

**Consciousness, sleep and death. A Quranic perspective**

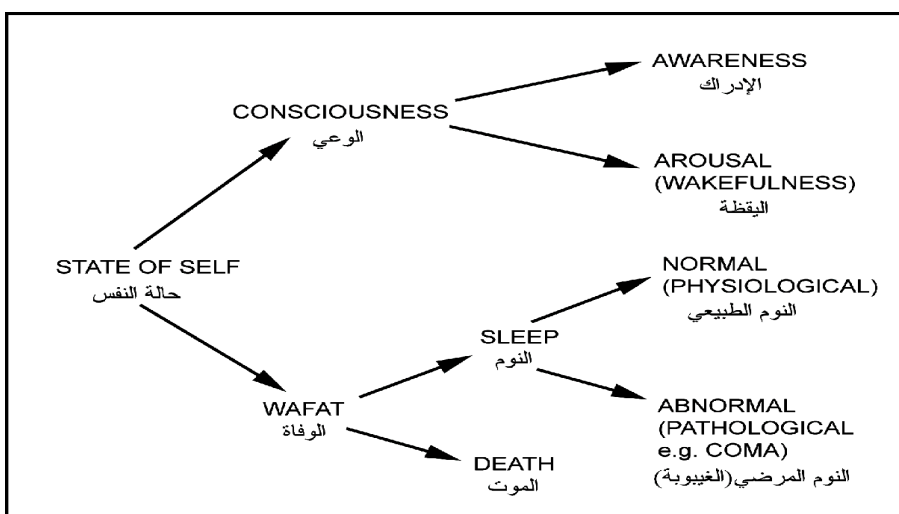
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Consciousness is the most mysterious aspect of the mind or brain function. The term is considered to be extremely complex and practically indefinable.<sup>1</sup> Philosophically, the mystery is still surrounding the nature and relationship between the mind, the brain, the soul and the self. As regards all the body systems and how they work, major scientific advances are being made but the least understood is the question of how the human brain works, and of all the brain functions the most mysterious is what is consciousness?<sup>2,3</sup> Furthermore, sleep is an interesting phenomenon that is experienced by all living animals including man.<sup>4</sup> Growing evidence indicates that the brain is the major benefactor from sleep which maintains neuronal and synaptic integrity in dynamic stabilization and is viewed as an actively induced and homeostatically controlled and organized function.<sup>5,6</sup> However, no single location in the central nervous system could be identified as a defined center for the control, organization and regulation of sleep and consciousness.<sup>4,7</sup>

**Neurophysiology.** The known neurophysiological concepts of “consciousness” and “sleep”<sup>3,4</sup> consider consciousness as 2 states: 1) awareness is a high level of integration which confers on the individual an understanding of the self and its surroundings and requires the contribution of the cerebral cortex and 2) arousal or wakefulness is a more primitive level of consciousness which is predominantly dependent on the Ascending Reticular Activating System of the brain stem. Sleep, on the other hand, is a state of physiological alteration of

consciousness, which is readily reversible. During sleep, the interaction of the body with the environment is temporarily suspended while the vital functions of the body are maintained to keep the status of living.

**Quranic concept.** In the Holy Quran the specific concepts of sleep, consciousness and death are considered as separate stages or phases of the ‘state of self’. The Holy Quran divides the “state of self” into 2 main phases or states: 1) A state of consciousness and 2) A state of “Wafat”. The state of consciousness can then be subdivided into: i) Awareness and ii) Arousal (wakefulness) along the same lines of conventional physiological understanding. The state of “Wafat” is further subdivided into: i) Sleep (temporary death) and ii) Death (“normal” death) (“It is Allah Who takes the souls at death and those who die Not (He takes) during their sleep. Those on whom He has passed the decree of death, He keeps back (from returning to life). But the rest He sends (to their bodies) for a term appointed. Verily in this are signs for those who reflect” Sura #39, verse #42).<sup>8</sup> The main difference between the state of sleep and death in the present context is the maintenance or not of the “vital functions” which, in turn essentially indicates whether the body is alive or dead. Thus, the word “wafat” indicating either sleep or death is unique in the sense that it means effectively removal of “consciousness”. Hence, the meaning given in the translation as “taking of the soul” is not really accurate because the “soul” is the extra component that when its removal is added to “wafat” results in death. Therefore, when “wafat” occurs alone the loss of consciousness is temporary, indicating sleep or any other state of altered consciousness with preserved vital functions. **Figure 1** shows a flow chart of the Quranic concept of the “states of self” with Arabic translations of the terms. Thus, the



**Figure 1** - Flowchart showing the Quranic concept in classifying consciousness, sleep and death.

word “wafat” refers to 2 states of unconsciousness; a reversible state of “sleep” and an irreversible state of “death”. The Islamic concept of life is that it is a continuum of cycling between the states of “consciousness” and “sleep” for a predetermined term (age). When this term comes to the “prefixed” endpoint, “death” takes place (“*It is He Who doth take your souls (yatawafakum) by night and has knowledge of all that ye have done by day. By day doth He raise you up again, that a term appointed be fulfilled. In the end unto Him will be your return. Then will He show you the truth of all that you did*” Sura #6, verse #60).<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the state of sleep has been used in the Quran as a major distinctive sign that separates the creation, including mankind, from the Creator who as the Almighty Sustainer of all creation never experiences spells of drowsiness or sleep (“*Allah! There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him Nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appears to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over heavens and the earth and He feeleth No fatigue in guarding and preserving them, for He is the Most High, the Supreme*”, Sura #2, verse #255).<sup>8</sup> The term “wafat” has been used in the Quran in relation to the major event of elevation of Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) to heavens (“*Behold!*” Allah said: “*O Jesus! I will take thee (mutawafeeka) and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection. Then shall ye all return unto me, and I will judge between*

*you of the matters wherein ye dispute*”, Sura #3, verse #55)<sup>8</sup> which indicates that the state of “wafat” in this context was not a state of death since according to the Islamic teachings, the descent of Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) to earth will be one of the major signs of the nearness of the Day of Resurrection.

The Quranic term of “wafat” is, therefore, a dynamically resilient concept for unconsciousness and sleep that offers a new perspective and terminology that may simplify understanding for the neuroscientist.

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