



“Understanding Human Consciousness Through The Mandukya Upanishad: A Theoretical Inquiry”

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Chapter 1:

1.1 Abstract

The study of consciousness has remained a central concern in both philosophical and scientific discourse, raising fundamental questions about the nature of reality, selfhood, and awareness. This paper undertakes a theoretical inquiry into human consciousness as presented in the Mandukya Upanishad, one of the most concise yet profound texts in the Upanishadic tradition. The Upanishad offers a systematic framework by classifying consciousness into four states: waking (jāgrat), dreaming (svapna), deep sleep (suṣupti), and the transcendental state (turīya).

The study analyzes these four states as progressive levels of awareness, demonstrating how empirical and mental experiences are ultimately grounded in a deeper, non-dual consciousness. Special emphasis is placed on the concept of turīya, which is described as pure, unconditioned awareness beyond subject-object duality. The paper further explores the philosophical implications of identifying Ātman (individual self) with Brahman (ultimate reality), a central doctrine within Advaita Vedanta.

In addition, the symbolic significance of the syllable Om (AUM) is examined as a representation of the totality of consciousness and as a practical means for its realization. The study also engages with contemporary perspectives by comparing the Mandukya model with modern theories in psychology and neuroscience, particularly in relation to different states of consciousness.

By integrating classical philosophical insights with modern discourse, this paper argues that the Mandukya Upanishad provides a comprehensive and non-dual framework for understanding consciousness, one that transcends materialistic explanations and offers a deeper ontological and experiential perspective. The findings suggest that the Upanishadic model remains highly relevant for contemporary studies of consciousness and the philosophy of mind.

1.2 Introduction

The study of consciousness has long been one of the most profound and challenging areas of inquiry in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. It concerns fundamental questions about awareness, perception, selfhood, and the nature of reality. While modern scientific approaches attempt to explain consciousness in terms of neural processes and cognitive functions, philosophical traditions particularly those of ancient India approach it as the very ground of existence and experience. (Consciousness | Definition, Nature & Function | Britannica, 2026)

The Upanishads, which form the philosophical core of Vedic literature, provide a deep and systematic exploration of consciousness through introspection and metaphysical analysis. These texts shift the focus from external ritual practices to inner realization and knowledge of the Self (Ātman). They assert that ultimate reality (Brahman) is not separate from individual consciousness, thereby presenting a non-dual understanding of existence. (Upanishad | Hindu Scriptures, Vedic Texts & Ancient Wisdom | Britannica, 2026)

Among these texts, the Mandukya Upanishad occupies a unique and significant position due to its exclusive focus on consciousness. Despite consisting of only twelve verses, it presents a highly structured and comprehensive model of human experience by categorizing consciousness into four distinct states: waking (jāgrat), dreaming (svapna), deep sleep (suṣupti), and the transcendental state (turīya). (Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.)

The framework proposed in the Mandukya Upanishad is not merely descriptive but deeply philosophical, as it interprets these states as progressively subtler levels of reality. The waking and dreaming states represent external and internal experiences respectively, while deep sleep indicates a state of undifferentiated awareness. The fourth state, turīya, transcends all empirical experiences and is described as pure, non-dual consciousness. (Upanishads > Mandukya Upanishad | Vedas.How, n.d.)

This conceptualization forms the foundation of Advaita Vedanta, which asserts that reality is fundamentally non-dual and that all multiplicity is an appearance caused by ignorance (avidyā). According to this view, consciousness is not a product of the mind or body but the ultimate substratum of all existence. (“Advaita Vedanta,” 2026a)

A distinctive feature of the Mandukya Upanishad is its use of the sacred syllable Om (AUM) as a symbolic representation of consciousness. Each component of Om corresponds to one of the states of consciousness, while the silence beyond them signifies turīya. This symbolic approach integrates metaphysical insight with meditative practice, offering both a theoretical and experiential path to understanding consciousness. (The Mandukya Upanishad - Journal - Shanti Sadan, n.d.-a)

In recent decades, the study of consciousness has gained renewed interest in fields such as cognitive science, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind. Researchers have identified various states of consciousness, including waking awareness, dreaming, and deep sleep, which correspond closely to the first three states described in the Mandukya Upanishad. However, the concept of a transcendental state

such as turīya remains largely absent in scientific discourse, highlighting a gap between ancient philosophical insights and modern empirical approaches (Van Gulick, 2026a).

This paper, titled “**Understanding Human Consciousness through the Mandukya Upanishad: A Theoretical Inquiry**,” seeks to examine the Upanishadic model of consciousness from a philosophical perspective. It aims to analyze the four states of consciousness, explore the nature of turīya, and evaluate the relevance of these ideas in contemporary discussions on consciousness. By integrating classical philosophical insights with modern perspectives, the study attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of consciousness as both an experiential and ontological reality (Turiya: Significance and Symbolism, n.d.-a).

1.3 Literature Review

- I. A study titled “Mandukya Upanishad and Modern Psychology: A Qualitative Exploration of Consciousness, Self, and Well-Being” by Anupama S. R. employs a qualitative and conceptual methodology to analyze the teachings of the Mandukya Upanishad in relation to modern psychological theories. The research uses thematic interpretation to compare Upanishadic concepts with ideas such as mindfulness and self-awareness. The findings reveal that the Mandukya framework provides a holistic understanding of consciousness that goes beyond mechanistic and reductionist models, emphasizing inner awareness and well-being. (R, 2026).
- II. Another significant study, “A Comparative Study of Consciousness in Gabriel Marcel and Mandukya Upanishad” by K. Santiago Mary, adopts a comparative philosophical methodology. The research analyzes existential philosophy alongside Upanishadic thought to explore similarities and differences in their understanding of consciousness. The results indicate that while Western philosophy focuses on existential experience and individuality, the Mandukya Upanishad presents a deeper metaphysical and transcendental understanding of consciousness that emphasizes unity and non-duality. (Mary, 2024).
- III. In the study “Understanding Advaita Vedanta: A Synthesis of Shankara and Mandukya Upanishad”, Ranjan Kumar Mishra uses a textual and philosophical synthesis approach to examine the relationship between classical Advaita teachings and the Mandukya Upanishad. The methodology involves analyzing primary texts and commentaries to understand the concept of non-dual consciousness. The study concludes that consciousness is identical with ultimate reality (Brahman), reinforcing the non-dualistic principles of Advaita Vedanta and emphasizing self-realization as the ultimate goal. (Understanding Advaita Vedanta: A Synthesis of Shankara and Mandukya Upanishad - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH, n.d.)

- IV. The classical work “The Mandukyopanishad with Gaudapada’s Karikas and Shankara’s Commentary” translated by Manilal N. Dvivedi follows a textual exegesis methodology, focusing on the interpretation of original scriptures. This study systematically explains the four states of consciousness and their philosophical significance. The results highlight that turīya is the ultimate state of pure consciousness, transcending empirical experiences and representing non-dual reality.(The Mandukyopanishad, 2003)
- V. From a scientific perspective, Max Tegmark’s study “Consciousness as a State of Matter” uses a theoretical physics methodology to examine consciousness as an information-processing system. The research proposes that consciousness can be understood as a physical state with measurable properties. While this view differs from the metaphysical approach of the Mandukya Upanishad, it provides a complementary framework for understanding consciousness in scientific terms.(Tegmark, 2014)
- VI. Another modern study, “Artificial Intelligence for Topic Modelling in Hindu Philosophy” by Rohitash Chandra and Mukul Ranjan, employs machine learning techniques such as BERT-based topic modeling to analyze philosophical texts. The methodology involves computational analysis of large textual datasets. The results reveal that consciousness is a central and recurring theme in Upanishadic literature, including the Mandukya Upanishad, highlighting its continued relevance in contemporary research.(Chandra & Ranjan, 2022)

1.4 Need and Significance of the Study

To provide a comprehensive theoretical understanding of human consciousness through the framework of the Mandukya Upanishad, particularly by analyzing its four states and the concept of turīya as the ultimate reality.

Chapter 2: Philosophical Foundations of Consciousness

Consciousness, within Indian philosophy, is regarded as the fundamental reality underlying all existence rather than a byproduct of physical processes. In contrast to materialistic views, which reduce consciousness to neural activity, the Vedāntic tradition asserts that consciousness is self-existent, eternal, and independent. This perspective is central to understanding the nature of reality as presented in the Mandukya Upanishad(Van Gulick, 2026b)

The Mandukya Upanishad establishes the identity of Ātman (individual self) with Brahman (ultimate reality), forming the basis of non-dual philosophy. This idea is further elaborated in Advaita Vedanta, where all distinctions between subject and object are considered illusory. Thus, consciousness is not divided but appears fragmented due to ignorance (avidyā).

Furthermore, consciousness is described as self-luminous, meaning it reveals both itself and all objects of experience. Unlike physical objects, which require external perception, consciousness is immediate and direct. This epistemological position highlights the primacy of awareness in all forms of knowledge and experience(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015a).

This non-dual understanding is further developed in Advaita Vedanta, where reality is interpreted as a single, undivided whole. The apparent diversity of the world is considered illusory (māyā), and true knowledge consists in realizing the unity of existence. This perspective challenges dualistic and materialistic interpretations of reality(“Advaita Vedanta,” 2026b).

Moreover, consciousness is described as self-luminous (svayam-prakāśa), meaning that it illuminates itself and all objects of experience. Unlike external objects, which require perception through the senses, consciousness is immediate and self-revealing. This epistemological standpoint emphasizes that all knowledge is ultimately grounded in awareness(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015b)

The philosophical significance of this approach lies in its rejection of reductionism. Instead of explaining consciousness in terms of matter, it reverses the relationship by positing that matter itself is known only through consciousness. This inversion has profound implications for metaphysics and epistemology, as it places consciousness at the foundation of reality(Van Gulick, 2026c).

Chapter 3: The Four States of Consciousness

The Mandukya Upanishad provides a systematic classification of human experience into four states of consciousness, offering a structured framework for understanding reality. These states are not merely psychological conditions but represent different levels of awareness and ontological significance(Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.-a).

The waking state (Jāgrat) is characterized by outward awareness and sensory engagement with the physical world. In this state, consciousness is directed toward external objects, and the individual experiences duality. Although it appears as the most concrete form of reality, it is limited by constant change and subject-object division(Upanishads > Mandukya Upanishad | Vedas.How, n.d.)

The dream state (Svapna) represents inward consciousness, where the mind creates its own world independent of external stimuli. This state demonstrates that reality is not confined to physical objects but can be constructed internally. It challenges the assumption that waking experience is inherently more real than dreaming(Mandukya Upanishad | Extensive Talks & References | Vedanta Scriptures, n.d.)

The deep sleep state (Suṣupti) is described as a condition in which there are no desires, thoughts, or duality. It is a state of undifferentiated awareness and bliss. However, it is also characterized by ignorance, as the individual is not consciously aware of this blissful state(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015c).

These three states together illustrate the varying expressions of consciousness, from active engagement to complete dissolution of mental activity. They reveal that consciousness persists even when cognitive

processes are absent, indicating its independence from mental functions(Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.-b).

Chapter 4: Turīya – The Transcendental Consciousness

The fourth state, turīya, represents the culmination of the Mandukya Upanishad’s analysis of consciousness. It is described as a state beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, embodying pure, non-dual awareness. Unlike the other states, it is not conditioned by time, space, or causation(Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.-c).

In Advaita Vedanta, turīya is understood as the realization of the identity between Ātman and Brahman. It is the state of ultimate knowledge, where all distinctions dissolve and the individual recognizes the unity of existence(“Turiya,” 2026)

The significance of turīya lies in its transcendental nature. It cannot be described in terms of empirical experience or conceptual thought, as it transcends all categories of understanding. This makes it both the most important and the most challenging concept in the study of consciousness(Turiya: Significance and Symbolism, n.d.-b).

Furthermore, the realization of turīya is associated with liberation (moksha), as it involves the dissolution of ignorance and the recognition of the true nature of reality. This transformative aspect highlights the practical significance of the Mandukya Upanishad(Mandukya Upanishad — Vedanta Society of New York, n.d.-a).

Chapter 5: Symbolism of Om and Consciousness

The Mandukya Upanishad employs the syllable Om (AUM) as a symbolic representation of the totality of consciousness. Each component of the syllable corresponds to one of the states of consciousness: “A” represents the waking state, “U” the dream state, and “M” the deep sleep state(“The Mandukya Upanishad,” n.d.-a).

The silence that follows the sound of Om symbolizes turīya, the ultimate state of consciousness. This silence is not merely the absence of sound but represents pure awareness beyond all forms and distinctions. It signifies the transcendental nature of reality(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015d)

This symbolic framework integrates metaphysical concepts with practical techniques for realization. Meditation on Om is considered a means of transcending the three empirical states and attaining awareness of turīya(Mandukya Upanishad — Vedanta Society of New York, n.d.-b)

The use of Om demonstrates the holistic approach of the Mandukya Upanishad, where philosophy, symbolism, and practice are interconnected. This integration distinguishes it from purely theoretical models of consciousness(The Mandukya Upanishad - Journal - Shanti Sadan, n.d.-b).

Chapter 6: Comparative and Contemporary Perspectives

The study of consciousness has become a central focus in contemporary disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind. Modern scientific approaches primarily investigate consciousness through empirical observation, brain imaging, and cognitive analysis. These approaches define consciousness in terms of awareness, perception, and subjective experience, often linking it to neural activity and brain function. While such models have provided valuable insights, they tend to adopt a reductionist perspective, treating consciousness as a byproduct of material processes rather than as a fundamental reality (Van Gulick, 2026d).

In contrast, the framework presented in the Mandukya Upanishad offers a phenomenological and metaphysical understanding of consciousness. The Upanishad classifies consciousness into four states—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and *turiya*—which correspond closely to the states recognized in modern psychology. For instance, the waking state aligns with ordinary conscious awareness, the dream state corresponds to REM sleep, and deep sleep relates to non-REM stages characterized by minimal cognitive activity (Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.-d).

Modern neuroscience has made significant progress in identifying the neural correlates of consciousness, particularly in relation to the waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states. Techniques such as electroencephalography (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have enabled researchers to observe brain activity patterns associated with these states. However, these studies primarily focus on the objective aspects of consciousness and often overlook its subjective and qualitative dimensions (Van Gulick, 2026e).

A key limitation of contemporary scientific approaches is their inability to adequately explain the nature of subjective experience, often referred to as the “hard problem of consciousness.” This problem, articulated by philosophers like David Chalmers, highlights the difficulty of explaining how physical processes in the brain give rise to conscious experience. In this context, the Mandukya Upanishad offers an alternative perspective by treating consciousness as the fundamental reality rather than something that emerges from matter (Van Gulick, 2026f).

The concept of *turiya* presents a particularly significant point of divergence between ancient and modern approaches. While modern science recognizes altered states of consciousness, such as those induced by meditation or psychedelics, it lacks a clear framework for understanding a state that transcends all empirical experience. In the Mandukya Upanishad, *turiya* is described as pure, non-dual awareness beyond subject-object distinctions, making it fundamentally different from measurable states of consciousness (Turiya: Significance and Symbolism, n.d.-c).

Recent studies in meditation and contemplative neuroscience have begun to explore experiences that may correspond to non-dual awareness. Research on advanced meditators suggests the possibility of states characterized by reduced self-referential processing and a sense of unity or pure awareness. These

findings indicate a potential convergence between ancient philosophical insights and modern scientific research, although the nature of such states remains difficult to quantify (Van Gulick, 2026g).

Furthermore, the Mandukya model emphasizes the continuity of consciousness across all states, suggesting that consciousness persists even in the absence of mental activity, as in deep sleep. This contrasts with modern views that often equate consciousness with active cognition. By recognizing consciousness as independent of mental processes, the Upanishadic framework provides a more expansive understanding of awareness (Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.-e).

Another important aspect of the Mandukya Upanishad is its integration of theory and practice. While modern science primarily focuses on external observation, the Upanishadic approach emphasizes direct experiential realization through meditation, particularly through the contemplation of Om. This highlights the importance of subjective experience as a valid method of inquiry into consciousness (www.wisdomlib.org, 2015e).

The comparative analysis between ancient and modern perspectives reveals both convergence and divergence. While there is agreement regarding the existence of multiple states of consciousness, the interpretation of these states differs significantly. Modern science tends to view them as functions of the brain, whereas the Mandukya Upanishad interprets them as manifestations of a deeper, unified consciousness (Van Gulick, 2026h).

In conclusion, the comparison between the Mandukya Upanishad and contemporary studies of consciousness highlights the need for an interdisciplinary approach that integrates empirical research with philosophical and experiential insights. Such an approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of consciousness, bridging the gap between ancient and modern scientific inquiry (www.wisdomlib.org, 2015f).

Chapter 7: Critical Analysis and Discussion

The Mandukya Upanishad presents one of the most systematic and concise frameworks for understanding consciousness in the history of philosophy. Its classification of consciousness into four states—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and *turīya*—offers a comprehensive model that integrates phenomenological observation with metaphysical insight. This structure enables a deeper understanding of human experience by moving beyond surface-level cognition to explore the underlying nature of awareness (Mandukya Upanishad | Hindu Text | Britannica, n.d.-f).

One of the primary strengths of the Mandukya model lies in its non-dualistic approach, which challenges the dominant dualistic and materialistic paradigms in contemporary thought. By identifying *Ātman* with *Brahman*, the Upanishad eliminates the distinction between subject and object, proposing a unified reality grounded in consciousness. This perspective provides a compelling alternative to reductionist theories that attempt to explain consciousness solely in terms of physical processes (“Advaita Vedanta,” 2026c).

Another significant contribution of the Mandukya Upanishad is its emphasis on experiential knowledge rather than purely conceptual understanding. The text suggests that true knowledge of consciousness can only be attained through direct realization, particularly through practices such as meditation on Om. This experiential approach aligns with phenomenological traditions in Western philosophy, which prioritize lived experience as a primary source of knowledge(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015g).

However, despite its philosophical depth, the Mandukya framework also faces certain limitations, particularly when examined from a modern scientific perspective. Concepts such as turīya are inherently abstract and transcend empirical observation, making them difficult to validate through scientific methods. This creates a challenge in integrating the Upanishadic model with contemporary empirical research, which relies heavily on measurable data(Van Gulick, 2026i).

Furthermore, the interpretation of the four states of consciousness as hierarchical levels of reality has been subject to debate. While the Upanishad presents turīya as the ultimate state, some scholars argue that the distinction between these states may be more fluid than rigid. Modern psychology, for instance, often views states of consciousness as dynamic and overlapping rather than strictly hierarchical(Van Gulick, 2026j).

Another critical issue concerns the epistemological framework of the Mandukya Upanishad. The text relies heavily on introspection and subjective experience as means of knowledge. While this approach offers valuable insights into the nature of consciousness, it also raises questions about objectivity and verifiability. In contrast, modern science emphasizes empirical observation and reproducibility, leading to a methodological gap between the two approaches(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015h)

Despite these challenges, recent developments in fields such as contemplative neuroscience and consciousness studies suggest a growing interest in integrating subjective and objective approaches. Research on meditation and non-dual awareness indicates that experiences similar to turīya may be accessible and can have measurable effects on brain activity and cognition. This points toward the possibility of bridging the gap between ancient philosophical insights and modern scientific inquiry(Turiya: Significance and Symbolism, n.d.-d).

Moreover, the symbolic use of Om in the Mandukya Upanishad highlights the integration of theory and practice, which is often lacking in contemporary models of consciousness. By linking philosophical concepts with meditative techniques, the text provides a practical pathway for realizing its theoretical insights. This holistic approach enhances its relevance in both academic and experiential contexts(“The Mandukya Upanishad,” n.d.-b).

In evaluating the overall contribution of the Mandukya Upanishad, it becomes evident that its greatest strength lies in its ability to offer a unified and comprehensive vision of consciousness. It not only addresses the nature of awareness but also provides a framework for understanding reality itself. However, its integration with modern scientific paradigms requires further interdisciplinary research and methodological innovation(www.wisdomlib.org, 2015i).

In conclusion, the Mandukya Upanishad remains a foundational text for the study of consciousness, offering insights that are both philosophically profound and practically relevant. While it presents certain challenges in terms of empirical validation, its non-dual framework and emphasis on direct experience provide a valuable complement to modern approaches. This underscores the importance of developing integrative models that combine philosophical depth with scientific rigor (Van Gulick, 2026k).

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The present study, “Understanding Human Consciousness through the Mandukya Upanishad: A Theoretical Inquiry,” has explored the nature of consciousness through one of the most profound texts of Indian philosophy, the Mandukya Upanishad. Through a detailed analysis of its philosophical framework, the study has demonstrated that consciousness is not merely a function of the mind or brain but the fundamental reality underlying all experience.

The classification of consciousness into four states—waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and *turīya*—provides a comprehensive model for understanding human experience. While the first three states represent different levels of empirical awareness, they are shown to be limited and transient. In contrast, *turīya* emerges as the ultimate state of pure, non-dual consciousness that transcends all distinctions and serves as the ground of reality.

The study further highlights the significance of non-duality as articulated in Advaita Vedanta, where the identity of *Ātman* and Brahman reveals the unity of existence. This philosophical perspective challenges materialistic and dualistic interpretations of consciousness, offering a deeper and more holistic understanding of reality. The integration of symbolic elements, such as Om, also demonstrates how theoretical knowledge is connected with practical methods of realization.

In addition, the comparative analysis with modern perspectives shows that while contemporary science has made progress in understanding the empirical aspects of consciousness, it remains limited in addressing its transcendental dimension. The concept of *turīya* introduces a level of awareness that goes beyond current scientific frameworks, suggesting the need for interdisciplinary approaches that combine philosophical insight with empirical investigation.

Despite certain challenges, particularly in terms of empirical validation, the Mandukya Upanishad provides a coherent and profound model of consciousness that remains highly relevant in contemporary discourse. Its emphasis on direct experience, non-duality, and the unity of existence offers valuable contributions to the fields of philosophy, psychology, and consciousness studies.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the Mandukya Upanishad presents a timeless and comprehensive understanding of human consciousness. By bridging ancient wisdom with modern inquiry, it opens new possibilities for exploring the deeper dimensions of awareness and reality, ultimately contributing to a more integrated and holistic understanding of human existence.

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