

Chapter IV

Sri Aurobindo : Looking for the 'True Vedanta'

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of integration is well-known. Philosophy, for him, is Philosophy of Existence, of which Matter and Spirit are the twin terms. In *The Life Divine* he states that "all problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony"¹, and sets himself to discover "the Vedantic solution"². What is the solution? And what is the Vedānta? We may put the solution in his own terms, and go looking for what Sri Aurobindo understands by Vedānta?

The solution is that Life is involved in Matter and Mind in Life. In essence Matter is a form of veiled Life, and Life is a form of consciousness. Our mental consciousness is only a form and a veil of higher states which are beyond Mind. There is in man an impulse towards Light, Bliss, Freedom and Immortality. The impulse is imperative, since Nature is seeking to evolve beyond Mind. The next higher state of consciousness points to a progressive self-enlargement of humanity. Sri Aurobindo acknowledges a series of ascending terms : Life, Mind, Supermind, the grades that link Mind to Supermind, and the grades between Matter and Spirit. Evolution, for Sri Aurobindo, is the evolution of consciousness,

symbolized by the famous prayer to be led from death to immortality, from darkness to light.

The complex character and the adventurous programme of Sri Aurobindo's futuristic philosophy is non-presently our concern. Instead, we shall try to find out how and why does he locate his philosophical orientation as having its roots in the 'original Vedānta'³. What is this original Vedānta? Why does Sri Aurobindo characterize it as 'original', 'ancient or earlier' and even 'true'?⁴ These are judgements belonging to Sri Aurobindo's view of the history of philosophy in India. He appears to suggest rewriting the history of philosophy in India and elsewhere, Europe in particular, in terms of his own integral outlook. That is a fascinating story, and we content ourselves by simply mentioning it.

Sri Aurobindo's *magnum opus*, *The Life Divine* is known widely. But it is not much known that before he set himself writing *The Life Divine*, he began writing a commentary on the *Īs'a Upaniṣad* under the title "The Life Divine". The task was undertaken in 1912, and left off in 1914. It is incomplete, only two of the *Upaniṣad's* eighteen verses are directly commented on in more than a hundred pages. In fact Sri Aurobindo used this "Life Divine" commentary as a vehicle for presenting his own philosophy. This commentarial "Life Divine" is almost unknown. Sri Aurobindo has commented upon quite a few of the *Upaniṣads*, and these are available to the reading public. There is one on the *Īs'a Upaniṣad*,

containing translations of the verses and an analysis divided into four movements, followed by conclusion and summary. In this chapter we shall be concentrating on the “incomplete” commentary on the *Īs'a* along with the translation and analysis published separately, and try to form an idea of what Sri Aurobindo meant by the “original” or “true” Vedānta, and what is its significance for him. In short, Sri Aurobindo is a Vedantin with a difference. He does not go by the Vedānta of the schools, rather he follows the distant and dim suggestions of the proto-historical, or as he himself says, the “original” or “true” Vedānta glimpsed in the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*. It is worth mentioning that Sri Aurobindo has written extensively on the *Vedas* differing significantly from *Sāyana's* hermeneutics of sacred texts.

For Sri Aurobindo the *Upaniṣads* are the Vedantic scriptures. They contain “the original Vedanta”, and in the Vedānta of the *Upaniṣads*, “the Becoming of Brahman is accepted as a reality”. The reality is omnipresent both in Being which is “One without a second”, as well as in the Becoming, “All this is Brahman”. The two declarations complement each other. The first requires to be read in the light of the second. The aspiration of man upward to the Divine is as much real as the descending movement of the Divine leaning downward to embrace eternally Its manifestations. The Upanisadic Vedānta voices a larger and completer affirmation than the metaphysical schools that goes by that name.

This is evident when Sri Aurobindo translates the first part of the first verse of the *Īs'a Upaniṣad* : “All this is for habitation by the Lord”. The enormous difference between Samkara and Sri Aurobindo becomes immediately clear. Samkara takes the Sanskrit expression *vāsyam* in the sense of “to be clothed”. In this significant word the status of the world is staked. Just as the superimposed snake conceals the rope underneath, so does the garment, i.e., the manifold of the empirical world covers the unity of the real behind. Hence it has to be cast off in order that the real stands revealed. Sri Aurobindo has added a long note to the translation. He notes “So explained the first line becomes a contradiction of the whole thought of the Upanishad which teaches the reconciliation, by the perception of essential Unity, of the apparently incompatible opposites, God and the World, Renunciation and Enjoyment, Action and internal freedom, the One and the Many, Being and its Becomings ...”. He adds that the image of dwelling place “agrees better with the thought of the Upanishad”⁵. According to Sri Aurobindo the central idea of the *Īs'a Upanishad* is “a reconciliation and harmony of fundamental opposites”⁶, while Samkara interprets it in accordance with the Law of Excluded Middle. The first verse lays down the idea of the one and stable spirit inhabiting and governing a universe of movement and of the forms of movement. “The microcosm is one with the macrocosm”⁷. The “ancient Vedanta” holds “Brahman is His own subject and His own object, whether in His pure self-existence or in His varied self-becoming”⁸. The two aspects are inseparable. “All

appearance of pure subjectivity holds itself as an object implicit in its very subjectivity; all appearance of pure objectivity holds itself as subject implicit in its very objectivity”⁹.

In the ‘conclusion and summary’ part Sri Aurobindo remarks that the *Īs'a Upanishad* is an ancient Vedantic treatise. It is closer to the Vedic roots. It stands face to face with the problem of reconciling human life and activity with the Monistic standpoint, and its solution is one of the most interesting passages of Vedantic literature. “It is the sole Upanishad which offered almost insuperable difficulties to the extreme illusionism and anti-pragmatism of Shankaracharya”¹⁰.

For Samkara, the spirit alone is real, but the ancient or original Vedānta teaches that “Being and Becoming, One and Many are both true and are both the same thing : Being is one, Becomings are many; but this simply means that all Becomings are one Being who places Himself variously in the phenomenal movement of His consciousness. We have to see the one Being, but we have not to cease to see the many Becomings, for they exist and are included in Brahman’s view of Himself”¹¹.

All this is quite novel and unique in the history of Indian Spiritual thought, since in course of the ages the monastic ideal displaced the balanced integral view of life. We may now turn to the unfinished “*The Life*

Divine” (henceforth “LD”), for further illumination on the point about ‘ancient’ or ‘true’ Vedānta.

This is Sri Aurobindo’s unfinished commentary on the *Īs'a Upaniṣad*. Let us see how he formulates the ancient Vedānta. The opening verse contains in a “monumental phrase” the two supreme terms of existence, in juxtaposition, the *Īs'a* and the *Jagat*, and they are set in their “real” relation. Everything is declared to be the Lord’s temple and mansion. The relation of divine Inhabitant and objective dwelling-place is the fundamental truth of God and the world for life. Ancient Vedānta as in the *Īs'a Upaniṣad*, builds up “a practical rule of life”¹². The later metaphysical Vedānta, as the philosophy of Samkara, seeks to satisfy the intellect. The very first line of the opening verse of this *Upaniṣad* emphasises the generality of *idam sarvam* by the comprehensive particularity of *jat kinca*, and thus brings at once “the Advaitic truth in Vedanta”¹³. According to Sri Aurobindo, advaita is not a negation of the manifold or multiplicity. It simply asserts that there is a multitude of objects in the universe, but only one soul of things and not many. *Eko'calah Sanā tan ah*. The Soul in all this and in each particular form is one, still and sempiternal one in the multitude of its habitations. “Nature is the multiplicity of God, Spirit is His Unity ... Nature is His variation, Spirit is His constant sameness”¹⁴, nothing is to be excluded, the manifold are in themselves, in their sacred reality the living God. This is “the second general truth of Vedanta”¹⁵.

The soul abiding in the world is *Ātman*. Sri Aurobindo's explanation of the concept of *ātman* is worth noticing. He says that the word comes "from old root *ā*, still extant in Tamil, and the suffix *tman* ... expresses substance or substantial embodiment"¹⁶. Therefore "all existences whether they are or seem animate or inanimate, are self-conscious or veiled in consciousness"¹⁷. Nature is spirit in motion, the world is God at play.

The conclusion of the ancient Vedānta is momentous. Without recouring to the thesis of *adhyāsa*, Nature is explained in terms of *chandas*, rhythms of Existence. Nature, says Sri Aurobindo, is a divine motion of becoming of which spirit is the origin, substance and control, as well as the inhabitant and enjoyer. Spirit or Brahman, transcendent and original of the universe, is the sole existence, the motion of the universe, can only take place in the spirit.

According to Sri Aurobindo, "The identity of the soul and God behind all veils is the Vedantic charter of man's freedom"¹⁸. Vedānta, he says, arrives at the perception and experience of Spirit everywhere and declares our eternal and indefeasible freedom. It passes beyond the Law itself to the Liberty of which the Law itself is the creation and expression.

Sri Aurobindo, taking his stand on the original Vedānta of the *Upaniṣad*, the *Īs'a* in the context, reviews the history of metaphysics and ethics in India. Having lost the integral vision of the unity of *Īs'a* and *Jagat*

there arose an opposition of the ideal of *tyāga* and that of *Sannyāsa*. The ancient Vedānta enjoins us to enjoy through *tyāga*, the classical Vedānta preaches *sannyāsa*. The basic teaching of ancient Vedānta is that it is possible to find God as freedom and immortality in the world and not aloof from the world. Instead of taking God and Nature, Brahman and the universe as two hostile and incompatible entities we are asked to realise God manifest in the world. Their apparent divergences in consciousness must be somewhere connected in consciousness, says Sri Aurobindo.

According to Sri Aurobindo, Buddhism is a great watershed. How to escape from grief, death and limitation? All later solutions are affected and governed by Buddhism, and Sri Aurobindo mentions *Māyāvāda* and monastic Christianity. The problem is to put man by life, and there have been two solutions, and both are “heroic”¹⁹. Buddha’s solution is escape and divorce, the solution of the ancient Vedānta is a recoil : “one is a mighty heroism of difficult retreat and flight, the other a mightier heroism of self-perfection and conquest”²⁰. The point is further elaborated in the following way : “The most powerful support and argument of purely ascetic philosophies is the Buddhist idea, foreign to the Vedic Hinduism, that true freedom and true bliss are impossible in the universe and can only become possible if we escape out of it into some world-shunning secrecy of being, whether Nihil or Nirvana”²¹. In opposition to the Buddhist declaration of the omnipresence of grief and pain outside Nirvana, the Vedānta declares

renunciation of the world as mere undivine. The Buddhist emphasis on *sannyāsa* as physical renunciation, while *tyāga* of the ancient Vedānta is inner renunciation. Sri Aurobindo thinks that in “the true and early Vedānta, the practical freedom of the soul is not to be gained as in Buddhism by self abolition”²². Śaṅkara’s *māyāvada* is a form of reformulated Buddhism. The world is to the *Māyāvādīn* a freak of knowledge, an error on the surface of self, a misconception of mind about Brahman. Yet, as Sri Aurobindo notes, “the dominant sense of our later Indian spirituality has been with the conclusion of Śaṅkara and against the conclusion of the ancient, “the inspired, the suprarational Vedānta”²³. India, he says “has inertly accepted and combined the Buddhist law of Karma and Rebirth and Śaṅkara’s gospel of cosmic Illusion and actionless Peace”²⁴.

More illuminating is the following comparative study of the two master makers of India’s spiritual history : “Śaṅkara has practically transmuted or replaced Buddha’s vague and undefined Nirvana by the actionless and peaceful Atman, substituted for Buddha’s false world of subjective sensations, a false world of erroneous ideas starting from the original self-deception of duality, and accepting Buddha’s Law of Karma as applicable only to this false world and Buddha’s means of escape by an ultimate act of knowledge, substituted knowledge of real self for Buddha’s knowledge of no-self as the essence of that act and the true culmination of inner experience and meditative reason”²⁵. The intellectual difference

between the two systems is immense; their temperamental kinship is close. Both ignore the true Vedānta. Buddhism, for Sri Aurobindo, is the only logical basis for *Māyāvāda*. As a philosopher of integration Sri Aurobindo considers all exclusive knowledge as a form and manner of ignorance. Freedom cannot be a silent nothingness. The true Vedānta announces the necessity of life and action, and hence Sri Aurobindo puts the figure of Krishna of *the Gītā* to stand for the ancient Vedantic ideal of life and action, typifying *tyāga* as adjacent ideal of *sannyāsa* put forward by Buddha and followed up by Samkara. He mentions that even “the great Vivekananda, who was in outward seeming a storm of speech and thought and force and action, was yet reaching always to the rare, remote and sky-pure *linga* of Amarnath, the still and silent Mahadeva, as his inmost self and goals”²⁶. Sri Aurobindo seeks to distinguish *tyāga* from *sannyāsa*. From Buddha to Vivekananda, through Samkara it is the ideal of *sannyāsa* that has prevailed over the soul of India. *Tyāga*, on the other hand, is a different ethical ideal.

The Vedānta of the *Upanishads*, the books of the real, the true and ancient Vedānta teaches us not to give up the world as something false and unreal, rather the field of action through which we can fulfil ourselves. This is the injunction of the *Īs'a Upaniṣad* : *Kurvanneva Karmani*. The stress of the *eva* gives the force, “doing works indeed, and not refraining from them”.

Sri Aurobindo notes that Samkara's interpretation of *karma* in the sense of Vedic sacrifices which are intended for the ignorant is not fair. For Samkara, the enlightened soul abandons works and the world. This rendering, says Sri Aurobindo, is forced and unnatural. To interpret the *Īs'a Upaniṣad* in favour of *sannyāsa* is to get a vain message. The highest teaching of Vedānta is to work desirelessly, with a free soul, doing human action, accepting the full term of human life. It may be recalled that Balgangadhar Tilak too had argued against Samkara's *sannyāsa* interpretation of the *Gītā*. In his *Gītā rahasya*²⁷, the notion of *bhāgavata dharma* is affirmative enough to make room for intense activity without renouncing the world. This is much in agreement with Sri Aurobindo's line of argument. Again, if one cares for perusing Tagore's interpretative essays on the Upanisadic passage in the *Sādhanā*²⁸ one would find a close hermeneutical similarity with Sri Aurobindo. Both take the word *vāsya* implying 'habitation' of the Lord, and the imperative of ethical actions for living in society. This is the attitude towards life and existence according to the real Vedānta.

It should be worth asking why does Sri Aurobindo criticise the ideal of *sannyāsa* in the teachings of Buddha and Samkara? One of his intensions is the recovery of "the early thought of Vedānta"²⁹. He notes the wide divergence between the early Vedantic and Buddhist conceptions of *karma* and the direct opposition between their fundamental conceptions of

existence itself. Vedānta in the *Upanishads* uses the terms *s'akti* and *prakṛti* as the processive working of Brahman. Buddha ignores *s'akti* and *prakṛti* in denying the existence of God and soul or of any essential unity. Vedānta uses *karma* in the plural, while Buddha sums up the work done in the general singular word *karma* and elevates it into a determining conception governing and constituting our phenomenal existence. Buddha views the world as void of unity and existence as consisting of a successive continuity of habitual subjective sensations *samskāras*. For Buddha therefore all phenomenal existence is determined by *karma*, the sum of previous works. For Vedānta all phenomenal existence is determined by the working of *s'akti* or *prakṛti* under the will and choice of *Is'vara*. Material existence and action exist in sensational consciousness which, in turn, exists as a phenomenon in the void. But behind this sensation-troubled void there is another state, Nirvana. Samkara "a less mighty soul" than Buddha³⁰ built up a position reconciling Vedic *Brahmavāda* and the *Karmavāda* of Buddhist rationalism. He asserts the real existence of the *Ātma* which alone exists and is indeed the essential substratum of the phenomenal existence. But he admits with Buddha the absolute rule of *karma*, the law of cause and effect over the conscious soul immersed in the phenomenal universe. Where then is the point of escape, the door?

The point of escape lies for Samkara, as for Buddha, in an ultimate act of knowledge which denies the real existence of the phenomenal world.

Samkara erects a rigid antagonism between essential truth and practical truth, *paramārtha* and *vyāvahāra*, the one we must admit to be the truth, the other we must reject as only apparent truth. But the world is a world of action, of *karma*, its law drives the soul through the endless chain of birth and death and rebirth, “whirling for ever betwixt heaven and earth and hell, tossed from good to evil and evil to good, pain to joy and joy to pain, like a tennis ball kept continually at play between two skilful players”.³¹ The why and how of all this is rendered possible by self-division, by *bheda*, by *dvaita*, by false conception of the soul of itself as not one, but many, by *Avidyā*, by *Māyā*, a great sin of ignorance, a mighty cosmic self-deception, rooted in the principle of mind.

Sri Aurobindo puts Samkara’s argument as follows : “Where there are many, relation and action are possible: where there is one, there can be no relation and therefore no action. Atman or Soul is one, therefore, relationless and actionless”³². Hence the denial of the phenomenal world and actions is man’s only escape from his false mental self into the calm essential reality, objectless bliss and relationless self-knowledge of the *Ātman*. “We see then that”, says Sri Aurobindo, “Shankara has practically transmuted or replaced Buddha’s vague and undefined Nirvana by this actionless and peaceful Atman ... substituted for Buddha’s false world of subjective sensations, a false world of erroneous ideas starting from the original self-deception of duality”³³. For both, release comes by an

ultimate act of knowledge, for Buddha it is knowledge of non-self, for Samkara, it is knowledge of a sole self-existent Self. Both of them drive straight at the actual fact of bondage, the practical cause of bondage and the most direct path of escape from the bondage. Neither accounts for the existence of the fact of bondage, for Samkara *Māyā* is an original mystery, and hence the fact of existence of bondage would for ever remain inexplicable to the mind.

Sri Aurobindo does not deny the value of ideal of asceticism, but resents its implied stillness and world-disgust which has over-shadowed for centuries the lives and souls of people. “On one side the race and the world have gained immensely, on the other it has suffered an immense impoverishment... The cry of OM Tapas with which God creates has grown faint in the soul of India, the cry of OM Shanti with which He withdraws from life alone arouses and directs the best energies of a national consciousness to whose thought all life is sorrow, self-delusion and an undivine thunder”³⁴. What is remarkable is that Sri Aurobindo links philosophical positions to national history in course of his discovery and recovery of the true Vedānta. It is in consonance with the original Vedānta that Sri Aurobindo structures his ideas on society and history. Nothing is left out of consideration. There is nothing mundane *per se*, everything is a symbol of the Divine, and waits for transformational appearance into the categories of Existence towards which Nature is already moving.