

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

Part 6 of 7

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In modern parlance, when we begin a process of rigorous logical reasoning it is customary to characterize the elements with which we begin as “fundamental assumptions.” This has replaced the old Greek conception of beginning a process with axioms, which were viewed as self-evident truths. But our substitution of the word ‘assumption’ grows out of the fact that the question as to whether a statement is true or not is not a problem capable for logic by itself to determine. Logic would determine only that which follows from a group of preliminary statements and the question as to whether those statements are true or not is extra-logical, ultimately. In using the term ‘assumption’, therefore, it is not implied that the terms are necessarily false, or unknown, or untrue, but simply that for the process that starts at that point they are simply given and the question of their truth is not considered. What is of importance is that which is implied by them. Now the material of these given assumptions may be simply fanciful inventions; they may be the result of judgments based upon experience; or, they may be transcriptions from the level of Realization. But in either case, or in any of these cases, for the purposes of logical reason they’re viewed as assumptions by which is meant that their truth or untruth is not here considered but only the consequences that follow from them.

Using the word ‘assumption’ in the sense just expounded, it is a fundamental assumption of these discourses—and as well of all my writings, lectures, and other tapes since 1936—that Realization gives Truth, spelt with a capital ‘T’; that it is authoritative on its level, but that in the process of transcription of this pure material, which is non-conceptual in its original form, into a conceptual statement, distortion can arise, and that therefore if we have material that comes or purports to come from the level of Realization, Enlightenment, or Mystical Unfolding, that gives results in the field of discourse that seem to be incompatible, then we should look for a possible error in the transcription, and, second, even though there is no error detectable by reason of the transcription, there is the further assumption, which again is grounded upon experience or rather imperience,<sup>1</sup> that there is difference of level in the case of different Realizations and that Realizations upon a lower level which may appear to be incompatible can be, and as a matter of fact have been, resolved by an ascension to a higher level of Realization from which perspective the apparent incompatibility of lower level Realization is resolved. Therefore, in statements

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<sup>1</sup> For the definition of ‘imperience’, see the audio recordings “General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy,” part 10 and “On My Philosophy: Extemporaneous Statement.” In speaking of introceptual knowledge, Wolff says, “The third function therefore gives you imperience, not experience. It is akin to sense perception in the sense of being immediate, but is not sensuous.”

that may appear, and in fact do appear, among the great religious philosophies of the world, our first effort should be not to view them as essentially incompatible, that one may be false while another true, but rather to see if from some deeper or higher perspective they may not be shown as complements of each other.

We have so far considered, either in these discourses or elsewhere among my writing or statements, three different forms of apparent incompatibility. First, and primarily here in these discourses, we considered the contrast between the *universal illusionism* of Sri Shankaracharya and the *universal realism* of Sri Aurobindo and have offered a suggestion for the resolution of this apparent incompatibility.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, I have considered the apparent incompatibility between the *anatmic* doctrine of the Great Buddha and the *Atma-Vidya* of Sri Shankaracharya.<sup>3</sup> Put in simpler terms, it is the doctrine, in one case, that there is no permanent self, and in the other case, that the Atman is permanent if taken in a sufficiently profound sense. We have also considered the contrast between the *positivistic* position of the Buddhistic *sutras* and the *substantialistic* position which is presented in the *Vedanta* philosophies of both Shankaracharya and Sri Aurobindo.<sup>4</sup> We have now to face a fourth apparent incompatibility.

The Buddhistic position is radically non-theistic. It, therefore, contrasts with the three following possible forms: the extracosmic theism of the ben-Israel religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Moslemism; also with pure pantheism; and, finally, with a combination of pantheism plus transcendentalism which is characteristic of the standpoint of Sri Aurobindo. I'll present this contrast by a quotation from Sri Aurobindo, on the one hand, and a quotation from one known to many of us as Koot Hoomi from *The Mahatma Letters* where he speaks explicitly as a philosopher and a Buddhist. The quotation taken from Aurobindo is to be found in *The Life Divine* beginning at the bottom of p. 317 and consisting of two paragraphs which conclude at the bottom of p. 319:

But it is evident that whatever the posture taken or relation formed in any individual nodus of Purusha-Prakriti, the Being is in a fundamental cosmic relation lord or ruler of its nature: for even when it allows Nature to have its own way with it, its consent is necessary to support her workings. This comes out in its fullest revelation in the third aspect of the Reality, the Divine Being who is the master and creator of the universe. Here the supreme Person, the Being in its transcendental and cosmic consciousness and force, comes to the front, omnipotent, omniscient, the controller of all energies, the Conscious in all that is conscient or inconscient, the Inhabitant of all souls and minds and hearts and bodies, the Ruler or Overruler of all works, the Enjoyer of all delight, the Creator who has built all things in his own being, the All-Person of whom all beings are personalities, the Power from whom are all powers, the Self, the Spirit in all, by his being the Father of all that is, in his Consciousness-Force the

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<sup>2</sup> See the audio recordings "Further Thoughts on the Relation of Buddhism and the Vedanta with Special Reference to the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo," parts 2 and 3.

<sup>3</sup> See the audio recordings "Meaning of the Paradox," parts 1 and 2.

<sup>4</sup> See the audio recordings "Meaning of the Paradox," parts 1 and 2.

Divine Mother, the Friend of all creatures, the All blissful and All-beautiful of whom beauty and joy are the revelation, the All-Beloved and All-Lover. In a certain sense, so seen and understood, this becomes the most comprehensive of the aspects of the Reality, since here all are united in a single formulation; for the Ishwara is supracosmic as well as intracosmic; He is that which exceeds and inhabits and supports all individuality; He is the supreme and universal Brahman, the Absolute, the supreme Self, the supreme Purusha. But, very clearly, this is not the personal God of popular religions, a being limited by his qualities, individual and separate from all others; for all such personal gods are only limited representations or names and divine personalities of the one Ishwara. Neither is this the Saguna Brahman active and possessed of qualities, for that is only one side of the being of the Ishwara; the Nirguna immobile and without qualities is another aspect of His existence. Ishwara is Brahman the Reality, Self, Spirit, revealed as possessor, enjoyer of his own self-existence, creator of the universe and one with it, Pantheos, and yet superior to it, the Eternal, the Infinite, the Ineffable, the Divine Transcendence.

The sharp opposition made between personality and impersonality by our mental way of thinking is a creation of the mind based on the appearances of the material world; for here in terrestrial existence the Inconscient from which everything takes its origin appears as something entirely impersonal; Nature, the inconscient Energy, is entirely impersonal in her manifest essence and dealings; all Forces wear this mask of impersonality, all qualities and powers, Love and Delight and Consciousness itself, have this aspect. Personality makes its apparition as a creation of consciousness in an impersonal world; it is a limitation by a restricted formation of powers, qualities, habitual forces of nature-action, an imprisonment in a limited circle of self-experience which we have to transcend,—to lose personality is necessary if we are to gain universality, still more necessary if we are to rise into the Transcendence. But what we thus call personality is only a formation of superficial consciousness; behind it is the Person who takes on various personalities, who can have at the same time many personalities but is himself one, real, eternal. If we look at things from a larger point of view, we might say that what is impersonal is only a power of the Person: existence itself has no meaning without an Existent, consciousness has no standing-place if there is none who is conscious, delight is useless and invalid without an enjoyer, love can have no foundation or fulfilment if there is no lover, all-power must be otiose if there is not an Almighty. For what we mean by Person is conscious being; even if this emerges here as a term or product of the Inconscient, it is not that in reality: for it is the Inconscient itself that is a term of the secret Consciousness; what emerges is greater than that in which it emerges, as Mind is greater than Matter, Soul than Mind; Spirit, most secret of all, the supreme emergence, the last revelation, is the greatest of all, and Spirit is the Purusha, the All-Person, the omnipresent Conscious Being. It is the mind's ignorance of this true Person in us, its confusion of person with our

experience of ego and limited personality, the misleading phenomenon of the emergence of limited consciousness and personality in an inconscient existence that have made us create an opposition between these two aspects of the Reality, but in truth there is no opposition. An eternal infinite self-existence is the supreme reality, but the supreme transcendent eternal Being, Self and Spirit,—an infinite Person, we may say, because his being is the essence and source of all personality,—is the reality and meaning of self-existence: so too the cosmic Self, Spirit, Being, Person is the reality and meaning of cosmic existence; the same Self, Spirit, Being or Person manifesting its multiplicity is the reality and meaning of individual existence.<sup>5</sup>

The primary fact which is indicated by this quotation is that in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo the conception of an infinite Being who is a Person, one of whom one would speak using a capitalized personal pronoun 'He', is the ultimate principle of all. It is also stated that this conception of Person, spelt with a capital 'P', is not the same as our ordinary conception of person, and this results in a real obscurity in the whole philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. At any rate, this much seems clear: that the concept of an infinite, ultimate Person implies that a conscious attitude can be taken by this supremacy towards the individual, particularly the individual *sadhaka*; that it is a Being who is conscious; it is not a case of a root consciousness or a root matter, in the sense of a *Svabhavat*, that is the ultimate, but a supreme Person; and this supreme Person is identified with the concept of *Ishwara*.

Ordinarily, we view the *Parabrahm* as the supreme in its *Nirguna* aspect and the *Ishwara* as its personalized manifestation; at least this is characteristic of the other Indian philosophies with which I am acquainted. Thus, here, the *Ishwara* is seen as supreme, and that should be borne in mind when considering the quotation I am about to make from the writing of Koot Hoomi in *The Mahatma Letters*. This quotation will consist of the first paragraph of "Letter Number 10," which appears on p. 52 of *The Mahatma Letters* and under the heading are these words: "Notes by K.H. on a "Preliminary Chapter" headed "God" by Hume, intended to preface an exposition of Occult Philosophy." The quotation is as follows:

Neither our philosophy nor ourselves believe in a God, least of all in one whose pronoun necessitates a capital H. Our philosophy falls under the definition of Hobbes. It is preeminently the science of effects by their causes and of causes by their effects, and since it is also the science of things deduced from first principle, as Bacon defines it, before we admit any such principle we must know it, and have no right to admit even its possibility. Your whole explanation is based upon one solitary admission made simply for argument's sake in October last. You were told that our knowledge was limited to this our solar system: ergo as philosophers who desired to remain worthy of the name we could not either deny or affirm the existence of what you termed a supreme, omnipotent,

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<sup>5</sup> Aurobindo Ghose, *The Life Divine*, vol. 18 of *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, 1970), 351-353.

intelligent being of some sort *beyond* the limits of that solar system. But if such an existence is not absolutely impossible, yet unless the uniformity of nature's law breaks at those limits we maintain that it is highly improbable. Nevertheless we deny most emphatically the position of agnosticism in this direction, and as regards the solar system. Our doctrine knows no compromises. It either affirms or denies, for it never teaches but that which it knows to be the truth. Therefore, we deny God both as philosophers and as Buddhists. We know there are planetary and other spiritual lives, and we know there is in our system no such thing as God, either personal or impersonal. Parabrahm is not a God, but absolute immutable law, and Iswar is the effect of Avidya and Maya, ignorance based upon the great delusion. The word "God" was invented to designate the unknown cause of those effects which man has either admired or dreaded without understanding them, and since we claim and that we are able to prove what we claim—*i.e.* the knowledge of that cause and causes—we are in a position to maintain there is no God or Gods behind them.<sup>6</sup>

Could any two philosophies stand in more radical contrast than these two as represented by the quotations just given? It would seem that they hit head on: that the difference between them is more than a paradox which can be resolved by the ascending to some more comprehensive or synthetic point of view. In other words, it appears that we are in the presence of a real contradiction where one must make a choice and cannot accept both positions at the same time. I am rather saddened to have to admit this. I would wish that it were otherwise. But, here is an issue that forces one to choose. Either the Root of all is *being*, in the sense of Person, which is just another name for God, or the Root of being is a *principle*, quite impersonal, and the concept of Person belongs exclusively to a lower category. Thus, in the latter case, personality would be an achievement in the evolution and not an original fact, something eternal and even infinite. And, in fact, consonant with all of our common understanding of the word 'person', an "infinite Person" is a contradiction in terms. Of course, this may be a verbal distinction only; it may be that Aurobindo has taken the word 'person' to extend it illegitimately beyond its proper usage, as earlier he has pointed out has been necessary in the use of words like 'intuition' and 'consciousness', and that must be borne in mind. But, as stated, there is here a clash of two positions such that no responsible thinker can accept both positions at the same time. Now which way on this point must I take my own stand? Here I must be governed by the body of Realizations that I have known and none of them confirmed the principle of Person.

I direct your attention to the Realization designated as the High Indifference. Three aspects stood out in this. First of all, the principle of equilibrium—a state of complete balance as between all pairs of opposites. It thus was, as the second point, the integration of all pairs of opposites whatsoever, even of that ultimate pair of opposites represented as *Sangsara*, the universe of objects, or the evolution, on one side, and that other state known variously as *Nirvana* or *Moksha*. The one, namely the *Sangsara*, was

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<sup>6</sup> A. T. Barker, ed., *The Mahatma Letters* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1923), 52.

the field of duality and ultimately of manyness; *Nirvana* carried the force of unity, of the essential oneness of all. And thus the contrast of *Sangsara*, the universe of objects, or the evolution, with *Nirvana* is the ultimate duality: the duality of the *many* and the *one*. But the High Indifference was the integration of these two. Finally, it contained the meaning of an ultimate Consciousness which was self-existent and not a function of a Being; but on the contrary, inverted the relationship so that all beings and all selves were seen as functions of a self-existent Consciousness which was the universal support of all. There was also the indication of a greater Beyond—an intimation; so I do not regard this as the final possible word, but simply as the monitor or modulus of any statement for which I am responsible.

Let us return to the quotation from Sri Aurobindo and examine what appears to be a critical sentence in that quotation. This occurs on p. 319:

If we look at things from a larger point of view, we might say that what is impersonal is only a power of the Person: existence itself has no meaning without an Existent, consciousness has no standing-place if there is none who is conscious, delight is useless and invalid without an enjoyer, love can have no foundation or fulfilment if there is no lover, all-power must be otiose if there is not an Almighty.<sup>7</sup>

Let us examine this in some detail. Take the phrase, “. . . we might say that what is impersonal is only a power of the Person . . .”<sup>8</sup> and consider in connection with this a clause from the quotation on p. 410, “. . . the creations of the absolutely Real should be real and not illusions . . .”<sup>9</sup> Why not, then, the application of that principle here? It would seem that the expressions of the power of the Person would be like unto its source by the same criterion, and therefore, that that expression would be personal. Now, we have in the balance of this sentence about four statements that are important for our consideration. First, the statement that existence implies an existent; that consciousness implies one who is conscious; that delight implies an enjoyer; that love implies a lover; and that power implies an almighty. In other words, entity is here viewed as the foundation and that all four of these—existence, consciousness, delight, love, and power—are the expressions of an underlying entity. This, then, is characteristic of substantialistic philosophical thinking, and I admit that to our ordinary experience this seems reasonable enough and is what we might very well expect to be the case. But let us look at the analysis of Buddha with respect to fire in connection with the question: is the qualities of fire, namely, light and heat, functions of an underlying substance? To this the answer of the Buddha was “no,” that the qualities light and heat are all that there is of fire and there is no basis for assuming an unseen, hidden substance. As I pointed out at the time, this is characteristic of what is technically known as positivistic thinking. Now, by the same token, by the same method, it would be inferred that he would apply this same technique here: that existence is a fact of immediate experience and that we do not have a

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<sup>7</sup> Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 352-353.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

basis of affirming an existent behind the existence; and in this same way with respect to consciousness, the entity who is conscious is an assumption, a substantive something behind that carries the consciousness, whereas what we know is simply the fact of consciousness, and that rests on itself alone; the same with delight; the same with love; and the same with power.

So, here we have presented before us in very strong form, two ways of viewing the world: the phenomenistic, positivistic position formulated by the Buddha and the substantialistic formulation of Sri Aurobindo. Now for myself, I will admit that prior to that Realization of the High Indifference, I could not have imagined any other way; I could not have imagined a consciousness that was not a consciousness of a Self. I would have felt that the center which is conscious was the starting point, and it was only the impact of the Realization of the High Indifference that rendered it possible for me to see otherwise.

Now let us consider a statement of Dr. Carl G. Jung in connection with this same question. I direct your attention to the psychological commentary of Dr. Carl G. Jung prefacing *The Book of the Great Liberation*, edited by Evans-Wentz, and which is based upon the teachings of Padma-Sambhava. Quoting from p. xxxviii, in Roman numerals, paragraph toward the bottom of the page, the last sentence of the preceding paragraph had this phrase, “. . . *the self-liberating power of the introverted mind.*” Continuing:

This aspect of the mind is practically unknown to the West, though it forms the most important component of the unconscious. Many people flatly deny the existence of the unconscious, or else they say that it consists merely of instincts, or of repressed or forgotten contents that were once part of the conscious mind. It is safe to assume that what the East calls ‘mind’ has more to do with our ‘unconscious’ than with mind as we understand it, which is more or less identical with consciousness. To us consciousness is inconceivable without an ego; it is equated with the relation of contents to an ego. If there is no ego there is nobody to be conscious of anything. The ego is therefore indispensable to the conscious process. The Eastern mind, however, has no difficulty in conceiving of a consciousness without an ego. Consciousness is deemed capable of transcending its ego condition; indeed in its ‘higher’ forms, the ego disappears altogether. Such an ego-less mental condition can only be unconscious to us, for the simple reason that there would be nobody to witness it. I do not doubt the existence of mental states transcending consciousness. But they lose their consciousness to exactly the same degree that they transcend consciousness. I cannot imagine a conscious mental state that does not refer to a subject, that is, to an ego [Note that sentence particularly.] The ego may be depotentiated—divested, for instance, of its awareness of the body—but so long as there is awareness of something, there must be somebody who is aware. The unconscious, however, is a mental condition of which no ego is aware. It is only mediately and by indirect means that we eventually become conscious of the existence of an unconscious. We can observe the manifestation of unconscious fragments of the personality, detached from the patient’s consciousness, in insanity. But there is no evidence that the unconscious

contents are related to an unconscious centre analogous to the ego; in fact there are good reasons why such a centre is not even probable.<sup>10</sup>

Now, here we have presented again the same difficulty of which Aurobindo spoke when he said that there cannot be a consciousness if there is none who is conscious; but here is a position that is taken, in Dr. Jung's case, with relation to a more ancient Indian figure, namely, Padma-Sambhava. And there is presented, quite evidently, the conception of an egoless, or selfless, and therefore inevitably a "personless" consciousness. It implies the existence of consciousness as apart from any center. The difficulty that Jung brings up is a difficulty of imagination; he cannot "imagine" he says, and I recognize very well this difficulty. But then he goes on to say, that in the unconscious there is a psychical condition in which there is no evidence of a center analogous to that of an ego, and even further, that there's good reason to believe that such a center is impossible. Now then, if by the unconscious, in the psychological sense, we mean the same thing that the Tibetan Buddhist is speaking of when he uses the term *rig-pa* as that pure form of consciousness which is not cognizant of objects, then here we have the idea of a reversal or transformation in consciousness such that, that which to our ordinary consciousness, namely, the relative consciousness of which Jung is speaking, is inverted and that which previously seemed unconscious, to the inverted state is consciousness, but now a consciousness that does not depend upon a center for its existence. Now, I'm well aware that using 'consciousness' in these two senses of our ordinary relative consciousness and of a deeper kind of consciousness, namely, that which is called *rig-pa*, is straining the use of a term illegitimately,<sup>11</sup> as Sri Aurobindo said in a footnote that I quoted in another connection; but, we have no other terms. It is a different kind of consciousness, but it is awareness; that I can say positively.

Now, even though we cannot imagine a consciousness which does not have a center or which is not the consciousness of a Self, it does not therefore follow that we cannot conceive of such a state. This is assumed in the development of the *Aphorisms on Consciousness Without an Object* and in the work *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, for this Consciousness is a consciousness also without a Self. We can conceive of it, for this is a practice with which we are familiar in higher mathematics where at certain levels we deal with material that cannot be imagined and has none of the aid of intuition; yet progress can be made in the field, thought can be accomplished, results attained that are valuable not only for pure mathematics but even in the field of practical application. Therefore, I have assumed in the writing of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object* that the reader can take this position and then judge the consequences that follow from it. The consequences ultimately may lead to an orientation that solves the metaphysical problem for the individual that would bring about an

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<sup>10</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), xxxviii-xxxix.

<sup>11</sup> Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 65-66: "I use the word "intuition" for want of a better. In truth, it is a makeshift and inadequate to the connotation demanded of it. The same has to be said of the word "consciousness" and many others which our poverty compels us to extend illegitimately in their significance."



adjustment between the seeking individual and the world, the universe, the Transcendent beyond him. That, we may say, is seeking a pragmatic test of value.

We have now dealt with a principle or problem of contrast between two points of view that seem quite incompatible to us. I shall continue with further implications in the part that follows this present discussion. This, therefore, is the end of Part 6.