

The Spiritual and the Natural World: Upanishadic Interpretation

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The Upanishads contain many references to trees including the tree whose roots go downwards, that is, the banyan tree, and the eternal tree which has its roots above and its branches below. How is life in the world to be reconciled with the human desire to go beyond it? It is almost as if the two tree images presented alternatives which could not be combined, the classic alternatives of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. And yet combined they must be, and in this life, lest we are to hear echo within us the ancient words, “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” Contemporary idiom would recast this in terms of a sense of meaninglessness or absurdity. Is it the spiritual which saves us from a sense of the futility of existence? For this to be so, the spiritual must have a link with everyday existence, or else how can it illuminate it, still less redeem it?

Before we examine our tree images in detail, something more general must be said about religious life. Indian languages have no word either for religion or for spirituality. I may mention that the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee has given a reason for this. He wrote:

“For religion, the ancient Hindu had no name, because his conception of it was so broad as to dispense with the necessity of a name.... To the Hindu his whole life was religion.”¹

Now, the absence of a word does not mean absence of a concept unless we are speaking of material things. For example,

we would not expect African languages to have a word for 'kangaroo'. The line 'white as snow' is translated "white as the inside of a coconut" in one of the South Indian languages. There is no Indian word for the famous Cambridge 'backs'. But river banks are common in India, and so it is not difficult to find a locution—it may involve a number of words instead of one—to describe what is meant by the 'backs'.

The absence of a particular term, however, does indicate a difference of cultural matrix and universe of discourse. This is why Hajime Nakamura's book on the ways and thinking of eastern peoples does not list spirituality in the index. It is quite possible to talk about, say, the value set on *harmony* in the ethico-religious systems of the Far East without using the word 'spirituality'. Someone determined to use it, however, may choose to locate it in the value of order and harmony both within and without the self, and be sufficiently satisfied that this is the counterpart of spirituality in the cultures concerned.

The Indian family of religions presents tremendous variety. Philosophico-religious thought is not the same as popular religion. But the saving grace is that the Upanishads were written by seers or *kavis* and not by academic philosophers. They were men of vision who celebrated the cosmos and did not turn away from it. No poet can. Indian thinkers seem to have been obsessed by the impermanence of the universe rather than by the iniquity of man. There is, on all counts, and ambiguity about the relation of man to nature. From one point of view, man is part of nature. For example, mind is classified along with the body according to *Samkhya*. Now such a view poses a philosophical problem when consciousness is made the lever of man's ascent from nature.

If consciousness operates, thanks to the mind-body complex, and this would be dittoed by psychologists today except for extreme behaviourists and physicalists, how can consciousness be the route through which man attains a higher state of being? The problem is often circumvented by speaking of levels of consciousness. Theists are in a position to invoke grace as well.

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In India, the metaphysical problem was cast in the form of questions like these—how is bondage to be overcome, how can death be conquered and the imperishable attained. Some advised the path of discipline and others the path of expression. Some followed the path of devotion. One could describe these as the *mārgas* or paths of *tapasyā* (renunciation), *ānanda* (bliss), and *bhakti* (devotion).

Indian cultural life has always shown these diverse tendencies. If the first produced the *yogi*, the second path nurtured the poet and musician, and the third the devotee. The cosmic outlook, with which all Indian thinking has sometimes been credited, is really part of the second path. The *yogi's* method is essentially that of withdrawal. Control over the body is often used as a base for control over nature, for what are called *alaukik* or extraordinary practices.

The supernatural here means the magical. People in many cultures, not only in India, have associated the holy with the possession of extraordinary powers. But there have always been others who have been able to distinguish between this kind of expertise and saintliness. At the level of popular religion it is noteworthy that the saintly and the righteous have always been foci of admiration and devotion.

There is also another popular concept concerning psychic energy, namely, *sakti*. This qua concept, is cut free from goodness, indicating sheer power. However, mythology comes to the rescue by endowing a goddess like Durga not only with power but with the ability to defeat evil, and her images are always endowed with a graceful and benign quality.

The worldlines of the Hindu worldview can be illustrated in many ways. Here are a few. In no philosophical system is their mention of the *sinfulness* of the flesh. When the Brahmos wanted to reform Hindu society and do away with habits like Kulinism they could only do so by repudiating *mythological* religion, for the stories of the goings on of gods and goddesses, even of sages and holy men, contained much that was hardly edifying. Bodily

satisfactions are legitimated through the value of *Kāma* (desire), and the householder stage of life is where this can appropriately find its place. Renunciation, however, was believed to generate power, and there was a tendency to conflate power and merit. The religious practices of the Hindus are concerned with prosperity, rites of passage, and seasonal celebrations. Penances performed by legendary beings and historic figures were more often than not undertaken for worldly ends like regaining a kingdom.

The world-affirming nature of Hindu thought can be illustrated by the concept of *dharma*, the only word there is in Indian languages for religion. The word, of course, meant different things at different times, as indeed was the case with the Greek word *pneuma*. J. Gonda defines *dharma* as the motive of action which is “the endeavour to be in harmony with the eternal and universal norms”² Now these norms are those which concern the maintaining of stability and equilibrium in society. *Dharma* is above all *sāmājīk*, i.e., social. Now it is interesting to note that many Indian philosophers today insist that *dharma* does not mean religion at all.

There is some warrant for this if one recalls the themes of the *Dharmaśāstras*—law, codes of social usage and custom, duties and judicial procedure. One is tempted to infer that, if the pursuit of *dharma* is not a religious quest, and if *dharma* and *mokṣa* are integral to each other (and this is always stressed) then the pursuit of *mokṣa* is not a religious quest either. There are indeed treatments of liberation in some Hindu systems which seem to transpose *mokṣa* into a key far beyond good and evil.

Now if the liberated or ‘realised’ man is beyond good and evil, that is, if the liberated state is truly autonomous, then it can have no truck with spirituality in any of the senses we explored in the first chapter, for we found that the spiritual was never autonomous in the sense of being set free from the ethical. But there are many conceptions of what being realised involves. The English sense of grasping or understanding clearly (cf. “I realised

what life was like in a totalitarian state”) is not very helpful here. The German ‘verwirklichen’, to make real, is more suggestive. The realised soul is the one who is in a certain way. It was often said in Hindu scriptures that the realised man is a friend to all, and looks with an equal eye upon all. Whether this would involve good works or not was not spelt out. It was of course positively spelt out in *Mahayana* Buddhism with reference to the life of the *Bodhisattva*. It may also be mentioned that an instrumental value is commonly attached to good works according to Hindu ethics in that good works lead to an accumulation of merit, and this in turn augurs well for the life to come.

Now in Hindu thought the highest stage of human development is sometimes referred to in terms of *sāttvika* qualities. To explain this takes us to the *Samkhya* system of philosophy according to which there are two eternal principles, *purusa* and *prakṛti*, spirit and matter. Now matter is by no means inert. It has a special connotation in *Samkhya* philosophy, being composed of three strands of energy or *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Gonda defines *sattva* as “the *guṇa* of purity, rest and comfort”, while *rajas* is “the *guṇa* of emotion and activity”.³ *Tamas* is inertia, dullness and ignorance. Liberation comes about through realising that the mind-body complex is not the spirit and bringing about dissociation of the spirit from all that encumbers it. What follows will be liberation from suffering, luminosity of being, but not bliss. The *Samkhya* conception of the highest state seems to encourage *nivṛtti* (withdrawal) rather than *pravṛtti* (activity). It presents a model for self-integration, rather than for integration with society or with the cosmos.

While *puruṣa* can be translated as spirit we cannot, strictly speaking, derive a concept of the ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’ from it. It was in fact in the nineteenth century, in response to the impact of western philosophy and Christian theology, that Hindu thinkers started looking for a concept of spirituality in their own tradition. Schopenhauer had discerned in some Hindu writings a pessimism which probably only belonged to the *Samkhya* system.

In any case his response to the literature was confined to evidence of a *Weltschmerz* with which he was already afflicted on account of his own metaphysical system. No less a scholar than Max Müller wrote⁴ that:

“it is curious that the ancient language of India which generally allows us so clear an insight into the earliest history of words, should tell us so little by its names for soul or spirit”.

Incidentally, he seems to have sailed into heavy weather when he gave the lecture in Glasgow University in which this comment occurs. If he had lectured in Calcutta University, no doubt he might have been able to find scholars to tilt swords with. Whatever may have happened in the rest of India, many famous names in Bengal added their weight to the attempt to show that indeed Indian life and letters were not wanting in respect of a concept of spirituality.

Let us go back to the tree metaphors with which this chapter began. This takes us pleasantly back to the Upanishads. In a tropical country, the tree that provides shade is as much a source of blessing as the rock in a weary land is to people living in a desert. The tree symbol brings together seed, root, leaves and fruit in a single unitary image of life and growth. In Indian languages the phrase ‘the root of the matter’ takes the place of the English expression ‘the heart of the matter’ Just as in some other cultures the phrase ‘where your heart is’ is significant, so the *location* of the root in the Upanishads becomes a theme in more than one of the discourses.

In the sixth and last chapter of the *kāṭha* Upanishad, Yama begins his exposition to Nachiketas with a description of *Brahman* as the Tree of existence. He says: “This eternal *aśvattha* tree has its root above and branches below.” The *aśvattha* is the peepul, a tree with pale grey bark and popular-like leaves which flutter like clapping hand when the wind blows through them. It does not produce a dense shade when in full leaf but it is shady enough to provide a cool gathering place in a village. Much is written about

this tree in Sanskrit literature. The *Atharva Veda* speaks of it as the home of the gods. The *Svetaśvatara* Upanishad (VI. 6) speaks of the world tree, and the truth of *Brahman* which is above and beyond it. In the *Padma Purāṇa* Vishnu is said to have once taken birth as an *aśvattha* tree. In the *Gīta* (X. 26) Krishna refers to himself as the *aśvattha* among all the trees. The leaves are the *Vedas*. The branches are fed by the *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*).

Legend has it that Buddha sat under an *aśvattha* tree to meditate and this is reflected in Buddhist iconography. The tree was called *caityavṛkṣa*, the sanctuary tree⁵, and Buddha himself is regarded as a refuge by his devotees. Yama's reference to the root of the *aśvattha* tree is in the singular—*ūrdhvamūlam*, that is, the taproot. This could be contrasted with the many-rooted tree *Igdrasil*, the ash tree of Scandinavian mythology which has its roots, i.e. in the plural, in the kingdom of death. The image of an upturned tree is indeed a startling one. How are we to interpret it?

The meaning of 'above' here is with reference to time. The root of the world tree of existence is *Brahman* and so it is above time. It is also the root of the tree of *dharma*, *mūlam dharmataroḥ*. How is this root to be discovered? The answer is, within man himself. The upturned root is very evidently not to be perceived by the mortal eye. Sankara's commentary shows how the tree of *samsāra* or phenomenal existence proceeds from the unmanifest to the manifest. The root of the word *samsāra*, incidentally, suggests constant movement, coming and going.

Nothing is left out in a passage of great power which describes the truth, leaves, flowers and fruit and the rustling due to the winds of desire and attachment. Man is enjoined to search for the invisible root, that is *Brahman*. Which is to be discovered within man himself. This discovery or realisation transforms the world tree into peace and joy. The sage Trisanku of the *Taittirīya* Upanishad (1.10) says, after realising *Brahman*: "*Aham vṛksasya rerivā*"—I am the inspirer of the tree, the inner self of the world

tree. Now all this can also be seen in the context of another symbol, that of the forest. Take this:

“Those standing on the path of the forest of worldly existence (*samsāra*) who are tormented with troubles and surrounded by sensual pleasures... are travellers who have lost their way.”⁶

The same image is also used in the *Samkhya* and by the Buddhists. There is also the dark forest of Taragram in the Koyil Purāṇam, where a group of heretical sages were disputing until they were set at naught by Shiva who came in his usual ascetic disguise.

In the *Ramayana* the forest is a symbol of exile. In any case the image of the forest does not give us the idea of something which can be bypassed. Nor is worldly existence a kind of preparation for a life which is to come, for, on a cyclical view of time, mundane existence will go on. The traveller needs to find a path through the forest. This he will find, so the Upanishads have it, in an insight whose presupposition is a gradual process of detachment. Discovery of the root gives the knowledge that provides a way through mundane existence and which transforms our manner of looking at it. I have not mentioned the grove, which serves, so to say, as an intermediate symbol between the tree and the forest. Whether in the ‘temple’ discovered by Grimm, or the groves frequented by Krishna, one can see how the idea of trees growing in sufficient clusters to provide shade, but not dense enough for the traveller to risk being lost, can tie up with the notion of a sacred *space* which provides sanctuary. The bulk of mankind must go on their way, however, following the path through the forest, the light being within.

It is at this point that we can see the meaning of another symbol derived from the trees of the Indian subcontinent. The banyan tree is called *nyagrodha*, (‘nyag’ meaning downward and ‘rodha’ meaning growing). At first sight we have an image which pulls in an opposite direction from that of the eternal *aśvattha*, with its taproot above. The banyan with its hanging roots which strike and form new trunks is a symbol of the imperishable. The central trunk can die but the rest of the tree live. This is the way

the banyan proliferates and attains a great age. The *Chāndogya* Upanishad uses this tree symbol in the following way. A broken seed of this tree does not reveal the subtle essence of the tree. The subtle essence is the *ātman*. The banyan renews itself again in the earth. Without this downward rooting the tree would not outlive all others.

We also have here yet another example of the idea of the invisible centre and a proliferation which is as unending as life itself. The banyan has always been regarded as auspicious as well as sacred, and these two concepts usually go together in Indian thought. The mythical wish-fulfilling tree, the *kalpavṛkṣa*, which produced food and drink and other treasures, so some legends have it, was a *banyan* tree. Buddha received enlightenment under a *peepul* tree, but he preached in a mango grove and under the shade of banyan trees. The lotus signifies the centre without circumference. In Buddhism it signifies a purity and perfection whose nature is to expand without limit. The louts plant rises up from clay bed of the pond and holds its head above the water. But the banyan tree reaches down again and again into the soil. How are we to interpret these various symbols? Goethe once said of pictures:

“who would understand the painter must go to the painter’s country”. I mention this because one of the things which a study of religious symbolism can do for us is to make us more sensitive to what I call ‘spiritual landscape.’⁷

No belief belonging to a culture not our own can properly be approached (I choose this verb carefully) without relating it to spiritual landscape. Perhaps one of the main reasons for contemporary religious disquiet, not that we should assume there is a universal churning of hearts, is a lack of congruence between inherited spiritual landscape and actual landscape. Each can be used as a filter for the other. In fact, of course, and this is what keeps our thinking on the move, both landscapes are changing as a result of social factors, new research and the impact of unfamiliar thought systems. Now a landscape can possess considerable

variety. Even so, those who know their way around are able to read the signs presented by manifold topography. Let us look back at the Hindu spiritual landscape in the light of the tree symbols we have been reflecting upon.

The upturned tree, inter alia, reminds us of the potency of the invisible, and perhaps, through an image of what is in fact absurd, reveals a truth which is to be appropriated through inner understanding. To find that *Brahman* is the root of the tree of *dharma* is to unearth a metaphysic of morals where it was least expected. It is not *dharma* in the legalistic sense, or what philosophers of an earlier vintage called customary morality. Rather it is *dharma* in its fundamental sense of a sustaining order which yet needs human agency to keep it going. To transfer analogies, if the lordship of the garden is *Brahman's*, without man's stewardship the garden cannot be maintained. This kind of transfer, I think, also shows up what happens if you look at one spiritual landscape through the lens of another.

We cannot strictly speaking talk of the *lordship of Brahman*. This is not really the message of the Upanishads. To return to our symbols, if the *asvattha* tree image seems to take us away from the earth, the banyan tree reminds us of the need to root ourselves again and again in it. The concept of *dharma* is deeply social. But while *dharma* is usually seen as an indispensable stage on the way to *mokṣa*, the thrust of the argument of the *kaṭha* Upanishad, via the very medium of its diverse symbolism, reminds us of the complementary process, how realisation of the *Brahman/ātman* equation throws light on *dharma*, on the question "what then must we do?".

Indian writers have often drawn parallels between trees and human beings. A *bhajan* composed by Surdas finds in the tree the paradigm of the long suffering one. In spite of standing in the heat of the day it provides cool shade to the weary. Tagore saw in the *tāl* tree, which has no branches, the image of the *yogi*, the one who practises *tapasyā*, or, as he puts it in the poem which all Bengali children know, it is the tree which stands on one leg.

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The banyan tree stands on many legs, and odd though this may sound, so do we all. If any member perishes, the community suffers a deprivation. If it is the destiny of the hanging roots to find the earth, such surely is the destiny of men. Both symbols have to be taken together—the movement of ascent and descent. Upanishadic thought presents this, not through the sacred history of the incarnated Lord, but through living phenomena in *nature*.

The *aśvattha* and the banyan represent *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti*. For the Hindu, the spiritual landscape would not be complete without both. The image of the cave may be more readily associated with the Hindu standpoint, and of course cave and market place are as far apart as mountains and cities are. But there is scarcely an Indian village where we will not find a peepul tree and a banyan side by side. Even those familiar with the promise of green pastures can perhaps hear the resonance of these powerful images.

I introduced the concept of spiritual landscape a little time back. One the whole, I am inclined to stress the distinctiveness of spiritual landscapes. But we often encounter a similarity of topography where we least expect it, and this invites further exploration. The rhododendrons of the Himalayas, as far as we know, are native to the places where they grow, whereas we know very well that the plants in hothouses in Kew Gardens were brought there from distant lands. But what are we to make of the presence of the upturned tree image in the kabbalah literature? I shall come to this presently. But first let us look at the following passage:

“Nothing remains the same; everything blooms, everything ascends, everything steadily increases in light and truth. The enlightened spirit does not become discouraged even when he discerns that the line of ascendance is circuitous, including both advance and decline, a forward movement but also fierce retreats, for even the retreats abound in the potential of future progress.”

At a first hearing this sound very like Sri Aurobindo, or even Teilhard de Chardin. But the passage comes from the

writings⁸ of Abraham Isaac Kook, the Latvian Rabbi who eventually became Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. Kook, Aurobindo and Teilhard do resemble each other in so far as they see a process of cosmic evolution at work through which nature advances towards divine perfection. If the idea of overcoming ignorance of the root of all existence be the inner meaning of the upturned tree of the *Kaṭha* Upanishad, in Jewish thinking the message will always be that of Psalm 90, vs. 3: “Return to Me, you children of men.” Such a return is only possible through the outpouring of *Ru’ah-ha-Kodesh* (the Holy Spirit) and repentance on the part of men.

The spiritual landscape of the children of Israel is not lacking in tree symbolism: the green bay tree, the vine, the juniper. The Book of Proverbs speaks of the *zaddik* (the righteous) as ‘rooted forever’. The godly man is described in Psalm 1 in these words:

“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”⁹

One can notice something similar to what we found in the *Kaṭha* Upanishad, the link between knowledge of Brahman and the performance of *dharma* from which joy would follow.

Now the Kabbalah was set apart from orthodox Jewish philosophy by reason of its doctrine of the *Sefirot* or divine emanations of wisdom. Of the ten *Sefirot* it is worth noting that discernment was not regarded as the highest. Not only was the system of thought characterised by a theory of emanation rather than creation, but a new synonym is introduced for God, namely, *Ein-Sof* which literally means ‘extends without end’. This term was coined by the early kabbalists of Provence and Spain.

Gershom Scholem explains that *Ein-Sof* is not a proper name but signifies God’s complete concealment. This was perhaps why later *Kabbalists* made a distinction between *Ein-Sof* and ‘the light of *Ein-Sof*’. *Ein-Sof* is clearly not one of the names of God for it is never followed by the phrase ‘blessed be He’. In another idiom,

we can perhaps see in this both a sense of the inadequacy of attribute language with reference to the Deity, an insight already there in the Talmud and Midrash treatments of *Kavod* (glory) and *Shekhinah*, and the experiential evidence of the Divine outpouring of powers.

Old engravings from the fourteenth century onwards show the ten *Sefirot* in the form of a tree. The *Sefer-ha-Bahir* says:

“All the divine powers of the Holy One, blessed be He, rest one upon the other, and are like a tree.”

The tree is said to start growing by being watered by the waters of Wisdom. Having said this those whose religious imagination thought this out are committed to the model of the upturned tree. There was also another image of the *Sefirot* in the form of a human figure standing erect. The tree image recurred in Kabbalist diagrams of the structure of creation as it proceeded downward in the form of *ilanot* or trees. A thirteenth century writer compared the power of evil with the bark (*Kelippah*) of the tree of emanation, and the bark idea could be compared with the *Kośas* or sheaths which Indian thinkers said were to be shed, although the *kośa* concept did not have the connotation of evil. Kabbalists were divided between those who held that the soul is universally shared by all descendants of Adam and those who confined it to the followers of the Torah, that is, the children of Israel.

A further image concerned the ‘sparks of holiness’ also regarded as the reflected light (*hozer*) of the Divine Being and the way in which they ascended towards their source. The Kabbalist imagery of ascent and descent suggests the movement of flames and this in turn recalls the language of the first chapter of the book of Ezekiel. No doubt the Kabbalists of the Middle ages and later had a lot to draw upon—the image of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, Merkabah mysticism, gnostic conceptions of wisdom, esoteric beliefs about Hebrew words and numbers, and magical practices. But, all this a part, there are a few further features I cannot resist highlighting.

Even though the Kabbalah writers stress the inwardness of the soul, it is the grandeur of the *Infinite* (the *Ein-Sof*) that faith expresses. The language used is that of *cleaving* to God's ways, the divine *Sefirot*. There is no question of any identity between the soul and God. This is a central contrast with the thrust of the Upanishads, in spite of the parallel use of the arboreal and light images. A modern mystic like Rabbi Kook is able to endow the tree image with a deeply social meaning. He says, and I quote:

The spiritual powers blossom, they branch out and become intertwined, and send deep roots into the depths of life, and the person is elevated and becomes a blessing to himself and to the world.¹⁰

He goes further and says:

Why shall we not see all existence as aspiring, hoping, ascending and descending, and then ascending again, in inner feeling, and overall enlightenment.¹¹

From the late fifteenth century onwards, Christian Kabbalistic thought influenced German philosophers like Hegel and Schelling via George von Welling and F.C. Oetinger. One of the themes that attracted such thinkers was the parallel the Christian could see between the cosmic Adam (Adam Kadmon) and Christ as primordial man. It was out of timber that the Cross was made on which Christ was crucified. For the Christian all tree symbolism has its culmination here. But, taking a cue from this very sketchy excursion into the Kabbalah it is worth seeing how Kabbalist language compares with that of Sri Aurobindo. Rabbi Kook wrote, and I paraphrase, that the theory of evolution that is gaining currency has a greater affinity with the secret teaching of the Kabbalah than all other philosophies. Let us see how the philosophical theme running through our discussion is handled by Aurobindo, the theme of the relation of nature, man and God, the aspiration and rooting which the banyan tree so well symbolises.

During the two years in which Aurobindo read the Classical Tripos at Cambridge, from 1891 to 1893, he was much more

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drawn to poetry than to philosophy. In a rather appealing confession he once said this:

“...let me tell you in confidence that I never, never was a philosopher—although I have written philosophy which is another story altogether.”

Both Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo centre their thinking on the concept of spirituality and, in common with many other thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance, seem consciously to be seeking out a weaponry of ideas impelled by the nationalist feeling of pre-Independence days. They were also motivated by a reaction to the language of redemption and salvation used by Christian missionaries. Vivekananda's reflections were less eclectic than Aurobindo's. However, there is an interesting divide in the thinking of each of them. For Vivekananda the divide was between his speeches outside India which laid the foundation for decades of talk of Indian spirituality both abroad and at home, and his message within India which warned against any complacency about spirituality and urged people to tackle poverty and injustice and serve “My God the poor”. The divide for Aurobindo, however, is between his early political activism and the withdrawn life of the sage of Pondicherry.

The Life Divine gives Aurobindo's fullest statement of his vision of a transformed humanity, the key to which is the notion of a changed consciousness. Now when Indian writers speak in this way, they are not just saying we should think differently. Nor are they recommending a conversion experience brought about through conviction. The non-credal nature of Indian religions casts the whole style of asceticism in a different idiom. The call to transform one's consciousness is far more like the invitation to go on journey which has different stages, the destination of the traveller being unclear until he gets there. He may even travel afar and eventually find his way back to where he began. In terms of the two images of the *asvattha* and banyan trees, what Aurobindo advocates is something like a combination of them both, fascinated as he is by both ascent and descent. On the whole, however, his approach is Vedic rather than Upanishadic.

Aurobindo had studied Plato's *Republic* and the *Symposium*. But what he was attracted to was not an ascent of reason culminating in a vision of the Good, but rather a rhythm of activities in which the polarity of inner and outer would be maintained through a process of interchange. Put more simply, unlike in the case of the Platonic ascent, nothing is really left behind. If we essay a comparison between the four *puruṣārthas*, *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*, and the Divided Line analogy of the *Republic*, it is clear that the four *puruṣārthas* are meant to be integrated over a lifetime. This is why, rather shockingly perhaps, I have striven to emphasise the this-worldly bias of Hindu thinking. Plato's ladder of ascent, however, is a *noetic* one. I used the word 'integrated' advisedly just now, for Aurobindo calls his system of thought 'integral *yoga*'. Let us, however, first see how he continues the emphasis on *dharma* which is so typical of the Hindu worldview and which was rethought by many modern Hindus right up to the time of Mahatma Gandhi.

Sri Aurobindo deals with *dharma* most fully, perhaps, in his *Essays on the Gītā*. As a contemporary of Tilak he had praised the latter's *Gītā-Rahasya*. But he dissociated himself from the modern tendency to find in the *Gītā* merely a gospel of activism. On his own view, the key conceptions of the *Gītā* are, I quote: "God or the Eternal and spirituality or the God-state".¹² It may be mentioned that Aurobindo abandoned political activism in 1910 and started publishing his essays on the *Gītā* in *Ārya* in 1916. In the interim he was very evidently on the rebound from his earlier social and political activity and oriented towards an inner quest. Even so, he writes that *dharma* in the full sense is "that which holds together our inner and outer activities".¹³ He also writes of man's way to liberation and perfection lying through 'an increasing impersonality'.¹⁴ This derives from his attempt to cultivate a "consciousness of the Divine as the self and as the All". Now 'consciousness of the Divine', as he understands it, is as different from obedience to God's commands as it is from the *Brahman/ātman* equation of the *Upanishads*.

In this connection, his departures from the Advaita position need to be taken into account. Aurobindo had no truck with Sankara's *māyāvāda*. His belief was that the *pāramārthika* and the *vyavahārika* needed to be brought close together. Whereas Sankara's system hinges on the *distinctness* of levels of consciousness, so that the next can only be attained by leaving the earlier level behind, Aurobindo sees the extent to which human consciousness is prone to go to and fro between different stages. While at Cambridge Aurobindo had been very attracted to Heraclitus and in fact wrote a work on him. Between the philosophers of Being and the philosophers of Becoming, Aurobindo was more attracted to the latter. Heraclitus' semi-poetic style, full of riddles and paradoxes, seemed to him very appropriate for describing the kaleidoscopic world of things. The Heraclitean volatility of fire is translated by Aurobindo into the volatility of light, light which can be more or less, and which is matched by shadows. There is also perhaps another source for Aurobindo's refusal to ditto any theory of onwards and upwards ascent.

The notion of Divine *līlā* or *play* is a prototype of withdrawal and return, ascent and descent, a to-ing and fro-ing that is not tantalising or wayward, but which is in many ways akin to the spirit which bloweth where it listeth. So also is human consciousness, dynamic and aspiring, but also so often faltering and flagging. While Sankara had advocated realising what one *is*, Aurobindo said that it was in man's nature "to exceed itself by conscious evolution, to climb beyond what he is."¹⁵ But there was one point where Aurobindo and Sankara agreed and that was in seeing *ānanda* as build into the nature of the ultimate. This of course is not Sankara's invention, but derives from the insight of ancient sages. Even in this matter, however, I believe that Aurobindo and Sankara differ significantly.

The delight, of which Aurobindo was probably personally aware, has strong artistic overtones and the materials of artistic creation are certainly firmly rooted in the sensible world. No artist can look upon the *indriyas* or senses as seductive in a bad

sense. For all the mysticism with which Aurobindo is credited and the cosmic outlook stressed in all Zaehner's discussions of him, the elements which prevent him from losing respect for the phenomenal must not be forgotten. As I see it, among these elements two predominate—one is the artist's enjoyment of the sensible and the other is the Tantric recognition of the importance of the corporeal. Aurobindo's interest in the total personality, moreover, lends his work a pleasing concreteness in contrast to those who looked on everything other than the *ātman* as a drag on the human aspiration for a transformed existence. If aesthetic sense is integral to self-perfection we are free of what Aurobindo called "the refusal of the ascetic". It was bold on his part to say, and I quote:

"It is great error to suppose that spirituality flourishes best in an impoverished soil with the life half-killed and the intellect discouraged and intimidated."¹⁶

Aurobindo's understanding of personality included the very important insight, to my way of thinking, that its deeper reaches have no demarcations. While in many cultures, the activities of spirit had been conceived of in a rather rarefied manner and in *contrast* to all other human endowments, Aurobindo can see that such a rarefied instrument would not be worth having, as it would cut man off from all he holds dear.

Now the Brahmic consciousness, even in the *Kāṭha Upanishad*, had been associated with the power to illuminate the empirical, to transfigure it. It is in this form that the Upanishads had dealt with what Plato calls the return to the cave. Aurobindo's reconciliation of the two images of the *aśvattha* and the banyan trees—and these images are of course of my own choosing rather than his—depends on how he regards nature, and to this we must now turn.

Aurobindo usually personifies nature, and this is in keeping with the period in which he was writing. His work is full of Tennysonian overtones. He writes of nature "widening from limit to broader limit of its own possibilities". Some of the arguments

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read strangely. Here is one. Unless nature were already divinised, it could not have the potentiality of further divinisation. Or, take this one:

“The ideal ultimate aim of Nature must be to develop the individual and all individuals to their full capacity...”¹⁷

The philosopher may well wonder wherein the must lies in this sentence. It does not go very well with the more frequent references he makes to the chief ‘danger’ (his adjective) of nature, namely, “The confused play of the three *gunas* of Prakriti in their eternal entangled twining and wrestling.”¹⁸ At least this brings out that, for Aurobindo, nature is not merely matter but the whole matrix, including man, which is striving for self-consciousness. The ‘must’ of the earlier quotation refers neither to a determination from behind, a mechanistic push, nor to a teleological pull inseparable from the kind of theism which was foreign to Aurobindo’s way of thinking. For all the archaic vocabulary which Aurobindo seemed to like using, he had a clear vision of the crucial place of man in a century characterised by the explosion of human knowledge. He thought in terms of ‘a far-off divine ideal’¹⁹ and not a far-off divine event. Tennyson’s ‘nature red in tooth and claw’ is recast in Heraclitean terms into the inevitability of strife, and this in turn is seen as an outcome of the operation of *Sakti*. Aurobindo was a young man when he wrote in 1905 that:

“We need a nucleus of men in whom the Shakti is developed to its uttermost extent, in whom it fills every corner of the personality and overflows to fertilise the earth.”

These early writings show another dimension of what Aurobindo meant by spirituality—its connection with nationality. Whether it was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda, or Sri Aurobindo, all made mystique out of nationhood. In Aurobindo’s case one might have wondered if, in the course of his studies at Cambridge, he had become acquainted with a very similar interpretation of *Geist* on the part of certain German philosophers. Yet the records suggest he was innocent of German philosophy, and so when he speaks of the spirit of the time he is

thinking of *Yugadharmā* and not of the *Zeitgeist*. There is a definite link between his pamphlet called *Bhavānī Mandir* (1905) and his book *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. *Yugadharmā*, the spirit of the time, must be combined with *swadharmā*, he says; but this is not a task for every man but for those architects of history who are the ‘swallowers of formulas’²⁰.

It is an evocative metaphor, recalling the mythological role of Shiva who, in swallowing the poison that was stirred up when gods and *asuras* churned the ocean, saved the universe. It reflects Aurobindo’s critique of ideologies in general and of socialism in particular. To the extent that he thought the nations were manifestations of an invisible spiritual principle, the *Virāṭa puruṣa*, the Great Being, Aurobindo was oriented towards internationalism and the *ashram* he founded was, and still is, an international community.

But what of evil, and suffering, the host of surd elements which seem recalcitrant to the model which Aurobindo presents to us? I now move into a more critical position than I have taken so far. It seems to me difficult to do justice to the problem of evil, unless, to begin with, man’s ethical life is taken seriously. At times Aurobindo seems to do this, and an integral approach would presumably involve not a leaving aside of any aspect of human life, but an incorporation of them somehow into a total view of man’s place in the cosmos. But, on the whole, he tends to confine the ethical domain to what he calls “the lower level of consciousness”. He is committed to this if ethics be concern with conflict within the self while the higher reaches of development are said to be characterised by absence of such conflict. But when he says that the aim of divinisation is to bring about “fully illumined, immortal and immune substance” we seem to have left the realm of humanity altogether. We have also left the Divine Nature as understood both in Judaism and Christianity, for in both these traditions the heart of God himself is not immune from suffering.

Furthermore, one wonders what exactly a generalist quest for perfection amounts to. Aurobindo assumes that the progression

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towards perfection involves more and more consciousness. Consciousness, and its manifold gradations in his system, has to bear the weight of change of heart and all the other-regarding virtues that are not traditionally built into yogic asceticism at all. Many of the changes of outlook that are needed at any point in time are *specific*. Some concern all men, for example a reorientation of attitude regarding the use of natural resources or regarding racial inequality, and others are known to ourselves or, à la Robbie Burns, known to those close to us. Even its states of consciousness are states of Being, as they perhaps are for Aurobindo, there would still be a gap between intention and practice, a tendency to overlook what makes the cave a cave, a temptation to soar to the point of no return.

To say that “I should love my neighbour not because he is in the neighbourhood... but because he is myself”²¹ could indicate a sort of neo-Vedantic interpretation of “Tat tvam asi”. But, alternatively, it could indicate an attitude of a rather prudential and self-regarding kind. If the expansion of which Aurobindo eloquently speaks time and again is merely an expansion of *consciousness*, is this sufficient to bring about a transformation of *life*? We need at this point to look closer at the idea of the pursuit of perfection, for although this idea is explicit in Sri Aurobindo’s writings it is also to be found in an implicit form in the Upanishadic *ātman/Brahman* equation. The Hindu philosophical treatment of ‘spirituality’s has on the whole been optimistic about the possibility of attaining perfection. This tantalising field of inquiry invites attention next.

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UPANISHADIC PHILOSOPHY
UPANISHADIC PHILOSOPHY The Upanishads are one of the world's great repositories of spiritual insight and wisdom. Composed orally by Indian sages as early as the ninth century b.c., they have attracted the attention of scholars and spiritual seekers the world over. They signal a personal, experiential, and at times mystical understanding of the cosmos, the divine, and the human self, which over the centuries many have found profound. Source for information on Upanishadic Philosophy: Encyclopedia of India dictionary. They signal a personal, experiential, and at times mystical understanding of the cosmos, the divine, and the human self, which over the centuries many have found profound. This relationship between nature and the spiritual world explains the terrible and supernatural reaction that the Mariner and his shipmates must face after he kills the albatross. Nature, as the poem has it, is God's creation, and therefore when a person interacts with nature they also interact with the spiritual world. It is only when the Mariner learns to live with and value the natural world, as he does when he sees the beauty in the Water Snakes that, it seems likely, he previously would have despised, does the punishment against him ease. The poem, then, casts the appreciation and valuing of nature, the act of embracing Romanticism, not just as important in and of itself, but as above all a spiritual, religious necessity. The Upanishads are ancient Sanskrit texts of spiritual teaching and ideas of Hinduism. They are the part of the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, the Vedas, that deal with meditation, philosophy, and spiritual knowledge; other parts of the Vedas deal with mantras, benedictions, rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices. Among the most important literature in the history of Indian religions and culture, the Upanishads played an important role in the development of spiritual ideas in ancient India, marking a