Chapter Two

The Veda and the Upanishads

The Vedic Rishis

It is not I only who have done what the Vedic Rishis did not do. Chaitanya and others developed an intensity of Bhakti which is absent in the Veda and many other instances can be given. Why should the past be the limit of spiritual experience?

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I can’t say whether any of them [the Vedic Rishis] attained the supramental plane, but the ascent to it was their object. Swar is evidently the illumined regions of Mind, between the supramental and the human intelligence formed by the rays of the Sun. According to the Upanishads those who ascend into the rays of the Sun return, but those who ascend into the Sun itself do not come back. That is because the ascent to supermind was envisaged, but the descent and organisation of the supermind here (as apart from the descent of the Rays) was not. We need not bother about the rebirth of the Rishis — they will come along if they are needed, I suppose.

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I don’t know of any [Vedic Rishis] that have taken birth this time. According to the Puranic stories there must have been many Rishis who were far from being jitendriya, jitakrodha. But also there are many Yogis who are satisfied with having the inner experience of the Self but allow movements of a rajasic or tamasic nature on the surface, holding that these will fall off with the body.

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The Vedic Rishis were mystics of the ancient type who everywhere, in India, Greece, Egypt and elsewhere, held the secret
truths and methods of which they were in possession as very sacred and secret things not to be disclosed to the unfit who would misunderstand, misapply, misuse and degrade the knowledge. Their writings were therefore so couched as only to be intelligible in their secret meaning to the initiated, \( nīnyā \ vacāṇiṇi \ nivacanāni kavaye \) — secret words that carry their significance only to the seer. They were equipped with an apparent meaning exoteric and religious for the people, esoteric, occult and spiritual for the initiates. That the people should not find out the real Truth was their intention; they wanted them only to know the outward truths for which they were fit.

* This picture of Vedic society [a completely pastoral life, without priests or warriors] could easily be challenged. The householder may have lit daily the fire on the household altar, but when he wanted to offer a sacrifice he did it with the aid of sacrificial priests who knew the ritual. Sometimes the Rishi himself performed the sacrifice for the householder. He was not a priest by profession, however, for he might have any occupation in the society. Besides, in a large sacrifice there were many versed in the Vedic rites who performed different functions. In the very first verse of the Rig Veda Agni is described as being himself the Purohit, the priest representative of the householder sacrificer, Yajamana, as the Ritwik, the one who saw to the arrangement of the rites, the Hota who invoked the Gods and gave the offering, and in other hymns he is spoken of as the priest of the purification, the priest of the lustration etc. All this has obviously an esoteric sense but it testifies to the habitual presence of a number of priests at any large sacrifice. So we cannot say that there were no priests in the Vedic age. There does not seem to have been any priestly caste until later times when the four castes came definitely into being. But the Brahmins were not predominantly priests but rather scholars and intellectuals with a religious authority derived from birth and from knowledge of the scriptures and the books of the social law, Shastra. The function of priesthood has never been highly honoured in India.
and it would therefore be incorrect to speak of priestcraft or any rule by priests or ecclesiastics at any time in Indian history.

As for the warriors, there are in the Rig Veda two or three hymns describing a great battle which the scholars declare to have been the fight of one king against ten allied kings, and besides that, the hymns are full of images of war and battle. These too have an esoteric meaning, but they indicate a state of things in which war and battle must have been frequent; so we cannot say that there were no warriors.

Again, your description seems to indicate that all the householders were initiated in the knowledge held by the Rishis. But this was a secret knowledge imparted by the Rishi to his family and to disciples whom he found to be fit, it was not given to everyone. The language of the Veda was also veiled and mystic, “secret words of seer-wisdom which yielded their meaning to the seer” as one of the Rishis described them, but understood in an outward sense by the ordinary uninitiated man. This principle of secrecy was common to all the mysteries in every country and it was maintained also in ancient India. The religious worship practised by the common man and any communion it might bring with the gods was only a preliminary preparation and not the deeper knowledge.

It was always held in ancient India that religion, life and society should be so arranged that every man should have the opportunity to grow spiritually by whatever means is suitable to his capacity, adhikāra. Everywhere there was a system of gradations by which this purpose could be served. It provided for a continual contact of man at every step with what was behind and beyond the material life. In Vedic times meditation, worship and sacrifice were the means by which this connection with the Unseen was sought to be established and maintained. The sacrifice was symbolic in its ritual and the symbols were supposed to have an occult power to create a relation between the unseen powers worshipped and the worshipper; by it they were called in to preside over and help all the action and life of the human being. Worship was for establishing a more inner relation and meditation the means of spiritual experience,
development and knowledge. The institutions which grew up in later Vedic times, such as the four Asramas and the four Var-nas, the fourfold arrangement of society originally had the same intention and are so recognised in the Gita. So trained a man could develop until he was ready for a deeper knowledge and receive the initiation. In the Vedic times this deeper knowledge was the mystic doctrine and practice of the Vedic Rishis; it was that that afterwards developed on a hundred branching lines into the later systems of Yoga.

The Veda and the Greeks

As to the Eleusinian mysteries, about which he has asked an explanation, they were connected with the same mystic knowledge as was held in India by the Vedic Rishis. Demeter and Persephone were goddesses worshipped by the Greeks; Demeter is the Earth-Mother and Persephone was the goddess of the Harvest, but in the mystic symbols Persephone represented the earth consciousness buried in the Ignorance and emerging into the Divine Light. The Eleusinian mysteries were instituted as an outward symbol of this secret knowledge.

* The Soma wine was the symbol of the divine or spiritual Ananda. This wine was however symbolic and cannot be exactly equated with the nectar or ambrosia of the Greeks which were the food and drink of the gods and sustained their immortality; but outwardly there is some resemblance.

No Incarnation of the Vedic Gods

In the Veda there is no idea or experience of a personal emanation or incarnation of any of the Vedic gods. When the Rishis speak of Indra or Agni or Soma in men, they are speaking of the god in his cosmic presence, power or function. This is evident from the very language when they speak of Agni as the immortal in mortals, the immortal Light in man, the inner Warrior, the
Guest in human beings. It is the same with Indra or Soma. The building of the gods in man means a creation of the divine Powers, Indra the Power of the Light, Soma the Power of the Ananda in the human nature.

No doubt, the Rishis felt the actual presence of the gods above, near, around or in them, but this was a common experience of all, not special and personal, not an emanation or incarnation. One may see or feel the presence of the Divine or a divine Power above the head or in the heart or in any or all of the centres, feel the presence, see the form living there; one may be governed in all one's actions, thoughts and feelings by it; one may lose one's separate personality in it, may identify and merge. But all that does not constitute an incarnation or emanation of the Divine or of the Power. These things are universal experiences to which any Yogin may arrive; to reach this condition with relation to the Divine is indeed a common object of Yoga.

An incarnation is something more, something special and individual to the individual being. It is the substitution of the Person of a divine being for the human person and an infiltration of it into all the movements so that there is a dynamic personal change in all of them and in the whole nature; not merely a change of the character of the consciousness or a general surrender into its hands, but a subtle intimate personal change. Even when there is an incarnation from the birth, the human elements have to be taken up, but when there is a descent, there is a total conscious substitution.

This is a long, subtle and persistent process. The incarnating Person first overshadows as an influence, then enters into the centres one after the other, sometimes in the same form, sometimes in different forms, then takes up all the nature and its actions. What you describe does not correspond to this process; it seems to be an endeavour to build the gods in yourself in the Vedic sense and the Vedic manner. That can bring, if it succeeds, their powers and a sense of their presence; it cannot bring about an incarnation. An incarnation is destined, is chosen for you; the human person cannot choose or create an incarnation for
himself by his own personal will. To attempt it is to invite a spiritual disaster.

One thing must be said — that an incarnation is not the object of this Yoga; it is only a condition or means towards the object. The one and only aim we have before us is to bring down the supramental consciousness and the supramental Truth into the world; the Truth and nothing but the Truth is our aim, and if we cannot embody this Truth, a hundred incarnations do not matter. But to bring down the true supramental and nothing but the true supramental, to escape from all mental mixture is not an easy matter. The mere descent of the suns into the centres, even of all the seven suns into all the seven centres is only the seed; it is not the thing itself done and finished. One may feel the descent of suns, one may have the attempt, the beginning of an incarnation, and yet in the end one may fail if there is a flaw in the nature or a failure to pass through all the ordeals and satisfy all the hard conditions of the perfect spiritual success. Not only the whole mental, vital and physical nature of the ignorant human being has to be overcome and transformed, but also the three states of mental consciousness which intervene between the human and the supramental and like all mind are capable of admitting great and capital errors. Till then there may be descents of supramental influence, light, power, Ananda, but the supramental Truth cannot be possessed, organised, put in possession of the whole nature. One must not think before that that one possesses the supermind; for that is a delusion which would prevent the fulfilment.

One thing more. The more intense the experiences that come, the higher the forces that descend, the greater become the possibilities of deviation and error. For the very intensity and the very height of the force excites and aggrandises the movements of the lower nature and raises up in it all the opposing elements in their full force, but often in the disguise of truth, wearing a mask of plausible justification. There is needed a great patience, calm, sobriety, balance, an impersonal detachment and sincerity free from all taint of ego or personal human desire. There must be no attachment to any idea of one’s own, to any experience, to any
kind of imagination, mental building or vital demand; the light of discrimination must always play to detect these things, however fair or plausible they may seem. Otherwise the Truth will have no chance of establishing itself in its purity in the nature.

Terms and Verses of the Upanishads

It is quite impossible to say to what they [the seers of the Upanishads] were referring in those days. We have no longer a clue to their symbolism. But it is meant that the lower worlds are in the higher worlds even as the higher worlds are in the lower worlds — they penetrate each other. E.g. in our system there is a vital mental, several layers of the vital itself, a physical vital and so on in each realm. Everything contains everything else, as it were.

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It is quite probable that the sloka [Katha Upanishad 2.3.4] refers to a going up into higher worlds of felicity and light and this can be called a liberation or release. In later times the idea grew strong that from all these higher worlds return is inevitable and it is only release from all cosmic existence that gives mukti. The Vedic Rishis seem to have looked to an ascent into a divine luminous world or state above the falsehood and ignorance. In the Upanishad the sun is the symbol of the supramental Truth and it is said that those who pass into it may return but those who pass through the gates of the Sun itself do not; possibly this means that an ascent into the supermind itself above the golden lid of overmind was the definitive liberation. The Veda speaks of the Truth hidden by a Truth where the Sun looses his horses from his car and there all the myriad rays are drawn together into One and that was considered the goal. The Isha Upanishad also speaks of the golden lid hiding the face of the Truth by removing which the Law of the Truth is seen and the highest

1 The correspondent asked for an explanation of certain terms in a passage (3.6.1) from the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. — Ed.
knowledge in which the One Purusha is known (so’ham asmi) is described as the kalyāṇatama form of the Sun. All this seems to refer to the supramental states of which the Sun is the symbol.

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The mental realisation [of the one self] does not bring this result [the ending of delusion (moha) and grief (śoka)], the spiritual does.² In the Vedantic experience “seeing” means also becoming, one is that one self, identified,— all action of Nature seems to one a movement in that one self which is itself not touched by it. Therefore there is no moha or śoka. That is, when one can keep the experience and when it is complete. Even if one has the experience only as something within while the movements of the vital continue on the surface, yet these movements are felt as external and superficial, not really belonging to oneself—the self within remains untouched, calm, griefless, at peace. If the vital also is transformed into this consciousness, then even on the surface grief becomes impossible.

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Perception is not enough to transform the nature. Paśyataḥ³ in the spiritual language does not mean only perception. Perception is of the mind and a mental perception is not enough—a substantial and dynamic realisation in all the being is necessary. Otherwise one of three things may happen. (1) The mind perceives oneness but the vital is not affected, it goes on with its impulses, for the vital is governed not by thought or reason but by tendency, impulse, desire-force—it uses reason only as a justification for its tendencies. Or even the vital may say, “All is one so it does not matter what I do. Why should not I seek oneness with others in my own way?” (2) If the mind has a realisation, but the vital does not share in it or distorts it, then also the vital can insist on its own way or even carry the mind

² The correspondent asked for a clarification of verse 7 of the Isha Upanishad, which ends, “. . . how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness?”—Ed.

³ This term appears in verse 7 of the Isha Upanishad.—Ed.
along with it. As the Gita says, the senses (vital) carry away the 
mind even of the sage who sees, as the wind carries away a ship 
on a stormy sea. (3) The inner being may have the realisation 
strongly and live in the oneness, calm, peace, but the interior 
parts of the outer may feel the reactions of desire etc. In this 
case the reactions are more superficial; but even so rejection 
is needed till they cease. When all the being lives in the solid 
realisation of calm, peace, liberation, oneness, then the desires 
fall away and the necessity of rejection ceases, because there is 
nothing to reject any longer.

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It [the identification of buddhi with the vijnānamaya kośa] is 
the error that came with the excessive intellectualism of the 
philosophers and commentators. I don’t think buddhi includes 
intuition as something separate in kind from intellect — the 
intellectualists considered intuition to be only a rapid process of 
intellectual thought — and they still think that. In the Taittiriya 
Upanishad the sense of vijnana is very clear — its essence is rtam, 
the spiritual Truth; but afterwards the identification with buddhi 
became general.

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I do not suppose they [the commentators] mean expressly intu-
tion [by buddhi]; they regard buddhi as the means of knowl-
dge, so they include all knowledge in it, and as the vijnānamaya 
kośa is the Knowledge sheath, they think it must mean buddhi. 
Obviously it doesn’t. The description you have quoted⁴ evidently 
means something much higher than buddhi. It is the satyam rtam 
brhat of the Upanishad — the truth-consciousness of the Veda.

The Vedantin

No, certainly I did not mean that the Vedantin who sees a 
greater working behind the appearances of the world is living

⁴ From the Taittiriya Upanishad 2.4.1. — Ed.
in a different world from this material one—if I had meant that, all that I had written would be without point or sense. I meant a Vedantin who lives in this world with all its suffering and ignorance and ugliness and evil and has had a full measure of these things, betrayal and abandonment by friends, failure of outward objects and desires in life, attack and persecution, accumulated illnesses, constant difficulty, struggles, stumblings in his Yoga. It is not that he lives in a different world, but he has a different way of meeting its ordeals, blows and dangers. He takes them as the nature of this world and the result of the ego-consciousness in which it lives. He tries therefore to grow into another consciousness in which he feels what is behind the outward appearance, and as he grows into that larger consciousness he begins to feel more and more a working behind which is helping him to grow in the spirit and leading him toward mastery and freedom from ego and ignorance and he sees that all has been used for that purpose. Till he reaches this consciousness with its larger knowledge of things, he has to walk by faith and his faith may sometimes fail him, but it returns and carries him through all the difficulties. Everybody is not bound to accept this faith and this consciousness, but there is something great and true behind it for the spiritual life.

I doubt whether the condition of which you speak is that of the realised Vedantin—except of course the loss of the sense of personality and the non-identification with desire and the movements of Prakriti. Still perhaps the condition of the jadavat Paramhansa (like Jada Bharata) may resemble it. The theory of prārabdha karma goes farther than that—it assumes that even if there are vital movements, that is also only the continuance of the machine of Prakriti and will drop off at death. They may, perhaps. I don’t base the gospel of the transformation of Nature

5 The correspondent wrote that he felt dull, sleepy and mechanical, with no sense of desire or personality; therefore he could easily imagine why the realised Vedantin could say that with the static realisation of Brahman one’s past karma would fall off at death. —Ed.
on an impossibility of taking a static release as final — the static release is necessary, but I don’t consider that to take it as final is the object of coming into world-existence. I hold that the static release is only a beginning, a first step in the Divine. If anyone is satisfied with the first step as all that is possible for him, I have no objection to his taking it like that.