



Waking (Dreaming): A Vedantic Reflection on Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*

Jaya Upadhyay, University of Lucknow, mailjayaupadhyay@gmail.com

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Abstract

This is a reading of the film *Waking Life* (2001) in the framework of the Indic philosophy of 'Vedanta,' more specifically the 'Advaita' or the non-dual school of Vedanta. The film's narrative is constructed out of the protagonist's dreamscapes. The itinerant protagonist moves through conversations within his dreams, trying to make sense of his 'wake walking' situation. These conversations take the form of a more significant philosophical reflection upon the conscious life of humans. In this paper, I analyze some of these conversations and discussions from the Advaita point of view to affirm the film's orientation towards a spiritual and metaphysical reflection on human life.

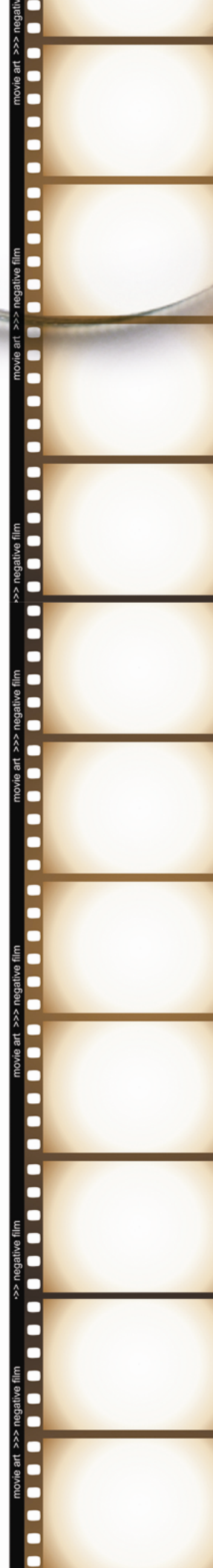
Keywords: Dreaming; Illusion; Waking; Vedantic; Consciousness



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Waking (Dreaming): A Vedantic Reflection on Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*¹ Jaya Upadhyay

Introduction

The film *Waking Life* (2001) is an assemblage of diverse and interconnected conversations and cogitations. Some of these conversations feature the unnamed protagonist, and others feature characters other than the protagonist. With or without the protagonist's participatory presence, all these conversations form a part of his experience. However, his frequent oscillation between dreams and false awakenings in the film makes it difficult to tell if these are part of his dream or waking experience. As the directorial work of Richard Linklater, the film is intended for much more than just a casual viewing. Linklater's cinema-scape concerns itself with the sharpening of spectator's awareness and making them more receptive to the complex and unusual. Grabiner (2015) underlines that "Linklater appears to be even less concerned with any narrative arc in *Waking Life* and more concerned with engaging its audience in looking at, thinking about, and experiencing looking" (p. 41). Most of Linklater's works unfold in a manner that would make the spectator question the commonsensical approach of perceiving things around them, and *Waking Life* is no different. It is the structure of his films that foregrounds the profoundness of his themes, be it the successive shuffling of scenes, introducing various characters and their philosophies in a movie like *Slacker* (1991), or a similar "narrative of digressions" (cited in Wilson, 2014, p.1) in

Waking Life. Also, the technique of rotoscoping employed in the film gives the scenes a unique character. Often the characters appear dream-like, there are faces without clear margins, and people and things seem to be floating in a wave-like manner. Shot entirely on a camcorder, this low-budget feature film does produce much to meditate upon.

The movie is a question and an answer within itself, the question being the nature of the thing we understand as reality. The answer to it unfolds through the film's progression when the protagonist finds himself in a dilemma regarding his awareness. He is seen moving in and out of dream states, having several false awakenings where he thinks he has woken up only to find himself dreaming again. To use an analogy from Richard Linklater's another film, *Before Midnight* (2013), the protagonist is "passing through". "He appears, and he disappears, like a sunrise or sunset, anything so ephemeral. Just like our life — we appear, and we disappear ... but, we are just passing through" (2013). An in-depth analysis of the film affirms that it is not meant to find solutions to the protagonist's false awakening situation but for an exploration of conscious first-person human experiences. There is an underpinning of metaphysical and spiritual inquiry within the film, which is substantiated by the fact that most of the scenes in the movie have conversations regarding dreams, death, and subjective experiences, not to mention the universe and God. The film's reflection on the nature of dream and waking states has an obvious objective of grappling

at the idea of consciousness and the self. The inquiries into which have been metaphysical concerns of the ancients and the moderns alike; in fact, the present century sees consciousness as an essential topic for contemplation within philosophical and scientific circles.

In this article, I explain the film's theme regarding the investigation of dream and waking experiences and the broader questions of consciousness and self, based on the 'Vedantic' method. The Vedantic system of thought follows various methodologies to understand the unreality of the world as it is witnessed. Since the film follows a wandering protagonist moving in and out of dream states, the method directly relevant to it is 'Avasthatraya Vichara.' Here avasthatraya means three states, and vichara means inquiry; together it means inquiry into the states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. Vedanta, especially 'Advaita Vedanta,' or the non-dual school of Vedanta, establishes that the world's reality is a singular consciousness, devoid of a second, i.e., non-dual. For the non-dualists, the names and forms and their subsequent experience is an appearance within this singularity. By appearance, they mean that the plurality of objects and experiences (pain and pleasure, desire and aversion) experienced daily are misperceived within a single reality, that is, consciousness. One potent example within the Advaita system is of a rope appearing as a snake to a traveler in the dark of night which disappears on a closer inquiry during the daytime. Likewise, an investigation of the three states leads to the understanding of the

nonduality of the self. It provides a way to transcend the apparent duality, which is also the other theme that I explore in *Waking Life*.

The film opens with a girl and a boy playing with a paper fortune teller, the boy randomly picks specific numbers and colors, and the girl reveals his fortune message, “Dream is destiny” (Linklater, 2001). The tone of the film’s thematic orientation is set first by the quote and then by the music that follows the scene. The piano notes fit the intense questioning and meanderings that are to follow. The boy moves towards a car looking at the sky, and at that moment, he starts floating until he grasps the car’s door handle. The following scene shifts to a man suddenly waking up on a train, suggesting that the scene before it was a part of this man’s dream. This man getting out of the train would be the unnamed protagonist of the film who will have random conversations with characters after that. It is essential to reveal at the outset that the scientists, philosophers, and lunatics that he will meet and the various musings that he will participate in will all constitute his dreams.

Waking Life and the Question, ‘Who am I?’

Through its numerous conversations, the film addresses the five most important questions of philosophy in the present times, as identified by a write-up on the Oxford University website. These questions are, do we have free will? can we know anything at all? who am I? what is death?

and what would global justice look like? (“5 Great unsolved,” 2018). Out of the various film musings, at least one deals with the questions mentioned above. The interesting thing is that the discussion of these questions seem to be referring to the question, who am ‘I.’ Conversations relating to political freedom, science, consumerism are reflections upon the question of ‘who am I’ or the nature of an individual. This reflection on an individual’s nature concerns finding his essence in the spiritual/metaphysical sense and not locating him as a socio-cultural product.

Danijela Kulezic Wilson (2014) mentions in her work that *Waking Life*’s elusive screenplay directs the spectator to question the protagonist’s state of awareness as well as to inquire on the more significant philosophical questions relating to their waking reality. She writes, “[...] the film’s wavy, quivering shapes and colors and its narrative space which lingers somewhere between dream and reality, conscious and subconscious, it also speaks of the unreliable nature of our perception and reality as well” (p. 5). While the film’s subject matter appears to be drawn towards surrealism, Freudian analysis of dreams, unconscious, and impressionism, as the narrative progresses, one recognizes its orientation towards a spiritual investigation into the nature of being. Wilson adds, that the answer to a quest for an informed reading of the film can be found in lines from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which David Lynch quoted during a screening of his film, *Inland Empire*: that “We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives the dream. This is true for the entire universe” (2014, p. 5).

Theoretical Background: Advaita Vedanta and the Four States of Being

The protagonist's trajectory makes the spectator question whether the waking world is as false, as illusionary as the dream world. Wilson (2014) mentions that "[...] Linklater's dream-within-a-dream narrative, on the other hand, questions the border between dreaming and waking life and asks: is there such a thing as reality?" (p. 8). It is easy to accept the unreality of the dream world, but if someone were to suggest that the waking state is equally false because it is similar to dreaming, one would reply with a resounding 'no.' Advaita Vedanta takes the risk of doing that, of poking the hornet's nest, not only today but several centuries ago when they first came up with it. It ended up in a good deal of attacks on them from other philosophical traditions.

Mandukya Upanishad, a key text of Advaita philosophy, is the smallest and the most profound contemplations on reality. It is the premier text for inquiring into the nature of the three states: waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. The Upanishad's entire teaching is based on the premise that one's essential nature is distinct from what one perceives through these three states; this essential nature is referred to as the 'Atman' or 'Brahman'. It establishes the commonality of the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep by pointing out that they are characterized by the absence of the knowledge of reality. The pure consciousness (Atman or Brahman) in the Upanishad, on account of its identification with the external objects (gross objects), appears as the

waker/waker's world. According to the Upanishad, these external objects are also illusionary since they depend on consciousness for their existence. They are not independent of the perceiver's mind; in fact, all phenomenon is described as nothing but "mental modifications" by Advaita Vedanta. The mind is also ultimately revealed within consciousness. The same consciousness associated with the dream objects (subtle objects) appears as the dreamer and the dreamer's world. In reality, dreams are impressions left on the mind during the waking state, which the mind generates in the state of dreaming. They cannot exist either without consciousness. There are no objects to be experienced in the deep sleep state, the world is packed into a homogenous mass of darkness, and consciousness remains in a seed form. The Upanishad mentions, "As at night, owing to the indiscrimination produced by darkness, all (precepts) become a mass (of darkness) as it were, so also in the state of deep sleep all (objects) of consciousness, verily, become a mass (of consciousness)" (The Mandukya Upanishad, 2013, p. 22). Yet it is still an experience of absence because when one gets up, one reports: "I slept like a log" and similar statements. It also mentions, "The causal condition is also verily experienced in this body from such cognition of the man who is awakened from the deep sleep, as, 'I did not know anything (at the time of deep sleep)" (32). It establishes a continuity of consciousness throughout, otherwise on waking one's feeling would be of sleeping, dreaming, and waking again.

The Upanishad further points out the reality underlying the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, without which none of these states can exist. It refers to this reality as ‘the fourth state,’ or ‘turiya’ in Sanskrit. It should be noted that the number fourth is also used relatively to explain the concept because it is the only state that exists within which the rest are only appearances. Turiya, or the pure consciousness, is described as the fundament of the universe, non-inferable by a second phenomenon. The only method to realize it is through the elimination of all that it is not. Turiya is “Essentially of the nature of consciousness constituting the self alone, the negation of all phenomena, the peaceful, all bliss and non-dual” (The Mandukya Upanishad, 2013, p. 48).

Dreaming and Waking: Perspectives from Gaudapadacharya’s *Karika*

The film is an intellectual exercise in pointing out the falsity of waking experiences, and it does that by showing a similarity between wakefulness and dreaming. Gaudapadacharya, a teacher and philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, talks about the discontinuity of dream time and waking time in a book of aphorisms on the *Mandukya Upanishad*, called *Mandukya karika*. In the chapter where he talks about the illusoriness of duality, he gives logical explanations to prove the unreality of dreams and the similarity between dreaming and waking. One could mention a scene from the movie connected to Gaudapadacharya’s philosophy. Two characters, played by Ethan Hawke and

Julie Delpy, intellectually muse over life and note a similar discontinuity between dream and waking time. They talk about a second of dream awareness lasting infinitely longer than a waking second and brain activity lasting 6-12 minutes after a person's death. Julie Delpy's character also describes how, when dreaming, one sees long, intricate visions, something unimaginable in a matter of 1-2 minutes, but when one wakes up, it has only been 1-2 minutes. One could very well connect the dialogue to how Gaudapadacharya's philosophy explains the falsity of dreams.



Fig: 1 Film still from *Waking Life* (2001)

After establishing the falsity of dream states in the *Mandukya Karika*, Gaudapadacharya explains the similarity of dreaming and waking as both share the feature of subject-object experiences, which means that all objects of dream and waking are objects of experience and thus false. According to Advaita, only the subject is true since all objects (dream and waking) appear to the subject, without which no experience is possible. It is consciousness, according to Advaita, that alone appears as the object and the objective universe. The experiences in the waking state are

not independent entities apart from the waker's consciousness, just like dream objects and the dreamer's mind. Drawing a parallel to that, one could mention an instance from the two characters' conversation. One of them mentions the feeling of observing their life from the perspective of an older version of themselves. She says, "[...] like I am looking back on my life. Like my waking life is her memories" (Linklater, 2013). The dialogue, when followed closely, explains the essential nature of being according to the Vedantic perspective. The character's experience of being the observer of her own waking life is one key aspect of making sense of pure consciousness, realized when the subject and object distinction drops off in the perceiver's mind.

These characters further continue on the same subject when one of them concludes to the other, "I mean, yeah, maybe I only exist in your mind. I am still just as real as anything else" (Linklater, 2013), which is a radical perspective to understanding the character of one's waking life. All material concepts, in the Vedantic sense, are ultimately concepts in mind. Still, even the mind is revealed to the consciousness as it is aware of its contents (memories, concepts, ideas). This consciousness is a self-evident truth, which is not revealed to anything other than itself. If we take Vedantic liberty on the dialogue to put it into perspective, it would sound something like, 'Maybe I only exist in your mind, and your mind exists in your consciousness, and so maybe I only exist in your consciousness.'

Waking and Dreaming: A Continuity of Awareness

As the movie continues, the protagonist walks into a hall where he meets various characters sharing their insights on dreaming and waking. In one such instance, an unnamed character talks to him about dreams and states of consciousness. He tells him that the two seemingly opposing states of consciousness (dreaming and waking) are not opposing. According to him, the neuro system suppresses the triggering of memories' vividness in the waking world by blocking hallucinations with seratonic neurons. These seratonic neurons are blocked during REM sleep, resulting in vivid visions, causing people to confuse dreams with reality. It indeed is a very contemporary perspective to comprehending human life by explaining the 'felt experiences' by reducing them down as phenomena generated by the physical system. Both, scientific and Vedantic view holds that waking and dream experiences are identical, and thus appearances. However, whereas Vedanta recognizes a fundamental reality of human existence, namely consciousness, within which these experiences are cognized, the character's perspective is limited to appearances without acknowledging any fundamental fact of human life. Although, a Vedantic investigation of the character's dialogue reveals that what it seems to be arriving at is no different from what Vedanta postulates. According to it, the two very different states of our lives, dream, and waking

are in reality a continuity of awareness differentiated into dreaming and waking by neuronal activity.

The protagonist then carries the same thought to the next person, who, playing the ukulele, tells him that “the worst mistake you can make is to think that you are alive when you are actually asleep in life’s waiting room” (Linklater, 2001). The last character in the scene also suggests something similar and urges him to question the nature of his waking life. He says, “Seems like everyone is sleepwalking through their waking state or wake walking through their dreams” (2001). Both of them hint that a majority of people lead life unconsciously without questioning their reality.



Fig. 2 Film still from *Waking Life* (2001)

Indeed, in Vedantic parlance, questioning is a prerequisite for someone who wants to inquire into the nature of reality. Most of the Vedantic texts are inquiries and not dictums on what the world is. Things are real as long as they are quantifiable for the one rooted too much into body

consciousness. An individual like that identifies so much with his/her mind, thoughts, feelings, and the physical structure that he/she cannot imagine a truth beyond the empirically evident. The character in the film affirms this when he says, “most people never ask themselves that... when they are awake or when they are asleep” (Linklater, 2001). According to Vedanta, it is only the discerning minds who ask the question, ‘who am I?’ For a person trying to inquire about reality, it is imperative first to understand that his/her experiences are mere appearances. That is the primary requirement towards realization. Without distancing oneself from the waking experiences, it is challenging to realize the permanency beyond the impermanent. The scene is aligned to the film’s spiritual/metaphysical point of view; it acts as a means to exemplify the theme of similarity of waking and dreaming perception and foray into the more prominent theme of transcending the apparent duality of life.

Waking Reality: A Mental Model?



Fig 3: Film still from *Waking Life* (2001)

At around 1:15:11 through the film, the protagonist comes across a man who tells him, “[...] examine the nature of everything you observe, for instance, you might find yourself walking through a dream parking lot. And, yes, those are your dream feet inside of your dream shoes—part of your dream self. [...] This is an image, a mental model” (Linklater, 2001). If the scene is read closely, the character seems to be telling the protagonist that no matter how real the waking state appears, it still is nothing but a mental model, just like the dream state. The dream states from the point of view of the person in the dream are true. So, as long as the protagonist is not awake, his dream self, walking through the dream parking lot with his dream feet in dream shoes, is valid. It is a mental image created within his mind, which is true as long as it lasts. The same goes for the waking state; everything is real for an individual identifying with his/her body-mind complexes. But the moment one transcends that and realizes oneself as the pure consciousness or the turiya, he will recognize the illusory nature of his waking experience. To such a person waking perceptions will be no different from mental models. The first part of the dialogue, “You have not met yourself yet. But the advantage to meeting others in the meantime is that one of them may present you to yourself ” (Linklater, 2001) is a reference to the fact that the protagonist is still ignorant of his true self, which is of the nature of pure existence, consciousness, and bliss. His

waking/dreaming dichotomy is proof of this. But the only way he can realize it is through having various experiences.

Even from a Vedantic perspective, the realization of oneself as existence consciousness bliss can only be reached through the experience of duality; it is a knowledge that has to be inferred from “examining the nature of everything one observes” (2001) and a logical negation of them. Vedanta maintains that one cannot know consciousness without the names and forms; it is only through error that the knowledge of truth is possible. This error is also called ‘maya’ within Vedantic parlance, “[...] Maya or illusion is the name we give to something which does not (really) exist (but which is perceived)” (Nikhilananda, 2013, pp. 272-273). Miri Albahari, in her article, states that the external world of names and forms is what gives an appearance of separateness to the wholesome consciousness. “[...] witness-consciousness normally presents as directional and object-oriented; without objects, it would lack directedness” (Albahari, n.d.). According to Vedanta, it is only through a systematic negation ‘neti neti’ (not this, not this) of all that is the ‘non-self’ that the knowledge of one’s true nature dawns upon oneself; it happens alongside the understanding of the unreality of phenomena.

Individual Self (Jeeva) and the Universal Self (Brahman)

The film's metaphysical theme of knowing one's true nature is explored through musings on political freedom, scientific discoveries, language, existentialism, and free will. In one such musing, the protagonist is walking alongside a man who tells him that the contents of the mind (the cogitations and the musings) are an exercise aimed at transcending the mind's limitations and even the restricted notion that a person is a bundle of mind/body complex. He also adds that the life one leads on this plane of existence, in its immense glory, is preparation for expanding the margins of one's mind/body complex. It is the discovery of one's identity as the non-dual consciousness instead of a transactional subject. What he seems to be saying could be explained with a line often used within Vedantic parlance, that an individual is not a wave in the ocean but the entire ocean itself.

Amid the same conversation, this character mentions, "I remember where I came from and how I became a human. Why I hung around. And now my final departure is scheduled" (2001). This statement resonates with the Vedantic idea of the individual self (jeeva), who is bound in a body/ mind duality and the cycle of birth and death as a result of one's karma. The same jeeva is what the character means by 'human' in the lines, 'how I became human,' and the 'final departure'

is the Vedantic realization of the jeeva as the brahman (universal self). Realizing oneself as brahman, according to Vedanta, is realizing that the individual jeeva or the human birth, bound in flesh and blood, is an illusion, like the waves that fall and rise in the ocean. To quote from *Ashtavakra Samhita*, a book on non-dual realization, “How wonderful! In me the shoreless ocean, the waves of individual selves, according to their nature, rise, strike each other, play for a time, and disappear” (Ashtavakra Samhita, 2015, pp. 31-32).



Fig 4: Film still from *Waking Life* (2001)

This pure self or consciousness in the Vedantic sense is devoid of any confusions and limitations because it is non-dual. It is of the nature of absolute bliss, absolute presence, and absolute happiness, known as ‘satchitananda.’ All human endeavors, like scientific discoveries, revolutions, and creative expressions, are ways to transcend this limitation and experience reality by seeking immortality, infinite happiness, and knowledge. When this character talks about ‘escaping velocity, not just eternity but infinity,’ he seems to be alluding to the moment of enlightenment, where a person realizes himself as the pure subject. As he tells the protagonist

about this, the margins of his physical body fade away and become indistinguishable from the background.

Singular Mind and the Cosmic Mind

The essence of Advaitic teaching is that the individual or jeeva in Sanskrit, appearing as a separate entity through maya (Ignorance) is no different from the universal brahman. The realization of this essence is achieved through questioning and discrimination between the real and illusionary. In that connection, one of the scenes depict a character, a writer, discussing the story of his upcoming work with the protagonist. The story he narrates is about a character called ‘the mind’ experiencing a liminal moment of oneness with the cosmos. In this liminal space, the mind has achieved radical objectivity over radical subjectivity; in short, it has realized its cosmic identity as opposed to the limited human identity. There is a parallel between the character’s moment of oneness and the oceanic feeling experienced by the Advaitic meditation practitioners, where the mind becomes empty of all ego identifications. This emptiness is full of universal oneness and feels as if everything from the highest mountain to the lowest grain of sand is packed within it. The writer character states, “[...] The moment is not just a passing empty nothing, [...] yet, it is empty with such fullness that the great moment, the great life of the universe, is pulsating in it”

(Linklater, 2010). This experience of fullness happens when according to Vedanta, the singular mind attunes itself to its cosmic identity; the cosmic mind.

The Quintessential Human Identity: Perspectives from ‘Panchakosha Viveka’

Panchakosha Viveka, or ‘the knowledge of five sheaths,’ is one of the Vedantic investigation methods that holds that an individual comprises five sheaths or layers, similar to the layers of an onion. These five layers are ‘annamaya kosha’ (our physical body, food sheath), ‘pranamaya kosha’ (energy sheath), ‘manomaya kosha’ (mind sheath), ‘vijnanamaya kosha’ (intellect sheath), and ‘anandamaya kosha’ (bliss sheath). Vedanta deconstructs the concept of individual identity by emphasizing that these sheaths are subject to change, disease, decay, and aging, but one remains aware of the changes they go through. Thus, rather than the sheaths themselves, an individual’s identity is that which is aware of the sheaths. The scene that follows, in which two ladies discuss aging and identity, also calls into question what one believes to be one’s true identity. A person’s commonsense approach to understanding identity is via their body and mind (ideas, thoughts, and feelings). The two women in the scene use the experience of looking at an old baby image of oneself to decode the nature of authentic human identity. They discuss how one has to run an entire story through one’s mind to connect the baby image with one’s adult self in the present. One of

them says, “This was me when I was a year old, and later I had long hair, and then we moved to Riverdale, and now here I am. So, it takes a story that is a fiction to make you and the baby in the picture identical, to create your identity” (Linklater, 2001). She also alludes to Benedict Anderson, referring to his idea of ‘imagined communities,’ which deconstructs the notion of organic identity. According to her, one’s identity is the story told to oneself and others, fabricated using material data like one’s birthplace, education, or skin color.



Fig 5: Film still from *Waking Life* (2001)

As a response to the first woman’s ideas on identity, the second woman says that it is strange that despite the physical/psychological changes, somehow, people tend to retain their quintessential identity. To explain that further, the feeling of selfhood remains unchanged through the colossal modifications of one’s body/mind complex. The body ages, become diseased, and people’s ideologies alter over time, yet the feeling of awareness within a person remains unshaken.

That same awareness is a witness of the growth, the development, the alteration, and every other change that happens to the mind/body complex. That awareness, according to Vedanta, is the consciousness or the self, which is an individual's reality.

The film scene encourages one to examine their own experience to recognize this awareness/consciousness. It also hints that the only method to realize it is the logical negation of all that it is not. The second woman in the scene says, "And the funny thing is, our cells are completely regenerating every seven years. We have already become completely different people several times over, and yet we always remain quintessentially ourselves" (Linklater, 2001). In the Vedantic sense, our true nature is beyond the skin cells, the stomach cells, and the entire body's cells; it is the consciousness within which their regeneration/degeneration occurs. In that regard, Swami Sarvapriyananda writes, "Bodies are born, change, age, and die. Minds are subject to the spectrum of misery, depression, joy, remembering, forgetting, waking, dreaming, and sleep. These states of mind are revealed by consciousness, which itself is immutable and immortal. All thoughts and emotions occur at the body-mind level and do not exist at the level of consciousness, which cannot itself be objectified" (2020, p. 95).

From Duality to Non-Duality: Journey from a 'No' to a 'Yes'

Suppose the viewer has a question about this lofty philosophical journey; he will find it answered in the protagonist's conversation with a character near the film's end. This character, played by Linklater himself, discusses the journey towards transcending the apparent duality of life, which he describes as the journey from a 'no' to a 'yes' to 'God's invitation.' He discusses a part of his dream with the protagonist where someone tells him that existence is singular and time is only an abstraction within it. And this illusion, he says, is what keeps humans trapped. According to him, as one moves from a no to a yes to God's invitation, the eternity that appears divided into time frames is revealed as a moment existing endlessly. As per the non-dual understanding, the attachment to one's ego identity keeps humans bound. Only when one is ready to give up that identification, in other words, say yes to God's invitation, does one open up to the vision of a non-dual existence, a present that transcends all dissections.

Douglas Mann (2010) further extends this idea on non-dualism in his article in the part where he discusses Vedantic themes within the film. He writes, [...] "in scene 33, "The Tango of Yes," Linklater himself says that in his dream of Lady Gregory, she told him that "there's only one instant, and it's right now, and it's eternity": in other words, Atman is Brahman. And there is only one story—do you say no or yes to God's invitation to enter eternity? Here is yet more evidence for the presence of the Vedantist idea of cosmic monism in the film" (p. 21). What Mann identifies

as ‘cosmic monism’ in his article is another term for non-dualism or Advaita. A Vedantic explanation of the dialogue is that individuals are always within the singularity, consciousness, but they drift away within appearances like time and space. The impetus of waking life keeps people oblivious of the oneness that they are. The character of the pinball-playing man, Linklater himself, suggests the protagonist escape his endless dream-meanderings by giving up attachment to his body/mind existence (saying ‘yes’ to God’s invitation) and knowing it only as an appearance within a singular and non-dual oneness.



Fig. 6: Film still from *Waking Life* (2001)

The scene’s discussion is incomplete unless one delves into the phrase ‘God’s invitation’ and the reasons for saying no to it. As previously stated, the concept of God in Vedanta is the same consciousness that has been addressed. In Vedantic sense, God is not separate from humans, and God-realization is the realization of one’s identity with God. The same is summarized in Shankaracharya’s words as, ‘Jivo Brahmaiva Niparah,’ meaning Brahman (God) and jeeva (individual) are identical. According to Vedanta, the key to realizing that is by saying ‘yes’ to

‘God’s invitation.’ To know one’s godliness, one has to discriminate between the real and the apparent. It may be through the inquiry into the knowledge of the five sheaths (Panchakosha Viveka), or concerning this film, through the investigation into the three states of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep (Avasthatraya Vichara). When one realizes this truth by the process of discrimination, one is said to be ‘one with eternity.’ Mann (2010) expresses a similar strain of thought in his article, he writes, “Linklater, speaking of his dream of Lady Gregory, talks about how there is only one story, moving from the ‘no’ to the ‘yes,’ embracing eternity and the unity of things underneath their phenomenal differences (hinting at Vedantic cosmic monism once again)” (p. 27). Indeed, one’s whole life is characterized by a yearning for and attachment to worldly objects. Hence, one keeps saying ‘No, thank you’ to eternity until the day one surrenders and says yes. That is the day of waking up from this perpetual dream into reality.

Later in the scene, the protagonist tells Linklater that he feels trapped within an endless dream in which he believes he is awake but is still dreaming. He also asks Linklater’s character the way out, to which he replies, ‘wake up.’ If subjected to a thorough spiritual analysis, the conversation symbolizes a questioning between a spiritual master and his disciple. The realized soul (master) guides the disciple about the nature of existence. When the nameless character affirms that waking up was a life-altering experience for him, one understands that it is no usual

waking up from sleep that he is talking about; but waking up from his delusions into the knowledge of ‘existence consciousness bliss.’ By presenting an example from his own experience, he urges the protagonist to ‘wake up’ and look beyond the world of names and forms. As the protagonist confesses that he wants to wake up for real, he has come one step closer to saying yes to God’s invitation. And although the film does not give us any proximal clues on whether he wakes up or not, we must imagine him waking up finally.

Conclusion

Waking Life is a mental exercise on discovering the ‘real’ in reality. This exercise takes the shape of an investigation of the protagonist’s endless dream instances. The movie reflects on the nature of one’s waking state taking the protagonist’s dream route and hints that the one who dreams and wakes and then dreams again must be apart from him/her. The one who reflects on dreaming and waking must be apart from him/her, too, besides being impermanent and transient. The film also gives clues on the existence of a larger reality through its philosophical conversations and musings. It suggests the presence of a way to reach this permanent and intransient reality. Through its narrative technique and metaphysical theme, the film becomes a field guide for the audience looking to put ‘real’ back into reality.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ Editors' Note: There is very limited writing on Linklater's *Waking Life* and the film deserves to be covered from a variety of angles such as mind-game film approach by Elsaesser et al (2021), Shavior (2007 and Chang (2001).