

## The Meaning of Symbols

First we should ask ourselves how we think about symbolism. Does it seem to have much importance to us, either theoretically or practically? Are we aware of its prominent role in our use of language? What are the symbols with which we are most familiar and how do they affect us?

We can easily reflect on the practical aspect of familiar symbols such as traffic signs and the many commercial images that influence our behavior, such as product logos like “Apple” and “Toyota” and the Big Yellow M. All of us also probably respond in similar stereotypical ways to graphic designs like the Swastika, the Hammer and Sickle, the Star of David, and the Christian Cross. The similarity of all of these examples is that they are visual images associated with institutions that have had a certain degree of power over the lives of people and societies within the scope of recent history and to which we have all been exposed. Therefore we have some idea of their meaning. The simple formula that can be assigned to the relationship between the symbols and their

meaning is A=B, or A represents B. The Big Yellow M represents the McDonald's corporation, the Star of David represents Judaism, and so on. But what the symbol tells us about the thing it represents is basically nothing. We are able to associate the two because of direct experience or training and conditioning. If we eat lots of fast food we will surely know about the Big Yellow M, and if we are members of the Christian religion and have been reasonably well indoctrinated by it, the Cross will mean something more or less specific to us. Otherwise such symbols may simply represent an institution whose existence we are vaguely aware of but whose meaning we don't really know much about. The Auroville symbol may mean a lot to some of us while to many people it will have no meaning at all.

On a deeper level, symbolism is a common technique or device used in novels and movies to represent things we especially value or fear, or which have a strong appeal to our feelings about ourselves and the world, such as Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, who represents hope in a future of justice and freedom, or the "ring" in *The Lord of the Rings*, which represents the hidden aspects of our nature which may either save us or cause us to fall. We can interpret many science fiction movies and novels as representing either a glorified view of technological civilization or a dystopian view of its inherent dangers and possibly disastrous consequences. Such symbolic representations

can profoundly influence the emotions and ideas of people and society. For example, the mendacious behavior of the American President with which the media bombards us every day must affect the morale of society in ways that are likely to be destructive of our faith in government and our way of life. It seems that in fact our values and freedoms are being stolen from us under the noses of our elected officials, with at least their tacit consent. (Unfortunately, this situation is not unique to either this country or this moment in history, of course.) Whether or not this is the political reality, the construction is elevated to the status of a symbolic image that is constantly projected in various forms by the media – journalistic commentaries, comedy shows, dramas, and academic theses. It's like Sita in her protective circle when the golden deer attracts her interest, loyal Lakshman goes after it for her and thus fails in his commitment to be her vigilant guard, allowing the evil Ravana through the ruse of his magician's skillful fakery to abduct the culture's symbolic soul of purity. The dharma of the most righteous and noble representatives of society, its leaders and role models, is undermined by human weakness and evil intent. It's one of my favorite symbolic tales from India. Each of us harbors all of these characters, psychologically, in ourselves, including the hero Rama who is busily mustering his army to rectify the situation. That's the truth of the symbol.

Symbols, therefore, are things that we commonly use to represent other things, but there may be little or no similarity or necessity in the relationship between the symbol and the thing it represents. We could see it every day and it might never tell us anything about what it means. And it is possible for the same symbol to mean entirely different things to different people. The association between the two sides of the equivalence depends upon our education, experience, cultural exposure, - the conditioning that creates understanding in some form. In fact, the whole idea of symbolism is based on the way in which we humans are conditioned by culture, and especially by the way in which language is used to convey conventionally understood meanings. And here we can raise important questions concerning the relationship between language and meaning, symbols and truth. For example, how can something as different as a symbolic image or word can be from the thing it represents actually convey the thing it represents to our understanding? We may say that this is just how language works, or that learning is a product of repetition whereby we establish mental and emotional associations between symbolic images and things. Some philosophers, such as David Hume in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, have proposed that our sensations and perceptions are turned into ideas by the mind, by some mysterious mechanism of cause and effect that we cannot actually see or understand, but which nevertheless produces a one-to-one relationship between image and reality. And what is more, the whole evolutionary continuum from molecules to mind is believed to be the

product of such a mechanical process, including the human brain, thought, and language, in the empirical view. In fact this is a popular view held by neuroscience today, which it strives very tenaciously to prove. But actually none of these answers really explains the mysterious process of language and consciousness with which we are constantly engaged. Just about everything we know, as far as language is concerned, is a symbolic representation of some other reality, and we simply accept that there is this close relationship, or identity, between the symbol and what it means, because most of the time it works pretty well for us.

Reflecting on these aspects of language has led many philosophers and scientists to conclude that all knowledge is representational and consists only of certain frameworks of understanding that are constructed by the mind and conventionally agreed upon. Language is the primary tool that we use to systematize such conventional ways of understanding things. But the skeptical tendency that is predominant in such schools of thought also easily leads to the conclusion that we actually know very little about things themselves. What we really know are our constructed frameworks. The extent to which our symbols and systems of symbols correspond to and correctly represent the world of our experience, according to this constructivist theory of knowledge and language, depends entirely on the efforts of talented people to verify, or prove, the adequacy or inadequacy of the correspondence between the

representation and the reality. But in any case such theories generally agree that there will always be a distance, or gap, or an essential difference between our knowledge and reality, just as there is between the symbol and what it represents. And such a conclusion commonly leads to doubt regarding the possibility of knowing the real truth of things, or that there are any realities to be known; there are only many different points of view.

There is another approach to the question of meaning, however, which asks: How is it that language and consciousness can even know and represent reality in the first place? In fact, human beings have been using language to symbolize and communicate about reality for thousands of years quite successfully. We are perfectly conscious of the cup and vase on the table, and when we name them we are naming real things. We are not merely expressing a representation of something that might not exist, or something imaginary that exists only as a symbol, as if in a dream or on a screen. When we accept that this is what is actually happening, we can then embark on another theory of language and meaning which has also been widespread among philosophers and psychologists for many centuries, and for which Heidegger is especially well-known, along with Whitehead, going very far back in history to Hegel, Thomas Aquinas and the Christian Scholastics, and to Plato and Aristotle. This approach to the problem of language and meaning is

known generally as Idealism, which, to put it simply, believes that consciousness is a field of universal ideas and particular things, both of which are real. Everything that is known and represented by consciousness is a combination of universal qualities and more or less tangible, concrete things. Individuals and their interrelationships are actual representations or expressions of universal realities. We know their forms, and we give them names: the cup and vase on the table and the flower in the vase are actual things that are manifestations of universal forms: cup, vase, flower. Our awareness of these things and the language we use to symbolize them emerge from the same field of consciousness as do the things themselves; the former is a representation, or phenomenon, on the mental plane, and the latter is a phenomenon, or representation, on the physical plane. And there is a life plane in-between that energizes them both. We exist in a world where complex processes of consciousness and force produce cups and vases and flowers and also the awareness and language by which such things are known and expressed, by insects and by human beings; everything is an embodiment of some combination of ideal forms and the knowable something that they are. And it is not only language that symbolizes things, but things themselves are the symbols of the universal forms that they embody and express. The cup on the table is an actual individual expression of the thing that is named, whose meaning and purpose is its existence as a cup, or a vase, or a flower. Nature is in fact this world of constantly emerging, interacting, and self-reflecting forms and meanings.

In this theory of language and meaning, the actual object we perceive and name, is the symbol of a universal reality that is known innately by consciousness, and the meaning of that reality is expressed by the thing itself, as well as by thought and language. The linguistic symbol may actually be closer to the reality than the material object, in a way, because the ideal is the reality of the thing, and it is known by consciousness in a subtler and vaster view of the possible and actual forms that it creates, as well as their relational contexts. But in another way they are the same thing on different planes of that reality: the actual individuals and their ideal forms. In Sanskrit and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, the reality of something that is known, and expressed by its actual existence, is called its *swabhava*, or essential nature. So now, let us turn to Sri Aurobindo's theory of Vedic knowledge and symbolism, where we may find a further elaboration and reinforcement of this idealistic theory of language and meaning, raised to a higher level of intensity that may help us answer these questions with greater clarity.



An exploration of symbolism in the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother reveals how symbolic consciousness works in very concrete ways that we can experience and understand, while at the same time we are being guided by it into a deeper relationship with their teachings and their Yoga of Transformation, which is precisely its purpose. And the best way to begin such an exploration is through a study of Sri Aurobindo's approach to translating and interpreting Vedic symbolism, which he has described in detail in *The Secret of the Veda*.

In this work Sri Aurobindo develops a very thorough and elaborate theory of interpretation and translation of the Rg Veda which effectively forms the basis of his philosophy and Yoga. The first and foremost example of this is in his treatment of the Vedic god Agni with which the Veda begins and to whom many of its hymns are dedicated. This god, according to Sri Aurobindo's interpretation, is a symbolic representation of the divine will in mortals. While Agni was traditionally thought of as the symbol of sacrificial fire, Sri Aurobindo finds that many things are attributed to Agni throughout the Veda which could not be associated with physical fire and ritual sacrifice. According to his reading of the Sanskrit, the traditional authorities, such as Sayana in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, did not manage to produce a reliable account of the meaning of either the language or the symbolism employed by the ancient Rishis of the Veda. And the many avid attempts to do so in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe

didn't fare any better. An example with which he begins the demonstration of his theory, which is both linguistically and psychologically more coherent and consistent than others, is taken from the first hymn to Agni which says: *agnir hotā kavikrutah, satyaś citraśravastamah; devo debehir ā gamat.*

Even if we don't know Sanskrit, if we have read Sri Aurobindo's work somewhat extensively we might recognize many of the words in this verse, such as fire, priest, seer, force, mind, truth, inspired hearing, and finally "come, a god with the gods". At any rate, Sri Aurobindo translates the verse in a variety of ways and discusses the terminology that it uses in order to demonstrate the basis of his theory. For example, "Agni, the priest, whose work/action is that of the seer"; "Agni the priest, active in the rite, who is true"; "Agni, priest of the offering whose will towards action is that of the seer, most rich in varied inspiration". And then he states his argument, systematically, repeatedly, and persuasively, as we shall see in these selections from *The Secret of the Veda*:

"Who, then, is this god Agni to whom language of so mystic a fervour is addressed, to whom functions so vast and profound are ascribed? ...It is not a sacrificial fire that is capable of these functions, nor can it be any material flame or principle of physical heat and light.

...Psychologically, then, we may take Agni to be the divine will perfectly inspired by divine wisdom, and indeed one with it, which is the active or effective power of the Truth-consciousness. ...Agni is *satya*, true in his being; perfect possession of his own truth and the essential truth of things gives him the power to apply it perfectly in all act and movement of force. ...Moreover, he is *citraśravastamaḥ*; from the Ritam (*vast law of Right in the cosmos*) there proceeds a fullness of richly luminous and varied inspirations which give the capacity for doing the perfect work. For all these are epithets of Agni as the *hotṛ*, the priest of the sacrifice, he who performs the offering. ...We see, then, in what capacity Agni is called to the sacrifice. “Let him come, a god with the gods” ...For in the external sense of the Veda the gods are universal powers of physical nature personified; in any inner sense they must be universal powers of Nature in her subjective activities, Will, Mind, etc. ...Thus the Ribhus (*a family of seers and priests*) who were at first human beings or represented human faculties, became divine and immortal powers by perfection in the work. ...It is a continual self-offering of the human to the divine and a continual descent of the divine into the human which seems to be symbolized in the sacrifice” (SV, 65-67).

In these first few pages of his commentary on the hymn, Sri Aurobindo introduces several key terms associated with Agni which he finds recurring throughout the hundreds of hymns that he will translate

and that he will use as reference points throughout many of his writings on Yoga Philosophy. For example, in this verse he highlights the term *śravas* which has the root associated with *śruti* or inspired truth-hearing, which, along with *dr̥ṣṭi* and *viveka*, he will often mention in his writing as essential powers of consciousness to be developed through Yoga. From here on for two hundred pages in this volume, and then for another four hundred pages in the next volume on Vedic symbolism, he will continue to provide examples of his psychological theory of interpretation which he applies in his translations of more than 80 hymns and a thousand verses. And he will assign many more specific psychological meanings and supramental processes and powers of consciousness to a plethora of other Vedic deities: Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Vayu, Vishnu, Sarama, Savitri, Saraswati, Brihaspati, Illa, Usha, Soma, etc, etc. Each of these gods and goddesses becomes the symbolic representative of a power or function of the processes of spiritual transformation which are brought to consciousness in us through their mantric invocations. And yet, it is only through these inspired commentaries of the Master Yogi that such meanings could possibly be known by us, or that we could access the rhythmic speech through which we are enabled to become directly cognizant of their power. Through the mediation of Sri Aurobindo's commentaries and translations we discover that the many Vedic images of nature, such as rays, brightnesses, waters, rivers, oceans, cows, horses, wine and riches actually represent, and present to us in all their dynamic

and revelatory meanings, the truths of consciousness and cosmic existence that are revealed to the supramental vision.

I would like to quote a few passages that I think will illustrate quite fully and dramatically the nature of the symbolic significances that Sri Aurobindo assigns to the various Vedic gods and images, which constitute the basis of his psychological and spiritual interpretation of the Veda. In the next few chapters of the book, for example, we learn these equivalences:

- 1) In Sanskrit the root *dakṣ* means to hurt, kill and also to be competent, able, the adjective *dakṣa* means clever, skilful, competent, fit, careful, attentive; *dakṣiṇa* means clever, skillful, right-hand, like *dexios*, and the noun *dakṣa* means, besides strength and also wickedness from the sense of hurting, mental ability or fitness like other words of the family. We may compare also the word *dasā* in the sense of mind, understanding. All this evidence taken together seems to indicate clearly enough that *dakṣa* must have meant at one time discernment, judgment, discriminative thought-power and that its sense of mental capacity is derived from this sense of mental division and not by transference of the idea of physical strength to power of mind. We have therefore three possible senses for *dakṣa* in the Veda, strength generally, mental power or especially the power of judgment, discernment. *Dakṣa* is continually associated with *kratu*; the Rishis aspire to them together, *dakṣāya kratve*, which may mean simply, “capacity and effective power” or “will and discernment”. (p. 73)

- 2) Indra in the psychological interpretation of the hymns represents, as we shall see, Mind-Power. The word for the sense-faculties, *indriya*, is derived from his name. His special realm is Swar, a word which means sun or luminous, being akin to *sūra* and *sūrya*, the sun, and is used to indicate the third of the Vedic *vyāhrtis* and the third of the Vedic worlds corresponding to the principle of the pure or unobscured Mind. Surya represents the illumination of the Ritam rising upon the mind; Swar is that plane of mental consciousness which directly receives the illumination. Vayu on the other hand is always associated with the Prana or Life- Energy which contributes to the system all the ensemble of those nervous activities that in man are the support of the mental energies governed by Indra. (p. 73)
- 3) Indra and Vayu awaken in consciousness (*cetathaḥ*) to the flowings of the Soma-wine; that is to say, the mind-power and life-power working together in human mentality are to awaken to the inflowings of this Ananda, this Amrita, this delight and immortality from above. They receive them into the full plenitude of the mental and nervous energies, *cetathaḥ sutānām vājinīvasū*. The Ananda thus received constitutes a new action preparing immortal consciousness in the mortal and Indra and Vayu are bidden to come and swiftly perfect these new workings by the participation of the thought. For *dhī* is the thought-power, intellect or understanding. It is intermediate between the normal mentality represented by the combination of Indra and Vayu and the Ritam or truth-consciousness. (p. 74)
- 4) Varuna and Mitra, Powers of the Truth, are invoked “accomplishing a richly luminous thought,” *dhiyaṃ ghṛtācīm sādhanā*. This is the first occurrence in the Veda of the word *ghṛta*, in a modified adjectival form,

and it is significant that it should occur as an epithet of the Vedic word for the intellect, *dhī*. In other passages also we find it continually in connection with the words *manas*, *manīṣā* or in a context where some activity of thought is indicated. The root *ghṛ* conveys the idea of a strong brightness or heat such as that of fire or the summer sun. It means also to sprinkle or anoint, Greek *chriō*. It is capable of being used to signify any liquid, but especially a bright, thick liquid. It is the ambiguity of these two possible senses of which the Vedic Rishis took advantage to indicate by the word outwardly the clarified butter in the sacrifice, inwardly a rich and bright state or activity of the brain-power, *medhā*, as basis and substance of illuminated thought. By *dhiyam ghṛtācīm* is meant, therefore, the intellect full of a rich and bright mental activity. (p. 75)

- 5) The word *usra* is always used in the Veda, like *go*, with the double sense of the concrete figure or symbol, the Bull or Cow, and at the same time the psychological indication of the bright or luminous ones, the illumined powers of the Truth in man. It is as such illumined powers that the all-gods have to come and they come to the Soma-juice, *svasarāṇi*, as if to seats or forms of peace or of bliss; for the root *svas*, like *sas* and many others, means both to rest and to enjoy. They are the powers of Truth entering into the outpourings of the Ananda in man as soon as that movement has been prepared by the vital and mental activity of the Ashwins and the pure mental activity of Indra. (p. 89)
- 6) If we turn to Vedic symbols we see that the Ashwa or Horse is an image of the great dynamic force of Life, of the vital and nervous energy, and is constantly coupled with other images that symbolise the consciousness. *Adri*, the hill or rock, is a symbol of formal existence and

especially of the physical nature and it is out of this hill or rock that the herds of the Sun are released and the waters flow. The streams of the *madhu*, the honey, the Soma, are said also to be milked out of this Hill or Rock. (p. 93)

- 7) Saraswati means, “she of the stream, the flowing movement”, and is therefore a natural name both for a river and for the goddess of inspiration. But by what process of thought or association does the general idea of the river of inspiration come to be associated with a particular earthly stream? And in the Veda it is not a question of one river which by its surroundings, natural and legendary, might seem more fitly associated with the idea of sacred inspiration than any other. For here it is a question not of one, but of seven rivers always associated together in the minds of the Rishis and all of them released together by the stroke of the God Indra when he smote the Python who coiled across their fountains and sealed up their outflow. It seems impossible to suppose that one river only in all this sevenfold outflowing acquired a psychological significance while the rest were associated only with the annual coming of the rains in the Punjab. The psychological significance of Saraswati carries with it a psychological significance for the whole symbol of the Vedic waters. (p. 93)
- 8) Saraswati is the goddess of speech, of learning and of poetry and Bharati is one of her names, but in the Veda Bharati and Saraswati are different deities. Bharati is also called Mahi, the Large, Great or Vast. The three, Ila, Mahi or Bharati and Saraswati are associated together in a constant formula in those hymns of invocation in which the gods are called by Agni to the Sacrifice. (p. 94)



- 9) The rays in the Veda are the rays of Surya, the Sun. Are we to suppose that the goddess is a deity of the physical Light or are we to translate “go” by cow and suppose that Mahi is full of cows for the sacrificer? The psychological character of Saraswati comes to our rescue against the last absurd supposition, but it negatives equally the naturalistic interpretation. This characterisation of Mahi, Saraswati’s companion in the sacrifice, the sister of the goddess of inspiration, entirely identified with her in the later mythology, is one proof among a hundred others that light in the Veda is a symbol of knowledge, of spiritual illumination. Surya is the Lord of the supreme Sight, the vast Light, *br̥haj jyotiḥ*, or, as it is sometimes called, the true Light, *ṛtam jyotiḥ*. And the connection between the words *ṛtam* and *br̥hat* is constant in the Veda. (p. 95)
- 10) The gods have this consciousness. Agni, for instance, is termed *ṛtacit*, he who has the truth-consciousness. Mahi is full of the rays of this Surya; she carries in her this illumination. Moreover she is *sūnṛtā*, she is the word of a blissful Truth, even as it has been said of Saraswati that she is the impeller of happy truths, *codayitrī sūnṛtānām*. Finally, she is *virap̥sī*, large or breaking out into abundance, a word which recalls to us that the Truth is also a Largeness, *ṛtam br̥hat*. ...As Saraswati represents the truth-audition, *śruti*, which gives the inspired word, so Ila represents *dr̥ṣṭi*, the truth-vision. If so, since *dr̥ṣṭi* and *śruti* are the two powers of the Rishi, the Kavi, the Seer of the Truth, we can understand the close connection of Ila and Saraswati. (p. 96)

How is something so extraordinary as this imagery, which lies far beyond the scope of ordinary mind and our contemporary mental conditioning, even possible, we might ask? Are these names and their rhythmic incantations – this word that breaks out into abundance - actually magical, as some mantric traditions might have us believe? If we persist in following Sri Aurobindo deeper and deeper into his exposition we may begin to feel that the answer to the question must be given in the affirmative. And when we come to Ch. XVI on The Angiras Rishis, we shall find the indication of a proof that could justify this conclusion, although, as Sri Aurobindo will reveal many years later in his mantric poem *Savitri*, what seems to be magical to us may be considered normal at this higher level of inspired knowledge and speech.

Here Sri Aurobindo devotes a few pages to a discussion of the possible existence of legendary families or schools of Rishis, such as Aswins, Ribhus and Angirases referred to in some Vedic hymns, and to the eventual assimilation of such beings into godlike figures as a result of their mystical transformations. But then he turns to a more profound discussion of the etymology of the terms Agni and Angiras, which have the same root and mean basically the same thing, with the nuance that Angiras may specify the flames of the fire Agni, both of which are symbols of the divine will and the action of sacrifice. And then Sri Aurobindo takes up the elaboration of a theme found in various hymns

which seems to me to be the central issue and essence of his entire enterprise of Vedic interpretation – the theme that establishes the basis for his massive creative output and his powerful spiritual influence. Commenting here on several verses that refer to the Angiras Rishis, he says:

The Veda speaks expressly of “luminous sages”, *dyumanto viprāḥ* and the word *sūri*, a seer, is associated with Surya, the sun, by etymology and must originally have meant luminous. In I.31.1 it is said of this god of the Flame, “Thou, O Agni, wast the first Angiras, the seer and auspicious friend, a god, of the gods; in the law of thy working the Maruts with their shining spears were born, seers who do the work by the knowledge.” Clearly, then, in the conception of Agni Angiras there are two ideas, knowledge and action; the luminous Agni and the luminous Maruts are by their light seers of the knowledge, *ṛṣi*, *kavi*; and by the light of knowledge the forceful Maruts do the work because they are born or manifested in the characteristic working (*vrata*) of Agni. For Agni himself has been described to us as having the seer-will, *kavikratuḥ*, the force of action which works according to the inspired or supramental knowledge (*śravas*), for it is that knowledge and not intellectuality which is meant by the word *kavi*. ...Here it is Agni who is the *hotā*, the priest; it is he who is sacrificing to the gods, to his own embodiment, *tanvaṁ tava svām*, to the Maruts, Mitra, Varuna, Heaven and Earth. “For in thee” says the hymn “the thought even though full of riches desires still the gods, the (divine) births, for the singer of the hymn that he may sacrifice to them, when the sage, the most luminous of the Angirases, utters the rhythm of sweetness in the sacrifice.” It would almost seem that Agni himself is the sage, the most luminous of the Angirases. On the other hand, the description seems to be more appropriate to Brihaspati.

For Brihaspati is also an Angirasa and one who becomes the Angiras. He is, as we have seen, closely associated with the Angiras Rishis in the winning of the luminous cattle and he is so associated as Brahmanaspati, as the Master of the sacred or inspired word (*brahma*); for by his cry Vala is split to pieces and the cows answer lowing with desire to his call. As powers of Agni these Rishis are like him *kavikratu*; they possess the divine Light, they act by it with the divine force; they are not only Rishis, but heroes of the Vedic war, *divas putrāso asurasya vīrāḥ* (III.53.7) sons of heaven, heroes of the Mighty Lord, ...they have the divine word and the inspired knowledge it carries with it. This divine word is the *satya mantra*, it is the thought by whose truth the Angiras bring the Dawn to birth and make the lost Sun to rise in the heavens. This word is also called the *arka*, a vocable which means both hymn and light and is sometimes used of the sun. It is therefore the word of illumination, the word which expresses the truth of which the Sun is the lord, and its emergence from the secret seat of the Truth is associated with the outpouring by the Sun of its herded radiances; so we read in VII.36.1, "Let the Word come forward from the seat of the Truth; the Sun has released wide by its rays the cows." ...The Angiras, therefore, is not only an Agni-power, he is also a Brihaspati-power.

"Brihaspati coming first to birth out of the great Light in the highest heaven, born in many forms, seven-mouthed, seven-rayed (*saptāsyah saptaraśmiḥ*), by his cry dispelled the darkness; he by his host with the Rik and the Stubh (the hymn of illumination and the rhythm that affirms the gods) broke Vala by his cry." It cannot be doubted that by this host or troop of Brihaspati (*suṣṭubhā ṛkvatā gaṇena*) are meant the Angiras Rishis who by the true mantra help in the great victory. (p. 165-169)

Sri Aurobindo developed this idea of the *satya mantra* in later chapters of this text on the hymns to Brihaspati ("Brihaspati gives the

Word of knowledge, the rhythm of expression of the superconscient...”), and to Savitri (The Goddess of Illumined Speech who “by the truth is the Creator...by the pressure of consciousness on its own being...”). And this master idea was later developed in much greater detail in *The Future Poetry* as well as in other commentaries on Sanskrit scripture in his various books. But what I hope we can take away from this brief exploration is the implication regarding Sri Aurobindo as the *kavi* who uncovered the power of *mantra* in the Veda and used it to bring down the supramental consciousness and force. This was the *sādhana* (spiritual practice) of the guru of the Integral Yoga and author of the great mantra of transformation *Savitri*, whose power has yet to be fully revealed.

But what we may begin to realize through a study like this is that the faculty of symbolism that has been developed and used in human language, literature, mythology, and philosophy for millennia may have much deeper roots in reality than is generally recognized. In the interpretation of Vedic symbolism by Sri Aurobindo there emerges a theory of consciousness and language whereby the energy of the human mind can be elevated to a level of intensity and luminosity that has a direct perception of the unity of universal Truth and the forces that create its individual forms of expression in the universe. There is a latent capacity in human consciousness, according to this theory, which can generate an energy of creative harmony and bliss which becomes “the knower of all things born”. And this supramental consciousness has the

power to see the Infinite in the finite, and to bring the knowledge and force of an essential immortality down into mortal forms.<sup>1</sup>

### 3

#### The Mother's Flowers and their Symbolic Meaning

The concept of symbolism discussed in the first section of this exploration focused on the relative nature of symbolic language used by the mind to represent things experienced in the world. The kind of knowledge expressed by such language might be termed “intellectual”. It is constructed by the mind and carries with it an implicit awareness of the fundamental difference between what it thinks and says and the world it represents. In the second section we have encountered another kind of symbolism in which the knowledge and the language used to express it achieve a unity beyond the scope of the intellectual mind and its experience. The language used is still symbolic to the extent that the words and images used convey experiences and realities that are entirely different from what is said, in the same way that metaphorical language is generally different from and often even the opposite of what it represents. But in the case of Vedic symbolism the intensity of the language itself and the consciousness that generates it convey in an immediate and direct way what is seen and heard by the intuitive

---

1 I have attempted to demonstrate this theory of mantric rhythm and energy in the Vedic hymns and in *Savitri* for the past 50 years, and I am attaching a link here to a workshop in which I have tried to demonstrate it, especially in session #4. <http://universityofhumanunity.org/wp/recentposts/savitri-and-death-books-9-11-august-2017-by-rod-hemsell/>

faculties known as *śruti* and *dr̥ṣṭi*. In both cases we are speaking about knowledge obtained by consciousness through experience and expressed by language that is symbolic, but the types of knowledge are different in the two cases. Perhaps the difference can be indicated most adequately by saying that one is the product of the intellect based on information obtained by the rational faculty, and the other is the product of the intuition based on information obtained by the supra-rational faculty. In the former case, the knowledge is of things of material equivalence; in the latter case, the knowledge is of things of spiritual equivalence.

In the case of the Mother's work with flowers and their messages, we have the opportunity to explore a third dimension of the use of symbolic language, which might be termed "psychic". In the introduction to the book *Flowers and their Messages* (1979)<sup>2</sup>, the Mother says, "Since flowers are manifestations of the psychic in the vegetal kingdom, love of flowers would mean that one is drawn by the psychic vibration and consequently by the psychic in one's own self. When you are receptive to the psychic vibration, that puts you in a more intimate contact with the psychic in your own self. Perhaps the beauty of flowers too is a means used by Nature to awaken in human beings the attraction for the psychic. ...When one is in conscious contact with one's own psychic, one becomes

---

<sup>2</sup> This is the second edition, printed in Auroville at Auropress, and the first was published in 1972 when I was the English proofreader there, and the proofs were flowing back and forth between the Mother and the editors on a daily basis.

aware of an impersonal psychic behind the whole creation and then, through this, one can enter into contact with flowers and know the psychic prayer they represent” (p.II-III).

And with regard to the theme of assigning equivalences to symbols, which we have seen is a typical function of the intellect in using language to express meaning, as well as of the supramental intuition, the same function is used by the Mother with regard to psychic experience and flowers. She says, “It is plants that are most open, on the material plane, to my influence – I can transmit a state of consciousness more easily to a flower than to a man: it is very receptive, though it does not know how to formulate its experience to itself because it lacks a mind. But the pure psychic consciousness is instinctive to it. When, therefore, you offer flowers to me, their condition is almost always an index of yours. ...If your aspiration is strong your flower-offering will be fresh. And if you are receptive you will be also very easily able to absorb the message I put in the flowers I give you. When I give them, I give you states of consciousness; the flowers are the mediums and it all depends on your receptivity whether they are effective or not” (p. IV).

“There is a mental projection when you give a precise meaning to a flower. It can answer, vibrate to the contact of the projection, accept the meaning, but a flower has no equivalent for the mental consciousness. ...in the flower it is something like the movement of a baby – it is neither a sensation nor a feeling, but something of both; it is a spontaneous movement, a very special vibration. If you are in contact with it, if you



feel it, you can get an impression which may be translated as a thought. That is how I give a meaning to flowers and plants. There is a kind of identification with the vibration, a perception of the quality that it represents. Little by little, by a kind of approximation that sometimes comes all of a sudden and on other occasions needs time, there occurs a close approach between these vibrations, that are of the vital-emotional order, and the vibration of mental thought. If there is sufficient accord, you have a direct perception of what the plant may signify” (p. VI).

Through her example and the knowledge she conveyed over many years as guru of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, dispensing flowers daily to everyone and conveying the psychic qualities that she wanted to develop in us, we may cultivate a sensitivity both to flowers and to our own subtler natures, and learn yet another level of consciousness and symbolism than those studied above. In this case the flower symbol and what it represents become vibrationally, perceptively identical, to an extent that has not been seen in either the intellectual or the intuitive forms of symbolism, although the approximation to identity is much closer in the latter than in the former.

We may look briefly at a few examples, such as the Dahlia, of which many varieties are cultivated in the Ashram. Its general significance is “nobility”, and in contemplating the large red variety we might experience “The incapacity for any pettiness either of sentiments or of action.” The large, pure-white variety, might speak to our inner nature about a “superhumanity” that is “the aim of our aspiration,” or the large

orange-yellow variety may convey a “supramentalized mental dignity that tolerates no pettiness in the thought turned towards the Truth” (p. 89). Turning to the rose, which generally signifies “love” we learn that the red rose conveys “human passions changed into love for the divine”; the yellow rose signifies “mental love for the divine”; the white rose represents “integral love for the divine,” and so on (p. 220-221). There is a pattern that we may notice here with respect to colors in many types of flowers with multiple varieties, and there are other families of qualities that we can notice associated with size, shape, fragrance, seasons, blossoming patterns, and so on, if we want to try to make a scientific system of the art. But this will not lead to the deeper cultivation of the potential qualities of our true selves which is the aim of this symbolic language. It is a language of vibrational realities that we can embody and express along with flowers that have similar capacities. And this art, or occult science, is not the province of the Mother alone. It has been practiced by many occultists, such as Madame Theon, who was one of the Mother's teachers, and by the well-known Sufi master, Hazrat Inayat Khan, for example. And in popular culture the flower essences and essential oils of Dr. Edward Bach provide a familiar example of this type of symbolism, in which external or material forms of nature are identified with subtle and more or less invisible qualities and potentials of human nature. These are realities that are to be found on a plane of existence other than the physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual, and yet they form a subtle link of consciousness and energy between the inner

selves of things and these other levels of their being and nature. The Mother has catalogued more than a thousand such qualities, and can bring them to birth in us if we surrender to her Divine Force. Similarly, if we invoke Agni and Savitri by generating the *satya mantras* of Sri Aurobindo, we may learn the truths of the spiritual planes of which all forms are temporal manifestations.

Rod Hemsell

April, 2020