

Levels of experience – a reflective psychology of education

An inward journey

In the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad, our experience is described by dividing it into four pādas. These pādas are four stages in an inward journey. And this journey is not merely *inward*, but also *downward*, into an innermost depth of our experience. The four stages are thus also *levels* of experience. They are: first, the waking state; second, the dream state; third, the state of deep sleep; and finally, an ultimate something which is called ‘*turiya*’ or the ‘fourth’. A summary is shown in the accompanying table (below).

- The waking state is the uppermost level, at the outer surface of experience. It is described as ‘*bahish-prajnya*’ or ‘knowing outward’. Here, attention is directed outwards, through the sense-perceptions of our gross bodies. Thus, we see a world of outside objects, located in external space.

This is shown at the top row of the table, immediately below the column titles.

- Going down, the second level is the dream state. It is described as ‘*antah-prajnya*’ or ‘knowing inward’. Here, the mind looks at its own conceptions, which it contains inside. It only sees appearances: which are inwardly produced, by its internal process of conception.

As attention turns from one thing to another, appearances keep on replacing one another, in our minds. Through this passing stream of appearances, there is a process of manifestation, which shows a world that mind conceives, in the course of time.

<i>Passing state</i>	<i>Perceiving instrument</i>	<i>Perceived appearance</i>	<i>Locating order</i>
Waking	Gross body	World of objects	Space
Dream	Subtle mind	Process of manifestation	Time
Deep sleep	Silent witnessing	Unmanifest potential	Causality

Non-dual consciousness

The dream state shows this mental level of experience. In the summarizing table, it is the second row.

- Going further down, the third level is the state of deep sleep. It is that state where there are no appearances. There is no outward knowing, of objects in the world. Nor is there any inward knowing, of conception in the mind. And yet, in the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad, this state is described as ‘prajnyāna-ghana’, which means ‘filled with consciousness’. Thus, though deep sleep is seen habitually as an ‘unconscious’ state, we are told that the real content of deep sleep is pure consciousness and nothing else.

Deep sleep is that state where thoughts and dreams dissolve, into the depth of mind. Habitually, that depth is seen from the outside – from the surface of the mind. Then it appears to be ‘unconscious’. This is our habitual view of it.

But, according to the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad, this habitual view needs questioning. Through such a questioning, the mind reflects into its seemingly ‘unconscious’ depth. And then that depth turns out to be an underlying consciousness. It is a silent witnessing: which keeps on knowing quietly, beneath the seeming things that come and go. That witnessing continues at the underlying background of experience, while appearances keep changing at the surface of the mind.

As that silent witnessing continues underneath, it enables our experiences to be assimilated into an unmanifest potential. In this unmanifest potential, we assimilate ‘samskāras’ or ‘conditionings’. Accordingly, an earlier experience can leave behind an unmanifest conditioning: which gets manifested later on, and hence gives rise to an effect.

The deep sleep state uncovers, thus, a silent witnessing: which continues underneath, at the persisting background of the changing mind. That underlying continuity is the integrating level of experience. It enables the assimilation of experience into an unmanifest potential; and so it gives rise to an interconnecting causality, which persists through all change and difference.

In the summarizing table (page 1), this integrating level is the third row, immediately above the horizontal line.

- Beneath the integrating level of deep sleep, the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad tells us of a final ground, which it calls ‘turīya’ or the ‘fourth’. That ground is not a passing state. It is not a state of outward knowing, like the waking state. Nor is it a state of inward knowing, like a dream. Nor is it a silent state, like deep sleep: where no seeming things are known, neither outside nor inside.

Instead, the ground is described as ‘ek’-ātma-pratyaya-sāra’ or the ‘one self-evident principle’. In other words, it is the self-illuminating principle of consciousness, which is shared in common by all experiences. So it is present

in all states, beneath their changes and their differences. It is their ground reality, beneath their differing appearances.

In it, subject and object are the same. The 'consciousness' that knows and the 'reality' that's known are found identical. They are two words for one, same thing. That is its 'advaita', its 'non-duality'. In the summarizing table (page 1), that non-dual consciousness is shown at the bottom, beneath the horizontal line.

The final ground is thus described as a non-dual truth. It is the truth of all the world, which each of us can find within. For every one of us, it is one's own home ground. To find it means to come back home, to one's own true reality.

That, says the Māṇḍūkya Upanishad, is what we need to know.

Psychology and education

However, this conclusion can seem very strange, from the viewpoint of the outside world. What is the use of such an inward journey? What is the point of describing such a journey through successive levels, going down into a changeless ground beneath our minds and bodies?

This description is essentially reflective. And its purpose is purely educational. As the journey inward is described, it provides us with a comprehensive analysis of our experience. The analysis includes a profound psychology, in which the mind is a mediating process: in between the world we see and the consciousness that underlies our seeing.

At each moment of experience, consciousness has been expressed, in some perception of the world. An object then appears perceived. And, immediately afterward, there is a reflection back, as the perception is interpreted and taken into underlying consciousness. From there, from that underlying consciousness, the cycle of expression and reflection keeps repeating, in the course of time. As it repeats, it gives rise to the appearances that succeed each other in our minds. And the mind's succession of appearances gives rise to the world that we perceive.

But when the mind is described like this, as a mediating process, the use of this description is very specific. The use is quite simply to reflect: back from the world, to underlying consciousness. And what that's meant to achieve is purely educational. The purpose is only to know better, by returning to the underlying basis of knowledge.

It may be helpful here to make a distinction between two ways of using our theories and descriptions. On the one hand, we may use our theories and descriptions in a calculating way, in order to achieve prescribed objectives in the

world. On the other hand, we may use them through education, so as to clarify what we know.

Take, for example, a map. On the one hand, it can be used to calculate the route to some prescribed destination. ‘Go m kilometres in x direction, then n kilometres in y direction’ and so on. A map can even be digitized and fed into a computer, so as to guide a missile towards some military target.

But, on the other hand, a map can also be used to educate one’s understanding of a territory, and that can cultivate one’s living ability to get from place to place. This educational use is achieved by reflecting back from the map, into one’s understanding of the experience that it represents. Thus, as one looks at a map, one may reflect upon how roads and routes have to get past obstacles like hills and rivers and railway lines. And, through such reflection, one may come to a better understanding of the general lay of the land. Then, as one travels in the territory, that better understanding gets quite naturally expressed in a living ability to navigate one’s way and to go about one’s business there.

The same two aspects, of calculation and education, are found as well in scientific theories and ideas. In modern physics, theories are applied essentially through calculation: both in the mathematics of theoretical deductions, and in the measuring and engineering use of material instruments. However, in a living science like psychology, the situation is quite different. In psychology, the instruments of application are essentially our living faculties of mind and personality. So, theories and ideas are essentially applied through education, in particular through the clarification and cultivation of our living faculties.

In short, where physics is essentially applied through calculation, psychology is more essentially an educating science, applied through a reflective use of theories and ideas. The question is: how far down can the reflection go? If it goes only to some level of intention, thought or feeling, then it is still in the realm of personal and partial mind. Here, it produces some prescription or idea or intuition: which still needs some more deliberation to apply it, through some further calculation or technology.

The Māṇḍūkya Upanishad speaks of a reflection that goes down to where all mind dissolves. It questions back, beneath all mind and mental picturing, towards a ground of consciousness that is utterly impartial and impersonal. The aim is to arrive at a true knowledge of that ground. No calculation or technology is needed to apply that knowledge. It applies itself spontaneously, at all levels of expression. From it, our living capabilities develop of their own accord, as consciousness is naturally expressed in feelings, thoughts and actions.