

From Vedas to Sri Aurobindo

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From Vedas to Sri Aurobindo — I

At a time when India is being battled by divisive forces, I thought it would perhaps be necessary to understand and see through these disturbing times and find out what is the real spiritual destiny of India. Seeing the present situation many may get disturbed and lose sight of the real vision and mission of India. I would like to analyse the perennial vision of Indian spirituality. This would give us not only the backdrop of Indian spirituality in the past, but we would also take a leap into the future. And first of all, it is important to have a clear definition of what our own religious culture is because there is a lot of debate on the word 'Hinduism' itself. Well, Sri Aurobindo defines it thus:

The religious culture which now goes by the name of Hinduism gave itself no name because it set itself no sectarian limits, it claimed no universal sadism, asserted no infallible dogma, and set up no single narrow path or gate of salvation. It was less a creed or cult than a continuously enlarging tradition of the Godward endeavor of the human spirit, an immense many-sided and many-staged provision for spiritual self-building and self-finding. It has some right to speak of itself by the only name it knew: 'The Eternal Religion – Sanatana Dharma. (CWSA 20:179)

This definition amply makes it clear that we are wedded to a tradition of Godward endeavor of the human spirit and this Godward endeavor is a many-sided and many-staged provision for the spiritual self-finding and self-building. This definition itself is so vast, that there is no possibility of any religious conflict based on it otherwise the questions of Hindutva, and the questions of Hinduism, all arise and create unnecessary political and social conflict and confusion. And if this is the definition of our Sanatana Dharma, then it is not, as you know, a religion at all. It is "a Godward endeavour" which has been a

tolerant synthesis of all spiritual worship and experience and it is a unifying and always progressive and self-enlarging system of spiritual culture. So, these are the two important things: 1) a Godward endeavour which is a tolerant synthesis of all spiritual worship, even of Atheism and Agnosticism, it has embraced. 2) it is a progressive enlarging system. That is of great importance because this is how our Dharma has been 'Sanatana' in the sense that it has always progressed in its form, it has always embraced the new and newer experience. It has never got stacked in one definition or one practice or one way. This has been a progressive system.

Secondly, Sri Aurobindo mentions here, it is a "many-staged provision". Now, this is again a primary characteristic of the Sanatana Dharma, that we are not asked to be so-called 'spiritual' right from the beginning. We have different levels of existence as we said: the four ashramas – Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa. So, there is a level of progression in human life and Sanatana Dharma takes into account the fulfillment and the maturing of each stage of life. This basic spiritual experience has some fundamental spiritual characteristics if we may call them. Sri Aurobindo puts them in a formula: Number one, he calls it nityo nityanam i.e. the one existence behind all existences. That means the fundamental experience of Sanatana Dharma is the existence of One supreme or absolute Reality. This is unique to our Sanatana Dharma or contemporarily called Hinduism. But this is the very beginning of our experience.

The second characteristic of our Indian spiritual life is, as he calls it, chetana chetananam one consciousness in many forms and this is again extremely important because it gives us the freedom and liberty of approaching the Divine in any form, through any path that we want to. There is no one single path to reach the Divine, so this multiplicity or this

question of numberless paths to the Divine is again absolutely unique to Hinduism. As Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated in the recent years: 'so many men, so many paths'. So, this cosmic universal approach to the Divine is hardly to be found in any other religious culture. Now, to realise the existence of One as the transcendental existence may be difficult for the common man. Even to imagine an absolute Reality may be very difficult. So the great Indian rishis brought that great oneness of the transcendental experience closer to our embrace. And they said the same Brahman, the same Divine in the transcendental is there within each one of us as the 'Atman', so this has kind of brought the spiritual life into a reaching distance of ordinary men seeking inner life. It is not a thing that is far away, it is as if the Divine is right within oneself and therefore we could reach the Divine. These are some of the basic experiences which translated into various other experiences down the ages, through different yogis, saints and sannyasins. But if you have to define Hinduism – I am using this word in view of Sanatana Dharma - if you have to define, this is the essential experience, the oneness, the multiplicity and the One within each one. But what has been unique to our Indian spiritual life is that this essential experience has a specific process.

It has undergone a line of devolution, as we call it. It starts from one apex point and then spreads from one level to another; at each level it embraces a greater humanity. It is as we normally speak of the Gangotri, the river, the Ganga starts from Gangotri and as it comes down towards Bay of Bengal it widens and covers more and more area. This is the area. The devolution of Indian spirituality has been exactly the same. It has started from what we say the Vedas and then it went down different levels. We have the second level, the grand level, the Upanishads, and then we have here the Bhagavad Gita, the sad-Darshana and the great Tantra, Then comes Sri Aurobindo. So, you can see the pattern that falls, it has come down embracing.

This is one of the great beauties of Indian spiritual life, that at each level it has embraced not only a greater mass of humanity, but at the same time, it has demarcated the higher truth. At each level, there is an expansion and integration. This is the simultaneous movement that has happened in our Indian spiritual devolution. And this has been if I can say, done almost consciously, it has not happened by chance, and it has not happened just by an accident, there has been a consciousness or a conscious process of devolution involving expansion and integration at each stage. Conscious devolution means that consciousness is behind this process, behind the universal evolution, it is as if working in India. And, of course, if you study the world's religious patterns you will see more or less the same rhythm in the entire world's spiritual culture. But we can see the pattern clearly because we are familiar with Indian culture. For those of you who are interested, you can study the Greek or Egyptian culture or any other ancient cultures - you will see more or less the same pattern of devolution. That's why I use the word evolutionary pattern. This is a kind of rhythm that is innate.

Now we can call it devolution or, in other words, it is a kind of evolution. You see, devolution is a movement coming from the top downward, but this downward movement is not derogative, this is a movement actually from Spirit to Matter. It means spiritual truths coming down to the material level and this is the fundamental line of growth in Indian spirituality. In my talk series, I intend to deal with three major stages into which Indian spiritual tradition has devolved. At each level, along with the expansion, there is a larger synthesis. I shall speak of Vedas and Upanishads first, then of Gita and Tantra and then of the Grand synthesis in Sri Aurobindo.

First, we take up the Vedas. We will try to see what is important to us in this pattern of devolution of spiritual

consciousness. The Vedas were, as Sri Aurobindo says “it is a creation of an early intuitive and symbolic mentality” It means that the Vedas are primarily the creation of Intuition. Let us bear in our mind that the Supreme Truth has come down in gradations from the Supermind, to Overmind, then to Intuition, Illumined Mind, Higher Mind, and has gone right into our cells. It means the supermind has got embedded into our very cells and atoms and molecules. In fact this is the process of creation. Now, we are aware that from these levels of consciousness various scriptures and philosophies have taken birth. Vedas have been regarded as the highest among them. It is a synthesis between the physical and psychic worlds, between the individual and the universal powers of the cosmos and man and the Gods. The basic effort of the Vedic rishis was to link up external life with the Gods. This has been the primary motive.

We need to remember the common man during the Vedic period lived on the external level. It means that he could relate better with Sun, Moon, Plants, animals, etc. He could easily worship them. Perhaps he could not very well relate to the subliminal levels within us. Therefore, the Vedic rishis gave them psychic elements through external symbols. We too are on the external level but our mind has developed a bit to understand our own inner poises.

Sri Aurobindo tells us that in The Secret of the Veda, the Sun and the Moon etc. were actually symbolic of the planes and parts of their own being, but if in those early times you would tell a man, a common man, that there is an inner vital and inner mind and the subtle physical, nobody would understand, the best way was to make the sun as the Surya, the god of the moon, the god of rain, the god Indra. So this was one of the basic attempts that were very successfully taken up by the Vedic Rishis and for this, they provided many rituals, rites, and ceremonies. It is easy for man to perform ceremonies, he loves

to do some kind of ritual to remind him of the Godhead. That is why at every moment in our life we have some ritual to remind us of the Godhead. So, the importance of a ritual per se is in this, that it is a reminder of a godhead beyond. And the best practice that was taken up, was the Yajna. Yajna was important because that was the process; Sri Aurobindo calls it "the Divine's commerce".

Today we have this human commerce, but in the older Vedic times, there was the Divine commerce which is another name for Yajna. Through this commerce between the individual and the godhead, a constant link was established. That was the process that man perhaps got into too many ceremonies. Vedas had given us the essential truths, and the ceremonies were only a means to realise them. However, with time the truths took a back seat and ceremonies alone became important. That is what we see in marriage ceremonies these days. The bride and groom, sometimes even the priest is unaware of the real meaning of the mantras he is reciting. With this fossilization, there was a need for revival; a revival of the kind which could restore the Vedic truths and break the moulds of the rituals.

Many centuries passed by and to save the truths a new revolutionary movement, called the Upanishads took birth. So Upanishads came as a great saviour of India's spiritual culture. We can see now the meaning and importance of the Upanishads. The rishis, the gurus, they withdrew into the forest and some students went to them, then there they got rid of all the ceremonies, all the rituals, all the rites, and concentrated on the experience of the Vedas. This is the very first synthesis, as we say, synthesis of all the spiritual experiences of the Vedic period. And if the Upanishads had not done the synthesis, we would have lost the Vedas forever. But there is one thing about the Vedas we have said: the language of the Vedas is highly symbolic, it is so very symbolic that hardly anyone until

Sri Aurobindo's writings, has been able to find out the secret of the Vedas. Many scholars have interpreted it, right from the western to Indian but no one has given the real psychological secret of the Vedas. The symbolism was extremely difficult for the uninitiated.

What did the Upanishads do? They re-captured the Vedic experience and put it in a highly metaphysical language. Now, metaphysical language is again difficult to understand, but it is not symbolic, it is a difficult rational language. It is a direct experience, a direct expression of Truth but definitely, not all common people could understand them. But at least this taking away the symbol was taking away the possibility of misunderstanding or nonunderstanding. Here at least, if you make an effort, if you go to the sastras, if you train yourself, you can understand. So the basic thing in the Upanishads was that they changed the language, or the expression while keeping to the same Vedic experiences.

This is again extremely important because when you come to Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*, we can see why he has used such metaphysical language. With the Upanishads and Sri Aurobindo's works, we realise that the expression has changed while the truth and experience remain the same. Upanishads are brilliant in expressing in brief and monumental phrases what we normally call the Mahavakyas. Mahavakyas, as Sri Aurobindo says have a revealing power and suggestive thought colour. They contain each in itself the substance of a vast philosophy, so the Upanishads had given humanity some of the most fundamental Mahavakyas. We shall deal with a couple of them.

The Mahavakya for self-knowledge is *Aham brahmasmi* – I am Brahman, *Soham* – I am that. Then there is the Mahavakya for world knowledge, he calls it: *tat-tvam asi* – Thou art that, Svetketu third level, God knowledge, *Sarvam Khalvidam Brahman* "All this is Brahman". Upanishads gave us four

Mahavakyas one was self-knowledge, the other was world knowledge and the third was God-knowledge. But they had given four cryptic mantras. In fact, for centuries these four little phrases have carried on the entire spiritual culture of India and we will see in the end, not only India but how that has influenced western thought also. What I am giving you here is only a framework. As you can see the subject itself beholds a thesis. It is so vast and so deep that we cannot go very much into details. So we have seen that Mahavakyas. And then, there is one more description that is extremely interesting and important.

Apart from these Mahavakyas, the Upanishads have given clarification of two things: one of Brahman, the other of Avidya and Vidya and of maya. So, if you want to really understand the Upanishads these are the three things: The Mahavakyas, Brahman and Atman, and Vidya and Avidya. If you can understand these three, then you have understood the essence of the Upanishads. Now, coming to the different poises of Brahman, as we would call them, we could say the first poise is that of the Virat Brahman, the Virat Purusha. We have all heard about this Virat Purusha, a sort of the waking universe. What is the meaning of the master of this waking universe? You see, when we say Virat Purusha he is not some being sitting there who is the Master and controlling this world, but just as we have in the Mother, the Transcendental, the Universal, and the Individual, so we have the Brahman different poises. One of them is the Virat Purusha, which means that form or that poise of Brahman who is part and parcel of this waking universe. That means all of the waking consciousness is a reflection of the Brahmic consciousness. So to say, that this too is Brahman, they have called it the Virat Purusha. Let us not think that Brahman belongs only to man and to mind. Even this matter, this life animal and the flower, everything, is this Virat Purusha. Because the word 'waking' is not as against sleeping and waking; waking

here is in the sense of getting up from the slumber of the inconscient. So right from the time from which this inconscient has awakened, ignorance has awakened and the evolution has begun. From there till this level of the mental man is called Virat Purusha. That's why it is called the awakened Purusha. Then, the next poise is the Hiranya Garbha, the golden embryo. This is the master of the dream universe or, as we understand, of subtle matter. We can see now the gross matter, the subtle matter. The subtle matter is the Hiranya Garbha from where there is the beginning of this creation of light and form. And that beyond this Hiranya Garbha, is causal matter, that which is the beginning, the cause of this material creation itself. The third level is called the Tajasa objected Brahman. He is the master of the causal matter. Now, those of us who have read The Mother should understand these three states of poises. So Brahman is there in the matter, in the subtle physical, and in the causal matter.

Then, there is the fourth level - Supreme Parabrahman. Supreme Parabrahman is again described by Sri Aurobindo in three aspects. In fact, in one of his essays, written in the Upanishads he explains the three types of experiences in relation to Parabrahman. He says to imagine a chamber – the garbha griha or sanctum sanctorum of the temple where the inner deity is seated. Outside the chamber, there is a porch, a small room. One of the significant experiences of a spiritual seeker is to see the Parabrahman standing in the corridors of the temple. Such a seeker is called Jivanmukta. The Jivanmukthas are those who are still living in a body but have got the experience of the Parabrahman from outside.

Then those are there who come inside the porch, and look at the beautiful face of the Divine, the Parabrahman. But here Sri Aurobindo says: 'once you get inside the porch and look at the Divine face, you cannot come back. However, only one

person came back, one who is an avatar, like the Buddha. It is an avatar alone who can come into the porch, have the face-to-face darshan of the Supreme Parabrahman and then return to Earth for doing the work. And this was the great experience and contribution of the Buddha. The Buddha need not have come back from that experience of Parabrahman. For the Buddhists it is maybe difficult to understand this experience or this explanation, because the Buddhists would never accept that the Buddha had the darshan or the experience of the Parabrahman, because he talks and teaches about Nirvana. But talking about nirvana does not mean that Buddha did not have the experience of Parabrahman. It is true, he did not speak about it. There is a distinction here, Buddha did not speak about what he experienced of the Parabrahman because it was not necessary for those times. But another avatar, Sri Aurobindo, alone knows this for he had been in those realms already and saw that before him one who visited this realm was the Buddha. So it is Sri Aurobindo who reveals that Buddha's footprints were found in the inner chamber of the divine temple. So that is the second experience of the Parabrahman.

Then, he says the last and the highest experience is when one gets completely merged in Parabrahman. In the third level once you have the darshan of the Parabrahman in the inner chamber you get completely identified with him. From there, there is no return, even for an Avatar. This is the highest spiritual experience and we have had experiences of all these three in the Indian spiritual history. So this is the Parabrahman and beyond the Parabrahman, the fifth poise, Virat Purusha, Parabrahman, and the supreme unknowable unknown Tat. Well, in The Life Divine, there is a long description of that indeterminable Tat so the Brahman has these five poises. So this is one of the most important descriptions in the Upanishads, but if you again want to remember the Upanishads, as I gave you the three Mahavakyas, the five poises of Brahman, you will get one more

formula to remember the synthetic approach, that is what Sri Aurobindo beautifully gives the two formulas. He says the subjective and the objective experience of Sat Chit and Ananda. Sat Chit Ananda is the subjective supreme divine and the objective reality of Sat Chit Ananda is Satyam Jnanam Anantam. Well, I am sorry I cannot use the board, otherwise I could have explained to you. Now, you know this formula, Sat Chit Ananda.

We have explained Sat Chit Ananda many times in our classes. Sat is the existence, and he is the sole existence, the sole reality, nothing exists beyond. Remember the word 'existence'. Then, what exists is not without consciousness, this existence has its own consciousness and that is the Chit. And then, wonderfully, what consciously exists must be full of bliss. Even in our sadhana, we are asked to have a conscious existence. A conscious existence would give us peace, joy, and Ananda. So, what is this conscious existence? It is essentially bliss. Yoga is nothing but trying to become more and more conscious - conscious of your true existence, the real reality within you. That is, the more you become conscious of your true existence, the more bliss you get. So, Sat Chit Ananda is existence, the consciousness of this existence and conscious existence which means bliss.

Now what is again of great importance to us is the Satyam Jnanam Anantam. What is this Satyam? Satyam -you say is very easy, it is truth. But what is truth? It means 'that' which exists is true. If I say 'this bottle is there, then that's the truth. That this bottle is there because it exists. When the bottle is not there and someone says - there is a bottle on the table, you will say 'this is untrue'. So, truth and existence are one and the same, but existence is subjective and the truth is objective, because truth is something that I experience, that I see, I touch, I feel, I smell. So this is why what exists, reflects as the true. So, if you say I am in search of truth, what is the truth? The truth can be

on many levels. That is what the great Rishis found out. The truth of material existence, the truth of mental existence, the truth of spiritual existence, the truth of silence and the truth of no existence. So, existence must precede truth. So, truth from our evolutionary angle is truth, but from the supreme angle, truth is Sat, so Sat and Satya go together.

Now, coming to Chit. Chit, of course, as we know, is consciousness. But how is Chit and Jnanam related? Jnana means knowledge. How are they related? Now, if I say 'I know this bottle is there', how do I know it? By touching it. Well, if I am in a semi-coma condition and touch the bottle would I still know the bottle? No, because I am unconscious. If I want to know that the bottle is there, I have got to be conscious. If I am asleep and touch this bottle, I do not know what I have touched, because my consciousness is asleep. So, knowledge per se is a reflection of consciousness. Therefore, if knowledge can increase your consciousness, that is true knowledge. If there is purely materialistic knowledge that does not increase your consciousness, then it is of no use for spiritual life. But if in material knowledge also you seek a consciousness then that will make all the difference. For example, a scientist, if he just handles matter as matter, he may be a great scientist, but not a great yogi. But a yogi is one who may be a scientist, but while he is handling things in the laboratory, while he is finding out the secrets of matter, he is trying to see the Divine Consciousness in matter. So, if you relate consciousness and knowledge, that is yoga, that is tapasya, and sadhana. So, that is why The Mother and Sri Aurobindo constantly tell us that whenever you work, whatever your work may be, from cleaning of dishes to giving lectures, try to put consciousness into it, because just to have the knowledge of computer science or the knowledge of the technology of some things is of no value unless it is enveloped in consciousness, and enhance it. So, this is how Chit and Jnana are inter-related.

Now, the third one is the Ananda, the bliss, and Anantam. Anantam is infinity. How is infinity related to bliss? Apparently, nothing, but what is infinity? What is Anantam? It is limitlessness, beyond bounds, beyond the boundaries of time and space and causality. So, this kind of limitlessness is bliss. You can see in your ordinary life that when there is a hurdle and when you overcome it you feel happy. You say yes, I had a target work, I had to finish it by midnight today and the moment you complete that work, you feel happy because the hurdle of the time of twelve o'clock at midnight is passed. So, whenever a limit gets broken up, you feel a sense of happiness and joy, so, limit and sorrow are interrelated. Recently, we had a seminar on the cause of man's unhappiness and sorrow. One of the causes is limitation, narrowness, and pettiness. In fact, at one place, Sri Aurobindo says: 'It is not the question of poor people, it is not the question of illiterate people who are bad in this world, it is a question those who are poor are not those who are not having money or not having literacy, or not having comfortable material things. Poor are those who are selfish, and poor are those who have this common mentality of exclusive self-concentration. So, he calls them the real poor people, not otherwise. So this is a limitation that is always the cause of sorrow and suffering. And if you enlarge this limitation, you are moving towards happiness, joy, and bliss. So, the ultimate infinity, ultimate limitlessness is ultimate bliss. There is only one path to bliss, one path to happiness - the more you widen yourself, the greater is your happiness. So, we see now how Ananda and Anantam are interrelated. So this is how Sri Aurobindo has given in two cryptic phrases: Sat Chit Ananda and Satyam Jnanam Anantam - the essence of the Upanishads.

So, to conclude, we have 3 things to learn from the Upanishads: the Mahavakyas, the poises of the Brahman, and the cryptic synthesis of the Upanishads. And, of course, there are other definitions of what I said, Avidya and Vidya.

I will end with a quotation from Sri Aurobindo where he says:

These two trinities of thought subjective and objective, coupled with the explanation of Avidya and Maya form such a vast synthetic vision of the Supreme that there is hardly any philosophical idea that cannot find authority or sign or indication in these antique writings. In the whole world, Upanishadic thought is there. In fact, he would say:

Buddhism is nothing but a re-statement of the fundamental experience of the Upanishadic thought experience of the Ananda because the Ananda takes the form of compassion, this Ananda when it is related to humanity, it takes the form of compassion, and Buddha has got this compassion aspect of Ananda. He does not use the word Ananda, he uses the word compassion. Compassion is nothing but Ananda.

Well, he says Buddhism is also a re-statement. In fact, he would say: Even Sufism is another kind, another language, another experience of the same Upanishadic thought. And he would go and say- Pythagoras, Plato, new Platonism is all nothing but the Upanishads. And he would come down.

