

The Kena Upanishad and Savitri (Lecture 3)

Day 2 (afternoon session)

In the Kena Upanishad that we are considering, a great deal of attention is given to the notion of *prana*. By what is the mind or the speech or the life breath moved forward in its path? This moving forward, *praithi*, is the action of the *prana*. The movement is carried forward by the *prana*. Like many terms that appear in this Upanishad, throughout the history of Vedic, Indic, Hindu psychology and yoga, there are many stages of development of these ideas. When Sri Aurobindo comments on the Upanishads, he is commenting at the same time on Sankhya, Yoga and Vedanta. He is bringing that whole tradition of psychology and spirituality and yoga knowledge forward through the commentary on this text that is near the origin of that tradition. So he is not just commenting on Kena Upanishad. All these yoga teachings are acknowledged in the commentary on this text. The way that he deals with it is not linear and systematic: we find a little bit on the *prana* here, there. So to study the text and put together all the lines of thought that are here, seminal to the yoga of knowledge, requires a great deal of concentration and attention. This is not something that we read once, and go on to the next thing, saying "Oh, I've read that," as of course we have all done. And then at some point we realize that we did not understand anything; but we realize that it sounded so good. Everything that Sri Aurobindo writes is like that: it sounds good but we often do not understand anything.

What he is speaking about here is what he is transmitting in *Savitri* and we can hear the difference. The passages about the supreme Word of the Brahman being translated into forms by the Devas through the *prana* and eventually becoming accessible to the analytical mind through the perceptions of the senses, by which time they have moved worlds away from their essential truth, Sri Aurobindo communicates vividly in *Savitri* in a way that prose writing and philosophy cannot reveal. That is the demonstration of the difference between *mantra* and *shastra*, or *sutra* and *tantra*; it is *sruti*, the hearing/seeing of inspired truth. The Sutra teaching is something we can understand mentally: it is about the separation of Purusha from Prakriti, the purification and silencing of the mind and the vital so that the self steps back from its attachments and realizes that it is something still and pure and free, and all of the things that it normally attaches to are Prakriti. And that attachment is illusory, because even Prakriti is much more than that. This is the yoga teaching we get from Patanjali, Mahayana Buddhism, and Sri Aurobindo in *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Behind that there is this basic idea of Purusha and Prakriti. We heard that there are only two principles in reality: the Self and the Gods. But through hearing *Savitri* we come to understand that the supreme Self (Purusha) is the unknowable eternal reality, and its supreme emanation is the Divine Mother (Prakriti) and her emanations are all of the gods, and through them the manifest temporal tangible world of becoming is mediated.

So the gods do what they do, they translate the eternal word into representative structures, but even they do not know the source of their own inspired vision and universal power. That is what we heard in that canto this morning, and it is the theme of the Kena Upanishad. In spite of all that they do, they still do not know their source; it is hidden from them. We get a glimpse of their source at the end of the canto when it is revealed by the *mahashakti*, Divine Mother. We come to understand that if the gods are using an energy that is not physical to move physical things (because they are not physical), then what means do they use? A less subtle energy than their own called *prana*, which is able to move physical energy and manifest physical energy. So Sri Aurobindo says a lot of things in his commentary about the *prana*. Moving from the concept of *adhidaiva*, and *adhiatma*, the plane of the gods, and the supreme Self, downwards towards *adhibhuta*, manifest nature, we get the *prana*. The *prana* of the Upanishad is the life energy itself which is supposed to act in the body with a fivefold movement: in, out, throughout, up, and out..., the *pranic* movement is a movement like breathing in, taking in sense

impressions, vision, words, energy and information, which is then distributed in the system as perception, and gathered into a concentrated knowledge, then elevated to the will that creates the response; and then the energy is evacuated through the breath and dissipated through the movement forward in action, or through dissolution. So there are these five simultaneous directions. Not just the breath, but energy flowing through the *nadis* in us, and the will power of the gods flowing through all the forms of existence. This life force is not physical, Sri Aurobindo says. So it is not the breath, not the sensations, the smells, the sights and sounds. But the sense of smell and the odor, and the perception of the odor through the sense of smell and the imaging mind, are all movements of the *prana*, which also creates the sense apparatus that receives the odor, and knows what it is in the object by the mind, and in the knowing they are not separated. Knowing, knower, and known are one pranic field.

The *prana* is what Plato called the soul or the unifying principle in the relational field; the essence that makes something what it is, and it is also the ability of the mind and senses to perceive and know what it is. The relational field can also be called consciousness, *prana*, *psuche* in Greek, *loong* in Tibetan, *chi* in Chinese. So again, the Self and the gods, two fundamental principles. Prana is an emanation of the gods, which are an emanation of the Shakti, the Divine Mother. Prana in itself, in its essence, is desire, as Sri Aurobindo says. He means that the *will to be* is embodied in that subtle energy, which becomes desire to realize whatever it needs to become. There has to be a force of intention, a need, a goal. Desire is a word that can mean a very high level of energy of intention to produce a form, and to enjoy producing the form, creating it, being it, so that the essential energy in things is a desire to be those things, and each thing can only be what it essentially is; the soul is the essence that wants to be realized in the form and its relations. The *pranic* field contains all of that: the will to be, the form, the relational position of the form in the whole field, its consciousness in the knower. Separate essences all together constitute the meaning of life, the beauty and power of processing the energy which makes it possible for the flower to shine, the bee to fly and buzz and suck the sugar, and spread the pollen to ignite in another flower, and for the cycle to continue. All of that is the physical-vital-mental sheath that covers the *prana*.

Sri Aurobindo says this is not material, not physical, but a different principle supporting matter and involved in it. “Without it no physical forms could have come into being or remain in being. It acts in all material forces and it is nearest to self-manifestation in those forces that are nearest to pure force. All material aspects are only field and form of the Prana which is in itself a pure energy, their cause and not their result: it therefore cannot be detected by any physical analysis. Physical analysis can only resolve for us the combinations of those material happenings which are its results and the external signs and symbols of its presence and operation. How, then, do we become aware of it?” That is Sri Aurobindo’s question. And he answers, “By that purification of our mind and body and the subtilisation of our means of sensation and knowledge which become possible through yoga.” The word Yoga suddenly takes on a very vast meaning. “We become capable of analysis other than the resolution of forms into their gross physical elements and are able to distinguish the operations of the pure mental principle from those of the material, and these from the vital or dynamic, which forms the link between them and supports them. We are then able to distinguish the movements of the pranic currents, not only in the physical body but in the subtle frame of our being which yoga detects underlying the vital and the physical. But the pranic energy supports not only the physical but also the mental operations of the mind in the living body. Thus, by controlling the pranic energy it is not only possible to control the physical and vital functioning and transcend their ordinary operations, but also to control the operations of the mind and to transcend its ordinary operations.”

What then is this life of our life, this pranic energy? It helps to also visualize not only that distinction between the supreme self (the eternal) and its supreme force (the shakti), which becomes in us the

Jivatman (small *purusha*), and the ordinary movements of energy (small *prakriti*); the two hemispheres. He says he glimpsed the intersection of the two hemispheres: Sachidananda and Mind-Life-Body, and the Supermind is the intermediate joining principle between them. This is one way to visualize Purusha and Prakriti. We can also visualize the movements of the *nadis*; the left and the right brain. The structure of the movement of the *prana* corresponds to these ideas of the subtle energy channels. Then there is that one central channel which becomes the two: the in and the out, up and down movement. All of these physical structures we are so familiar, which come about as a result of the principle of duality: Purusha and Prakriti: the still Self and the dynamic force of Nature. The balance between them creates movement; that movement is a vibration, which originates as the word of the Brahman. That vibration multiplies itself and becomes a form; each form has an essential sound vibration, a center of being, which sustains itself in that form for as long as the material conditions allow it to. And then the petals fall and the seed becomes another form.

So this is the eternal perpetual dynamic of life force and it is a product of the principles of Purusha and Prakriti, Self and Nature. And nature is, we know now, these universal forces, the gods. Nature is constantly changing its forms and does not last, and we consider there to be two principles of reality, as Sri Aurobindo points out: universal forces called gods which are emanations of the supreme, and the Self, which is the supreme. It has a corresponding form in us known as the psychic being or the soul, which is eternal, free and empty, and without personality, genes, heredity: a spiritual being in us. The Mother said in the first article of *To be a True Aurovilian it is necessary to discover who you really are: not your personality, genes, heredity, cultural conditioning, etc. It is a vast and free being. That self in us corresponds to the supreme Self, and it has no form; it is formless. Formlessness means the absolute of every quality; it is the spiritual essence of everything but in itself it has no expression; it is only by taking on a body that it has an expression, and that body changes all the time.*

This is the essential theme of the *sanatana-dharma*, the Hindu *shastra*, *the essential theme that runs through all its teachings is the idea of Purusha, Self, and Prakriti, Nature, and their relationship, which is one of union at some point and division at another point. It is not really either dualism or monism. The clever idea of Dwaitadwaita means integral non-dualism; that is a philosophical game that is interesting. We can become conscious of the oneness of the still Self and its dynamic Nature at once.*

So then, this energy is the product of a duality. It is the one, but it is the many. “The self-existent.” I am sure nobody can imagine what that means. The self-existent: another of those philosophical terms that is supposed to baffle us. Something which is not dependent upon anything, that exists by virtue of itself, so it is not caused. “The self-existent is luminously aware of itself, and full of its own delight.” So, the self-existent is the formless, which is in fact the delight of everything, the absolute of everything, it has no second, it is the One. So if you read your handouts, the first paragraph says that this is the essential thing to know: all forms in evolutionary nature come from the One, the one is not the result of all the forms added together. “And that self-awareness is a timeless self-possession which in action reveals itself as a force of infinite consciousness, omnipotent as well as omniscient: all-powerful and all-knowing being is revealed through forms. For it exists between two poles: one of eternal stillness, and pure self-identity; the other of eternal energy, and identity of all with itself.” The stillness eternally supporting the energy. This is Yoga. This is the true existence. “Therefore, the object of the wise must be to pass in their illumined consciousness beyond the false and phenomenal terms of life and death to this immortality. And this immortality is known as *the* delight: the delight of the self-existent being, eternally still, supporting all the dynamic qualities of existence, and enjoying them, without losing its identity.” Not easy, but it sounds good.

So, what is this stillness? Can we seriously contemplate it? Like I said, this is a seed of Sri Aurobindo’s

writings. In *The Synthesis of Yoga* he elaborated this idea, and it is really the fundamental teaching of the Upanishads. So when you are reading *The Synthesis of Yoga*, these paragraphs do not necessarily grab your attention but they are extremely significant. If you understand this you do not need to read the whole book:

“Obeying the necessity to withdraw successively from the practical egoism of our triple nature (body, life and mind) and its fundamental ego sense, we come to the realization (if we obey that necessity) of the spirit, the self, lord of this individual human manifestation, but our knowledge is not integral if we do not make this self in the individual one with the cosmic spirit and find their greater reality above in an inexpressible but not unknowable transcendence. The Jivatman must give itself up into the being of the Divine. The self of the man must be made one with the Self of all. The self of the finite individual must pour itself into the boundless finite and that cosmic spirit too must be exceeded in the infinite. ...This cannot be done without an uncompromising abolition of the ego-sense at its very basis and source. In the path of knowledge one attempts this abolition negatively by denial of the reality of the ego; positively by a constant fixing of the thought upon the idea of the one and the infinite in itself or the one and the infinite everywhere.”

That is what he was suggesting: that we make an effort to see behind the forms, ideas, etc. Step back and try to perceive the universal entities behind those forms, and to see beyond them their source, which is the One. And when we get close to that, through meditation and practice, and surrender and stillness, we actually feel the Ray - not only coming down but moving out and in, horizontally. Because energy in that state of stillness is more powerful and continuous and sensible as an unbroken permanent radiance which is everywhere all the time without break. In that state we have no inclination to react or respond to anything, but we can if we choose. That is *samata*, perfect equality, an energy; not a concept or moral virtue: a concrete spiritual state of being that is in fact an energy field that is equal in all, to all, without break.

Sri Aurobindo tells us: “This, if persistently done, changes in the end the mental outlook on oneself and the whole world, and there is a kind of mental realization; but afterwards by degrees or perhaps rapidly and imperatively and almost at the beginning the mental realization deepens into spiritual experience - a realization in the very substance of our being. More and more frequent conditions come of something indefinable and illimitable, a peace, a silence, a joy, a bliss beyond expression, a sense of absolute impersonal Power, a pure existence, a pure consciousness, an all-pervading Presence. The ego persists in itself or in its habitual movements, but the place of the one becomes more and more loosened, the others are broken, crushed, more and more rejected, becoming weak in their intensity, limp or mechanical in their action. In the end, there is a constant giving up of the whole consciousness into the being of the Supreme. In the beginning, when the restless confusion and obscuring impurity of our outward nature is active, when the mental vital physical ego sense is still powerful, this new outlook, these experiences may be found difficult in the extreme. But once that triple egoism is discouraged or moribund and the instruments of the Spirit are set right and purified, in an entirely pure, silent, clarified, widened consciousness, the purity, infinity, stillness of the One reflects itself like the sky in a limpid lake.”

So the subject here is 'the stillness'. And the duality. The duality of energy and stillness, of Purusha and Prakriti. And the transition from the normal habitual patterns of the mind-life-body into that other state which is energized completely, not negative but very positive as a result of the negation of the usual patterns of sensation, perception, response, opinion, desire. So the positive is a result of the negative. Unfortunately..., perhaps, but we will hear this pattern in *Savitri* repeatedly. A canto, or a part of a canto, which insists on absolute negation and then another canto or part is about the total divine

positive affirmation of everything. This corresponds to the duality of existence itself, but it becomes a process in Yoga. He says: "We see that there is an infinite pure status and immobile silence of the Spirit; we see too that there is a boundless movement of the Spirit, a power, a dynamic spiritual all-containing self-extension of the Infinite. Our conceptions foist upon this perception, in itself valid and accurate, an opposition between the silence and status, and the dynamis and movement, but to the reason and the logic of the Infinite there is no opposition. ...The silence, the status are the basis of the movement, an eternal immobility is the necessary condition and foundation of the vast action of the Force of being. It is when we arrive at something of this silence, stability, immobility, stillness, that we can base on it a force and energy which in our superficial restless state would be inconceivable." The challenge is always: are we willing to sacrifice the superficial restless state, which is so habitual and which everyone expects of everyone else, and so is mutually and universally reinforcing; are we willing to sacrifice that in order to attain an illimitable energy and force of true effective action?

(In the excerpt that follows from *Savitri*, Book 2, Canto 12, the bi-polarity of the stillness and energy, Purusha and Prakriti, soul and spirit, are powerfully symbolized by the Yogi's inner experience of "the deathless Rose" and the "house of Flame".)

Above the spirit cased in mortal sense
Are superconscious realms of heavenly peace,
Below, the Inconscient's sullen dim abyss,
Between, behind our life, the deathless Rose.
Across the covert air the spirit breathes,
A body of the cosmic beauty and joy
Unseen, unguessed by the blind suffering world,
Climbing from Nature's deep surrendered heart
It blooms for ever at the feet of God,
Fed by life's sacrificial mysteries.
Here too its bud is born in human breasts;
Then by a touch, a presence or a voice
The world is turned into a temple ground
And all discloses the unknown Beloved.
In an outburst of heavenly joy and ease
Life yields to the divinity within
And gives the rapture-offering of its all,
And the soul opens to felicity.
A bliss is felt that never can wholly cease,
A sudden mystery of secret Grace
Flowers goldening our earth of red desire.
All the high gods who hid their visages
From the soiled passionate ritual of our hopes,
Reveal their names and their undying powers.
A fiery stillness wakes the slumbering cells,
A passion of the flesh becoming spirit,
And marvellously is fulfilled at last
The miracle for which our life was made.
A flame in a white voiceless cupola
Is seen and faces of immortal light,
The radiant limbs that know not birth and death,
The breasts that suckle the first-born of the Sun,
The wings that crowd thought's ardent silences,

The eyes that look into spiritual Space.
Our hidden centres of celestial force
Open like flowers to a heavenly atmosphere;
Mind pauses thrilled with the supernal Ray,
And even this transient body then can feel
Ideal love and flawless happiness

And laughter of the heart's sweetness and delight
Freed from the rude and tragic hold of Time,
And beauty and the rhythmic feet of the hours.
This in high realms touches immortal kind;
What here is in the bud has blossomed there.
There is the secrecy of the House of Flame,
The blaze of godlike thought and golden bliss,
The rapt idealism of heavenly sense;
There are the wonderful voices, the sun-laugh,
A gurgling eddy in rivers of God's joy,
And the mystic vineyards of the gold moon-wine,
All the fire and sweetness of which hardly here
A brilliant shadow visits mortal life.
Although are witnessed there the joys of Time,
Pressed on the bosom the Immortal's touch is felt,
Heard are the flutings of the Infinite.
Here upon earth are early awakenings,
Moments that tremble in an air divine,
And grown upon the yearning of her soil
Time's sun-flowers' gaze at gold Eternity:
There are the imperishable beatitudes.
A million lotuses swaying on one stem,
World after coloured and ecstatic world
Climbs towards some far unseen epiphany. ...

Onward he passed to a diviner sphere:
There, joined in a common greatness, light and bliss,
All high and beautiful and desirable powers
Forgetting their difference and their separate reign
Become a single multitudinous whole.
Above the parting of the roads of Time,
Above the Silence and its thousandfold Word,
In the immutable and inviolate Truth
For ever united and inseparable,
The radiant children of Eternity dwell
On the wide spirit height where all are one.

(audio file of reading from *Savitri* not currently available)