

# A Brief Survey of Vedāntic Oneirology

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## Abstract

The Upaniṣads, as one of the trilogy of principal Vedāntic texts, the oldest and the most fundamental of them, have exposed a more or less detailed discussion on dreaming, taking it whether as the factual object of their discourse or as a symbol. However, there has been a debate between different schools of Vedāntic philosophy about oneirology, science of dreams and their interpretation, discussion of nature of the dream state, its reality and unreality. This paper, after a short study of oneirology in the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*, examines argumentations of four great philosophers of different Vedāntic schools, Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva, pertaining to dreams.

**Keywords:** Vedāntic oneirology, Science of dreams, Upaniṣads, Gauḍapāda, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhvācārya.

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*Let one know the controller of all, subtler than the subtle, bright like gold, the Supreme  
Puruṣa, who is comprehensible by the intellect operative in dream.  
Manusmṛti, XII.122*

Due to the ambiguity of the Vedic and Upaniṣadic<sup>1</sup> standpoint regarding dreams, there have been emerged different opinions, in various Vedāntic schools, , about oneirology, the science of the dream state, its nature, reality and unreality, which will be considered after a summarized description of the Vedic and Upaniṣadic oneirological views.

In the *Ṛgveda*, dreams are generally conceived as made by demons, often referred to by repudiative phrase of “demonic dreams” (*duḥsvapna*)<sup>2</sup> (see, for examples, V.82.4, X.37.4), the dreams which are consigned to Trita Āptya<sup>3</sup> for their removal. (VIII.47.14-15) In *Atharvaveda* (XIX.57.3-4), dreams are explicitly divided into two kinds of good and evil. The good dream is symbolized as ‘minister of Yama’, ‘Child of Gods' Consorts’, ‘Black Bird’, and ‘Horse’ (Griffith 1895-6, 258). ‘Minister of Yama’, because of its noted relationship with death; ‘Child of God’s Consorts’, because of its relationship with ‘angelic and true dreams’; ‘Black Bird’, in accordance to augury, the old customs of divination through bird sounds and signs, because of its forecasting nature; ‘Horse’ (*aśva*), as a Vedic symbol of *prāna* or etheric soul (Aurobindo 1998, 44),<sup>4</sup> because of its ‘subtle’ nature and its relationship with the ‘intermediary world.’

In the *Upaniṣads*, dream as a symbol represents both *māyā* and the intermediary level of manifestation. It represents *māyā*. The world, on the one hand, is pure illusion, and on the other, is the Truth, similar to the dream perceptions. It represents the intermediary world. Between the transcendent abstract spiritual world and the corporeal world, there is a middle world, which possesses some corporeal features but at the same time like the spiritual world is to some degree abstracted from materiality, similar to dreams, which possess some corporeal conditions (e.g. formality and spatiality) and devoid some others (e.g. materiality and temporality<sup>5</sup>).

According to the Upaniṣadic doctrine of the fourfold states of consciousness (*catuṣpāda*, lit. four-footed), Brahman, the divine Objectivity, identified with Ātmā, the divine Subjectivity (Schuon 2007, 99-108), manifests itself on the four states of consciousness, the first three of which

are corresponded to the three letter of the holy syllable Aum (vocal symbol of the divine Aseity) and the fourth is silence or “without an element”:

- The waking state (*jāgrat*) is the first, corresponded to the letter *a* (अ), and the gross body (*sthūlaśarīra*), hence to the corporeal world.
- The dream state (*svapna*) is the second, corresponded to the letter *u* (उ), and the subtle body (*sūkṣmaśarīra*), hence to the intermediary or subtle world.
- The dreamless state of deep sleep (*suṣupta*) is the third, corresponded to the letter *m* (म), and the principal body (*kāraṇaśarīra*), hence to the spiritual world or formless manifestation.
- Next is the state of oneness with Ātmā (*ekātma*), or the Fourth (*turiya*).

The subtle body, associated with the dream state, according to the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, consists of three sheaths (*kośa*), energetic sheath (*prāṇamaya*), rational sheath (*manomaya*), and intellectual sheath (*vijñānamaya*). Therefore, the dream state, from a subjective point of view, includes the energetic sheath, insofar as it is related to “life” and symbolically “breath”, the rational sheath, insofar as it is related to “individuality” and symbolically “inwardness”, the intellectual sheath, insofar as it is related to “intuition” and symbolically “sight”.

The dream state, which is inward-knowing, having seven limbs and nineteen mouths,<sup>6</sup> experiences subtlety. This second foot is fiery ... the fiery dream state is the second letter [of Aum], i.e. *u*, on account of its superiority and intermediacy. (*Mā. Up.* IV and X) (Nikhilananda 1952, 227, 245) (Radhakrishnan 2006, 696, 700)

The dream state is called inward-knowing (*antaḥ-prajñya*), because outward faculties, which deal with external affairs, becoming inward (*antaḥ*) return to their common source, the reason (*manas*). It is called subtle (*pravivikta*), because this state has a relative abstractness from grossness and materiality. It is called fiery (*taijasa*), consisting of two symbolical aspects: heat and light. Heat, because subtlety has a close

relationship with the nature of vitality. Light, because this state is the beginning of formal manifestation, and hence diffraction of the intelligible Light through the prism of the “Universal Life”<sup>7</sup> into extra-sensible modalities of formal manifestation. It is called superior (*utkarṣa*), because it transcends the waking state. It is called intermediary (*ubhayatva*), because it has one side towards the gross domain of the waking state and one side towards the spiritual domain of the state of deep sleep. (*Ś. Mā. Up.*, III, IV and X) (Gambhirananda 2009, 176-181, 216-217) (Guénon 2001, 88-94)

According to the above-mentioned Upaniṣadic doctrine, the most conditioned mode of human consciousness is the the waking state; it becomes less conditioned in the dream state, and the dreamless state of deep sleep respectively is free from its preceding two conditioned states. Obviously, awakesness here is a symbol of restriction of consciousness by external senses, contrary to its other symbolical meaning in other traditions where it represents attention of consciousness towards reality after a period of the negligence of reality symbolized by the sleeping state. However, the Vedāntic symbol of dreaming represents a restriction of consciousness by internal senses and its exemption from external senses. The dreamless state of deep sleep represents a total liberation of consciousness from all individual modes of being.

In the state of deep sleep, when (the thought of) ego disappears the body also becomes unconscious. The state in which there is the half manifestation of the ego is called the dream state and the full manifestation of the ego is the state of waking. (Nikhilananda 1931, 13-14)

In the opinion of Gaudapādācārya and, following him, Śaṅkarācārya, there is not much difference between the two states of waking and dreaming; both are, to the same degree, fictitious (*kalpit*), delusory (*mithya*), *māyā*, and unreal (*asat*). (*G. Kā.*, II, 1-7) (Nikhilananda 1952, 252-256) Besides, according to the *Gauḍapāda Kārikā*, dream has no material product. It can be said neither to be one with the dreamer nor to be separated from him, for it is impossible for dreamer to make innumerable objects he experiences in his dream. Therefore, in Gaudapāda’s opinion, dreams are even one step further from the reality. As a proof, he refers to what is stated in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

In that place [the dream state], there are no chariots, there are no animals, there are no roads, but he creates chariots, animals, and roads. In that place, there are no pleasures, joys, or delights, but he creates the pleasures, joys, and delights. In that place, there are no pools, ponds, or rivers, but he creates the pools, ponds, and rivers. He indeed is the creator. (*Br. Up.*, IV,iii,10) (Olivelle 1998, 113) (Nikhilananda 1956, 268) (Radhakrishnan 2006, 257-258)

Gaudapādācārya says:

The different objects seen in the confined space of dreams are unreal on account of their being perceived. For the same reason [i.e. on account of their being perceived], the objects seen in the waking state are also unreal. The same condition [i.e. the state of being perceived] exists in both waking and dreaming. The only difference is the limitation of space [associated with dream objects] ... The utility of the objects of waking experience is contradicted in dreams; therefore, they are certainly unreal. (*G. Kā.*, II, 4; II,7) (Nikhilananda 1952, 254-255)

Nonetheless, even Gaudapādācārya finds a place for true dreams in which “wonderful things” like those of the dwellers in heaven are observed. (*G. Kā.*, II, 8) However, that is *māyā* and unreal too, not deserved deep consideration:

Even in dreams, what is imagined inside by the mind is fictitious (*kalpit*) and what is cognized outside by the mind is existing (*sat*). But both are known as delusory (*mithya*) ... In the waking state too, what is imagined inside by the mind is fictitious and what is cognized outside by the mind is existing. But both are to be taken as delusory on rational grounds. (*G. Kā.*, II, 9-10) (Nikhilananda 1952, 257-258) (Karmarkar 1953, 12)

On the word of Śāṅkarācārya, too, dreams are unreal and derived to a large extent from thoughts, acts, and desires of the waking state. According to him, as the dreams are due to *Vāsanās*<sup>8</sup> acquired during the waking state, there are similarities between the latter and the dream state. (Sivananda 2008, 337) (*Ś. Br. Bh.*, III.ii.6) (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 98-99)

(Madhvananda 2012, 43) In the dream state, the inner organ assumes the nature of both the seer and the seen like a flower-pot which produces the impression of flowers without having any in it. (Ś. Āt., III.8) (Jagadananda 2013, 39)

However, Śaṅkara passingly alludes to the dreams which represent good and evil (*dharmādharma*) of feature without further explanation. In the *Upadeśasāhasri*, chapter 14, *svapna-smṛti prakaranam* (on dreams and memory), he tries to make a distinction between *Ātmā* and *Ahaṅkāra*, pointing to the two experimental modes of dreaming and memory retrieval, in both of which the mind is the subject of perception. According to him, dreaming and memory retrieval are largely similar to each other; they both present to the mind the contents which have been already experienced in the waking state. Therefore, the nature of *Ātmā* can be obtained in none of these experiences:

Just as dreams appear to be true as long as one does not wake up, so, the identification of oneself with the body etc. and authenticity of sense-perception and the like in the waking state continue as long as there is no Self-knowledge ... It is the reason that becomes the instrument, the object, the agent, actions and their results in dream. It is known to be so in the waking state also. The Seer [i.e. the Self] is therefore, different from the reason ... The impressions arising on account of the contact of the mind with the object known in the waking state are perceived like objects in memory and dream. So, the body, the mind and their impressions are different from the Self as they are objects of perception. (Ś. Up., XI,5, XIV,8, XIV,49) (Jagadananda 2012, 117, 138, 150)

As mentioned above, Gaudapāda and Śaṅkara, referring to the quoted passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, had been seeking for a scriptural proof to show that dreams are solely made by the mind and they have no correspondence with the waking state, still less to the deeper states of consciousness. Contrastingly, Rāmānujācārya, referring to the same Upaniṣadic passage, maintains that observations in a dream are created by the will of God:

[With reference to the state of dreaming] the *Śruti* says, "There are no chariots in that state, no horses, no roads; then he creates chariots, horses and roads ... For he is the creator." The question is whether this creation is accomplished by the individual soul (*jīva*), or by the Supreme Lord. (*R. Br. Bh.* III,ii.1) (Thibaut 1962, 601) (Vireswarananda and Adidevananda 2012, 330-331)

According to *Brahmasūtras*, "dream has a *māyā* nature (*māyāmātram*)". Rāmānuja comments:

The creation in dreams [chariots, lotus tanks, and so on] are created by the Supreme Person (*Parama-Puruṣa*) and it is merely His *Māyā*. It is *Māyā* insofar as the term denotes wonderful things ... not insofar as it is illusion ... it is not possible for the soul in bondage to create objects in dreams. The person mentioned in the *Śruti* [*Br. Up.*, IV.iii.10 and *Ka. Up.* II.ii.8] is not the individual soul but the Supreme Self. (*R. Br. Bh.* III,ii.3) (Thibaut 1962, 602) (Vireswarananda and Adidevananda 2012, 331-332)

As he states, dream is a micro scene of Heaven and Hell:

The things seen by an individual soul in its dreams therefore are specially created by the Supreme Person for the retribution of the soul—whether reward or punishment—for deeds of minor importance. (*R. Br. Bh.* III,ii.5) (Thibaut 1962, 603) (Vireswarananda and Adidevananda 2012, 333)

Another reason why dreams are created by God and not individual soul is that some dreams have a prophetic nature, the fact that is approved by the *Śruti*:

[According to the *Śruti*,] dreams are prophetic of future good or ill fortune. ["When a man engaged in some work undertaken for some special wish sees a woman in his dream, he may infer success from his dream vision." (*Ch. Up.* V.ii.8)] Those also who understand the science of dreams teach that dreams foreshadow good and evil fortune. But that which depends on one's own wish can have no prophetic quality. Hence the creation of the dream world can be

the Lord's work only. (*R. Br. Bh.* III,ii.6) (Thibaut 1962, 604) (Vireswarananda and Adidevananda 2012, 333)

Madhvācārya, in the creation of dreams, acknowledges the roles of both the will of God and the individual (*jiva*). He believes that *Vāsanās* (see ft. n. 6) are material causes (*upādāna kāraṇa*) and the will of God is efficient cause (*nimitta kāraṇa*) in the creation of dreams. According to him, *Vāsanās* are not limited to the waking state of the present life and sensual perceptions, as Śāṅkara asserts (*Ś. Āt.*, I.17) (Jagadananda 2013, 11), but, more consistent to the Hindu beliefs, they are extended to the time prior to this life and he refers to them as 'beginningless'. Therefore, even untrue dreams, according to Madhva, are real and their untruthfulness is not on account of the unreality of dream but on account of wrong identification of objects of the dream and waking states. (Sharma 1986, 227-228) He writes in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtras*:

The Lord solely at his pleasure makes the soul see the impressions stored in the mind (*Vāsanās*) that has no beginning; he does not create with any other means or out of any other material ... This is said in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāna*: "the Supreme Lord shows, at His will, to the individual soul only the impressions imbedded in the mind"; and this state is called 'Dreaming'. To think of them as the things of the waking state is the wrong notion; and this error of identifying dream creation with the things of the waking state is proved by the very difference of its character. As the things of this creation have no forms of perceptible dimensions, they cannot be things made out of any other material. (*M. Br. Bh.*, III,ii,3) (Rau 1904, 183-184)

In summary, dreams are considered mostly as being demonic in the *Vedas*. However, a multidimensional symbolism of the 'good dream' is presented in the *Atharvaveda*. The Upaniṣadic approach to oneirology is relatively detailed. Dreams, in the *Upaniṣads* symbolically represents both *māyā* and the intermediary state of being, intermediary between the gross state of waking and the formless state of deep sleep. According to Gaudapādācārya, Śāṅkarācārya, and the school of Advaita Vedānta the waking and dream states, unlike the deeper state of dreamless sleeping, are

equally inconsiderable due to their unreal nature. In the opinion of Rāmānujācārya and the school of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, dreams are all caused by the will of God who grants him a glance of reward and retribution of his deeds. Among these dreams, some, again by the will of God, are prophetic of future events. Finally, Madhvācārya and the school of Dvaita Vedānta, in the creation of dreams, endorse on both the will of God as the efficient cause and *Vāsanās* as the material cause, which are acquired not only in the present life but also from the times prior to that.

As a final note, let us mention that a comparative study of this subject grants one the ability to draw many interesting conclusions. In a comparative-religious study of dreams, Vedāntic teachings are of very important value. Explicitness of the teachings in considering the dream state as intermediary between the gross and the formless states and its close relation to the subtle body can help one, in many respects, to trace the true meaning of the ideas in other esoteric traditions, especially those of Daoism and Sufism. Likewise, in Vedāntic debates on oneirology, a comparative view is required to have the philosophical assertions clarified and even fairly judged.

### Abbreviations

- Br. Up. → Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad  
 Ch. Up. → Chāndogya Upaniṣad  
 G. Kā. → Gauḍapāda Kārikā  
 Ka. Up. → Kaṭha Upaniṣad  
 M. Br. Bh. → Madhvācārya's commentary on Brahmasūtras  
 Mā. Up. → Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad  
 R. Br. Bh. → Rāmānujācārya's commentary on Brahmasūtras  
 Ś. Mā. Up. → Śāṅkarācārya's commentary on Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad  
 Ś. Br. Bh. → Śāṅkarācārya's commentary on Brahmasūtras  
 Ś. Āt. → Ātmajñānopadesavidhi  
 Ś. Up. → Upadeśasāhasri

## Notes

1. In all the schools of Vedānta, the *Upaniṣads* are known as one of the trilogy of principal Vedāntic texts (*prasthāna-traya*), the oldest and the most fundamental of them, indeed. Moreover, along with Vedic *mantras*, the *Upaniṣads* are known as *Brahmavidya* (lit. knowledge of Brahman) which constitute the highest knowledge of Hinduism.
2. This term has an interesting etymological lineage. In Indo-European languages, those words that denote the vision during sleeping time are mostly derived from two different roots in the Proto-Indo-European language; first, *dhreugh* the first meaning of which is to deceive, and second, *swep* and *sup*, the first meaning of which is to sleep. From the root of *dhreugh* there are derivations such as English *dream*, German *traum* (dream, deception) from Proto-Germanic *draugmaz* (to deceive, injure, damage), and Sanskrit words from the root of *duh-* (to injure, demon, deception), etc. From the root of *swep* or *sup* there are derivations such as Old English *swefn*, Latin *somnium*, Greek *hupnos*, Sanskrit *svapna*, etc. The term *duḥsvapna*, thus, is a combination of two words from both of the mentioned roots.
3. “A hero of divine or semi-divine nature who with various other attributes was a dragon slayer and associated with water and the purifying powers of water.” (Barnett 1928, 145)
4. See also Sri Aurobindo’s commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Aurobindo 2001, 275-287) where he expertly explains various aspects of this connection. “It must always be borne in mind,” Coomaraswamy says, “that ‘horse’—as in other traditions also ‘camel’—and ‘chariot’ are interchangeable symbols of the psycho-physical complex on which Ātman stands or in which it is seated.” (Coomaraswamy 1942) (See the same source on the connection between ‘horse’ and ‘sun’).
5. Time of dreams, in fact, is solely a subjective (*citta-kāla*, individual) or imaginary time (*kalpanā-kāla*) when there is no objective (*dvaya-kāla*) or measurable time (*bheda-kāla*). See Śaṅkarācārya’s commentary on the *Gauḍapāda Kārikā* (ii,14) (Nikhilananda 1952, 260) (Nakamura 2004, 225).
6. These are the same numbers as what are ascribed to the waking state, since their perceptual faculties of both are the same although different in degree of development. (*Mā. Up.* III) (Guénon 2001, 94)
7. Let us touch on the point, from a comparative-religious point of view, that this principle is the origin of the “Universal Breath”, and thus closely related to the subtle states of the Heavens.

8. *Vāsanās* are subtle forms of habits and desires imprinted on the sub-consciousness. Their seeds are implanted in the “principal body” (*kāraṇaśarīra*) and they grow in perceptual faculties of the “subtle body” (*sūkṣmaśarīra*).

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