

Exploring the Higher States of Consciousness

By Deepak Chopra

Reality is created by consciousness differentiating into cognition, moods, emotions, perceptions, behavior, speech, social interactions, environment, interaction with the forces of nature, and biology. As consciousness evolves, these different aspects of consciousness also change.

Although every spiritual tradition speaks of higher states of consciousness, in Vedanta we find a clearly structured map of these stages of development. The average person only experiences three states of consciousness in an entire lifetime. These are deep sleep, the dream state, and the waking state of consciousness. The brain functions are measurably different in each of these states. Brain biology and brain waves show precise and different characteristics between sleep, dream, and waking states of consciousness.

Spiritual practice or *sadhana* begins the process by which an individual transforms his or her consciousness from these three common states of consciousness into higher states of consciousness. Through any of the four primary yoga practices (the yogas of being, feeling, thinking, and doing) the mind is led past its conditioned states to its pure, unconditioned state. Beyond the first three states of consciousness are the following four states: soul consciousness, cosmic consciousness, divine consciousness, and unity consciousness. As each state of consciousness unfolds within us, it opens us to a new, more expanded reality. Let's discuss each of these in turn.

Soul Consciousness

Soul consciousness is the state we experience when our internal reference point shifts from body, mind, and ego, to the observer of body, mind, and ego. We experience and cultivate soul consciousness when we meditate. This observer is referred to as the witnessing awareness or the silent witness. During meditation we begin to identify with this aspect of the self, which is beyond thinking and feeling, and we start to feel more calm, centered, and intuitive in daily life.

As we access our authentic self, we experience less emotional drama in our lives. Our relationships become more loving and compassionate, and we find a deeper, more caring relationship with the environment. With the experience of the silent witness, our biology also reflects greater balance and the activation of homeostatic mechanisms. Meditation has been shown to lead to the reduction of stress markers, slower heart rate, lower blood pressure, enhanced

immune function, and orderly and precise self-repair mechanisms. Those who practice meditation are less prone to sickness.

Cosmic Consciousness

Cosmic consciousness is the state in which soul consciousness gets stabilized and the witnessing awareness is present all the time in waking, dreaming, and sleeping states. This state of consciousness is sometimes described in wisdom traditions as being both local and non-local simultaneously. The silent witness self is unbounded, but the body and the conditioned mind are localized. In the Christian tradition the phrase "to be in the world and not of it" describes this flavor of cosmic consciousness.

In this state, even during deep sleep, our witnessing awareness is fully awake. We have the realization that we are not the mind-body physiology, which is in the field of change, but rather an eternal spirit that transcends space and time. The most remarkable aspect of this state of consciousness is the knowledge of our nature as timeless and eternal. We lose our fear of death. Although cosmic consciousness is not the pinnacle of enlightenment, it nevertheless marks the critical transition from an identity bound to a conditioned life, to a life of freedom in self-knowledge.

Divine Consciousness

Divine consciousness is the expansion of cosmic consciousness in which we experience the ever-present witnessing awareness not only in the silence of the self, but also in the most abstract qualities of nature and the mind. In this state we begin to experience dormant potentials such as the awakening of the non-local senses (referred to in Sanskrit as *tanmatras*).

As the individual mind starts to access these realms of the psyche, they will activate extraordinary spiritual abilities previously thought to be unattainable. These include experiences such as knowledge of past and future; clairvoyance; a refined sense of taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing; and control over bodily functions, heart rate, and autonomic functions. In other words, objects are experienced simultaneously on a gross, sensory level and on a subtle, more abstract level. Appreciation of life from this more refined perspective represents the real engagement of the heart and love as the engine of spiritual growth.

By experiencing the patterns and deeper connections that underlie external diversity, we find our soul is stirred by a profound sense of beauty, awe, compassion, gratitude, and love. The integrating power of these qualities brings together the polarized world of cosmic consciousness, which is divided between the self and non-self. In divine

consciousness this harmonizing and synthesizing power is felt as the presence of divinity in our heart. Wherever we go we feel the presence of the divine. The Vedic seers would say that in divine consciousness, God is not difficult to find, but impossible to avoid. At this stage, we have an even greater conviction of the immortality of existence, not only as non-local consciousness but also as the enduring presence of divine love. Divine consciousness also brings a deeper experience of liberation, as we no longer see the external, sensory world as a kind of spiritual exile that the soul must endure; instead, we see the world as a manifestation of the beauty and love of our consciousness and therefore integral to our spirituality.

Unity Consciousness

Unity consciousness is also referred to as Brahman consciousness. It is a state of consciousness in which we perceive the ever-present witness not just as the core self of our existence but also as the primary reality of every experience. You, as the observer, are that pure consciousness. The process of observation is also that consciousness. And the object of observation is that same pure consciousness. The culmination of enlightenment is the knowledge that consciousness alone exists. It is all there is, was, and ever will be. That oneness, or unity, dominates awareness even as you engage in the same mundane details of life as before. You cease to identify with an individual mind-body apparatus and see the whole universe as your physical body. Of course, there is a personal body and there is a material universe, experienced through the senses, but they are now cognized to be incorporated in that one single reality of consciousness.

Dormant potentials are now fully operative. We have an ability to heal and transform others, and we experience everything as miraculous. We see a flower as a flower while also experiencing it as rainbows, sunshine, earth, water, wind, air, the infinite void, and the whole history of the universe swirling and transiently manifesting as the flower. In other words, we see every object as the total universe transiently manifesting as a particular object. And behind the scenes we can feel the presence of the same ever-present witnessing awareness that is now in both subject and object.

Unity consciousness is the ultimate level of freedom from fear. It is characterized by an abiding sense of joy and peace. There is no "other" outside of ourselves to be afraid of, and the constant dance of unity masquerading as diversity is seen as the blissful nature of life itself. All of creation is seen as the play of consciousness or *leela*.

This state of enlightenment is sometimes compared to the drop of water that is experiencing itself as the ocean, knowing that it was the ocean the whole time. You

and God are now one because there is no you left any more. Sometimes when people try to conceptualize this by projecting their current sense of self into unity consciousness, they are afraid that in losing their old identity they will lose their existence, memories, and individual perspective. But enlightened beings don't see it that way. They understand that personal identity was an illusion to begin with. They realize that nothing real or valuable is ever lost on the path to enlightenment. They are experiencing their original identity but are only now recognizing it in its completeness and its full glory. This state is described in the Vedantic tradition and is also beautifully captured in the following verses from T.S. Eliot:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

This brief outline of higher states of consciousness is only intended to give you a general sense of the unfolding of human potential. As you continue to meditate, you will experience the ongoing expansion of awareness, opening to your unbounded self in the field of all possibilities.

About Deepak Chopra, M.D., F.A.C.P.

Recognized as one of the world's foremost leaders in the field of mind-body medicine, Deepak Chopra, M.D. is a best-selling author, teacher, and co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing. His medical training is in internal medicine and endocrinology, and he is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and an adjunct professor of Executive Programs at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. Deepak is also an adjunct professor at Columbia Business School, Columbia University, a senior scientist at the Gallup organization, and an assistant clinical professor in the Family and Preventive Medicine Department at the University of California, San Diego. For more than a decade, he has participated as a lecturer at the Update in Internal Medicine, an annual event sponsored by Harvard Medical School's Department of Continuing Education and the Department of Medicine, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.