

## BONDAGE, LIBERATION AND TRANSFORMATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL SURVEY

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“What man dare, I dare.  
 Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,  
 The armed rhinoceros, or th’ Hyrcan tiger;  
 Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves  
 Shall never tremble. Or be active again,  
 And dare me to the desert with thy sword;  
 If trembling I inhabit, then protest me.  
 The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!  
 Unreal mockery, hence!”

Macbeth, Shakespeare

Are these only words full of sound and fury signifying nothing? No, they are not. They are the very stuff of Macbeth’s agony. A strong and powerful character such as that of Macbeth cannot bear the mental and the psychological sufferings. As he indicates, physical sufferings and pain can be born to a great extent, but mental and emotional agonies cannot be borne. They haunt us at every second and they make us helpless victims. It is in such moments of life that one feels its bondage. It is again in these moments of our life that we feel our limitations and then we try to escape from the human bondage by whatever means we can find near the hand.

To help this poor miserable folk, many philosophers and saints have analyzed the nature and origin of bondage and then laid out very effective paths by which we can be liberated.

Buddha is believed to have said that our life is a chain of action—actions resulting from desires and desires resulting from the consequences of an actions. These desires are the cause of our pleasures and pain of our bondage. The only way to be liberated from this bondage is to retire from this action and to annihilate our desires. When one succeeds in doing so, one has the experience of Nirvana—a state of universal calmness and quietude, a consciousness static and luminous. It is true that we cannot speak of ‘one’ having the experience of Nirvana because as the word ‘nirvana’ implies, the whole packet of emotions



*Spiritual significance: Transformation.*

and desires and matter is blown out and nothing remains to experience nirvana. It would be more true to state that Nirvana comes down and settles at that particular level of consciousness. Whatever the inaptitude of expressions, there is the path—the eightfold path—that Buddha suggested for one's liberation.

The philosophy of Sankhya also gives us an interesting analysis of bondage and liberation. It holds that there are two ultimate realities—the Purusha and the Prakriti. The Purusha is consciousness, static and individual whereas the Prakriti is diametrically opposite and hence is unconscious, active and universal. These two are independent realities and yet Prakriti is dependent upon Purusha for the beginning of its manifestation. This is because, it is only when the Purusha glances at Prakriti that it begins to unravel itself and creates Mahat, the Buddhi, the Ego, the five tanmatras, etc. In this creation, the Purusha is charmed by the beauty parade of the Prakriti and then he forgets his own real nature that he is static, that he is consciousness and begins to consider himself as the ego that was created by Prakriti. So, according to Sankhya, it is this trapping of the Purusha by the Prakriti that is the real bondage.

And the way to liberate this Purusha from the enticement of Prakriti is to concentrate on the Buddhi—the subtlest creation of Prakriti as much as possible. In this state of the Purusha remembers his own nature and then he withdraws from the Prakriti and becomes his own real Self.

This explanation of Sankhya seems to solve the problem of the 'one' who is to be liberated, but, it raises many other questions which it cannot satisfy. How can Purusha who is absolutely static glance at Prakriti, because 'to glance' is an action which is contrary to Purusha's nature? How can absolute consciousness

and absolute knowledge forget itself when it is enveloped by Prakriti? And how can the liberation of Purusha depend upon the Buddhi which is a creation of the unconscious Prakriti? These and many other questions fail to find an answer in Sankhya. But apart from this failure of giving metaphysical answers this system seems to satisfy the practical need of liberation.

In the 8th century, the great intellectual genius, Sankaracharya comes and brings a new cyclone in the intellectual thinking of the Indian masses. He preached that there is nothing as Purusha or Prakriti but that there is only one reality, namely Brahman. By some unaccountable and inapprehensible phenomenon, Brahman, who is completely static, consciousness and transcendental comes to face the Maya and its creation. This Maya eclipses the Brahman and as in the case of the Sankhya explanation of bondage, in Sankara also, the Brahman loses himself and becomes the individual ego-self. This falling of Brahman from his transcendental state to the individual state is the great bondage of the absolute.

The only way to liberate this ego-self is to teach Buddhi the sense of discrimination—*viveka*. That is to say, the Buddhi must be taught and must be made to realise that it is not the Maya, that it is on the contrary the transcendental, the Sachchidananda. Once the Buddhi realises this, the ego-soul is liberated from Maya and it gets back its true transcendental self.

This theory of Sankara does not bring progress to the previous theories expect that it urges man to shun this life from the very beginning and to escape from it as soon as is possible. This theory also had its ambiguities such as, if the world is an illusion and that Brahman is lost in the world, where is the goal, where is the bondage to be liberated from, where is the path to follow? All these are illusionary and it makes no sense. When Sankara is asked about these problems of an illusory goal, an illusionary path etc. he replies that they cannot be answered because they are self-contradictory and hence do not have any answers and secondly they are ultimately non-existent and as they are illusory they do not need any answer. With these shrewd answers he claims that he has answered to all the questions and thereby ever smiles mawkishly at the philosopher- critics.

Another philosopher who brought revolution in the philosophical field was Ramanuja. He propounded the system of 'bhakti-marga'. He holds the view that there is only one reality whom he names as Vishnu or Brahman. Unlike the Brahman of Sankara, the Brahman of Ramanuja is dynamic. He manifests himself as the Nitya Vibuthi or the Supermind. And this dynamic Brahman also created the Lila Vibuthi or the world of play. This Lila Vibuthi is in the Sankhya terminology the Prakriti. Into this world of play wanders the jiva, the soul, the son of the Brahman. In this world, the jiva is captured and it forgets itself. It then begins to identify with the mind, "I am the Mind, I am the Ego etc." The soul entrapped in our world is the bondage according to Ramanuja.

What then is the method to escape this mayaic bondage? Ramanuja says that the only path for liberation is to turn the emotional being towards God. In this godward aspiration, the emotions must be purified and intensified. It is only when the bhakta succeeds in surrendering entirely to the Divine, that the Divine child, the soul is liberated from the earthly meshes. Unlike other philosophers who stressed on the purification of intellect, Ramanuja lays stress upon the heart of man. This bhakti-marga being easier than the other paths, it has attracted many more disciples.

The first thing a liberated man—liberated through any of the above four means—notices is that the sorrows of the world no more trouble him. Secondly, the liberated man notices that the ego and the desires in him have vanished, are evaporated. This is so because, as long as man is not liberated, his egos seeks to aggrandize and to grow in quantity, but, once the seeker is liberated he becomes a universal being and his ego has nothing to aggrandize—the island ego is one with its continent and it loses its entity. Thirdly, the seeker experiences that he was never in bondage, that the Purusha or the Brahman or the jiva is ever free. This seems to be quite paradoxical and quite contrary to the analysis done by the great masters of philosophy.

Examining these systems of philosophy with a metaphysical mind, we notice that when the philosophers have given us paths to liberation, all of them have invariably stressed upon the purification of our lower—Sankara, Buddha and Sankhya lay stress upon Buddhi and Ramanuja on the emotions. This shows that it is our own nature, specifically Buddhi which is trapped in the mayaic creation and that it is Buddhi which has forgotten its origin, its home. So, in a sense, it is not the Brahman or Purusha or the jiva who were in bondage and in ignorance, it its Prakriti which is limited and ignorant.

Such an explanation which gives the right relations between Purusha and Prakriti is found only in Gita and in Sri Aurobindo. They conceive of a Supreme Being, the Purushottama—the Perfect Man. He is Akshara—static, and Kshara-dynamic at the same time. In his poise of dynamism, according to Sri Aurobindo, he first created the Supermind or the nitya-vibuthi in Ramanuja's terminology. This supramental being has a consciousness which can live simultaneously in the three aspects of existence. He can exist as a universal being, as well as an objective soul and thirdly as a soul that projects itself into action and becomes the action itself. This state of the Superman is the highest stage in which the individual can exist as cosmic- individual.

This Supreme Purushottama does not stop his manifestation with the creation of the Supramental being but he undergoes an involution and goes right into the state of Nescience. After this, he begins to evolve and has at present come to the state of the mental being. This mental being feels that he is limited, that he is a petty creature crawling upon earth because this complex being of mind, life and body exclusively concentrates upon itself—its ego and desires—and ignores other parts of its being. So, the real bondage lies in this

exclusive consciousness of the individual being upon its outer being. He is bound to his own magnetic field and it is this that he feels as bondage.

In a subtler sense of the word 'bondage', our soul also is bound. The soul which is eternally free and which is ever in touch with the jivataman emanates rays of divine will. But, because of the whirlpool created by mind, body and life, the rays of the divine will are incapable of piercing through and manifesting in the actions of nature. It is this incapability of the soul to manifest its will in Prakriti that can be considered as bondage of the soul.

From this and the previously discussed analysis of bondage, it seems that Prakriti is all-powerful, that on it depends the liberation. This point would be correct if we had considered it in the light of Sankhya philosophy. That is, if there were two independent realities Purusha and Prakriti—Prakriti would be as powerful as Purusha. But this is not so. It is by the withholding of its knowledge that the Supermind has created this Prakriti. And hence, Prakriti is a part and parcel of the Supreme Purushottama and as all the limitations of the soul are self-willed, Prakriti is not all powerful.

To continue with our analysis, how is the individual to be liberated from Prakriti? The Gita and Sri Aurobindo profess that the road to liberation lies in turning the exclusive concentration of our being towards our soul, or the inactive Brahman, or the Supreme Purushottama. This type of switching on to our inner realities, many philosophers have preached and many saints have practiced. Those who have concentrated on the widening of their mind have reached the Impersonal Brahman; others who have intensified and purified their emotional being have come in contact with their psychic being and still others who have practiced severe Hatha yoga have opened channels in their beings through which the Purushottama, the Supermind, and the Soul have slowly influenced the Prakriti and liberated the individual.

But, Sri Aurobindo is not satisfied with this turning of the single parts of our being towards the Divine. He wants that all our parts must concentrate upon the Supreme Lord because it is only the liberation of all the three parts of our being that would be the true liberation. By liberation we mean that the parts of our being turn exclusively towards the Jivatman and the Supermind, the Purushottama, and allow the rays of our soul to penetrate the whirlpool of mind, life and body. This penetration of the spirit's rays through the thick veil of body, life and mind is not liberation of the soul alone, but also of our individual nature. Our nature would not be troubled by ego or desires because it would grow into cosmic consciousness.

But this liberation of the mental, vital and physical entities is not enough because this is not the total purpose of Purushottama's manifestation. We have already seen that the aim of this evolution is to return to the Divine consciousness in all its integrality. And if this is so, what happens to Inconscience, the Tamas, the Rajas and the Sattwa natures of the individual being? They can't be ignored

if the Divine is to evolve from Nescience to Supreme Consciousness! It is not that the liberated man will not have these gunas in him. He will surely have them though more transparent than in the unliberated man! Hence, we have to seek for the transformation of total Prakriti in order to fulfill the Divine scheme:

All here must learn to obey a higher law,  
Our body's cells must hold the immortal flame.  
Else would the spirit reach alone its source;  
Leaving a half-saved world to it dubious.  
Nature would ever labour unredeemed;  
Our earth would ever spin unhelped in space,  
And this immense creation's purpose fails,  
Till at least the frustrate universe sank undone.

*SABCL Vol.28, Book 1 Canto 03, p.35*

Thus, Sri Aurobindo warns of the peril of an untransformed world. He not only warns, but he also paves the way to the transformation that is necessary in order to save the world. He says that the earth-nature must undergo a triple transformation—the psychic transformation, the spiritual transformation and the supramental transformation. Briefly,

Psychicisation means the change of the lower nature bringing right visions into the mind, right impulse and feeling into the vital, right movement and habit into the physical—all turned towards the Divine, all based on love, adoration, bhakti—finally, the vision and sense of the Mother everywhere in all as well as in the heart, her Force working in the being, faith, consecration, surrender. (*SABCL Vol.24, p.1093*)

“The Spiritual change is the established descent of the peace, light, knowledge, power, bliss from above, the awareness of the self and the divine and of a higher cosmic consciousness and the change of the whole consciousness to that.” (*SABCL Vol.24, p.1093*)

Maybe, again, a few have had these transformations separately. And with these two types of transformations humanity has remained satisfied. But, Sri Aurobindo insists on the supramental transformation because this supramental consciousness which is empowered with dynamic power of Purushottama can alone penetrate and transform the solid Nescience into a Divine consciousness.

Once man achieves this glorious transformation, not only will he bring down the life divine upon earth by manifesting the Divine in every cell of his



body, in every thought of his mind, in every feeling of his heart, he will also change the three gunas of Prakriti into their divine equivalents: Sattwa becomes jyoti, the authentic spiritual Light; Rajas becomes Tapas, the tranquilly intense divine force; Tamas becomes *sama*, the divine quite, rest, peace and thereby transform Nature too. This is the glorious culmination of man's journey because at this luminous end--

A mightier race shall inhabit the mortal's world.  
 On nature's luminous tops, on the spirit's ground,  
 The Superman shall reign as king of life,  
 Make earth almost the mate and peer of heaven  
 And lead towards God and truth man's ignorant heart  
 And lift towards godhead his mortality.

SABCL Vol.28, Book 11 Canto 01, p.707

The gnostic individual would be the consummation of the spiritual man; his whole way of being, thinking, living, acting would be governed by the power of a vast universal spirituality. All the trinities of the Spirit would be real to his self-awareness and realised in his inner life. All his existence would be fused into oneness with the transcendent and universal Self and Spirit; all his action would originate from and obey the supreme Self and Spirit's divine governance of Nature. All life would have to him the sense of the Conscious Being, the Purusha within, finding its self-expression in Nature; his life and all its thoughts, feelings, acts would be filled for him with that significance and built upon that foundation of its reality. He would feel the presence of the Divine in every centre of his consciousness, in every vibration of his life-force, in every cell of his body. In all the workings of his force of Nature he would be aware of the workings of the supreme World-Mother, the Supernature; he would see his natural being as the becoming and manifestation of the power of the World-Mother. In this consciousness he would live and act in an entire transcendent freedom, a complete joy of the Spirit, an entire identity with the cosmic Self and a spontaneous sympathy with all in the universe. (*The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 22, (*The Life Divine*), p. 1007)