

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

Part 7 of 7

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Throughout the decade of the fifties, I gave a concentrated attention to the reading and studying of the Aurobindian literature and found this to be a very fruitful period. Many conceptions that I have derived from this study have proven to be of permanent value. Very often I find the schemas which he has presented as more effectively interpreting certain facts of my own “imperience” than any other schemas with which I am familiar.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this is not always so. Sometimes it is a schema drawn from other source such as that of Buddhism, or the Vedanta of Shankaracharya, or *The Secret Doctrine*, that meets the requirements of my imperience better. And while I am unable, as yet, to build a system that embraces these different components so that they may fall within a systematic whole, yet, I envision it as in principle possible that such a schema somewheres exists or else may come into manifestation in the future. While, therefore, Aurobindo’s material has proven to be a rich treasure in my own experience, I cannot therefore blindly accept everything that he says simply because he says it; and, in fact, this is an attitude which I take towards even the very greatest of whom I have any knowledge. I would dare to disagree with the Great Buddha or with Shankara if the force of my own Realizations rendered that necessary. And such disagreement has nothing to do with the order of valuation that I place upon such figures, for often the position that has become possible to me is there because of what has gone before.

Now, in connection with Sri Aurobindo, a certain fact stands out as one peruses the rich mass of this literature and that is that he has a very close orientation to an ancient figure in Indian literature, namely, the figure of Krishna. This is evident in the *Essays on the [Bhagavad] Gita*, but it is evident also in repeated testimony that one finds in the printed excerpts from the Aurobindian letters to *sadhakas*, even to the extent that he views himself as, in a certain sense, fused with Krishna—for such fusing of consciousness I know is a possibility.

Now, in connection with the problem of whether the ultimate is a Person, a theory which we may call “Personalism,” whether that is ultimately true or not, if one recalls the *Bhagavad Gita*, we find here something that can serve or can be interpreted as a confirmation of this point of view, for in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna speaks in the first

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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.”

person again and again. And to give a picture of this, I shall quote from the very last part of the tenth chapter. Here he is speaking to his *chela*, Arjuna, and closing a long discussion is saying:

I am the Head of the great clans and families. I am the Sage of the sages; the Poet of the poets; the Bard of bards; Seer of seers; Prophet of prophets. To rulers of men, I am the Scepter of Power. Among statesmen and those who seek to conquer, I am Statescraft and Policy. Among the secretive I am Silence. I am Wisdom.

In short, and most briefly stated, O Prince, I am That which is the essential principle in the seed of all beings and things in nature; and everything whether animate or inanimate is infilled with me—without Me nothing could exist for even the twinkling of an eye, O Prince.

There is no end to my manifestations, O Arjuna—my powers are infinite in quality and variety. Every being or thing that can be known is the product of an infinitesimal portion of my power and glory. Those which I have mentioned are but trifling examples of the same. Whatever is known to thee as existing, know that as being a tiny manifestation of my infinite power and glory.

But why concern thyself with all this knowledge, and all these instances? *Know thou, Arjuna, that I manifested all this Universe with but an infinitesimal fragment of Myself—and still I remain, its Lord, unattached and apart, although pervading all.*<sup>2</sup>

In our customary usage of the first personal pronoun ‘I’, the reference is to the person, the ‘I’ refers to the person, such as a Mr. Smith or a Mr. Brown, and that is our customary practice. And if we interpret the use of the first personal pronoun as here given in the *Gita* in that sense, it would appear to be a statement which implies that at the very root of all that is, is the person known as Krishna; that the whole universe was the manifestation of that person; yet only, actually, a portion of it, in fact, it is said an infinitesimal portion, so that in large measure the total person would stand apart from the manifestation. So interpreted, we have here not simply a narrow pantheism, for pantheism renders the conception of the deity and of the world as co-extensive; but in this case, the universe stands as only an infinitesimal portion and that the rest stands apart. So we have a combination of pantheism with transcendentalism. And this definitely defines a position differing radically from the extra-cosmic God of ben-Israel theism and also from the common Western conception of pantheism. And it should be noted that throughout Aurobindo’s literature where he refers to this subject, he reaffirms the same position.

Now, let us look a little again at this. First, as a sort of introductory note, I do not know whether the *Bhagavad Gita* is an authentic bit of history or not. It is said to have been written by Vyasa as part of a larger epic poem known as the *Mahabharata*. Then the

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<sup>2</sup> Yogi Ramacharaka, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Chicago: The Yogi Publication Society, 1907), 108-109.

question arises, is the author writing history or is he using the conception of Krishna for the formulation of his own conceptions? I cannot give an answer to this. Certainly there is a question as to whether we're dealing with actual history or a symbolic statement. The *Bhagavad Gita* undoubtedly is one of the greatest of the *shastras* that have come down to us and is especially the *shastra* of the *Karma* yoga. There is no question about its value as a source of spiritual importance; but whether it is history or a symbolic statement is a question on which there is no agreement among the students of the subject. Aurobindo, in his essays, defines his position as an acceptance of the *Gita* as a story of historic fact. He says it is not symbolical, though it is typical or typical; in other words, representing a situation that actually can arise among the peoples. Other interpreters have treated it as symbolic.

Now, what is the referent of the 'I' when Krishna is represented as speaking in the first person? Most immediately, one would be inclined to take it in the sense of a reference to a person. But let us consider for a moment. This is a treatise on yoga, on the three forms known as the *Trimarga*: the yoga of knowledge, the yoga of action, and the yoga of devotion. Now, in the self-analysis which is so fundamental to the yoga of knowledge, the objective is the isolation of the true Self, the true I, and this is there isolated from that general reference which is popular, namely, a reference to the person, but rather a reference to the true subject to all awareness or knowledge. In other words, the 'I' means, in this case, not the person but the Self, the *Atman*, and ultimately the *Paramatman*. Now let us consider those words that were quoted from the last portion of the tenth chapter and interpret the 'I' reference in this sense. Returning to the last portion of the quotation:

*Know thou, Arjuna, that I manifested all this Universe with but an infinitesimal fragment of Myself—and still I remain, its Lord, unattached and apart, although pervading all.*

Let us substitute for the 'I' the word *Paramatman*, and then quote it again:

*Know thou, Arjuna, that I [Paramatman] manifested all this Universe with but an infinitesimal fragment of Myself—and still I [Paramatman] remain, its Lord, unattached and apart, although pervading all.*

If you'll note, this changes the whole meaning. The pure subject, the *Paramatman*, is not a person, but a principle. And it implies this, that existence is produced only by becoming conscious of an object. No meaning attaches to the notion of an existence which is unknown in any sense whatsoever. Such a conception is as meaningless as the Buddha's reference to the word combinations such as "a barren woman's son," or "a hare's horns." Just study the point; what do you mean when you say that there is an existence which is totally unknown in any sense whatsoever? Really, it is merely a meaningless combination of words. Existence is produced, with respect to any object whatsoever, only when it is known. And therefore it is perfectly true, and can be known to us as perfectly true, and each and every one of us can repeat these words:

*Know then that I [the Self] manifested all this Universe with but an infinitesimal fragment of Myself—and still I [the Self] remain, its Lord, unattached and apart, although pervading all.*

What we have here in the “I” is really the true meaning of the “*first Logos*”<sup>3</sup> and the object that is brought into existence by the cognition is the “*second Logos*”; but behind and above both these lies the undying pure Consciousness, the *Alaya Vijnana*, the *Rig-Pa*, the Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject. In this lies both the first Logos and the second Logos, and from the initial projecting power of the first Logos, the universe is produced. And now we have this point: that there is a macrocosmic meaning attached to these words and also a microcosmic meaning. The statement is true with respect to each one of us as a microcosm as well as with respect to the grand macrocosm. I, this microcosm, produce from an infinitesimal portion of Myself, the only universe that I know. And each and every one can say the same thing.

Thus considered, the name Krishna represents the Self, the pure subject, the *Atman*, and the *Paramatman* that abides in all of us and in every creature, both animate and inanimate. It is thus a principle rather than simply and exclusively the name for a great historic incarnation. So interpreted, the *Bhagavad Gita* does not authenticate the principle of Person as lying at the root of all that is, but rather a principle lying as the root of all.

Now, while the conception of a pantheistic transcendentalism is in philosophic terms very different from the counter conception of an extracosmic theism, as has been presented by the religiosity that came from ben-Israel, yet in psychological terms there is a similarity. There is involved the idea that, ultimately, irrational factors are dominant. There is the tendency to view a divine will as something essentially arbitrary; that it is a mystery that cannot be known; that it is what it is because it so chooses to be. The principle of law is only a divine fiat, and it is also characteristic to view the divine as capable of acting beyond the limits of such a fiat so that there is the manifestation of “miracles,” in the sense of being something that is a violation of law. This is a spirit that exists most widely in the West, and I find it present in much that is connected with the Aurobindian following. And this, I find myself very unsympathetic toward it. Beyond, it implies that a science, in the great sense of the word, which can know the underlying principles and laws that govern the universe, is essentially impossible. One moves, then, with a feeling of rational insecurity and that the only security lies in a devotee’s willingness to be played with violently, and so forth, as well as in terms that are delightful. It gives, practically, the sense of something arbitrary at the root of all—a position which I find personally extremely obnoxious and not at all maintained by the content of any Realization which I know. The Realizations that I know confirmed the view that science, in the great sense of the word, not the narrow limited Western sense alone, but in the major sense of Knowledge, spelt with a capital ‘K’, is possible and that through Knowledge mastery is possible. To me, this is supremely attractive.

And let us look at the other point of view that involves the notion of Person at the root of all. It tends to a position in which one becomes a sort of permanent bambino and never grows to a state of true manhood. It appeals, essentially, to a child consciousness,

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<sup>3</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Adyar: The Theosophy Company, 1888), 45.

not to an adult consciousness. Let me now quote some words from a source that represents the diametric opposite point of view. Turn to these words of the third fundamental of *The Secret Doctrine* to be found close to the end of the “Proem,” in my edition on p. 45:

In other words, no purely spiritual Buddhi [or] (Divine Soul) can have an independent (conscious) existence before the spark which issued from the pure Essence of the Universal Sixth Principle—or the OVER-SOUL—has (a) passed through every elemental form of the phenomenal world of that Manvantara, and (b) acquired individuality, first by natural impulse, and then by self-induced and self-devised efforts, checked by its Karma, thus ascending through all the degrees of intelligence, from the lowest to the highest Manas, from mineral and plant, up to the holiest Archangel [or] (Dhyani Buddha).<sup>4</sup>

This, I submit, gives an adult appeal. It implies this: that all the powers of nature lie before one and that we have the right to take what we can. This is manly. This transcends the status of the bambino. It greatly transcends the point of view of that one who sometime in Indian history said, “I prefer to *eat* sugar, not to *be* sugar,”<sup>5</sup> the spirit of the bambino, not very attractive. And what does this line of thought that I’ve just quoted from lead to in the end; to what is known in *The Voice of the Silence* as the Great Renunciation—not something that one *must* do, but something that the individual *sadhaka* may choose to do. Having reached the point where he stands upon the threshold of *Nirvana* and has the right to enter into that glory, he is offered the chance to renounce this for himself and then to labor among the suffering peoples of the earth so that they too may be aided, insofar as *karma* permits, to enter also into that state of inconceivable glory. But, he himself remains outside until the last has entered in. The appeal here is to a very adult consciousness, not to the spirit that wishes to remain the eternal bambino.

If there is no incognizable substance behind the qualities, how does that affect the state of ultimate Realization or Enlightenment? In point of fact, it in no way reduces the value of this imperience, for if one is surrounded by and identical with love, it is unnecessary that there should be a lover. If one is surrounded by and identical with beauty, it is unnecessary that there should be a beautiful thing. If one is surrounded by wisdom and knowledge, it is unnecessary that there should be a wise one or a knower. If one is surrounded by and identical with an illimitable consciousness, it is unnecessary that one should be an incognizable substance which is conscious, for consciousness is its own full value whether there is one who is conscious or whether consciousness is self-existent. What does it matter if one is surrounded and filled with power that there should be an incognizable Almighty? These qualities are what one realizes in the state of Enlightenment, and whether there is entityhood behind them or not is irrelevant. The richness of the consciousness, the richness of the Realization is an immediate fact itself. It is what it is regardless of how it may be interpreted. The view that there is an

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ramakrishna often said, “I don’t want to become sugar, I like to eat it. I never feel like saying, ‘I am Brahman.’ I say, ‘You are my Bhagavan and I Your servant.’”

incognizable substance behind the qualities may be affirmed or denied. In general, Buddhism denies it, and as I read it, in general, Vedanta affirms it. But it makes no difference whether one affirms or denies that which is essentially incognizable. So I suggest that we may take a different view, namely, that of non-predication: neither affirming the reality of that which is incognizable nor denying its reality but accepting the richness of the qualities which are facts of immediate Realization.

If it is true that at the root of all there lies a principle and not an infinite Person, then does it follow that there is no place whatsoever for the conception of person or of individual? The answer is no. It merely means that the development of person or individual is an effect of the evolution, a culmination perhaps, a development or a becoming rather than something which lies at the root source of all. Personality may even be regarded as the successful achievement of the *great work*. As we are born into this world at our present stage in the evolution, we find that there is a person here; there is that something which clothes the inner consciousness of each and every one of us, and we find that this is valuable. We see that the development of personality may be well regarded as an important part of our work. In fact, the conception of the integration of personality, which is fundamental in the psychology of Dr. Carl G. Jung, might even be regarded as the *great work*.

When we finish the span of life that is our apportioned part here, there is an eschatology which teaches that the person who passes in continues for a period of time, perhaps on the order of a thousand or more years, as that personal identity, and then enters again into rebirth at which time he drops the old ego and assumes a new one which is the *karmic* child of the old and that this, then, is clothed with a new individuality and personality which also is the *karmic* child of that which has gone before. There is thus given to us as a result of the development of the past a span of personal identity which, however, does come to an end in time. It is then further taught that by the appropriate effort of the will to live, this span may be greatly increased; that the personal identity may continue for spans on the order of thousands of years; and perhaps by repeated effort in the exercising of the will to live may be continued indefinitely; and, indeed, that there is an order of beings evolved beyond man which have a higher order of personality and individuality that could be sufficiently exalted to represent as much or more than man's power to envisage a God. Oh, I do not mean that he couldn't use words that transcend this; he can conceive of the infinite, but he cannot imagine it. And I mean that the personality at these levels, as that of a *Dhyani Buddha* or Archangel, could well be more divine than his imagination could encompass. But all of this would be a flower of the evolution, not a truth that lay at the root source of all that is.

There is a figure that may suggest the principle of individuation, or individuality and personality, which is at the same time coextensive with the universal. Let us take the figure of the vortex: the vortex can be represented by what we know as smoke rings. If one takes into his mouth a certain amount of smoke and puts it forth in the appropriate way, he'll have a circular figure which is rotating in a rather complex way. Now, let us assume that there is no smoke and that the same figure is produced with just air in which case it would not be visible. This would be a vortex. Now, this will persist as a kind of individual differentiation in the massive continuum of the atmosphere for a limited period of time. It tends, ultimately, to dissolve and to disappear into the mass of the air as no

longer distinguishable. But let us assume that a power of will is maintained so that it persists more or less indefinitely. This, then, could represent in the terms of a logical paradigm, not an aesthetic paradigm, of the nature of individuality and personality as such. It consists of the substance of the air, yet as a vortex of motion within that substance. And this vortex of motion is a differentiation of an individual in the whole which at the same time is continuous with the whole since it is part and parcel of the air, composed of the air, yet as a form in the air. The significance of the smoke was merely that of rendering it visible to us.

Now we have a conception of it as composed of the root material of air alone. Let the air here represent the root substance of all that is, the vortex ring as an individuation within that root substance, yet remaining continuous with the root substance, and if maintained by an act of will it could last indefinitely. Now, let this represent the arising of individuality or personality out of a root that is an impersonal principle; and since these entities may evolve, not alone to the highest place that is possible to man as man, but also beyond man into that vaster kingdom of the *Dhyani Buddhas*, which include in their heights the conception which we call the Archangels, here there can be a relationship between the *sadhaka* and a principle that is also a person. There is the person of the Buddhas, and there can thus be contact with other personality of a most exalted sort; yet such person is not the infinite root from which all comes but is a crowning effect, perhaps, of the evolution.