

YOGA AND BEYOND

Essays in Indian Philosophy

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&
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Reprinted

SCHOCKEN BOOKS • NEW YORK

First SCHOCKEN edition 1972

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 73-179075

Originally published in Great Britain
under the title *A Reappraisal of Yoga*.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

Our thanks are due to the authors and publishers for permission to quote from the following works:

- A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. III, Oxford University Press, London.
R. Otto, *Mysticism: East & West*, Collier-Macmillan Ltd., London.
A. Montagu, *The Concept of the Primitive*, The Free Press, New York.
T. Dobzhansky, *The Biology of Ultimate Concern*, Rapp & Whiting, London.
D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*, Allen & Unwin, London.
A. Eddington, *Science and the Unseen*, Allen & Unwin.
A. Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, W. Collins Sons & Co., London.
Shree Purohit Swami, *Aphorisms of Yoga*, Faber & Faber, London.
E. Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature & Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Methuen & Co., London.
M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality & Freedom*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
M. Eliade, *Shamanism*, Bollingen Foundation, New York.
R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred & Profane*, Clarendon Press, London.
J. Ellistone, *The Signature of All Things*, Dent & Son, London.
L. Renou, *Religions of Ancient India*, Schocken Books, New York.
Elmer O'Brien, *The Essential Plotinus*, New American Library, New York.
J. Gonda, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets*, Mouton & Co., The Hague, Netherlands.
S. S. Suryanarayana Sastri, *The Bhamati*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, India.
Shri Aurobindo, *On the Veda*, Shri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India.
A. B. Purani, *Sri Aurobindo's Vedic Glossary*, Shri Aurobindo Ashram.
V. S. Agrawala, *Sparks from the Vedic Fire*, School of Vedic Studies, Varanasi, India.
J. Gebser, *Ursprung & Gegenwart*, Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, Stuttgart, Germany.
J. Quint, *Meister Eckehart*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München, Germany.
Portions of the essay on Agni and the note on Rgvedic interpretation were published in *Hinduism*, Journal of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, London Branch.

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3

The Hymn of Creation. A Philosophical Interpretation

- I The Unmanifest was not then, or the Manifest;
spatial depths or heaven beyond were not.
What encompassed, where, who nurtured it?
What ocean, profound, unfathomable, pervaded?
- II Death was not then or immortality.
Neither night's nor day's confine existed.
Undisturbed, self-moved, pulsated the One alone.
And beyond that, other than that, was naught.
- III Darkness there was; at first hidden in darkness
this all was undifferentiated depth.
Enwrapped in voidness, that which flame-power
kindled to existence emerged.
- IV Desire, primordial seed of mind, in the
beginning, arose in That.
Seers, searching in their heart's wisdom,
discovered the kinship of the created with the uncreate.
- V Their vision's rays stretched afar.
There was indeed a below, there was indeed an above.
Seed-bearers there were, mighty powers there were;
energy below, will above.
- VI Who knows the truth, who can here proclaim
whence this birth, whence this projection?
The gods appeared later in this world's creation.
Who then knows how it all came into being?

- VII Whence this creation originated;
whether He caused it to be or not,
He who in the highest empyrean surveys it,
He alone knows, or else, even He knows not.

Of all the Rgvedic hymns, the celebrated *nāsadiya-sūkta* (X.129) has perhaps received the highest praise and the worst condemnation, according to the depth or lack of understanding of the commentators. Nevertheless, one may still wonder whether the full philosophical implications have been fathomed out and sufficiently appreciated by Western exegesis.

This ancient poem contains within its short compass not merely an outline of subsequent Indian metaphysics—it heralds the Advaita-Vedānta and the Sāṃkhya ontology—but also touches upon the core of mystical doctrines East and West, particularly the philosophy of Plotinus.¹ No later speculation, whether philosophical or religious, has ever gone completely beyond its range, or has ever solved the ultimate mystery of the Absolute which, in the poem, is left to silent contemplation. Considered in depth, it reveals the essence of all metaphysical thought.

About the seer-poet (*ṛṣi*) of this hymn nothing is known. To all intents and purposes he remains anonymous, as so many great figures of past ages who cared for the quality of their work rather than for themselves. That the hymn has been ascribed to Parameṣṭhin Prajāpati can mean only one thing, that it was revealed in the highest state of *samādhi* to a person endowed with the gift of formulating what he 'received' or 'saw'.

I *na-asad-āsīn-no sad-āsīt-tadānīm*
na-āsīd-rajo no vyomā paro yat,
kim-ā-avarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarmann-
ambhaḥ kim-āsīd gahanam gabhīram.

The Unmanifest was not then, or the Manifest;
spatial depths or heaven beyond were not.
What encompassed, where, who nurtured it?
What ocean, profound, unfathomable, pervaded?

¹ Plotinus, very probably influenced by Indian thought, conceived the ultimate cause and source of all being as transcendent and unknowable. His only positive way of describing this indescribable *ens a se* was 'the eternal One' or 'the Good' (*ἀγαθόν*).

The first line, translated here 'the Unmanifest was not then, or the Manifest', strikes the keynote of the whole poem. At the outset a warning should be sounded. We cannot really apply the canons of logic, the laws of the concrete analytical mind, to the metaphysical thought of the *ṛsis* as expressed here without risk of foundering in hopeless argumentation, or of drawing nonsensical conclusions. There is here no question of sense data or of empirical evidence such as is usually admitted as being the only reality. From the very first verse, the poet confronts us with that state of being, that ultimate of ultimates beyond all speculation, whence is the origination and whence will be the resolution of all things. He is straining to give us a glimpse of that primeval oneness beyond time, beyond space, beyond the sway of the opposites, that state of inexhaustible fulness (*pūrṇatā*) of which the finite human mind can catch but a faint glimmer. Yet the mind cannot be excluded if one is to explain anything by means of language. It must somehow grasp and express what transcendental awareness holds as pure knowledge. As Plotinus pointed out: 'The act and faculty of vision is not reason but something greater than, prior and superior to, reason.'² Hence the extreme difficulty in describing the content of the transcendental insight. Upon the testimony of the sages, the mind is, whilst struggling to understand and to express, all the time immersed in that infinite which eludes its every attempt at pinning it down. The only requirement to touch the Absolute is to transcend the mind, for the infinite dwells in the human 'heart' (*hṛd*).

Its form does not stand in [the field of] vision; no one can perceive It with the eyes. Those who, through the heart [or] [transformed] mind, know It as thus standing in the heart, become immortal.³

The poem begins with the introduction of two important terms, *sat* and *asat*, which may be rendered as Being and non-Being. *Sat* is the immutable substratum of all that is. *Asat*, however, is here not simply non-Being in the sense of nothingness. This would be in direct opposition to the whole tenor of the poem. For there is implied that the opposite of Being is not sheer void (*śūnyatā*), annihilation, but

² *Enneads* VI.9.10. Throughout this essay we have used the translation by Elmer O'Brien, *The Essential Plotinus* (New York, 1964).

³ *Śvetāśvatara-Up.* IV.20.

merely the opposite of Being as we envisage it. We know and experience limited existence, that which 'stands out' through limitation—even to use 'existence' as a synonym of Being is not quite correct: existence is but the outer aspect of Being.⁴ We might observe in passing that *sat*, that which is, is the root of *satya* or 'truth'. But *asat* certainly does not mean the false, although it can, in certain contexts, express just that. In this particular metaphysical poem it doubtlessly refers to another form or kind of Being, unlimited, spaceless, timeless, of which man is unaware, hence to a state the finite mind finds itself incapable of conceiving and therefore tends to deny the possibility of its existence. H. W. Wallis rightly points out that *asat* must have held within itself the potentiality of *sat*,⁵ otherwise it could not give rise to *sat*, nor can *sat* emerge out of nothing—although the latter may be considered *nothing* by the mind. H. W. Wallis goes further: 'It is not merely the non-existent, but may almost be translated the "not yet existing".'⁶ In other words, it is that which is held potentially and thus has some kind of being—the *laya* state of later Indian speculation.

Sat may thus stand for manifested Being, *asat* for unmanifested. These were not, claims the seer-poet, and in this fundamental assertion he brings to our notice an utterly inexpressible, transcendent state beyond all possible realms of Being we can imagine, an ultimate, summed up significantly enough in the second stanza as the One pulsating by its own power, beyond space, time, limitation, out of all relation to the humanly known. To this there is a striking parallel in Eckehart who declares: 'Nothing hinders the soul's knowledge of God so much as time and space. Time and space are fragments, but God is one. Therefore, if the soul is to know God, it must know Him above time and space.'⁷ A similar approach to the ultimate reality has been voiced by mystics throughout the ages. We might recall Nicolas of Cusa's confession: 'I have learnt that the place wherein Thou art found unveiled is girt round with coincidence of contradictories . . . 'tis

⁴ The word *existence* as opposed to *essence* is here used as that state of conditioned or manifested being—manifestation implying relatedness and thus limitation, the latter implying incompleteness—which provides the data of our sensory perception. Being intrinsically is unconditioned. Empirically it is known only indirectly, through its conditioned aspect.

⁵ H. W. Wallis, *Cosmology of the Rigveda* (London, 1887).

⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁷ Sermon 36. J. Quint's German edition.

beyond the coincidence of contradictories that Thou mayest be seen, and nowhere this side thereof.⁸

The use of further negatives, sweeping and almost devastating as they may seem to some, only serves to enhance this affirmation of beyond-ness and other worldliness so strongly held in the poet's mind, and certainly has a far deeper meaning than most commentators, particularly so W. D. Whitney,⁹ could find in their exegesis. The negative details which follow on in this poem do not 'dilute' the force of the 'absolute denial' of any and every manifestation, as is claimed by W. D. Whitney.¹⁰ Here could be compared Plato's *Sophistes*, the main argument of which tries to establish the existence of non-Being! 'Let not, then, any one assert that we venture to speak of non-entity as existing in the sense of the contrary of entity; since long ago we gave up asserting the existence or rationality of any such contrary.'¹¹

There was neither space nor heaven beyond space, continues the *ṛṣi*. *Rajas* can mean either 'space' or 'air' or even 'ether'; Monier-Williams' dictionary also gives heaven, here obviously referring to the sky overhead; whereas the word *vyoman*, translated by 'heaven', should be understood in the spiritual sense as that state of consciousness beyond the mental 'prison', which can only be described as pure bliss (*ānanda-mātra*). Even these imponderables were not, states the poet. There is obviously still that much doubt to the mind as to what could be when everything has been denied. Who or what held this all in germ?

'In whose shelter' (*kasya śarman*) is translated here as 'who nurtured it', because of the idea of protection in the word *śarman*; hence the nurturing mother aspect symbolised, in all ancient cosmogonies as also in the *Rgveda* and in this poem, by the 'waters' (*ambhas*). 'This all' (*sarvam idam*) or cosmic manifestation as contrasted to 'That' (*tat*), the Absolute, was then but 'unfathomable water', the ultimate state of matter or *mūla-prakṛti*, the matrix through which the cosmos is generated, a conception which is developed in the third stanza.

The word *tadānīm*, 'then' or 'at that time', calls for consideration. How can one speak in terms of 'that time' or 'time' at all when the

state evoked is out of time, out of all relation to time? Time as the 'moving image of eternity', to use Plato's definition, is the objective, cosmic but for all that purely mental representation or mirror of the subjective, great 'breath'. There is here an indirect hint at that eternal rhythm of cosmic life expressed in the next verse as the 'great breath', that 'eternal recurrence' inwoven in the very rhythm of life, evidenced at every level of manifestation in time and space, but in a certain sense carried over and expressed as the alternance of 'states' of non-activity or unity and activity or multiplicity. 'At that time' refers to one of those alternate states in which all that had been conditioned, finite, manifested and therefore active in time and space had reverted back into the latency of the alternate state, fused as one into the heart of the ultimate in which all opposites are resolved. Thus the word *tadānīm* is not out of place.

This first stanza clearly anticipates the Indian philosophical idea of the 'days' and 'nights' of Brahma as well as the Sāṃkhya theory of involution (*pralaya*, *tirobhāva*) and evolution (*sarga*, *āvirbhāva*). The *ṛṣis* observed and then gave out what they 'had seen' (*apaśyanta*) in their visions (*dhī*) by means of poetry or *mantra*, often in cryptic statements which the philosophers in due time built into highly complex systems. Thus the Sāṃkhya teaches the dualism of spirit (*puruṣa*) and matter (*prakṛti*), that substance out of which the phenomenal world is moulded, emerging from latency into objective existence to serve the needs of the many spirits or Selves. Evolution here means 'increasing differentiation', so that 'what was an incoherent, indeterminate homogeneous whole evolves into a coherent determinate heterogeneous whole'¹² and thence back to dissolution or *pralaya*. Empedocles' theory of the alternance of 'love' and 'strife' could also be cited as it is based upon the same idea of cycles. With him the principle of strife divides or scatters all things apart to form a differentiated heterogeneous world, whilst that of love starts all things back to their primordial undifferentiated unity.

II *na mṛtyur-āsīd-amṛtaṃ na tarhi*
na rātryā ahna āsīt-praketaḥ,
ānīd-avātaṃ svadhayā tad-ekaṃ
tasmād-ha-anyan-na paraḥ kiṃ cana-āsa.

⁸ *The Vision of God*, Chapter IX. Transl. by E. G. Salter (London, 1928), p. 44.

⁹ W. D. Whitney, 'The Cosmogonic Hymn, *Rgveda* X.129', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, May 1882.

¹⁰ op. cit., p. cx.

¹¹ Transl. by R. W. Mackay, *The Sophistes of Plato* (London, 1868), §. 259.

¹² B. Seal, *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (London, 1915), p. 8.

Death was not then, or immortality.
 Neither night's nor day's confine existed.
 Undisturbed, self-moved, pulsated the One alone.
 And beyond that, other than that, was naught.

Here we are again confronted with the negation of the 'opposites'. In choosing 'death' and 'deathlessness', life spiritual and life physical, 'day' and 'night', the changing and the unchanging, motion and rest, time, the poet summarises what essentially constitutes manifested life to the human mind. Light and darkness, good and evil, birth and death, whether these be considered in their factual aspect of day to day experience or in their abstract or spiritual sense, make up the warp and woof of human horizons. But these are limits, stresses the poet, and the state posited lacks these demarcation lines. Also, these limits denote a mind of some sort to cognise them, but mind was not yet.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* there is a clear expression of the alternating cycle of rest and activity, creation and dissolution, in the life of the One:

From the unmanifested (*avyakta*) all the manifested (*vyakta*) [things] stream forth at the coming of day; at the coming of night they dissolve in just that called the unmanifested.¹³

Another celebrated creation hymn of the *Rgveda* sums up this same alternation in the life of the Lord of Being in these splendid words: 'Whose shadow is immortality, whose shadow is death.'¹⁴

The poet has now reduced everything to an ultimate One, and to show that in spite of all the negations he has so lavishly used, it is still 'life', though life transcendent, that he is positing, he now describes that life in a more positive way as the One that breathes breath-less, by its own power. Another paradoxical statement to tax human logic!

The mighty pulse of the cosmos, the great breath which means life in its deepest sense, for everything that lives breathes, however imperceptible or however differently from what we strictly mean by breathing¹⁵—and breath means contraction and expansion—this

¹³ BhG VIII.18.

¹⁴ Rgv. X.121.2.

¹⁵ Even the minerals (which contract and expand and get *fatigued*), even the solar system, the distant stars have their own way of 'breathing'.

great breath is chosen as the one characteristic that never fails, even in that state of being which is beyond anything the human mind can conceive. The essence of all existence, all rhythms, all movements is contained in the great breath. Obviously, since it is soundless, windless or breath-less-breath, the poet is only trying to describe the very essence of what in manifestation is breath. Inherent power, inherent motion, breath. Breath is not an attribute, it is the essence of, it is Being. W. D. Whitney's remark that the *ṛṣi* of this hymn 'anthropomorphises his IT by making it breathe as if a living being'¹⁶ shows a remarkable lack of understanding of the meaning of breath, rhythm, the core of life, as implied in the whole poem as well as in Indian philosophy in general, a characteristic peculiar to the whole of creation and not merely to creatures as such, a characteristic the poet takes to be rooted in the One.

The keynote has been struck. The seer-poet has done his utmost to express the inexpressible. To intuitive perception, he has succeeded in a masterly way. To the mere brain understanding, he has but heaped up negatives upon negatives, resulting in a meaningless denial. This is W. D. Whitney's conclusion. The poet, for the latter, 'deludes himself with the belief that by first denying absolutely everything, and then denying all but an indefinable something, he has bridged over the abyss between non-existence and existence'.¹⁷ In the following it is hoped to show the fundamental meaning at the back of this negative approach which, moreover, ushers in the famous 'not this' (*neti*) of Upaniṣadic thought, where reality is stated as not anything that we can know about and thus does not stand comparison with anything. The ultimate reality or *brahman* cannot be 'seized' (*grhyate*), declares the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* (IV.5.15). S. Dasgupta explains: 'He is *asat*, non-being, for the being which Brahman is, is not to be understood as such being as is known to us by experience; yet he is being, for he alone is supremely real, for the universe subsists by him.'¹⁸ Here also Plotinus may be quoted to full advantage: 'This principle is certainly none of the things of which it is the source . . . But if you manage to grasp it by abstracting even being from it, you will be struck with wonder.'¹⁹

¹⁶ W. D. Whitney, 'The Cosmogonic Hymn', p. cx.

¹⁷ op. cit., p. cx.

¹⁸ S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, repr. (Cambridge, 1963), vol. I., p. 45.

¹⁹ *Enneads* III.8.10. O'Brien's translation.

III *tama āsit-tamasā gūḥam-agre'*
praketam salilam sarvam ā idam,
tucchyena-ābhv-āpihitam yad-āsīt-
tapasas tan-mahinā-ajāyata-ekam.

Darkness there was; at first hidden in darkness
 this all was undifferentiated depths.
 Enwrapped in voidness, that which flame-power
 kindled to existence, emerged.

The poet is now becoming more positive. In this particular context where the definite attempt is being made to go beyond any known data, there is in this idea of 'darkness hidden by darkness' another of such gropings after that which is 'beyond' (*para*)—that state of pure being which to the mind is darkness indeed, but to the spirit absolute light. As Eckehart confirms: 'Where reason and desire cease, there it is dark, but there God is shining.'²⁰ We should not interpret darkness to mean simply the opposite or the absence of light. In Greek cosmogony all things are also traced back to 'night', that abysmal darkness the mind cannot fathom. Darkness, in all ancient cosmogonies, comes before light—for light is also that which 'stands out' and hence signifies differentiation, manifestation, action.

Some commentators rightly take this darkness to be the matrix from which proceeds all manifestation. This is confirmed by the second half of the verse. 'This all', or objective manifestation, was then 'waters', the symbol of amorphous cosmic root-matter (*mūla-prakṛti*), the basis of all substance and all forms, the 'all-pervasive' of the *Śatapatha-Bṛāhmaṇa*, the nurturing mother aspect, the *χάος* of the Greeks, the 'face of the deep' upon which broods the Spirit of God as in Genesis. The idea is the same. The Greek *chaos* does not mean an indescribable medley of all things, but rather that matrix in which all things shall be moulded. It is translated here as 'depths' to avoid the literal connotation of 'water', which to the modern mind has lost its ancient significance.

V. S. Agrawala has an interesting commentary: 'The waters represent the principle of rest in which matter existed in a state of equilibrium and as an amorphous mass.'²¹ Furthermore he states: 'The principle of *salilam* is the same as *āpaḥ* . . . It is primordial matter,

²⁰ Sermon 39.

²¹ V. S. Agrawala, *Sparks from the Vedic Fire* (Varanasi, 1962), p. 64.

the unformed void . . . primordial *prakṛti* in which the Creator lays his germ.'²² The 'waters of life' of Christian scriptures, apart from their specific meaning of the Word of God given out through the Christ, may have had just a touch of the ancient connotation of 'water', the mother aspect of creation through which life bubbles forth to fulness and without which life remains unmanifest. Śrī Aurobindo defines the word *salilam* as 'inconscious ocean' and says: 'The existence out of which all formations are made is an obscure, fluid and indeterminate movement.'²³ Hence the idea of surging billows at the root of the world.

Whether the undifferentiated substance or the surging billows of the previous sentence are equated with the void which enwraps the eternal pulse is here not exactly clear, but must be so, especially if one considers how 'matter', to the conception of early European scientists, a solid substratum underlying all phenomenal objects, through further observations is dwindling to particles of atoms formerly deemed indivisible though now found more and more divisible, to electrical charges, to even 'energy', soon possibly to vanish into the vortex of *citta*, mental stuff, as the Indians express it. V. S. Agrawala explains that *tucchyā* is 'void or spatial cavity',²⁴ the cosmos in latency. Understanding this spatial cavity as the cosmic matrix which contains all in essence, then following his arguments, a further step may be taken: this matrix implies circumscription, a protecting 'shell', as he calls it, within which life will germinate; but circumscription also implies limitation. Out of the unlimited the matrix is formed—in what way will soon be evidenced—the circle is drawn and life is shaped into its multifarious forms. Similarly, out of the block of marble the statue is carved. Creation in this sense means self-limitation, not an adding to one's self, but a focussing of one's potentiality into a chosen, restricted field. But imposed self-limitation, however self-willed, does imply sacrifice, an idea so prominent throughout the *Rgveda*, and for that matter in all ancient cosmogonies, but so utterly misunderstood by modern exegesis. We might note in this connection that the same idea is present in St. John's Revelation—'the lamb slain from the foundation of the world' (XIII.8)—and that the ritual sacrifice of Vedic times may have stemmed from this conception rather than *vice versa*. Again the idea of contraction for later expansion appears here, although this

²² op. cit., p. 9.

²³ Aurobindo, *Vedic Glossary* (Pondicherry, 1962), p. 97.

²⁴ V. S. Agrawala, *Sparks from the Vedic Fire*, p. 72.

expansion takes places so to speak in a different dimension. However, the significant point about the 'void', which brings to mind Eckehart's *niht* or 'nothing', concerns another aspect of the question. There is here a hint as to the great void—be the latter the veil of the essence of matter as apparent here or not—which stands guard upon the threshold of the ultimate reality to which man can attain. At the human level or microcosmically therefore, if that reality is to be apprehended in actuality and not merely in theory, all sense data and emotional, mental processes must be reduced to nothingness, to that emptiness wherein alone the Spirit can manifest. One must go through the void to find the divine ground of being; for only beyond the senses and thoughts, beyond the warring of opposites and multiplicities, beyond the void, which is but the threshold, the *ātman* abides in bliss.

'That which flame-power kindled to existence emerged' is a contracted rendering of the original so as to avoid the great awkwardness evident in all purely literal translations. The living principle in which is all power arouses from within itself the fire of creation. In other words, from the unknowable darkness 'that' (*tat*) which lay hidden by the void is aroused to creativity by *tapas*—a word never satisfactorily translated, for no single English word can be found with its profound implications. *Tapas* is far more than mere 'warmth' or 'heat' or 'austerity'. We have to turn to Indian commentators for any real understanding. A. Chandra Bose explains the word as having a positive significance, 'not self-mortification but self-awakening by activating the spiritual power within oneself'.²⁵ This is valid at the human level and also, by analogy, considered to be similar at the cosmic level. For *tapas* refers to that contemplative act which as a result of contraction or focussing to one point (*ekāgratā*) arouses to action the 'flame divine' or supreme creative energy, elsewhere in the *Rgveda* personified by Agni, till then in a state of pure latency; this macrocosmically and microcosmically. Śrī Aurobindo makes the following pertinent remark: 'The action of the Causal Idea does not fabricate, but brings out by *tapas*, by the pressure of consciousness on its own being, that which is concealed in it, latent in potentiality and in truth already existent in the beyond.'²⁶ Here is thus meant by *tapas* the release of the supreme creative energy by means of intensest contemplation at the highest possible level. Obviously, only a master of meditation could have

²⁵ A. Ch. Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas* (London, 1966), p. 8.

²⁶ Aurobindo, *On the Veda* (Pondicherry, 1964), p. 302.

conceived of such a process and chosen it as an analogy for describing the divine creative act. As such a knowledge is extremely rare in the West, it is not surprising that current interpretations are so very poor and betray such complete ignorance of fundamentally spiritual states upon which are based these cosmogonic explanations.

A somewhat analogical thought may have struck Plotinus when he considered the beginning of creation in terms of 'radiation': 'How are we to conceive this sort of generation and its relation to its immovable cause? We are to conceive it as a radiation that, though it proceeds from the One, leaves its selfsameness undisturbed.'²⁷ Here again we are at variance with W. D. Whitney who, in the whole of his criticism, shows a profound lack of understanding, even ignorance, of Indian metaphysics. First he is not sure whether *tapas* in this context means 'physical heat or devotional ardor, penance'. He opts for the latter sense. 'For no such physical element as heat plays any part in the Hindu cosmogonies, while penance, the practice of religious austerities is a constant factor in their theories.'²⁸ The complete lack of foundation of such a statement may be evidenced by any glance at Hindu cosmogonical references, as for example to Agni, the flame who underlies all creation, the dynamic energy released at the foundation of the world, who in the *Bṛhaddevatā* is called *agrajā tapas*, primordial heat, who sets the wheel of cosmos revolving, who in the *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad*, as the 'son of the two' poles from whom proceeds manifestation, is identified with the *tat*.²⁹ Hence the translation of *tapas* as 'flame-power', because the inherent power and the release thereof are of the nature of the flame and are the very essence of the highest contemplative act. The overtones of these Sanskrit words have no equivalent in the English language. In the *Maitrāyaṇīya-Upaniṣad* it is stated that the divine One 'generated heat. The heat is a person and a person is the universal fire (*agni*).'³⁰ The qualification of heat as a person may at first glance seem absurd, but it only means that the principle that animates all creation is a divine intelligence, Agni, the personified dynamic power of the Absolute.

Furthermore, Whitney, taking as he does *tapas* in the literal sense of austerity, a sense he cannot really understand, finds the performance of

²⁷ *Enneads* V.1.6. E. O'Brien's translation.

²⁸ W. D. Whitney, 'The Cosmogonic Hymn', p. cxi.

²⁹ *Kaṭha-Up.* IV.8: 'This verily is That.' (*etad vai tat.*)

³⁰ *Maitr.-Up.* II.6:

penance, used as an image by the early Indians to express the accomplishment of any creative act by the Absolute in its phenomenal form, as Prajāpati, a 'grossly anthropomorphic trait'. This is, of course, rooted in the basic misunderstanding of the word. Graphic metaphors can but be taken from human experience, and those of the present hymn are no worse than those found in the Bible.

The word *ābhu* gives some difficulty. F. Edgerton translates the verse thus: 'What generative principle was enveloped by emptiness—by the might of (its own) fervour, that One was born.'³¹ To the term 'generative principle' he adds in a footnote: 'Literally "coming into being", *ābhu*; noun to the verb *abābhūva* "came into being" vss. 6 and 7.'³² Thereby he is following Macdonell. The One for him 'begets all beings'.³³ In a footnote he adds: 'RV 10.129.5 seems to compare the act of creation to a sexual act.'³⁴ Knowing the Western, and especially American, bias for reducing everything to sex, we can but turn back to Plotinus, that perfect 'Advaitin' (though perhaps unknowing to himself)³⁵ to find an explanation of this idea far more in the spirit of the hymn: 'We have to remove from our minds any idea that this is a process like generation in time because here we are treating of eternal realities. We speak metaphorically, in terms of generation, to indicate the causal relations of things eternal and their systematic order.'³⁶

Both the Western commentators diverge widely from the meaning ascribed to *ābhu* by Monier-Williams and such Indians as Sāyaṇa, Kunhan Raja and Agrawala, for whom *ābhu*, in the case of Monier-Williams, means 'empty' and in the case of the others 'the all encompassing' or the all pervading. Following the latter interpretation, the verse could be rendered thus: 'The all pervading was covered with the void, and by the power of *tapas* was that One born.' According to Agrawala both *tucchya* and *ābhu* are technical terms. '*Tucchya* is void and spatial cavity, i.e. the cosmos; *ābhu* is that which pervades on all sides . . . and denotes Brahman itself.'³⁷ He goes on: 'The particular portion of *ābhu* that was shadowed by *tucchya* generates within itself

the temperature of heat which brings into being the individual centres manifesting as the sun in the midst of each system. Sūrya is the manifest form of intense *tapas*.'³⁸ Sūrya, one may add, is the great ancient symbol of manifested Deity.

To sum up the meaning of this much debated verse. The ṛṣi conceived that through some analogical kind of concentration and contemplation as that known to human beings—an action which is first contraction to a focus—the divine life then expands into the activity of creation or manifestation by which the One pouring itself forth becomes the Many. Whilst through the veil of root-matter (*prakṛti-pradhāna*), whether unmanifest (*avyakta*) or manifest (*vyakta*) the great breath pulsates eternally.

IV *kāmas-tad-agre sam-avartata-adhi,
manaso retaḥ prathamam yad-āsīt,
sato bandhum-asati nir-avindan-
hṛdi pratiṣṭhā kavayo manīṣā.*

Desire, primordial seed of mind,
in the beginning, arose in That.
Seers, searching in their heart's wisdom,
discovered the kinship of the created
with the uncreate.

The poet now becomes most specific. One should first notice the continual reference to the impersonal *tat*. The primordial One, the unknown darkness in which all is contained in latency, the infinite is simply 'That'—beyond attributes (*nirguṇa*), beyond mind and the senses. One should also compare the first line of this verse together with the preceding three stanzas with Böhme's curiously similar statements in his *The Signature of All Things*:

8. We understand that without nature there is an eternal stillness and rest, viz. the Nothing; and then we understand that an eternal will arises in the nothing, to introduce the nothing into something, that the will might find, feel and behold itself.

9. For in the nothing the will would not be manifest to itself,

³⁸ op. cit., p. 73.

³¹ F. Edgerton, *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy* (London, 1965), p. 73.

³² op. cit., p. 73.

³³ op. cit., p. 25.

³⁴ op. cit., p. 25.

³⁵ Cf. O. Lacombe, 'Note sur Plotin et la pensée indienne', *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. Annuaire 1950-1 (Paris, 1950).

³⁶ *Enneads* V.1.6.

³⁷ V. S. Agrawala, *Sparks from the Vedic Fire*, p. 72.

wherefore we know that the will seeks itself, and finds itself in itself, and its seeking is a desire, and its finding is the essence of the desire, wherein the will finds itself.³⁹

Obviously, the Christian mystic, through his own contemplative absorption, arrived at the same kind of view as the Indian *ṛṣi*. Here again we have the 'nothing' to describe what is unfathomable to the mind.

Kāma, translated here by 'desire', calls for elucidation. J. Mascaró renders the word as 'love'.⁴⁰ This should not be considered, in the present context, as just desire for sensuous experience. The *ṛṣi* is treating of transcendental 'acts', and this should be constantly kept in mind. There can be no doubt, the word is here used in its highest connotation, just as J. Böhm also used the same word but without any reference to its mere earthly meaning. Love in its purest essence, as *ἀγάπη*, is desire and its own fulfilment: self-offering and self-fulfilment in the very act of self-offering. Nothing higher than this love can there be and possibly this is the kind of desire—the all-kindling flame which creates as an act of self-gift and in the act fulfils itself—that the poet has in mind. The Indian idea of eternal recurrence at the cosmic scale has been criticised as a reduction of the cosmos to a mere machine. The implications of the word *kāma* should dispel such erroneous impressions.

In the *Atharvaveda*, Agni is actually called *Kāma* who appears in IX.2 as the creative desire, the first born, whom neither gods nor mortals can rival. The myth is here quite transparent. *Kāma* is the essence of the divine creative flame and as such involves will, love, fire. Gods and humans are only partakers of this fire according to the measure that they also are divine. They can only create at their own limited level. *Kāma* is the concrete expression of *tapas*, the kindled flame resulting from the action of the latter, the divine will which by its *fiat* (let it be) caused manifestation; the ultimate product of *tapas*, i.e. the cosmos, is not illusory in the common sense, but it is also not completely real. Another typical Indian paradox! It is the Absolute or the One seen under a veil, hence the Indian idea of *māyā* which—apart from every meaning which has been ascribed to it by commentators

³⁹ Chapter II. Transl. by J. Ellistone, *The Signature of all Things and Other Writings* (London, 1912).

⁴⁰ J. Mascaró, *The Upanishads*, Penguin Books (Harmondsworth, 1965), pp. 9–10.

despairing of grasping its basic sense—signifies a 'measure' of reality, from $\sqrt{mā}$ ('to measure, mark off, limit, apportion').⁴¹ *Māyā* can be said to be 'illusion' only in the sense of veiling, or giving only a part of reality. Thus we may have a further inkling into the *Śatapatha-Brahmaṇa*'s paradoxical statement in connection with being and non-being:

In the beginning this [world] existed as it were and did not exist as it were.⁴²

The kernel of all later Advaita-Vedāntic thought is contained in these very early speculations.

One important point at this stage in the R̥gvedic hymn under consideration emerges. Desire for sentient existence or that urge to manifest which is the one characteristic common to all aspects of life—however obscure or latent or unself-conscious in the atom or the plant, however fully or self-consciously developed, in man and the *devas*—is rooted in the very origin of life, in the primordial One. Thus the poet cuts the Gordian knot as to the eternal why of all this by ascribing this urge for life to the very essence of being: the need to be; it is inwoven in the rhythm of the one life and expresses itself in the recurrence of the 'days' of Brahma; the counterpart of this urge to activity being the urge to rest, the other facet of the eternal rhythm, the great breath of the One.

This eternal *why* has been the subject of speculation with man throughout the ages. Thousands of years after the *ṛṣi* of the present hymn, Plotinus also asked the same question: 'Why did the One not remain by Itself? Why did it emanate the multiplicity we find characterising being and that we strive to trace back to the One? . . . The eternally perfect is eternally productive.'⁴³ Once again the answer is that it is its own nature to create.

Desire (*kāma*) is stated to be the seed of mind. Desire, in its will aspect, is the propelling or dynamic force that moves to action; without it there is no activity. But before physical or material action can take place, there is mental action. Mind is the principle of differentiation,

⁴¹ J. Gonda, *Four Studies in the Language of the Veda* ('S-Gravenhage, 1959). Chapter IV: 'The "original" sense and the etymology of Skt. *māyā*.'

⁴² Śat.-Br. X.5.3.1.

⁴³ *Enneads* V.1.6.

the mover in action; it plans, directs, divides, puts order, shape, colour into a given field; it geometrises; hence manifestation is its handiwork. But it is the fire of desire or will that kindles it to action.

The Indian sages claim the mind is established in the heart. This is another way of putting what has just been explained. Macrocosmically, the universal mind comes into being only after *kāma*, the expression of the flame divine, has established a centre within the cosmic field, or the 'waters', or Aditi, the 'boundless' of Vedic cosmogony. From the unmanifest or heart of the One to the manifest or universal mind, that root of cosmos or differentiating power which produces multiplicity, there is but one step, brought about by *tapas*. Consciousness or universal mind cannot manifest before the flame, elsewhere Agni, here called simply *kāma*, wells up from within the depths of latent cosmic life, and by its impact upon the 'waters' kindles them to a mighty conflagration from which will emerge the starry galaxies. Combustion at the physical level is love at the spiritual level. The Christian scriptures maintain that love is the foundation of the world. But they are not alone in holding such a belief. The present stanza demonstrates that the *ṛsis* also knew the fundamental meaning of love. Elsewhere in the *Rgveda*, Agni, the concrete form of *kāma*, is said to have entered the 'waters',⁴⁴ to have been discovered 'hidden in the waters' by the gods,⁴⁵ to have 'occupied, upright, the lap of the prone',⁴⁶ and to lie 'deep in the ocean . . . with waters compassed round about' whilst 'in continuous onward flow the floods their tribute bring to it'.⁴⁷ Agni 'waxes in the lap of the waters'.⁴⁸ *Kāma* indeed feeds upon the waters of life.

It is significant that the wise are represented as searching in their heart (*hṛd*) for the ultimate truth, not in their mind. As already explained, the mind can never apprehend truth as a whole, but the core of man alone touches the infinite.

A further difficult point is made. In their heart, the seers discovered the bond between that which is and that which is not, *sat* and *asat*, being and non-being, the defined and the undefined, translated here the 'created' and the 'uncreate' in order to avoid any misconception such

as usually arises in connection with these opposites to which we ascribe a definite concrete meaning.

Once again the logic of the mind seems to fail to grasp the link between the two. It is not explained *how*; there is merely the simple statement that this bond can be apprehended 'in the heart' (*hṛdi*), in other words, by soul awareness, not by means of empirical cogitation. Unless this be through intuitive perception—that flash of instant apprehension which occurs at rare intervals—we may *know*, in the deepest sense of the word, only when completely absorbed in that state of perfect at-oneness described by Plotinus⁴⁹ and implied here by the very expression 'searching in the heart'.

We are not surprised that W. D. Whitney can find no meaning in this verse. 'The verse seems to project, without any preparation, certain wise persons into the midst of the nonentity or its development . . . And wherever *sat* and *asat*, existence and non-existence, are brought together, it is a mere juggle of words, an affectation of profundity.'⁵⁰ Whitney notwithstanding, the mind can and does find some meaning here. It is not difficult to conceive of matter as ultimately energy, as explained in the commentary to the third stanza, and energy as ultimately mental 'stuff'. Hence the created is that which is compounded of particles of energy and like all compounded things will eventually be resolved into its constituent elements which themselves will be resolved into their original source. The created is thus rooted in the uncreate, in the 'waters' or essence of substance, the veil, or perhaps the breath of the One.

v *tiraścīno vitato raśmīr-eṣām-
adhaḥ svid-āsīd upari svid-āsīt,
retodhā āsan-mahimāna āsant-
svadhā avastāt-prayatīḥ parastāt.*

Their vision's rays stretched afar.

There was indeed a below, there was indeed an above.

Seed-bearers there were, mighty powers there were.

Energy below, will above.

⁴⁴ *Rgv.* VII.49.4.
⁴⁵ *Rgv.* X.32.6.
⁴⁶ *Rgv.* II.35.9.
⁴⁷ *Rgv.* VIII.89.9.
⁴⁸ *Rgv.* X.8.1.

⁴⁹ 'The man who obtains the vision becomes, as it were, another being. He ceases to be himself, retains nothing of himself. Absorbed in the beyond he is one with it, like a centre coincident with another centre. While the centres coincide, they are one. They become two only when they separate.' *Enneads*. VI.9.10.

⁵⁰ W. D. Whitney, 'The Cosmogonic Hymn', p. cxi.

After his supreme effort to transcend the opposites, the *ṛṣi* now strives to visualise how differentiation arose. He could only express what he conceived in broad generalisations. We find general principles here, but nowhere is there a hint as to an anthropomorphic creator active in his creation. This is really a later simplification of the whole cosmogonic process intimated here.

This is perhaps the most difficult stanza of the whole hymn. Yet once again one does not at all agree with W. D. Whitney's sweeping condemnation that 'no one has ever succeeded in putting any sense into it'.⁵¹

The meaning of the word *raśmi*, considered by Macdonell as 'uncertain', cannot be taken literally. It seems rather to be a figure of speech. With their mind's eye or ray of inner vision, the sages probed the original undifferentiated substance to discover the broad principles as they emerged and first produced the division of the above and the below, the spiritual and the material, heaven and earth. Their yardstick was not a physical cord with which to measure the immeasurable, but the instrument of mental analysis which defines or delimits.

The poet refers to *retodhāḥ*, 'impregnators' or seed-bearers, and *mahimānaḥ*, 'powers', without any further particularisation. Macdonell and others describe these as 'male and female cosmogonic principles',⁵² the positive and the negative powers, to whose action and interaction manifestation is due. The seed-bearers could be the gods who came into being as the embodiments of universal mind and who are the direct agents of creation in its details; seeds of the divine will which the many forms (*rūpas*) of the phenomenal world will carry within themselves; and the *mahimānaḥ* or divine energies could be their feminine counterpart or the *śakti* of Tantric philosophy. The phrase is very abstract and probably so with a purpose.

Agrawala has the following comment: 'The two principles essential for birth are the parental pair comprising Father and Mother. The Father is the *retodhā* and the Mother is the *mahimānaḥ*.'⁵³ These two are constantly referred to in Rgvedic hymns as Heaven and Earth, the symbolic personification of the primeval parents.

C. Kunhan Raja in his commentary to this poem refers to 'spatial extension and life activity' as 'the two factors that arose in the infinite

when there was the first activity of the mind'.⁵⁴ In other words, space and motion, the latter of which gives rise to time; space and time are inherent in the universal mind, but not in the ultimate reality. They are attributes of the mind.

The next line, translated 'energy below, will above', is quite intriguing and in the last analysis remains somewhat of a riddle. *Svadhā* means innate or inherent power or energy, and as it is coupled with the word 'below', the energy of matter, its own inherent nature must be referred to. But the word *prayati* is far more difficult as it is subject to various interpretations; its root is $\sqrt{\text{yam}}$ ('to extend, bring, produce'). Monier-Williams gives its meaning as 'offering, presenting, oblation, will' and Macdonell adds 'donation, intention'. C. Kunhan Raja translates it as 'activity'. For H. W. Wallis it usually has the sense of 'presentation of sacrifice' which is given in the dictionary as 'oblation'; this would explain the gods' action or act of creation at their own manifested level as an offering which would be in accordance with Rgvedic doctrines of the eternal cosmic sacrifice repeated indefinitely.

The word *prayati*, taken in the sense of 'intention' and with an eye to its root meaning of 'forth giving', may also imply the 'pattern' or 'intention' in the universal mind, the will aspect of the divine, concretised by the action of the gods or active agents or architects which these, in their quality of 'generators' or embodiments of the universal mind, bring down to the lower level or *avastāt*, below, to become the innate nature of each thing, the divine will made manifest. The whole problem of the interpretation of this stanza is still very moot.

VI *ko addhā veda ka iha pra-vocat-
kuta ājātā kuta iyaṃ viśṣṭih,
arvāg-devā asya visarjanena-
athā ko veda yata ābabhūva.*

Who knows the truth, who can here proclaim
whence this birth, whence this projection?
The gods appeared later in this world's creation.
Who then knows how it all came into being?

⁵¹ W. D. Whitney, 'The Cosmogonic Hymn', p. cxi.

⁵² A. A. Macdonell, *A Vedic Reader for Students* (Oxford, 1960), p. 210.

⁵³ V. S. Agrawala, *Sparks from the Vedic Fire*, p. 75.

⁵⁴ C. Kunhan Raja, *Poet-philosophers of the Rgveda* (Madras, 1963), p. 228.

VII *iyaṃ viśṛṣṭir-yata ābabhūva
yadī vā dadhe yadī vā na,
yo asya-adhyakṣaḥ parame vyomant-
so aṅga veda yadī vā na veda.*

Whence this creation originated;
whether He caused it to be or not,
He who in the highest empyrean surveys it,
He alone knows, or else, even He knows not.

The last two stanzas have often been taken as the proof of the final scepticism of the Vedic seers as to the ultimate truth. Do we really know how this whole cosmos came into being, asks the seer-poet, since there was no one to witness it? In the last analysis, we are ignorant of how the original processes of creation came about since no conditioned creature, no finite mind, could have taken cognisance of these and related the story. Even the gods themselves, the highest beings, who, however, are not forming part of the original *fiat* and come into being subsequently, cannot tell. We are only indulging in speculations which, at best, are approximations to truth. The whole reconstruction of the origination of the cosmos has, we believe, come to the *ṛṣi* in direct vision, in the deepest moments of *samādhi*; yet who is there to tell that he is right? The utter sincerity of the final question, 'who knows, who can here proclaim?', the humble, tacit admission that even the highest flights of illumination may fall short of reality, should be appreciated rather than smiled down at, as has all too often been the case. Thousands of years later, *we know no more*.

Throughout the poem it has been evident that the Indian idea of creation is quite different from the Christian conception. For the Indian speculation, creation is 'a letting forth' of that which was held in latency. This is fully brought out again in the use of the words *viśṛṣṭi* and *visarjana*, both from \sqrt{srj} ('to let go, emit, pour forth'). These two words summarise the whole doctrine of the projecting into more and more concrete expression of that which is ever latent in the inmost, a doctrine very close to that of Plotinus' *hypostasis*.

Two important points which seem to have been quite ignored by Western exegesis should here be noted. There is One in the highest heaven who surveys the whole world. Since he may or may not know the original process of manifestation, even he is not the Absolute, but

deity manifested, the *īśvara* or 'lord' of later Vedānta. The use of the masculine pronoun *sa* or 'he' as against the primordial impersonal *tat* or 'That' is of the highest interest. It shows the dynamic pole of creation as himself a differentiation from the One, as one step down from unity towards multiplicity. In that ultimate unity the two poles, the active and the passive, lay as one, to be differentiated when the cosmic pendulum swung towards creation, separation, when the divine contemplation had reached such a peak that the *fire* of life was kindled, that the *fiat* of manifestation was sounded. Modern theistic religions have nothing beyond their active masculine creator which, to the Indian mind, is a finite god and thus only an aspect of that which is infinite or ineffable.

Having pervaded this whole universe
with one fragment [of Myself], I remain.⁵⁵

This is the *Bhagavad-Gītā*'s summing up, a realisation inherent in the hymn of creation. Even that supreme overseer, the highest personification of manifested deity, muses the poet, may not know. The secret of it all may then be locked up in the Absolute beyond all godly grasp.

The second striking point on which no comment whatsoever has been made by Western exegesis, so far as we are aware, arises from the first. The poem ends on a similar note of transcendence as was struck at the beginning. Neither in the first stanza nor here is there any direct mention of the Absolute. That is left to intuitive perception. The final admission of human ignorance, and even of a possible ignorance on the part of the highest manifested deity, serves to elevate the idea of the Absolute, the One, the *tat*, to the loftiest heights the human mind can barely touch, to surround it with the utmost reverence and awe, beyond all speculation. The history of subsequent religion only shows a steady but complete degradation from the lofty estate to which the *ṛṣis* had elevated the Absolute. They had conceived and left It to the silence of deepest contemplation.

⁵⁵ BhG X.42.