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Sleep in Advaita Vedānta: A Prologue

Karl H. Potter, in his introduction to the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, lists twelve propositions as constituting the theoretical basis of Advaita. The last of these propositions reads as follows: "Pure consciousness is experienced during deep sleep; since we awake refreshed, it is inferred that pure consciousness (reality, Brahman, the true Self) is also the ultimate bliss."¹

The statement is merely an earnest of the profound role the phenomenon of deep sleep plays in the formulation of the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta. We read in one of its major proof-texts, the *Chāndogyaopaniṣad*: "Uddālaka son of Aruṇa said to his son Śvetaketu, 'Learn from me the doctrine of the sleep. When a man literally "sleeps" [*svapiti*], then he has merged with Existent. He has "entered the self" [*svamapītaḥ*], that is why they say that he "sleeps." For he has entered the self.' "²

The physiological experience of deep sleep continues to be profoundly significant in the subsequent evolution of Advaita, as well as in its classical formulation at the hands of Śaṅkara. This is a matter of some surprise, as sleep, on the basis of ordinary experience, may be regarded as a state of *un*consciousness, as a time we need to take off from the waking

state to return to it with renewed vigor in the pursuit of our normal, or even intellectual and philosophical, pursuits. This rather surprising role the phenomenon of deep sleep plays in Advaita has led William M. Indich to remark:

This phenomenological analysis of the deep sleep state is extremely important for the Advaitin, for it is in terms of this analysis that he argues for the non-dual, self-luminous and, . . . the blissful nature of pure consciousness. It may seem somewhat odd to a person trained in Western philosophy that an analysis of dreamless sleep should play a significant role in the philosophical defense of a particular theory of consciousness. Of course, both Freud and Jung saw in sleep a physiologically and psychologically necessary period of relief and recovery from the strains of waking experience, a point that goes back at least as far as Aristotle, but there seems to be little of philosophical concern for these thinkers behind this observation. On the other hand, while Śaṅkara discusses the physiology of sleep and acknowledges its value in allowing the individual to recover from fatigue, he goes beyond this and extracts arguments for his theory of Self from his discussion of sleep. And he is not alone among Indian philosophers in doing this.³

This then is the paradox to be confronted: that a state of being normally associated with unconsciousness becomes, in the hands of the Advaitins, the cornerstone of their doctrine of pure consciousness, a doctrine that constitutes the basis of the philosophical system. A striking illustration of this is found in the vantage point accorded to different states of consciousness in normal living and in Advaita. In normal living the baseline is provided by the *waking state*.⁴ From this waking state we pass into sleep—either a state of dreaming or deep sleep. In Advaita the perspective is reversed. The state of *deep sleep*

is said to be the gateway to cognition (*cetomukha*). From a blissful non-awareness of things and events in sleep,

one either wakes up gradually and eventually to full consciousness of the external world, or passes to the experience of objects and events in a dream. On the one hand, one goes into dreamless sleep from waking and dream, and on the other, one lapses from sleep into either of these states. Hence it is called the gateway of consciousness, alike to its entrance and to its exit.⁵

It might be useful to state here, in a general way, the metaphysical status of deep sleep in Advaita Vedānta, as we proceed to examine its role in particular texts and thinkers. The following account meets this need well:

Deep sleep (*suṣupta*) is the self in the form of *prājñā*, an undifferentiated and self-luminous mass of consciousness. Here one is desireless, without the superimposition of gross *or* subtle limitations. One rests in pure self-awareness, full of bliss (*ānanda*). Sleep is the source and limit of the other states, and most like the self in its true nature. Still, one inevitably returns from sleep to waking limitations, and the sleeper is ignorant within the bliss.⁶