

***Suṣupti* and the Structure of Witness Consciousness: Rethinking Embodied Subjectivity in the *Māṇḍūkya* *Upaniṣad*²⁴**

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Abstract

This paper examines the Self as the foundational condition of subjectivity and as the non-objectifiable ground of conscious experience. Although, concepts like, Consciousness and embodied subjectivity are primarily attended within the Western philosophical fashion, particularly, in the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, but similar philosophical insights can be found in Indian traditions and its use as a concept is ages old, which is found in Upaniṣads' teachings, such as Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, etc. This paper primarily investigates the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad and undertakes a philosophical inquiry into the Suṣupti state, as documented in this Upaniṣad to highlight the concept of the Self, which is beyond subjectivity.

Keywords: Witness-Consciousness; *Suṣupti*; Wholesome nature of Consciousness; *Mulāvidyā*; Near-death experience

1. Introduction

Modern philosophical, psychological, neuroscientific and various other cognitive studies, which are concerned with the human experience treat subjectivity as the center of human experience and assume it is responsible for perception, interpretation and analysis of given object. However, several Indian philosophical traditions and texts discuss a concept of the Self that exists beyond the framework of subjectivity and human - world interaction. The concept of Subjectivity, especially

²⁴ Parts of this article are adapted from the author's doctoral thesis, "*The Problematic of the Self and its Subject Object Predicatability: A Phenomenological Study of the Suṣupti mode of the Self in the Light of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad.*" PhD dissertation. ([University of Delhi], [2026]).

embodied Subjectivity immediately situates the discussion within Western phenomenology. Although, the subject-object based knowledge is strongly associated with Western phenomenology, the concerns underlying it have long been addressed in Indian *Upaniṣadic* period. While, in the West, the center of experience (Consciousness) is about opinionated ego which works as an agent in the act of experience.²⁵ Indian philosophical traditions, especially, *Upaniṣadic* philosophy discusses this concept in layers; it treats the witness of experience and ego (I) as two different entities working together to make experience possible. Western studies of the Consciousness frequently attempt to situate it within the brain of human and proceed to study it with this understanding only. In contrast, the *Upaniṣadic* perspective on Consciousness is based on the notions of eternality and omnipresence.²⁶ It does not localize Consciousness within any specific physical or mental framework.²⁷ According to the *Upaniṣads*, Consciousness is understood all-pervasive. To further elucidate and highlight the concept of the Self beyond Subjectivity, this paper engages with the teachings of *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*.

Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad offers a distinctive account of the concept of Consciousness and its different modes, approaching it in a manner largely absent from Western phenomenological discussions. In contrast to dominating Western philosophical accounts on the concept of

²⁵“Edmund Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, after an initial skepticism about the existence of an ego (*Ich* or *I*), defended the idea that Consciousness involved a pure ego,” see, Stefano Vincini and Shaun Gallagher, “The phenomenology of egoic and non-egoic Consciousness,” In K. Brown and M. Leary (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Hypo-egoic Phenomena*, (2016), pp. 31-46.

²⁶ The idea of the Self as eternal and all-pervading is highly celebrated among several *Upaniṣads* like, *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (1.1.1-1.3.12), *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.17, 2.22), see, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, translated by S. Radhakrishnan. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1953), pp. 515-520, 616-618.

²⁷ “O Maghavan, mortal, verily is this body. It is held by death. But it is the support of that deathless, bodiless Self. Verily, the incarnate Self is held by pleasure and pain. Verily, there is no freedom from pleasure and pain do not touch one who is bodiless,” see, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.12.1. see, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp. 508

Consciousness²⁸, *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* treats the Consciousness in all its modes, not just the phenomenological lived experience but it also provides the absence of subjectivity in the state of Oneness.²⁹ This *Upaniṣad* discusses multiple dimensions in which the concept of Consciousness can be understood, articulated and brought into existence.

2. Witness-Consciousness (*Sākṣīn*) in Indian Phenomenology

The Self is a layered and nuanced concept in Indian Phenomenology. It is not merely a concept confined to an entity projected towards the world to witness what comes to it; rather it encompasses multiple layers—such as ego, body, witness—and extends into the involvement of the social construct to become a person. It is a complex concept with multiple layers of senses embodied within it, where each layer reveals a different ontological status of the existence. As put by Jessica Frazier, “As a conscious agent, the Self is interwoven into multiple fabrics, that constitute the universe.”³⁰ This term “Self” can be used in different senses, from Ultimate reality to individual Self. In *Upaniṣadic* tradition, usage of terms like *Brahman*, *Ātman*, *Jīva* are commonly found for the concept of the Self. This can be easily understood by the categorization done by Jessica Frazier in her book, *Hindu Worldviews: Theories of Self, Ritual and Divinity*.³¹ She identifies basically three categories of Consciousness, namely, Open Consciousness, Core Consciousness and Pure Consciousness which helps to translate this complex idea of the Self into a framework more easily comprehensible for the seekers, especially the Western readers.

²⁸ Accounts of Brentano, Husserl, etc., which claim Consciousness is always intentional towards object, for more details, see, Martina Reuter, “Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Pre-Reflective Intentionality,” *Synthese* Vol. 118, No. 1 (1999), pp. 69–88.

²⁹ *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* verse 5, 6, 7, see, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp. 696-699.

³⁰ Jessica Frazier, *Hindu Worldview: Theories of Self, Ritual and Divinity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 31-40

³¹ *Ibid.*

a.) It begins with the Self as Pure Consciousness, which is unaffected by any association with the world”³² She further explains, “Self as pure, disengaged, substratum of all, beginningless, unborn, eternal, all-pervading being is recommended since *Vedic* times till systematic period in various texts in Indian philosophy.”³³ This concept initially found in *Rg-Veda* and called as *Tad-Ekum*,³⁴ etc. Later on, the same concept is adopted by the various *Upaniṣads* and is developed as the concept of the Ultimate reality, i.e., *Brahman*. This Self is conceptualized as attribute less and Self-subsistent underlying foundation for the whole creation.

b.) Moving from the transcendental aspect of the Self to the immanent aspect, i.e., the Self as Open Consciousness, which is understood as deeply engaged in the world and continuous with it”³⁵ and often identified as *Jīva*. J.N. Mohanty in his book, ‘The Self and its Other’ discusses this multilayered structure of the individual Self (*Jīva*). According to his analysis, the indexical pronoun ‘I’ is not a simplified concept but has multiple layers to it, starting from the subject pole, ego, the Self to person.³⁶ Moreover, in the *Upaniṣadic* traditions, the concept of the Self cannot be reduced to the subject pole of an experience alone. Its role is not limited to the viewership only, but along with the role of experiencing, it is agency, and it is also responsible for the embodiment of the *Ātman*. As beautifully quoted by Radhakrishnan, “The *Jīva* is the *Ātman* in association with *ajñāna*,”³⁷ also called as “*Avidyā-Avicchinna-Chaitanya*.”³⁸ It comprises of intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*ahaṁkāra*), mind

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *The Hymns of the Rg-Veda*. Vol. 2, translated by Ralph Griffith, ed.2. (Benares: E.J. Lazarus & Co., 1897), pp. 575.

³⁵ Jessica Frazier, *Hindu Worldview: Theories of Self, Ritual and Divinity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 31-40.

³⁶ J.N. Mohanty, *The Self and its Other: Philosophical Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 73.

³⁷ See, Radhakrishnan. *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Second edition, Eighth impression (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931/ 1958), pp. 596.

³⁸ “*avidyāvicchinna tu jīvaḥ*” (2), in, *Vedānta Sangraha of Bellamkonda Ramaraya*, translated by A. Narayana (Sri Ramanama Kshetram, 1998), pp. 1.

(*manas*), memory or thought (*citta*), collectively called *antaḥkaraṇa*. All these are necessary for the functioning of a subject and make an object of experience available for the viewership. All these actions are made possible by core Consciousness i.e. *Ātman*, which is explained further.

c.) The third and the last category mentioned by Frazier is the Self as Core Consciousness, which may interact with the world but stands in counter-point to it.³⁹ The concept of the Self as Core Consciousness, which is usually called as *Ātman* in *Upaniṣadic* philosophy, is beyond all those entities which are *Jaḍa* in nature i.e., body, *antaḥkaraṇa*, etc. As it is discussed in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* that *Ātman* is the owner of chariot, body is chariot, *buddhi* is charioteer, senses are horses and objects are the path over which chariot is running.⁴⁰ This Core Consciousness is explained repeatedly as seer, knower, source of knowledge, guiding force.⁴¹ But, when this *Ātman* comes in association with *upādhis*, it becomes conditioned and called *Jīvātman* as mentioned above. Although, this is in association with the empirical I, but *Ātman* is always beyond its empirical identity. It transcends bodily, psychological (5 Sheaths)⁴² attributes of *jīva*. In this framework, *Ātman* is attributed as witness, knower, source of all cognition, it serves as foundational principle for all our experiences.

Although, these three categories belong to different senses, but these ultimately point toward a common underlying reference. Despite their differences in usages, there exists a shared conceptual core or essence that unifies all these i.e., *Cit* (Consciousness).⁴³ The concept of Consciousness serves as the illumination ground for all sort of experiences. It makes possible for object of experience to become

³⁹ Jessica Frazier, *Hindu Worldview: Theories of Self, Ritual and Divinity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 31-40.

⁴⁰ (KaU 1.3.3-9), *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp.623-625.

⁴¹ (BaU 3.4.2); (BaU 4.3.1-6); (ChU 5.1.12), *Ibid*, pp.220, 254-256, 423.

⁴² (TU 2.1.1-2.5.1), *Ibid*, pp. 541-547.

⁴³ Karuna. *The Problematic of the Self and its Subject Object Predicatability: A Phenomenological Study of the Suṣupti mode of the Self in the Light of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. PhD dissertation, University of Delhi, 2026.

manifest and it is due to the presence of Consciousness that the experiences are possible. Within the tradition under consideration i.e., *Kevala-Advaita-Vedānta*, this principle is considered as constant and ever-present reality. However, few Indian traditions like *Nyāya* school of philosophy, it is understood as a principle that comes and goes from embodied existence, based on the contact between senses and the object.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Consciousness is closely associated with existence itself. Both Consciousness and existence are not treated as separate or independent concepts, rather both these are understood as inseparable. As a constant presence, this principle persists throughout all modes of experience and does not require any other entity to exist. Such as, in Western traditions, body is essential for the witnessing, and there is no access to world without embodiment,⁴⁵ and the Self is always intentional, relational and finite.⁴⁶ Subject and world are intertwined.⁴⁷ No absolute separation between the two is talked about. On contrary, *Kevala-Advaita-Vedānta* demonstrates that the world is ultimately *mithyā* and Consciousness is independent of the world or any other entity.⁴⁸ It is taught that the constant witness does not need gross body for witnessing.⁴⁹ Although, the concept of subjectivity stays within lived experience, but *Kevala-Advaita-Vedānta* shows through the concept of *Suṣupti* that Consciousness is not limited to the lived experience. Indian

⁴⁴ *buddhiḥ upalabdhiḥ jñānam iti anarthāntaram* (Nyaya Sutra 1.1.15); *pratyakṣalakṣaṇānupapattih asamagravacanāt {pratyakṣalakṣaṇa-} {pratyakṣalakṣaṇaparīkṣā}* (Nyaya Sutra 2.1.21), in *The Nyāya Sūtrās of Gotama*, trans. Vidyabhuṣana. (Allababad: The Pāṇini Office, 1913), pp.6, 29.

⁴⁵ According to M. Merleau-Ponty, Intentionality is not mental representation at all, but skilful bodily responsiveness and spontaneity in direct engagement with the world. To perceive is not to have inner mental states, but to be familiar with, deal with, and find our way around in an environment. Perceiving means having a body, which in turn means inhabiting a world.” For more details, see, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. X.

⁴⁶ Reuter, “Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Pre-Reflective Intentionality,” 1999, pp. 69–88.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ “*Brahma satyaṁ, jaganmīthyā. jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*” (Brahmajñānavālimāla, 20), in, Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya. *Brahmajñānavālimāla*, translated by S.N. Sastri (Vedanta Spiritual Library, 2023), <https://www.celextel.org/adi-sankara/brahma-jnanavali-mala/>. This philosophy has always been supplied by *Upaniṣadic* traditions, such as in *Tat tvam asi* (ChU 6.8.7), in *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1968, pp. 458.

⁴⁹ However, Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity tries to reach a deeper level beneath empirical ego.

tradition especially, philosophy of *Kevala-Advaita-Vedānta* is centered on the concept of ultimate reality and its identification with the individuated embodied Self. Although, it deals with the subjectivity but also maintains its claim that subjectivity is merely an effect of *mulāvidyā* and the real Self is beyond this subjective and objective framework. This is well documented in the work i.e., *Dṛg Drśya Vivēka*.

rūpaṃ drśyaṃ locanaṃ drk taddrśyaṃ drktu mānasam

drśyā dhīvṛttayah sākṣī drgeva na tu drśyate (Dṛg Drśya Vivēka 1)

Translation: The form is perceived and the eye is its perceiver. It (eye) is perceived and the mind is its perceiver. The mind with its modifications is perceived and the Witness (the Self) is verily the perceiver. But, It (the Witness) is not perceived (by any other).⁵⁰

Now, in the above verse, it is stated that the Witness Consciousness i.e., *Sākṣīn* is the ultimate perceiver and the subject, everything else is its objects including, mind, senses etc., but this *Sākṣīn* can never be the object of any other entity because it is self-luminous (*Svayam-Prakāśa*) and does not need further witness to exist or to be witnessed. If this witness requires another witness to exist then, it will lead to the problem of *infinite regress*. As discussed above, it is the ultimate illuminator which illuminates every other entity and hence, just like a source of light it does not need any other source of light to be seen or witnessed. This demonstrates that witness is constant, eternal in nature and independent of any other entity, unlike the concept of subject in Western tradition. The two notions are not mutually exclusive of each other. The Self and subjectivity are interconnected in the way that subject and object, both the poles of an experience are nothing but the Self in itself, as defined in the *Vedānta Paribhāṣā*, a text for *Kevala-Advaita-Vedānta* epistemology. According to the *VP*, in an experience the same Consciousness manifests

⁵⁰*Dṛg-Drśya-Viveka: An Inquiry into the nature of the "Seer" and the "Seen"*, text, with English translation and Notes by Swami Nikhilananda with a foreword by V. Subrahmanya Iyer (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Asrama, 1931), pp. 2.

into three kinds of entities namely, as subject, as object and as knowledge.

*tathāhi trividhaṃ caitanyam -viṣayacaitanyam pramāṇacaitanyam
pramāṭṛcaityaṃ ceti (Vedānta Paribhāṣā)*

Translation: Consciousness is threefold—as associated with the object (*viṣaya*), with the means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and with the subject or knower (*pramāṭṛ*).⁵¹

That’s why Consciousness always present, despite of no intentional experience, object etc. Ego not identical to the Witness Consciousness. *Kevala-Advaita-Vedānta* gives example of *Suṣupti* (from the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*) to demonstrate that the Subjectivity is different from the constant and eternal concept of Witness-Consciousness.

A. An Overview of the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*

This *Upaniṣad* is in itself a phenomenological enquiry to establish the Objective reality and embodied Self in an identity relation. Its central claim is that “Everything is *Brahman*, and this *Ātman* is *Brahman*.”⁵² This whole thesis of identification relies on the concept of the Oneness. The text approaches this identification through the phenomenological exploration of different modes of the Consciousness and later declares the underlying presence of the ultimate reality beyond the subject-object notion. The entire text is structured in two main parts, it begins by central thesis, then followed by the argument to strengthen it. For this, it provides total 12 verses in which this *Upaniṣad* describes each mode of the Consciousness in first half of the *Upaniṣad*. Later on, it takes up a different method for its task of identification i.e., defining it in the parameters of *Omkāra*. The text ultimately demonstrates that the notion

⁵¹ *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā of Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra*, translated by Swāmī Mādhavānanda. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), pp. 13, 14.

⁵² “*sarvaṃ hyetaḍ brahma ayamātmā brahma so’yamātmā catuspāt*” (Verse 2), *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*, translated by Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 474. Translation from, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp. 695.

of fragmented or embodied Consciousness is not beyond or other than the objective Ultimate reality, i.e., *Brahman*.

With this conceptual groundwork established, we are now in a position to address the four modes and their interconnectedness. Consciousness is defined in different modes in this *Upaniṣad*, starting from the embodied Consciousness which is engaged with the outer objects, then inner object, then a unique potential form of Consciousness is introduced, and lastly, all these modes of Consciousness are disregarded while approaching the ultimate reality. *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, (the croaking of a frog), often seen as the metamorphosis.⁵³ It changes and moves forward for the development. It begins with the inquiry of the Subjectivity as seen in waking state and moves forward to the elimination of Subjectivity from the notion of the Self. The first face of this Self is the active phase, which experiences the world as an object and participates in the experience. It uses its limbs and organs⁵⁴ to engage with the outer world. Next, the dream Consciousness is engaged with the subtle objects of our mental perceptions. Next is the passive phase of Consciousness. According to this *Upaniṣad*, the Selfhood is not limited to the subject and object interaction and hence, it explains the Selfhood beyond this subject-object framework in its third state, which is called the state of *Suṣupti* (state of dreamless deep sleep). The Self is known as *Prājña* in this state as it is ‘knower of all’⁵⁵, at the same time it is called ignorant one as it is deprived of any reflective Consciousness.⁵⁶ This face of Consciousness (the Self without Subjectivity) is often absent from Western phenomenological studies. The last state, which is discussed by this *Upaniṣad* is *Turiya* (the fourth). This state is beyond Subjectivity, but not phenomenology. It is clearly stated in the *Upaniṣad* (Verse 7) that

⁵³ Nanditha Krishna, *Sacred animals of India* (India: Penguin, 2014).

⁵⁴ “*Saptāṅga ekonaviṁśati-mukhaḥ*” (verse 3), *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp. 695.

⁵⁵ (Verse 6), *The Early Upaniṣads*, translated by Patrick Olivelle, 1998, pp. 474.

⁵⁶ Reflective Consciousness is that Self-awareness which includes the judgement, predication and conceptual reflection, it is found in works of Husserl, Sartre, etc.

it is neither internal nor external, neither mass of Consciousness nor fragmented Consciousness, etc., but it is oneness, underlying in all the experiences,⁵⁷ discussed above, this step is distinctive in *Upaniṣadic* philosophy, where it discusses phenomenology in the absence of Subjectivity. It is pure Consciousness, which is not engaged with the world, not different from the world, its existence is the only mark which can be asserted about it.⁵⁸

Having discussed all the modes of the Self, one thing we get to know that there is one common notion among all these modes, one entity which has been always there to make this flow continuous, and which is constantly witnessing the subject and object, both the poles of an experience, and that entity is mode neutral Witness Consciousness (*Sākṣīn*).⁵⁹

B. *Suṣupti* in *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*

Within the framework of Indian phenomenology, the concept of *Suṣupti* assumes a distinctive role of demonstrating that the witness Consciousness (*sākṣīn*) is beyond the subjectivity. The state of *Suṣupti* is well documented in the verse 5 of *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*.

yatra supto na kañcana kāmam kāmāyate na kañcana svapnam paśyati tat suṣuptam. suṣuptasthāna ekībhūtaḥ prajñānaghana evānandamayō hyānandabhuk cetomukhaḥ prajñāstrīyaḥ pādaḥ (MaU 5)

Translation: Where one, being fast asleep, does not desire any desire whatsoever and does not see any dream whatsoever, that is deep sleep. The third quarter is *Prājñā*, whose sphere (of activity) is the state of deep sleep, who has become one, who is verily, a mass of cognition, who is

⁵⁷ (Verse 7), *The Early Upaniṣads*, translated by Patrick Olivelle, 1998, pp. 474.

⁵⁸ *Sat-Cit-Ananda*, “*ānandādaya pradhānasya*” (BSB 3.3.11), translates as, Bliss and other characteristics of the principal entity (i.e., *Brahman*) are to be combined, in, *Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, translated by Swami Gambhirananda (India: Advaita Ashrama, 1965/1972), pp. 663.

⁵⁹ Albahari in his paper, used this expression for the Witness Consciousness. See, Miri Albahari, “Witness-Consciousness: Its Definition, Appearance and Reality.” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2009): pp. 62-84.

full of bliss and who enjoys (experiences) bliss, whose face is thoughtful.

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A closer analysis of the above verse reveals that the state of *Suṣupti* is a non-dual state of Consciousness, where the perception and conception both are absent. In the state of *Suṣupti*, the Self is constant and without the presence of any differentiation of subject and object. The embodied subjectivity i.e., *jīva* is absent in this state, as it is defined as a mass of Consciousness instead of conscious of something. There is no particularized knowledge in this state. In order to examine this state in depth, this section divide the verse into parts and analyze each aspect so that the Self of *Suṣupti* which exists without subjectivity can be established on analytical grounds.

- I. *Na kañcana kāmam kāmāyate, na kañcana svapnam paśyati* (desires no desire, sees no dreams whatsoever): These two expressions used in opening of the verse should not be understood merely as negations, but both these expressions are deeply philosophical in nature. The intention of the author to use these two expressions in the very opening of the description of this state of *Suṣupti* is to demonstrate how this state of *Suṣupti* is radically distinct from previous two states. This denies the presence of perception as well as conception in their ordinary form in the state of *Suṣupti*. Experience is generally either an outer experience or inner experience; this verse denies both these to establish the Self of *Suṣupti* beyond dualistic framework of knowledge.
- II. *Ekī-bhūtaḥ* (who has become one): This expression implies the Oneness in this state, where all the fragments of dual framework (like in waking and dream mode) merge and this state appears as a unified Consciousness, where all the fragments of subject and object is merged into the Witness Consciousness, which is eternal

⁶⁰ *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1953, pp. 696.

and substantial. This state is interesting as it shows a unique wholesome nature of the seer. The seer here is from the under layered i.e., the Self (eternal witness). Here, the seen and seer becomes numerically one.⁶¹ “Deep sleep represents the greatest degree of unification of the Subject possible in phenomenological experience.”⁶²

- III. *Prajñānaghaṇaḥ* (a mass of cognition/Consciousness): The term *Prajñānaghaṇaḥ* to describe the state is aptly used here by the author, and knowing that this is state appears to be the state of ignorance, the use of this terminology becomes even more philosophically intriguing. Both the expressions are contradictory as one describes the Self of this state as knower of all and other calls the Self-ignorant. This tension in expressions is not accidental or overlooked by the author of the *Upaniṣad*, rather it seems deliberate attempt of the author to explain this unique state where, all the fragments are latently present but none can be actively expressed. Hence, it is knower of all as well as ignorant. The presence of *mulāvidyā*, explains further the underlying reason for the ignorance of the Self here. “As at night, owing to the indiscrimination produced by darkness, all (percepts) become a mass (of darkness) as it were, so also in the state of deep sleep all (objects) of Consciousness, verily, become a mass of Consciousness”⁶³ Despite of the presence of Consciousness, the *mulāvidyā* which is the cause for the dualistic framework, is present here with its effect.

⁶¹ *Dṛg-Drśya-Viveka: An Inquiry into the nature of the “Seer” and the “Seen”*, text, with English translation and Notes by Swami Nikhilananda with a foreword by V. Subrahmanya Iyer (Mysore: Sri Ramakrishna Asrama, 1931).

⁶² William M Indich, *Consciousness in Advaita Vedānta* (India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), pp. 104.

⁶³ *The Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad with Gauḍapāda’s Kārikā and Śaṅkara’s Commentary*, translated & annotated by Swami Nikhilananda. (Advaita Ashrama, 1949/1987), pp. 23.

- IV. *Evānandamāyo hyānandabhuk* (full of bliss, experiences bliss): The word ‘Eva’ means alone or only,⁶⁴ which implies the absence of any other fragment except bliss in this Self. Here, this unified Consciousness is wholesome in nature *Pūrṇa*, which implies bliss. This bliss is the result of absence of duality, differentiated Consciousness. It emerges because duality exists here only in potential form. Therefore, the bliss which is said to be experienced by the Self here in this state should not be understood as an ordinary experience consisting subject-object framework. Rather, the Self itself is of the nature of bliss. Yet, despite this non-dual Consciousness, this state is not identified as the ultimate state. It becomes philosophically fascinating in the commentary of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, because he cautions the seeker that the present form of bliss is not ultimate form of Bliss yet.⁶⁵ The reason behind this is the presence of *mulāvidyā* in *Suṣupti*. For the presence of ultimate Bliss, the duality must be destroyed but here due to presence of *mulāvidyā* (which is the cause of dual world), this duality is restored as the effect of this causal *mulāvidyā* in upcoming states of waking and dream. In other words, this verse appears to suggest that the state of *Suṣupti* is not the ultimate state yet and the Self can exist without subjectivity even without realizing its true nature i.e., *Brahman*.
- V. *Cetomukhaḥ* (whose face is thought): The term ‘face’ does not merely imply the appearance of the Self of this state but it has a philosophically dense interpretation that it provides the gateway to fragmented world of thought. Here, thought signifies the world of duality. In the earlier verses, describing waking and dream mode, the external organs for experience are well documented as “seven

⁶⁴ Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, 1899), pp. 232.

⁶⁵ *The Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad*, trans. Nikhilananda, 1949/1987, pp. 23.

limbs and nineteen mouths”, but in this state no such aids are mentioned for the experience, so here to avoid the misunderstanding, the concept of *Cetomukhaḥ* is introduced. As described by Swami Krishnananda in his translation on *MaU*, “it is the mouth of the sleeper through which bliss is being experienced.”⁶⁶

This careful evaluation of all the aspects related to the state of *Suṣupti* leads us to the conclusion that the constant seer in Indian phenomenology is not dependent on any of the empirical facet. Although, this perspective of the Self beyond just subjectivity has always been central to the Indian phenomenological studies. This ontological status of the Self acquired such intellectual authority within this tradition through the strength of the concept of *Suṣupti* that it was subsequently accepted in a largely unquestioned manner. No or very few researchers adopted this concept for their investigation within Indian *Vedāntic* philosophy. On the contrary, the contemporary researchers in the neuroscientific field have started massive discussion about this state and nature of Consciousness in few last decades. This line of thought and reasoning is called into question when scientific inquiries about the nature of Consciousness specifically in deep sleep points towards the factor of reportability.

The field of neuroscience is based on the study of brain activity and neural processes. Consequently, a few decades ago when Consciousness is examined within this field, is understood in terms of brain-based mechanisms. Several attempts are made to establish a theory about Consciousness through neural communication and brain functioning, but none is proven to be entirely definitive.

⁶⁶ *The Mandukya Upaniṣad: An Exposition*, translated by Swami Krishnananda (India: The Divine Society, 1996), pp. 85-89.

3. The case of *Suṣupti* challenges the default view of Neuroscience

While the previous section analyzed the *Upaniṣadic* perspective whose foundational assumption differ from the more recent field of Neuroscience. The present section examines the modern Neuroscientific understanding of Consciousness (seer). This distinctly different conceptual lens is the result of various theoretical contributions including theories like, NCC,⁶⁷ global broadcast⁶⁸, IIT,⁶⁹ etc., which have emerged through a long process of experimentation, empirical observation, numerous interviews with patients, etc. Although, these theories emerge from different timelines, contexts, etc., but the underlying constituent framework of all these theories is based on the intentionality model of Consciousness, which defines Consciousness with the relation to object only. The concept of subjectivity is comparatively very recent in this fields of Neuroscience, it began to engage with this concept only a few decades ago, its development can be traced from the work of Penfield⁷⁰ and followed by Koch through his theory of NCC, where for the very first time it was introduced in to the field of Neuroscience. These earlier works were influenced by developments in related disciplines like psychology, cognitive sciences, etc., to formulate a distinct perspective on this concept of Consciousness. According to James, the Consciousness is not an entity but a stream of thought, he says, “Within each personal Consciousness thought is sensibly continuous.”⁷¹ This model defines subjectivity as something which is objectual. This very belief is the foundation of Consciousness in Neuroscience. On the

⁶⁷ Francis Crick and Christof Koch. “Towards a Neurobiological Theory of Consciousness.” *Seminars in Neuroscience* Vol.2 (1990), pp. 263-275.

⁶⁸ Bernard J. Baars, *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 43.

⁶⁹ Giulio Tononi, *et al.* “Integrated information theory: from consciousness to its physical substrate.” *Nat Rev Neurosci* Vol. 17 (2016), pp. 450-461.

⁷⁰ The works by Penfield, can be marked as the foundation of neuroscience into the concept of Consciousness. For more details, see, Wilder Graves Penfield and L. Gage, “Cerebral Localization of Epileptic Manifestations,” *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry* Vol. 30 (1933), pp. 709-727.

⁷¹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1890), pp. 225.

contrary, in Indian *Vedāntic* knowledge system, Consciousness is not object dependent and *Suṣupti* is the classic example for its defense, as showed in previous section.

In the field of Neuroscience, the state of *Suṣupti* (deep sleep) is considered as devoid of Consciousness due to absence of reportability.⁷² The reportability is a major factor in establishing the level of awareness in these studies. For this, the studies of Neuroscience are dependent on the third person perspective; techniques like, EEG (electroencephalography), fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging), etc.,⁷³ which are used to detect the degree of awareness, present in the brain of a patient.⁷⁴ Out of these two methods, EEG is widely used in the brain mapping, EEG detectors basically record the frequencies of electrical activities of neurons in the form of brain waves. There are mainly five major brain waves, starting from the slowest frequency (which means reduced or no brain activity) i.e., Delta (1-4 Hz), followed by Theta (4-8 Hz), Alpha (8-13 Hz), Beta (13-30 Hz) and lastly the Gamma waves with the highest frequency range of (30-47.5 Hz).⁷⁵ On the basis of brain electrical activities and frequencies of these waves, as recorded by EEG⁷⁶, the sleep is explained in terms of five different stages, i.e., wake; N1, N2, N3-N4 (collectively called NREM)⁷⁷ and

⁷² Giulio Tononi, *et al.* "Consciousness and Sleep." *Neuron* Vol. 112 (2024), pp. 1568-1594.

⁷³ Karnig Kazazian, *et al.* "Functional Neuroimaging in Disorders of Consciousness: Towards Clinical Implementation," *Brain* Vol. 148 (2025), pp. 2283-2298.

⁷⁴ Human sleep and sleep pathology are defined based upon scalp recorded electrical potentials (EEG), which have provided seminal information on the changes of brain electrophysiology that are associated with sleep pathologies and pathologies that adversely affect sleep. In this issue, EEG and FMRI have been utilized to examine changes associated with pathologies of sleep. For more details, see, Xi-Jian Dai, *et al.* "EEG and fMRI for Sleep and Sleep Disorders—Mechanisms and Clinical Implications," *Frontiers in Neurology*. Vol. 12 (2021).

⁷⁵ Vytene Janiukstyte, *et al.* "Normative brain mapping using scalp EEG and potential clinical application," *Scientific reports* Vol. 13,1 (2023), 13442.

⁷⁶ "EEG is a noninvasive method for measuring the electrical activity of the cerebral cortex...It is measured using multiple electrodes that are placed on the scalp at multiple locations." For more details, please refer, Khalid Ali I. Aboalayon, *et al.* "Sleep Stage Classification Using EEG Signal Analysis: A Comprehensive Survey and New Investigation." *Entropy* Vol. 18, No. 9 (2016), pp. 272.

⁷⁷ "NREM Sleep consists of three stages (N1, N2, and N3), with N3 being the deepest stage", in, Adam Walker. "Sleep and its Impact on Brain Function: A Neuroscientific Perspective." *Perspective – Neuroscience and Psychiatry: Open Access* Vol. 7, No.6, (2024).

REM (Rapid Eye Movement).⁷⁸ A normal sequence of sleep stages starts with the wake, then light sleep consisting N1 and N2, followed by deep sleep (N3-N4), and finally REM stage. This whole sequence is called a sleep cycle. A normal human being in a normal night consists of such 6 sleep cycles, with duration of each cycle of 90 to 110 min.⁷⁹

1. The first stage of sleep is wakefulness, where beta and alpha waves are dominant.⁸⁰
2. The second stage is N1, this stage is a transition from wakefulness to sleep, with less alpha waves.⁸¹
3. In the third stage (N2), theta and delta waves are recorded.⁸²
4. Next, N3-N4 are dominant by delta waves, also known as slow waves.⁸³
5. Lastly, REM is wake like, but no alpha waves are measured here. It is densely formed by sawtooth waves (it is pattern, not a frequency like alpha, beta, etc.).⁸⁴

In the case of dreamless deep sleep, the abundant presence of slow frequency delta waves is recorded, which is an indication of reduced inputs and weak or no neural communication (which is supposed to generate Consciousness). Therefore, based on these reports, Neuroscience suggests the faded or no Consciousness in the state of deep sleep.⁸⁵ Not only neural reports, but the verbal reports of person in deep sleep is absent or very few instances are recorded. In other words, there are only a limited number of cases in which some experience is actually being recalled or reported. Tononi in his paper, “Consciousness and

⁷⁸ Aakash K. Patel, *et al.* “Physiology, Sleep Stages,” *StatPearls* (2026).

⁷⁹ Thomas Penzel, *et al.* “Dynamics of Heart Rate and Sleep Stages in Normals and Patients with Sleep Apnea.” *Neuropsychopharmacology* Vol. 28, No. S1 (2003), pp. S48–S53.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² *Ibid*

⁸³ *Ibid*

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

⁸⁵ Giulio Tononi and Marcello Massimini, “Why Does Consciousness Fade in Early Sleep?” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* Vol. 1129 (2008), pp. 330-334.

Sleep”, conducted a sleep sampling experiment with several participants. The verbal reports obtained from different stages of sleep demonstrated that ‘null’ reports of non-being in NREM stage (N3 -N4) is due the absence of Consciousness.⁸⁶ This correspondence between verbal reports and neural reports also seem to strengthen the hypothesis of no Consciousness in dreamless deep sleep. Hence, on the basis of the absence of neural and verbal responsiveness, Neuroscientists conclude that there is no Consciousness present in the deep sleep mode and Consciousness is something which goes away in deep sleep and comes back in waking state.⁸⁷

4. Discussion: Objections and Responses

Having discussed both the valuable perspectives about the nature of Consciousness, I, in this section attempt to create a dialogue between these two approaches. The first approach succeeds in highlighting the significance of the constant seer (the Self) above the embodied subjectivity, whereas the second foregrounds a more externalized understanding of the subjectivity and opted for the third person perspective in establishing it.

I. Reportability versus Experiential Presence

According to the Neuroscientific perspective, reportability is the primary factor in evaluation of the first-person perspective of the seer. On the contrary, the *Vedāntic* understanding of the seer is independent of reportability, and reportability in this evaluation seems to be overly emphasized. If, in Neuroscience, the presence of seer is dependent on the reflective Consciousness and reportability of the experience then, cases like blindsight experiment will be objection to it. In the case of Blindsight, the reportability is produced without being aware of that reported object. Blindsight (perception without awareness) —brain can

⁸⁶ Tononi. “Consciousness and Sleep”, 2024, pp. 1568-1594.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

process information without making it Conscious. A patient (D.B.) whose striate cortex from right hemisphere of the brain was removed in an operation became blind in his left half field, was able to detect locations of objects presented to him in his blindsight, despite of saying that he cannot see anything.⁸⁸ “I couldn’t see anything...Can you say how you guessed—what it was that allowed you to say whether it was vertical or horizontal?” ‘No, I could not because I did not see anything: I just don’t know.’⁸⁹ This case is the evidence for the non-significance of reportability in establishing the relation between reportability and Consciousness. “This divorce, or discrepancy, between the absence of conscious perception revealed by the “no” response (reported by the patients or demonstrated in the monkey) and the unconscious visual processing revealed by above chance guessing at AFC is, indeed, the hallmark of blindsight.”⁹⁰

Another candidate for contrast comes from the cases of sleepwalking. Windt in her paper says, “71% of patients reported at least one dream-like mentation associated with the sleepwalking/ sleep terrors episode”⁹¹ This suggests that when the brain functions are assumed to be at rest, such activities are being done without being aware about it. The patient can’t recall the activities, performed by him/her in the previous episode of sleep walking. This lack of reportability of cognitive mental activity paints the whole significance of reportability in different picture.

II. Localization versus all-pervasiveness

Although, Neuroscientific approach to establish brain-based model of Consciousness have offered significant insights into the relationship between brain activity and conscious experience, certain anomalous

⁸⁸ Lawrence Weiskrantz, *Blindsight: A Case Study and Implications*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 24.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ C. Aleci and Ketty Dutto, “Seeing the invisible: theory and evidence of blindsight” *Discover Medicine* Vol.1, No. 149 (2024).

⁹¹ For more details, Delphine Oudiette, *et. al.*” Dreamlike Mentation During Sleepwalking and Sleep Terrors in Adults,” *Sleep* Vol. 32 (2009), pp. 1621-1627.

cases continue to challenge this explanation. One such case is studied by John Lorber, where a patient of Hydrocephalus condition challenged the long-established view of brain-based Consciousness. “A 44- year- old civil servant from France was diagnosed with the excess of fluid in the brain. The scans showed that 90% of his brain is transformed into\ fluid only. The surprising factor is that this man showed no symptoms and he lived a regular life with normal range of IQ i.e., 70-75.”⁹² This uncommon case of minimal brain questions that: If Consciousness is generated by neural communication and brain activities then, how can so little brain produces normal Consciousness? This concept of all pervasive Consciousness can be further developed by considering the cases of Near-death experience (NDEs) in the next section.

III. Brain-Based Consciousness versus Wholesome Consciousness

While the last section of minimal brain cases challenged the assumption that Consciousness is generated through neural communications and brain activities, NDEs introduce an even more fundamental difficulty for brain-based model of Consciousness. In several reported cases of NDEs, patients have recalled the verbal exchange while their clinical measurable brain activity showed flatline on the monitor. For example, “One of the patients clearly remembered a nurse taking away his denture on a tray while his brain was apparently inactive...after waking up he even asked the nurse, ‘Hey, where did you take my denture’, to which nurse got shocked.”⁹³ According to Wolf, the brain activity in epileptic seizures also make patients to experience similar experiences like NDEs.”⁹⁴ “A few documented reports, including a review published in the reputable medical journal *The Lancet*, also describe people seemingly recollecting some events that happened in their hospital room while they

⁹² Louis Buckley, “The Man with a Hole in his Brain,” *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, (2007).

⁹³ Matthieu Ricard and Wolf Singer. *Beyond the Self: Conversations between Buddhism and Neuroscience*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), pp. 256, 257.

⁹⁴*Ibid*, pp. 258.

were in a coma with a flat EEG.”⁹⁵ Why it seems to challenge brain-based Consciousness? It occurs when brain activity is severely reduced.

Another instance comes from the autobiography of a Neurosurgeon, who himself experienced the NDE when he was attacked by a rare disease and went into coma for a week. He reported after recovering from illness and coma that he went into another world where several new experiences he had. All these experiences he narrated in his book “Proof of Heaven”, were reported to occur when the Consciousness was absent from his brain. He wrote, “Consciousness, but Consciousness without memory or identity-like a dream where you know what’s going on around you, but have no real idea of who, or what, you are.”⁹⁶ Along with these experiences, he mentioned one interesting fact of experiencing all these without possessing an immediate awareness of them. He puts it as:

“I didn’t have a body-not one that I was aware of anyway. I was simply...there, in this place of pulsing, pounding darkness. At the time, I might have called it “primordial.” But at the time it was going on, I didn’t know this word. In fact, I didn’t know any words at all. The words used here registered much later, when, back in the world, I was writing down my recollections.”⁹⁷

Although, such accounts remain controversial, these reports raise important philosophical questions concerning the dependency of presence of Consciousness on brain activities.

5. Concluding Remarks

The present study highlights the primacy and conceptual centrality of the constant seer (the Self) over the embodied subjectivity within Indian *Upaniṣadic* tradition, particularly in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*. The analysis further suggests that the presence of both the subject and object

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 256.

⁹⁶ Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s journey into the Afterlife*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), pp. 29.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

in a framework is completely dependent upon the Self. Although, this constant seer or the Self did not get much attention in the Western phenomenological fashion, Indian tradition provides the central position in its discussions. The analysis therefore calls for a reconsideration of theories of Consciousness which are dependent on the brain-based model. The concept of *Suṣupti* in *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* and its understanding of Consciousness challenges purely brain-based interpretations of Consciousness. The contrast between these two traditions and the literature gap between these two years apart traditions, my research attempts to bridge this gap in phenomenological studies. This revisit may offer alternative ways of understanding the nature of Consciousness and holistic nature of human existence.

The relationship between the Self and new contemporary brain-based Consciousness still demands deeper exploration. Given the limited scope of the present study, I, therefore conclude this analysis ultimately aligns more closely with the *Vedāntic* approach on the nature of seer, however, these tensions between contemporary brain-based approach to understand Consciousness and *Upaniṣadic* approach of “*sarvam khalv idam brahma*”⁹⁸ remains philosophically productive, and open new possibilities and directions for future interdisciplinary inquiries.

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⁹⁸“Verily, this whole world is *Brahman*” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1), ⁹⁸ *The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1913, pp. 391.

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