

THE MYSTICAL TRADITIONS OF INDIA

A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision

by Swami Abhayananda

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PART ONE HINDUISM

I. The Vedic Hymnists

When we attempt to discover the origins of mysticism, previous to the existence of written testimonies of mystical experience, we enter a dim, dark realm. For it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether or not a mystical philosophy was possessed by men living in a preliterate period. Without the evidence of written documents, one must rely only on the slim evidence provided by the scattered artifacts taken from the ruins of ancient cities. In the case of India, the surprisingly large and elaborate cities unearthed at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro prove the existence of the remarkably developed civilizations of the Dravidian people who lived in the Indus Valley perhaps as far back as 2500 B.C.E.

Among the artifacts found in these cities was a seal containing a male figure which may be the prototype of the Father-God, Shiva (*Figure 7*), whose epithets are *Pashupati*, "Lord of all creatures," *Maheshvar*, "Great Lord", and *Yogeshvar*, "Lord of yoga." He is shown in his three-faced aspect, with a large crown of horns, sitting cross-legged in contemplation, with an erect penis; and he is surrounded by Shiva's traditional symbol, the bull, and other animals. In addition, there were found a number of phallus-shaped stones, known as *lingams*, which are also traditionally representative of Shiva, the world-transcending Absolute.

Along with these representations of the Father-God, however, were found a number of figurines and emblems of the Mother-Goddess, identifiable as Shakti, the fertile Mother of all creation. She is shown in one figure in a dancing pose, and in a seal from Harappa she is shown standing on her head, her legs apart, with a plant or tree growing from her womb (*Figure 8*). There were also found a number of ring-shaped stones, called *yonis*, which are traditionally associated with Shakti, the Female principle of generation. And even a few figurines were found which appear to be androgynous, having breasts as well as what appear to be male genitals.

From the scant evidence found in these excavations we may assume that a mystical religious view which recognized the dual principles of the Absolute and Its creative manifestory-Power as complementary aspects of the one Reality existed and flourished even in so remote a time. We are led to believe, therefore, that the religious view of these ancient peoples was inspired by one or more seers of the ineffable duality-in-Unity which has been described in more explicit and intelligible terms by mystics of a later era. Yet, however convincing this evidence may be, it cannot be considered conclusive, but must remain forever a matter of conjecture.

Nevertheless, if we do accept this evidence, from the pre-Aryan (Dravidian) civilization, of a full-blown Shiva-Shakti mythology, we may trace the manifestation of the Shaivite tradition to these pre-Aryan peoples, and account for the appearance of two separately developing traditions among the early Indian peoples: one, the long-established (*Shaivite*) tradition of the aboriginal races, and the other, the imported Vedic pantheon of the invading Aryans. For the Dravidian population, the Absolute Being was, or became, known as *Shiva*, and His world-manifesting Power was called *Shakti*; while the Aryan tradition eventually adopted the name, *Brahman* for the Absolute principle, and *Maya* for Its world-manifesting Energy. And, while these two traditions eventually intermingled and became recognized by the wise as representative of a common and identical worldview, for many centuries each retained a semblance of independence while coexisting alongside one another.

The earliest written records from India to convey the mystical view of Unity are found in the collection of songs of devotion and ceremonial liturgy known as the *Vedas* (“Wisdom”). The Vedas were originally part of an orally transmitted legacy of the Aryans, dating from 2000-1500 B.C.E., which was only transmitted to writing centuries later. The *Aryans* (“Kinsmen”) entered India from the northwest via Persia and Afghanistan, originating, it is believed, from somewhere in Central Asia. They were a light-skinned race who conquered and absorbed the earlier Indus Valley civilization of the dark-skinned Dravidian peoples, the builders of the vast complex cities at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. What later came to be called the civilization of the “Hindus” (a corruption of *Sindhu*, the name of the river which once served as the nation’s northernmost perimeter), is an amalgam of these two cultures, a sifting and blending of two independent traditions whose individual traces can still be found in the divergent racial and religious traditions of present-day India.

For the early Aryan interlopers, the one God of all was called by a great variety of names, according to the qualities intended to be praised. Here, for example, in the following Vedic verses, He is addressed as *Visvakarma* (“the all-Creator”):

O Visvakarma, Thou art our Father, our Creator, Maker;
Thou knowest every place and every creature.
To Thee, by whom the names of the gods were given,
All creatures turn in prayer. ¹

The Female Divinity was called *Prthivi* (“Nature”); and in a prayer to Her, the seer cries:

May Earth pour out her milk for us, as a mother unto me her
son.
O Prthivi, beautiful are Thy forests, and beautiful are Thy
hills and snow-clad mountains. ²

In yet another song from the Rig Veda, in which the Father-God is spoken of as *Prajapati* (“Lord of all creatures”), His Female Power of manifestation is called, not *Prthivi*, but *Vac* (“Speech” or “Word”):

In truth Prajapati is the Father of the world; With Him was
Vac, the other aspect of Himself. With Her, He begat life.
She conceived; and going forth from Him, She formed all
creatures. And then, once again, She is re-absorbed into
Prajapati. ³

This is a depiction of Creation almost identical to the Egyptian and Judaic ones appearing around the same time (ca. 1500 B.C.E.) and is amazingly similar to the opening paragraph of the Fourth Gospel by the Christian evangelist, John. Here, once again, we have a symbolic representation of the perennial vision of the mystic who perceives the Absolute and Its manifestory Power as an ineffable duality-in-Unity and characterizes It as the universal Father-Mother.

We find in the Vedas many different names for the Father-God, each representative of a special power or quality of the one Being. Sometimes He was called *Dyaus*, “the Almighty”, or *Varuna*, the power of the wind; sometimes He was *Indra*, whose thunderbolts brought the rain. But as time

went on, these various epithets came to be recognized as but various aspects of the same one Lord:

They call Him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, or Agni, or Garutmat, the heavenly bird. Reality (*Sat*) is one; learned men call It by various names, such as Agni, Yama, or Matarisvan. ⁴

Satchidananda

In some Indian spiritual traditions, the supreme Reality is referred to as “Satchidananda.” This epithet is made up of three Sanskrit words, “*Sat*,” or Existence, “*Chit*,” or Consciousness, and “*Ananda*,” or Bliss. If we think about this designation for the supreme Reality, we realize that these three joined words epitomize the qualities that we associate with God. First, He is *Sat*: He is everything, He is all that exists; He is the Source and manifestation of our own existence. Secondly, He is *Chit*: He is the very consciousness or Soul within us that makes us a living, sentient, being. And thirdly, He is *Ananda*. He is the Bliss within us that constitutes every joy of life that we experience. Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, a perfect name for the one supreme Reality!

Too often, men take the names of God, which accumulate over the centuries to represent separate and distinct entities, and then pit them one against the other. This was true of the early poets and mythologizers of the Vedas as well. As soon as one tribe or civilization absorbed another, it established its own name for God as the superior and relegated the subjugated people’s name for God to an inferior position. In this way, a polytheistic mythology accumulated in no time, peopled with all manner of anthropomorphized gods. This, however, is the work of the priests and mythologizers, not of the seers. As one Vedic mystic put it:

With words, priests and poets make into many the hidden Reality, which is but One. ⁵

The Vedas are an amalgamated collection of many songs written by priests, sages, legalists, rulers and poets of the early Aryans, and they run the gamut from lyrical devotion to ceremonial doctrine, from primitive superstition to high philosophy. They represent not only a broad extent of time—perhaps a

thousand years of development—but also a wide divergence of intellects. It was the poets and priests contributing to the Vedas who fashioned the liturgical and legal traditions of subsequent generations, but it was some unnamed mystic or mystics who gave expression to the exalted vision of Unity which is the cornerstone of the Vedas and the foundation upon which rests the great Nondual tradition of Vedanta.

Others may attempt to speak of such things, but it is only the mystic whose words are capable of conveying the certainty and authority which is born of true experience. Here, in the *Creation Hymn* (X:129) from the Rig Veda, we have a description of the primal Reality prior to the manifestation of the world by a sage who had seen It for himself. In one of the oldest extant declarations of a true mystic, that one Beginning place of all things is described:

1. Then, neither the non-Real (*asat*) nor the Real (*sat*) existed. There was no sky then, nor the heavens beyond it. What was contained by what, and where, and who sheltered it? What unfathomed depths, what cosmic ocean, existed then?
2. Then, neither death nor deathlessness existed; Between day and night there was as yet no distinction. That ONE (*tad ekam*), by Its own power (*svadha*) breathlessly breathed.⁶

First, let us understand that prior to the existence of all the pairs of opposites, such as “the Real” (*sat*) and “the unreal” (*asat*), “death” and “deathlessness”, “day” and “night”, there was only the “ONE”. Nothing else existed. Then the Hymnist explains how, within *tad ekam*, that ONE, that Nondual Existence, a creative impulse arose, giving expression to both the Real and the unreal, both the Divine Source and the manifestation of the illusory universe:

3. In the beginning, darkness lay wrapped in darkness; All was one undifferentiated (*apraketa*) sea (*salila*). Then, within that one undifferentiated Existence, [Something] arose by the heat of concentrated energy (*tapas*).

4. What arose in That in the beginning was Desire (*kama*), [Which is] the primal seed of mind (*manas*).
The wise, having searched deep within their own hearts,
Have perceived the bond (*bandha*) between the Real (*sat*)
and the unreal (*asat*).

Mystics of succeeding generations, who have seen THAT in the depths of contemplation for themselves, have recognized the author of the above Hymn as one who had also known “the mystical vision.” He was, himself, one of those sages whom he describes, who, searching deep within themselves, perceived “the bond between the Real and the unreal.” He had seen THAT from which all Creation emanates; for in that mystical experience of unity, one goes back—not temporally, but causally—to the Beginning of things, to that eternal, unmoving Consciousness from which the world-manifestation springs forth. There, in that perfect Stillness, night and day, life and death, do not exist; they are indistinguishable in that state prior to the coming into being of all such opposites. All these opposites, these complements, rely for their existence on an initial differentiation within the One, creating a perceiver and a perceived.

The subtle source of that differentiation, says our mystic, is “Desire;” i.e., the impulse within the One to create within Itself an object, an “other,” for the purpose of experiencing enjoyment. Is it not the same with us? Does not the same subtle process occur in all our own mental constructions? First, arises a desire, followed by the formation of a thought or fantasy to gratify the desire, and then delectation. It is this subtle movement of desire which comes into expression as mind (*manas*) or mentation; and, by the production of mental imagery, we have created within our integral consciousness an artificial duality: a *seer* (the witnessing subject) and a *seen* (the object of inner vision). And so, within ourselves, we experience a microcosmic reproduction of the process, which occurs as universal Creation within the one Mind. Universal Destruction is likewise mirrored in the dissolution of a thought within the mind, as we return to self-awareness.

5. They (the wise) have stretched the cord (*rashmi*) of their vision [to encompass the Truth],
And they have perceived what is higher and lower: The mighty powers [of Nature] are made fertile By that ONE who is their Source.

Below [i.e., secondary] is the creative Energy (*svadha*), And above [i.e., primary] is the Divine Will (*prayati*).

It is, we are reminded, the one Divine Consciousness, which is the primary Reality (*sat*); the thought-creation is but illusion (*asat*). The Divine Will (*prayati*) is superior, or above; and the creative energy (*svadha*) of thought-imagery is subordinate, or below. This has been seen in contemplation by all the mystics of every time.

6. [But, after all,] who knows, and who can say whence it all came, or how this creation came about?
The gods, themselves, came later than this world's creation, so who truly knows whence it has arisen?

7. Whence all creation had its origin, only He, whether He fashioned it or not—
He, who surveys it all from highest heaven—He knows. Or perhaps even He does not! ⁷

Why on earth, we must all wonder at some time or another, would God have given birth to this dream-like realm, where individualized souls struggle for wisdom and contentment while continually buffeted by passions, blinded by ignorance, assailed by pain, and threatened with death? What could be His motive? As there were no witnesses to the initial Creation, there is no one to tell. But what of the mystic? Surely, while he is lost in the depths of the Eternal, he is in a unique position to explain the 'why' of Creation! Unfortunately, even the mystic perceives no 'why'. For, in that unitive vision, He alone is. The joyful expression, which is the universal drama, radiates from Himself, the one Mind. He alone is the one Cause. There is nowhere else to look for causation, for whatever appears from Him and before Him is His own most natural and unquestionable radiation of Bliss.

Another way of expressing this truth is to say that the appearance of the world-manifestation in and on the one Consciousness is simply the nature of That. All questions regarding the how and why of it are therefore alogical. It is like asking, "Why does light shine?" or "Why does a mind think?" Who knows why a desire arises? Who knows how a thought is formed? We are aware that our thinking processes are distinguishable from our background consciousness, which is merely a witness to the mind's activity. We are

aware that the thought-producing aspect of our mind is superimposed on our consciousness, but we don't know how or why. It simply occurs. We say that it is merely the nature of consciousness to manifest as thought. Similarly, the nature of That, the one Consciousness, is to manifest as the phenomenal world. "Perhaps," says our Vedic author, "even He doesn't know the how or why of it."

Here is another passage from the Rig Veda (X: 90:1-5) that points up the difficulty of explaining the relationship between the two complementary aspects of Reality:

All this is He—what has been and what shall be. He is the Lord of immortality. Though He has become all this, in reality He is not all this. For truly, He is beyond the world. The whole series of universes—past, present, and future— express His glory and power; but *He transcends His own glory*. All beings of the universe form, as it were, only a portion of His being; the greater part is invisible and unchangeable. He who is beyond all predicates *appears* as the relative universe; He *appears* as all sentient and insentient beings. ⁸

In the above Hymn, we are taught the perennial paradox of duality-in-Unity: "Though He has become all of this, in reality He is not all of this." He is the transcendent, the Unchangeable, the Eternal; yet conjunctive with the absolute, unqualified voidness of that one Consciousness, is the shining forth of His "glory." This 'shining forth' as the universe of forms is not He, yet it is He. His "glory" stands in relation to the Absolute as the Sun's radiating light stands to the Sun. They are different, yet they are one. The rays of the Sun have no independent existence and exist only because of the Sun; the glory of God, which appears as the phenomenal universe, also has no independent reality, but exists only as a radiation or emanation from that pure Sun of Consciousness. "He transcends His own glory," says the seer; remaining forever One, unchanging and pure, He appears as the multiform universe.

Such an understanding comes not from the mind of a speculative philosopher, but from the vision of the mystic. Only one who has plumbed the depths of his own mind and passed beyond the mind to the Source of all mind and all manifestation, can know the truth of this unity- in-duality, this duality-in-unity. It is the knowledge of the Vedic seer, which, as we shall see,

has been throughout the ages the common knowledge of all who have passed beyond the “glory” of God, and have seen in the depths of inner contemplation the one Beginning and Ending of all things.

NOTES:

1. *Rig Veda*, x.82
2. *Rig Veda*, v.84
3. *Tandya Maha Brahmana*, xx.14.2
4. *Rig Veda*, i.164.46
5. *Ibid.*, x.114
6. *Ibid.*, x.129.1
7. *Ibid.*, x.129.2-7
8. *Ibid.*, x.90.1-5; Prabhavananda, Swami, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, Hollywood, Vedanta Press, 1963; p. 32.

II. The Upanishadic Seers

In India, sometime during the first millennium B.C.E., the Vedas were finally collected and put into an organized written form; and an additional, much later, collection of philosophical writings by the *rishis*, or seers, who had known God, were appended to those earlier hymns and religious precepts, and thereafter regarded as an integral part of the *Vedas*. These philosophical appendages, addressed to a more learned and intellectually sophisticated audience, were called the *Upanishads*. The Sanskrit word, *upanishad*, means “sitting beneath,” and refers to those teachings which are received at the feet of a spiritual Master, or *Guru*. The Upanishads are also “sitting beneath” the Vedas as the final portion of the collection and are therefore known as the *Vedanta*: the end (*anta*) of the Vedas.

Of the one hundred and eight Upanishads said to exist, twelve are regarded as of primary importance and merit. In philosophical purity and persuasiveness, these few represent what, for most of us, are the Upanishads. Their names are the *Isha*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Chandogya*, *Brihadaranyaka*, *Aitareya*, *Taitiriya*, *Svetasvatara* and *Maitri Upanishads*. The authors and exact date of authorship of these separate spiritual treatises

are unknown; we know only that they were written, by various anonymous sages who had realized that Truth of which they speak, sometime between ca. 1200 and 400 B.C.E. While they vary in length and in style, their one common theme is the inner realization of the identity of the *Atman* (Self) and *Brahman* (the one universal Consciousness). We may strive to know God, or we may strive to know our Self; but, say the Upanishads, when you find the one, you shall also find the other; and it is this discovery which constitutes Enlightenment.

It has long been recognized as a fact of mystical psychology that, as a man comes to know God in the unitive vision, he knows in that some moment, his own true Self. This intriguing fact is expressed most succinctly in a passage from the ancient Indian epic, the *Ramayana*; in it, Rama, who represents the Godhead incarnate, asks his servant, Hanuman, “How do you regard me?” And Hanuman replies:

dehabhavana daso 'smi
jivabhavana twadamshakah
atmabhava twamevaham

(When I identify with the body, I am Thy servant; When I identify with the soul, I am a part of Thee; But when I identify with the Self, I am truly Thee.)¹

These three attitudes represent progressively subtler stages of self-identification: from the identification with the body, to identification with the soul, until, finally, one comes to know the Divine, and thereby one's eternal Self. While each of these three relational attitudes finds expression as the prevailing attitude within various individual religious traditions, they are essentially representative of the viewpoint from these different stages of self-awareness.

We have seen, in the Vedas, how religious thought progressed from a primitive sort of nature-worship to monotheism, and finally to a monistic

conception of reality. This progression of understanding is a duplication of the progression of understanding that takes place in the mind of every individual as well. We all begin as materialists, taking for granted that the phenomenal world before us is the sole reality. The idea of a transcendent God, or a unifying Principle inherent in the world, seems but a remote and hazy notion. Then, as our religious sense awakens, perhaps through some shocking reminder of our mortality, or a dawning clarity of mind while viewing the starry heavens or some quiet stretch of seacoast, we begin to reflect. And some inner logic seems to demand a Creator for so vast and mysterious a universe. We begin to sense an Intelligence beyond our own, an Intelligence with whom we can communicate, and of whom we are increasingly aware in all our thoughts and actions.

The second stage of our religious development comes when, after some deliberation and inner probing, we come to the conclusion that there is something within ourselves, a moral spirit, a guiding light, which is, itself, Divine, and partakes of God Himself. We call it our “soul,” and we sense the longing of that soul to rejoin the Divine beauty and goodness from which, like a spark from a blazing fire, it emanated.

Finally, we experience the third stage in our journey when, in a moment of longing, contemplating our Divine Source, we know “the peace that passes all understanding,” and suddenly, in a moment of unprecedented clarity of Intelligence, we know that one Divinity face to face. In that clear knowing, we realize that the seeker and the Goal, the knower and That which it sought to know, are one. Like the king of a vast kingdom, awakening from a dream in which he is poor and lost, we awake to the realization that we were never separate from the One, but only imagined a separateness where none existed. Then we know who we have always been: we are the one all-pervading Being, who, while transcending this world of light and shadow, is Itself the substratum and essence of all being.

It is in the Upanishads that we first hear from those fully illumined seers who have reached the final stage of knowledge regarding God and the Self, declaring to us that the Self and God are one:

Even by the mind this truth is to be learned:
There are not many, but only ONE. ²

We are easily able to understand the idea of an underlying Unity intellectually, but that remains an imperfect and ultimately unsatisfactory

knowledge so long as we do not directly experience that Unity as *I*. Our very knowledge stands in the way of experiencing the Truth, because we retain the limited awareness of “I know”. That very intellect which knows establishes a separation between the knower and what is known. Hear what the seers of the Upanishads say on this point:

He is known by those who know Him beyond thought, not to those who imagine He can be attained by thought.

If you think, “I know Him well,” you do not know the Truth. You only perceive that appearance of Brahman produced by the inner senses. Continue to meditate. ³

What cannot be thought with the mind, but That whereby the mind thinks: know That alone to be Brahman.

... It is not what is thought that we should wish to know; we should know the thinker. “He is my Self!” This one should know. “He is my Self!” This one should know. ⁴

And *that* knowledge, of the Self, or *Atman*, is obtained only through the direct experience that occurs when the knowing mind is transcended, and the knower and the known are directly realized to be one. No amount of reasoning, no amount of philosophical understanding, can approach this directly apprehended knowledge:

He cannot be seen by the eye, and words cannot reveal Him. He cannot be realized by the senses, or by austerity or the performance of rituals. By the grace of wisdom and purity of mind, He can be seen in the silence of contemplation. ⁵

When a sage sees this great Unity, and realizes that his Self has become all beings, what delusion and what sorrow could ever approach him? ⁶

When awake to the vision of one’s own Self, when a man in truth can say: “I am He,” what desires could lead him to grieve in fever for the body?

... When a man sees the *Atman*, his own Self, the one God, the Lord of what was and of what shall be, then he fears no more. ⁷

This “vision” of the Self is described in the Upanishads as Liberation (*moksha*). It is a freedom, a release, from doubt, from uncertainty, from the fears attending ignorance, forever. All questions are answered; all desires and causes for sorrow are put to rest; for thereafter, a man knows the secret of all existence. All previous notions of limitation and mortality, all darkness of ignorance, is swept away in the all-illuminating light of Truth:

When the wise man knows that it is through the great and omnipresent Spirit in us that we are conscious in waking or in dreaming, then he goes beyond all sorrow. When he knows the Self, the inner Life, who enjoys like a bee the sweetness of the flowers of the senses, the Lord of what was and what will be, then he goes beyond all fear. ⁸

When a man has seen the truth of the Spirit, he is one with Him; the aim of his life is fulfilled, and he is ever beyond sorrow. ... When a man knows God, he is free; his sorrows have an end, and birth and death are no more. When in inner union he is beyond the world of the body, then the third world, the world of the Spirit, is found, where man possesses all—for he is one with the ONE. ⁹

It is these truths, that “Brahman is the Atman,” ¹⁰ “Atman is Brahman,”¹¹ and that the realization of Atman/Brahman is man’s ultimate “Liberation,” which constitute the great message of the Upanishads. But a further question remains: “How is this realization to be attained?” In answer to that question, the various authors of the Upanishads offer various answers, which to a perplexed student may appear contradictory and mutually exclusive. But, with a little explanation, it can be easily understood that their directives are not contradictory at all, but complementary. For example, in the *Katha Upanishad*, we are given three different explanations of the way to know God. The first is “by the grace of God”:

The man who surrenders his human will leaves sorrows behind and beholds the glory of the Self by the grace of God. ... Not through much learning is the Atman reached, nor through the intellect and the sacred teachings. It is reached by those whom He chooses; to His chosen the Self reveals His glory. ¹²

The second is “by purity of heart”:

He is seen by a pure heart and by a mind whose thoughts are pure.

... When all desires that cling to the heart are surrendered, then a mortal becomes immortal, and even in this world he is one with Brahman. ¹³

The third is by “one-pointed contemplation”:

Not even through deep knowledge can the Self be reached, unless evil ways are abandoned, and there is rest in the senses, concentration in the mind, and peace in one’s heart.

... When the wise man rests his mind in contemplation on our God beyond time, who invisibly dwells in the mystery of things and in the heart of man, then he rises above both pleasures and sorrows. ¹⁴

These three, apparently diverse, methods or means to attain the realization of God appear in one form or another throughout all the Upanishads. And, in order to understand the integral relationship of these three apparently different “paths,” we must examine them in the light of the experience of those who have reached the goal of Self- realization. First, let us understand what is meant by “the grace of God.”

Those who have known that absolute Self realize that whatever exists, and whatever occurs in this universe, is His doing. There is nothing whatsoever that is apart from Him. This the sages have clearly seen. Where, then, is that which is outside of His doing? Can we suppose that the awakening of our understanding about God is something apart from His doing? Or that our efforts, our devotion to Truth, our desire for knowledge, is something other than His own activity within ourselves? It is God’s grace which inspires within us the effort, the desire. The vision of God is not attained without effort, but the effort itself is a manifestation of His grace. And the revelation of Himself—could that be accomplished without His doing it? We are within God, and everything—even our doubting, our rejection, our foolishness—is He. Can that inward journey to Self-realization be inspired by someone other than He?

Regardless of what steps we take toward the realization of God, it is God Himself who is playing out the drama. The light that fills a room is nothing but light; how could we find a portion of that light that is acting independently from the rest? Likewise, all this universe is the glory of God,

and nothing but Him. What, then, is not Himself? What is not a manifestation of His grace? The authors of the Upanishads, like all true seers of God who have come after them, have acknowledged the fact that, ultimately, their turning to God, their thirst for Him, and their eventual Self-realization, are all inspired and accomplished by His grace. “He is indeed the Lord supreme whose grace moves the hearts of men. He leads us unto His own joy and to the glory of His light.”¹⁵

Now, in the light of this understanding, let us examine the qualification of “purity of heart.” Though it is a vague and broadly generalized phrase, it is one used repeatedly by the sages of the past and present, including Jesus of Nazareth, to describe the state of mind prerequisite to the “vision” of God. Pure heartedness suggests guilelessness, simplicity and childlike humility. “He is unknown by the learned and known by the simple.”¹⁶ It implies tenderness, compassion, sincerity, and all those qualities we associate with “goodness.” It is the state of the heart of one who knows that God is universally present, and who regards nothing in this world as divorced from, or other than, God.

“Purity” suggests a single, uncontaminated, element or quality. “Purity of heart,” therefore, is an undeviating regard to God alone, who has become the center and focus of all one’s thoughts, words and actions. Only by such purity of heart is the mind of man readied and prepared for the perfect concentration of mind, which is known as contemplation.

The mind of man is of two kinds: pure and impure. It is impure when in the grip of worldly desire, and pure when free from such desire. ... If men thought of God as much as they think of the world, who would not attain liberation?¹⁷

Contemplation, the third stipulated precondition, is the result of mental purity, and the open gateway to the experience of the Eternal. It is not attained by allowing the mind to dwell on sense-pleasures, nor by the calculating of philosophers, nor by the proud and complacent; it is attained by the mind that dwells solely and intently on God, who knows its own darkness, and longs solely and purely for the light of clear vision.

When a wise man has withdrawn his mind from all things without, and when his spirit has peacefully left all inner sensations, let him rest in peace, free from the movement of will and desire.... For it has been said: There is something

beyond our mind, which abides in silence within our mind. It is the supreme mystery beyond thought. Let one's mind and subtle spirit rest upon that and nothing else.

...When the mind is silent, beyond weakness and distraction, then it can enter into a world, which is far beyond the mind: the supreme Destination Then one knows the joy of Eternity.

...Words cannot describe the joy of the soul whose impurities are washed away in the depths of contemplation, who is one with the Atman, his own Self. Only those who experience this joy know what it is.

...As water becomes one with water, fire with fire, and air with air, so the mind becomes one with the infinite Mind, and thus attains Freedom. ¹⁸

If we are to know that Freedom, say the authors of the Upanishads, we must leave behind the world of speculation and philosophizing, and enter into the devout life of grace, purity of heart and contemplation. Thus, they assure us, with a full trust in His loving guidance, with a sincere and naked surrender of all thoughts not of God, and all actions not in His service, and finally in the constant flow of the mind to Him in the intimacy of silent contemplation, we shall enter the depths of our being, and know the glory of our own eternal Self.

When first one discovers these exalted thoughts in the Upanishads, one is startled and wonderstruck that such sublime thoughts were penned so many hundreds of years ago—long before anyone in the West had come near to such heights of knowing. We discover that the knowledge of the Spirit is not dependent upon the so-called “progress of civilization,” but has always been the same for all humanity in every age.

In the annals of spiritual knowledge, the testimonies of the *rishis* who authored the Upanishads may perhaps be equaled, but they have never been, nor will ever be, surpassed. They have the last as well as the original say in spiritual knowledge. All that has been said since regarding the Source, nature, and final Goal of man is but so many footnotes to the Upanishads; for, in them, the furthest reaches of knowledge have been explored. They have reduced all existence to One, the final number beyond which there is no more reduction. And they have shown the path whereby this supernal knowledge may be attained. Whatever came after the Upanishads, in the way

of spiritual knowledge, is only the echoing cries of those who have rediscovered the same Truth, by the same path, and have raised their voices to sing the same joyous song.

NOTES:

1. Valmiki, *Ramayana*
2. *Katha Upanishad*, IV; based on Mascaro, Juan, 1965
3. *Kena Upanishad*, II; *Ibid.*
4. *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, III.8; *Ibid.*
5. *Mundaka Upanishad*, III.1; *Ibid.*
6. *Isha Upanishad*, I.7; *Ibid.*
7. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV.4.25; *Ibid.*
8. *Katha Upanishad*, IV; *Ibid.*
9. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, II.1; *Ibid.*
10. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, I.5; *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, II.6; *Ibid.*
12. *Katha Upanishad*, II; *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, VI; *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, II; *Ibid.*
15. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, III; *Ibid.*
16. *Kena Upanishad*, II; *Ibid.*
17. *Maitri Upanishad*, VI.24; *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, VI.19-23; *Ibid.*

* * *

III. Oneness

The one Reality is called, in a Sanskrit phrase, *Chit-Shakti Vilas*, “the play of Consciousness-Energy.” This phrase, *Chit-Shakti*, is an interesting one, in that it stands for the one Reality, and yet it is made up of two words: *Chit* (“Consciousness”) and *Shakti* (“Energy.”) These are the two aspects of Reality with which we have become familiar as *Shiva-Shakti*, *Brahman-Maya*, *Purusha-Prakrti*, *Theos-Logos*, etc. *Chit*, or Consciousness, is called in other contexts by the name of *Shiva*, the absolute and formless aspect, the transcendent Godhead; and *Shakti*, or Energy, is the creative aspect of that one Consciousness which manifests as the multi-formed universe. They are

one, but they appear to be two. The two are but complementary aspects of the same one indivisible Truth.

These complimentary aspects are frequently symbolized as Male and Female. He—the masculine aspect of God—is the world-transcending Absolute. He is the pure and stainless Consciousness that is the source of His own manifestory Power. He is the eternal One, beyond all dualities, beyond all predication. He is known by those to whom He reveals Himself as the Unmanifest. But this stainless Consciousness possesses a Creative Power. And with that Power It periodically produces an Energy that manifests as a universe of time, space, and material forms. That Power of manifestation could be characterized as the Breath of God, which is in turn exhaled and then inhaled back again. Between the contraction and re-expansion of this universal manifestation, there is a period of stillness, in which His manifestory Power rests within Himself. This manifestory Power, this Matter-producing faculty, is often regarded as the Female aspect of God. It is the creative movement that arises within the Absolute Mind, and it is everything that this creative movement produces. Within this creative production, which we call the universe, these two aspects of God are given symbolic representation in the form of creatures designated as male and female.

Though a universe of form is made manifest by this (Female) Power, He (the Source) never becomes anything other than the eternally pure Consciousness. Just as the human consciousness (which is His likeness) remains unaffected by the millions of thoughts that pass across its face, or as the pure sky remains unaffected by the myriads of clouds that drift by, that pure Consciousness produces a vast universe of Thought-forms, and yet remains in Himself unchanged, unmoved. Just as the human consciousness witnesses in full awareness the play of thoughts as they arise and disperse within it, so does He witness in full awareness the universal play in all its detailed convolutions. And as the human consciousness lives in its own thoughts, being their source and witness, so does He live in His creative exuberance of universal Thought-Energy. This exuberance is His own. It has no existence apart from Him; He is its Soul and substance. Still, the One has these two aspects: It is the one pure and eternal Consciousness (the "Father"), and It is the creative Power of manifestation (the "Mother"), just as we human "images" of God contain the same two aspects to our being. And so, God is both Male and Female, both God and Goddess, both *Purusha* and *Prakrti*, both *Chit* (or *Shiva*) and *Shakti*.

Listen to how the 13th century sage, Jnaneshvar, describes them:

“The Shakti cannot live without her Lord, and without her, He (Shiva, the absolute Consciousness) cannot appear. Since He appears because of Her, and She exists because of her Lord, the two cannot be distinguished at all. Sugar and its sweetness cannot be told apart, nor camphor and its fragrance. If we have the flame, we have the fire as well; if we catch hold of Shakti, we have Shiva also.

“... Shiva and Shakti are the same, like air and its motion, or gold and its luster. Fragrance cannot be separated from the musk, nor heat from fire; neither can Shakti be separated from Shiva.”¹

The whole world of apparent phenomena is the manifestation of the Shakti of Shiva. Shiva is our innermost consciousness, our very Self; and Shakti, therefore, is our own creative power, our power of will. By its very existence, an apparent duality is created in That which is one. From this original duality comes the duality of seer and seen, or subject and object. It is because of this apparent duality, this imaginary division in the One, that the world-appearance continues to exist. Nonetheless, the truth of the matter is that it is one Being who is playing all the roles; He is the Director, the stage Manager, the actors, and the scenery. He is the stage, and He is the audience of this play as well. There is nothing outside of God. This is brought out in the story of the egoistic king who asked his Minister, “Who is greater, me or God?” And the wise Minister replied, “You are, O King! For you can banish anyone from your kingdom, but God cannot banish anyone from His kingdom.”

It is not possible to leave God’s kingdom. The only thing that really *is* is that one Being; He is both the unchanging Absolute, the Unity, and the world-appearance as well. He is both Shiva and Shakti. For, as we’ve seen, you can’t have one without the other; they form an inseparable unit. And so, the question, “Who am I?” is readily answered: “I am the one Reality. I am *Chit-Shakti*, and all this is my play!” It is, of course, important to experience this truth; but it’s perhaps just as important to understand it and to make this knowledge a part of one’s being. This is not just philosophy or theorizing. It is very important to fully comprehend this; otherwise, who knows what you

might imagine yourself to be? Perhaps you would regard yourself as merely a weak and insignificant creature!

Because the final and ultimate Truth is unity, is oneness, all talk of duality is misleading. In our very good intentions of making the truth understandable to others, we like to describe the dual aspects of the One in order to explain the relationship between the Transcendent and the Immanent, the Absolute and the Relative, the Unity and the Diversity. And from there we go on to delineate all the limbs and subtle layers, and so forth; and before we know what has happened, we're immersed once again in the swamp of multiplicity.

The initial conceptual division of the One into two (*Purusha-Prakrti, Brahman-Maya, Chit-Shakti*, etc.) is the intellectually tempting pathway leading into this swamp. And almost every mystical philosopher and metaphysician finds himself beguiled by the apparent usefulness of exploring this pathway. But, since the ultimate Truth is unity, and always unity, we are much better off adhering bull-doggedly to One and only One, without allowing for the slightest admission of duality or mention of even an *apparent* division in It. For this reason, the author of the Biblical book of Second Isaiah, as a counter to those who would dissect reality into good and evil, Jehovah and Satan, Light and Darkness, put these words in the mouth of God: "I am the one Lord; there is no other beside Me. I form the light and create the darkness; I make peace and create evil. I, the one Lord, do all these things." ²

Let's look for a moment, from the historical perspective, and see what happens when we begin dabbling with "two-ness." In the *Yajurveda*, we find the statement, "The One becomes the many by Its own inherent power." This seems innocent enough. Everyone can see that "Its own inherent power" is not an entity separate from the One; it is just an inherent quality. A little later, however, we find in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, "Brahman projects the universe through the power of His Maya. Then He becomes entangled in that universe of Maya. Know, then, that the world is Maya, and that the great God is the Lord of Maya."

Uh oh! Now, we have established a definite pair! Here, we have the Lord *and* His Maya. From the smallest seed, duality has sprung up as a full tree of contention. We have forgotten that "Maya" simply refers to His "inherent power" of manifestation, and we have begun to see "the Lord" and "His

power” as two separate and distinct entities. Do you not see how craftily and insidiously this imaginary separation has taken place? Once you have a “Lord,” you have a “servant” as well.

By the time of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this dualism has taken a firm hold on the mind. We hear Krishna saying, in the 13th chapter, to Arjuna: “He sees truly who sees that all actions are performed by *Prakrti* (i.e., Shakti, or Maya), and that the *Purusha* (Shiva or Brahman) is actionless.” Now, this is a very useful concept for understanding that one’s eternal Self remains constant, inactive, and unchanged, even while one’s body and mind engages in actions; but a split is being established which will prove to be very difficult to patch up again.

The great Nondualist philosopher and sage, Shankaracharya, though quite aware of their underlying unity, describes “the two” in such a way as to widen the division between them. He says:

“Maya... is the power of the Lord. It is she who brings forth this universe. She is neither real nor unreal, nor partaking of both characteristics; neither the same as the Lord, nor different, nor both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. She is most wonderful and cannot be described in words.”³

Now, let’s look at what’s happened so far: The Lord emanates the universe by His inherent Power. And suddenly, we are saying that He is real, but the universe and the Lord’s Power by which the universe exists are both unreal! Can we say that the Sun is real, but its rays are unreal? No; of course not. But, let’s not be unfair to Shankaracharya; it should be perfectly clear that he was merely pointing out that the Godhead, the formless Absolute, is *eternally* real, while the manifestation known as “the universe” is only *temporarily* real. And, to this, we all agree. But can we say that the Lord’s inherent “Power of manifestation” is also only temporarily real? No. His Power, His *Shakti*, His *Maya*, though it may indeed become inactive and dormant, is co-eternal with Shiva; it is inherent. It is never something separate or independent of the Lord, any more than wetness can be thought of as separate or independent of water, or any more than the power to think can be thought of as independent of the mind. He, the Lord, and She, His Power, were never divided, were never two; and only confusion can result by allowing this mistaken impression to stand.

It was with just such an objection to Shankara's descriptive language that, in the 9th and 10th centuries, the authors of the literature of Kashmir Shaivism began to rephrase and reformulate the philosophy of Unity. As we shall see, however, there is really no satisfactory solution to the problem of expressing in language That which exceeds the capabilities of language. In every time, in every culture, the seers of the One have attempted to explain in a satisfactory way the fact that the universe is God, and yet is not God; that He is eternal, and yet lives in the temporal; that He is forever unchanging, and yet is manifest as the ever-changing universe.

Jnaneshvar, in the 13th century, likewise felt impelled to object to the language of Shankara, and to attempt to do away with such concepts as "Maya," and "superimposition." In his *Amritanubhav*, he says:

"When it is always only the one pure Consciousness seeing Itself, why postulate the necessity of a superimposition? ... By His very nature, He *is* whatever He sees. Whatever form appears, appears because of Him. There is nothing else here but the Self.

"... In the current of the river or the waves of the sea, there is nothing but water. Similarly, in the universe, nothing else exists besides the Self.

"... Therefore, whether He is the seer or the seen, it doesn't matter; there is only the Self vibrating everywhere." ⁴

Again, in his *Changadev Pasashti*, Jnaneshvar says: "Only Oneness is real. All else is a dream!" ⁵ And yet, we must ask the question, "What all else?" And the answer can only be, "the appearance of multiplicity!" And this, of course, is precisely what Shankara had said: "Only Brahman is real; the world (the appearance of multiplicity) is illusory." So, you see, it is not possible to solve this question of how to talk about the (apparent) duality in Unity. This is why, in India, there are so many authentic schools of mystical thought. There is the *Advaita*, the Nondualism of Shankara; there is the *Dvaita*, or Dualist, school of Madhva; there is the *Vishishtadvaita*, or Qualified Nondualism of Ramanuja. All speak the truth, and yet each sees the Truth a little bit differently. But that's okay. The built-in ambiguity of language demands alternate expressions. Still, the ultimate Truth, the final

Reality, known by the seers, is One without a second. All duality is apparent only. We can say that it is simply the “Play of Consciousness-Energy,” *Chit-Shakti Vilas*.

So much for correct understanding! It is necessary to pass beyond understanding if we are to *experience* the joy of Unity, the bliss of God. This Bliss is not attained by engaging the mind in trying to comprehend the nature of God—though this has its place, of course. The bliss of God is attained through devotion. Devotion leaves the intellect far behind; in fact, it is possible only through the abandonment of the pride of intellect. It is more akin to the longing of a child for its mother than to the ratiocination of the adult. Devotion begins with the awareness of one’s utter dependency upon God for everything, and an open upturning of one’s mind and inner gaze to the Source of all mind and all vision.

We engage our minds so often in circuitous analysis and repetitious thought-patterns. Far better would it be if we could build into our minds the thought-pattern of calling on God for our succor and support. He is capable of filling the mind and body with ecstasy and light, and of setting our minds at peace in perfect understanding. All that is required is a pure and innocent heart, and a simple and steady regard to Him for all our satisfaction and reward.

As the mind becomes steady and one-pointed on God, all questions become answered automatically. A mind at peace is a mind illumined by Truth. Let there be an apparent duality between you and your Lord! But keep on trying to close the gap through love. Talk to Him. Pray to Him. Give all your life and love to Him. And the God within you will manifest the more as you become engrossed in Him. You become what you meditate on; so, meditate on God. Regard Him as the only Reality and become as a moth dancing about His flame. Yearn to be immersed in His perfect light, His perfect love, and He will draw you into Himself and make you know your eternal oneness with Him.

NOTES:

1. *Jnaneshvar: The Life And Works of The Celebrated 13th Century Indian Mystic-Poet, Amritanubhav: I:21-24, 41, 42; Abhayananda, 1989, p. 116.*
2. Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament of the Bible: 45:6-7.
3. Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, III:7; Prabhavananda, & Isherwood, Vedanta Press, 1978, p. 49.

4. Jnaneshvar, *Amritanubhav*, 7:165, 233, 235, 237, 244; Abhayananda, 1989, pp. 186, 193-195.
5. Jnaneshvar, *Changadev Pasashti*, 25; Abhayananda, 1989, p. 240.
6. The book, *The Wisdom of Vedanta*, containing this and many other excellent articles, may be downloaded in its entirety as a PDF document from the “Read or Download” page of my website: www.themysticsvision.com.

* * *

Meditation

The Latin phrase, *E Pluribus Unum*, is the motto of our country. It means, “Of many, one.” But we would be more accurate in saying, “Of One, many.” This simple formula explains everything we need to know about the Reality in which we live. For, just as the one white light is refracted to appear as the entire spectrum of colors in a rainbow, so does the one undivided Existence appear as a multitude of forms. Just as a sunflower spreads itself out in its many tender petals, so God spreads Himself out into this variously formed creation. Just as the ocean raises up from itself a tossing surface of countless waves, so the ocean of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss raises up from Itself countless individual forms of life from shore to shore.

In every single form the One alone exists; it is He alone who lives in every life. However wise, however foolish, however attractive, however repulsive—the tiger and the scorpion, the spider and the snake—all is His Life, playing in a million fantastic forms. And we, children of His mind, images projected from His light upon Himself, wander here and there upon His screen, playing out our roles, forgetful of the One in whose dance of Light we live. But when we turn within, behold! We discover as our very essence that One who lives as many, the heart and soul of all that lives, the blissful God whose life and breath we are. ⁵

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IV. Kapila

The seers who authored the Upanishads had known in themselves the great Unity and had declared for all to come thereafter that the soul of man and the Lord of all creation were one and the same; *Tat twam asi!* was their repeated cry: “That Thou Art!” And more, “All this universe is That!”

‘But how,’ the uncomprehending mind questions, ‘can this be so? How can the Unmoving be identical with the incessantly fluctuating universe? How can this world of transient phenomena, where all things and beings are born, suffer and die, be identical to the God who is said to be formless, unchanging, and eternally One? And how is it possible to reconcile that eternal Self with what we experience as our separate transient selves existing in the world? Are there two selves, or is our personal self merely an illusion that we are experiencing in this world of birth, suffering, and death?’

‘It cannot be understood through reasoning or subtlety of intellect,’ reply the sages of the Upanishads; ‘only those who see It in the depths of contemplation know the secret.’ And yet, still, the uncomfited mind strives to grasp it with the intellect, and those sages who have seen It continue in their steadfast endeavor to describe It, in order to provide to those who have not seen It some idea of just what It is like.

One such sage, named Kapila, who lived around the 8th or 9th century B.C.E. in the northeastern part of India, after realizing in himself the Truth of existence, made a valiant and brilliant attempt to explain the mysterious Unity-in-duality to the satisfaction of those who had not known It. Like all attempts before or since, it failed to accomplish its purpose, and mainly served only to foster more misconceptions and misinterpretations. Still, it is a perfectly true and simple description from the vantage point of one who has seen the Truth, and for that reason, Kapila’s beautifully formulated description of Reality has lived on for centuries and centuries, providing the foundation and framework for description by the many seers of the Truth who came after him.

Kapila’s explanation of Reality came to be known as the philosophy of *Samkhya*, a word which, like *Veda*, means “knowledge” or “wisdom.” To designate the all-pervading eternal Consciousness, Kapila used the word, *Purusha*; it is a word, which had appeared previously in the Vedas to mean “the universal Self,” or “Person.” And to designate the creative Energy, which emanates from *Purusha* and manifests as the phenomenal world, he

used the word, *Prakrti*. *Prakrti* is identical with Shiva's *Shakti*, Brahman's *Maya*, or *Prthivi*, the earth Mother of the Vedas. *Prakrti* is the Divine Energy which appears as atoms, molecules, and all the sentient and insentient world.

These two, *Purusha* and *Prakrti*, are what we today might call "spirit" and "matter," except that *Prakrti* is more than what we regard as matter; it is the substance of all forms, including thought-forms, dream-images, and the individual psyche. It is everything that is experienced as "the world"—on both the subtle and gross levels, from both the subjective and the objective perspectives. *Purusha*, on the other hand, is the Eternal, the unmanifested Essence, the unstained and unchanging Consciousness. It is the light of conscious Awareness, which not only illumines but also allows us to perceive the world of *Prakrti*. *Purusha* is the one cosmic Consciousness; *Prakrti* is the Energy-production of that Consciousness. Our own individual consciousness mirrors *Purusha*; and our power of thought-production mirrors *Prakrti*.

Those who have known the experience of Unity realize these two to be complementary aspects of one indivisible Reality; but, as both of these aspects of the One possess mutually exclusive qualities, it is necessary—in order to differentiate them by quality—to give them separate and distinct names. This division of names and qualities gives the impression of an ultimate duality; but that is an impression due merely to the nature of language. These two Divine aspects must, in language at least, remain apparently distinct simply in order to explain their unity. And that unity is realized only in the transcendent "vision" of the mystic, who knows them to be, beyond all doubt, inseparably One.

Kapila's categorization and analysis of the two aspects of Existence, *Purusha* and *Prakrti*, had a vast influence on later thinkers, yet many who had not experienced that Unity for themselves corrupted his vision into a Dualistic philosophical system wherein the two came to be regarded, not as complementary aspects of the One, but as two eternally separate and irreconcilable Principles at odds with one another. It was just such a dualistic view, which was also espoused by the followers of Zoroaster in Persia, and later by the Manichaeans and Gnostics. It seems there has never been a scarcity of unenlightened men and women at the ready in this world to corrupt the words of the enlightened to fit their own pitifully childish views. Today we see the same delusion upheld by those who see existence as an eternal struggle between Jehovah and Satan.

While these two terms, *Purusha* and *Prakrti*, may appear foreign to the Western mind, we must recognize that Kapila's conception of Reality is the essence of all mystical philosophy, past and present. We find it echoed, at least implicitly, in the conceptions of Reality formulated by all the mystics and teachers of spiritual life. This, for example, from the Bible, expresses a distinction between "the Father" and "the world":

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father, but of the world." ¹

Similarly, in the earlier Upanishads, these two aspects of the One, corresponding to *Purusha* and *Prakrti*, were not referred to by name, but were merely inferred:

"The Immortal is veiled by the world. The Spirit of Life is the Immortal. Name and form are the world, and by them the Spirit is veiled." ²

"Behold the glory of God in the universe and in all that lives and moves on earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal." ³

But in the later Upanishads, written after the time of Kapila, such as the *Svetasvatara*, the Samkhya terminology is used:

"*Prakrti* is changing and passing; but *Purusha* is eternal. ...By meditation on Him, by contemplation of Him, and by communion with Him, there comes in the end destruction of earthly delusion." ⁴

In the same Upanishad, the author refers to the names used by the older Vedic tradition for these two to show that they are synonymous terms:

"With Maya, His mysterious power, He made all things, and by Maya the human soul is bound. Know therefore that *Prakrti* is Maya, and *Purusha* is Rudra (Shiva), the ruler of Maya. All beings in our universe are contained in His infinite splendor." ⁵

"...He is the Eternal among things that pass away, pure Consciousness of conscious beings, the One who fulfills the

prayers of many. By the wisdom of Samkhya and the practice of yoga (contemplation), a man knows the Eternal; and when a man knows the Eternal, he is free from all fetters.”⁶

The great contribution which Kapila made to philosophical thought was to define and examine in unprecedented detail the nature and qualities of each of the two aspects of Reality, so that the mind could easily distinguish between them. *Prakrti*, he tells us, is the undifferentiated field of Energy, which transmutes itself into the elements that make up the entire world of forms. The primary process of this transmutation is described by Kapila as a self-division into three separate modes of Energy, which he calls *gunas* (strands). These correspond to what scientists today would call “positive,” “negative,” and “neutral” energy-charges. Kapila calls them *rajas*, *tamas*, and *sattva*. They are the three “strands” which, woven together, constitute the fabric of *Prakrti*; and which, by their incessant interaction, form the manifold universe, including all sentient and insentient beings.

According to Kapila, we experience these three modes of energy in the following ways: *rajas* as passion, restlessness and assertive activity; *tamas* as dullness, lassitude and inertia; and *sattva* as clarity, refinement of intellect, and tranquility. *Sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are constantly alternating, which accounts for the changes we experience in mood and functional ability. Thus, *Prakrti*, composed of the three *gunas*, is both the cause and the substance of the entire vast range of experiential phenomena, which we call “the world.” Yet, while this transient and ephemeral drama of thought, form, and movement goes on, there is a steady, unchanging and eternal Consciousness, which remains ever aloof as the Witness of the drama; that is *Purusha*. *Purusha* is the universal Self, the light of Consciousness, which illumines *Prakrti* and which, standing distinguishably separate from *Prakrti*, exists as the unchanging witness-consciousness in every individual being.

Today, many would consider Kapila’s metaphysics to be anachronistic. Our current (scientific) view sees the world in quite different terms. The world is regarded nowadays as a manifestation of a fourteen billion-year old burst of Energy that gradually solidified over time into a material universe. But this world of energy, perceptible as matter, is still held to be contradistinguished from the one Divine Consciousness which is its Source, and which constitutes our true and eternal Self. In that respect, our current metaphysics is not so different from the view of Kapila.

All suffering, according to Kapila, is simply the result of forgetfulness of one's true Self, or *Purusha*, while identifying with the ever-changing world of *Prakrti*, and thereby being caught up in the play of light and shadow, believing that to be one's self. And the means of deliverance from suffering is, first of all, to distinguish between the two, and to cease to identify with *Prakrti*. Since *Prakrti* is a mere display, intrinsically transient, it is, in the final analysis, unreal. The real is *Purusha*, the eternal, unchanging Self. Kapila condenses this philosophy into four principal "truths":

1. That from which we want to be delivered is pain.
2. Deliverance (liberation) is the cessation of pain.
3. The cause of pain is the lack of discrimination between *Prakrti* and *Purusha*.
4. The means of deliverance is discrimination [between these two].⁷

In other words, according to Kapila, all suffering in this life is the result of wrong identification: identifying with *Prakrti* instead of *Purusha*. Suffering is inherent in *Prakrti* but does not exist in *Purusha*. *Purusha* is our eternal, and therefore real, Self. When we discriminate between them, we realize that all suffering belongs only to *Prakrti*, and cannot touch our true Self. It is this vision of Kapila's which provided the framework for that great spiritual masterpiece, the *Bhagavad Gita*.

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V. The Bhagavad Gita

Sometime between the 10th and 5th centuries B.C.E., the great epic classic, the *Mahabharata*, was written by an unknown poet who was known as Vyasa. It told the story of a great war between two rival clans of ancient India, and was no doubt based in part on ancient historical events. Throughout its complex allegorical fabric of moral tales within tales, it wove the philosophical precepts of Kapila's Samkhya. By this time, the culture of India had become completely permeated and greatly influenced by Kapila's vision and terminology.

Within the marvelous poetic drama of the *Mahabharata* is found the *Bhagavad Gita*, "The Song Of God." It is a philosophical dialogue, (also attributed to the legendary sage, Vyasa), which offers the most comprehensive and definitive expression of the Samkhya philosophy ever written. While it forms a segment of the *Mahabharata* story, it has become a separate and complete work in itself known for its beauty and clarity. We can only surmise that it was written in such a way that it would fit comfortably into the *Mahabharata* story as a philosophical discussion between two of its characters, in order to assure its endurance in that immortal work. Indeed, since the time of its composition, it has become the Bible of India, and one of the most sacred of holy books for students of philosophy and religion throughout the world.

In the first chapter of the *Gita*, we find Arjuna, a warrior of the Pandava clan, on the battlefield with Krishna, his chariot-driver, who happens also to be an incarnation of God. Krishna, who is only incidentally Arjuna's cousin and the king of Dwarka, represents, throughout this dialogue, the Divine Spirit in man; he is literally "the driver of the chariot" of the body. And the dialogue begins between Arjuna and Krishna as a dialogue between man and his indwelling Spirit, or Self. Arjuna, faced with the task before him, of battling to the death against his own vices and wrong notions, allegorically represented in the story as those whom he has known from childhood as friends and relatives, faces the battle of life which all men face; and he feels overwhelmed and utterly despondent. "Letting fall his bow and arrows, he sank down in his chariot, his soul overcome by despair and grief." ¹

But Krishna, the voice of the Eternal in him, prods him from his weakness and dejection, by reminding him of his unconquerable Soul. He brings to Arjuna's mind the remembrance that all this world is but a drama, a play of opposites, wherein heat and cold, pleasure and pain alternate, but can never touch the eternal Soul of man. "He dwells in these bodies, beyond time, and though these bodies have an end in time, He remains infinite and eternal. Therefore, great warrior, carry on your fight." ²

This dialogue, though set on a battlefield and forming an integral part in the story of the great war between the two factions, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, is quite evidently intended as an allegorical parable of man's struggle to conquer his own illusions and weaknesses, and to realize the Divine in himself. It is the perennial battle of life: the struggle between the darkness of ignorance, which sees only the frightening appearance of the world, and the light of wisdom, which sees the eternal Spirit in and behind all appearance. Krishna, the light of wisdom, explains to Arjuna the truth of the Spirit and exhorts him to take up his arms once again and to struggle toward the awareness of his own eternal Soul. He begins to teach him the wisdom of Samkhya and the path of yoga.

Samkhya, as we have seen, is the knowledge of *Prakrti* and *Purusha*, and the discrimination between the two; and yoga is the effort to realize the eternal Truth through the practice of serenity, steadfastness, meditation and contemplation on the Self. Says Krishna: "When your mind, confused by the apparent contradictions of the scriptures, becomes steady in contemplation of the Divine, then the goal of yoga is yours."

Through Samkhya, Krishna tells him, he will learn to understand his true Self; and through yoga, the practice of contemplating that Self, he will attain the direct realization of Truth. These two, says Krishna, go hand in hand; understanding leads to practice, or application, and the application of knowledge leads to realization.

Samkhya is the path of knowledge, what Krishna calls *jnan yoga*, "the yoga of knowledge"; and the application of this knowledge in thought, word and deed is the path of action, or *karma yoga*. We are all bound to act, Krishna reminds Arjuna; there is no way to escape from the world of action. But through knowledge, a man learns that he exists beyond

Prakrti as the eternal *Purusha*, the constant Self, who remains unstained by the actions which he must perform in this world:

All actions take place in time by the interweaving of the *gunas* of *Prakrti*, and the deluded man thinks that he is the doer of the actions.

But the man who knows the relation between the *gunas* of *Prakrti* and actions understands that actions are only *gunas* acting upon other *gunas*, and that he is not their slave. ⁴

In other words, the man who identifies with actions, thinking he is only the body and mind, is entirely swayed by the desire for pleasures of the body and mind, and suffers through this wrong identification; but one who identifies with the Eternal, the *Purusha*, is not swayed by these desires, and thereby remains free of the suffering that accompanies this mistaken identification.

In the Fourth chapter, Krishna strips away the last vestiges of pretense in this thinly disguised parable, and openly declares that his character represents the *Atman*, the Divine Self in all men. He is the *Avatar*, the manifestation of God, appearing within His own drama in order to give concrete utterance to the unspoken wisdom that teaches itself from within all men. By this literary device, he becomes the voice, not of Krishna, the king of Dwarka, but of the all-pervading, all-inclusive God. "By whatever path men love Me," he tells Arjuna, "by that path they come to Me. Many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to Me." ⁵ By "Me," he refers, of course, to the one supreme Self of all.

Krishna, now speaking as the Divine Reality, explains to Arjuna that, while He acts in the world (as *Prakrti*), He is ever beyond action (as *Purusha*). He works, but He is ever beyond work, in the freedom of eternity. And He asks Arjuna to perform all his actions in the same spirit, understanding that he must continue to do actions for the good of all, while remaining aware that he is entirely unaffected by his actions. In this way, says Krishna, you will remain unattached to and unaffected by the success or failure of your actions. You will enjoy the peace and freedom of your eternal Self even while engaging in actions.

Arjuna is not yet clear on this point, however, and he questions Krishna further, just as all men deliberate with themselves on the facts of life and how they must behave in accordance with the Truth. Krishna explains to Arjuna that it is not action that is to be renounced, but wrong identification that is to be renounced; for it is wrong identification which causes a man to be attached to desire for the fruits of his actions:

When a man knows himself to be Brahman, his reason is steady, and all delusion is gone from him. When pleasures come, he is not moved; and when pain comes, he is unmoved. He is not bound by things without; within himself he enjoys happiness. His soul is one with Brahman, and so he enjoys eternal bliss. ⁶

This perfect state is attained through understanding and through practice. "Such a man is a yogi," says Krishna; "he is one with Brahman and lives in Brahman." ⁷

Krishna then explains to Arjuna the practice of yoga, by which the realization of his unity with Brahman is to be attained. Now that Arjuna has learned the renunciation of attachment and desire, he is ready to learn the path of meditation. Says Krishna:

When the mind of the yogi is in peace, focused on the Self within, and beyond all restless desires, then he experiences Unity. His mind becomes still, like the flame of a lamp sheltered from the winds.

When the mind rests in the prayerful stillness of yoga, by the grace of the One, he knows the One, and attains fulfillment. Then he knows the joy of Eternity; he sees beyond the intellect and the senses. He becomes the Unmoving, the Eternal. ⁸

... In this experience of Unity, the yogi is liberated, delivered from all suffering forever. The yogi whose heart is still, whose passions are dissolved, and who is pure of sin, experiences this supreme bliss and knows his oneness with Brahman. ⁹

Krishna then goes on, in the Seventh chapter, to describe the ways that He (the supreme Self) appears in this world:

I am the fragrance of the earth and the light of the fire; I am the life of all beings, and the austerity of the yogis.
 ... I am the intelligence of the intelligent, and the beauty of all things beautiful.
 ... I am the strength of the strong, ... and the purity of the pure.¹⁰

And yet again, Krishna reminds Arjuna that while all these qualities exist in Him, He remains ever beyond all manifestation:

The three gunas comprising Prakrti come from Me, but I am not in them; they are in Me. The whole world is under the delusion of My Maya (appearance), and know not Me, the Eternal. This Maya of Mine is difficult to penetrate, but those who know Me go beyond My Maya. ¹¹

Here again, the author is presenting that most difficult of truths to comprehend—that the universe is the "appearance" of God, His *Prakrti*, or *Maya*, and not God Himself. The world is His "glory," but it is merely an appearance; He exists beyond His appearance, as the pure Absolute:

I am hidden by My veil of Maya, and the deluded people of the world do not know Me, the Beginningless, the Eternal. ¹²
 ... But the man of vision and I are one. His Self is Myself, and I am his sole trust.
 At the end of many lives the man of vision comes to Me. "God is all," this great man declares. But how rarely is such a man found! ¹³

Krishna then explains to Arjuna how the world (His Maya) evolves into appearance and "involves" back into Himself. The 'day' of world-manifestation lasts for eons upon eons, and alternates with the 'night' of dissolution:

When that 'day' comes, all visible creation arises from the Invisible; and when the 'night' of dissolution comes, all creation disappears. ¹⁴

Such a cyclic beginning and ending of the universe of appearance is no mere theory; in the experience of Unity, this recurrent creation and dissolution is seen quite clearly. From the standpoint of Eternity, it occurs in the blinking of an eye; it is like the breathing in and breathing out of *Prakrti*; but from the viewpoint of time and mortals, it is a cycle that takes billions of years to complete. Only now, the scientists who study the motions of the heavens are beginning to surmise from their observations that this is the case, but to one who has seen it and experienced it, there is not the slightest doubt about it.

In the experience of Unity, when one knows his eternal Self, this expansion and dissolution of the universe is recognized as only an appearance. It is like a thought-production that exists for a while, and then is withdrawn. The eternal Self is not affected in the least by it:

...Beyond this appearance and dissolution of the world, there is an invisible, higher, eternal Principle. And when all things in the world pass away, THAT remains forever. ¹⁵

THAT remains pure and infinite, an eternal Consciousness, beyond all manifestation or non-manifestation. "This invisible and supreme Self," says Krishna, "is everlasting. ...This is My highest Being." ¹⁶ As a further explanation of how the cycle of universal creation and dissolution is a function of *Prakrti*, and not of *Purusha*, the Unchanging, Krishna continues:

At the end of the 'night' of time, all things return to My Prakrti; and when the new 'day' of time begins, I bring them again into manifestation. Thus, through My Prakrti, I bring forth all creation, and all these worlds revolve in the cycle of time. But I am not bound by this vast display of creation; I exist alone, watching the drama of this play. I watch, while Prakrti brings forth all that moves and moves not; thus, the worlds go on revolving. But the fools of the world know Me not; ...they know not the supreme Spirit, the infinite God of all.

Still, there are a few great souls who know Me, and who take refuge in Me. They love Me with a single love, knowing that I am the Source of all. They praise Me with devotion; ...their spirit is one with Me, and they worship Me with their love.

They worship Me, and work for Me, surrendering themselves in My vision. They worship Me as the One and the many, knowing that all is contained in Me. ¹⁷

This is the sublime theme that one hears throughout the *Gita*, in which knowledge, action, love and contemplation, all are synthesized in one vision. To love God is to dwell on Him. For what else is love but the constant flow of thought and desire toward the object of love? In the *Gita*, we find the summit of universality, an all-embracing concern for every tradition, every temperament, every degree of comprehension. For those who require a tangible form of God for worship, the adoration of the loveable Krishna is offered; for those who seek Him in the world through good works, the path of *karma* yoga is proffered; for those who are determined to wend their way to Him through understanding and Self-knowledge, the path of *jnan* yoga is opened wide; and for those who, having understood, and whose actions are ever directed toward Him, and whose love is solely for Him, the path of meditation and contemplation is the royal road, the *raja* yoga, which leads to union with Him. Of such devotees, Krishna says:

Their thoughts are on Me, their life is in Me, and they give light to all. They speak always of Me, and in Me they find peace and joy.

To those who focus their minds on Me, who worship Me with their love, I give the yoga of vision whereby they come to Me.¹⁸

Give Me your mind and give Me your heart; give Me your offerings and your adoration. Thus, with your soul focused solely on Me as your supreme Goal, truly, you shall come to Me. ¹⁹

Throughout every chapter of the *Gita*, there is this interweaving of love, action, knowledge and contemplation, harmonized to comprise the full tapestry of the life of the spirit. No one single thread of this finely woven fabric is emphasized or exalted above another, but all facets and needs of the human spirit are equally represented and interrelated. We find precisely the same message in the *Gita* as was found in the Upanishads; but whereas

the Upanishads shine as a single bright beacon of pure white light, the *Gita* is refracted into a spectrum of living color and brilliant detail.

When Arjuna begs Krishna to reveal to his eyes the vision of His manifold splendor, Krishna consents, granting to him a divine eyesight whereby he can view the infinite creative effusion of God:

If the light of a thousand Suns suddenly arose in the sky, that splendor might be compared to the radiance of the supreme Spirit. And Arjuna saw in that radiance the whole universe in its infinite variety, standing in one vast Unity as the body of God. ²⁰

In this vision, Arjuna sees all the worlds and all the gods and demons and peoples of the universe rising up from the one Source and then being devoured by It. Overwhelmed by this vision, and trembling in awe and terror, Arjuna bows before Krishna, and cries out:

Adoration unto Thee who art before me and behind me!
Adoration unto Thee who art on all sides, O God! All- powerful
God of immeasurable might, Thou art the Destination of all,
and Thou art all! ²¹

Then, when Krishna had once again resumed his human form, he explained to Arjuna that His vision is not given to the religionists with their reverence for rituals and legal formulas, nor to the self-torturers, nor to those pious people who imagine that devotion consists merely of the dutiful giving of alms; but only to those who long for God with true love in their hearts:

Only by love can men see Me and know Me, and enter into Me.
He who works for Me, who loves Me, whose supreme Goal is
Me, free from attachment to all things, and with true love for all
creation, he, truly, becomes one with Me. ²²

The author of the *Bhagavad Gita*, who put these words into the mouth of Krishna, seems never to tire of repeating his explanation of the primalduality-in-unity; for once again he makes Krishna say:

Prakrti is the source of all material things; it is the creator, the creating, and the creation. *Purusha* is the Source of consciousness. The Purusha in man, united with Prakrti, experiences the ever-changing conditions of Prakrti. When he identifies with the ever changing, he is whirled through life and death to a good or evil fate. But the Purusha in man is ever beyond fate. He is the supreme Lord, the supreme Self. That man who knows that he is the Purusha, and understands the changing conditions of Prakrti, is never whirled around by fate, wherever he may be.²³

This theme of *Purusha* and *Prakrti* is so crucial to the understanding of Reality and the spiritual life that it is explained again and again throughout the *Gita*. In chapter Thirteen, Krishna attempts this explanation in a novel way, by introducing two new terms. Here, *Prakrti* is referred to as *kshetra* ("the Field"), and *Purusha* is referred to as *kshetrajna* ("the Knower of the Field"). "Whatever is born in this world," says Krishna, "comes from the union of the Field and the Knower of the Field."²⁴ But when a man knows that he is the eternal Knower, the Experiencer of the Field, and not the Field alone, he knows his eternal freedom:

He who knows that he is, himself, the Lord of all, and is ever the same in all, immortal though experiencing the Field of mortality, he knows the truth of existence. And when a man realizes that the Purusha in himself is the same Purusha in all, he does not hurt himself by hurting others. This is the highest knowledge. He who sees that all actions, everywhere, are only the actions of Prakrti, and that the Purusha is the witness of these actions, he sees the Truth.

... Those who, with the eye of inner vision, see the distinction between the Field and the Knower of the Field, and realize that the Purusha is free of Prakrti, they attain the Highest.²⁵

As we shall see in later chapters of this book, the conception of these two Principles of existence is a perennially recurring one, not only in the religious and philosophical literature of India, but in every mystical tradition throughout the world, in every time. And, in nearly every tradition in which these two Principles appear, the eternal, imperishable Principle is universally characterized as Male, the Father; and the Principle of Creative Energy, out of which is formed the world of matter, is universally characterized as His

Female consort, the Mother. Even today, in our own culture, we say that it is our "Father" in heaven who is our Source and Governor; but it is "Mother Nature" who feeds us and nourishes us in this phenomenal world.

These same appellations of gender are applied by the ancient seers of India to the two complements of Reality. The very word, *Purusha*, means "the Man"; and *Prakrti*, like *Prthivi* before, is a noun of the female gender, as is *Durga*, *Maya* and *Shakti*. They are synonymous terms, though stemming from disparate traditions; and each represents the Goddess, the great Mother-Womb of all creation. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that the author of the *Gita* has Krishna say:

Wherever a being may be born, Arjuna, know that My Prakrti is his Mother, and I [Purusha] am the Father who gave him life.²⁶

The suggestion that we are born of the union of *Purusha* and *Prakrti*, as a child is born of the union of a father and mother, may seem only an extension of a simile; but the Samkhya philosophy means by this "union" something more literal than figurative. These two are really one Reality. *Prakrti* and *Purusha* are merely abstractions designed to separate out these two aspects of the One in order to understand It in Its fullness. Their "union" is in fact a "unity"; they overlap, as it were, like superimposed images on a photographic film. We say at times that *Purusha* is "within" *Prakrti*, or that God is "within" Nature; but that is only a figure of speech. They are locked in an embrace so absolute that they have never been, nor ever can be, separated. Our existence is their interlocking existence. It is in this sense that we are born of their union.

The author of the *Bhagavad Gita* has, through his character, Krishna, stated this truth in many ways to Arjuna, the disciple. But in the Fifteenth chapter, in which Krishna speaks of *Prakrti* and *Purusha* as "the perishable" and "the Imperishable," he states in an unequivocal manner that the ultimate Reality (the supreme Self) is a Unity which, containing within Itself both of these complementary aspects, supercedes them both:

There exists two Principles in this world: *kshara* (the perishable) and *akshara* (the imperishable). The imperishable is the Unchanging, the Eternal. But the highest Reality is something else; It is called *Paramatman* (the supreme Self). It is *both* the Eternal *and* that which pervades and sustains all this universe.²⁷

When one experiences the mystical vision of Unity, he experiences not merely *Prakrti*, the undifferentiated world-energy, nor merely *Purusha*, the unmanifested Absolute; he experiences the one Reality, which is both of these at once. It is called *Paramatman*, "the supreme Self." Here is seen no distinction between *Prakrti* and *Purusha*, the perishable and the imperishable; the ONE contains no such division. By transcending *Prakrti*, one realizes the eternal *Purusha*, but in that realization, *Prakrti* and *Purusha* no longer have any separate, independent, existence. They are one.

This great Unity cannot be easily explained; that is why It must be experienced to be known. It is eternal and unchanging, yet It appears as the phenomenal world of change. It is only as a means of explaining Its two aspects that the names, *Prakrti* and *Purusha*, are invented. In fact, the Creative Energy, of which this body and all this universe is composed, is just as imperishable and eternal as the one Consciousness which supports it. They are the same; and in this one Imperishable, there is no differentiation between Energy and Consciousness, *Prakrti* and *Purusha*.

Nothing at all ever perishes—except the images and forms, which *Prakrti* constructs of herself. And because we identify with the perishable body-form, we make a distinction between the perishable body and the "spirit" within us; we regard this body as the vessel or abode of the "spirit." But when the realization of the ONE dawns, then one looks about in awe, declaring, "O my God, even this body is Thine own!" And then one asks, "Which the Imperishable, which the abode?"

Because I am beyond the perishable, and even beyond the imperishable, in this world and in the Vedas, I am known as 'the Supreme.' One who, with a clear vision, sees Me as "the Supreme," knows all there is to be known; his soul is merged in Me. I have revealed to you the most secret teaching, Arjuna. He who has realized it has realized the Truth, and his task in his world is done.²

To one who knows his own supreme Self, there is no longer a witnessing subject and an acting object, no longer a *Purusha* and a *Prakrti*. All his actions are the actions of the ONE. He can no longer say, "He guides me," or "He does everything through me." His breathing is God's, his work is God's; there are no longer two. "He is the only ONE in all, but it seems as if He were many." ²⁹

In the Eighteenth and last chapter, Krishna reiterates and sums up all that he has taught to Arjuna, with a special emphasis on the nature, necessity, and goal of all man's works. It is a message of relevance to every man, but most especially to those who would learn the secret of spiritual harmony and happiness in this world. It is the message of *svadharma*.

Dharma is, of course, translated as "duty," but *svadharma* is not simply the duty to perform works in the world, but the necessity of performing one's own special God-given duty. It is not often easy to know exactly what one's *svadharma* is. Is it simply to work at that occupation which brings the greatest material gain? No. Nor is it simply the serving of others. Rather, it is the serving of God, the Self, who is the indwelling, guiding, joy of man. No matter what a man might do in this world, no matter how respectable or charitable or unselfish, if it is not his *svadharma*, he will be miserable; he will feel frustrated, unfulfilled and dissatisfied. This is especially true for the sincere aspirant to Truth, for he will feel most keenly the disharmony between his spirit and his actions.

Oftentimes, however, there are great obstacles, great temptations, in the way of performing one's *svadharma*. Those whose *svadharma* is to do the work of God know this well. The necessities of the body, the pressures of society, and the loneliness and effort involved in following our *svadharma* are often troublesome obstacles to the following of our God-ordained path. Who cannot imagine how difficult was the path ordained for a Jesus or a Buddha, or for the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*? To follow their *svadharma* required great sacrifice and surrender of all that men regard as good and wholesome in this world. Yet it is to the great benefit of the world that they chose to surrender all else in order to perform their *svadharma*. For them, having known their eternal Identity, there was no other course but to share that knowledge with all humanity. No other duty could possibly hold sway over them. Had they denied or suppressed their *svadharma*, how miserable, how wretched a life would they have had—even if they had been surrounded with all luxuries and wealth!

It is by this a spiritual man knows his *svadharma*; if his soul is happy and delighted in its performance, and if the very thought of diverting from that path makes him sick at heart and despondent, he may be sure that it is his *svadharma*.

It is not right to leave undone the holy work which ought to be done. Such a surrender of action is a delusion of darkness. And if a man abandons his *svadharma* out of fear of pain, truly, he has no reward. ³⁰

The reward of performing the work appropriate to one's own *svadharma* is the peace and joy of God. By renouncing all other concerns but the performance of the work God has ordained for you, you will feel and know His confirmation within you.

A man attains perfection when his work is worship of God, from whom all things come and who exists within everyone. Greater is your own work, even if it is meager, than the work of another, even if it is great. When a man does the work that God gives him, no sin can touch him. And a man should not abandon his work, even if he cannot achieve it in full perfection; because in all work there is some imperfection, as in all fire there is some smoke. ³¹ ...It is better to perish in your own work, than to flourish in another's. ³²

In earlier chapters, Krishna has already taught Arjuna the way that a man should work:

Set your heart upon your work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward; but never cease to do your work. ³³ ...When a man surrenders all desires that come to the heart, and by the grace of God finds the joy of God in himself, then his soul has indeed found peace. ³⁴

The man who has found the joy of the Spirit and in the Spirit has his satisfaction and his peace, that man is beyond the law of karma (actions and rewards). He is beyond what is done and not done. He is beyond the world of mortal beings. In freedom from the bonds of attachment, do, therefore, the work to be done; for the man whose work is pure attains indeed the Supreme. ³⁵

Therefore, offer to Me all your works and rest your mind on the Supreme. Be free from vain hopes and selfish thoughts, and with inner peace fight your fight. ³⁶

The *Bhagavad Gita* has stood the test of time and is so beloved among men of all nations because its author was steeped in wisdom, a wisdom that is applicable to the seekers of God, the lovers of Truth, at every level of understanding. The devotee finds in it the summit of devotion; the intelligent find in it the heights of wisdom; the servant of God finds in it the supreme path to victory; and in it the yogi reads the secrets of inner union.

Whoever the great sage was who wrote it, he was a man of truly universal and all-embracing wisdom. He had attained both the height and breadth of Self-knowledge; he knew the supreme Reality, both at Its Source and in Its manifestation. And his guidance, the sharing of his knowledge in the *Bhagavad Gita*, is now and for all time a source of life and joy for all who have the good fortune to read it. When a book is truly inspired and filled by the grace of God, it shines so brightly into the hearts and minds of men that it becomes universally revered as a holy receptacle of God's word. Such a book is the *Bhagavad Gita*, "the Song of God"; it is a never-failing wellspring of the water of life for all thirsty travelers on the road to Truth.

NOTES:

1. *Bhagavad Gita*, 1:47; based on the translation of Juan Mascaro; Mascaro, Juan, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1962.
2. *Ibid.*, 2:18
3. *Ibid.*, 2:53
4. *Ibid.*, 3:27-28
5. *Ibid.*, 4:11
6. *Ibid.*, 5:20-21
7. *Ibid.*, 5:24
8. *Ibid.*, 6:18-21
9. *Ibid.*, 6:23-27
10. *Ibid.*, 7:9-11
11. *Ibid.*, 7:12-14
12. *Ibid.*, 7:25
13. *Ibid.*, 7:18-19

14. *Ibid.*, 8:18
15. *Ibid.*, 8:20
16. *Ibid.*, 8:21-22
17. *Ibid.*, 9:7-15
18. *Ibid.*, 10:8-10
19. *Ibid.*, 9:34
20. *Ibid.*, 11:12-13
21. *Ibid.*, 11:15
22. *Ibid.*, 11:54-55
23. *Ibid.*, 13:20-23
24. *Ibid.*, 13:26
25. *Ibid.*, 13:27-34
26. *Ibid.*, 14:4
27. *Ibid.*, 15:16-17
28. *Ibid.*, 15:18-20
29. *Ibid.*, 13:16
30. *Ibid.*, 18:7-8
31. *Ibid.*, 18:46-48
32. *Ibid.*, 3:35
33. *Ibid.*, 2:47
34. *Ibid.*, 2:55
35. *Ibid.*, 3:17-19
36. *Ibid.*, 3:30

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VI. Tantra

The word, “Tantra,” appears as early as the 4th century B.C.E., in a work called the *Apastamba-Srauta Sutra*, where it is used to signify any ritual procedure containing a number of aspects. Kautilya, in the 3rd century B.C.E., used the word in the sense of ‘fundamental canons of a system of thought.’ But by the early centuries of the Current Era, the word, *Tantra*, had come to be associated with a distinct metaphysical view complete with its own unique terminology. It is a metaphysic based on mystical experience, and is essentially identical to the viewpoint of Vedanta, Samkhya and Yoga. It is, indeed, yet another expression of the age-old and perennial vision of a primal and essential Unity self-divided into Male and Female principles.

Since the earliest utterings of man, the primal Unity, experienced by the mystic, has been characterized as dual-faceted; one aspect being transcendent, the other immanent as the world; one absolute, the other relative; one eternally unchanged, the other a panoply of movement. And since earliest times these two aspects have been designated as Male and Female: The Absolute, the supreme Consciousness, is the Father, the male sovereign and Lord; His creative Energy, which gives birth to the universe, is the Mother-power, the bountiful Goddess, queen Maya. Put in less figurative terms, the constant Awareness, which is realized in the experience of Unity to be the one eternal and indivisible Reality, is also realized to be the very One who projects His own living light in the form of the universe. That light is not separate from Himself, nor does it, in fact, go out from Him; but in order to speak of it at all, it is necessary to differentiate it from the constant Awareness, the unchanging Absolute. Thus, the primal Awareness is spoken of as “He”; and the light that forms the mutable world is called “She.” But they are never two. He is the universal Mind; She is His Thought. He is the Speaker; She is the Word. He is the Seed; She is the Tree. They are complementary aspects of one indivisible Reality.

It is not very difficult to see how these two purely abstract principles came to be represented by artists and poets since primitive times as two independent objects of worship, humanized according to the characteristics described by the sages. “He” was the remote, unapproachable, Absolute, and was therefore portrayed by the Dravidian peoples of ancient India as a totally indrawn ascetic, a naked yogi, seated in perpetual contemplation of eternity atop the icy peaks of Mount Kailas. He sat on the ground with his

long, untended hair piled on his head, a cobra draped 'round his neck, and his face and body covered with the ashes of the world, which, in his own mind, he had reduced to nothing. In his hands he held a trident and a conch; his mount was the great white bull, Nandi; and his symbol was the phallus-shaped stone, called the *lingam*. Such an hyposticized representation of the absolute Being has existed in India since the most ancient of times, long before the Aryan invasion; and over the centuries, "He" has been called by many different names. In Vedic times, he was referred to as *Pashupati* ("Lord of *pashus*, or sentient creatures); when associated with the angry and destructive forces of nature, he was *Rudra*. One of Rudra's epithets was *Shiva*, meaning "auspicious" (even today, in India, a great rainstorm is considered "auspicious"); and eventually, *Shiva* came to be the name for God most prominently used among the Dravidian peoples. Frequently, Shiva, himself, is referred to by such epithets as *Mahadev*, "the great God," or *Maheshvar*, "great Lord."

Simultaneous with the early development of this God-symbol among the rural populace consisting mostly of the aboriginal races of India, was the similarly symbolic representation of the one God among the Aryan population as *Vishnu*. Vishnu, one of the names for God appearing in the Vedas, was pictured as a golden-robed sovereign who lived in splendor in the heavenly realm of Vaikuntha. It was he who became incarnated as Krishna, the cow-herd boy who later became the great king and sage of Dwarka in the *Bhagavad Gita*, and also as Rama, the brave warrior-king of the epic, *Ramayana*. Shiva and Vishnu, though obviously dissimilar in characteristics, are both symbols of the one Godhead. Shiva represents the qualities of eternity, detachment, immovability; while Vishnu stands as a symbol of the power, glory and sovereignty of the one all-governing Lord. From both the predominantly Dravidian Shaivites and the predominantly Aryan Vaishnavites, a vast body of mythology arose around both these symbols as their ritual worship spread throughout the land of India, and as many temples and statues (*murtis*) were built commemorating one or the other of these two representations of God. But, of course, the poets and artists had not forgotten the Female aspect of Reality.

The *shakti*, or manifestory-power of God, was symbolized as the female counterpart to the male deity. The consort of Shiva, his *shakti*, was *Sati* (feminine form of *Sat*, or "Truth"), the beautiful nymph-like daughter of king Daksha, whose seductive charms moved Shiva to awake from his profound contemplative state. In yet another mythological representation,

She was called *Parvati*. As the hypostacized and deified Power of Shiva, She was also called *Durga*, *Kali*, or *Ambika*. She too was represented by statues and worshipped in temples devoted to her alone. She was usually depicted as many-armed, displaying both her beneficent and her destructive aspects, holding out one hand in a gesture of gentleness and compassion, while in another she wielded a sword. She was garlanded with skulls, and daubed with blood, as she rode forth astride a ferocious lion or tiger.

For those who preferred the Vishnu-personification of God, the Female principle was the goddess, *Lakshmi*, also known as *Shri*. She was the source of all wealth and good fortune. She was the jewel-bedecked Mother who granted to her children whatever boons they asked of her. It was she who took the form of Radha, the paramour of Krishna; and Sita, the faithful wife of Rama. While the female counterpart to Shiva was associated more prevalently with the angry, destructive, aspects of nature, and was pictured as a bloodthirsty she-demon, Vishnu's consort was the compassionate and gracious bestower of gifts and was pictured as the epitome of feminine beauty and grace.

Between the 1st and 5th centuries of the Current Era a vast body of mythological literature was written about these two pairs of gods. Hundreds of stories were written to describe their lives and exploits, and, mingled with these stories were the philosophical explanations of the abstract principles, which they represented. These philosophical mythologies were all the rage, as they reached to the non-intellectual populace in a way that purely didactic treatises could not. They were called by the generic name of *Puranas*; there was the *Vishnu Purana*, the *Shiva Purana*, the *Shakti Purana*, the *Bhagavat Purana* (which told the legends of Krishna), a *Skanda Purana*, and many, many others.

By this time and probably long before, there were large, magnificent temples dedicated to Shiva all over the country. Some of the grandest were the Badrikashrama and Somnath temples in the north, Vishvanath temple at Benares, Nakulishvar temple at Calcutta and Rameshvaram temple in the south. Great yogis of the time, such as the illustrious Gorakshanath and Manikka-vachakar, sang the praises of Shiva, and imitated Him in their outer appearance and appurtenances. Temples and *murtis* dedicated to Vishnu in the form of Rama and Krishna also dotted the country in every town and city. The spread of the Puranic legends aroused devotion to one or another of these "gods" in the hearts of the simple populace, and every facet of their

lives became permeated with devotion to these legendary beings, who represented, of course, the one Divinity.

Shakti, too, had her own temples, and her own worshippers. According to Farquhar, the medieval historian, the period ranging from 500 to 900 C.E. was called “the Shakta period,” a time in which Shakti worship became widely prevalent throughout India. But even as early as the 2nd century it is apparent that She was the object of a widespread cult. In the *Mahabharata* (2nd-3rd century C.E.), She is described as Durga, and prayers are offered to Her. And in the *Markandeya Purana*, compiled during the Gupta period (ca. 4th century), Mahadevi, the great Goddess, is treated quite extensively in one complete book of thirteen chapters, called the *Devi Mahatmyam* (“Praise of the Goddess”). There She is described as identical with Purusha’s Prakrti, Vishnu’s Maya, and Shiva’s Shakti. She is also referred to as *Chiti*; i.e., pure Consciousness, a manifested aspect of the Absolute. The *Devi Bhagavata Purana* is entirely devoted to Her; there She is referred to as *Mahashakti*, *Mahalakshmi*, *Mahakali*, and *Mahamaya*.

The great Goddess also appears in the *Agni Purana*, *Bhagavat Purana*, *Vishnu Purana*, and others of this genre. In the 8th and 9th centuries, lesser Puranas were written in sole dedication to the Goddess; these were the so-called *Upa-Puranas*: the *Devi Purana*, *Kalika Purana*, and *Mahabhagavata Purana*. Here, as a representative sample, is how She is described in the *Vishnu Purana*:

“Shri [epithet of Lakshmi], the bride of Vishnu, the mother of the world, is eternal, imperishable. As He is all pervading, so also is She.... Vishnu is the meaning, She is speech (*Vac*). Vishnu is consciousness; She is intellect. He is Goodness; She is devotion. He is the Creator; She is the creation. Shri is the earth; Hari (Vishnu) is the substratum. The God is utter stillness; She is surrender.

“...Lakshmi is the light; and Hari, who is the All and the Lord of all, is the lamp. She, the mother of the world, is the creeping vine; and Vishnu, the tree around which She clings. ... He, the bestower of blessings, is the bridegroom; the lotus-throned Goddess is the bride. ...Govinda (Vishnu) is love; and Lakshmi, his gentle spouse, is [the] pleasure [of love]. But why go on listing the ways in which they are present? It is enough to say, in a word, that of gods, animals and men, Hari is all that is

called male; Lakshmi is all that is termed female. There is nothing other than these two.”¹

It was by such figurative language that the mystic’s profound vision of a unitive duality was conveyed to the populace. In art, the one self-divided Reality was sometimes portrayed as a god and goddess locked in a passionate embrace. In some medieval sculptures, Shiva is portrayed as a corpse (dead to the world), with Shakti, in the dreadful form of Kali, sitting on him in an act of sexual union, or dancing in abandon on his outstretched body. What the Chinese symbolized in the Yin-Yang circle, which is both divided and undivided, the Indians preferred to represent as male and female joined in a loving union. Some of the most beautiful and erotic representations of this union were sculpted by the Buddhists in the 9th century and are in evidence to this day in the caves of Orissa and at Khajuraho. Many Tibetan figurines of the same period, which are called *Yab-Yum* (Father-Mother), also represent in erotic copulative poses these two principles of the one Reality. The inseparability of these two is expressed in the statues of Shiva as *Ardhanarishvara*, a being who is half male, half female. The predominant pictographic symbol of this duality-in-unity, however, has been since pre-Aryan times, the *lingam* in the *yoni*, a symbol found in almost every Indian temple, comprised of a stone phallus symbol accompanied by a base in the form of the female sex organ. The two together form a recognizable symbol of the complementarity of the two inseparable aspects of the One.

We are now ready, after this long preamble, to understand the expansive development of Tantra during this same period. Tantra is the yoga of the union of Shiva and Shakti. Of course, they are already one, but in order to *experience* this unity, certain practices are prescribed whereby the illusory and separative ego is dispelled and the awareness of the eternal unity dawns within. Where the Upanishadic philosophy leaves off, spiritual practice, or *sadhana*, begins; and it is this *sadhana*, which is the province of the Tantric scriptures.

From the earliest times, the Tantric *sadhana* has coexisted with the Vedantic philosophy in the mainstream of Indian spiritual teaching. But only around the 5th or 6th centuries did it become disseminated in literary form; thereafter, the principles of Tantra are to be found in nearly every subsequent piece of spiritual literature, and in the teachings of India’s saints and sages. If the Vedanta represents the exoteric teaching, the Tantra represents the esoteric

teaching; it is the guide to the culmination of the spiritual journey begun with the comprehension of nondualistic philosophy.

Some of the earliest of the literary expressions of Tantra were the *Apabhramsa dohas* and the *Charyagitis* of the Siddhas, and the Yogic texts of the Nathas, such as that of Gorakshanath. In Kashmir, a number of Tantric writings appeared in the 7th and 8th centuries, which are called *Agamas*, regarded by their proponents as divinely inspired scriptures. As they extol the Absolute by the name of Shiva, they are also known as *Shaivagamas*. They contain the precepts of what is now known as Kashmir Shaivism. Among these scriptural writings are the *Shiva-sutras* of Vasugupta, the *Shiva-drshhti* of Somananda, the *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta, and the *Pratyabijna-hridayam* of Kshemaraj. Immensely popular, these Tantric texts were immediately copied both in Sanskrit and in the regional Dravidian languages such as Telugu, Tamil, and Kanarese.

By the 8th century, Tantrism was widely taught by Brahmin and Buddhist teachers alike. In 747 C.E., Padma Shambhava, a professor at the Buddhist university of Nalanda, took the Tantric philosophy to Tibet where he founded his monastery; and around the same time a Mahayana Buddhist in Bengal was publishing his *Hevajira Tantra*. Shankaracharya, the great exponent of *advaita* (Nondualistic) Vedanta, is also said to have written at least two Tantric works, the *Sundaryalahari*, and the *Prapanchasara*. In the 10th century, while a Shaivite yogi was writing his Tantric works, the *Kalika Purana* and the *Rudrayamala*, a Jain monk of Aysore was writing his *Jvalini Tantra*. Today, the treatises on Tantra by the representatives of various religious sects are too numerous to mention.

While Tantra is primarily a *sadhana*, that is to say, a prescribed system of practice, nonetheless, in order to understand the reasoning behind the *sadhana*, it is necessary to understand not only Tantra's metaphysics, but its conception of the psychophysical nature of the human body as well. It is the teaching of Tantric yoga that the Shakti, which is the universal creative force manifesting as all sentient and insentient beings, is the projected "Power" or "Will" of Shiva, the pure Absolute:

"He knows the true Reality who sees the entire universe as the play of the supreme Shakti of supreme Shiva ²

"...Throughout all these forms, it is the Lord alone; He illumines His own nature. In truth, there is no other cause of all

manifestation except His Will (Shakti), which gives existence to all worldly enjoyment and liberation as well. ³

“...In truth, there is no difference between Uma (Shakti) and Shankara (Shiva); the One consists of two aspects; of this there is no doubt.” ⁴

Such statements reveal that the Tantric metaphysic is identical to the Vedantic view and to that of all its mystically inspired predecessors. What is unique in Tantrism, and what constitutes its most significant contribution to mystical thought is its conception of man’s subtle psychophysical nature. Like all mystical philosophies, Tantra recognizes that man’s essential being is identical with the ultimate Being, i.e., Shiva. But, according to the Tantric scriptures, man remains ignorant of his Godhood and identified with the body and mind, so long as the Shakti residing in him remains unawakened and unevolved.

According to the Tantric scriptures, Shakti exists in man in an involuted state, whose purpose it is to evolve toward the realization of its identity with Shiva. This Shakti resides in man in a concentrated state in the subtle body, at a location corresponding to the perineum (shown in diagrams as being at the base of the spine). To differentiate this involuted Shakti-within-man from the all-inclusive Shakti, it is called *Kundalini-Shakti* (“the coiled energy”). This *Kundalini* energy can be compared to a watch-spring which is involuted to a state of potential release, and which, according to its own timing, acts as the evolutionary force which eventually brings all mankind to a complete expansion of consciousness. When, however, it is activated (awakened), by any of several methods, it becomes quickened, rapidly increasing its activity, and leads a person to enlightenment within one lifetime.

The Tantric seers say that the subtle body is composed of a complex network of subtle nerve-filaments (*nadis*) through which the life force, called *Prana-Shakti*, flows. This *Prana-Shakti* (called *Chi* by the Taoists of ancient China) is the current, as it were, which operates to enliven the body and mind and to regulate the functions of the internal organs. When the involuted *Kundalini Shakti* is aroused, it infuses the *Prana* current with a newly intensified potency, by which the evolutionary process is greatly accelerated.

The *Prana-Shakti* normally flows evenly through two main *nadis*, which parallel either side of the spinal column; these are called *Ida* (on one’s left)

and *Pingala* (on one's right). But when the *Kundalini-Shakti* is activated, this current finds its way through a subtle middle passage, called the *Sushumna*. Within this central *nadi*, through which the activated *Prana* current flows, there are six ascending nerve-plexuses, called *chakras* ("wheels"). It is the purpose of the awakened *Kundalini* energy to cleanse and purify the *nadis*, which in unregenerate man, are clogged and constricted by immoderate living, and to pass through each of the *chakras* as it ascends from the base of the spinal column to the crown of the head. Its final goal is the seventh nerve-plexus at the top of the head, called *Sahasrar* (the thousand-petalled lotus), where *Kundalini-Shakti* is said to attain its union with Shiva. When this occurs, a person experiences the Absolute, the Godhead:

"As long as the *prana* does not flow in the *Sushumna* and enter the *Sahasrar*, ...as long as the mind does not become absorbed in the Self, so long those who talk of spiritual knowledge indulge only in boastful and false prattle. ⁵

"...The rush of bliss that ensues upon the meeting of the Pair, the supreme *Shakti* and the Self above, is the real joining; all other joinings are mere copulation." ⁶

The *Kundalini-Shakti* is ordinarily in a dormant, regulated-function state; only when it becomes awakened, or activated, does it begin its accelerated work. This awakening is said to be achieved by several different methods: the *Kundalini* may be forcefully awakened through the regimen of postures (*asanas*) and breathing techniques (*pranayama*) prescribed by *Hatha-Yoga*; through intense devotion to God; through concentration of the mind upon the inner Self; through the practice of chanting or reciting the *mantram* given by a qualified Master (*Sadguru*); or simply by coming in contact with and receiving the graces of one who has already accomplished the full ascendancy of the *Kundalini-Shakti*. Such a person, who is in the state of enlightenment and capable of transmitting *Kundalini-Shakti* from his own accumulated fund, is called the *Guru*; and the transmission of his grace in the form of *Shakti* is called *Shaktipat*. According to the Tantric *shastras*, or scriptures, such a *Guru* is able to thus awaken the dormant *Kundalini* of those he deems prepared for it, by a mere glance, a word, a touch, or simply by his very thought or will. Such an "initiation" by the *Guru* is regarded as synonymous with receiving the grace of God:

“The learned men of all times always hold that the descent of grace does not have any cause or condition but depends entirely on the free will of the Lord. ⁷

“...From his transcendent station, the Lord in the form of the Guru frees one from all bondage. ⁸

“...The Guru is the means [to enlightenment]. ⁹

“... Initiation [by the Guru] is the first ladder to the terrace of Liberation. ¹⁰...The touch of the hand of the Guru destroys the impurities of the world and converts the base metal [of the disciple] into gold.” ¹¹

When the *Kundalini-Shakti* is thus awakened, certain initial symptoms occur. They are evidenced physically, mentally, and emotionally. Physical symptoms include increased internal body heat, involuntary shaking of the spine and limbs (*kriyas*), and the spontaneous occurrence of *asanas* and vocal productions. Physical pain may be experienced at the base of the spine, or one may experience alternating heaviness and lightness of the body, or a stimulation of the sexual glands, or merely a great increase in vitality. One may also have the sensation of a darting, or crawling, energy rising up the spine, or experience the movement of the activated *Prana-Shakti* moving about in various parts of the body.

It is said that when a person’s Shakti is operating in the lower three *chakras* — *Muladhar*, *Svadhithana*, and *Manipura* (corresponding to the coccyx, the sex organ and the navel) — sleep, sex, and food are one’s main concerns. But when the *Kundalini-Shakti* reaches the heart-center, the *Anahat chakra*, one begins to feel intense devotion and longing for God. As the *Kundalini-Shakti* rises higher to the throat region, the *Vishuddha chakra*, then one begins to hear different inner sounds and taste inner nectars; and at the forehead, the *Ajna chakra*, one sees delightful lights and visions. When the Shakti reaches the crown of the head, the *Sahasrar*, the individual consciousness merges into super-consciousness, and the aspirant reaches *samadhi*, the pure awareness of the transcendent Self:

“From the element earth in the Muladhara,
To the element fire in the Svadhithana,
To the element water in the Manipura,
To the element air in the Anahata,
To the element ether in the Vishuddha,

To the element of mind in the Ajna,
 You travel, O Mother, to keep your secret rendezvous
 With your Lord in the thousand-petalled lotus, Sahasrar.”¹²

“...When the bliss of Consciousness is attained, there is the lasting acquisition of that state in which Consciousness is one’s only Self, and in which all that appears is identical with Consciousness. Even the body is experienced as identical with Consciousness.”¹³

“...Awareness of the perceiver and the perceived is common to all beings. But with Self-realized yogis it is different; they are aware of them as one.”¹⁴

Thus, the whole purpose of the Tantra scriptures is to elucidate the means whereby one may experience the union of Shakti and Shiva, and thus know the transcendent Unity in *samadhi*. This Tantric *sadhana* takes many forms, from the ritualized worship of Shiva and Shakti (with flowers and fruit offerings, etc.) to austere yogic practices, to the actual sexual union of male and female practitioners in the symbolic enactment of the transcendent union of the God and Goddess. This last, however, is a degenerate form of Tantra, known by the name of *Vamachara*, or “left-hand path,” to distinguish it from the “right” (*Dakshina*) or pure Tantric path. It was just this degenerate form of Tantra which led Kumarila, in the 6th century C.E., to write that Tantra was “only for the degraded, the uneducated, the fallen, and the infirm, and is fraught with much danger.” The “pure” form of Tantric *sadhana* aims at transforming the individual through a harnessing of his inherent energy (*shakti*), and by a concentrated confinement of that energy within, forcing it to rise Godward. It is the focusing of this psychic energy, which is the entire purpose of Tantric *sadhana*; and the goal of this *sadhana* is Self-realization.

In the Tantric, as well as the Vedantic, view, Self-realization is synonymous with Liberation. “Liberation,” said the Shaivite sage, Abhinavagupta, “is nothing else but the awareness of one’s own true nature.” He was stating in effect what Jesus of Nazareth had said many centuries previous: “You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free.” Always we are Consciousness. That is our continually undeviating Reality. We are the Witness of the play of our own Shakti, which is forming this entire universe. It is the *knowing* of this, the direct realization of the Self, which constitutes

the soul's liberation. For the Self, of course, there is no liberation; the Self is always free. It has never been bound. It is only our "illusory" self, our limited soul-identity that experiences bondage and liberation:

"Though in reality there is no bondage, the individual is in bondage as long as there exists the feeling of limitation in him. ...In fact, there never has been any veiling or covering anywhere in reality. No one has ever been in bondage. Please show me where such bondage exists. Besides these two false beliefs, that there is such a thing as bondage and such a thing as an individual mind, there is no bondage for anyone anywhere." ¹⁵

"...The individual soul (*jiva*) is Shiva; Shiva is *jiva*. When in bondage, it is *jiva*; freed from bondage, it is Shiva." ¹⁶

"...The knowledge of the identity between the *jiva* and Shiva constitutes liberation; lack of this knowledge constitutes bondage." ¹⁷

The eternal Self is always free; yet so long as we are unaware of that freedom, we are bound. Liberation is therefore a state of awareness. So long as we are aware of the ever-free Self, we are entirely unconditioned by external circumstances or states of the mind. For, one who has realized that Self possesses a certainty, a permanent underlying confidence, that can never be erased, and which allows him to retain an inner peace and joyfulness regardless of circumstances of destiny or the transient fluctuations of the mind:

"The yogi who knows that the entire splendor of the universe is his, who rises to the consciousness of unity with the universe, retains his Divinity even in the midst of various thoughts and fancies. ¹⁸ ...This entire universe is a sport of Consciousness.

"One who is constantly aware of this is certainly a liberated being (*jivanmukta*). ¹⁹ ...The individual who has the cognition of identity, who regards the universe to be a sport and is always united with it, is undoubtedly liberated in life." ²⁰

Such "liberation" is the ultimate goal of all knowledge-seeking. It is the inner freedom which all men seek, a freedom from doubt, from the barbs of worldly misfortune, from the deadly sting of sorrow to which all those ignorant of their true nature must be subject. For one who has attained this liberating knowledge of his eternal Self, neither bodily affliction, nor worldly circumstance, nor even death has the power to afflict him with fear;

he is fearless, (*abhaya*), for he is grounded and established in the unshakeable certainty of his permanent immortality and incorruptible bliss.

NOTES:

1. Vishnu Purana, I.8
2. Spanda karika
3. Paramartha-sara
4. Linga Purana
5. Hatha Yoga Pradipika
6. Kularnava Tantra, 5.111-112
7. Malini Vijaya Vartika
8. Kularnava Tantra, 12.25
9. Vasugupta, *Shiva Sutras*, 2.6
10. Paramananda Tantra
11. Jnanarnava Tantra, 24.41
12. Shankara, Sundaryalahari
13. Kshemaraj, Pratyabijnahridayam
14. Vijnanabhairava
15. Tripurarahasya
16. Kularnava Tantra, 9.42
17. Ishvarapratyabijna Vimarshini
18. Ishvarapratyabijna, 11-12
19. Spandakarika, 3:3
20. Kshemaraj, Pratyabijnahridayam

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VII. Dadu

In India, during the 16th century, there lived many great illumined saints. We have already mentioned Kabir and Nanak; there was also Chaitanya (1485-1533), the love-intoxicated *bhakta* of Bengal; Vallabha (1479-1531), the great mystic-philosopher and *acharya*; and Eknath (1548-1609), the gentle Maharashtran mystic and poet. But there was one who is especially worthy of inclusion in our story for the simple clarity of his vision and the universality of his message: his name was Dadu. Like Kabir and Nanak, he stood quite alone between the quarrelling factions of Hinduism and Islam and proclaimed the unity of all men in God and the universality of the message of all who have known Him. "Ask of those who have attained God," he said; "all speak the same word. All the saints are of one mind; it is only those in the midst of the way who follow diverse paths. All the enlightened have left one message; ...It is only those in the midst of their journey who hold diverse opinions." ¹

Dadu (1544-1603), whose name is an affectionate diminutive of the common Muslim name, Allahdad, was born at Ahmedabad, on the banks of the Saraswati river, to a Muslim merchant named Lodi Ram and his wife, Basri. From his early youth, Dadu was gifted with a curious intellect and a love of learning. It is said that, at the age of eleven, he received the blessing of a wandering holy man, and from that time began to take interest in the knowledge of God.

At the age of eighteen, he left his home to live the religious life of prayer and meditation. He wandered from city to city between the regions of Gujerat and Rajputana as a mendicant, until, sometime around the age of twenty-five, he took up his abode in the town of Sambhar, on the shores of the Salt Lake, in the Moghul province of Ajmer. There, he came into contact with a number of spiritual teachers and came under the tutelage of one called Shaikh Buddhan; but he was to claim no lineage from any tradition save the one common tradition of all mystics, and no teacher save the one interior Teacher common to all.

It was at Sambhar that Dadu became married and fathered four children: two sons and two daughters. As a householder, he practiced the trade of a cotton-carder; yet the holiness and authority of his discourses among his friends quickly earned for him a reputation as a holy man, and he began to attract a following of devoted disciples. Like Kabir, whom he greatly admired, Dadu knew both the Muslim and Hindu mystical traditions, and

preferred not to be associated exclusively with either. He had experienced the One to whom both Muslims and Hindus aspire, and attempted, by his teachings, to reconcile them in understanding of their common pursuit. He had known God directly, and had seen, therefore, how foolish are those who squabble over their petty ideas of God, and their various modes of external worship and behavior:

“One says ‘Swami,’ one says ‘Shaikh’; neither grasps the mystery of this world. One speaks of ‘Rama’ and the other of ‘Allah,’ but they have not known either Rama or Allah! ...Says Dadu: I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. I follow none of the Six Systems [of philosophy]; I worship the Merciful. Dadu belongs to neither faction: he is the slave of Allah-Rama. He who is without form or limitation, He alone is my Guru.”²

Naturally, such words as these were offensive to the orthodox Muslim legalists; and soon Dadu became a controversial figure in Sambhar and found he had as many enemies as friends. A Muslim official, by the name of Buland Khan, assaulted Dadu, beat him, and had him jailed for his self-proclaimed infidelity to the doctrines of Islam. Shortly thereafter, Dadu decided to leave Sambhar. At the age of thirty-five, he moved to Amber, and was well-received there by the local Hindu ruler, Raja Bhagwan Das, and was supplied by him with a comfortable retreat on the shores of Lake Maota.

Bhagwan Das, while a Hindu, was brother to one of the wives of the Muslim emperor, Akbar; and was a commander of the royal armies. While at the emperor’s court one day, he had occasion to mention to the emperor the presence in his kingdom of Dadu; and Akbar, who was always eager to meet with the saintly of all religious persuasions, remarked that he would like to meet him. Soon thereafter, a meeting was arranged between Dadu and Akbar at the emperor’s palace at Sikri. To appreciate this historical meeting, it is necessary to know something about Akbar.

Padashah Akbar (d. 1605) was a descendent of the great conqueror, Babur (d. 1530). Babur, in whose veins flowed the blood of the Turkish ruler, Timur (the Tamerlane of English literature) and Genghis Khan, the Mongol, was succeeded by his son, Humayun, who was twenty-three when he ascended the throne as emperor of Hindustan. Humayun’s son, Akbar, then came into power in 1556, at the age of thirteen, after his father fell from his

library staircase and died as a result. Thereafter, Akbar proved himself a superior Commander-in-chief of the armies, and an indefatigable ruler of an ever-widening empire.

Akbar was an ambitious and ruthless warrior, and a crafty administrator, who accomplished the conquest and consolidation of nearly all of India under his rule; but he was also a man of unusual curiosity and tolerance concerning all religious traditions—a trait highly uncharacteristic of Muslim rulers of India up to that time. It is said that he had been influenced from his early youth by the teachings of the Sufis, and that he, himself, sought “to attain the ineffable bliss of direct contact with the Divine reality.”

In his eagerness to know as much as possible about the religious traditions of the various factions existing in his Empire, he met frequently with representatives of Sufism, Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. His interest was no doubt partly spiritual, partly intellectual, and partly political. In the naive hope of establishing a religious synthesis in which all religious ideals would be reconciled in one universal religion to be adopted throughout India, he built a universal “House of Worship,” and proclaimed his new religion, with himself as its titular and infallible head.

While this “new religion” was not to last beyond his own rule, it must be conceded that it had widespread beneficial effects throughout India, in establishing, at least, a temporary truce between the various warring religious factions. Though his attempt to form a universal religion, founded on Imperial decree rather than on direct spiritual experience, was naive and doomed to failure, it had the value of fostering a time of peace and tolerance between the Muslim and Hindu populations. It was, thus, under such tolerant and generous conditions, that Dadu was welcomed to the palace of Akbar in the Spring of 1584.

According to the account preserved by Dadu’s followers, when Dadu arrived at the palace, he was first met by the emperor’s representatives whose custom it was to interview those with whom Akbar was to meet. These representatives were Shaikh Abu-l Fazl and Raja Birbal. Abu-l Fazl, one of Akbar’s closest and most trusted advisors on religious matters, was himself a true Sufi. He greeted Dadu with these words: “We esteem you highly, O saintly Dadu, and desire to know more of your teaching. What God do you worship, and what is the manner of your worship?”

“The God we worship,” said Dadu, “is the Creator of all things. Our

teaching is to hold Him in constant remembrance. Our mode of worship is to subdue the senses and sing the praise of Rama. To be sure, God is other than His name; He can neither be uttered nor comprehended. But men, for their own purposes, have given Him various names. Beholding in Him some attribute, they have given Him the name of that attribute. He deals graciously, and they call Him *Dayal*, the Gracious; as Protector of His creatures, He is styled *Gopal*, the Cowherd; as dwelling within the heart, He is known as *Rama*; as showing mercy, He is *Rahim*, the Compassionate; as He who is beyond man's reach, He is called *Allah*; as unseen, He is known as *The Invisible*; as fashioner of all things, He is *Creator*; as transcending all limitation, He is the *Absolute*; as drawing men's hearts to Himself, He is *Mohan*, the Charmer; as pervading the universe, He is the *Omnipresent*. He accepts the homage of His true worshippers, and they witness His presence in the world.”³

Abu-l Fazl and Birbal were delighted with Dadu's conversation, and immediately made arrangements for him to see the emperor, Akbar. When, at last, Dadu was ushered into the royal presence, Akbar, after greeting him courteously, asked about his religious views, and Dadu explained to him the inner state of constant recollection of God. “But how,” Akbar asked, “is this inner state to be attained?” And Dadu replied, quoting a Persian verse:

“The soul, filled with passionate yearning, stands expectant at the door of vision; The surrendered heart dwells every moment in the Divine Presence, watchful, alert.”⁴

“First,” said Dadu, “a man must cease from the indulgence of the body, which binds him to the world. He must abandon all hope in the three worlds, and the Changeless One will surely reveal Himself.” They continued to talk of spiritual matters in this manner for some time, and, at the close of their interview, Akbar invited Dadu to return another time; but Dadu declined the invitation.

Nonetheless, before Dadu returned to Amber, Akbar sent for him to bid farewell, and Dadu went as bidden. “Tell me,” said Akbar, in this, their last meeting, “how one so enmeshed in the world's affairs as I am may find God. I am ready to love Him with every power of my being, and to school my heart in truth, if thus I may learn His secret.”

“Well spoken!” said Dadu; “Well spoken, indeed! That is the sum of all I have to say. May God keep you ever in this frame of mind.”

Akbar bowed his head. “Swami,” he said, “you have given, and I have received.”

With this, Dadu returned the emperor’s bow, and bestowed the blessing hitherto withheld: “I pray the indwelling God to keep you continually in His protection and favor.”⁵

That evening, everyone gathered together to sing religious hymns, and to honor Dadu before his departure. And in the morning Dadu returned to Amber, where he was congratulated by Bhagwan Das on the splendid impression he had made on the emperor. This little scenario of Dadu with the emperor Akbar is interesting as a look into the court life of the time, but even more so as a portrait of Dadu, who appears as natural and sincere in the emperor’s presence as on the dusty roads with his disciples. We see these same qualities in the many songs and utterances of Dadu, which were collected after his death. Dadu had set down in written form, at different times throughout his life, his thoughts, convictions, and experiences of God. Extending over a long period of time, they vary from prayers to spiritual directives, from yearning for God to proclamations of His unity. In all of these songs and utterances, one senses a real man, blunt and ordinary at times, but always totally honest with himself, and utterly impatient with phoniness and pretense.

Dadu’s songs remind us a good deal of those of Kabir or Nanak, but they have a quality of roughness and independence which is wholly his own. He was openly critical of all that smacked of “the business of religion,” and most especially of those who paraded as Gurus and accumulated disciples for their own aggrandizement, wealth and power. “The disciple is the cow,” said Dadu; “and the Guru is the milker of the cow. Great care does he take of his cow, and well he might, when he makes his living by him!”

Dadu, himself, was a true Guru, in the best sense of the word. He had attained the Highest, yet he never seemed to posture or lose sight of his own humble station before God. Some of his songs of yearning for the vision of God, for example, remind us of the tenderest of the Hebrew Psalms, or the writings of the Christian saint, Juan de la Cruz:

“Ah me! oft do I feel such pangs of separation from my
Beloved that I am like to die unless I see Him.
Maiden hearken to the tale of my agony; I am restless without
my Beloved.

“In my yearning desire for the Beloved I break into song day and night.

I pour out my woes like the nightingale.

Ah me! Who will bring me to my Beloved?

Who will show me His path and console my heart?

Dadu says: O Lord, let me see Thy face, even for a moment, and be blessed.”⁶

“He sits close at hand; he hears everything, yet He doesn’t answer me.

Dadu casts himself on Thee; take away this life of mine.

Everyone I see is happy; no one is in distress.

Yet sore distressed is thy servant Dadu, because I see Thee not face to face.

No one in all the world is in such deep distress as I;

I weep floods of tears in my longing to meet the Beloved.

I find Him not, neither can I find peace without Him.

Tell me, how can I continue to live?

“He who wounded me is the only one who can heal me.

Sighing for the vision, this lonely one lives apart.

Enduring the pangs of separation, Dadu awaits Thy coming, O Hari!

He who ardently yearns for the meeting, like a fish taken out of water,

He alone beholds Thy vision; he is joined to Thy Spirit.

This lonely one, separated from Rama, does not find Him.

Dadu writhes like a fish, till Thou hast mercy upon him.”⁷

Dadu continued to live in Amber for many years, teaching his disciples and writing his songs of love to his Lord. But, as at Sambhar, there were many of the orthodoxy, Hindu and Muslim alike, who resented his words, which they interpreted as critical of their beliefs. And so, after fourteen years in Amber, Dadu was forced to leave that city, and for nearly ten years thereafter, he moved from town to town and city to city with his close disciples, welcomed everywhere he went by both peasantry and royalty; until, at the city of Nairana, in the year 1603, in the company of his many beloved disciples and his two sons, he passed away.

The many songs and utterances (*Bani*), which Dadu left behind, comprise today the holy book of the Dadu-panthis. Here are just a few:

“Be done with self and worship Hari; cast off worldly desire in mind and body.

Cherish goodwill towards every living creature; this, says Dadu, is the sum of religion.

“He is the true saint who bears enmity to none;
 There is but one Spirit, and he has no enemy.
 I have made diligent quest: truly, there is no second.
 In every man is the one Spirit, whether he be Hindu or Muslim.
 Both brethren have alike hands and feet, both have ears.
 Both brethren have eyes, be they Hindus or Muslims.
 When you look in the mirror of ignorance, there appears to be two.
 When error is dispelled and ignorance vanishes, there is no ‘other.’
 To whom then will you bear enmity, when there is no other?
 He from whose Being all sprang, the same One dwells in all.
 In every man is the one Spirit; hold Him therefore in reverent respect.
 Recognize that Spirit in yourself and others; it is the
 manifestation of the Lord.
 Why give pain to any when the indwelling Rama is in every man?
 O revered Self, give peace and contentment,
 for there is none but Thee in all the three worlds.
 When the soul perceives the one Self, then are all souls brethren.
 Give your heart to Him who is the Creator of all.
 When a dog wanders into a palace of mirrors,
 it sees its own reflection everywhere and begins barking.
 See how the One has likewise become many, and angrily seeks
 to destroy itself.

“All souls are brother-souls, the offspring of one Womb.
 Consider this truth! Who, then, is the other, O foolish man?
 All came in one likeness; it was the Lord who sent them.
 They have all taken different names, and thus become separate.
 Worship the divine Self, and bear hatred toward none.
 In this worship you will find peace, in hatred only sorrow.”⁸

“Teach me, O Hari, to reverence Thy pure Name,
 that my heart may be glad in Thy worship.
 Make my heart to overflow with love, devotion, yearning, O
 Hari!

“Make me gentle in speech and humble of bearing, rejoicing in
 Thy presence, O Rama!
 Fill me with spiritual longing, detachment from the world, and
 a loving heart.
 May I steadfastly cherish the desire to remain ever devoted to Thy
 feet.
 Grant me quiet contentment and self-control,
 and keep my heart firmly directed toward Thee.
 O Ever-Present, awaken me to the sense of Thy constant presence.
 O Mohan, grant me knowledge, and the power of meditation,
 that my mind may continually turn to Thee.
 O Lord of the humble, grant that the Light of lights may
 illumine Dadu’s heart.”⁹

“While the mind is unstable, there can be no union.
 When the mind becomes stable, He will be found with ease.
 How can the mind remain firm without some resting place?
 It merely keeps wandering here and there.
 It will become stable only when you settle it on the
 remembrance of God.

“Where you hold fast to His Name with a steadfast mind—
 there, says Dadu, is Rama.
 Delight in the remembrance of Hari; then will the mind become
 steadfast.
 When it has tasted the fellowship of love, it will not move away
 a single step.
 When it is fixed on the One within, it finds no joy in other attractions.
 “Fixed firmly there, it does not wander anywhere else.
 Like a gull, perched on a boat’s mast in mid-ocean, the mind,
 After it has grown weary of flying here and there, has found its
 resting-place.

“Then only does my soul find peace and happiness, when my
 mind has become stable, steadfastly fixed on Rama.
 If only one could learn this secret!
 The pure mind is stable; its joy is in the name of Rama.
 In this way, you too shall find the vision of Him who is
 supreme and perfect Bliss.”¹⁰

“Wonderful is the Name; it holds the truth of the three worlds.
 Considering this, O heart, repeat it night and day.
 Wonderful is the Name; let the heart never forget Hari.
 Let His image dwell in the heart; cherish it with every breath.
 When you cherish Him with every breath, one day He will
 come to meet you.
 ... Abandon all other means of approach and devote yourself to
 the Name of Rama.”¹¹

“... The Creator has many and diverse names:
 Choose the name that comes to mind; thus, do all the saints
 practice remembrance.
 The Lord who endowed us with soul and body—worship Him
 in your heart.
 Worship Him by that name which best suits the moment.”¹²
 “Many great scholars there are, and brave imparters of wisdom.
 Religious garbs are endless. But rarely is one found who is
 wholly devoted to God’s service.
 ... If you can understand, I will speak: There is one ineffable Truth.
 Be done with the leaves and branches and go for the root.
 What does mere garb signify?

“Devising all manner of costumes, men array themselves [as
 devotees],
 Yet how few take the way of self-effacement and the worship of Hari!
 All the world are actors; rare is the real sadhu.
 ... There is but one Spirit; the Lord is in all.
 Therefore, let your union be with the Lord, not with a sect or
 mode of dress.

“Rosaries and sect-marks are of no avail; what have I to do with
 them?
 Within me is One who is mine; day and night I take His Name.
 All look to the outward appearance, and do not perceive what is
 within.
 The outward is what is shown to the world, but Rama reveals
 Himself within.
 Hari, the all-knowing Lord, accepts only what is of the heart.
 To Rama, the truth is dear, despite a thousand pretenses.

“Hari receives, not the word spoken by the lips, but the intent of the heart.

... True love is the most wondrous of signs.

the soul who aches for the vision of God is the true sadhu.”¹³

“Without a torturing thirst, how should one drink the bliss of communion with the Lord?

O God give me an aching desire to behold the vision of Thee!

Desire [for God] does not arise without the pain of separation.

How could love exist without this pain?

Without love all is false, try however hard you may.

The pain of separation is not born of words; desire [for God] is not born of words.

Love cannot be found through words. Let no one put his faith in them.”¹⁴

“Where Rama is, there I am not; where I am, there Rama is not.

This mansion is of delicate construction; there is no place for two.

While self remains, so long will there be a second.

When this selfhood is blotted out, then there is no other.

When I am not, there is but One; when I obtrude, then two.

When the veil of “I” is taken away, then does the One become as It was.”¹⁵

“Have done with pride and arrogance, conceit, envy, self-assertion.

Practice humility, and obedience; worship the Creator.

When a man has abandoned false pride, arrogance, and

vainglory, when he has become humble and meek, then does he find true bliss.

Prince and beggar alike must die; not one survives.

Him you should call “living” who has died and yet lives.

My enemy “I” is dead; now none can smite me down.

‘Tis I who have slain myself; thus, being dead, I live.

We have slain our enemy, we have died; but he is not forgotten.

The thorn remains to vex us. Consider and lay this truth to heart:

You will only find the Beloved when you are as the living dead.
 Only by losing yourself can you find Him who knows all.
 When you regard yourself as nothing, then you will find the Beloved.
 Recognize, therefore, by quiet reflection, from whence this
 thought of self arises.
 Becoming as the living dead, enter onto the path.
 First bow down your head, then may you venture to plant your
 foot [on this path].

“Know that the path of discipleship is exceedingly hard.
 The living dead walk it, with the Name of Rama as their guide.
 So difficult is the path, no living man may tread it.
 He only can walk it, O foolish man, who has died and lives.
 Only he who is dead can tread the path that leads to God.
 He finds the Beloved and leaps the fearsome gulf.
 He that is alive shall die; and only by dying inwardly shall he
 meet with the Lord.
 Forsaking His fellowship, who could endure when trouble comes?
 O when will this dominion of self pass away? When will the
 heart forget every ‘other’?
 When will it be made wholly pure? When will it find its true home?
 When I am not, then there is One; when I intrude, then two.
 When the curtain of ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ is drawn aside,
 then do I become as I was [in the Beginning].”¹⁶

“My enemy ‘I’ is now dead; now none can slay me.
 ‘Tis I who have slain myself; I have died, and yet live.
 While the thought of self remains, so long are there two.
 When this selfhood is destroyed, then there is no second.
 Then only will you find the Beloved, when ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are
 wholly lost.

“When ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are no more, then shall you find the pure vision.
 ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are a load upon the head; you die with the weight of it.
 By the grace of the Master, remove it and lay it down.
 In front of [the true] I, stands the [false] I; for this reason, He remains
 hidden.

“When this [false]selfhood passes away, the Beloved is revealed.

Hide yourself where no one can see you.
 See and show forth only the Beloved.
 Then you shall find eternal happiness.
 If there is no inward thought of self, but the mouth still utters
 the words, 'I' and 'Thou,'
 Let no one make this a matter of reproach; for it is in this way
 that they ['I' and 'Thou'] hold communion with one another.
 When others see that devotee who, having abandoned self, is
 wholly devoted to Rama,
 Then they too are led toward the Lord.”¹⁷

“Omniscient God, it is by Thy grace alone that I have been
 blessed with vision of Thee.
 Thou knowest all; what can I say?
 All-knowing God, I can conceal nothing from Thee.
 I have nothing that deserves Thy grace.
 No one can reach Thee by his own efforts; Thou showest
 Thyself by Thine own grace.
 How could I approach Thy presence?
 By what means could I gain Thy favor?
 And by what powers of mind or body could I attain to Thee?
 It hath pleased Thee in Thy mercy to take me under Thy wing.
 Thou alone art the Beginning and the End; Thou art the Creator
 of the three worlds.
 Dadu says: I am nothing and can do nothing.
 Truly, even a fool may reach Thee by Thy grace.”¹⁸

“Many have spoken and passed on, but the mystery remains
 unsolved.
 We too speak, but what more can we say?
 What do I know, what can I speak, concerning that almighty
 One?
 What knowledge have I of His manner of being?
 It utterly passes my comprehension.
 How many have spoken and passed on; even the wisest have
 spent their powers in vain.
 ...There, neither silence nor speech exists.
 No 'I' or 'Thou', no self or other, neither one nor two.

If I say “One,” there are two; if I say “two,” there is but One.
 The Magician who devised this play—go and enquire of Him.
 How He fashioned the many from the One, let the Master
 Himself make plain.”¹⁹

NOTES:

1. Bani 190, 191; Orr, W.G., *A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic*, London, Lutterworth Press, 1947; pp. 93-94. This article on Dadu is taken from my book, *History of Mysticism*, which contains many other articles on the world’s great mystics and their teachings. *History of Mysticism* may be downloaded as a free PDF document from the ‘Downloads’ page on my website: www.themysticsvision.com.
2. *Ibid.*; p. 62.
3. *Ibid.*; pp. 32-33.
4. *Ibid.*; p. 33.
5. *Ibid.*; p. 33-34.
6. Psalm 7, Pad 151; *Ibid.*; p. 66.
7. *Ibid.*; pp. 174-175.
8. *Ibid.*; pp. 191-192.
9. Psalm 181, *Ibid.*; p. 124.
10. *Ibid.*; pp. 170-171.
11. *Ibid.*; p. 141.
12. *Ibid.*; p. 140.
13. *Ibid.*; p. 103.
14. *Ibid.*; p. 168.
15. Parcha, *Ibid.*; p. 66.
16. Jiwat Mritak, *Ibid.*; pp. 105-106.
17. *Ibid.*; pp. 162-163.
18. *Ibid.*; p. 142.
19. Hairan, *Ibid.*; p. 101.

* * *

PART TWO BUDDHISM

I. The Buddha

In the 6th century B.C.E. the main center of Indian civilization was in the Ganges plain, or the ‘middle country,’ from what is now Delhi eastward to Bhagalpur. From June to September, during the monsoon season, a river that is only a couple hundred feet wide in the preceding hot season becomes two miles wide. The Ganges, having its source in the melting snows and glaciers of the Himalayas, never dwindles away; for that reason, the surrounding plain is always fertile. And during the cooler winter months, from October to January, the Spring-harvested crops of wheat, barley, and linseed and mustard, for their oil, are grown in abundance.

During that time long ago, the land was far more fertile and the forests far more extensive than today. Surrounding the villages were the cultivated fields; further outward were the pastures, and beyond them were the forests, deep and lush. Accounts of the time speak of the forests as places of easy retreat, where mango, banana, date, jackfruit, and coconut trees were in bloom, and the banyan, palmyra, acacia and ebony trees housed the wild and colorful birds and monkeys.

The town of Kapilavastu (named for Kapila), in the kingdom of Koshala, lay just due north of Benares, and just west of the great capital city of Shravasti, containing 57,000 families. It was positioned along a major trade route from Shravasti to Rajagriha, the capital city of the neighboring Magadhan kingdom. It was therefore a center of business and trade, and also a place of much activity, culture, and entertainment. Then, as now, cities were distinguished from the country villages by their sophistication and diversity of lifestyles. It was here, in Kapilavastu, that Siddhartha of the Gautama clan, who was to become known as “the Buddha,” was born to Suddhodana and his wife, Maya, around 586 B.C.E.

Suddhodana was the elected ruling citizen of the small republic of Shakya of which Kapilavastu was the capital. He was a wealthy aristocrat, and lived in a sumptuous and elegant home, where he raised his son, Siddhartha, amid the splendor and wealth, which his position provided. When Siddhartha was but sixteen, he was married to the princess, Yashodara; and by her he had a son, named Rahula. But this life of comfort, wealth and pleasure was not to

last. At

the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha, who was of a philosophic turn of mind, having studied many doctrines and having reflected on the perplexities of life and death, resolved to quit the home of his father and the company of his wife and child, to enter into a life of solitude in the forests, where he might resolve his questions in the supreme inner knowledge of which the sages of old had spoken.

From that time, he became a homeless wanderer, one among many of the monks, ascetics and solitary hermits who frequented the forests and riversides. He met, during his wandering, many brother monks, *sannyasins*, and would-be teachers; and he experimented with many different practices, including austere penances and discursive reasonings; but he felt as empty, as unfulfilled, as before.

After six years of study and wandering, Siddhartha had become intensely focused on the attainment of his goal of knowing the ultimate Truth. And so, one day, he took his seat beneath a peepul (Bo) tree on the banks of the Nairanjana river, near Uruvela, the present city of Bodh-Gaya, and resolved to meditate there, and not to leave his place until he had attained what he had come to the forest to attain.

Then, one morning, just before dawn, like a flash, enlightenment came. According to the *Dhammapada*, which was written much later, Siddhartha exclaimed at that time:

Looking for the Maker of this temple (referring to his body), I have run through a course of many births, not finding Him; and painful is birth again and again. But now, Maker of this temple, Thou hast been seen; Thou shalt not construct this temple again. All Thy rafters are broken, Thy ridgepole is sundered; the mind, approaching the Eternal, has attained *nirvana* [the extinction of the ego illusion].¹

In that transcendent experience of Unity, which the Buddha refers to as *nirvana*, he knew himself to be the one Consciousness who is manifesting as the entire universe. All forms, though transient, he knew as his own, with no division anywhere. Yet, when his mind returned to its normal state, once

again he was associated with a particular form within the transformative world, called *samsara*, “the ocean of phenomenal appearance.” As he sat beneath the Bo tree, Siddhartha reflected on what he had seen in that revelation, and perhaps mused within himself thusly:

‘From this state of limited consciousness, I appear once again to be a separate form within *samsara*; but from the state of expanded awareness, all of *samsara* is a manifestation of myself. I am a single, undifferentiated Mind, yet I shine forth, like the radiant beams of the Sun, as a universe of countless living beings, all made of my light. All beings are united in me, for I am their consciousness, their form, their very being. Never are there any separate selves; that is only an illusion produced by the limiting of consciousness. All are but players in the outflowing radiance of the one Being. These transient forms live but for a moment, but I, the One, live forever. Though I appear as many, I am forever One, forever serene.’

‘Yet, who would believe such a story?’ he wondered. ‘It is so implausible, so utterly fantastic and radical a revelation, so completely opposite to what men believe, that no one, unless they too had seen it, would be able to give any credence to it at all.’ Siddhartha realized that this transcendent knowledge could never be adequately communicated by words but was attainable only through such diligent effort as he himself had put forth. According to a later Buddhist text, called the *Agama Sutras*, he deliberated within himself at this time, questioning the wisdom of attempting to teach such knowledge:

My original vows are fulfilled; the Truth I have attained is too deep for the understanding [of men]. A Buddha alone is able to understand what is in the mind of another Buddha. In this age of the five-fold ignorance, all beings are enveloped in greed, anger, folly, falsehood, arrogance, and flattery; they have few virtues and have not the understanding to comprehend the Truth I have attained. Even if I revolve the wheel of Truth [by teaching it], they would surely be confused and incapable of accepting it. they might, on the contrary, misinterpret it, and thereby fall into evil paths, and suffer therefore much pain. It is best for me to remain quiet and enter [once again] into

nirvana.²

In the same vein, another Buddhist text has Siddhartha reflecting at this time:

Why should I attempt to make known to those who are consumed with lust and hate This which I've won through so much effort! This Truth is not a truth that can be grasped; it goes against the grain of what people think; it is deep, subtle, difficult, delicate. It will be cloaked in the murky ignorance of those slaves of passion who have not seen It.³

All those who have experienced this amazing revelation of the true nature of Reality have recognized the impossibility of expressing to others what they had come to know and have held serious doubts as to the wisdom of speaking of it at all. Chuang Tze, the Chinese sage of the 3rd century B.C.E., for example, debated with himself on this same quandary, and wrote:

Great truths do not take hold of the hearts of the masses. And now, as all the world is in error, how shall I, though I know the true path, how shall I guide? If I, while knowing I cannot succeed, still attempt to force success, this would be but another source of error. Better, then, to desist and strive no more. *Yet, if I do not strive, who will?*⁴

Siddhartha, pondering on these questions in his forest retreat, apparently reached the same conclusion, and, armed with a firm decision to serve as a guide to suffering mankind, he set out on his illustrious teaching career. To many hundreds of generations thereafter he would be known as *the Buddha*, “the enlightened”; the *Tathagata*, “the attainer of Truth”; the *Shakyamuni*, “sage of the Shakyas.”

The Buddha, having grown up in an environment where the Vedantic mystical tradition had been subverted by the priestly class, saw around him only a ritualistic religion presided over by an unenlightened Brahmin priesthood. He had seen how the talk of “God” by the unenlightened led men to a false understanding of the Divine Reality and fostered a philosophical Dualism between man and God; and he determined, therefore, to explain the knowledge of Unity in a way radically different from his

Vedic predecessors. He would eschew the old traditional terms for the One, such as “Brahman,” “Shiva,” “Purusha,” etc.; for when one spoke of “the knowledge of God,” a duality was implied between the knower and the object of knowledge, which was not in fact the case. The very nature of language is such that it relies for meaning upon the normal subject/object relationships. But, in the experience of Unity, there is no such separation. Thus, simply by naming It, that Unity is misrepresented.

In the eyes of the Buddha, it was just such graphic objectifications of the Reality in terms such as “Shiva,” “Vishnu,” etc., which fostered a mistaken notion of the Truth, and perpetuated the present degenerative state of religion. For this reason, he refused to apply any name at all to the transcendent Reality; he preferred to refer to the *experience* of the eternal Unity, rather than apply to It an objective noun. The experience of Unity he named *nirvana*, a word which signifies “extinction,” or “non-being.” What was extinguished in this experience was the false sense of a separative ego, and hence the subject/object relationship. Though misinterpretation was unavoidable in any case, the Buddha felt that the term, *nirvana*, was less likely to misrepresent his meaning than those many objectified nouns, which had been for so long used to signify the one Reality.

He was keenly aware of the inability of language either to express the Truth or to bring about Its realization. He had seen how little true knowledge was obtained by those proud Brahmin scholars who continually discussed and debated every fine point of metaphysical doctrine. As for himself, the Buddha would refuse to engage in any metaphysical discussions at all, insisting that all such harangues were worthless to effect enlightenment, and that if one sincerely wished to know and understand the nature of Reality, it was necessary to engage oneself seriously in the practice of meditation and inner reflection.

When asked by the idly curious such questions as, “Is the universe eternal or non-eternal? Is it finite or infinite? Is the soul real or unreal?” the Buddha would reply:

Such questions are not calculated to profit and are not concerned with the attainment of Truth; they do not lead to the practice of right conduct, nor to detachment, nor to purification from lusts, nor to quietude, nor to tranquilization of the heart, nor to real knowledge, nor to

insight into the higher stages of the path, nor to nirvana.
This is why I express no opinion on them.⁵

It is, perhaps, this reluctance on the part of the Buddha to describe the Reality in objective terms, or to engage in metaphysical discussions, which has led many to view the Buddhist and Vedantic perspectives as irreconcilably antagonistic, when, in fact, they are identical. We are accustomed by unenlightened scholars and partisan religionists to think of Vedanta, Taoism, Buddhism, and the other “isms,” as separate and distinct religious philosophies; but they are, in fact, but different names for the one perennial philosophy of the mystics. Having originated independently in different lands and different times by different seers, each of these “isms” possesses its own idiosyncratic language, its own literary heritage; yet the message of the mystics remains undeviatingly the same. All true mystics have accentuated the need for that personal enlightenment or realization by which the true nature of Reality becomes self-evident. And all have stressed that this enlightenment is attainable, not through much learning, almsgiving, or through following the precepts of ritualized religion, but only through devotion to and contemplation of one’s own essential Being.

Shortly after his enlightenment, and his subsequent decision to share his wisdom with other sincere seekers of Truth, the Buddha journeyed to a large deer park near Benares, where many of his fellow monks congregated. And there he addressed his brothers, explaining to them that excessive asceticism, scriptural recitations, sacramental offerings, and other such practices were as futile to the attainment of freedom from suffering as were the opposite extremes of revelry, and the wanton gratification of the senses. He spoke to them of a ‘Middle Path’ by which one could approach true knowledge and a harmonious life. Like Kapila before him, he offered no religious platitudes, no fanciful gods, but spoke to his hearers of “what pain is, and the method by which one may reach the cessation of pain.”

And when he spoke to them, the gathered monks recognized his attainment of enlightenment, and herded around him to listen to his teaching, his Sermon. The Buddha’s Sermon at Benares was the first of many to follow; and it contains for his followers the same profound meaning that the Sermon on the Mount holds for followers of Jesus. It contains in brief form the entirety of the Buddha’s message, the authentic version of which we may only assume has been passed down to us, as the Buddha wrote nothing himself. What we possess of his teachings were handed down orally until

they were committed to writing in the 2nd century B.C.E., nearly 300 years after his death.

Sitting before the gathering of monks, the Buddha began his Sermon by saying:

Whatever is originated will be dissolved again. All worry about the self is vain; the ego is like a mirage, and all the tribulations that touch it will pass away. They will vanish as a nightmare vanishes when a sleeper awakes.⁶

This first statement of the Buddha's that "whatever is originated will be dissolved again," is particularly obvious to anyone in the 20th or 21st century who is familiar with the findings of modern physics regarding the nature of matter. All matter, we know, is constituted of one undifferentiated Energy, which 'condenses' or integrates into different congregate forms which then disintegrate once again, only to take on new forms. This statement of the Buddha's is true on all levels of reality, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, but here it is intended to refer to the ephemeral nature of the individual body and personality.

Bodies are originated, and must one day be dissolved; therefore, "all worry about the self is vain," says the Buddha. He had seen the Truth, and knew that the sense of an individual self, or ego, was an illusion, a mirage, and that all the troubles and worries that afflict one during the course of a life vanish when that false sense of ego vanishes.

One whose mind awakes to the realization that it is the one Mind and is not in any way affected by the manifestation or de-manifestation of forms within this world of *samsara*, sees this world as a kind of dream. And just as one no longer fears the evil monsters of a dream once he awakes and realizes that he is the dreamer, the awakened Buddha can never again be drawn to identify himself with the body or mental images that exist only in the world of *samsara*.

He who has awakened is freed from fear; he has become a Buddha; he knows the vanity of all his cares, of his ambitions, and also of his pains.⁷

From the time we are infants and discover this body and mind that

manipulates us and in turn is manipulated by us, we feel certain that this body and mind is our self, is who we are. That identification becomes so strongly rooted in us, that never once do we doubt that we are this particular mind and body limited in space and time, and any suggestion to the contrary strikes us as bizarre and absurd. But, say the seers, the Buddhas, it is merely a case of mistaken identity; that which is born, thrives for a while, and then decays, is not who you are. You are the one Mind of the universe, which is the cause and the witness of all this world of changing forms but is never affected by it. You are the Eternal, but you see this transient world of forms and think, "This form is me!" It is like a man who, dreaming that he is being roasted alive, suffers the pain from the heat of the imagined flames; or like a man who is frightened by a snake which, on closer inspection, turns out only to have been a piece of rope.

It sometimes happens that a man, when bathing in the river, steps upon a wet rope and imagines that it is a snake. Terror will overcome him, and he will shake with fear, anticipating in his mind all the agonies caused by the serpent's venomous bite.

What a relief does this man experience when he sees that the rope is no snake. The cause of his fear lies in his error, his ignorance, his illusion. If the true nature of the rope is recognized, his tranquility of mind will come back to him; he will feel relieved; he will be joyful and happy. This is the state of mind of one who has recognized that there is no selfhood (ego), and that the cause of all his troubles, cares, and vanities is a mirage, a shadow, a dream.⁸

Here, in his first Sermon, the Buddha gives the essence of his teaching, and the teaching of all the seers. It should be apparent, of course, that the "selfhood" to which the Buddha here refers is not the Self (*Atman*) of the Upanishads, which is synonymous with the Eternal, but is the false sense of self, the ego. When the Truth is realized, the false idea of an individual self is dissolved, like the idea of the snake which is really a rope. Then it is seen that no separate self exists or ever existed; it is a mirage, a mistaken interpretation of one's own awareness, which is really the immortal and eternal Self, the Absolute. Only that One is real; It is the Self of the universe, the universal Being which manifests as all beings, all things. It is the knowledge of this Self, which is the source of the joy and happiness of

the enlightened.

Happy is he who has overcome his ego; happy is he who has attained peace; happy is he who has found the Truth.⁹

Some, when they hear of the Truth from one who has seen It, immediately recognize it as the truth, and are overjoyed to learn of It. But some others who hear of It, say, “How unconvincing, how unappetizing!” To them, the Buddha says:

Have confidence in the [eternal] Truth, although you may not be able to comprehend It, although you may suppose Its sweetness to be bitter, although you may shrink from It at first. Trust in the Truth. ...Have faith in the Truth and live [in accordance with] It. ¹⁰

Sooner or later, we must acknowledge that what keeps us from the enjoyment of peace, of happiness, of freedom, is the sense of selfhood, the false ego, by which all pain, all suffering, comes to us. It is the mistaken identification with the transient that must eventually cause us much sorrow.

[The illusion of] self is a fever; self is a transient illusion, a dream; but Truth is sublime, Truth is everlasting. There is no immortality except in [the eternal] Truth. For Truth alone abides forever. ¹¹

The Buddha explained his message as the way to the cessation of suffering. He did not promise heavenly rewards, or a place at the right hand of the Lord, nor did he claim that he was sent from God; he claimed only that his was the way to the cessation of suffering:

He who recognizes the existence of suffering, its cause, its remedy, and its cessation, has fathomed the four noble truths. He will walk in the right path. ¹²

Here, the Buddha introduces his formula of the “four noble truths”:

1. There is suffering, i.e., humans suffer.
2. There is a cause of suffering; namely ignorance.
3. There is a remedy to suffering; namely enlightenment.

4. The cessation of suffering results from the destruction of ignorance.

If we pay close attention to the words of the Buddha's Sermon in the above passage, his message is clear and unequivocal: the cause of all suffering is the ignorance by which we believe we are an individual self, limited to a particular body and mind. This ignorance is inherent in existence and has no cause or beginning. Yet it can be dispelled, and thus ended, by the realization of Truth. In this sense, it is both real and unreal; while it exists, it is experienced as real, and when it is dispelled, it is recognized to be unreal, non-existent—like the snake in the rope. Release from suffering, then, is attained by the direct realization of our eternal Being. To understand this is to possess the right understanding:

Right understanding will be the torch to light the way of one who seeks to realize the Truth. Right aims will be his guide. Right speech will be his dwelling-place on the road. His path will be straight, for it is right behavior. His refreshments will be the right way of earning his livelihood. Right efforts will be his steps; right thinking his breath; and peace will follow in his footsteps. ¹³

In this metaphor of the Buddha's, in which he likens the moving of a man's awareness toward enlightenment to a man walking toward his destination, he outlines the right means by which a man reaches to the realization of Truth. "Right" simply means that which is conducive to success. This "eight-fold path" of the Buddha reiterates, in its own way, the *yogas* of the *Bhagavad Gita*: jnan, bhakti, karma, and raja. As a man is a thinking, speaking, acting and contemplating being, all facets of his nature must be coordinated toward the attainment of his goal.

Following naturally from right knowledge, is the second means, right aims, which is to say, the aspiration to know the Truth, to renounce all other pursuits, which might detract from the single-minded pursuit of one's goal. Without such unflinching determination, and utter disregard for all the trouble, opposition, and deprivation encountered, a man cannot hope to attain to it. The Buddha's "right aspiration" is really not different from the *Gita's* "devotion to Truth." Devotion to the Truth, or God, is devotion to the Eternal in oneself; aspiration toward the attainment of *nirvana* is also devotion to the Eternal in oneself. The mental restraint, renunciation of self

(ego), and inward attentiveness required by the one is the same as that required by the other. They are, in aspiration, practice, and result, identical. Only the words are different.

The third means, right speech, is merely an extension of right thinking; it is that speech which is truthful, sincere, and cognizant of the oneness of all beings. Untruthful speech betrays an untruthful mind and is entirely incompatible with the mind's attainment of the ultimate Truth. Never, in a million years, will untruthfulness lead to the Truth. "Truth," says the Mundaka Upanishad, "is the way that leads to the region of Truth. Sages travel therein free from desires and reach the supreme abode of Truth."

The fourth means, right action, is also simply an extension of right thought. That action which is inspired by and leads to the awareness of Truth, is the right action. It is action that stems from peace of mind, and whose result is peace of mind. Whatever defiles and disturbs the quiet awareness of Truth cannot be right action. This "right action" of the Buddha may be compared to the karma yoga of the *Gita*. It is action, whose sole aim is the awareness and promotion of Truth. It is action that stems not from egoistic desire, but from the awareness that all this world of *samsara* and all beings in it are identical in the one Mind. Such actions flow forth naturally as expressions of service to the One in all.

The fifth means, right livelihood, may be viewed in the same way that Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, viewed the necessity of following one's own *svadharma*, or personal duty. Men of differing stations in life are obliged by their differing aspirations to differing livelihoods. The livelihood of the householder is in accordance with his aspirations; the livelihood of the student is in accordance with his aspirations, and the livelihood of the realized sage is in accordance with his aspiration. For one, the "right" is not the same as the "right" for another. What conduces harmoniously to one's aspirations is the right livelihood. For the spiritual seeker, that work, which is conducive to the meditative life, is the "right" livelihood; and for the sage who has no aspiration but to share his knowledge to relieve the suffering of the world, the need for livelihood is not so great; he accepts what comes to him in the course of his mission.

Right effort is the sixth means, and it follows from right aspiration. If right aspiration is determination to attain enlightenment, right effort is the application of that determination. The conquest of the sense of selfhood

requires great effort. It is the most difficult of all battles. According to the *Dhammapada*, “If one man conquers in battle a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, the second is the greatest of conquerors.”¹⁴

Lao Tze, the great Chinese sage, said this as well: “He who conquers others may be strong, but he who conquers himself is stronger.”¹⁵ To conquer oneself is, in effect, to reduce oneself to nothing. For, as the Buddha tells us, that self is not only an illusion, but an obstacle to the realization of Truth. Only when it is reduced to nothing, shall we find that greater Self which is the one all-pervading Reality, the Buddha-Mind, the Truth.

The seventh means—right mindfulness, or recollection—is the mental aspect of right effort. It means the continual watchfulness of the mind over itself. The pure mind is itself *nirvana*; the illusions that continually becloud its surface serve only to obscure the Truth. Right mindfulness is therefore the retention of the pure mind. It might just as well be spoken of as surrender of the separative will, for it is just that will which obscures the awareness of Unity. Jesus of Nazareth taught the surrender of the will to God; the Buddha taught the surrender of the will to Truth. Who can find any difference between them? That to which the will is surrendered is the one pure Mind. Right mindfulness is simply the retention of the pure Mind.

Right concentration is the eighth and final means; it is an extension or intensification of right mindfulness, which can only be achieved during times of silent meditation. It is the final step toward the threshold of *nirvana*. What is the object of the mind’s concentration? Itself. Let it become still and concentrated, and it reverts to its original, pure Mind, state. In this state is all knowledge, all peace, all satisfaction. It is this utter one-pointedness of mind which lifts it to its ultimate state, that state in which it knows itself as the one Mind of the universe.

The Buddha’s message is so clear and straightforward that, to the wise, it needs no further clarification or elucidation. But there has been, over the years, no dearth of clarification; for it is the delight of all who have attained the knowledge of Truth to speak of It. Many brilliant followers of the Buddha, who lived much later, have offered their own insights into the Truth and Its attainment. Among these, was an enlightened sage of the 2nd century of the Current Era, called

Ashvagosha, whose poetic work, *Buddha-Karita*, tells, in a picturesque fashion, the life of the Buddha. Ashvagosha also wrote a Mahayana treatise called, “The Awakening of Faith,” in which he offered his insights into the nature of Reality. Like Kapila, the author of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and so many others, Ashvagosha attempted to explain the two, absolute and relative, aspects of the one universal Soul, or Self:

In the one Soul we may distinguish two aspects. The one [aspect] is the Soul-as-Absolute (*Tathata*); the other is the Soul-as-relative-world (*samsara*). Each in itself constitutes all things, and both are so closely related that one cannot be separated from the other.

What is meant by “the Soul-as-Absolute” is the oneness of the totality of things, the great all-inclusive Whole.... This essential nature of the Soul is uncreate and eternal. Therefore, all things in their fundamental nature are not nameable or explicable. They cannot be adequately explained in any form of language. ...They possess absolute sameness. They are subject neither to transformation nor to destruction. They are nothing but the one Soul, for which “Absolute” is simply another designation.

The Soul-as-the-relative-world comes forth from the Womb of the Absolute; but the immortal Absolute and the mortal relative world coincide with one another. Though they are not identical, they are not two. ¹⁶

It should be evident that, in this explanation by Ashvagosha, these two, *Tathata* and *samsara*, are precisely those same two aspects of Reality described in earlier chapters as Brahman & Maya, Purusha & Prakrti, Shiva & Shakti, Tao & Teh, etc. They “coincide,” as Ashvagosha says, in the experience of *nirvana*.

Another great sage of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition was Nagarjuna, who lived in the late 2nd century C.E. He too placed great emphasis on the understanding of these two aspects of Reality, insisting, in his “Discourse On The Middle Way,” that:

The Buddha's teaching rests on the discrimination between two aspects of Reality: the Absolute and the relative. Those who do not have any adequate knowledge of them are unable to grasp the subtle and profound meaning of Buddhism.¹⁷

Yet, in the same Discourse, he acknowledged the fact that *samsara* is an activity of *nirvana* (in this sense, the Absolute) itself; not the slightest distinction exists between them.”

It is only from the viewpoint of the enlightened that *samsara* and *nirvana* (or *Tathata*) no longer appear as two. One who has seen the Truth sees only oneness everywhere. He knows himself to be that One who exists eternally, beyond all manifestation of *samsara*; yet he knows also that *samsara* is his own appearance, a play of changing forms on the one ocean of Existence. When a man awakes to *nirvana*, behold! Suddenly he knows himself as the Absolute, the one eternally pure, unblemished Consciousness. And there, also, shining forth from him is the world of *samsara*, with all its creatures and objects. Like a movie shown on a screen, or like a fantasy-image on one's own mind, the two exist at once. It is ONE, but It has these two aspects.

Those who have seen It realize better than anyone the impossibility of explaining this duality-in-unity to those who have not experienced It, yet they realize, too, that nothing can be said about enlightenment without referring to It. Here, on this same subject, is the master, Padma-Shambhava, who took his Buddhism to Tibet in 747 C.E., and wrote a book entitled, “The Yoga of Knowing The Mind, And Seeing The Reality, Which Is Called Self-Realization.” In it, he wrote:

Although the wisdom of nirvana and the ignorance of samsara illusorily appear to be two things, they cannot truly be differentiated. It is an error to conceive them as other than one.¹⁸

Those, like the Buddha, who have realized the Truth, tell of It to others and outline a path to that realization as a way of explaining what happened to themselves and describing the pattern of their progress to it. They are practical scientists who say, in effect, ‘This is

what happened to me, and these are the mental refinements that lead to it. You too, by doing likewise, will reach the same inner realization.’ When we examine the testimonies of those many who have described their experience of Unity and their progress to it, we have to be struck by the remarkable agreement evidenced in all their testimonies. Their lives, their methods, their enlightenment, reveal so undeviating a sameness, so compelling a unanimity, that we must be convinced of the universality of their experience, and the universality of the path to it. We must come to the conclusion that the Truth is one, that the way is clear, and that the choice is our own.

The Buddha continued to live and teach his disciples for forty-five years, moving about from place to place, proclaiming his wisdom to the people around Benares, Oudh, and Bihar. He established a monastic Order and accepted as gifts from his householder devotees many groves and monasteries where his liberating knowledge could be taught. He died at the age of eighty in 486 B.C.E. at Kusinagara, the present city of Kasia, in northern Gorakhpur. His last words to the disciples who gathered around him were: “All constituted forms pass away. Diligently work out your own salvation.”

NOTES:

1. *Dhammapada*, Ch. 11, Babbitt, Irving (tr.), *The Dhammapada*, N.Y., New Directions, 1965; I.
2. *Sutra On Cause And Effect In The Past And Present*, Suzuki, D.T., *Essays In Zen Buddhism, 1st Series*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1961; p. 49f.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 121
4. Chuang Tze,
5. Suzuki, D.T., *op. cit.*
6. *Buddha’s Sermon at Benares*, Stryck, Lucien (ed.), *The World Of The Buddha*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1968; pp. 52-53
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*

14. *Dhammapada, op. cit.*
15. *Tao Teh Ching*, 33
16. Ashvagosa, Stryck, *op. cit.*, p. 285
18. Padma-Shambhava; Stryck, *op. cit.*, p. 315

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II. The Ch'an And Zen Buddhists

Buddhism flourished in India until the end of the twelfth century, when the fierce Muslim invaders ravaged northern India, killing many Buddhists and forcing the remaining Buddhists to flee to Tibet. However, Buddhism had already entered China in the first few centuries of the Current Era, and, for a number of centuries thereafter, vied with Taoism for popular acceptance. Buddhism eventually prevailed, due perhaps to the already decadent condition of Taoism, and the massive proselytizing efforts of the Buddhists. There was really little to choose between the two, however; for, while the Taoist and Buddhist terminologies were different, the realization of Truth which each taught was, of course, the same. In every mystical tradition, the ultimate goal is the attainment of enlightenment, the direct perception of the one Reality. In ancient India, this realization was called *nirvana*, or *samadhi*; when Buddhism was transplanted in China, this supramental experience was called, in Chinese, *chien-hsing*, and as Buddhism became established in Japan in later centuries, this experience was called *kensho* or *satori*. The words and the languages are different, but the experience is the same.

This experience of enlightenment, of the absolute, quiescent, Source of all existence, is described by one Chinese Buddhist in this way:

In learning to be a Buddha, and in seeking the essence of the teaching of our school, man should purify his mind and allow his spirit to penetrate the depths. Thus, he will be able to wander silently within himself during contemplation, and he will see the Origin of all things, obscured by nothing.

...His mind becomes boundless and formless, ... all-illuminating and bright, like moonlight pervading the darkness. During that absolute moment, the mind experiences illumination without darkness, clarity without stain. It becomes what it really is, absolutely tranquil, absolutely illuminating. Though this all-pervading Mind is tranquil, the world of cause and effect does not cease; though It illumines the world, the world is but Its reflection. It is pure Light and perfect

Quiescence, which continues through endless time. It is motionless, and free from all activity; It is silent, and self-aware. ...That brilliant Light permeates every corner of the world. It is This we should become aware of and know. ¹

Many of the early Buddhist philosophers of India called this absolute, all-pervading Reality, *Dharmakaya*, “the Body of Truth.” Ashvagosha (2nd century C.E.) called it *Sarvasattvachitta*, “the one pure Consciousness in all.” In China, It was called *Hsin*, “Consciousness”; and in Japan, It was *Kokoro*. According to Ashvagosha, there arises, in this one pure Consciousness, a spontaneous movement, from which all the phenomenal world is produced; this aspect of Reality, he calls *ekachittakshan*, “the movement of the one Consciousness.” In Chinese, it is *nien*; in Japanese, it is *nen*. Just see how many words there are for our old friends, Brahman and Maya, Purusha and Prakrti, Shiva and Shakti!

Similarly, in every mystical tradition, the means to the realization of Reality is the same; it is an inturning of the mind in search of its root, its source; we call this process “meditation.” In India, the Sanskrit word for meditation is *dhyana*; in China, it is *ch’an*, and in Japan, it is *zen*. Ch’an, or Zen, then, is nothing but the practice of meditation toward the attainment of enlightenment. Enlightenment is the only goal of Zen; and it is meditation, or contemplation, alone which leads to it. For this reason, all the Ch’an and Zen masters incessantly point all sincere seekers of enlightenment to the meditative life. Here is an example of such pointing, from a Sermon by the Ch’an master, Szu-hsin Wu-hsin (1044-1115):

O brothers, to be born as a human being is a rare event, and so is the opportunity to hear discourses on the Truth. If you fail to achieve liberation in this life, when do you expect to achieve it? While still alive, be therefore assiduous in practicing meditation. ...As your self-reflection grows deeper and deeper, the moment will surely come upon you when the spiritual flower will suddenly burst into bloom, illuminating the entire universe.

...This is the moment when you can transform this vast earth into solid gold, and the great rivers into an ocean of milk. What a satisfaction this is then to your daily life! Since this is so, do not waste your time with words or phrases, or by searching for Truth in books; for the Truth is not to be found there. ...They consist of mere words, which will be of no use to you at the moment of your death. ²

This, throughout the centuries, has been the perennial call of the Ch'an and Zen masters. Their message is not different from that of all enlightened seers of the One. The early Ch'an masters of China, having realized the unchanging Absolute, acknowledged the unity of the One and the many, and grappled for some time with the expression of this paradox. Reiterating the old truth of the identity of *nirvana* and *samsara*, they spoke of the Real, the unreal, and the unitive way, which embraces them both in an undivided awareness. But the Chinese had their own way of expressing this duality-in-unity, this unity-in-duality. Here, for example, is a conversation of the Ch'an master, Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi (840-901) and one of his disciples:

Monk: "Where is the Reality in appearance?"
 Master: "Wherever there is appearance, there is Reality."
 Monk: "How does It manifest Itself?"
 Master: (The master silently lifted his saucer.)
 Monk: "But where is the Reality in illusion?"
 Master: "The origin of illusion is the Real."
 Monk: "But how can Reality manifest Itself in illusion?"
 Master: "Wherever there is illusion, there is the manifestation of Reality."
 Monk: "Do you say, then, Reality can never be separated from illusion?"
 Master: "Where can you possibly find the appearance of illusion?" ³

At another time, this same Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi was asked by a wandering monk,

"What is your name?"
 "My name is Pen-chi," he answered.

“Say something about ultimate Reality,” demanded the monk.

“I will not say anything,” [replied Pen-chi].

But the monk insisted; and Pen-chi said simply,

“It is not called Pen-chi.”⁴

The difficulty of expressing the paradoxical nature of the absolute Reality, which is other than, but not other than, the projected world-appearance is oftentimes illustrated in the utterances of the early Ch’an masters.

Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-896) said:

I meet Him wherever I go.

He is the same as me,

Yet I am not He.

Only if you understand this,

Will you identify with the *Tathata* (the Truth, the Real).⁵

Ch’an and Zen Buddhism is replete with the recognition of this paradoxicality, and brings this recognition into the most ordinary experiences of life, and the most ordinary of conversations, relying often, not on words, but on wordless symbols to get across their point:

The Master asked Pai-chang, his disciple, “What will you teach others?”

Pai-chang raised his staff aloft.

The Master remarked, “Is that all? Nothing else?”

Pai-chang threw his staff on the ground.⁶

Ummon (d. 996), holding up his staff before his disciples, asked, “What is this? If you say it is a staff, you go right to hell; but if it is not a staff, what is it?” And Tokusan (799-865), who was fond of giving blows with a stick to awaken his disciples, also used to ask a similar question of his disciples, and then say, “If you say ‘yes,’ thirty blows; if you say ‘no,’ thirty blows.”

It is easy to see from these examples that, while the goal of enlightenment is the same in all mystical traditions, and the Truth

experienced is always the same, the expression of that Truth is infinitely variable. What distinguishes the Ch'an and Zen Buddhist traditions from their Indian counterparts is their unique methods of teaching. They trace this "non-verbal" method of the transmission of knowledge to the Buddha himself, who, according to legend, gave his message to the gathered assemblage on the Mount of the Holy Vulture by simply raising aloft a single kumbhala flower which had been given to him by the god, Brahma. Only one disciple in the throng gave evidence of understanding the import of the Buddha's gesture: an old man named Mahakasyapa, who simply smiled in appreciation. With this, the Buddha is said to have immediately turned over the succession of Mastership to Mahakasyapa. From this legendary non-verbal transmission, the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists find a precedent for their own tradition.

The perpetuation of this special tradition is said to have been initiated in China by Bodhidharma, who came from India to China in 520 C.E. His influence is described in a 9th century work called "The Complete Explanation of The Source of Ch'an" by Kuei-feng Tsung-mi (780-841):

When Bodhidharma came to China, he saw that most Chinese students did not grasp the truth of Buddhism. They merely sought it through interpretation of textual terminology and thought of the changing phenomena all around them as real activity. Bodhidharma wished to make these eager students see that the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon itself. The real Truth is nothing but one's own mind. Thus, he maintained that the real teaching must be transmitted directly from one mind to another, without the use of words.⁷

Bodhidharma and his followers rejected the necessity of the long-winded metaphysical formulations of the Indians as a means to enlightenment. They advocated instead a method of evoking an immediate perception of Truth, a sudden recognition of the nature of one's own mind, unfettered by mental formulations or expectations, "a special transmission outside the scriptures; no dependence upon words and letters, a direct pointing to the Soul of man; the seeing into one's own nature and thus the attainment of Buddhahood."

Whenever words are used, whether as tools of analysis, or to construct metaphors and analogies, they must invariably fall short of an adequate representation of the unitive Reality. To many enlightened men, the endless parade of word-pictures and attempted descriptions by the countless millions of seers over the ages appears a futile and self-defeating game. Such a recognition led the early Chinese and Japanese Buddhists to pursue a method of knowledge-awakening which transcended the impossible demands of language, which directly evoked the immediate Reality, and awakened the mind to its true nature. And over the centuries, this method has gradually become the special hallmark of the Ch'an and Zen Buddhist traditions.

Taking the rejection of metaphysical formulations as their starting point, they began to devise methods whereby they might turn, or startle, a disciple toward the direct perception of his own Self, his own Being. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" questioned the Master; and the disciple, deprived of a verbalized answer, had necessarily to peer into the silence of his own being for the comprehension of Nonduality. Thus, instead of hoping to awaken a disciple to enlightenment through such explanations as Shankara and the Vedantists offer, and thereby leading him to delve into his own mind to experience the Truth, the enlightened seers of China and Japan practiced a non-analytical method of awakening the disciple; a method which causes the disciple to grab directly and immediately, by wordless insight, at the living truth of his own existence.

When Ummon is asked, "What is Zen?" he stares the disciple fiercely in the face, and exclaims, "That's it! That's it!" This method of the famous Ch'an and Zen masters is a method of shock, a startling of the mind in order to suddenly knock away the clouds of verbalized concepts in the mind of the seeker and awaken him to the immediate reality of consciousness in the here and now. But who can say whether this method is more effective than another? Who can say whether more men and women have been induced to know the Truth for themselves by Shankara's reasonings, or by Jesus' exhortations, or by the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*, or by Ummon's "That's it!" We can only observe that, in China and Japan, the intellectual method was rejected, and the "direct pointing to the Soul of man" was embraced as a method of instruction.

Teaching methods may vary; but the Truth remains one. And no one has ever realized It without an intense and arduous searching for It within themselves. In the last analysis, it is the determination and fitness of the disciple, which determines whether he will attain to the clear vision of Truth, and that, after all, is in the hands of God. Perhaps the most a teacher may do is to exhort and encourage a student to apply himself with all his might to the search for Truth within himself. With this purpose in mind, the famous Zen master, Hakuin (1683-1768), sang:

Not knowing how near the Truth is,
 People seek It far away—what a pity!
 They are like one who, in the midst of water,
 Cries imploringly for a drink of water,
 Or like the son of a rich man
 Who wanders away among the poor.
 ...Those who testify to the truth of the nature of the Self,
 Have found it by reflecting within themselves,
 And have gone beyond the realm of mere ideas.
 For them opens the gate of the oneness of cause and effect.
 And straight runs the path of Nonduality ...
 Abiding with the Undivided amidst the divided,
 Whether going or returning, they remain forever unmoved.
 Holding fast to, and remembering, *That* which is beyond
 thought,
 In their every act, they hear the voice of the Truth.
 How limitless the sky of unbounded freedom!
 How pure the perfect moonlight of Wisdom!
 At that moment, what do they lack?
 As the eternally quiescent Truth reveals Itself to them,
 This very earth is the lotus-land of Purity,
 And this body is the body of the Buddha. ⁸

The experience of *samadhi*, or *satori*, is self-revealing, self-illuminating; it effortlessly reveals the unitive Truth, and dispels all doubts. There is no difficulty of understanding involved in it whatsoever. What *is* difficult, however, is the subsequent adjustment to living the rest of one's life with the knowledge thus acquired. It takes a good deal of reflection and getting-used-to in order to

recognize only the One in all phenomenal manifestations as well. Such an acquired habitual perspective no longer distinguishes between the Absolute and the relative but focuses singly on the awareness of Unity. Such a mind takes no interest in pursuing gratification in appearances but remains unswayed from Unity-awareness by either pleasant or unpleasant circumstances.

It is this adjustment, or resolution, to life on the relative plane which, therefore, claims much of the attention of the enlightened, and which constitutes much of the written material by the Self-realized sages of every mystical tradition. The writings of the early Ch'an Buddhists are particularly replete with declarations concerning this resolution, this final state of Unity-awareness. Though the language and teaching methods of the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists are unique to themselves, the goal of enlightenment and the attainment of a perfect and lasting Unity-awareness is the same for all. In many of the poems and utterances of the memorable saints of the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist tradition, we can hear something of that pure and simple state; we can hear the voice of the unfettered Self, released from all doubt and conflict.

In one of the earliest Buddhist treatises to come out of China, called *Hsin-hsin ming*, "Inscription on The Self of The Self," written by an obscure monk named Seng-ts'an (d. 606), we find an especially illuminating expression of this ultimate awareness. While it represents a movement toward the early Chinafication, or simplifying, of Buddhist ideology, it is scarcely distinguishable from the Taoism which preceded it. Its author was, undoubtedly, an enlightened man, and a Buddhist; but he was also a Chinaman with a long heritage of Taoist phraseology. In this perfect gem of wisdom, we can actually see the transformation of Indian Buddhism into something distinctly Chinese, as Buddhism blends into Taoism, and the one perennial philosophy of Unity resurfaces once more—this time, under the name of Ch'an:

The perfect Tao knows no difficulties.
 It only refuses to make preferences.
 When freed from hate and love,
 It reveals Itself fully and without disguise.

A tenth of an inch's difference,

And heaven and earth are set apart.
 If you want to see It manifest,
 Take no thought either for or against It.

To set up what you like against what you dislike:
 This is the disease of the mind.
 When the profound Truth is not understood,
 Peace of mind is disturbed, and nothing is gained.

[The Truth is] perfect like the vastness of space,
 With nothing wanting, nothing superfluous.
 It is indeed due to making choices
 That the One Reality is lost sight of.

Pursue not the outer entanglements,
 Dwell not in the inner Void.
 When the mind rests serene in the oneness of things,
 Dualism vanishes by itself.

When oneness is not thoroughly understood,
 In two ways loss may be sustained:
 The denial of the world may lead to its absolute negation,
 While the denying of the Void may result in the denying
 of your [true] Self.

Wordiness and intellection—The more with them the
 further astray we go.
 Away, therefore, with wordiness and intellection,
 And there is no place where we cannot pass freely.

When we return to the root, we gain the meaning.
 When we pursue the external objects, we lose the purpose.
 The moment we are enlightened within,
 We go beyond the voidness of a world confronting us.

Transformations going on in an empty world which
 confronts us
 Appear real all because of ignorance.
 Try not to seek after the Real.
 Only cease to cherish opinions.

Tarry not with dualism,
 Carefully avoid pursuing it.
 As soon as you have right and wrong,
 Confusion ensues, and the mind is lost.

The two exist because of the One,
 But hold not even to this One.
 When the one Consciousness is not disturbed,
 The ten thousand things offer no offence.

When no offence is offered by them, they are as if
 non-existent.
 When the mind is not disturbed, it is as if there is no
 mind.
 The subject is quieted as the object ceases.
 The object ceases as the subject is quieted.

The object is an object for the subject.
 The subject is a subject for an object.
 Know that the relativity of the two
 Rests ultimately on the oneness of the Void.

In the oneness of the Void, the two are one,
 And each of the two contains in itself all the ten thousand
 things.
 When no discrimination is made between this and that,
 How can a one-sided and prejudiced view arise?

... In the higher realm of true Being,
 There is neither "other" nor "self."
 When a direct identification is required,
 We can only say, "not two."

In being not two, all is the same.
 All that *is* is comprehended in it.
 The wise in all the ten quarters
 Enter into this same absolute Awareness.

This absolute Awareness is beyond movement and rest.

One instant is ten thousand years.
 No matter how things are regarded— as being or non-being,
 It is manifest everywhere before you.

...One in all,
 All in One—
 If only this is realized,
 No more worry about your not being perfect! ⁹

About one hundred years later, another Ch'an master, by the name of Yungchia Ta-shih (d. 713), wrote his *Cheng-tao Ke*, "Song Of Enlightenment," which reiterates, in equally inspiring tones, this same knowledge, this same enlightened state of awareness:

Do you know that leisurely sage who has gone beyond
 learning, and who does not exert himself in anything?
 He neither endeavors to avoid idle thoughts nor seeks after
 the Truth
 [For he knows that] ignorance is also the Reality,
 [And that] this empty, illusory, body is nothing but the
 absolute Reality (*Dharmakaya*).

When one knows the Absolute, there are no longer any
 [independent] objects.
 The Source of all things is the absolute Self of all the
 enlightened.
 The five elements are like a cloud floating aimlessly here
 and there.
 And the three passions are like the foam which appears and
 disappears on the surface of the ocean.

When the absolute Reality is known, it is seen to be
 without any individual selves, and devoid of any
 objective forms.
 All past [mental and physical] actions which lead to hell are
 instantly wiped away.
 ... After the Awakening, there is only vast Emptiness; this
 vast universe of forms ceases to exist [outside of one's Self].

Here, one sees neither sin nor bliss, neither loss nor gain.

In the midst of the eternal Serenity, no questions arise.
 The dust of ignorance which has accumulated on the
 unpolished mirror for ages,
 Is now, and forever, cleared away in the vision of Truth.

...The people do not know where to find this precious jewel
 Which lies deep within the creative Power (*Tathagata-garba*);
 The activity miraculously performed by the creative Power
 is an illusion and yet it is not an illusion,
 [Just as] the rays of light emanating from the one perfect Sun
 belong to it and yet do not belong to it.

Let us be thoroughgoing, not only in inner experience, but in its
 interpretation,
 And our lives will be perfect in meditation and in wisdom as
 well—not adhering one-sidedly to Emptiness (*Sunyata*) alone.
 It is not we alone who have come to this conclusion:
 All the enlightened, numerous as the sands of India, are of
 the same mind.

I crossed seas and rivers, climbed mountains, and forded
 streams,
 In order to interview the Masters, to enquire after Truth, to
 delve into the secrets of Ch'an;
 But since I learned the true path from my Master [Hui-neng:
 638-713],
 I know that birth-and-death is not what I need to be
 concerned with.

For walking is Ch'an, sitting is Ch'an;
 Whether talking or remaining silent, whether moving or
 standing still, the Essence Itself is always at rest.
 Even when confronted by swords and spears, It never loses
 Its way of stillness.
 Not even poisonous drugs can perturb Its serenity.

Ever since the realization—which came to me suddenly—
 that I have never been born,
 All vicissitudes of fate, good and bad, have lost their power
 over me.

Far off, in the mountains, I live in a modest hut.
 The mountains are high, the shade-trees are broad, and
 under an old pine tree
 I sit quietly and contentedly in my monkish home.
 Here, perfect tranquility and rustic simplicity reign.

[The sage] neither seeks the Truth, nor avoids the
 defilements; He clearly perceives that all dualities are
 empty and have no reality.
 And, since they have no reality, he is not one-sided, neither
 empty, nor not-empty.
 This is the genuine state of sagehood.

The one Mind, like a mirror, reflects everything brightly,
 and knows no limitations.
 It pervades the entire universe in even its minutest crevices.
 This world and all its contents, multitudinous in form, are
 reflected in the one Mind,
 Which, shining like a perfect gem, has no “outer” or “inner.”

If we hold exclusively to Emptiness, we deny the entire causal
 World.
 All is then attributed to chance, with no ruling principle,
 inviting evil to prevail.
 The same error occurs when one holds exclusively to the
 manifested, denying the Emptiness.
 That would be like throwing oneself into the flames in order
 to avoid being drowned in the water.

...The Real need not be adhered to.
 As for the non-real, there has never been any such thing.
 When both Real and non-Real are put aside, “non-real”
 becomes meaningless.
 [Even] when the various means to [the attainment of]
 Emptiness are abandoned,
 The eternal Oneness of the sage remains as It has always
 been. ¹⁰

In the ongoing tradition of Ch’an and Zen Buddhism, many such
 declarations have been uttered; oftentimes they are but brief and simple

declarations of isolation and profound contentment. And oftentimes, when we read the poems of the early Ch'an and Zen masters, such as this, by P'ang-yun (d. 811):

How wondrously supernatural,
And how miraculous this!
I carry water, and I carry fuel.¹¹

Or this, by Pao-tzu Wen-ch'i (10th century):

Drinking tea, eating rice,
I pass my time as it comes.
Looking down at the stream,
Looking up at the mountain,
How serene and relaxed I feel indeed!¹²

Or this, by Hsue-tou (950-1052):

What life can compare to this?
Sitting quietly by the window,
I watch the leaves fall and the flowers bloom,
As the seasons come and go.¹³

...we may fail to recognize the connection of these Oriental Buddhists to their parent tradition, and lose sight of the long, arduous progression of understanding which led to the apparent simplicity of the enlightened Ch'an and Zen masters. Their simple poems may seem far removed from the reasonings of the early Buddhist Fathers on the complementarity of *nirvana* and *samsara*, but they represent the ultimate synthesis of centuries of metaphysics, and the final freedom of those who have realized that synthesis in their ordinary lives. How simple seem these Buddhist sages, yet their very simplicity is the simplicity of the blessed; it stands on the heads of the Buddhas of the past and reveals a consummation of the struggles of a thousand lifetimes.

NOTES:

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3. Chung-yuan, Chang, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism*, N.Y., Pantheon Books, 1975; pp. 72-73
4. *Ibid.*, p. 71
5. *Ibid.*, p. 60
6. Suzuki, D.T., *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1960, p. 111.
7. Chung-yuan, *ibid.*, 1975
8. Suzuki, D.T., *Essays In Zen Buddhism, First Series*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1961; p. 336
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11. Suzuki, D.T., *Essays In Zen Buddhism, First Series*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1961; p. 319
12. Chung-yuan, *op. cit.*; p. 141
13. Suzuki, D.T., *Manual of Zen Buddhism*, N.Y., Grove Press, 1960, p. 127.

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III. Milarepa

Tibet, that mysterious world high up in the Himalayan mountains, has borrowed much of its religious tradition from India, which it borders. From very early times, the mythology and philosophy of India found its way into the highlands of Nepal and Tibet, and, in a curious mixture with peculiarly Tibetan mythologies of a more primitive culture, formed a Totemistic religion called *Bon*. When Buddhism began to infiltrate Tibet in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Current Era, Bon was slow to give way; but by the 9th century, after the coming of Padma-Shambhava and other Buddhist monks, whose esoteric teachings were flavored with much from the Yogic and Tantric traditions, Tibetan Buddhism began to take on a settled character of its own, with its own sects and sub-sects.

Tibetan Buddhism was therefore compounded of the shamanism of Bon, the mythology of the Vedas, the Nondualism of the Upanishads, the ideals of the Buddha, and the disciplines of Yoga and Tantra. One of the more esoteric of the sects, which flourished in the 9th and 10th centuries, was the Karguptya line, descended from the great Buddhist yogi, Tilopa. And in the 11th century there was born a yogi of surpassing greatness who was to fuel the fire of Buddhist faith, and invigorate the Karguptya teachings, as no other man before or since has done. His name was Jetsun Milarepa.

Jetsun Mila (later to be known simply as Milarepa, meaning, “Mila, wearer of cotton garments”) was born to Mila-Sherab Gyalt-sen (“Mila, the Trophy of Wisdom”) and his wife, Karmo-Kyen (“White Garland”), in mid-August of 1052, at Kyanga-Tsa, in the province of Gungthang on the Tibetan frontier of Nepal (about 50 miles due north of modern Katmandu, the capital of Nepal). Milarepa’s father was a wealthy and industrious trader, and a man of some influence in his village. He owned a large piece of land, with a luxuriously spacious house, and he and his family were highly respected and honored in the community. He died when Milarepa was but seven years old, leaving his vast estate, including herds of cattle and horses, farmlands and granaries, to his son. He had stipulated that all was to be held in trust for Milarepa and cared for by an uncle and aunt until the child came of age.

The uncle and aunt, however, treated Milarepa, his mother, and his younger sister, Peta, very badly, forcing them to labor hard and long in the fields, with only meager earnings, and to live in great poverty and distress. And when the time came, after a number of years, for Milarepa and his mother and sister to receive the father's legacy, the uncle and aunt who had been entrusted with the property, refused to give it over. They had many sons and relatives, and were able, by their sheer numbers, to enforce their will upon Milarepa and his hapless family.

Milarepa's mother, Karmo-Kyen, was in such a distressed and enraged state of mind due to the perfidy of her husband's relatives that she sold what little she possessed in order to send Milarepa to a Guru who could teach him the art of black-magic, so that he could bring curses down upon the wicked uncle and aunt who had robbed them and bring destruction to their whole family. She threatened to kill herself if Milarepa did not agree to carry out her plan. And so, the young Milarepa traveled to a village called Yarlung-Kyorpo, where he became a student of a famous black-magician called Lama Yungtun-Trogyal ("Wrathful and Victorious Teacher of Evil").

The Lama taught Milarepa everything he knew, and then sent him after one year to someone more versed in the arts of destruction—another master of the black arts called Khulung Yonton-Gyatso, in the valley of Tsongpo. Here, Milarepa learned what he needed to destroy his archrivals. And thereupon, he caused by his incantations the death of thirty-five people, all sons and friends of the wicked aunt and uncle, by bringing down upon them the house in which they had gathered for a wedding feast. After that, he caused a hailstorm to destroy the grain crops of the entire village.

After thus consummating his mother's revenge upon those who had mistreated them, Milarepa felt great remorse for his deeds, and undertook to find a Teacher who would teach him the path of religion, so that he could free himself from the evil deeds he had committed. With this objective in mind, he traveled, with his old Guru's blessings, to Rinang to see a famous Lama of the Ningma Buddhist sect. This Lama told him to go to a monastery called Dowo-Lung ("Wheat Valley") in the province of Lhobrak, where he would find his destined Guru, a disciple of the famous Naropa, called Marpa, the Translator.

Marpa was called “the translator,” for his many translations of traditional Buddhist and Tantric scriptures, which he had personally brought to Tibet after a long search in India. He was a Lama; that is to say, a Guru, but he was not a monk. He was married and lived the life of a normal householder. He was the favored disciple of Naropa, who had been a disciple of Tilopa, the founder of the Karguptya school of Tantric Buddhism in the mid-tenth century. Tilopa had claimed that his doctrines were transmitted to him by the celestial Buddha, called Dorje Chang (*Vajra Dhara* in Sanskrit).

When Jetsun Milarepa went to Marpa, his arrival had been expected, due to a dream in which it was revealed to Marpa that a great disciple was coming to him, one who would become the bearer of the banner of Buddhist teaching in Tibet, and who would be celebrated throughout the world. Marpa, however, aware that Milarepa had accumulated many sins due to his black-magic practices which had first to be expiated before he could attain enlightenment, put Milarepa to many severe tasks and trials, and dealt with him very harshly, feigning indifference or anger toward him on many occasions. Marpa withheld his oft-promised teachings from Milarepa, while for years Jetsun was made to build stone houses in different locations and according to various plans, which then, on one pretext or another, he was required to tear down again. He had to convey the building-stones from great distances on his back, causing him to suffer from numerous bloody pus-oozing sores over the extent of his back.

Many times, Milarepa despaired of ever gaining the teachings, which would lead him to enlightenment. But throughout his trials, he had the sympathy and encouragement of Marpa’s wife, Damena, who nursed him and cared for his needs. On one occasion, Milarepa, through a plot hatched by Damena, pretended to leave Marpa, in despondency of ever receiving the precious teachings of his Guru, only to be beaten and kicked by Marpa, who saw through the pretense.

After much such ill treatment, and in utter frustration, Milarepa set out to find another Guru, and stayed for a time with one of Marpa’s chief disciples, Ngogdun-Chudor, to whom he had falsely represented himself. But in time, Marpa learned of his whereabouts, and sent for him. Marpa then confided to Milarepa that all his apparent mistreatment of him had been for his own benefit. He had known, he said, that Milarepa was a

worthy disciple who would one day bring him fame, but he had to bring him to utter despair nine separate times to expiate the sins of his past and to enable him to be fit to attain enlightenment in this lifetime. However, he had succeeded in so doing only eight times, interrupted in his last attempt by Milarepa's escape. Now, said Marpa, he would indeed attain enlightenment, but he would have to undergo yet more suffering in the attempt.

Relieved to know that his Guru had treated him so badly, not out of contempt, but out of concern for his welfare, Milarepa now began a new period in his *sadhana*. He was duly initiated into monkhood by Marpa and received from him the holy teaching. Thereafter, Milarepa lived in a cave for eleven months practicing intense meditation, while his Guru provided him with food and other essentials. At the end of this period, Marpa, who was now quite old, traveled to India to see his own Guru, Naropa; and after receiving his instructions, returned to pass the mantle of the Karguptya sect to Milarepa.

Milarepa remained several more years with Marpa, meditating in his cave, and practicing the discipline of *Tum-mo*, the awakening of the inner fire to heat his body in the severe cold of the mountains. And when he had attained proficiency in this practice, he approached Marpa, requesting that he be allowed to visit for one last time his old home, to see if his mother and sister were still alive and cared for. Marpa consented but added that he and Milarepa would never see each other again, as Marpa was nearing the time of his death. He gave thorough instructions to his disciple to remain at his ancestral home for only seven days, and thereafter to take himself to the remote caves in the mountains far from civilization, and there to continue his meditations to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all living creatures. With much show of emotion and tears from Marpa and Damena, Milarepa then set off on his journey to Kyanga-Tsa.

When Milarepa returned to his old home, he found it dilapidated and empty, and learned that his mother had been dead for eight years, and his sister, now a beggar, had disappeared and no one knew her whereabouts. After a short stay, during which he exchanged his family property for a store of barley-meal and other provisions, he retired to a remote cave where he lived for three years on the provisions that he had taken with

him. Thereafter, his diet was reduced to a soup made of nettles, which he found growing in a spring-fed field.

In time, his clothes rotted off, and his body became horribly emaciated. His skin and even his hair turned dark green from the solitary diet of green nettles. But it happened that his long-lost sister, Peta, having heard of his whereabouts, came to the cave to see him, and, appalled at his sad appearance, brought him food and clothing, and nursed him back to health. Yet, despite her entreaties, Milarepa would not give up his resolve to attain full enlightenment. And so, he continued to live in caves far from the populace, meditating steadfastly on the *Dharmakaya*, the Absolute.

Milarepa moved from cave to cave in the snowy mountain fastnesses, and, having passed through many inner trials, temptations, and visionary experiences, at last became firmly established in the highest realization of the all-pervading Consciousness. “At last,” he said, “the object of meditation, the act of meditation, and the meditator are so interwoven with each other that now I do not even know how to meditate!” He had also acquired an abundance of *siddhis* (supernormal powers), and before long, a number of disciples gathered around the now-famous yogi who had attained Buddhahood. Among his disciples, there were twenty-five accomplished yogis who, themselves, became saints through his blessings; of these, four were women.

Exhorting all his followers to spiritual endeavor, he taught them to abandon all other concerns in order to obtain enlightenment. “I have obtained spiritual knowledge,” he told them, “through giving up all thought of food, clothing and reputation. Inspired with zeal in my heart, I bore every hardship and inured myself to all sorts of privations of the body; I devoted myself to meditation in the most unfrequented and solitary places. Thus, did I obtain knowledge and spiritual experience; do you also follow in the path trodden by me, and practice devotion as I have done.”¹

Thereafter, Milarepa traveled about from mountain to mountain, community to community, to spread his teachings of enlightenment. Oftentimes, during his travels, he met with proud and learned scholars, who, having attained nothing more than book-learning, were of the opinion that their intellectual knowledge was the highest knowledge to be attained; and they attributed to Milarepa the same base motivations for

fame and prestige which they themselves possessed. One such scholar, Geshe (pandit) Tsaphuwa, eager to engage Milarepa in debate, asked him to give an interpretation of some doctrines found in a certain book. Said Milarepa to the Geshe: "I have never valued the mere sophistry of intellectual knowledge, which is set down in books in order to be committed to memory. These lead only to mental confusion, and not to those practices which conduct one to the actual realization of Truth."² Then he asked the Geshe to listen to this song:

Obeisance to the honored feet of Marpa the Translator! May
 I be far removed from contending creeds and dogmas. Ever
 since my Lord's grace entered my mind,
 My mind has never strayed to seek such distractions.
 Accustomed long to contemplating love and compassion, I
 have forgotten all difference between myself and others.
 Accustomed long to meditating on my Guru as enhaloed
 over my head, I have forgotten all those who rule by power
 and prestige.
 Accustomed long to meditating on my guardian deities as
 inseparable from myself, I have forgotten the lowly fleshly
 form.
 Accustomed long to meditating on the secret whispered
 truths, I have forgotten all that is said in written or printed
 books.
 Accustomed, as I have been, to the study of the eternal
 Truth, I've lost all knowledge of ignorance.

Accustomed, as I've been, to contemplating both nirvana
 and samsara as inherent in myself, I have forgotten to think
 of hope and fear.
 Accustomed, as I've been, to meditating on this life and the
 next as one, I have forgotten the dread of birth and death.

Accustomed long to studying, by myself, my own
 experiences, I have forgotten the need to seek the opinions
 of friends and brethren.

Accustomed long to applying each new experience to my own spiritual growth, I have forgotten all creeds and dogmas.

Accustomed long to meditating on the Unborn, the Indestructible, the Unchanging, I have forgotten all definitions of this or that particular goal.

Accustomed long to meditating on all visible phenomena as the Dharmakaya, I have forgotten all meditations on what is produced by the mind.

Accustomed long to keeping my mind in the uncreated state of freedom, I have forgotten all conventions and artificialities.

Accustomed long to humbleness, of body and mind, I have forgotten the pride and haughty manner of the mighty.

Accustomed long to regarding my fleshly body as my hermitage, I have forgotten the ease and comfort of retreats and monasteries.

Accustomed long to knowing the meaning of the Wordless, I have forgotten the way to trace the roots of verbs, and the sources of words and phrases.

You, O learned one, may trace out these things in your books [if you wish].³

It is said that this very Geshe to whom Milarepa sang this song thereafter poisoned Milarepa out of malicious envy; and Milarepa, aware that his death was approaching soon anyway, accepted it knowingly. Then, as his life was coming to its end, Milarepa called to himself all his devotees and disciples from far and wide, and gave to them his final teachings, which are, in many respects, reminiscent of the last instructions given by Gautama, the Buddha, to his own disciples:

All worldly pursuits have but one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow; acquisitions end in dispersion; buildings in destruction; meetings in separation; births in death.

Knowing this, one should, from the very first, renounce acquisitions and storing-up, and building, and meeting; and, faithful to the commands of an eminent Guru, set about

realizing the Truth. That alone is the best of religious observances.

...As regards the method of acquiring practical spiritual knowledge, if you find a certain practice increases your evil passions and tends you toward selfishness, abandon it, though

it may appear to others virtuous. And if any course of action tends to counteract your evil passions, and to benefit sentient beings, know that to be the true and holy path, and continue it, even though it should appear to others to be sinful.

...Life is short, and the time of death is uncertain; so, apply yourselves to meditation. Avoid doing evil, and acquire merit, to the best of your ability, even at the cost of life itself. In short, act so that you will have no cause to be ashamed of yourselves; and hold fast to this rule.

...Works performed for the good of others seldom succeed if not wholly freed from self-interest. It is difficult to meet success in the effort to insure one's own spiritual welfare, even without seeking to benefit others. If you seek another's spiritual welfare before attaining your own, it would be like a helplessly drowning man trying to save another man in the same predicament. Therefore, one should not be too anxious and hasty in setting out to save others before one has, oneself, realized Truth in Its fullness. That would be like the blind leading the blind. As long as the sky endures, there will be no dearth of sentient beings for you to serve, and your opportunity for such service will come. Till it does, I exhort each one of you to keep but one resolve: namely, to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all living creatures.

...Maintain the state of undistractedness, and distractions will fly away. Dwell alone, and you shall find the Friend. Take the lowest place, and you shall reach the highest. Hasten slowly, and you shall soon arrive. Renounce all

worldly goals, and you shall reach the highest Goal. If you follow this unfrequented path, you will find the shortest way. If you realize *Sunyata* (the absolute Emptiness), compassion will arise within your hearts; and when you lose all differentiation between yourself and others, then you will be fit to serve others. ⁴

Milarepa, in the company of his illustrious disciples and a host of celestial beings, passed away in his mountain homeland in 1135 C.E., at the age of eighty-four. And from that time to the present, his life, his unswerving perseverance in the pursuit of enlightenment, his teachings, and his incomparable songs, have inspired millions of souls to the attainment of the liberating Truth to which he dedicated his life.

NOTES:

1. Evans-Wentz, W.Y., *Tibet's Great Yogi, Milarepa*, N.Y., Oxford Univ. Press, 1971; p. 234.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-247.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 259, 261, 262, 270, 271

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IV. Buddhism: A Metaphysical Critique

The man, Siddhartha Gotama, who is said to have been born in northeastern India in 563 B.C.E., sought enlightenment as a young man, and upon attaining it, became known as ‘the Buddha’, the awakened one. His experience of the Eternal, an experience he called *nirvana*, suggesting the extinguishing of the ego-sense, was undoubtedly genuine. It was identical with the experience of all who have obtained the vision of the transcendent Reality both before and after him. However, the metaphysics he contrived in order to explain his experience in conceptual terms is uniquely his own and bears little similarity to either the Platonist metaphysics or the metaphysics of Advaita (Nondual) Vedanta.

The Buddha began his spiritual quest in his late twenties, was enlightened in his mid-thirties or early forties, and lived on into his eighties, and so for many years freely gave his teachings to those student-disciples who gathered around him. We may be fairly certain, therefore, that the teachings that have come down to us were for the most part what he taught, even though nearly a century had passed before his teachings were collected, and several centuries passed after his death before those collected teachings were written, published, and became known as the tenets of ‘Buddhism’.

No doubt, the three most identifiable doctrines of Buddhism pertaining to our comparison are these: the doctrine of the *skandhas* (or “aggregates”); the doctrine of *pratitya samutpada* (dependent origination); and the doctrine of *anatman* (the non-existence of a self, or soul).

Since there is no Godhead or Its Creative Power in the Buddhist system, there is no cosmological genesis such as is posited in a Theistic system. The Buddha’s teachings center, not on a cosmological origin, but rather on the origination of human existence. This is where the *skandhas* come in. These are the aggregations of tendencies that the Buddha says bring about a human birth.

According to the Buddha, a human is composed of five bundles or aggregates (*skandhas*): (1) the aggregate of *matter*, which includes the body made of four elements (solid, fluid, heat, and motion), from which are derived five basic sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, and skin); (2) the aggregate of *feelings*: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, which arise from the contact between a sense organ and a sense object, and which also give rise to

a sixth sense organ: the mind, which perceives mental objects; (3) the aggregate of *perceptions*, which arise from the interrelationship between the six sense organs and their objects; (4) the aggregate of *mental formations*, which includes all the possible activities of the mind; and (5) the aggregate of *consciousness*, the various kinds of which arise as awareness of the various objects of perception by the senses and the mind. Notice that Consciousness, in the Buddha's system, does not exist independently, but arises only as an awareness dependent upon the contact between a sense organ and its object.

According to the Buddha, it is these five aggregates, or bundles, which, coming together, constitute the spontaneous arising of the ego-sense, the sense of 'I'. There is no suggestion in the Buddhist metaphysics of a central originating Power, Consciousness, or eternal Ground to serve as the source of these various 'bundles'; nor is there anywhere in this scheme any mention of either a natural or supernatural origination of the universe. This, some will say, is due to the Buddha's famous unwillingness to formulate a complete metaphysical system. Alas, a metaphysical system was developed nonetheless. Perhaps we must hold lesser luminaries responsible for the results; but the doctrines of Buddhism are steadfastly attributed to the Buddha himself, and so we must charge him with inventing the features of the system attributed to him.

Here, I think it is necessary to insert a cautionary note: Anyone who has read widely, who is familiar with the writings of men living in past centuries as well as contemporaries, knows that accurate knowledge regarding the workings of both physical and psychological nature has increased rather than declined over the centuries, and many an assumption from centuries ago is now regarded as obsolete and inapplicable to our present understanding of things. Indeed, lists of constituent ingredients such as the Buddha enumerates above were common among Indian philosophers of the period, and are now viewed as archaic.

How unfortunate that intelligent men who ponder the things of the Spirit tend to place such unquestioning faith in the authoritarian utterings of those seers who lived in very ancient times, or in a permanent legacy of literature containing the purported utterances of such men! In every lasting religious tradition, there is a faithful reliance on the absolute verity of writings that originated in the minds of men whose experience and learning was excellent

in the time that they wrote several millennia ago, but who can no longer be regarded as well-informed by our present standards.

Spiritual understanding is frequently exempted from this kind of critical thinking because, it is argued, spiritual realities, being eternal, are not affected by changing views concerning the psychological or physical world. Yet we must recognize that so very often the written texts handed down as religious documents contain not only spiritual directions, but also many references to matters that may well be subject to empirical scrutiny—matters which have been shown in modern times to have been sorely misapprehended, or simply erroneously stated.

It would seem to be appropriate therefore for sincere researchers in each of the religious traditions to carefully re-examine even their most revered ancient books, with the understanding and realization that these holy books were written in a time when the world, let alone the distant galaxies, had not been explored, when the notions firmly held regarding creation, cosmology, human history, and the laws of nature were yet simplistic, primitive, and often false. I am not suggesting, as extreme elements among the secular materialists of today do, that we should throw out the good and true along with the bad and false in the various religious texts; I am only suggesting that we think of re-evaluating spiritual teachings in a way that better satisfies our modern intellectual integrity, and better represents our present understandings. Much of our religious past is profoundly valuable; and sadly, much of it is valuable only as an historical record chronicling the many speculative and imaginative accounts left by men of past ages, and which are today considered erroneous.

Real mystical experience can profoundly challenge one's earlier perspective, and in the search for a perspective that makes rational sense of our experience, we may be introduced to various spiritual traditions whose roots date from an obscure past and whose tenets, which may be absurd on their face, are well fortified by the ardor and certainty of accumulated testimonials. The personal appeal of one tradition over another no doubt involves an element of one's previous karma, even though we may prefer to think that our choices are purely rational. And, while we are not merely the products of our previous tendencies and actions, we are nonetheless deeply influenced by these ingrained habits. This is why it is important to carefully analyze and compare competing doctrines that purport to explain spiritual

(mystical) experience so as to reach conclusions that fit in all respects with what is actually experienced in the unitive vision.

Let us now move on to a doctrine in the Buddhist lexicon that may seem to be in conflict with the previously described doctrine of the *skandhas*: that of *pratitya samutpada*, the doctrine of ‘dependent origination’. It posits a 12-linked chain of causes likewise meant to explain the generation of a cycle of human birth. The originating cause of existence, says the Buddha, is (1) *avidya*, or ‘ignorance; which gives rise to (2) ‘volitional action’; which in turn gives rise to (3) ‘conditioned consciousness’; which in turn gives rise to (4) ‘name-and-form’; which in turn gives rise to (5) ‘the six bases (i.e., the five senses plus mind)’; which in turn gives rise to (6) ‘sense-impressions’; which in turn gives rise to (7) ‘feelings’; which in turn gives rise to (8) ‘desire’ or ‘craving’; which in turn gives rise to (9) ‘attachment’; which in turn gives rise to (10) ‘becoming’ (the birth or rebirth process); which in turn gives rise to (11) ‘birth’ or ‘rebirth’; which gives rise (eventually) to (12) ‘old age and death’.

This elaborate chain of causes is intended to describe how we arise as existents from the (unnamed, but implied) undifferentiated One; and this brings us to the third and most important doctrine of the Buddha: the doctrine of *anatma*, or, literally, ‘no-self’. As we can see from the above listing of the elements of human existence, there is no permanent identity anywhere to be found; all indeed is *dukkha*, ‘suffering’; *anitya*, ‘impermanence’; and *anatman*, ‘not self’.

This doctrine, of *anatma*, that no individual soul exists, brings up numerous questions, such as the obvious questions regarding rebirth and karma. While the Buddha believed in rebirth, he did not believe in reincarnation because, in his view, there is no soul to reincarnate. If there is no soul to reincarnate, ‘what, then,’ we must ask, ‘is reborn?’ And the Buddha replies, ‘the *skandhas*, which are the aggregates of tendencies and the results of karma.’ But no specific *persona* or soul is reborn, so there is no continuation, no progressive evolution of a particular being (though, paradoxically, it is said that the Buddha remembered *his own* past incarnations). According to the Buddha, when ignorance is destroyed (by enlightenment), there is no longer a causal ‘seed’ prompting further rebirth, and so liberation results. Since there is no soul or permanent identity, what is liberated upon enlightenment is apparently the *skandhas*. To some, this may seem an anticlimactic and unfortunate denouement.

The very designation, *anatman*, is unfortunate as well, since *atman* is not the traditional term for the ego-sense, but is the Sanskrit word used to signify the Eternal Self—the very antithesis of the ego-sense. Had the term *ajiva* been used instead, much misunderstanding could long ago have been avoided; but as it is, the word *anatman* (*anatta* in the Pali scriptures), which is intended to negate the ego-sense, has the unfortunate connotation of negating the very Reality that supplants the ego-sense in the experience of enlightenment. That there is no permanent personal identity associated with the human body/mind complex is a long-held conviction of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of the Upanishads, and a truth that is self-revealed in the mystical experience referred to in Vedantic literature as *samadhi*, and in Buddhist literature as *nirvana*.

But does that experience reveal only that there is no personal identity? No! In the Vedantic tradition, as in the Platonist tradition, it is well established that the sense of self arises from an eternal Ground, or substratum of Consciousness; also, the (mystical) experience itself reveals the Eternal Reality that alone is seen to be the *true* identity of all, and the source of the Consciousness one had been experiencing all along. It is not a personal identity, but an eternal Identity, which the Upanishads call the *Atman*, ‘the Self’.¹ It is none else but the One, *Brahman*. Though some later Buddhist writers called that One *Tathata* or the *Dharmakaya*, here, in a passage from an ancient text purporting to be his own words, the Buddha speaks of that eternal Reality as “the Unborn”:

Monks, there is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Unmade and Unconditioned. Were there not the Unborn, Unoriginated, Unmade and Unconditioned, there would be no escape from the born, originated, made and conditioned. Since there *is* the Unborn, Unoriginated, Unmade and Unconditioned, there is escape from the born, originated, made and conditioned.²

This acknowledgement by the Buddha of an eternal Reality beyond the ‘dependently originated’ *skandhas*, accessible to creatures born into this world, would seem to belie much of what we have absorbed about Buddhism up to this point, and to align his teachings with a ‘theological’ perspective. And so, there remains much ambiguity to overcome. What is clear is that the Buddha, having experienced the One, rightfully taught his disciples the means of approaching that experience through introspection,

through meditation on their own true nature. There, as he rightfully indicated, they would find the truth for themselves. But, when it came to formulating a comprehensive and consistent metaphysics, he fell a bit short, and left behind a confusing legacy of contradictions and misconceptions. One feels it might have been fortunate if he had kept to his stated intention to say nothing about such matters.

Let us now examine and compare the metaphysics of Plotinus: The permeation of the material universe by an ethereal Soul constitutes the foundation of Plotinus' metaphysical vision. Soul, emanated from the Divine Mind, has no physical parameters; It does not consist of mass or energy; It does not extend as a radiation into space. It is entirely beyond comparison with physical spatio-temporal phenomena. But the fact is that our language is framed in terms of phenomenal temporality, and we have only the tools of our phenomenally based language to use when attempting to convey the operation of the Divine Mind by means of conceptual language.

Can we even form an image in our minds of the emanated extension of the Divine Mind that is referred to as "Soul"? Yet without such an extension of Spirit, how and in what way would we be connected to, and therefore be of the same essence as, the Divine? We are souls, of a Divine nature; or we are some other thing with no connection or access to a Divine and eternal nature. It is not enough to simply say, 'There is no soul, yet we nonetheless partake of eternal Consciousness.' If we experience in our own being that eternal Consciousness, by what means do we do so? And by what pathway are we connected to it? Surely, we cannot reasonably state that the originating Cause of existence is 'ignorance'.

We reach the heart of this dispute when we see that Plotinus and the Buddha use the one word, "soul," to mean two different things: the Buddha means by it an illusory personal identity applied to a particular body-mind complex; Plotinus means by it an emanation from the Divine Mind, who is the creative aspect of the One. In negating the existence of the ego-soul, the Buddha is correct; however, if Plotinus were to negate the soul, he would place himself among the apostates, the infidels.

Plotinus acknowledges, as do the Upanishads, that the soul is capable of remaining blind to its Divine nature, its innate capacity, attributing an illusory 'I' to its transient embodiment, and thereby living a superficial life

concerned only with sensual and emotional pleasures, promoting its own aggrandizement and individual welfare. But eventually it must revise its outlook; for, understand, the soul is nothing else but the Divine—as a ray of sunlight is nothing but sun. Its only real identity is Divine Consciousness. Its association with body establishes an ego-sense, the illusion of an ‘I’, a *personal* identity, associated with one particular physical entity in a spatio-temporal universe. But there was never an actual personal identity; it was always the Divine Consciousness. The sense of a personal individual identity was simply an illusion, to be sure. But that does not mean that its true identity is not Soul.

Soul, remember, is the one Divine Consciousness; it is not something other than the one Divine Consciousness. When the soul is illumined by the God-given revelation of its true nature, its eternal, illimitable Self is revealed, and the illusion of a separate personal identity vanishes as all erroneous imaginations do. It is still soul—it is still a ray of Divine Consciousness. One must not become beguiled by mere word-confusion. If we could form meaningful language by using just one word, we could say: “God God God God.” But no one would know what we were trying to convey. In order to speak of the different ways that God manifests, we give different names to His differing aspects, and we speak of God as soul, God as matter, God as energy, God as consciousness; and so, we have all these seemingly disparate words. But “soul” is nothing but God; body is nothing but God, the many worlds strung throughout the night sky are nothing but God. How might one speak more clearly?

For those who acknowledge the one Divine existence as the Ground of all reality including themselves, the question of a separate personal self does not arise. If such a question were to arise, they would answer: ‘The One who *is* lives me. And He alone is, manifesting as soul and all else as well.’ For such as these, it is clear that only pitifully empty dreams remain when the blissful Giver of life and joy, the center and life-breath of one’s very being, is discounted and rejected.

You may tell me, “there is no soul.” And I will reply, “With what will you replace it?” If you don’t like my word, please use your own word to describe what your eternal essence is revealed to be. But you cannot negate That which is intended by the word, *soul*; for It is the eternal fabric of your very being, of your thinking and speaking and seeing and acting; It is indeed

the famous “Unborn” of the Buddha. It is the only reality that exists in and as whatever phenomena or noumena you may suggest for consideration.

If you are truly confirmed in the belief or knowledge that there is one and only One who is the origin, activator, manifestation and experienter of all that exists, and in the faith or knowledge that nothing outside of or other than that One exists in all the three worlds, be at peace; we are in perfect agreement. And if you are consistent in this belief or knowledge, you must acknowledge that you, being one of those things that exists, are undoubtedly included in the one Reality, are made of the one Reality, and are connected by indissoluble bonds to It and to all else that has existence, and are safely and inescapably contained in, embraced and empowered by, and ultimately one with, the omnipresent Reality—which you are free and most welcome to call by any name you like.

NOTE:

1. Just as the peak and the trough of a wave are complementary, “I” and “Thou” are complementary; that is, they require each other in order to exist. “I” cannot exist without the presumption of “Thou;” in other words, the subjective perspective requires the perception of an object; every perceived object requires a subject, and vice versa. In the unitive vision experienced by the illumined, neither of these exists; there is only the One, the absolute Reality, sometimes referred to as “the Self.”

Buddhists say there is no God, and they don’t like using the phrase “the Self,” as they equate it with the subjective “I,” and they say, that it doesn’t exist either. From the Buddhist’s perspective, what they say is correct: Truly, there is no God, and there is no subject (“I”). There is only the One. The problem is that other philosophies, like Vedanta, call the One by the name, “the Self (*Atman*).” And that is where the confusion arises. It is simply a conflict of Semantics.

If a Buddhist says, “there is no self,” he means that there is in reality no subjective “I.” If a Hindu were to say, “there is no self,” he would be saying, “there is in reality no *jiva*, no soul identity.” However, he would insist that, “what remains eternally is the one Self (*Atman*),” which is identical to the absolute Reality.

So long as there is an “I” there is a “Thou,” or God. When the individual consciousness is illumined, the “I” disappears, and so does “Thou” or God. But that doesn’t mean that there is Nothing left. We may think of the conscious Reality that remains as “the Godhead,” or “the absolute Consciousness,” or “the One.” Buddhists call It “Tathata,” or “Dharmakaya.” You see, whatever confusion arises regarding God and the Self, does so from the peculiar differences and complexity of language. The illumined among the Buddhists, and the illumined among the Hindus, are in full agreement as to the truth of the one Reality. It is only the terminology of their languages that disagree.

2. The Buddha, *Udana, Patalgam* 8.3.
from G.M. Strong, *The Udana: The Solemn Utterances of The Buddha*, trans. by Dawsonne Melancthon Strong, 1902; p. 115.
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