



The Self As Light (Ātma-Jyotiḥ): A Unified Vision Of Consciousness In The Upaniṣads And Yogasūtra

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Abstract

This paper, titled "The Self as Light (Ātma-Jyotiḥ): A Unified Vision of Consciousness in the Upaniṣads and Yogasūtra", presents a comparative analysis of the concept of consciousness in the Indian philosophical tradition. In particular, the nature of the Self is critically examined through the three states of consciousness—waking, dreaming and deep sleep—described in the Upaniṣads and the various forms of Samādhi described in the Yogasūtra. The main objective is to examine how the Self is viewed as 'light' or 'Ātman-Jyoti' in both the Upaniṣads and Yoga-Darshan and how this view contributes to the process of self-realization and liberation. While the Upaniṣad portray the Self as a witnessing and self-illuminating entity, the Yogasūtras reveal higher states of consciousness through Samādhi. This article explains the unifying philosophy underlying both traditions—in which the Self is not only the ground of experience but also the light of all knowledge and liberation. Ultimately, this research presents an esoteric view of the nature of the Self that lies beyond the three states of consciousness and Samādhi.

Keyword: - Ātma-Jyotiḥ, Avasthātraya, Samādhi, Turiya, Upaniṣadic Consciousness Yogasūtra Philosophy, Self-realization

Introduction

In the Indian philosophical tradition, consciousness has been studied from a very profound, philosophical and spiritual point of view. In particular, the three states described in the Upaniṣad—waking, dreaming and sleep—explain the experiential levels of man from the point of view of the ātman (Ātman). These states have been analyzed not only psychologically, but as a process of spiritual advancement. According to the Upaniṣad, the ātman, while functioning in different forms in these three states, remains unchanging, witnessing and self-illuminating (Svayaṁjyoti). Similarly, the Samādhi described in Pātañjala Yogasūtra, especially samprajñāta and asamprajñāta Samādhi, are the steps of sādhanā leading to higher states of consciousness. These levels of Samādhi pave the way for the realization of the ātman and the attainment of kaivalya. The special thing is that the concept of 'ātman-jyoti' is inherent in both the states of the Upaniṣad and the Samādhi of the Yogasūtra. This research focuses on this common element—the light form of the

ātman (Ātma-jyotiḥ)—and comparatively examines the Upaniṣad and Yoga philosophy. It also analyzes how the ātman is present as a witness (sākṣī) in these states and experiences its pure form through Samādhi. This integrated approach not only underlines the depth of Indian philosophy of consciousness but also clarifies the path to liberation.

Avasthātraya: Three-layered explanation of consciousness in Upaniṣad

In Indian philosophy, Avasthātraya—waking, dreaming and sleep—are considered as the three major states of human consciousness. In the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad, these states are called the three ‘pāda’ or ‘sthāna’ of the ātman, which are not only experiential levels but also gradual steps of penetration into the depths of the ātman.

- Waking state (prathama pāda-jāgaritasthāna) is addressed as ‘vaiśvānara’, where the ātman experiences gross objects through the senses. It is called ‘bahisprajñā’ because consciousness is inclined towards external objects. This state is the manifestation of the ātman in the gross body.
- Dream state (dvitīyapāda-svapnasthāna) is called ‘Tejasa’, where the ātman creates a virtual world based on the memories, imaginations and saṃskāra of the inner mind. It is called ‘antaḥprajñā’ because the consciousness is introverted. The ātman experiences through the subtle body here and the role of the external senses becomes inactive.
- Sleep state (tṛtīyapāda-suṣuptisthāna) The state of sleep (Suṣupti) is called ‘prājñā’, in which there is no experience, desire or dream. This state is an integrated, stable and blissful state of consciousness where the ātman resides in the causal body. Here the ātman is ‘ānandabhuk’ – situated in bliss in an unknown form, but there is no clear sense of knowledge.

Beyond these three states is a fourth state called ‘Turiya’. According to the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad, this state is “neither awake, nor dream, nor sleep”. It is *śāntam śivam advaitam* and is the essence of oneness. In this the ātman is not only a witness, but also exists beyond all duality, movement and change. It is considered to be the ultimate and pure form of the ātman. The Jyotirbrāhmaṇa section of the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad explains that the Self is light itself—even when all external light is gone, it is the Self that makes experience possible. Thus, the three states are limited manifestations of the Self, while Turiya signifies its infinite and unmanifest existence.

Concept of Samādhi in Yoga Darshan

In Indian Yoga tradition, Samādhi is considered to be the ultimate and pure state of consciousness. In Pātañjala Yogasūtra, it is the last step of ‘aṣṭāṅga yoga’, which paves the way for complete stability of the ātman and realization of the true nature. Samādhi is not just mental concentration, but the restraint of all the tendencies of the mind (citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ), through which the seeker realizes his true nature – puruṣa. In Yogasūtra, Samādhi is divided into two main types – Samprajñāta Samādhi and Asamprajñāta Samādhi. In Samprajñāta Samādhi, consciousness remains focused on an object, emotion or element and it has four levels:

- Savitarka Samādhi – Meditation on gross subjects with reasoning.
- Nirvitarka Samādhi – Meditation on gross subjects, but without reasoning.
- Savicāra Samādhi – Meditation on subtle subjects with thoughts.
- Nirvicāra Samādhi – State without thoughts on subtle subjects.

After all these states, consciousness also passes through the stages of ānanda and asmitā, where ego and self-bliss are experienced.

Next comes asamprajñāta Samādhi, in which the practitioner goes beyond any subject, thought, form or feeling. It is a pure, attributeless state where there is complete cessation of mind and intellect. This Samādhi is comparable to the 'turiya' state of the ātman. In this state only the form of the purusha or ātman remains. According to Yogasūtra, the final form of Samādhi is called Dharmamegha Samādhi. In this, the practitioner is freed from all karmic bondages and saṃskāra and is situated in pure existence only. This state leads to kaivalya, where the ātman is completely detached from nature and is situated in its own form. In these different states of Samādhi, the ātman does not require any external or internal light, because it is itself 'light'. This state resonates with the concept of 'Ātma-jyotiḥ' described in Jyotirbrāhmaṇa—where the Self makes experience possible without any other means. Thus the Samādhi of Yoga philosophy is not merely mental stillness or concentration, but a state of the Self being situated in the Self. This is the same state as Turiya in the Upaniṣad, Asamprajñāta Samādhi in Yoga, and brahma - sākṣātkāra in Vedānta.

Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences between the Three Stages of Samādhi and the Three Stages of Samādhi

In the Indian knowledge tradition, the Three Stages of Samādhi theory of the Upaniṣad and the three stages of Samādhi described in the Yogasūtra reveal different levels of consciousness. Though these two approaches appear independent, they present a wonderful synthesis—where the ātman is active in different states but remains a witness, independent and luminous. The Māṇḍūkya and Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad call the waking, dreaming and sleep states as the three main 'pāda' of the ātman. Whereas the four stages of Samprajñāta Samādhi in the Yogasūtras—Savitarka, Nirvitarka, Savicāra and Nirvicāra—represent the elevation of the ātman towards subtlety. If we do a comparative analysis of these, some profound similarities emerge. In the waking state (Vaiśvānara), the ātman experiences gross objects. This state is equivalent to Savitarka and Nirvitarka Samādhi, where attention is focused on objects and knowledge is manifested in the form of logic or irrationality. Both states are related to 'śravaṇa' or perception of the external world. In the dream state (Taijasa) the ātman creates a virtual world based on subtle attitudes, memories and imaginations. This state corresponds to Savicāra, Nirvicāra, ānanda and asmitā Samādhi, where attention is inward and the presence of the ātman is felt at the subtle level. It symbolizes the level of 'Manana'. The deep sleep state (Prajña) is a state of complete absorption and relaxation, where there is no desire, no dream. This state is similar to Asamprajñāta Samādhi, where all the attitudes of the mind dissolve and the seeker exists only in the existence of the ātman. This is the extreme form of 'nididhyāsana'. Beyond these three states comes the state of 'Turiya', which is the pure and attributeless state of the ātman. This state is considered to be the state of mokṣa in Advaita Vedānta and is equivalent to Kaivalya in Yoga Darshan. In this state the ātman neither acts nor experiences—it only 'is'. It is clear from these comparisons that both the Upaniṣad and Yoga Darshan take the journey of consciousness from the gross to the subtle and ultimately to the causal/ attributeless state. Both systems consider the ātman not only a subject of philosophy but also the goal of experience and sadhana. The special thing is that in the Upaniṣad the ātman has been called 'svayamprakāśa' or 'Ātma-jyotiḥ', and in Yoga, in the last stage of Samādhi, when the seeker does not resort to any other means, then the ātman itself becomes the source of experience. Both traditions consider the ātman as witness, non-doer, and eternally free.

Philosophical Conclusion: Unified Concept of Consciousness as Ātman-Light

In Indian philosophy, the ātman has been seen not only as 'being' but also as 'light'. This light is not only the medium of knowledge, but is also the original source of knowledge in itself. In the Upaniṣad, this ātman is called 'self-luminous' and in Yoga Darshan, in the final stage of Samādhi, it becomes clear that the ātman is not known through any external means, but in its own light. This unified concept of Ātma-jyotiḥ unites the Upaniṣad and Yogasūtra into one thread at the philosophical level. In Jyotirbrāhmaṇa of Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, when Janaka asks yājñavalkya – “Kiṁ jyotirayaṁ puruṣaḥ?” Then yājñavalkya, while mentioning the Sun, Moon, Fire and Speech respectively, finally says – “Ātmāiva asya jyotiḥ bhavati”. That is, when all external light is gone, the ātman still gives experience through its own Ātma-jyotiḥ. This answer is not a mere linguistic device, but a revelation of the ultimate nature of consciousness. The dream state is a direct proof of this, where neither the external senses are active nor any physical light, yet experience takes place. The Upaniṣad say - "Svena jyotiṣā prasvapati" - the ātman dreams with its own light. This means that the ātman is not dependent on any medium; it is self-illuminated, self-knowing and self-experienced. Similarly, in Pātañjala Yoga Darshan, when a practitioner enters asamprajñāta samādhi, his consciousness becomes free from any subject, emotion, logic or thought. Here the practitioner is only in the form. This state is not of any experience, but of "Svarūpe'vasthānam" - where nothing remains except the ātman. This state completely matches the Turiya state. The Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad calls it “śāntaṁ śivam advaitaṁ caturthaṁ manyante sa ātmā sa vijñeyah”. This Ātman is neither awake, nor dreamlike, nor asleep; it is that entity beyond experience, which is eternal, formless and self-form. From a philosophical point of view, 'Ātma-jyotiḥ' is not only a subject of knowledge, but also the basis of knowledge. This 'light' is not the light of any physical source, but is that form of unreceptive, unobstructed and absolute consciousness which is complete in itself. It is because of this that experience is possible in wakefulness, memory is possible in dream and even after deep sleep, the feeling like 'I was asleep, I did not know anything' is possible. So it is clear that the vision of consciousness of Upaniṣad and Yoga-philosophy converge on a common ground of 'Ātma-jyotiḥ'. While the Upaniṣad give priority to the direct experience of knowledge, Yoga gives the method to reach the same state through the discipline of Samādhi. In both the traditions, the ātman has been considered a witness, non-doer, form of light and the goal of salvation.

Conclusion

This paper explains the integrated concept of 'Ātma-jyotiḥ' through a comparative study of the three states (waking, dreaming and sleep) described in the Upaniṣad and the various states of Samādhi propounded in Yoga Darshan. The study proves that while the Upaniṣad consider the ātman as the witness and light of all experiences, Yoga Darshan provides a systematic method of sadhana to reach the ātman. The Jyotirbrāhmaṇa of Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad clarifies that the ātman is the ultimate light—even when the sun, moon, fire and speech all disappear, the Ātman still gives experience through its light. Similarly, the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad describes the four stages of the Ātman as 'Turiya', the highest and non-dual form of the Ātman—which is beyond experience, peaceful and of ultimate welfare. The states of Samādhi of Pātañjala Yoga Darshan are the path of gradual advancement towards the Ātman. The journey from Samprajñāta Samādhi to asamprajñāta and finally to dharmamegha Samādhi leads to the realization of the self-illuminating nature of the ātman. In the final state of Samādhi, when the mind, intellect and the instincts become still, the ātman is situated in its true nature—as the Yogasūtra say: “tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe'vasthānam.” Thus, both the Upaniṣad and Yoga philosophy consider the ātman not only as an object of experience but as the light, the foundation and the purpose of experience. This integrated concept of 'Ātma-jyotiḥ' gives a universal and spiritual vision to Indian philosophy of consciousness, where liberation is not only an intellectual realization but also a direct experience—the experience of the ātman situated in the light.

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