

Further Thoughts on the Relation of Buddhism and the Vedanta with Special Reference to the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo

Part 2 of 7

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At the close of Part 1, we gave a fairly extended quotation from William James, in which he confirmed the position maintained here, namely, that for him who has had a well-developed or Fundamental Realization that stands as authority for him. The question arises, of course, how far this authority extends beyond the individual who has had the imperience to others. The further quotation from William James has a very substantial significance here, and I shall quote from him beginning on p. 424 and continuing from there:

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But I now proceed to add that mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption. They form a consensus and have an unequivocal outcome; and it would be odd, mystics might say, if such a unanimous type of experience should prove to be altogether wrong. At bottom, however, this would only be an appeal to numbers, like the appeal of rationalism the other way; and the appeal to numbers has no logical force. If we acknowledge it, it is for "suggestive," not for logical reasons: we follow the majority because to do so suits our life.

But even this presumption from the unanimity of mystics is far from being strong. In characterizing mystic states as pantheistic, optimistic, etc., I am afraid I over-simplified the truth. I did so for expository reasons, and to keep the closer to the classic mystical tradition. The classic religious mysticism, it now must be confessed, is only a "privileged case." It is an *extract* kept true to type by the selection of the fittest specimens and their preservation in "schools." It is carved out from a much larger mass; and if we take the larger mass as seriously as religious mysticism has historically taken itself, we find that the supposed unanimity largely disappears. To begin with, even religious mysticism itself, the kind that accumulates traditions and makes schools, is much less unanimous than I have allowed. It has been both ascetic and antinomianly self-indulgent within the Christian church. It is dualistic in Sankhya, and monistic in Vedanta philosophy. I called it pantheistic; but the great Spanish mystics are anything but pantheists. They are with few exceptions non-metaphysical

minds, for whom “the category of personality” is absolute. The “union” of man with God is for them much more like an occasional miracle than like an original identity. How different again, apart from the happiness common to all, is the mysticism of Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Richard Jefferies, and other naturalistic pantheists, from the more distinctively Christian sort. The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional mood. We have no right, therefore, to invoke its prestige as distinctively in favor of any special belief, such as that in absolute idealism, or in the absolute monistic identity, or in the absolute goodness, of the world. It is only relatively in favor of all these things—it passes out of common human consciousness in the direction in which they lie.

So much for religious mysticism proper. But more remains to be told, for religious mysticism is only one half of mysticism. The other half has no accumulated traditions except those which the text-books on insanity supply. Open any one of these, and you will find abundant cases in which “mystical ideas” are cited as characteristic symptoms of enfeebled or deluded states of mind. In delusional insanity, paranoia, as they sometimes call it, we have a *diabolical* mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down. The same sense of ineffable importance in the smallest events, the same texts and words coming with new meanings, the same voices and visions and leadings and missions, the same controlling by extraneous powers; only this time the emotion is pessimistic: instead of consolations we have desolations; the meanings are dreadful; and the powers are enemies to life. It is evident from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. That region contains every kind of matter: “seraph and snake” abide there side by side. To come from thence is no infallible credential. What comes must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense. Its value must be ascertained by empirical methods, so long as we are not mystics ourselves.

Once more, then, I repeat that non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature.¹

What is presented by William James here is a problem of major importance. It is clear that the simple fact that a report comes from that psychological state which corresponds to the mystical states of consciousness is no guarantee that it is the absolute

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), 424-426.

and final word. There are materials of such diverse sort that there is imperative need for discrimination. Psychologically considered, these states correspond to certain psychological conditions that can be identified. They're generally known as trance or ecstatic states and they are even objectively recognizable by certain physiological marks. The conclusion forced upon us as a result of looking at the total record of the kind of material that comes from out such psychological states implies that the state itself is not a guarantee of the value which comes forth from it. This is not intrinsically different from the problem in connection with ordinary sensuous states. Sensuous perception, as we have seen, can give us a dream content; it can give us a mirage; and, it can give us a delusion such as that of the snake in the rope—a hallucination. Also, in addition to this, the perceptual field may give us impressions that are contrary to what we are forced to regard as a truer representation of reality; thus, it gives us the impression that the earth is flat; also, that the sun goes around the earth; and, it gives us an impression of certain apparent values in the luminosity of stars which when subjected to serious discriminating study may be quite different from the actual facts. We are not, therefore, dealing with an authority that transcends the need of discrimination any more than does sense impression in its own primitive immediacy give us a true conception of external relationships which we may regard as real.

I call your attention now to something that was considered by William James in the very first chapter of the volume from which we have quoted, namely, that there are two types of judgments, one of which is *existential* and the other is a judgment of *meaning* or a *spiritual judgment*. The *existential* judgment is the type of judgment made by science in determining fact; the *spiritual* or *meaningful* judgment is one that considers the value or the meaningfulness of the existential fact. The existential fact of these mystical states of consciousness is that they appear as trance or ecstasy. From the fact that a pronouncement of value and meaning comes forth from such a state, we cannot conclude that it is true simply because it comes from such a state. That is all that has been proven by these items quoted by William James. We cannot abandon discrimination. But on the other hand, because obnoxious material may come forth from such trance states, it by no means follows that all the material is therefore not to be trusted; we have other considerations. Sri Aurobindo has dealt with this problem and he has pointed out in his discussion of the “intermediate zone,” that there are transitional zones entered by means of the trance or ecstatic state of consciousness which are dark, and evil, and false, and also only partial revelations of ultimate Truth.

The next question which comes before us is how do we apply the principle of discrimination? How do we determine truth? In relationship to the perceptual order, the operating instrument is predominately the conceptual system of knowledge. For instance, a familiar test is that which has been identified by Pragmatism. A proposition or judgment is regarded as true if it leads to the expectation of experiences or discoveries that will ultimately be reached within the perceptual order; then it has passed the pragmatic test of truth. Thus, on the question as to whether the world is flat, as it appears to be, or has some other shape, namely, roughly spherical, as we now regard it with ample reason, there is a test of truth. If the world is flat, a circumnavigation of it is impossible; if it is spherical in shape, then it is possible to go west and arrive again at the starting point from the east. This is an example of pragmatic testing. We predicted that, if spherical, this could be done, and it was possible to do so within the perceptual order.

There is also another test which is preeminent in mathematics, namely, if a system is self-consistent, then it exists.

In general, in dealing with the question of truth as related to the perceptual order, the commanding power in the exercise of discrimination is the conceptual order of functioning. In the higher problem of discrimination with respect to introceptual realities or truths, this principle is inadequate. It is adequate with respect to the perceptual order because the conceptual order transcends it. But the conceptual order is inadequate with respect to the introceptual order because the latter transcends the conceptual. Here there has been in the past, as Sri Aurobindo has pointed out, a test. Back in the days of the *Vedas*, in the days of the *Rishis*, the question that was put is not what do you *think*, but what do you *know*. A knowledge level might be inferior, but valid within its range. It, however, was superseded by a higher knowledge level. The function that opens doors to cognition here is Realization, or Mystical Awakening, as we have already pointed out. The knowledge of one level of Realization may be viewed as valid within its zone; and, thus, there could be a zone opened up to this kind of consciousness that was dark and led to despondency and, in a sense, it would still be true. The correction of such a view would lie in the awakening to a Realization of a higher order, or a higher range, that placed this minor fraction of truth in perspective with respect to a larger whole. Thus, the correcting of a lesser and relatively inadequate Realization would be through the rising to a more comprehensive or inclusive Realization.

The principle can be illustrated out of my own experience. On August 7, 1936, there was an ascension to a liberating state of consciousness which involved the sense of ascending above space, time, and law, to identification with that from which space, and law, and time were derived. And the experience was one of overpowering delight and utter loveliness and sweetness. Having been impressed by the vow of Kwan-Yin which says: “Never will I seek nor receive private, individual salvation alone; never will I enter into final peace alone; but forever, and everywhere, will I strive for the redemption of all creatures throughout the world”—having been, as I said, impressed for long with this vow, I felt obligated to turn my back upon a purely private resolution of a problem and thought that thenceforth the greatest day was that day upon which I was turning my back. Later, there walked into my consciousness, exactly thirty-three days later, a state of Realization which I did not know existed and so was not in any way seeking it. Part of the meaning of this Realization is expressed as follows: it involved, not a state of ecstatic delight, but a state of absolute equilibrium, absolute equality of view with respect to delight and suffering, and all pairs of opposites. It involved also the Realization that there is no permanent subject to consciousness nor any permanent object of consciousness but only an indestructible and self-existent eternal Consciousness.

The first of these two Realizations confirmed the position formulated in the *Advaita Vedanta* as presented by Shankaracharya. It was a state of identification with the pure Self and involved the idea of entity, of permanent soul, of *being* as the root of things. But the second Realization had the effect of placing above this, a state in which Consciousness, in a pure form, transcended the notion of *being*, the notion of *soul*, so that they had an existence, in fact, at a more derivative level, but did not constitute the substance of a more transcendent level. It did not annul the earlier Realization, but showed it to stand as a partial view which came to occupy a different place in the light of

a larger view. In the earlier Realization there was a sense of an enormous luminousness, not in the sensual sense, but in another subtle sense. In the latter, there was rather the sense of a blending of light with darkness in a balance that had the value of something like *twilight*. Now, this illustrates what I believe to be the point that Aurobindo brought out, that an earlier state of Realization is enlarged and corrected by a more comprehensive state. The main factor here is not conceptual criticism, for conceptual criticism is not capable of submitting material more comprehensive than itself to review. It is a case where a deeper level of the introceptual consciousness acts as a corrective of the Realizations and interpretations that grow out of a less comprehensive view. Here is an application of the principle of discrimination. I would not, today, say that I know the last word of Realization; in fact, I have reason to believe, and even to be certain, that that is not the case. But I do know that which came from this Realization of the High Indifference as the highest point I now know and there were intimations of a still vaster beyond. But I conceive my first duty to be the presentation of that degree of truth which conforms to this, the highest Realization that I know.

What, then, is the relationship of any philosophic statement or interpretation, which of necessity is in conceptual terms, to the actual consciousness-value of a state of Realization? This question is one of major importance, and, indeed, is not essentially different from the parallel question of what is the relationship of any conceptual interpretation or philosophy to the content given by pure or primitive perception. Careful analysis of these different modes or states of consciousness shows that there is an essential incommensurability, in the first case between perceptuality, or the contents of perception, and the modes of conceptual cognition; and second, as between the state of consciousness given by Realization and, likewise, the modes of conceptual cognition. They are of different orders. There is not a continuum between them. There is something like a jump when one steps from one order to the other, a break in continuity.

But there arises this point, that it is the conceptual order that gives us the power of communication, the power of storing values in the medium of mental understanding, and if communication is of importance, or if understanding is of importance, then the conceptual factor must enter into the picture. If one were content to abide exclusively in a state of Realization by himself and remain completely wordless and thoughtless, that would be entirely adequate for him; but, if on the other hand, he were to share those values with other centers of consciousness, communication becomes necessary. And, in the same way, if we are to deal in forms of communication and understanding with respect to the primitive material of pure, sensuous cognition, the same problem arises. And there we have the base for the development of our various sciences and philosophies.

First, let us admit that that which is given by conceptuality is not precisely the same as that which is given by pure, primitive perception; and secondly, and even more emphatically, that which is given by conceptuality is not identical with the pure *quale* of the consciousness given through Realization. There is a relationship here of representation or pointing on the part of the conceptual function. Now, there are, indeed, philosophies that more or less effectively present the experiences from perception, on one hand, and from given states of introception or Realization, on the other, and there are other philosophies that fail to do this. But, in either case, it would appear there is no one

philosophy yet possible to conceptual or thinking man that is exclusively valid. This is a point that must be, I think, accepted. Now, as to an illustration of this, if we deal with the content of a purely perceptual cognition, a conceptual figure which is known as materialistic philosophy of one sort or another might be acceptable, and so also would be philosophies of the positivistic type at a higher level of sophistication. This sort of material probably makes up the great bulk of the philosophic thinking of humanity. Now, with respect to the introceptual level in relationship to philosophy, there are also statements in conceptual terms that harmonize in an essential degree with a given introceptual content or state, while other philosophies do not. And here we come to points where there may be differences in philosophic statement that come from states of introceptive Realization at different levels.

Here I will deal with but three outstanding figures in the history of liberating, or enlightening, or realizing, of human consciousness, namely, the three figures: Gautama Buddha, Shankaracharya, and Sri Aurobindo. Each developed philosophic positions that in certain respects are incompatible with each other, yet the base of the formulation was a Realization of perhaps not equal form, perhaps of such a nature that we cannot determine which one, if any, is higher than another, but certainly presenting quite different views in certain respects though agreeing in other respects. Let us note what are some of the formulations or principles maintained by these three.

Buddha affirmed the doctrine of *Anatman* and *Nastikata*, the latter meaning a non-theistic position, also the position of the *voidness* of the world of experience. This we have in part already discussed in the tape on the significance of the apparent contradiction known as the paradox.² Shankara affirmed the reality of the *Atman* and the *Brahman*, but also proclaimed a philosophy known as *maya* or *illusionism*. Both of these positions seem to agree in affirming the ultimate principle as essentially *impersonal*. In the case of the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, the basis of Realization is again taken as fundamental, but from it is developed a philosophy which he calls “universal realism,” and affirms, in conformity with the position of Shankara, the reality of the *Brahman* and the *Atman* or, namely, in other terms, of *being* as underlying the stream of consciousness, and further, gives, apparently, primacy to the principle of *personality* as characterizing the underlying, fundamental base of the universe. The result is that much of the formulation of Sri Aurobindo would cause one to feel that he is reaffirming the position of traditional Christianity, of Moslemism, and of Judaism; yet, he specifically affirms his differentiation from that position in certain of his communications. But, in at least this degree, when he affirms the primacy of the principle of *personality* over that of *impersonality*, he is definitely closer to the position of the religious movements that developed from the total complex which has been called *ben-Israel* than he does to the non-theistic position of both Shankaracharya and Gautama Buddha.

To bring the issue into clearer focus, I shall quote a little over a page from Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine*, beginning near the bottom of the p. 373. The quotation is as follows:

² See the audio recordings “Meaning of the Paradox,” parts 1 and 2.

The mind of humanity, ever seeking, ever active, never arrives at a firmly settled reality of life's aims and objects or at a settled reality of its own certitudes and convictions, an established foundation or firm formation of its idea of existence.

At a certain point of this constant unrest and travail even the physical mind loses its conviction of objective certitude and enters into an agnosticism which questions all its own standards of life and knowledge, doubts whether all this is real or else whether all, even if real, is not futile; the vital mind, baffled by life and frustrated or else dissatisfied with all its satisfactions, overtaken by a deep disgust and disappointment, finds that all is vanity and vexation of spirit and is ready to reject life and existence as an unreality, all that is hunted after as an illusion, Maya; the thinking mind, unbuilding all its affirmations, discovers that all are mere mental constructions and there is no reality in them or else that the only reality is something beyond this existence, something that has not been made or constructed, something Absolute and Eternal,—all that is relative, all that is of time is a dream, a hallucination of the mind or a vast delirium, an immense cosmic Illusion, a delusive figure of apparent existence. The principle of negation prevails over the principle of affirmation and becomes universal and absolute. Thence arise the great world-negating religions and philosophies; thence too a recoil of the life-motive from itself and a seeking after a life elsewhere flawless and eternal or a will to annul life itself in an immobile Reality or an original Non-Existence. In India the philosophy of world-negation has been given formulations of supreme power and value by two of the greatest of her thinkers, Buddha and Shankara. There have been, intermediate or later in time, other philosophies of considerable importance, some of them widely accepted, formulated with much acumen of thought by men of genius and spiritual insight, which disputed with more or less force and success the conclusions of these two great metaphysical systems, but none has been put forward with an equal force of presentation or drive of personality or had a similar massive effect. The spirit of these two remarkable spiritual philosophies,—for Shankara in the historical process of India's philosophical mind takes up, completes and replaces Buddha,—has weighed with a tremendous power on her thought, religion and general mentality: everywhere broods its mighty shadow, everywhere is the impress of the three great formulas, the chain of Karma, escape from the wheel of rebirth, Maya. It is necessary therefore to look afresh at the Idea or Truth behind the negation of cosmic existence and to consider, however briefly, what is the value of its main formulations or suggestions, on what reality they stand, how far they are imperative to the reason or to experience. For the present it will be enough to throw a regard on the principle ideas which are grouped around the conception of the great cosmic Illusion, Maya, and to set against them those that are proper to our own line of thought and vision; for both proceed from the conception of the One Reality, but one line leads to a universal Illusionism, the other to a

universal Realism,—an unreal or real-unreal universe reposing on a transcendent Reality or a real universe reposing on a Reality at once universal and transcendent or absolute.³

Thus begins a massive and highly impressive critique of the whole theory of illusionism which occupies more than sixty pages of the text. I shall not quote at length from this, for, him who wishes to enter into a deeper understanding of the whole position presented here should read the original text; but, there is one brief quotation which seems to bring us to the very heart of the matter. It is this, taken from p. 410: “. . . the creations of the absolutely Real should be real and not illusions . . .”⁴

As I read through the argument here, I am deeply impressed; but, it has led me to ask myself what do I mean by an illusion? As I hold my consciousness free from all judgment, I am unable to say that there's any meaning that attaches to the conception of illusion. The argument as developed by Sri Aurobindo seems to be predominantly what we might call *metaphysical* rather than *epistemological*, and, if Dr. Jung's evaluation of the Eastern mind is correct, this is typical. He even affirms someplace that the epistemological problem has not arisen in the Eastern mind, though I do not find myself able fully to agree with him here. I have found it as present in some measure in Shankara and in Aurobindo, but, admittedly, not highly developed as in the case of the philosophic history of the West which begins with John Locke and culminates in Immanuel Kant. The epistemological question in its most advanced development, I think, is a contribution of the West. Now, this has a bearing upon this problem. Aurobindo's thinking throughout this discussion is of the type that I might call *metaphysical* and not *epistemological*. When I consider the knowing process, I do find a meaning attaching to the notion of illusion or *maya*.

Let us take the illustration of the impression which our senses give us that the world is flat. We derive this by just being sensuously conscious. But when we test it by the exercise of the judgment, we find that it leads to contradictions and ultimately conclude that that impression of flatness is a delusion or illusion. Now we have introduced a different approach to the whole problem. We might say that for an unjudging consciousness, there is no distinction between the real and illusion. An illusion, then, arises only when we make an erroneous judgment. The given of experience is simply a fact and therefore real, whatever that experience may be. There is no distinction such as that between dream image, waking image, mirage, or hallucination, which reduces the apparent snake to a rope. It simply is, as a sheer experience. It is fact and therefore real. On the other hand, however, when we engage in the process of evaluation, then we enter into a zone of different problems. Is it *true*, is a question that is different from the question, is it *real*. Judging from my experience in reading Oriental sources, there seems to be a tendency to identify *truth* with *reality* and to use the terms in much the same way. But what I suggest here is something that seems more typical of Western thought. Reality is a conception that belongs to metaphysics; truth is better

³ Aurobindo Ghose, *The Life Divine*, vol. 18 of *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centennial Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 414-416.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 458.

viewed as a conception which belongs to epistemology. Now, if I judge that the apparent snake is a real danger to me, I have entered into a state of illusion or erroneous judgment. Viewed from this point of view, we could say with Shankara, now speaking in epistemological rather than metaphysical terms, that the whole apparent universe has become an illusion because we have made false judgments with respect to it such as it is a multiplicity wholly external and essentially unrelated to us or our consciousness; thus, affirming a position that is the contradiction of the state of Enlightenment. When judged to be such a pure, undivine externality, it is an illusion, an untruth. The illusion is dissolved by true judgment.

Thus, I would affirm that there is a validity in the conception of illusionism thus considered; and, thus, could reaffirm the truth of Shankara's and Buddha's position, while at the same time maintaining agreement, essentially, with the position of Sri Aurobindo. It has seemed to me that when we view philosophies and religious outlooks as contradicting each other, simply, that we have missed the essential point. We then tend to view that which differs from our own religion or our own philosophy as an enemy and then this leads to the possibility of war. On a higher level it may be simply dialectical dispute, but on a lower level it can be the cause of some of the greatest ills to which humanity is heir. Rather, if any material comes from the base of Enlightenment or Realization which seems to be incompatible with other interpretations from other Enlightenments or Realizations, the search should be made for that which will reconcile the different positions. And here arises the question, is the reconciliation only irrational, as is so often maintained by Dr. Carl G. Jung?