

# MANDUKYA UPANISHAD

An ancient Sanskrit text on the nature of Reality

Commentary by James Swartz

At twilight a thirsty traveler approached a village well. Reaching down, she was frozen by fear when she saw a big snake coiled next to the bucket. Unable to move for fear of being bitten, she imagined terrible things, including her own death. At that time an old man coming to the well noticed her predicament.

“What's the problem?” he asked kindly.

“Snake! Snake! Get a stick before it strikes!” she whispered frantically.

The old man burst out laughing. “Hey!” he said, “Take it easy. That's no snake. It's the well rope. It just looks like a snake in the darkness.”

Though never in danger the misapprehended rope produced intense fear. Most of our existential fears and desires come from taking the limitless Self to be limited. The fear of the snake arose simultaneously with the misapprehension of the rope and vanished when the rope was correctly perceived.

In the Mandukya Upanishad, an English version which is given below, the rope represents the limitless 'I' and the snake represents three limited 'sub-I's': the waker, dreamer, and sleeper. In the story the weary traveler, who represents human consciousness, projects a snake where there is only a rope and suffers because of it. The removal of this universal human error is the purpose of the Upanishad.

This mistake took place in twilight, a symbol of normal perception, and represents the waking state entity's partially-conscious state of mind. In broad daylight (full knowledge) or pitch darkness (total ignorance) no such error could have occurred. Because we're so obsessed with the objects in our lives and our reaction to them we somehow fail to see our limitless nature even though Awareness is the most essential part of every transaction. And we are equally unaware that the snake borrows whatever

reality it has from the rope, meaning that my life is meaningful because I exist, not the other way around. Even if we are indirectly aware of our essence we don't understand that deep inquiry into it produces the knowledge that sets us free.

The aim of the Mandukya is to help us inquire into the creation and arrive at an appreciation of the limitless 'I'. But the investigation of the creation, as modern science will testify, is daunting because every advance in knowledge opens up a new area of ignorance. So the Upanishad takes a shortcut. First it contends, as do all Upanishads, that reality is non-dual. Then it argues that if reality is non-dual the world and the knower of the world, limitless Awareness, can not be different. So by equating the limitless I, Awareness, with the world, as it does in the first mantra "The whole cosmos is the word *AUM*" we are lead to an understanding of our world...our bodies, minds, and environments...through an understanding of the Self.

The world as we know it is not a strange Sanskrit term. Physically it is matter, the elements in various permutations and combinations. Psychologically it is subtle matter...our subjective experience: thought, feeling, perception, knowledge, memory, dreams, fantasies, etc.

In what sense is everything we experience *AUM*?

Words are sound symbols, vibrations in consciousness. Of what is *AUM* the symbol? Science tells us that matter is energy in a state of motion or vibration. The energy that becomes the infinite range of gross and subtle matter by vibrating at different frequencies is symbolized in Vedic spiritual science as *AUM*. And because this is a non-dual reality composed only of Awareness (or Consciousness if you prefer), energy and matter, mind and matter, are just insentient forms of Awareness.

Because our bodies and minds are insentient they can only be animated by the presence of Awareness, the sentient principle. The materialist view, which is based on sense organ epistemology, contends that consciousness, read Awareness, evolved from matter. But this is not reasonable because evolution implies a conscious agent in so far as it is obvious that ours is a purposeful intelligently designed creation. Though unchanging, Awareness is capable of inspiring movement in its vehicles.

Are the vehicles different from Awareness? Is the spider different from its web? Though apparently different from the spider, the web, which is part and parcel of the spider, is non-separate from it. It is the spider minus the intelligence to create and manipulate its creation. Likewise the universe, AUM, though apparently a vast field of vibrating subtle and gross matter, is nothing but subtle and gross forms of Awareness. How far, the sages say, is the wave from the ocean?

Seen through the filter of time the limitless 'I' is said to be the cause of which the universe is an effect. Is the cause separate from its effect? The effect is the cause in a different form, just as a pot is not separate from the mud that sustains it. If we are little pots of awareness how far can we be from the Awareness that sustains all pots?

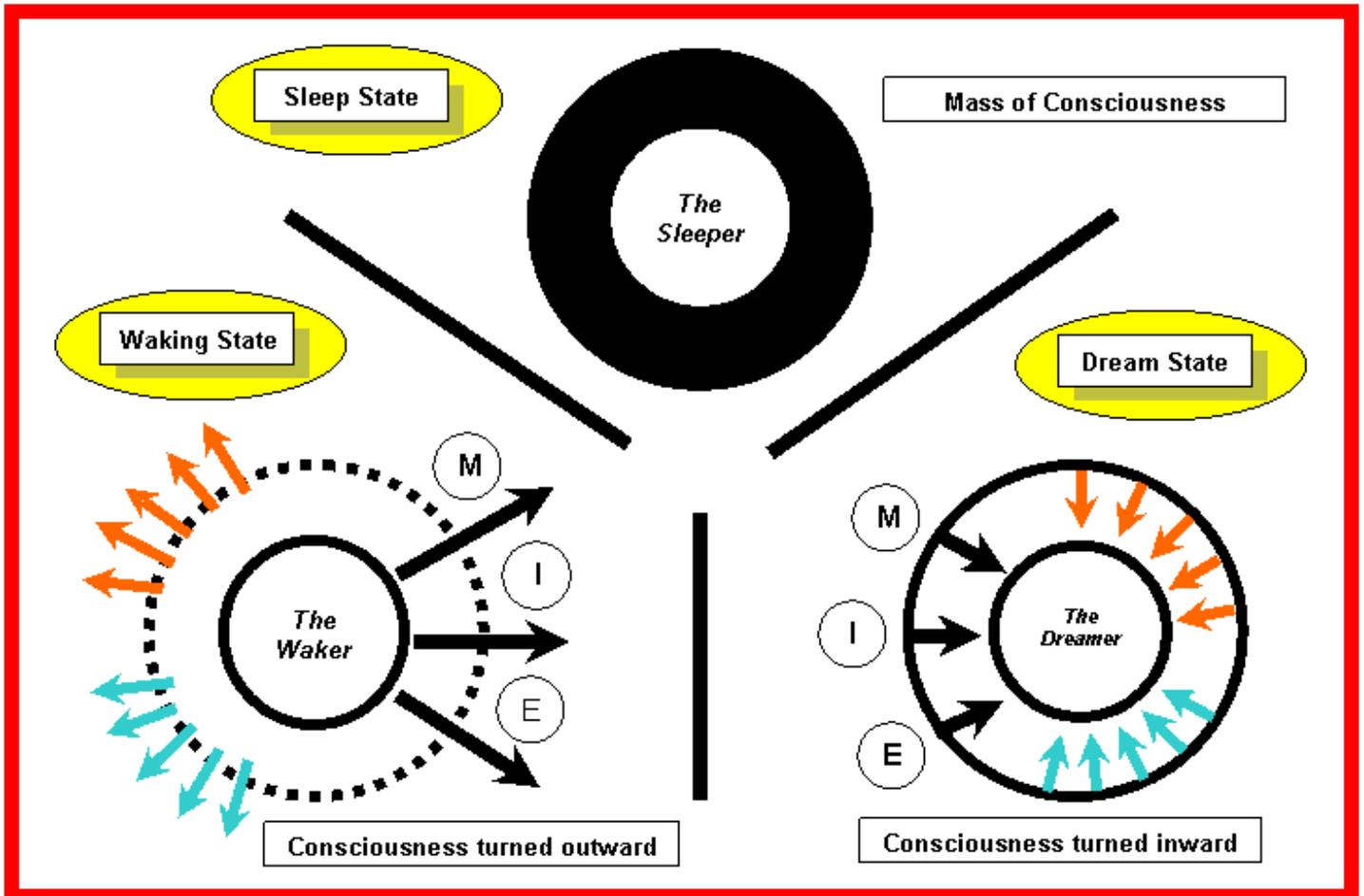
In this sense, the whole universe is Awareness, symbolized by the word "AUM."

The Mandukya's definition of AUM, the limitless 'I', is: **"That which exists in all periods of time, past, present and future, before the past and after the future."** And we can add a secondary definition: **That which exists in all states of consciousness and beyond.** Anything not conforming to this definition isn't real. Experienceable, yes, temporarily existent, definitely, but only seemingly real. In spiritual science only what is eternal is considered to be real. Since all forms of Awareness, mind and matter, don't fit the definition they are not the essential 'I'. To set myself free I need to realize who I am without the body and mind. When I'm one hundred percent convinced my 'I' is limitless I can operate in the world of forms without being conditioned by them. This freedom from dependence on the world of objects is called *moksha* in Vedanta and is the highest human goal.

Since only one 'I' fits our definition and It is present and accounted for, its analysis is straightforward. If, for example, I wish to understand the nature of water I needn't drink from every river, lake, and ocean in the world. I need only analyze one drop. If the creation is the limitless I, I need only inquire into myself to find out the nature of everything.

## THE WAKER, DREAMER, AND DEEP SLEEPER

As human beings we have three “egos” or experiencing entities. The first, the waking state ego, is [Awareness](#), the limitless Self, shining through the body-mind-intellect bundle experiencing the world of material objects and the subtle world of feelings, emotions, thoughts, ideas, memories, etc.



Everyone primarily views his or herself as a waker. When I say “me” in conversation, I am referring to myself as a waking state entity. The belief that I am a waker, and, as our analysis will show, it is only a belief, comes with the conviction that the waking state physical, emotional, and intellectual objects are real.

The waker's awareness is turned outward, the Self shining through the senses, mind, intellect, illumining their respective objects. When idealistic metaphysics claims there is no world apart from the perceiver, it is simply saying that the Self doesn't see a world unless it shines through the body, mind or intellect, not

that the physical world doesn't exist. Though it exists independently of the waker's perceptions, it doesn't exist apart from Awareness, the Self.

The waker, *vishwa*, is a consumer of experience. The Sanskrit literature describing the waker calls it “the one with thirteen [mouths](#).” The 'thirteen mouths' refer to the ten senses, mind, intellect, and ego. These instruments are mouths in that, powered by the momentum of past experiences, they aggressively seek experience in the present. The physical body consumes matter, the five [elements](#) in various permutation combinations; the mind constantly chews emotion; the intellect eats ideas; and the ego gobbles any experience it believes will make it feel whole, adequate, and complete.

The dreamer, awareness turned [inward](#), enjoys a world similar in some respects to the waking state world and radically different in others. In the dream state the Self illumines only subtle objects, a replay of the [vasanas](#) garnered in the waking state expressing in the form of images. In the waking state the *vasanas* express as the waker's thoughts and feelings. Like the waker, the dreamer believes he or she and his or her world is real. The dreamer is equipped with the same instruments for experience as the waker: dream senses to consume dream objects, a dream mind to emote and feel, a dream intellect to think dream thoughts, and a dream ego to go about the business of experiencing the [dream life](#). The dreamer is referred to in the Upanishad as *taijaisa*, the 'shining one,' a term indicating its nature as Awareness. All dreams appear in light, even though the waking senses are inactive and permit no light to enter the mind, because the Self, Consciousness/Awareness, is shining through the dreamer, just as it shines through the waker.

Sleep is defined as the state, saturated with happiness, where one loses consciousness, doesn't desire external objects, doesn't see internal objects, and is both Self and self-ignorant.

The sleeper is called *pragna* or mass of consciousness. In the other states consciousness flows outward and inward but in sleep it loses direction and becomes formless. The sleeper ego is extremely subtle, its presence indicated by the fact that we

experience limitlessness and bliss. In the waking and dream states bliss is sporadic because it is broken by many divisions of thought and feeling. The knowledge of the sleep experience is seemingly inferential: we know of it because the waker reports a good sleep after it surrenders its status as a sleeper. Were the waker actually a different ego from the sleeper, or the dreamer, it wouldn't recall the experience of sleep or dream. But the Upanishad says that the knowledge of sleep is not dependent on inference but on the presence of Awareness as it illumines the sleep state.

The deep sleep state is free of both waking and dream egos and objects because the *vasanas* projecting them have become dormant; hence it is referred to as the 'seed' state. When the 'seeds' sprout, one becomes a waker or a dreamer and experiences the appropriate world.

Because the waking ego wasn't there in sleep, the sleep state is often thought to be a void by metaphysicians and philosophers. In fact Sanskrit literature refers to it as 'the womb,' because our waking and dream worlds emerge from it. When you wake up in the morning your whole life is neatly laid out consistent with the day before, the same language you spoke yesterday on the tip or your tongue... indicating that previous experience had simply entered a dormant state. The dormant potential of the sleep state containing the [macrocosmic vasanas](#) is called *Ishwara*, the Creator, in Vedantic literature. With reference to the [microcosmic vasanas](#) the sleeper is called *pragnya*.

The sleep state is also known as the gateway between the waking and the dream states because it functions as a kind of room with two doors where the dreamer can don the guise of the waker and appear on either the waking or dreaming platform. Though a minor point, even in cases where one seems to be awakened directly out of a dream by a noise, for example, the dreamer passes through the sleep state. A motion picture image of a stationary object is actually dozens of individual images passing so fast they seem to be a solid object. Similarly, we can't trust our experience in this case because the change is so fast we don't notice it.

Though they seem so, the three selves are not actually

separate entities but apparently distinct entities created when the limitless I associates with a given state of consciousness. Associated with the waking state, the Self "[becomes](#)" a waking state personality, suffering and enjoying the limitations of the physical world, the senses, mind, intellect, ego, unconscious, and self-ignorance. The dreamer suffers the limitations of the mind, the unconscious, and self-ignorance. And the sleeper, the Self apparently merged into the unconscious, suffers only self-ignorance and limitless bliss.

These three states and egos are known to everyone and constitute the totality of the limited I's experience. The purpose of the Upanishad is to raise doubt in the waker's mind as to his or her identity. If I am the waking ego, which I'm completely convinced I am, what happens to me when I become a sleeper? I willingly surrender everything essential to my idea of myself (my body, mind, intellect, and all my physical possessions) and turn into a mass of [limitless Consciousness](#).

Yet I don't seem to be content as a sleeper ego, the blissfully ignorant subtle being, because I sacrifice that status to suffer and enjoy the world created by my *vasanas* in waking or dream states. My dreamer identity is obviously equally insufficient because I always leave it to become a sleeper. So my status as any one ego or ego aspect is limited and my true identity open to question.

Furthermore, if identity is happiness, any ego identity is limited since the happiness experienced in sleep disappears in the waking state. Dream happiness dissolves on waking, and waking happiness cannot be transported into sleep or dream.

### **IF I'M REAL I HAVE TO EXIST ALL THE TIME**

The answer to "Who am I" is that I am not any of these egos or ego states. If I'm real I have to exist all the time. I can't suddenly be one thing one minute and something else the next; I experience life as a simple single complete conscious being. In fact I exist in the waking, dream, and deep sleep states independent of the waker, dreamer and deep sleeper.

As what?

As the limitless 'I', Awareness, the common factor and [witness](#) to the three states. Except for meditation, the Self is probably easiest to recognize in the dream state because the physical senses are inactive. The dream is playing on the screen of the mind like a movie and even though physical light is absent because the eyes are closed, the dream ego and the events in which it is participating are clearly illumined, a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'lucid' dreaming. The lucidity is the limitless I temporarily functioning as the dreamer, 'the shining one.' However, identification with the dream ego and its doings prevents us from properly appreciating the presence of the dream 'light', the Self.

The Self is unknown in the waking state for the same reason. Preoccupied with the happenings in our worlds and minds, we are completely unaware that both the sense objects and our thoughts and feelings are bathed in the light of Awareness.

In deep sleep the ego/intellect is dissolved into its source, the dormant seeds of its past actions, so it isn't aware of either the Self or anything external.

The three ego's are called *upahdis*, limiting adjuncts, in Vedanta. An *upadhi* is something that apparently covers or conceals the nature of something else. If I put clear water in a colored glass, the water, seen through the glass, appears colored.

Similarly when I look at myself through my waking, dream, and sleep personalities, I seem to be three distinct personalities. However, when I remove the *upadhi* I can see what I really am. The removal or negation of the *upahdis* is simply knowing they are unreal, not going into some high 'spiritual' state to get rid of them. The Patanjali Yoga *Sutras* say liberation depends on destruction of the mind and the experience of *samadhi* but Vedanta says that the more one struggles to remove the thoughts the more one lends them reality, reinforcing Self ignorance.

To further confused the issue, the waker and the dreamer are fractured into many sub-identities, *upadhis* within an *upadhi*, so that most of us are dealing with a confusing array of selves, none of which are real. Remember, 'real' in metaphysics means enduring, unchanging, unlimited. Because something is

experienced does not make it real, the snake in the rope, the blue sky, and the rising sun, for example. With reference to my son, I'm a father. With reference to my father, a son. With reference to my wife, I'm a husband. To my boss I'm an employee. I'm a devotee with reference to God and a taxpayer with reference to the government. With reference to myself I'm a success, failure, victim, victimizer, sports fan, audiophile or any of the thousands of ready-made identities available in the supermarket of identities that is modern life. The often conflicting roles we play as waking and dream state egos are limited by each other, other selves playing similar or different roles, and our ideas about the meaning of these roles and selves. Caught in this thicket of identities, is it any wonder I suffer? In the end, spiritual life, irrespective of the ostensible path, always boils down finding out who one is...minus all one's roles and experiences.

Not that anything is wrong with role playing. Society only functions efficiently when our roles are well-defined and we play them impeccably. But when we identify ourselves completely with our roles we suffer. Spiritually, identification with the role, not the role itself, is the problem. For example, though an actress identifies herself with the character, she seamlessly returns to her original identity when the curtain falls. Even though the audience believes her illusion, she remembers her real self throughout.

After patient analysis I can see I'm not any of these personalities. What am I then? The limitless I. And what is the limitless I? The limitless I is called the substrate or *adisthanam* in Sanskrit. A substrate makes the error of limitation possible. The rope in our example, is a substrate, something whose nature is so subtle it is possible to mistake it for something else. The fact that I'm formless Awareness makes the playing of myriad roles possible.

A substrate is also the essence, a form reduced to its ultimate nature. For example, a ring, a bracelet, and a necklace are three forms into which gold can be crafted. If the three are melted down, their forms are destroyed but nothing substantial is lost because the gold, their essence, remains. Meditation on the nature of the 'I' melts down the waker, dreamer, and sleeper and leaves the limitless I shining as the innermost Self of the seeker.

When I look more carefully into the Self I find that I'm whole and complete. Nothing is missing. Because nothing is missing the Self has no need of desire. If I am desireless I am peaceful. I never change because all the changes that I desire are only for the sake of peace or happiness. When I look into my limitlessness I discover that I'm free of everything. Being free of limitation means that I'm eternally blissful, as I am in sleep. When I look into my bliss I see that my nature is pure love.

If my real Self is like this, I won't get caught up in the limited identities life asks me to play. Self-Realization/enlightenment/liberation/ salvation is not a mind-blowing mystical state but simply the condition of someone abiding in his or her real nature. To suppose that one must enter a transcendental superconscious 'forth state' to lose the waker, dreamer, sleeper identities is untrue. The enlightened sleep, dream, and carry on a normal waking life - minus the feeling of limitation bedeviling the unenlightened. Free of the expectation that experience should bring lasting happiness, they never deny duality, only it's reality, because, like the snake in the rope, it isn't actually there.

## **Meditation**

Even a careful reading of the Mandukya or a few teachings at the feet of a scriptural master would probably not produce the firm and lasting knowledge of oneself as the limitless I. So in the eighth century a great sage, Gaudapada, added a meditation to the verses to help the seeker realize the Self. In this meditation the three states are symbolized by three sounds and the '[forth state](#)' the limitless I, is referred to as soundless. Meditation on the three states confers certain benefits, but meditation on the Silence with right [understanding](#) produces liberation.

Silence is twofold. Relative silence, a negative state, is merely the absence of sound and not the Self. Because sound is so distracting, spiritual literature often prescribes cultivating relative silence. But the Upanishad's definition of sound includes mental and emotional noise. Often, only in relative silence do we realize how disturbed our consciousness is. The absence of

thought is also relative silence. This is why a blank mind is not enlightenment.

The second kind of silence is 'absolute.' Absolute means not opposed to sound. Absolute Silence is best realized in relative silence and could profitably be described as the Silence/Awareness because of which both sound and relative science are known. The absolute Silence is the Self, the Limitless I.

### **Mandukya Upanishad**

*(1) Om, the Word, is all this, a clear explanation of which follows: all that is past, present, and future is Om. Whatever is before the past and after the future is Om.*

*2) All this is Om, the Limitless I. This Self is the limitless I.*

*(3) The first quarter (of the Self) is the waker whose field is the waking state, who is conscious of the external world of objects, who has seven limbs and nineteen mouths, and who enjoys the world's gross objects.*

*(4) The second quarter is the dreamer whose field of experience is the dream state, who is conscious of the internal world of objects, who has seven limbs and nineteen mouths and who enjoys the subtle objects of the dream world .*

*(5) The third quarter is the sleeper in whom all experiences become undifferentiated into a mass of consciousness, and who is the gateway to the waking and dream states. In the deep sleep state the sleeper neither sees or desires subtle or gross objects.*

*(6) The sleeper is the Lord of all manifest existence. It is the knower of all, the inner controller, and the source of*

*all. The sleep state is that from which all things originate and into which they all dissolve.*

*(7) The Self is known as “the forth” and is to be realized. It is neither conscious of the external or internal worlds, nor is it a mass of consciousness. It is not simple consciousness, nor is it unconscious. It cannot be seen by the senses, is unrelated to anything, incomprehensible to the mind, uninferable, unthinkable, and indescribable. Its nature is pure consciousness, the negation of all phenomena, non-dual, blissful, and peaceful.*

*(8) Viewed as sounds the Self is A, U, M.*

*(9) The one who meditates on the waking state as “A,” the first and most pervasive, fulfills all desires and becomes a leader.*

*(10) The one who meditates on the dream state as “U” because it is between and superior, attains superior knowledge and is treated fairly by all. In his line of descendants everyone attains Self knowledge.*

*(11) The one who meditates on the sleep state as “M” as the measure and that wherein all things become one is able to realize the nature of things and beings and understand all things within himself.*

*(12) That which is partless, soundless, incomprehensible, beyond the senses, blissful, non-dual and that wherein all phenomena are resolved is the “forth,” the Self. The one who knows It dissolves the self in It.*

#### FOOTNOTES

**AUM or OM** is a sound symbol of the limitless I. In a scientific sense the verse means that the whole world is made of Consciousness in a state of vibration.

## **Pure Awareness.**

Vedanta says that in a non-dual reality there is only Awareness. It is not awareness 'of' anything. It is 'self-aware' and needs no other awareness to know/see/perceive itself. It also does not need objects to reveal it. It is self revealing. To say that I know Awareness, assuming that the 'I' that knows is different from Awareness, would be like taking a flashlight out in the daytime to see the sun. The rays of the flashlight will never reach the sun. So you cannot know Awareness as an object. You know Awareness because you are Awareness. This is called 'immediate' knowledge, meaning that no media (instrument) is necessary to give knowledge.

## **Reflected awareness (pratibimba or chidabasa)**

**In Maya you have the subject, the ego, which is pure Awareness reflected on the 'I' thought in the Subtle Body. Awareness bounces off this thought and the thought, the ego 'I', seems to be 'be aware' of the object. The 'light' in which this transaction between the reflected awareness and the objects takes place is Awareness. The reflected awareness is always awareness 'of' some object. In non-dual reality even if Awareness is split into subject and object Awareness knows that the subject and object distinction is apparent. Reflected awareness is 'mediate' knowledge. The subject requires an instrument (media) to know objects.**

In the West the word 'awareness' refers to reflected awareness and not to pure Awareness. Or it refers to the thoughts and feelings that reflected awareness illumines. Incidentally, the word 'consciousness' can be used as a synonym for awareness. You may be familiar with the term 'stream of consciousness.' It refers to the activities that appear in reflected awareness: dreams, memories, desires, fears, fantasies, etc. Now to your letter.

**Mouths.** The text actually says nineteen mouths because it includes the "five *pranas* ," the physiological systems and '*chitta*,' memory.

**The Elements.** Air, fire, water, earth, and space. These elements are called the *Virat* , the macrocosmic gross body.

**Inward.** Consciousness can't in fact turn inward or outward because it is all-pervasive, like space. The consciousness referred to is reflected consciousness, the mind.

**Vasanas.** The impressions of past experience, also termed "*samskaras*" in spiritual literature.

**Dream life.** The substance of the dream field, thought and feeling, are drawn from the macrocosmic mind, *Hiranyagargha* .

**Macrocosmic vasanas.** The impressions of the experience of all beings over limitless time. Creation, according to Vedanta, is simply the recycling of unmanifest experience.

**Microcosmic vasanas.** The personal subconscious, impressions of a particular individual gathered from the past.

**Becomes.** The limitless I never becomes a limited experiencer but seems to become one when it associates with a particular *upahdhi* .

**Limitless Consciousness.** One of the most common Sanskrit terms for limitlessness is '*ananda*', which literally means 'without an end' and is generally rendered in English as 'bliss.' The sleep state is a blissful experience because consciousness is not broken up into thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as it is in the waking and dream states.

**Witness.** Although from It's standpoint there are no states to illumine, the apparently real states are only known because they are illumined by the Self.

**Forth State.** Nowhere does the Upanishad refer to a 'forth' state of consciousness. The incorrect translation of '*turiya*', the forth, as a 'forth state' causes great suffering for people who believe Self realization is experiential. The purpose of the Mandukya is not to encourage people to 'transcend' the three limited entities and their respective states but to point out the invariable awareness that makes the experience of each state possible.

**Understanding.** That I am the Silence, limitless Awareness.