

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Turiya: The fourth state of consciousness, its nature and contemporary relevance

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the concept of Turiya, the fourth state of consciousness in Vedic philosophy, and its profound implications for our understanding of this human experience. The paper explores the value of Turiya within the broader context of perennial philosophy, examining its manifestation across diverse cultural traditions and the benefits it offers in modern times specifically around mental and physical health. The discussion encompasses the philosophical underpinnings of Turiya, its experiential aspect through the practice of Transcendental Meditation, and its potential to enhance individual and collective well-being. By drawing on a range of scholarly sources, this paper aims to elucidate the significance of Turiya as a profound state of being that transcends the ordinary realms of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, offering a transformative perspective on the nature of consciousness and human potential.

Keywords: turiya; perennial philosophy; transcendental meditation; consciousness; spirituality

1. Introduction

Among various spiritual traditions, transcendental experiences have been very commonly found and studied. These experiences are known to bring significant psychological and physiological changes in those experiencing it^[1,2]. Since these experiences are profoundly subjective in nature, researchers and academics who want to comprehend their underlying mechanisms and effects face multiple challenges^[3].

In Vedic philosophy, this transcendental experience has been defined as “Turiya” also known as the fourth state of consciousness^[4] which is categorically different from waking, dreaming and sleeping state of consciousness^[5]. Turiya, has long been a subject of fascination and scholarly inquiry. While the conceptual and intellectual aspects of this elusive state have been extensively explored, the experiential dimension remains relatively understudied. This state is known to be accessible through Meditation. Even though there is a plethora of research on meditation but most of it has been paying greater attention to examining shifts in cognition and performances rather than exploring relational and transpersonal/transcendent aspects of meditation experiences^[6]. Only a few studies have attempted to assess the transcendental state during meditation^[3,7,8].

For a long time, the scientific community largely overlooked consciousness as a legitimate subject of

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study. It is perhaps “the natural consequence of a practice of science that is all about the objects studied, and not at all about the subject who is studying the object. This has been the central thrust of science for the last several hundred years. It has cast aside subjectivity as too variable and conditional, and sought instead to observe, measure, understand, and manipulate the material, physical world”^[9]. Gaps in the understanding of higher states of consciousness can also be attributed to the fact that majority of academics have minimal firsthand knowledge of the states they study^[10].

For a considerable amount of time, practitioners of different contemplative traditions have described experiences of contentless awareness^[11]. These reports become vital in comprehending pure consciousness holistically. Additionally, it appears that experiencing such a state has a profound impact on an individual's life. Therefore, it's equally important to understand how these practitioners' daily lives have been affected by experiencing such a situation^[12].

Swami Vivekananda, who played a significant role in bringing Vedanta to the West viewed consciousness through the lens of Advaita Vedanta

There is an underlying reality which gives substance to the world as we experience it. This underlying reality is existence–consciousness–bliss– the Upanishad says you have to recognize. Just as water pervades all these waves, as wood pervades wooden tables and chairs, and as gold pervades all golden ornaments, there is one existence–consciousness–bliss that pervades all of us. Every existent being, living and non-living here is pervaded by one reality. Realize it, recognize it^[13].

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of Transcendental Meditation, a technique of meditation from the Advaita tradition, described consciousness by stating that:

All speech, action, and behaviour are fluctuations of consciousness. All life emerges from and is sustained in consciousness. The whole universe is the expression of consciousness. The reality of the universe is one unbounded ocean of consciousness in motion. Since consciousness is the most basic element of everyone's life, knowledge of consciousness is the most basic requirement for everyone to exist consciously and intelligently and enjoy full unbounded creative potential of life, with maximum success in all fields of personal and professional life^[14].

Past few decades have witnessed a profound interest by scholars in exploring the experiences of pure consciousness, but these experiences of Turiya/Pure consciousness have been perennial in nature.

2. Turiya in Upanishad

One of the most important concepts embedded in the Upanishads is Consciousness^[15]. Turiya is often understood as the ultimate human experience as it is considered to be the basis of all the other relative states of consciousnesses^[16]. In the Upanishads, consciousness is thought to be all-pervasive, omnipresent, and omniscient^[17]. According to the ancient seers, or rishis, these kinds of experiences may only be discovered by intuitive inquiry and by diving deep during the absorption phase (Samadhi)^[18]. The Upanishads speak both of 'within' and 'without' of things. The following verses from the Upanishad explain the nature of this state of consciousness.

“That reality which is Shivam—infinite silence, which is Shantam—infinite peace, which is Adwaitam—undivided, is said to be Chaturtham, the fourth (the fourth state of consciousness), which is beyond waking, dreaming, and sleeping. And that is the Self—that is to be known”

—Mandukya Upanishad

“That eternal should be known as dwelling only in the self. Truly, there is nothing beyond this to be known.”

– Shvetashvatara Upanishad

“Beyond the senses are their objects; Beyond the object is the mind; But beyond the mind is the intellect; Beyond the intellect is the great Self”

– Katha, third Valli, 10thverse

The verses above point out that Turiya is the true Self and is to be realized. It presents the idea that the eternal reality dwells within the Self and it is to be found within Oneself, not externally. It suggests that there is nothing beyond this to be known, emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of Turiya^[19]. The experiences of Turiya are universal in nature^[20]. These experiences have written about for centuries.

3. Experiences of Turiya across centuries

The insight about the experiences of Turiya/ Self/ Pure consciousness are present in all religious and wisdom traditions around the world^[3], especially in their mystical subsets. These ideas suggest that humans are capable of directly experiencing the underlying transcendental reality, deep within themselves. It promotes the idea that the purpose of life is to discover and experience this divine ground, to reconnect with the underlying essence of life^[21].

These accounts of experiences of Pure Consciousness/Turiya have been documented and strengthens the idea of perennialism.

- “A mind free of thought, merged within itself, Beholds the essence of the Tao A mind filled with thought, identified with its own perceptions, beholds the mere forms of this world” — Tao Te Ching.^[22]
- “The person should look for peace within and not depend on it in any other place.”—Sutta Nipata.^[23]
- “For the Kingdom of God is within you” Luke 17.21^[24]
- “There is something eternal within, upon which the notion of “I” depends.” (Shankara, Vivekachudamani (The Crest Jewel of Discrimination)
- “So come, return to the root of the root of your own soul. Although you appear in earthly form Your essence is pure Consciousness”^[25]
- “I rest myself in the intrinsic state, Relaxingly without distraction or effort, In the realm of Voidness, I rest myself with Illumination. In the realm of Blissfulness, I rest myself in Awareness. In the realm of Non-thought, I rest myself with a naked mind. In manifestations and activities, I rest myself in Samadhi...”^[26]

4. Perennial philosophy and experience (across traditions and centuries)

Certain truths about the realities of cosmic order are so fundamental that they have consistently appeared across diverse traditions, cultures, time periods in different parts of the world. The Indian sages called this phenomenon Sanatana Dharma. Agostino Steuco, an Italian humanist, introduced the concept into Western philosophy as perennial philosophy in the sixteenth century^[27]. These experiences have been a

subject of fascination and debate within the realms of philosophy, religion, and consciousness studies. At its core, the perennial philosophy posits that there is a universal, timeless wisdom that underlies the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of the world, wisdom that points to the existence of higher states of consciousness.

This view is often associated with the work of philosophers and thinkers such as Aldous Huxley, Frithjof Schuon, and René Guénon, who have sought to uncover the common threads that unite the world's great mystical and spiritual traditions. The perennial philosophy suggests that these higher states of consciousness, which may be variously described as enlightenment, union with the divine, or transcendence of the ego, are not the exclusive domain of any single tradition, but can be accessed through the diverse array of spiritual practices, contemplative disciplines, and metaphysical frameworks offered by the world's religions and philosophical systems^[28]. Perennial philosophy accommodates experiences of different traditions and their respective interpretations.

As per the understanding of those who follow perennialism, there is usually a difference between mystical experience, which is universal and timeless, and its interpretation, which is often determined by cultural and historical factors. According to this perspective, practitioners of different spiritual traditions experience the same mystical reality—the non-dual source of existence—but have distinct conceptualizations of it. The fundamental experiential reality is independent of these interpretations, whether it is interpreted as Vedantic Brahman, Buddhist emptiness, Christian oneness with the Divine, or as an object less absorption samadhi by a practitioner of Patanjali yoga^[29].

Practices like meditation, found in many world religions, may help reach these transpersonal states. This underscores the idea that human potential might go far beyond what Western psychology usually considers "normal"^[30].

There are three conventional states of consciousness, known as waking, dreaming and sleeping which have been extensively studied by researchers of neuroscience and psychology.

Three states of consciousness are self-evident: waking, sleeping, and dreaming. These states of consciousness are accompanied by specific physiological and brain changes^[31]. Dr Girish Momaya (2017) explains these states as:

- 1) Waking Consciousness (Jagrat Chetana)—In this state of Consciousness, the Mind and body are engaged in activity; oneself and the objects of perception are experienced as bound in space and time.
- 2) Dreaming Consciousness (Swapna Chetana)— To prepare for activity, body and mind gets in a state of rest and rejuvenation. There is an illusory experience of objects and of oneself in this state. The validity of subjective dream experiences requires evaluation outside of the dream state. This is termed as Dreaming consciousness.
- 3) Sleeping Consciousness (Sushupti Chetana) — To prepare for activity, body and mind gets in a state of rest and rejuvenation. It is an essential aspect of daily cycle for the maintenance of health. This state does not have any experience of objects of perception, and there is no experience of oneself. This is termed as Sleeping consciousness^[32].

Apart from these three states, Vedantic thought describes the fourth state of consciousness referred to in Vedic philosophy as "Turiya," also known as pure consciousness, which is distinct from the waking, dreaming, and sleeping states of consciousness. Scientists and doctors are also taking keen interest in

decoding Turiya. Dr Nader, a medical doctor trained at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a Ph.D. in neuroscience, and a globally recognised Vedic scholar describes Turiya as:

Attained during deep meditation and characterized by a paradoxical combination of an awake, alert (but quiet, even silent) mind, along with a relaxed, restful body, this state was known and described in ancient texts of Yoga as Turiya: “the Fourth.” This is not ordinary wakeful awareness, in which there is the observer (one’s Self), along with an object of perception; it is not deep, dreamless sleep; and it is not dreaming. It is a fourth natural state of human Consciousness. Like any state of Consciousness, the fourth state is characterized by both a subjective, mental component and a set of physiological correlates^[33].

Ancient and modern literature provides sufficient evidence of the experience of Turiya. It is essential to understand why this field still appears to be ambiguous in nature at times. “Many Western-trained researchers who have encountered altered states imply that it might be challenging to comprehend and distinguish between alternate states without first-hand experience”^[10]. To comprehend the systematic development of this state of Turiya, it becomes essential for us to identify tools which have proven to enable individuals to experience Turiya.

5. Turiya through Transcendental Meditation (TM): Research and benefits

Research suggests that the state of Turiya also known as pure consciousness can be naturally experienced through a systematic practice of techniques like Transcendental Meditation^[34]. There are different kinds of Meditation techniques with their roots in Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity and scientists put most of these meditation techniques under three broad categories a) Focussed attention b) Open monitoring c) Automatic- Self Transcending^[35].

Transcendental Meditation is a mental technique and belongs to the Automatic Self-Transcending category. It comes from the ancient Vedic tradition of knowledge and was introduced to the world in 1950s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. It is practiced 15-20 minutes twice daily sitting comfortably and does not require any concentration or controlling of the mind. Known to be effortless, natural and easy, in the practice of TM, the awareness experiences finer states of thinking and eventually transcends the finest level of thinking activity to experience a state of pure consciousness, a state devoid of thoughts but with inner wakefulness, a state of transcendental consciousness, of restful alertness. It is physiologically and experientially distinct from waking, dreaming and sleeping. “During Transcendental Meditation, “the experience of consciousness has been characterized by the absence of the very framework (time, space, and body sense) and content (qualities of inner and outer perception) that define waking experiences”^[36].

There is no subject/object dichotomy that marks waking experiences in Transcendental meditation. Self-awareness is both the subject and object of experience. This a self-referral experience. The content of Transcendental Consciousness is wakefulness itself, or consciousness itself. In the Vedic tradition, Transcendental Consciousness is called “the fourth” or turiya chetana”^[34].

It is crucial to recognize the immense importance of understanding and incorporating Eastern philosophical concepts into psychiatric practices in Asian countries^[37]. The systematic experience of transcendental consciousness/Turiya through meditation practices, can lead to improved state of psychology and physiology as has been established by hundreds of research studies done on TM.

Many mental health professionals are either unaware of or reluctant to acknowledge the various approaches to treating psychological disorders found in ancient Eastern texts and philosophies. These include works like Swami Vivekananda's translation of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad

Gita, and other ancient texts on yoga and meditation^[38]. The knowledge in these canonical texts can be scientifically validated and essentially utilized for holistic wellbeing.

The studies done on Transcendental Meditation, a technique which enables its practitioners to experience this state of Turiya shows improvement in their cognitive abilities. Researchers suggest that these improvements could be because TM reduces stress^[39]. According to Dr Fred Travis, during the experience of transcendental consciousness, alteration in breath rate, skin conductance, and EEG patterns have been recorded^[40]. Research on transcendental meditation technique also suggests that its practice requires minimal effort^[41], which can be attributed to the fact that it's a very simple and natural technique of meditation.

Multifaceted in nature the benefit of Transcendental meditation reflects in impacting both individual and collective spheres. At the personal level, the practice has been shown to promote intellectual development^[42]. Research also indicates that TM may significantly counteract dysfunctional brain changes linked to elevated stress and anxiety and reduce perceived stress^[43]. With reference to anxiety, TM practice has been more beneficial than standard care and most alternative therapies. The greatest effects have been seen in people with high levels of anxiety^[44], these effects could be attributed to the profound level of rest that TM provides to the body and the natural settling of the mind that takes place during the practice. Another study has indicated that the practice of transcendental meditation is associated with improvement in performance academically, a higher level of restful alertness, and increased capacity for self-reflection, self-control, and flexibility. This study also suggests that the state of restful alertness experience through the practice of transcendental meditation may facilitate the growth of social-emotional capacities necessary for regulating the emotional lability and interpersonal stress of adolescence^[45].

Studies also indicate that for veterans suffering from PTSD, TM may offer a beneficial therapeutic substitute to traditional therapies^[46]. A research article has also highlighted several studies from the 1970s to the 1990s that demonstrated significant benefits of TM practice, including improved conditions for schizophrenia patients, lower rates of psychiatric care among practitioners, and substantial reductions in health insurance claims and mental health costs^[47].

In a randomized controlled trial to show that in young adults at risk for hypertension, the TM program has shown to decrease blood pressure in association with decreased psychological distress and increase coping in young adults at risk for hypertension^[48]. Over 700 research studies on TM have recorded benefits in different domains of life which strengthens the practical value of Turiya and its role in living a holistic life.

Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Turiya share a profound interconnection in the realm of consciousness exploration. Turiya, known as the fourth state of consciousness beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, represents a state of pure awareness that TM practitioners naturally experience through their practice. Through the systematic use of this specific technique, TM provides a structured approach to transcending ordinary thought patterns and accessing this profound state of consciousness. When practicing TM, individuals may progressively experience glimpses of Turiya, characterized by a state of pure consciousness, non-dual awareness, and transcendental being. While TM serves as a specific technique or method, Turiya is the ultimate state being accessed. The relationship can be understood as that of a pathway and its destination, where regular TM practice facilitates the experience of Turiya. This connection is rooted in ancient Vedic knowledge, though TM presents it in a more systematic, scientifically studied format accessible to modern practitioners. As practitioners engage in regular TM sessions, they claim to experience physiological changes, including distinct brain wave patterns and increased coherence in brain functioning, which can be associated with the experience of Turiya.

6. Conclusion

The concept of Turiya, the fourth state of consciousness, has been a profound and intriguing subject of study across various spiritual and philosophical traditions. This research paper aimed to elaborate the nature of Turiya, exploring its presence and manifestation within diverse cultural and traditional frameworks. This paper also highlighted the importance of experiencing this state and the value of systematic growth of this state through Transcendental meditation as well as the profound benefits and transformative potential of its realization through the practice of TM.

This state of Turiya has not only been revered in the ancient eastern philosophy but is starting to prove itself as an important experience for holistic well-being and growth. Due to decades of research on this technique of meditation, transcendental meditation has been claimed to be a profoundly transformative practice, offering a wide array of benefits that extend far beyond the realms of personal well-being. By integrating ancient value of transcending with modern psychological insights, this practice seems to hold the potential of bringing about profound personal transformation, leading to increased physical, mental and behavioural wellbeing.

Transcendental Meditation (TM) can be beneficially associated with both psychiatry and psychology, offering unique contributions to each field^[49]. In psychiatry, TM may serve as a complementary treatment approach, potentially reducing symptoms of various disorders, enhancing stress management^[50]. In psychology, TM can contribute to enhanced cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, and self-awareness, aligning with concepts of personal growth and resilience^[51]. It provides a practical tool for exploring the mind-body connection. In both fields, TM could promote a more holistic approach to mental health, emphasizing prevention and self-empowerment.

Further research into the relationship between meditation and Turiya is essential for advancing a deeper scholarly understanding of both constructs within contemplative and philosophical studies.

Author's contribution

The authors confirm being equal contributors to this work and having approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

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