

# Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad

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The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad (MU) is the shortest among the Upaniṣads, consisting of just 12 *mantras* (brief passages). Some people have questioned whether it is a genuine Upaniṣad and whether the commentaries written on it by Śankara's teacher's teacher Gauḍapāda and by Śankara himself are in the Upaniṣadic tradition or in the Buddhist tradition. There is a whole body of scholarship devoted to examining the authorship, the date, and the subsequent use of the ideas in this Upaniṣad couched in a particular ideological framework. Yet, despite these controversies, it has been said that the study of MU alone is sufficient for obtaining self-knowledge if one cannot study all the Upaniṣads. In it occurs one of the four famous Mahāvākyas (great sayings or aphorisms) of the Vedas stating the identity of the Ātman and the Brahman.

MU focuses on the meaning, interpretation, and sound of the sacred syllable OM to explore the nature of reality at different levels. It identifies OM, also called Praṇava or Omkāra, with the whole world, with Brahman, and with the Self. The three constituent sounds in OM – the elemental A + U + M sounds (called respectively the *akāra*, *ukāra*, and *makāra* sounds) – are further identified with the three states of the Self: the waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states. Without explicitly mentioning the matter, it validates the practice of *omkāra upāsana* as a spiritual practice (*sādhana*) for clarifying one's Consciousness and obtaining an empirical, personalized experience of Reality. This is the practice of spending all of one's waking hours, day in and day out, continuously uttering the OM sound and attuning oneself to it in a disciplined way, preferably under the guidance of someone who has already undergone that discipline.

The MU uses this aspect of *omkāra upāsana* – the use of personalized, empirical experience as a data set – to enquire into the nature of Reality. It analyzes the three states of experience to reveal the Self as free and limitless in nature. The three states or *avasthās* are: (a) Jāgrata Avasthā or waking state, where all the five senses, the mind, and the life-energy (*prāṇa*) are alert and participating; where one is interacting with the environment of plurality, possibly with some utilitarian interests or as a way to define oneself by a process of approach and avoidance; where all of one's psychological processes are active. (b) Svapna Avasthā or dream state, where the five senses, the mind, and the *prāṇa* are functioning in a limited way; where one is creating one's own world based on one's memories, past experiences, and pent-up feelings of aspirations, fulfillments, and frustrations. (c) Suṣupta Avasthā or deep-sleep (dreamless) state, where one is not aware of what is going on; where interactions, perceptions, and even subjective feelings are completely absent.

All three of the above states are conditioned experiences – the conditioning coming from the whole empirical world around us, from one's personal experiences and memories, and from the complete absence of “the other,” respectively. In the waking state, one's experiences can be independently verified with reference to any other individual. In the dream state, the experiences are real only to the one dreaming; reality is so subjective

that it is real only with respect to the dreamer's own experience. In the waking state we may feel that we are poor; in the dream state, that we are powerful; and in our deep sleep state, we have neither of these feelings. Again, in deep sleep, we do not know what is going on and who we are; it is only when we wake up do we know who we are. In short, our characterization of our own status becomes variable in the three states.

We are thus led to recognize the presence of an underlying substratum of the three states, something that goes through all the three experiences and yet is not subject to any of the three environments. This ever-present "something" has no name, no form, no role, no interest, but is present everywhere and in all beings. It appears to be amenable for understanding and interacting in the three conditioned states but actually transcends them all and is not exhausted by any of them. This independent, unconditioned, and free presence is called Turīya, literally "four" or "fourth state." But it is not a state at all, it is the nature of the being, the Reality of the Self, the Consciousness or awareness present in every sentient being. Because it is the nature of the being, it is called Ātman. Because it is a witness of what is going on but is not really affected by the triple stream of experience, it is called Sākṣi. Because it is Consciousness, it is called Prajñānam.

As is common in the Upaniṣads, MU uses a poetical expression to describe the three states of wakefulness, dreaming, and deep sleep and the fourth, transcendental "state" that witnesses the other three. It calls them the four quarters.

Having thus surveyed the plurality of experiences in the different states, MU concludes that that One which goes through all the three stages and yet is not limited by any of them, is freedom which is spirit which is Ātman which is Brahman. This is succinctly expressed in the second *mantra* of MU by the Mahāvākya *ayam ātmā brahma* – This Self is Brahman. The activating principle in the individual and in the universe is the same.

On this concise Upaniṣad, elaborate commentaries have been written. Two famous ones are Gauḍapāda's Kārikā, a composition in verse form explaining the original text, and Śankara's Bhāṣya on the Kārikā. We have to go through all three of these texts to obtain a coherent understanding of Reality. We will then understand Reality as a plurality and as a unity and as neither – i.e. as something beyond such analytical schemes. The truth is that the words "plurality" and "unity" are terms we impose on Reality to describe our own interests and concepts; Reality itself is free from such things. An affirmation of that Reality which is free from these types of impositions is our own being. That is why, when a person says OM after having understood all this, the OM itself is the Reality as well as his own being. That is why the *omkāra upāsana* is an important way to experience the nature of Reality instantly as pure Consciousness, without the medium of the senses and without the dichotomy of observer and observed: Reality is nothing other than itself, that is the nature of OM, that is the nature of the being, and that being I am. The *omkāra upāsana* is thus a process for practicing the principle of Ātman. Eventually, even conscious participation drops away: it is simply being that way, and that is the Reality, and that I am. Whatever I am doing, that is Omkāra. This type of eventual absorption into the nature of Reality is fulfillment. Afterwards there is nothing left to do. There is no need to say OM. OM is there, and I am that. Anything that happens here is simply an expression of that being. This is the ultimate message of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad.