

The Four States of Waking, Dream, Deep Sleep and Turiya:
Their Centrality in Yoga and Meditation
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Our consciousness undergoes radical changes every day, manifesting and withdrawal with the rhythm of time as day and night. Yet because of the habitual nature of these changes, we have forgotten to notice these and instead take them casually as part of the ordinary course of our lives. By not looking into our daily states of consciousness, we miss uncovering the true mystery behind our existence. Yogic and Vedantic teachings back to the Vedas have examined these daily changes in consciousness carefully and show us how they can be used as doorways to transcendence and to cosmic awareness.

Our daily journey into consciousness is marked by notable fluctuations. Most important is our radical changes in awareness through the states of waking, dream and deep sleep. Yet even in the waking state our consciousness has many fluctuations through shifting patterns of sensation, emotion and thought, action and contemplation, work and enjoyment, relationship and solitude. Our waking state has its own moments of near dream, imagination and fantasy states, and near sleep or periods of dullness. Yet greater variations occur in dream and deep sleep.

In dream we lose our waking awareness, our conscious mind and drift into a state of heightened imagination, though beyond our personal control. In the dream state we do not know that we are dreaming. Nor do we remember our connection to the waking state until we wake up from dream. Our mind continues to be active in dream but according to impulses that we do not control. Meanwhile the body and senses are put to rest. Our dreams may be chaotic, incoherent and without consistency. Or they may present us a beauty, insight and inspiration far beyond the waking state.

In deep sleep the dream activity of the mind comes to an end and a deeper sleep state is reached, more inward than dream. We have no ordinary waking or dream activity in deep sleep, which we experience as a condition like space, darkness, the void, or a state of blankness. Yet there are many mysteries to the deep sleep state. In that state, both body and mind are renewed with subtle energies from within, coming out of the very stillness, silence and inaction that characterizes deep sleep. The brain itself is cleansed of toxins and blockages, including negative memory patterns, as modern science confirms.

Our waking state knows nothing directly of deep sleep, and only what of dream that we might happen to remember for a few moments upon waking. For deep sleep, we only have the sense when we wake up in the morning of having slept well. If we have disturbed dreams or wake up during the night, our restfulness from deep sleep is diminished.

Without adequate deep sleep physical and psychological immunity, resilience and harmony breaks down, leading to an eventual collapse of the entire organism. What is the nature of this healing power of deep sleep? According to Yoga and Vedanta it is because we return to the source of our being, the core eternal consciousness within us, which is not limited by external bodily factors.

Along with our consciousness, our prana also undergoes radical changes in the same manner. In the dream state our sense and motor organs are put to rest and our breath deepens. In deep sleep our breath becomes yet deeper and our prana more internalized. We lose direct control over our sense and motor organs in sleep. We are vulnerable to environmental forces and so must always sleep in a safe place. Our prana like our awareness shows a connection and a harmonization with hidden powers of deep sleep, which appears like a wellspring of vital energy.

The True Self Beyond Waking, Dream and Deep Sleep

Vedic thought speaks of the ultimate goal of Self-realization, a non-localized awareness beyond the constraints of ego, time, space and karma. It teaches us that our true Self dwells beyond the mind and is the witness of our thoughts. This Self-aware state is the secret core of our being behind the darkness and forgetfulness of deep sleep.

Relative to our daily journey into consciousness, we must realize that our true Self is not merely the self of the waking state. It is the Self or awareness behind all the three states of waking, dream and deep sleep. That inner essence of consciousness constitutes the fourth state or continuous state of immutable awareness. This is called Turiya or the Fourth in Vedantic thought, specifically in the *Mandukya Upanishad* that is oriented specifically to teaching us the nature of the four states and how to move through them.

Most of us identify our consciousness with our mental activity during the waking state, with dream as but a reflection of it. In Vedic thought, consciousness is defined as the awareness beyond the mind and body. Pure consciousness is not a type of mental activity as thought, emotion, sensation or memory. It is a state of presence, being, pure light and boundless space. This inner consciousness is beyond any conceptual content, name, form or number, description or definition. It has no external referent, objective quality or appearance. It is inherently beyond the entire manifest universe and all of its formations of matter, energy, life and mind. It is as the *Upanishads* declare, the unseen Seer, the unknown Knower.

The question arises whether this proposed witness consciousness behind the mind that endures through dream and deep sleep is something we can truly experience or is merely a mystical imagination. Yogis claim that if one cultivates concentration, meditation, focused and sustained attention, that one can experience this state simply and directly. In fact by practicing Yoga, mantra and meditation, we can easily increase our mental powers and gain the intuition of an eternal essence within us

that is not limited by time or space, birth or death. We can move into that ever wakeful witness that is not taken in by the transient appearances of the external world or the shifting contents of the mind.

For Meditators

So what does this mean practically for us as teaching Yoga, Ayurveda or meditation? The first thing to realize is that our Yoga sadhana or spiritual path is not merely an affair or consideration of the waking self. It belongs to our inner being that existed before the birth of this body and will continue beyond its end.

This understanding of the four states and the witness Self behind them indicates that our waking life is also but a dream. We have two states of dream as it were. The first is the dream state that is a personal and subjective dream of our own individual minds. The second is the waking state that is a collective and objective dream which we share with many other individual minds.

Yet more than this, our entire lives are a kind of sleep. While we know some things in life, there is much that we do not know. Most importantly we do not know the essence of our own being or the real meaning of our existence. Our mind and senses provide us only a superficial and limited knowledge bound by duality, error and ignorance. The darkness, ignorance and unknowing of the deep sleep state also colors and underlies the waking and dream states. Our waking consciousness is clouded in darkness, not knowing who we are, why we were born, when exactly our consciousness arose, and what will happen to us after death.

Normally we are obsessed with the physical body, the waking state and the waking ego, and seldom look behind these. Of course, biological, psychological and social necessities promote this waking state focus in a powerful manner. Even when we higher consciousness it is mainly in terms of the urges of the waking state. We have forgotten that our true Self is the Divine dreamer behind and beyond waking, dream and deep sleep.

For meditators, the most important consideration of this recognition of the four states of consciousness is that we should develop our meditation not simply in the waking state but through dream and deep sleep as well. We should not only look to promote the concerns of the self of the waking state or the waking ego, but address the concerns of the Self of all the four states, above all of our immortal soul that takes many births in many bodies and in many different types of worlds.

Meditation should be an awakening from the cosmic dream to the true reality and perpetual state of Divine waking, the unending day of the clear light of awareness. Meditation should be an inquiry into waking, dream, deep sleep and beyond and continue moment by moment, twenty four hours of the day.

Doing our meditation practice as the last activity before sleep is an important way to turn dream and deep sleep into meditation. Such meditative sleep is what was called *Yoga nidra* or Yogic sleep, in which we consciously enter into the state of deep sleep as a means of reaching pure transcendence. In fact, deep meditation is very much like entering into a deep sleep state during the waking state, withdrawing the mind and the body consciousness. We should look at going to sleep at night as the potential for a profound meditation beyond all the illusions of the world.

In conclusion, remember that your daily movement from waking to dream and deep sleep and back is a Divine journey into consciousness, understanding which you can unlock the secrets of cosmic awareness within you. Each day is a magical opportunity for Self-realization. You live only one day at a time. Yet when you do so with consciousness each day is eternity, each day is all creation, each day is full of bliss.