of Consciousness

We start with Mr Ouspensky's description of the states of consciousness:

According to the system we are studying, man has the possibility of four states of consciousness. They are: *sleep, waking state, self-consciousness and objective consciousness*. But although he has the possibility of these four states of consciousness man actually lives only in two states: one part of his life passes in sleep, and the other part in what is called 'waking state', though in reality it differs very little from sleep. [First Psychological Lecture]

In the first state of consciousness, i.e. in sleep, we cannot know anything of the truth. Even if some real perceptions or feelings come to us, they become mixed with dreams, and in the state of sleep we cannot distinguish between dreams and reality.

In the second state of consciousness, i.e. in waking sleep, we can only know *relative* truth, and from this comes the term 'relative consciousness'.

In the third state of consciousness, i.e. in the state of self-consciousness, we can know the full truth *about ourselves*.

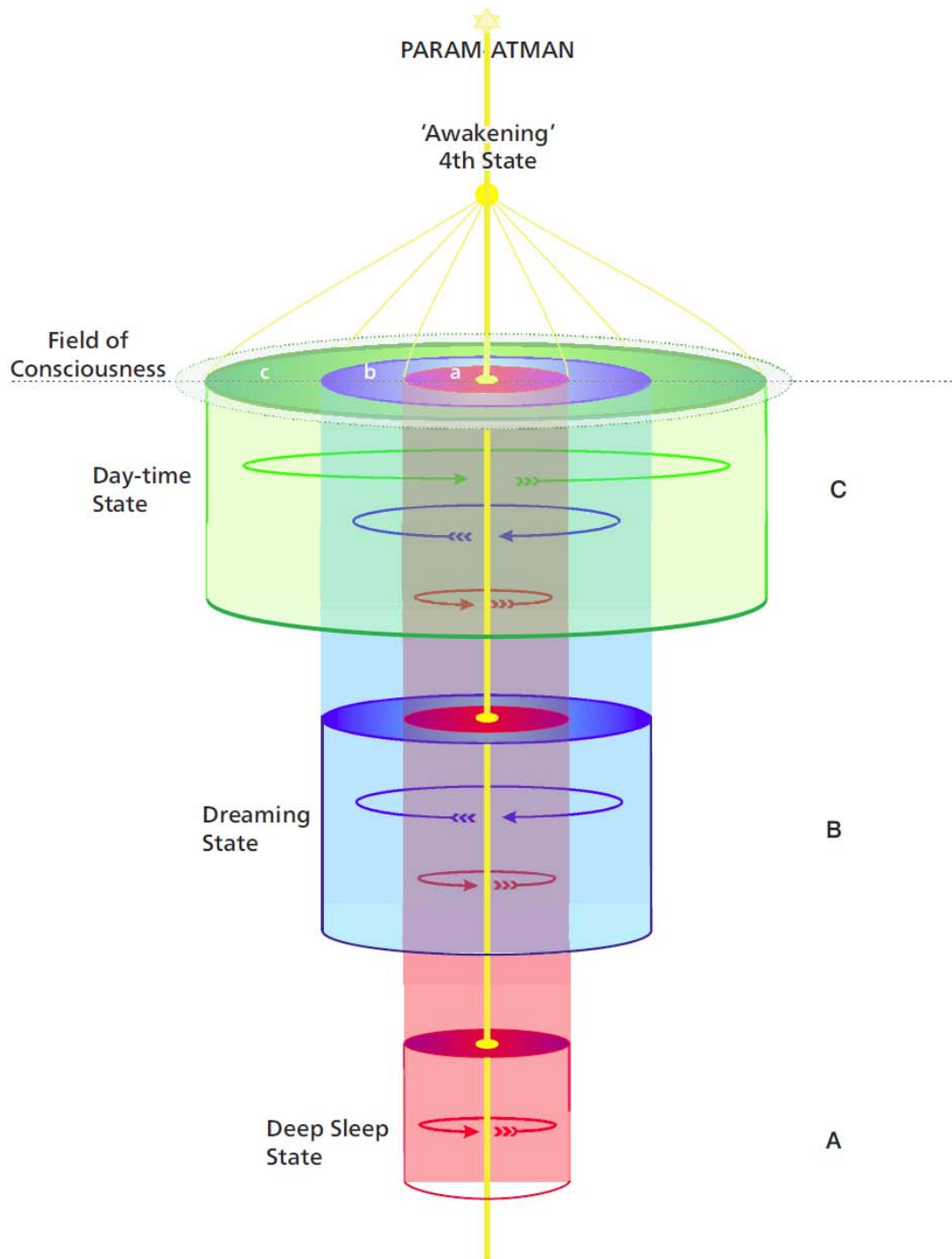
In the fourth state of consciousness, i.e. in the state of *objective consciousness*, we are supposed to be able to know the full truth *about everything*; we can study 'things in themselves', 'the world as it is'. [Second Psychological Lecture]

Nowadays, we normally divide Mr Ouspensky's state of '*sleep*' into two quite separate states – *deep sleep* and *dreaming sleep*, in keeping with the Advaita Vedanta tradition from which Mr Ouspensky's system was derived. Dr Roles recognised the importance of this distinction from the viewpoint of neuroscience. It may have been discoveries about the brain that led him to realise that it is not right to regard these five states of consciousness as a simple hierarchy. The states of *self-consciousness* and *objective consciousness*, are, from the point of view of brain function, more closely related to *dreaming sleep* and *deep sleep*, respectively. Here is Dr Roles's description, based on his schematic diagram of the brain shown overleaf:

Here are the three levels (A, B and C); it can be used for many purposes, but let us say that (A) is the area of the nervous system (brainstem) which is still operative to keep the organism alive in the deepest state of dreamless sleep or coma; (B) is the more evolved area higher up in the brain which operates in the state of dreaming; and (C) is that area which is added when we come into the daytime world with its external sensory impressions and their repercussions in our consciousness.

What all the scientists leave out is that there is an *absolute Consciousness* all through the universe and present from physical birth to death in every individual, which is the only pure Consciousness; everything that has been called 'consciousness' is just a *reflection* of that. Having regard to that, let us take man who (in common with the higher mammals) shares with them most of this structure (C) except one thing, and that is this top surface (*a, b, c*), which Professor Ey and other people like Teilhard de Chardin call a 'reflection'. An animal may do things, but only man *knows* that he is doing them; so I am calling this top surface the 'field of consciousness', and anything which doesn't come into our consciousness lies below that field; anything of which we are conscious lies in that field, and there are higher levels and a more universal Consciousness occasionally reached above it.

Thinking of the 'field of consciousness', the thing that is so important in meditation is that the content of lower levels continues and comes into consciousness as part of this 'field'. Then if this (A) is that area in which we live in the deepest sleep at night when we are aware of nothing, and (B) is the level of dreams, when we wake up during the day those two levels go on but are completely submerged in this outer level (C), which is governed by the external world and the evidence of our senses.



So now, in meditation we are proceeding from the outside – from our ordinary daytime state – and we try to get to the centre, to this absolute pure Consciousness, and we ask ourselves, ‘What really is this passage to the centre? – What does it feel like?’ We know what it means extracting ourselves from all the ordinary thoughts, feelings and impressions; we sit with our eyes shut and bypass all physical impressions; we then bypass all thoughts and feelings and psychological disturbances and dreams of the subtle world until we get to a place which the Shankaracharya describes as the equivalent of deep sleep, where we are aware of nothing whatever, but into which, in Meditation, we are letting in the light, whereas in deep sleep that area of mind is entirely in the dark.

So Self-realization doesn’t consist in becoming slicker and cleverer than other people – nothing like that! – or more mobile and active; it consists in lighting up areas which ordinarily are in complete darkness. Even when you discover the Light of Consciousness, you have to set about clearing all the debris out of the way so that Light gradually extends until even the daytime state is illuminated by the Pure Consciousness, and everything that one does and says in relation to other people becomes better done and better said. [FCR Record 1972/21]

This is consistent with the description given in the Mandukya Upanishad. (For those who are interested, a translation is given in the Annex to this paper.) We can perhaps see from the Shankaracharya’s description of self-consciousness (or ‘knowing oneself as the witnessing presence of awareness’), how similar this is in character to dreaming sleep:

HH. In order to appreciate the Self described in the Upanishads, one needs simple methods. Many such descriptions have been given in the past but more light can now be thrown on the subject. Pure consciousness belongs to the ‘silent impartial Observer’, upon whose inlook or outlook are imposed the changes and limitations we experience every 24 hours of our life. These are seen by this Observer as a passing show while He (the Self) remains always the same. Just as pure gold always remains gold, while its uses and shapes and forms are innumerable; as the sky we observe whenever a plane takes us above the cloud ceiling is always the same; or as the waves of the sea cause no loss or gain to it; so all these passing shows of nature do not change the Observer but only provide variety in the appearance of the world we see.

[HH Record, 1970: 30 August]

Similarly, the Shankaracharya’s description of deep sleep seems to correspond with cosmic consciousness in which, being awake, all that we see is seen not as a set of objects, but as a modulation of universal Consciousness:

HH. In deep sleep man feels no desire, creates no dream. This undreaming sleep is the third condition where the Self takes charge of both sides of our nature. In this state the Self is filled with joy, but the individual, being asleep, knows nothing at all. When he awakes however he can know that the Self is the Lord of all; the inhabitant of the hearts of all; the Creator and dissolver of beings. He can be defined only by what He is not. He cannot be seen, grasped, bargained with; He is indefinable, unthinkable, indescribable. The only proof of His existence is union with Him; the mirage of the world disappears in Him; He is peaceful and good.

[HH Record 1964; 2 September]

While Mr Ouspensky’s system, Dr Roles’s description and the Shankaracharya’s teaching shine a light on the first few steps of the Way, the Direct Path goes straight to the end-point of our journey. It says that the states of consciousness we experience are simply concepts superimposed by the mind on pure Consciousness – that which we call ‘I’:

In deep sleep, 'I,' this conscious witnessing Presence, remains exactly as it always is in the waking and dreaming states.

There are no objects present in deep sleep and therefore there is no memory of that state. On waking, the mind interprets that state as a blank, a nothing, a void. However, an absence of memory is not a proof of non-existence.

On falling asleep the well-organised images, sensations and perceptions of the waking state are gradually replaced by the less well-organised images of the dreaming state but, during this transition, there is no experience of a change in the presence of Consciousness.

Likewise, as images fade from the dream state, Consciousness remains as it is, and this presence of Consciousness without objects is referred to as deep sleep.

At no stage in the transition from the waking state to deep sleep does Consciousness ever experience a change in its own presence or continuity.

Just as Consciousness remains completely unaffected by the changing flow of experience during the waking state, so Consciousness remains exactly the same during the transition from the waking state to the dreaming state, during the dreaming state itself, and during the transition from the dreaming state to deep sleep.

In fact the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep are misnamed. These three categories are based on the assumption that there is an entity, called 'I,' which makes the transition through these three states. Once it is clearly seen that there is no individual entity, it is seen, by the same token, that there are not three states.

A state is something that lasts for a certain period of time. It comes and goes. It would be more accurate to say that there is one condition, one ever-present condition, which we call 'I,' Consciousness, Presence, in which all apparent states come and go.

The apparent states of waking and dreaming are modulations of this one Presence.

Deep sleep is in fact simply the presence of Consciousness shining by itself. That is why it is so peaceful and enjoyable! [Rupert Spira: *The Transparency of Things*, p82-83]

So what would it be like to 'live' this understanding? Here is Rupert's description:

Our experience, whether or not it is recognised, is always only of one ever-present, homogeneous, changeless substance, that is both aware and present.

This is all we are, all we know and all we love. We, this aware presence, never move, change, go anywhere or do anything. We are always in our own place, this placeless place of our self.

We simply abide as we are and sometimes this abiding seems to be coloured, as it were, by the taste of tea, the sound of conversation, the image of the street and cars, San Francisco airport, the grey of the London sky, the texture of sheets, the image of a dream, the 'nothingness' of deep sleep, an email from a friend...

In this placeless place, nothing appears or arises inside of awareness. There is no world, others or objects, as such.

Our self, awareness, is the sole substance of all (but there is no 'all') and every apparent thing is our own self modulating itself in the form of sights, sounds, tastes, textures, smells etc. but always being only itself.

Having seen clearly that there is no world, object or other, as such, we can then ask what then is our self, awareness, this one substance? However, in order to give it a name we have to objectify it even slightly. We make it a 'some' thing and as opposed to 'another' thing. We are back in duality.

So, when the idea of a separate, independent world collapses, the idea of awareness collapses with it. If there is no object, there cannot be a subject. If there is a subject, there must be an object. So even in the idea of 'oneness', duality is implied. 'Oneness' is one thing too much.

And then we realise how wise the early masters were. They didn't name this understanding 'one' or 'oneness'. They just went as far as saying that it is 'not two'.

[Rupert Spira: *Presence Volume II*, p153]

Pre-meeting task

What does the following System aphorism mean to you? Don't think about it or allow the mind to wrestle with it – simply allow it to rest in stillness in the mind. Sometimes when we do this, new ideas emerge as if from 'outside' ...

'A man may be born, but in order to be born he must first die, and in order to die he must first awake.'

Annex: Mandukya Upanishad

First, here is the Shankaracharya's interpretation of this Upanishad:

There was a sage who wrote the Mandukya Upanishad. Mandukya is a word which really means 'frog' and this sage, who had evolved a system, said that with 'three jumps' one can get into the deepest level of the self, just as a frog who is on dry land and getting scorched by the sun, and wants to be cool and peaceful, can reach the water with three jumps where he enjoys the cool and peace of the deepest water. Similarly, these are the three jumps we need, and with these three jumps it should be possible to establish the stillness of the mind.

[*HH Record, 1982, 19 February*]

The Mandukya is the shortest of the Upanishads. The following is the complete text, in a poetic translation by Sri Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats. (In this version, 'Brahman' is translated as 'Spirit'; in our tradition, we would translate this as 'the Absolute' or 'Universal Consciousness'.):

Lords! inspiration of sacrifice! May our ears hear the good. May our eyes see the good. May we serve Him with the whole strength of our body. May we, all our life, carry out His will.

Peace, peace, and peace be everywhere.

Welcome to the Lord!

The word Om is the Imperishable ; all this its manifestation. Past, present, future—everything is Om. Whatever transcends the three divisions of time, that too is Om.

There is nothing that is not Spirit. The personal self is the impersonal Spirit. It has four conditions.

First comes the material condition—common to all —perception turned outward, seven agents¹, nineteen agencies² wherein the Self enjoys coarse matter. This is known as the waking condition.

The second is the mental condition, perception turned inward, seven agents, nineteen agencies, wherein the Self enjoys subtle matter. This is known as the dreaming condition.

In deep sleep man feels no desire, creates no dream. This undreaming sleep is the third condition, the intellectual condition. Because of his union with the Self and his unbroken knowledge of it, he is filled with joy, he knows his joy; his mind is illuminated.

The Self is the lord of all; inhabitant of the hearts of all. He is the source of all; creator and dissolver of beings. There is nothing He does not know.

He is not knowable by perception, turned inward or outward, nor by both combined. He is neither that which is known, nor that which is not known, nor is He the sum of all that might be known. He cannot be seen, grasped, bargained with. He is undefinable, unthinkable, indescribable.

The only proof of His existence is union with Him. The world disappears in Him. He is the peaceful, the good, the one without a second. This is the fourth condition of the Self—the most worthy of all.

This Self, though beyond words, is that supreme word Om; though indivisible, it can be divided in three letters corresponding to the three conditions of the Self, the letter A, the letter U, and the letter M.

The waking-condition, called the material condition, corresponds to the letter A, which leads the alphabet and breathes in all the other letters. He who understands, gets all he wants; becomes a leader among men.

The dreaming condition, called the mental condition, corresponds to the second letter U. It upholds; stands between waking and sleeping. He who understands, upholds the tradition of spiritual knowledge; looks upon everything with an impartial eye. No one ignorant of Spirit is born into his family.

Undreaming sleep, called the intellectual condition, corresponds to the third letter, M. It weighs and unites. He who understands, weighs the world; rejects; unites himself with the cause.

The fourth condition of the Self corresponds to Om as One, indivisible Word. He is whole; beyond bargain. The world disappears in Him. He is the good; the one without a second. Thus Om is nothing but Self. He who understands, with the help of his personal self, merges himself into the impersonal Self; He who understands.

Footnotes

¹Heavens (head), sun (eye), air (breath), fire (heart), water (belly), earth (feet), and space (body).

²Five organs of sense—hearing, touching, seeing, tasting and smelling; five organs of action—speaking, handling, walking, generating and excreting; five living fires — Prana, Apana, Vyana, Udana and Samana; Discursive mind (Manas), Discriminative mind (Buddhi), Mind-Material (Chitta) and Ego (Ahamkara).

Contemplation

What is night for all beings is the time of awakening for the self-controlled; and the time of awakening for all beings is night for the introspective sage. [Bhagavad Gita Ch 2, v69]