

The Mandukya Upanishad and Siddhartha: OM as the Path to the Self

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Abstract

The influence of Indian philosophy on Hermann Hesse and his writings has been extensively studied and discussed. Most critics view Siddhartha's enlightenment in Hesse's eponymous novel as synthesizing his wisdom and selecting Eastern philosophical ideas. However, the profound significance of OM in this enlightenment remains underexplored. This paper investigates the role of OM in Siddhartha's spiritual journey with the help of Mandukya Upanishad, contending that his enlightenment aligns with the non-dual tradition of Vedanta. The realization of the Absolute—referred to here as Brahman, Atman, or the Self—is understood as Panentheistic rather than Pantheistic. This perspective affirms Siddhartha's existential concerns, demonstrating that his quest for self-realization is deeply embedded in the Upanishadic vision of the Highest Reality.

Key Words: Vedanta, Consciousness, Enlightenment, Panentheism, Brahman, Self, Absolute

Introduction

In *Siddhartha*, Hermann Hesse presents a journey of self-discovery that intertwines with profound spiritual insights. After Siddhartha's 'awakening' in the first part of the novel, where he begins to appreciate the empirical, phenomenal world instead of viewing it solely as a veil to the deeper Reality, his subsequent engagement with *Samsara* begins. Initially, he perceives this world as a game and remains detached from its pleasures and distractions. However, he eventually becomes ensnared by lust, sloth, and greed, leading to disillusionment. At his lowest point, Siddhartha contemplates suicide by drowning in the river. It is here, at the brink of dejection, that he experiences an epiphany:

Then, out of remote areas of his soul, out of past times of his now weary life, a sound stirred up. It was a word, a syllable, which he, without thinking, with a slurred voice, spoke to himself, the old word which is the beginning and the end of all prayers of the Brahmans, the holy “Om”, which roughly means “that what is perfect” or “the completion”. And in the moment when the sound of “Om” touched Siddhartha’s ear, his dormant spirit suddenly woke up and realized the foolishness of his actions. (Hesse 97)

Before this transformative incident by the river, Siddhartha had already mentioned OM to his friend Govinda, describing it as: "Om is the bow, the arrow is soul, The Brahman is the arrow’s target, That one should incessantly hit" (Hesse 15). This paper seeks to explore the pivotal role of OM in Siddhartha’s spiritual journey, arguing that it serves as the key to his realization of the non-dual nature of existence, which is central to Advaita Vedanta. By examining the significance of OM within this framework, this study aims to illuminate the novel’s philosophical depth, particularly its alignment with the Upanishadic tradition of overcoming duality and achieving unity with the Absolute.

The significance and meaning of OM are addressed in the ancient Indian philosophical-religious texts, namely the Upanishads. Upanishads are the concluding portions of the Vedas. They are often referred to as ‘Vedanta’ because they contain the cream or the highest teachings of the four Vedas. The Vedas contain Samhita, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads which together make up the *Shruti*. *Shruti* texts are those that contain unquestionable truths that are too profound to have human authorship. Rishis are ‘seers’ rather than the authors of these texts (Joshua, 2021).

The goal of these texts is to engage the reader in discourse and lead them to self-actualization. The scope of this study is limited to the Mandukya Upanishad which is one of the shortest Upanishads and contains only 12 mantras. Along with discussing the significance of OM this Upanishad also discusses the four states of Consciousness (*Atman*)– Waking, Dreaming, Deep Sleep, and Pure, and emphasizes that pure consciousness is the underlying form of the other three states. The relationship of OM with the four states of consciousness and how this relationship plays a role in Siddhartha’s spiritual journey is established in this study.

Review of Literature

Collin Butler, in his paper “Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*: Some Critical Objections”, critiques *Siddhartha*’s journey by referring to it as a philosophical wild goose chase. Butler contends that *Siddhartha* mistakenly assumes that the path to truth and the path to peace of mind are identical, ultimately leading to what he calls metaphysical solipsism. However, Butler’s reading does not fully consider the novel’s deep engagement with the non-dual Vedantic tradition. Rather than mere solipsism, *Siddhartha*’s enlightenment can be interpreted through the framework of Mandukya Upanishad, where the self (Atman) and the Absolute (Brahman) are ultimately one, and are identical to consciousness.

Madison Brown highlights the extensive Indian influences in *Siddhartha*, including its title, character names, settings, and cultural backgrounds. Other scholars, such as Johanna Maria Louisa Kunze, Hans Beerman, and Eugene Timpe, have identified parallels between the novel and the Bhagavad Gita, suggesting that Hesse was deeply engaged with Hindu philosophical texts. While these interpretations acknowledge the novel’s engagement with Indian spiritual traditions, they also lead to a discussion on its philosophical foundations. The fact that both Western and non-Western critics find resonances in their respective wisdom traditions in *Siddhartha* underscores the universality of the Upanishads, which serve as the novel’s ideological backbone. This reinforces the argument that *Siddhartha*’s enlightenment is best understood through the non-dual Vedantic tradition.

Geza Von Molnar classifies *Siddhartha* as a Bildungsroman. *Siddhartha* undergoes a series of transformative experiences—excelling as a Brahman, a Samana, and a successful tradesman—before ultimately attaining wisdom. While he deeply understands Buddhist doctrine and acknowledges the Buddha’s enlightenment, he chooses not to become his disciple, sensing that something is missing from the Buddha’s teachings. Molnar’s reading highlights *Siddhartha*’s spiritual independence and his rejection of prescribed paths. This also aligns with the non-dual Vedantic tradition, which emphasizes self-inquiry and direct realization of Brahman.

Bhabhagrahi Mishra interprets *Siddhartha* as Hesse’s exploration of the oneness of existence, viewing the novel as both a philosophical inquiry and a psychological release from the author’s inner conflicts. Mishra’s analysis underscores *Siddhartha*’s pursuit of a unified reality, which closely aligns with the non-dual tradition of Vedanta. By exploring the role of

OM in Siddhartha's spiritual journey, this paper further argues that his enlightenment embodies *Advaita Vedanta's* core principle: the indivisibility of *Atman* and *Brahman*.

Günter Baumann interprets *Siddhartha* as Hesse's quest for personal salvation, highlighting the protagonist's transformative experience by the river. He cites a pivotal moment, "When the sound of Om reached Siddhartha's ears, his slumbering soul suddenly awakened and he recognized the folly of his action..."Om", he pronounced inwardly, and he was conscious of Brahman... all that was divine" (Hesse 98). Baumann's reading underscores the novel's emphasis on spiritual awakening through the direct experience of Om, a central tenet of the non-dual Vedantic tradition.

The aforementioned studies provide insightful analyses of *Siddhartha*, yet they share a limitation: they do not sufficiently address how Siddhartha's quest for truth culminates in the realization of the unity of all existence, a core principle of *Advaita Vedanta*. While critics acknowledge various philosophical influences on the novel, they often overlook the significance of OM, despite its repeated mention in the text. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by exploring the pivotal role of OM in Siddhartha's spiritual journey. By situating his realization within the framework of Upanishadic non-dualism, this study argues that his enlightenment aligns with the non-dual tradition of Vedanta.

OM as a Signifier of the Absolute

Swami Krishnananda in his commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad states that the Absolute is the form of which OM is the name. When we use a name, the form corresponding to that name is automatically and spontaneously evoked in our minds. However, the Absolute or the Highest Reality is not a particular but a Universal Form. Therefore, particularised language cannot describe it. So, instead of a language that belongs to a particular geographic location or a particular set of humans, a very comprehensive language is required to describe the Absolute. Since there is no such language that has such a wide scope that it would apply to the whole universe and to what is beyond it, the only language conceivable is OM. OM is a universal name that refers to a universal form. As the name is universal and the form is also universal, they blend into a single existence, because there cannot be two Universals standing apart from each other (Krishnananda 17-18).

Though the Absolute has no name or any particular form, individuals cannot envisage it in that transcendent nature. They need to conceive it in their minds before they can meditate upon it and realize it. Thus, the indescribable Reality is signified by OM in the *Shruti* texts.

The timelessness of the Absolute

According to the first verse of the Mandukya Upanishad, time is threefold: the past, the present and the future, and these three are OM. Not being limited to this threefold nature of time, OM also transcends it. Thus, the Absolute or OM is the reason behind what exists in time but at the same time, it transcends the three periods of time (Krishnananda 35). This makes the Brahman or the Absolute timeless. This is realized by the enlightened Siddhartha who states this to his friend Govinda as; “Time is not real, Govinda, I have experienced this often and often again. And if time is not real, then the gap which seems to be between the world and the eternity, between suffering and blissfulness, between evil and good, is also a deception” (Hesse 151).

However, it is noteworthy that Sankara argues that there are two types of knowledge. Lower knowledge, by which the phenomenal world is apprehended, and Higher knowledge, by which Brahman is apprehended (Scott 2001). According to him, time, space, and causality belong to the phenomenal world, which is only relatively real. They do not belong to Brahman who transcends them. Thus time, space, and causality are only relatively but not ultimately real.

The indescribability of the Absolute

The Brahadaranyaka Upanishad states that the Absolute can only be described by using a series of negations or *neti, neti* (not this, not this) because ultimately what can be conceived by the mind and thus can be conveyed through words is not *Brahman* or the Absolute. Siddhartha tells Govinda; “I’m telling you what I’ve found. Knowledge can be conveyed, but not wisdom. It can be found, it can be lived, it is possible to be carried by it, miracles can be performed with it, but it cannot be expressed in words and taught” (Hesse 151). He also expresses his mistrust towards words and language because the Truth that he needs to experience, the *Brahman* that he needs to realize is beyond the scope of language and words. He says;

There are stones which feel like oil or soap, and others like leaves, others like sand, and everyone is special and prays the Om in its own way, each one is Brahman, but

simultaneously and just as much it is a stone, is oily or juicy, and this very fact which I like and regard as wonderful and worthy of worship. —But let me speak no more of this. The words are not good for the secret. (Hesse 153)

The Four Quarters of Atman

According to non-dual Vedanta, *Brahman* is identical to *Ātman* (*Ayam Atmā Brahma*). There is spiritual unity in all existence. Swami Krishnananda in his commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad states that there are four quarters of the *Ātman*. These four quarters are the four states of Consciousness, **and a study of Consciousness is the same as the study of Absolute or Brahman because Brahman is Consciousness (*Pragyanam Brahma*)**. The four states of consciousness are four aspects in the study of the nature of the *Ātman* and not four separate parts of the *Ātman*. They are called *jāgrat*, *svapna*, *sushupti* and *turiya* – the waking state, the dreaming state, the sleeping state, and the transcendent spiritual state. He adds that the study of the four states is a process of transcendence of the lower by the higher, the higher does not negate or reject the lower, but includes it within itself, just as the eighth standard is included in the matriculation standard, the matriculation standard in the graduate standard and so on (Krishnananda 46-48). The instances of Siddhartha experiencing these states of consciousness are mentioned explicitly in the novel, so the significance of this needs to be examined.

The First Quarter or the Waking State

The mind accepts what it perceives through the senses. The sensory facts which are presented to us in our day-to-day experience are comprehended within what may be called the waking state. The first quarter of the *Atman* is the waking state. It is conscious only of what is outside and not of what is inside (Krishnananda 50).

The chapter titled ‘Awakening’ is about Siddhartha taking cognizance of the empirical world and experiencing the waking state or *jagritawastha*. He says;

Here was blue, here was yellow, here was green, the sky and the river flowed, the forest and the mountains were rigid, all of it was beautiful, all of it was mysterious and magical, and in its midst was he, Siddhartha, the awakening one, on the path to himself. All of this, all this yellow and blue, river and forest, entered Siddhartha for the first time through the eyes, was no longer a spell of Mara, was no longer the veil of Maya, was no longer a pointless and coincidental diversity of mere appearances,

despicable to the deeply thinking Brahman, who scorns diversity, who seeks unity.

(Hesse 47)

But as has been mentioned earlier, this is a process of transcendence of the lower by the higher, Siddhartha experiences what Sankara would call the lower knowledge but does not try to go beyond that. He says;

That I know nothing about myself, that Siddhartha has remained thus alien and unknown to me, stems from one cause, a single cause: I was afraid of myself, I was fleeing from myself! I searched Atman, I searched Brahman, I was willing to dissect myself and peel off all of its layers, to find the core of all peels in its unknown interior, the Atman, life, the divine part, the ultimate part. But I have lost myself in the process.

(Hesse 46)

Thus, he begins to enjoy the plurality of the universe, begins to identify with his body and soul (not *Atman*) while forgetting about the unity of existence and eventually ends up in a suicidal state.

The Second Quarter or the Dream State

The second phase of the *Ātman* is dream consciousness. It pervades the waking consciousness and is pointed inwards. It is said that the dream world is imaginary and is contrary to and distinct from the waking world. Vedantic scholars do not consider this as the whole truth. According to Swami Krishnananda, although the dream world appears to be unreal in comparison with the waking world, the judge of the two states wholly belongs to the waking state, therefore, the conclusion is partisan (Krishnananda 69).

Thus, from the Upanishadic point of view dreams are not completely unreal. They are real in the sense that when we have them they produce some tangible effects on us like sweating or an increase in the heartbeat. They can be contradicted by the waking state and are relatively real. Siddhartha has a dream that is an indication of the state of his spiritual life which is represented by a bird that his lover used to have. When Siddhartha is entrapped in the snare of samsara he gets a dream;

Kamala owned a small, rare singing bird in a golden cage. Of this bird, he dreamt. He dreamt: this bird had become mute, who at other times always used to sing in the morning, and since this arose his attention, he stepped in front of the cage and looked inside; there the small bird was dead and lay stiff on the ground. He took it out,

weighed it for a moment in his hand, and then threw it away, out in the street, and in the same moment, he felt terribly shocked, and his heart hurt, as if he had thrown away from himself all value and everything good by throwing out this dead bird. Starting up from this dream, he felt encompassed by a deep sadness. (Hesse 90)

The sadness that Siddhartha feels is very real which nudges him to mend his ways, peel his attention away from the lower knowledge, and look towards the Higher knowledge.

The Third Quarter or Deep Sleep

The third quarter of the *Ātman* is deep sleep. When a complete cessation of the activity of the mind occurs, one experiences a dreamless sleep. In this state, there is no desire because the mind withdraws itself from both the physical and subtle objects. Swami Krishnananda in his commentary on the Mandukya Upanishad describes it as the complete absorption of the mind into itself that happens unconsciously. According to him, if there was consciousness in deep sleep, one would not like to return to the waking world at all. It is during deep sleep that we experience Brahman, but we remain unconscious while it happens. So, we are driven back by an impulse to the waking world. According to him, if deep sleep is to be coupled with consciousness, it becomes the realization of the *Ātman*. This is also called Super-consciousness, *nirvāna*, *mokṣha*, *kevalatā* – Liberation (Krishnananda 90).

Siddhartha experiences deep sleep at the bank of the river after he leaves behind the world and all his vices. This deep sleep or his unconscious realization of the Brahman rejuvenates him;

Deep was his sleep and without dreams, for a long time he had not known such a sleep anymore. It seemed to him as if his entire long sleep had been nothing but a long meditative recitation of Om, a thinking of Om, a submergence and complete entering into Om, into the nameless, the perfected. What a wonderful sleep had this been! Never before by sleep, he had been thus refreshed, thus renewed, thus rejuvenated! (Hesse 99)

The Fourth Quarter

The waking, dream, and dreamless states are the three relativistic phases of the Ātman while the fourth is the absolute state of Consciousness. Using the famous example of gold, it can be said that the three relativistic phases are like gold ornaments, for example, a ring, a necklace and a tiara respectively. The fourth state is gold itself. Just like gold pervades all the ornaments, similarly the fourth state or Pure Consciousness not only pervades all three quarters but also transcends them. Swami Krishnananda says;

This is the fourth state of Consciousness, which is called the Ātman. It is called the fourth, not numerically, but in comparison with the three relative states of waking, dream and sleep. When we go to this fourth state, we do not feel that we are in a 'fourth state'. It is the transcendence of the three, not in a fourth, but a numberless, figureless, quantity less, immeasurable Being. This is the Ātman. This is our essential nature and the essential nature of all things. We are the Ātman, which does not wake, dream or sleep, which does not restrict itself to the outer or the inner. The Ātman is the sole Being of all beings. (Krishnananda 107)

The connection between OM, the four states of Atman, and Siddhartha's enlightenment

The eighth mantra of the Mandukya Upanishad sums up the relationship between the Atman and OM. In his work, *Kena and Other Upanishads*, Sri Aurobindo translates the eighth mantra as; "Now this the Self, as to the imperishable Word, is OM: and as to the letters, His parts are the letters and the letters are His parts, namely, A U M" (195). The above-described quarters of the Self are identical to the components of the syllable OM. These components are- A, U, M -*akāra*, *ukāra*, *makāra*. These can be compared with the three states of the Ātman – *jāgarita* (waking), *svapna* (dream), *sushupti* (deep sleep). This is elaborated in the subsequent mantras of the Mandukya Upanishad.

The ninth mantra of the Mandukya Upanishad focuses on the first quarter of the Self which is the waking state. It experiences the world through the five senses. The waking state corresponds to the first sound, A or *akāra*. Sri Aurobindo says that it is the first and he who knows this attains all desirable objects and becomes the first (195).

The tenth mantra focuses on the second quarter of the Self which is the dream state. The dream state corresponds to the second sound, U or *ukāra*. Sri Aurobindo says that he who

knows this rises above difference. No one born in his family will be ignorant of the Supreme Reality or the Brahman (195).

The eleventh mantra shows that it focuses on the third quarter of the Self which is deep sleep. Deep Sleep corresponds to the third sound, M or makāra. In this state, the mind is endowed with bliss and he who knows this becomes ready to experience the Absolute (Aurobindo 196).

The twelfth mantra shows that the fourth state is soundless, unutterable and incommunicable. It is the source from which all things originate and to which they finally disappear. It is OM that is the *Ātman*. He who knows this transcends the egotistical self and realizes the Self (Aurobindo 196).

The three relative states are contained in and transcended by the fourth or the Absolute state. Siddhartha's enlightenment and liberation is not merely a metaphysical abstraction but the very realisation of the Absolute through OM, something he had already known but not experienced and therefore had forgotten. Hesse describes it as; "Om! he spoke to himself: Om! and again he knew about Brahman, knew about the indestructibility of life, knew about all that is divine, which he had forgotten" (Hesse 98).

Conclusion

The river in which Siddhartha intends to drown himself during a moment of spiritual dejection later emerges as a symbol that represents the identity of *Brahman* and *Atman* and the unity of all existence. It embodies the non-dual realization central to *Advaita Vedanta*. As Siddhartha gazes into the river, he comes to this profound realization;

Often before, he had heard all this, these many voices in the river, today it sounded new. Already, he could no longer tell the many voices apart, not the happy ones from the weeping ones, not the ones of children from those of men, they all belonged together, the lamentation of yearning and the laughter of the knowledgeable one, the scream of rage and the moaning of the dying ones, everything was one, everything was intertwined and connected, entangled a thousand times. And everything together, all voices, all goals, all yearning, all suffering, all pleasure, all that was good and evil, all of this together was the world. All of it together was the flow of events, was the music of life. And when Siddhartha was listening attentively to this river, this song of a thousand voices, when he neither listened to the suffering nor the laughter, when he

did not tie his soul to any particular voice and submerged his self into it, but when he heard them all, perceived the whole, the oneness, then the great song of the thousand voices consisted of a single word, which was Om: the perfection. (Hesse 144)

OM emerges as the culmination of Siddhartha's spiritual odyssey; it encapsulates the essence of his enlightenment. While it may be tempting to interpret his realization as pantheistic, a system that views the divine as immanent in the world—the Advaita Vedantic tradition suggests a panentheistic understanding. As Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta clarify in *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, panentheism acknowledges the immanence as well as the transcendence of the Absolute. The world exists within Brahman, but Brahman is not limited to the world (334). This distinction aligns with the teachings of the Mandukya Upanishad, which describes Brahman as pure existence-consciousness-bliss (*Sat-Chit-Ananda*), transcending and yet pervading all states of being.

Thus, Siddhartha's enlightenment is not merely a realization of unity within the empirical world but an awakening to the deeper, non-dual truth of existence. Through OM, he perceives the Absolute not as a mere totality of the phenomenal or the empirical world but as the ultimate Reality that underlies and surpasses them. His journey affirms the Upanishadic vision of self-realization, demonstrating that enlightenment arises from the recognition of the Self's identity with *Brahman*—the eternal, unbounded consciousness that transcends all distinctions.

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