

Purpose, Method, and Policy of this Work

Part 11 of 15

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I have now another parenthetical statement.

A few weeks ago, I came into my study and found lying on one of the seats in the room a volume which was not part of my personal collection. It was a copy of the *Crest Jewel of Discrimination* which was translated by Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. I long had another volume of this work in which the Sanskrit text is presented with translations, but this new work inspired me to attempt its reading even though my eyesight makes that difficult. Now, for some time, in fact for the past 40 years, I have avoided reference to the works of Shankara for a very special reason, namely, I was more strongly oriented to his thought than to that of any other Sage, and I did not wish to become merely a continuer of this philosophy, but rather to break out my own personal, indigenous thought as of this day.

Shankara does not provide a yogic method which is adapted to the needs of all psychological types, nor have I found any yoga system which is so adapted to the use of all. Differences of type is a fact of our psychological makeup which must be taken into consideration in providing means or facilities for different kinds of human beings, and it follows that there is not one yoga which is adapted to the needs of all individuals. I consider this a very important point. Shankara's explicitly oriented himself to the needs of the *Brahmin*. We do not recognize the distinctions of caste which were well recognized in the ancient law of Manu, but difference of type or caste is a fact in nature and something that we can ignore only to the disadvantage of many human beings. Shankara is oriented to a specific type in our modern psychological terminology. It is the introverted, thinking type with intuition as the auxiliary function. Shankara does not speak the language that fits the needs of the feeling types, or the sensational types, or the intuitional type which has feeling as its auxiliary function. The *Brahmin* seems to fit as a type the introverted, thinking intuitive, and as I happen to belong to this type group, it was natural enough that when I found Shankara, I found the one who served virtually as a guru through his writings.

There are those who have identified me as a reincarnation of Shankara in a Western body; but however that may be, this much is certain, that in those days before the breakthrough in 1936 when I was deeply engaged in reading the philosophy of Shankara, I found the material extremely familiar. Often I knew what was coming, what was going to be said, before I read it. Acceptance of the position was completely frictionless, and as I've already reported in *Pathways* and elsewhere, it was effective in rendering the breakthrough possible. So if in what I am about to say, I may seem somewhat critical of certain of Shankara's conceptions, let there be no doubt as to my basic valuation of Shankara's work. If I'm critical, I am so as a friendly critic. I may even

be critical of my own productions in this light, that when viewed from a later perspective may seem to need modification.

In Hinduism, there are three views of the root principles underlying the universe which are of predominant importance. Now, here is a footnote, I have said in Hinduism, rather than in East Indian philosophic thought because I am at the moment explicitly excluding Buddhism. Buddhism approaches the root principles in a different way. I am at the moment considering only the three approaches of Hinduism proper. Continuing with the text, these three different orientations consist of the following three pairs: *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, connected with the Sankhya; *Brahman* and *Maya*, connected with Vedanta; and *Ishvara* and *Shakti*, also present in general Indian thought but particularly the point of view taken by Sri Aurobindo. These three pairs do involve the contrast of male and female in the symbolism. *Purusha* is male and represents spirit or consciousness, while *Prakriti* is female representing nature. In the Sankhya system there are many *Purushas* and one *Prakriti*. In the Vedantic system, which is the system peculiar to Shankara, *Brahman* is male and is referred to as He; *Maya* is female and is therefore She. In the third system, of Aurobindo, *Ishvara* is male and *Shakti* is female. We are here most particularly concerned with the combination of *Brahman* and *Maya*. *Brahman* is said by Shankara to be the source of all that is, therefore it follows that He is the source of *Maya* in the last analysis, though in the drama of the world these two appear more or less in an adversary relationship. It is by deriving *Maya* from *Brahman*, in the last analysis, that Shankara's position is classed as monistic; nonetheless, in the manifestation there are two principles operating. Only through *Maya* is the simulation of what we call the universe produced. I use the word 'simulation' for in this system the universe has no substantive existence. It is an appearance only. When Liberation, the ultimate objective of yoga, is attained, the apparent universe vanishes. This point is made by Shankara again and again. The universe vanishes, death and rebirth ceases, and the yogic aspirant has attained Liberation, has become identical with *Brahman* in his consciousness as well as identical as an unconscious fact all along.

What is the technical means by which the universe is produce? Here Shankara introduces a special conception, namely, that of "superimposition." It is in connection with superimposition that the figure of the snake in the rope is employed. It is a frequent experience in countries which are filled with poisonous snakes that an individual may see lying on the ground a rope, what is in fact a rope, but which on his first impression appears to him as a snake. I have had this experience and have had an opportunity to analyze it. Once, I was walking through some of the wild desert country surrounding the place where I live, and I suddenly thought I saw on the ground close to my feet a serpent and jumped away. But, in a very brief time, perhaps no more than a fraction of a second, the snake disappeared and I saw a dead stick lying on the ground where the serpent had seemed to be. But I had the opportunity of seeing where that appearance of a serpent went. It shot back into my eyes. I saw this happen. And the meaning was apparent. I had projected the serpent upon the snake.¹ Now, in the symbolism of Shankara, the stick represents *Brahman*, the serpent represents the universe, and the observer projected that serpent upon *Brahman*.

¹ Wolff obviously meant to say, ". . . upon the snake."

But there are difficulties in this theory and these difficulties were indeed recognized by Shankara and he provided an answer for them which he thought was adequate. Now, while the stick or the rope symbolizes *Brahman*, these objects are in fact sensuous existences; in other words, existences in the universe. They are not *Brahman* actually, but only represent *Brahman* in the figure. The explanation, thus, is valid only in terms of an already existing universe. In point of fact, we have a superimposition of a sensuous existence somewhere, namely the snake, upon another sensuous existence, and that is not in fact a superimposition upon *Brahman*. But Shankara says in answer to this that there is a direct acquaintance with *Brahman* in our innate knowledge of our own self-identity, not as a Mr. A or B as we speak of different individuals, but the self-identity we know immediately in a wordless sort of way. I know my identity whether I know the name by which this person is known, and that there we have the root basis upon which the superimposition is made. But then the question arises, from whence cometh the image of the serpent? Shankara says here, that the image comes from previous experience. One has had experiences of snakes and fears them because they often are very dangerous; and it is a constant element in one's consciousness to be alert as to the presence of snakes. So from previous experience we have this to project upon the rope or the stick. There must, then, have been a previous experience of a serpent. When did this error arise, at point in the evolution? Shankara says it always was there. There is no point at which the error begins. There is no beginning, for the universe starts with a beginningless past. It always has been. So, from previous experience we have made the error, but that previous experience was itself an experience within the universe; and then how was the error produced then? The answer is from a still earlier experience, and so on in an endless regression. And this I find an inadequate explanation of how the universe was produced; however, it does have a certain validity.

Somewheres, I introduced the conception of a secondary universe. I believe I introduced this in *Pathways*.² The secondary universe is something superimposed upon the primary universe by projection. Projection of this sort is a familiar fact in analytic psychology, and it can lead to all sorts of troubles to the producing of conditions that render patients psychologically ill. We often blame our neighbors for the ills which fall upon us, or we blame it upon the other party, or upon something alien of any sort. A massive example of this was the projection of the ills of the German peoples upon the Jewish race at the time of Hitler. Projection, thus, is a dangerous power that we exercise automatically. What happens here is that an evil which really abides within ourselves is projected upon the other fellow in some form or another; and the result is that we do not see the other fellow, the other race, or the other party, whatever it may be, as it truly is, but see only that which we unconsciously have projected. And this produces a kind of secondary universe of relations that are not the authentic truth of things, but a sort of unreal *maya*.

But while superimposition may well be an adequate explanation of the secondary universe, it does not seem to me adequate for the explanation of the primary universe. In the employment of this conception upon the secondary universe, we are not required to introduce the conception of an infinite regression, but to apply it to the primary universe

² Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Pathways Through to Space* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1944), 206-211.

does require that conception, or at least that was the conception employed by Shankara. I find difficulty in this because there is no final explanation. It is simply referred back and back indefinitely with no final answer. There is another suggestion which I would like to employ here.

In my system, I do not employ the conception of *Brahman*, but I do employ the conception of a Root Consciousness, something that seems to carry the same meaning as *Alaya-Vijnana*, as *Rig-pa*, and as Absolute Consciousness as employed in *The Secret Doctrine*. This may very well be a synonym for *Brahman*, for Shankara often translates *Brahman* as identical with the Deep Consciousness; however, the word was not a natural one in connection with Western religious thought. Shankara is oriented to the fundamental East Indian scriptures, namely, the records produced by the Vedic *Rishis* and the writers of the *Upanishads*. He accepts their authority, and it is an authority generally accepted in the East Indian world; however, it is not an authority with Western man. We do not have the Vedic *Rishis* and the *Upanishads* as an accepted foundation in our Western religious and philosophical thought. I derived the conception of Root Consciousness from a Realization, namely, the fifth in the series, which walked into my consciousness during the night between the 8th and 9th of September 1936. Consciousness, therefore, in this fundamental sense, is the primary conception in my system and fills the same office that *Brahman* does in Shankara's system.

Now, conceive that this primary, Deep Consciousness, Root Consciousness, contains within it every possibility including that which ultimately produces the appearance of a universe. How does the process take place? This I suggest, not as authoritative but as a possible, thinkable way: that Root Consciousness produces from Itself many planes or zones which can be activated, and that then there are those which we may call the "builder" or the "builders," that which in most religions would be known by some sacred name such as God, Allah, or whatnot, that these builders "think" the universe upon a deep plane, which we'll call plane A, that it produces a reflex of itself upon the other planes or upon some of the other planes of consciousness. Now, for entities that exist upon these other planes, the appearance of the universe is objective. On the plane where it is thought, namely, plane A, it is subjective. On that plane, by the thought of the builders it could be erased; but on the other planes, for the denizens of those planes, it is objective and therefore cannot be thought away. In producing this universe, the builders lay down the laws of nature, and on the plane where our scientists function—the universe which to them there is objective—these laws that were thought on plane A appear as the laws of nature which are discovered in our scientific research and they are objective to us on this plane. In all our thinking and action upon these lower planes, we cannot ignore the laws of nature. We must accommodate our purposes and action to those laws or we pay a penalty. Here it is objective and we cannot think it away. It is something that conditions our existence here. Thus it is that this universe appears to us here as real and it is relatively real, though external to us as subjective entities. However, in the case of the yogin who has arisen in consciousness to plane A, it is possible for him, by the power of an appropriate thought, to erase, for a time, a portion of the appearance on the lower planes, or to make that appearance reappear or be transformed, simply by the power of the appropriate thought. But for those others of us who are not such yogins, the objective universe is real and conditions our lives and our thought, in so far as it is sound, with respect to the relationships in the universe.

In Shankara's system, we have the universe produced by a superimposition represented by the experience of the superimposition of a snake upon the rope. There's one conclusion that I find inescapable and that is that the universe is the product of an error, and with that I have essential difficulty. However in the world, if *Brahman* is all that is, could error arise in *Brahman*? It implies that the existence of the universe is a mistake and that Awakening, in the sense of Fundamental Realization or Enlightenment, is simply an erasure of an error. In the conception which I have just outlined, that the real nature of the universe is the thought of the builders, the thought being objectified, the idea of an essential error or deception is not involved. On the basis of pure logic alone, I do not know that one could give excellent reason why the notion of error should be rejected, but there are other considerations that make it seem that the whole essence of this universe is only a sort of error is too trivial a way for its interpretation. To be sure, the philosophy of Shankara is very favorable practically for aiding the *sadhaka* in making a breakthrough to the liberated Consciousness. I know from experience that that is a fact. I also know that when one makes the breakthrough, the whole universe loses its apparent substantial reality and becomes as though it were no more than a phantasmagoria; and that there is a strong tendency for that phantasmagoria to be dissolved, and for even the memory of experience within it also to be dissolved. But all of this interpretation seems to have a certain element of being trivial or inadequate. On the other hand, if this universe is conceived as being the result of a sort of transcendental thought, that view is compatible with the idea that there is a serious purpose behind the manifestation of a universe. I prefer that view.

There is also an obvious difficulty with the theory that I have presented, and that difficulty is shown rather clearly in the question, "Whence the builders?" An immediate answer could be this: that the builders are a sort of basic reincarnation of the builders of a previous universe and have brought again into manifestation a power which existed before. But here, too, we quickly face again the endless regression and do not have a resolution of the problem that is satisfactory. There is here at the very root of the problem of the development of a universe an inherent difficulty which reminds me very much concerning the story of the Gordian Knot. The knot was a very complicated one, and the tradition connected with it was that he who could untie the knot would conquer Asia. It is said that many tried but none succeeded. When Alexander the Great, so the story is told, developed the ambition to conquer Asia, he went to see if he could untie this Gordian knot, but he was, like the others, defeated by it. So, he drew his sword and cut it in two, and in fact he did conquer much of Asia. Well, I propose to do something of the same sort. And I'll say this: that we simply predicate that in the total resources of Fundamental Consciousness, Absolute Consciousness, there lies the potential to produce the builders. This is simply a predication. It's in the tradition of mathematical thought to lay down a group of assumptions or predications without questioning their soundness, and then proceed to develop the consequences, and by evaluating the ultimate consequences which follow, come to a decision as to whether the predication was sound. So I simply predicate that this power resides in the very nature of Root Consciousness or Absolute Consciousness and let it go at that.

There is a conception in *The Secret Doctrine* that is closely related to that which has just been said. This is the idea that the organization of the universe is such that there are several planes of consciousness and it is said that when the individual shifts from one

plane to another, the relationships that applied to the first plane no longer seem real and that this also applies to the second plane when there is shift to still another plane of consciousness. Also, it applies when one shifts back to the first plane. My own experience confirms this. I have known the repeated shift from the plane of outer consciousness passed a point of discontinuity where relationships totally change in the higher plane, and all the relationships of the lower plane seem unreal. But, also I've had the experience of shifting back to the first plane and found equally that the relationships of the higher plane seem unreal. With this as a basic fact, we have the implication that it is characteristic of the shift in level of consciousness to produce the sense that the relationships of the plane just left are unreal, and it would be questionable to say that this is a proof of the absolute unreality of the relationships of the plane just left. It is also said in the same statement in *The Secret Doctrine* that this condition continues until one has attained the state of Absolute Consciousness, and then it is implied that from that perspective all of the preceding planes are seen in their true perspective.

Shankara frequently employs the figure of a jar to represent the relationship between *Brahman* and the universe. He says the reality of the jar is simply clay. It is none other than clay. It has a form, but the form is merely a product of the imagination, and there is the implication that the form becomes nothing at all. Here I have difficulty also. Form was produced ultimately from a potential resident in *Brahman*. Form, to be sure, is different from the substance that has been produced in the shape of a form, but nonetheless, the form is something experienced. It is a fact. That fact does not become nothing at all. It has some meaning. I do not see that we can consistently produce something from nothing and make it return to nothing at all. It is the expression of a potential, of a power, and that power has meaning of a sort. Thus, the universe is not to be regarded as totally without significance or meaning, as totally worthless, as reducible completely to a naught; but, on the contrary, also would have its root in *Brahman*.

The construction of a jar with its form and its function is an expression of energy, and energy is not reducible to nothing at all. The expression or manifestation of this energy produced a fact of immediate awareness. It is, in some sense. It may be other than substance, to be sure, but it is not nothing at all. In my own series of Realizations, in the case of the fourth Realization, which was the result of my reading and meditation upon the thought of Shankara, there was the apparent implication that the whole drama of existence vanished into a reality that was wholly conscious but without content. And this is quite in accord with the statements repeatedly made by Shankara. For him who has Awakened, says Shankara in effect, the universe vanishes. But when the fifth Realization walked into my consciousness, it was as though the universe was regained without the loss of *Nirvana*. In other words, beyond the dichotomy of a universe of objects on one side and a consciousness without content upon the other, there is the integration of these two so that they appear as two complementary components of the whole; and thus the ultimate integration embraces both a universe of objects and the Pure Consciousness Itself.

Shankara says that in dreamless sleep we have Realization of *Brahman*, for *Brahman* is identical with Consciousness without content. And he gives a very ingenious and subtle proof of this, for when we awake we remember that we were aware of nothing. If there were no consciousness at all, we could have no memory of the fact that we were

aware of nothing. A state of complete non-consciousness could leave no memory trace at all. It is a subtle proof, but if one studies it he will discover its force. It would be something very good to meditate upon. This is even clearer in a state of fainting from which one may awaken with the afterglow of a state of bliss that may be quite strong. The state of *Brahman* Consciousness is a state of bliss. But I suggest that we are not restricted to the alternative of an awareness of the universe, on one side, with its suffering and its ignorance, and a state of no content in Consciousness, on the other side, where one imperiences either one or the other, but not both. I suggest that there is an alternative course where one may know both the state of consciousness with content and yet isolate at the same time Consciousness Itself apart from content; and that essentially this is a way where it is easier to realize this fact than it is when one is in a state of Consciousness without content and at the same time is conscious of the Consciousness. It is an act of discrimination. One ignores the content in his discrimination, and yet the content itself can render it more easily possible to have this complex awareness.