



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 6:2

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2025

**Becoming Esemplastic: *Being* and the *Oneness* of Consciousness(es) in
Early Upaniṣads**

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Abstract: There can be two ways of analysing consciousness depending on what view of it one takes. One of the two ways would be the objective way, which is almost a ‘surgical’ way, treating consciousness as an external object to study; and the other would be a subjective way or feeling and knowing and understanding that consciousness is something that characterises and connects all that exists in the manifested world. The first of the two ways, namely the objective way, is also the psychoanalytical way. This has been quite amply demonstrated in the last one and a half century in pre-Freudian, Freudian and post-Freudian approaches to consciousness studies. However, if consciousness is understood as the entity or the spirit that pervades and/or connects all that has been and can be perceived through senses or through thought or through some other means or agency, its analysis would have to take another form and course which is not clinically objective at all. This is precisely what consciousness appears to be in the discourses of the early Upaniṣads: an entity that connects the Creator with the Creation, the palpable with the impalpable, the being with the non-being, and the phenomenal with the non-phenomenal. Therefore, the character of the discourses on consciousness in the Upaniṣads deserve special attention. Among others, a major objective of this essay is to study and strive to understand the Upaniṣadic discourses on consciousness and thereby derive some concrete insights, to understand the (concept/idea of) essential ‘oneness’ that characterises the Vedāntic thought.

Key words: *Upaniṣad, Advaita Vedānta, svaprakāśa, Brahman, Turīya*

David Chalmers (1996) in the exposition of the opening chapter of his book *The Conscious Mind*, cites the following from *The International Dictionary of Psychology*: “Consciousness is a fascinating but elusive phenomenon: it is impossible to specify what it is, what it does or why it evolved. Nothing worth reading has been written about it” (03). This definition from the dictionary explains the fact that the science of psychology cannot shore up enough tangible material to make a definitive statement about consciousness. One must, therefore, enter the

domain of ‘consciousness’ with much trepidation, because there can be more than umpteen ways of looking at and more than umpteen understandings of ‘consciousness’. To take just one illustrative example, in the limited sense alone of “being aware”, including “object awareness” and “subject awareness”, consciousness “refers to at least seven different things”, starting from “reflective awareness” to what has been termed “pure awareness which is not predicated to any object or process, a state often reported in mystical experiences by yogins” (Rao 1998: 309). Consciousness can be approached from two completely opposite directions. So huge is the gap between the two approaches that Susan Blackmore terms it “the great chasm or the explanatory gap between inner and outer, mind and brain, or subjective and objective” (2005: 02). It is not only the huge gap between the approaches to consciousness but also the unlimited abstract possibilities or otherwise of defining it that add to the complexity. Susan Blackmore highlights that complexity when she cites the significant question in the history of consciousness studies: “what it is like to be a bat?”, the question that throws into stark prominence “the mind-body problem” that is “so intractable” (2005: 06). Going along with this line of argument, Blackmore cites both psychologists and philosophers either speaking of consciousness as beyond comprehension and reach, or of it being as traceable, mappable and measurable as much as the ‘brain’ (2005: 8-9).

In order that the thrust and the direction of the discussion do not get lost in the discursiveness of the many understandings and many explanations of consciousness, we close this section of the essay by quoting David Chalmers again (2010):

Consciousness is an extraordinary and multifaceted phenomenon whose character can be approached from many different directions. It has a phenomenological and a neurobiological character. It has a metaphysical and epistemological character. It has a perceptual and congestive character. It has a unified and a differentiated character. And it has many further sorts of character (xi).

“Mind is not (in) the brain”, says Dr. Hegde who has been a medical practitioner for very long and, now, is also a wellness advisor; and then he makes a quick explanation by asking if the sleeping pill affects the brain or the mind (Hegde 2021). The answer is or should be clear to anyone and everyone. The sleeping pill, obviously, dulls the brain but does nothing to the mind. Once that mind-brain dichotomy is laid down, accepted and established, the discussion can focus singly on the ‘mind’ and leave the ‘brain’ for the study of the scientists of the organs of the human body. And since the title of this essay specifically mentions the Upaniṣads, the

discussion hereafter has to focus on the theory of the mind and consciousness in those ancient Indian *darśana* texts only. The mind in the Upaniṣadic thought is an entity or a faculty that is different in character than what it is in some major streams of thought and theory in other branches, particularly the Western. To make things somewhat less complex, we quote a British-American spiritualist steeped in the spiritual knowledge and practices of the East:

...you don't have thoughts; you are thoughts. You are the universe experiencing itself... You are not a drop in the ocean; you are the ocean in a drop. Your mind is not just inside your body: your body is inside your mind... The world you see and touch is not something separate from you; it is you... (Watts 2025).

In ancient Indian philosophical (*darśana*) thought, the mind is a sort of complex digest of quite a few faculties of perception and cognition which include 'consciousness' and which lead to (or have the potential to lead to) some forms of 'awareness'. Of the several branches of ancient Indian *darśana*, Advaita Vedānta, for example, posits and accepts "pure consciousness as the singular reality", which is the form of awareness that Timalina (2009) transcribes as *Cinmātra*, "awareness only" (03). It indeed is very abstract and deeply philosophical, but Timalina (2009) cites Sureśvara, a ninth Century philosopher and a disciple of Śaṅkara, and refers to the theories of 'Ābhāsa and Dr̥ṣṭi-śr̥ṣṭi' to state that "consciousness-in-itself is 'what is perceived as real' in all instantaneous cognitive modes" (08). He adds that "the thesis" of "consciousness alone is a consequence of the arguments that (i) what exists is only what is cognised, and (ii) only the instances of awareness are cognised" (Timalina 2009: 08). In order that the direction of the argument is not lost on us, it is necessary to point out that Timalina (2009) is of the view that "the doctrines of *Sattādvaita* and *Cidādvaita* were developed by different scholars focusing on different aspects of reality and that their "historical congruence" indicates the establishment of the philosophical notion that "it is *cid* that not only determines *sat*, but also its own existence" (08); that is, "[f]or those who accept that consciousness is self-aware and self-reflexive, reality can be reduced to consciousness alone", which is *svaprakāśa*, self-illuminated, and is what the Upaniṣads identify as the *Self* (Timalina 2009: 16 & 18). The drift of this argument in Timalina's discourse could lead one to conclude that the central entity in the comprehensively wholesome tripartite concept of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* is 'consciousness'. In other words, *Cit* is the entity that connects the element of *Sat* with the state of *Ānanda*.

To make the idea of the *svaprakāśa* or the *svaprakāśatva* of the *self* more cogent, one may cite a part of a conversation between Janaka, the king of Videha and Yājñavalkya, the

sage, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Having been granted a free and open wish by Yājñavalkya and having chosen to ask spiritual questions, Janaka engages Yājñavalkya in a series of questions about the source of light for a person living here in this mundane world. The fifth question he asks is, “[b]ut when both the sun and the moon have set, the fire has died out, and the voice is stilled, Yājñavalkya, what then is the source of the light for the person here?” The immediate answer of the sage is, “[t]he self (*ātman*) is then his source of light. It is by the light of the self that a person sits down, goes about, does his work, and returns.” (Olivelle 1998: 111). Though a *Rajarṣi*, a sage-like king, Janaka is puzzled about the character of this *Self* which is its own light or, perhaps, is nothing but light - the *svaprakāśa*. So, he persists with his questioning and asks, “कतम आत्मेति? (which/what *Self* is that?)”, and forthwith comes the answer, “[i]t is this person—the one that consists of perception among the vital functions (*prāṇa*), the one that is the inner light within the heart. He travels across both worlds, being common to both” (Olivelle 1998: 111). This being, this *Self*, sometimes also referred to as the *puruṣa* (the being having earned or on the way to earn oneness with the ‘Cosmic Being’) in some Upaniṣadic discourses, goes through levels from the gross to the fine to become pure awareness or pure consciousness and/or the *cinmātra* to achieve that inner light, that self-illumination or enlightenment. *Śloka* 4.3.9 of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* speaks this way of those levels: “तस्य वा एतस्य पुरुषस्य द्वे एव स्थाने भवत इदं च परलोकस्थानं च । सन्ध्यं तृतीयं स्वप्नास्थानम् । तस्मिन्सन्ध्ये स्थाने तिष्ठन्नेते उभे स्थाने पश्यतीदं च परलोकस्थानं च ... । अत्रायं पुरुषः स्वयंज्योतिर्भवति” (Olivelle 1998: 112). That is, at the third level, which is the most elevated level or state where this world and the other beyond meet and merge, the *puruṣa* (self) becomes *svaprakāśa* — the pure awareness/consciousness, the *cinmātra* that is self-radiant. This, then, is that self-illuminated *Self*, the *Self* that has earned *svaprakāśatva*, which is synonymous with, or is itself the ‘consciousness alone’, the *cinmātra*. Lest the progress of this argument misleads or confuses, it would be meaningful to add a little elaboration here. It is an established piece of knowledge that the Upaniṣads were composed by a good number of scholars and Ṛṣis, usually unknown; and, therefore, along with an apparent difference of style among them, there is often an easily visible difference in the forms of expressions for different entities either seen or envisaged. As a result, the entity of ‘consciousness’, too is seen, envisaged, described, explained, and theorised upon differently in different Upaniṣads. It should not need much labour of argument, therefore, to suggest that what Timalisina calls *cinmātra* is synonymous with what the Upaniṣads call *Brahman*; or, to put it slightly differently, one can also safely argue that *cinmātra*, the ‘consciousness alone’, is a form of *Brahman*. For the benefit and comfort of those who may doubt the synonymity of *Brahman*

and *cinmātra*, it can be said by way of explanation that consciousness is the only vital element of and in *Brahman*. Consciousness as the vital element of *Brahman* (or *Brahman* itself), or consciousness as *Ātman*, has levels depending upon which part or level of an individual's being it associates with. The 'Brahmānandavallī' of the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* speaks of those levels as *koṣas*. The 'vallī' successively speaks of आत्मा प्राणमयः, आत्मा मनोमयः, आत्मा विज्ञानमयः, and आत्मा आनन्दमयः (Olivelle 1998: 300-302). These are the successive locations or the successive stages or even the successive forms of consciousness on a scale of evolution, so to say, from the level of life-breath (*prāṇa*) to the level of the highest form of non-corporeal bliss (*Brahmānanda*), the highest, the ultimate and everlasting experience. The ultimate on this scale is consciousness alone, unalloyed and consisting solely and purely of bliss, identified (therefore) as आनन्द आत्मा.

The esemplastic being, which or who has often been identified with or as both *Ātman* and *Brahman*, is the very originator of all that exists and is a part of the universe. So goes the Upaniṣadic thought. We cite the beginning of the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* as a major illustrative example: “आत्मा वा इदमेक एवाग्र असौन्यान्य त्किञ्चन मिषत्। स ईक्षता लोकानुसृजा इति”; and thus thinking, the *Self*, the one and only at that stage, creates the *lokas*, and then, to fill the *lokas* with life, the *Self* draws “the person” from the same “waters” (the most preponderant of the five elements) and brooding “over him” creates the living phenomena (Olivelle 1998: 316; Radhakrishnan 1953: 515-16). The theory in the Upaniṣads in general and in the opening part of the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* in particular, which is the part we have cited and quoted from above, the major foundational structure and material -- far and near, tangible and intangible, physical and in some other form and dimension -- comes primarily from the will of the *Self* (an existence most likely without a body). Secondly and nearer home (for us on our planet), the creation comes from “the person...brooded over” by the same *Self* bringing into existence fire, air, the sun, the moon, the quarters of space, plants and trees, and death “from the outbreath” (Radhakrishnan 1953: 515-16). The process of Creation that the *Aitareya Upaniṣad* delineates and the matter employed in the process, both, suggest and underline the esemplasticity of Creation. In our major philosophical discourses, it is the word ‘oneness’ that speaks of and for the (same) esemplasticity that this paper aims to establish as the character of all that exists in material or immaterial forms. Different Upaniṣads employ different analogies to delineate and to underline the esemplastic character — the oneness — of all that exists in different and varying forms. For example, the first verse of the second ‘*muṇḍaka*’ of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, for example, explains that essential oneness of all through the following terse image:

यथा सुदीप्तत्पावकाद्विस्फुलिङ्गा

सहस्रशः प्रभवन्ते सरूपाः ।

तथाक्षराद्विविधाः सोम्य भावाः

प्रजायन्ते तत्र चैवापियन्ति ॥ (Olivelle 1998: 442)

This is an interesting analogy envisaging the emergence of everything — living or nonliving, manifest or unmanifest — as coming forth like sparks from a well-lit fire and then returning back to the same fire. The fire in the verse designates what the next verse identifies as a divine and formless person (“दिव्यो ह्यमूर्तः पुरुषः”) who is “both within and without, unborn, without breath or mind” and, also, “farther than the farthest imperishable” (Olivelle 1998: 442-43). The analogy extends, expands and matures in the succeeding verses, and ascribes all that happens in the cosmos, including all our actions, to the same divine and formless person. The worldview that proceeds from this Upaniṣadic theory of Creation gets its ultimate base in the esemplastic notion and concept of the oneness of the manifest and the unmanifest cosmic phenomena.

Talking specifically of consciousness as *Brahman*, that is synonymous with the ‘divine and formless person’ (दिव्यो ह्यमूर्तः पुरुषः), contained in and enlivening the *Ātman*, the *Māndūkya Upaniṣad* opens with the declamation, “ओमित्येदक्षरमिदं सर्वम् । तस्योप्याख्यनम् । भूतं भवद्भविष्यदिति सर्वमोङ्कार एव । यच्चान्यत्रिकालतीतं तदप्योङ्कार एव ॥” (Olivelle 1998: 474). In his commentary on this opening verse of the Upaniṣad, Śaṅkara writes, “*Aum*, the word, that is all. As all objects that we see around us, ...and further as the different names are not different from *Aum*, therefore all this is verily *Aum*. As a thing is known through its name, so the highest Brahman is known through *Aum* alone” (Nikhilananda 1949: 10). By way of an explanation, one could say that the opening verse of the Upaniṣad (*Māndūkya*) sees and notices and sums up the entire limitless phenomena — all that is manifest and unmanifest — in the letter that is the word *Aum* and the sound that is the *mantra Aum*, the highest chant. The Upaniṣad, one of the shortest, then describes and talks of *Brahman*, synonymous with *Ātman*, as having four quarters — सर्वं ह्येतद् ब्रह्म । अयमात्मा ब्रह्म । सोऽयमात्मा चतुष्पात् — that are: *vaiśvānara*, “whose sphere is the waking state” and “who is conscious of the external objects”; *taijasa*, “whose sphere is dream” and “who is conscious of internal objects”; *prājñā*, “whose sphere is deep sleep” and in whom “all become unified and undifferentiated”; and that quarter “whose essence is perception of itself alone” which is “ungraspable” and “tranquil” and “auspicious” and “without a second” (Olivelle 1998: 475; Nikhilananda 1949: 14, 19, 22). Śaṅkara in his commentary on the verse explains that “*Ātman* indicated by *Aum*, signifying both the higher and the lower Brahman, has four quarters” and that “the knowledge

of the fourth (*Turīya*) is attained by merging the (previous) three in it in the order of the previous one, in the succeeding one” (Nikhilananda 1949: 12). In the interest of a better explanation, Śaṅkara uses the analogy of *kārṣāpana*, an ancient coin that has four quarters contained in it. For Śaṅkara, the word *pāda* in *chatuspāta* “is used in the sense of instrument” and also “in the sense of an object when the object to be achieved is the fourth”, that is, the “*Turīya*” (Nikhilananda 1949: 12). Prabhavanada and Manchester (1957) call this state the state of “superconscious vision”, that is the *Self* at the level at which “the Self, becomes the Self.” (49, 51). The *Turīya*, thus, is the ultimate state of consciousness — the sublimated state — that has contained in it the previous three stages or states of consciousness, *vaiśva*, *taijasa* and *prājña*.

Though borrowed from Coleridge, its progenitor, the world *esemplastic* makes a good and meaningful sense in this context of the unified and unifying consciousness, the *Turīya*, that subsumes all the earlier levels, shapes and forms of consciousness; is synonymous with *Brahman* (the *Self* or a form of the *Self*) which itself is synonymous with *Ātman* (again, the *Self*, or an analogous form of the same *Self* as *Brahman*). It is the absolute awareness and knowledge of the esemplasticity of consciousness that prompts the British-American spiritualist, whom we have quoted earlier and who has grasped the essence of Hindu, Zen, Taoist and Buddhist doctrines, to state in a discourse that “*self* is a verb, not noun; a process, not a possession” (Watts 2025). In order to undo the abstractness in the idea and, also, to make it rather graphic analogically, he adds, a little further in the discourse, “the oxygen in your lungs right now was exhaled by ancient forests...you were never separate from the cosmos, only a localised expression of that infinite creativity...you are the universe become conscious, evolved over billions of years to witness its own grandeur” (Watts 2025). That state of becoming one with the universe is the state which has developed out of and through the esemplasticity of being, and it has in its history the entire evolution from the elemental to the universal. The *Chhāndogya Upaniṣad* describes that evolutionary history in another vein but not in an unrelated context: “एषां भूतानां पृथिवी रसः। पृथिव्या आपो रसः। आपामोषधयोरसः। औषधीनानां पुरुषोरसः। पुरुषस्य वाग्रसः। वाच ऋग्रसः। ऋचः सामरसः। साम्न उद्गीथोरसः। स एष रसानां परमः पराध्याय्योऽष्टमो यदुद्गीथः॥” (Olivelle 1998: 170). That is, the finest and the ultimate essence of all that exists (from the ‘beings’ - living and non-living - to the earth, to water, to plants, to a person, to the person’s speech, to the ‘hymn’ (ṛk), to the sāman chant, to *Udgītha*, which may mean many things but here and in this context means the high chant of *Aum*. The state of the *Turīya* that the *Māndūkya Upaniṣad* describes is the esemplastic state which is complete (पूर्ण) in its शून्यता that is pregnant with infinite

possibilities. Hence the hymn or the ode to *Brahman* that is (the) ऋषि, which is the hymn that is also one of the most recited peace chants (the *Shānti Mantra*) that prefaces the *Iśa Upaniṣad*; and that reads as the following in a translation:

*Filled with Brahman are the things we see,
Filled with Brahman are the things we see not,
From out of Brahman floweth all that is:
From Brahman all — yet is He all the same.
OM... Peace — peace — peace* (Prabhavananda & Manchester 1957: 27).

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