

# Sādhana of sounding the Word

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*Ā devānāmapi panthām agnam yat śaknavām tat anu pravṛṇahum*

*We have come to the path of the gods, may we have the power to tread it, to drive forward along that road.<sup>1</sup> (Trita Aptya, Rig Veda 10.2.3)*

We open with some magnificent lines from Sri Aurobindo's Foreword to the *Hymns of the Atris*,<sup>2</sup> which is the source of our inspiration in the Sādhana we wish to describe.

*“To enter into the very heart of the mystic doctrine, we must ourselves have trod the ancient paths and renewed the lost discipline, the forgotten experience. And which of us can hope to do that with any depth or living power? Who in this Age of Iron shall have the strength to recover the light of the Forefathers or soar above the two enclosing firmaments of mind and body into their luminous empyrean of the infinite Truth? ....Small is the chance that in an age which blinds our eyes with the transient glories of the outward life and deafens our ears with the victorious trumpets of a material and mechanical knowledge many shall cast more than the eye of an intellectual and imaginative curiosity on the passwords of their ancient discipline or seek to penetrate into the heart of their radiant mysteries. The secret of the Veda, even when it has been unveiled, remains still a secret”.*

The *sādhana* we take up in this article is a *śabda upāsanā*, an assiduous dwelling on the “Word”. The Vedic Word or *śabda brahman* is the plenary creative substance which embodies the inmost truth of all that exists, *a voice of the rhythm which has created the worlds and creates perpetually*<sup>3</sup>.

This *śabda upāsanā* is carried out by a process, which for want of a better word, will be called “translation”. In the context of sacred literature, translation is usually taken to be an adaptation of sacred speech in a language accessible to the uninitiated. Normally, such an adaptation distils the mental elements from the entire substance of its experience as a means to conceptualize and philosophize. But for us “translation” is sounding the Word in silence as a means to plumb our own depths. Translation and dwelling on the Word is a process which we use to enter into the core of the Word to allow

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<sup>1</sup> Page 381, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 11, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Page 356, Secret of the Veda, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 10, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Page 306, Secret of the Veda, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 10, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

its substance to transfigure our being. Each translation is a journey by itself and no translation is taken as final. The choice of what to dwell on or translate is also dictated by the inner guide and not any preconceived theme or philosophy. Each word is received in a crest of a rising tide of consciousness from within an ocean of possibilities. Each word occultly and mysteriously forges and fashions another, resulting in a garland of jewels to be meditated upon. The search begins with the mind but imperceptibly the Word enters the heart of the seeker and eventually modifies his very substance.

The following passage from Sri Aurobindo is the Divine touchstone in our endeavour.

*“The text has to be studied with a great patience, a great passivity, waiting for experience and waiting for light and then waiting for still more light. ... if a man can make his mind like a blank slate, if he can enter into the condition of bottomless passivity proper to the state of the all-embracing Chaitanya Atman, not attempting to fix what the Truth shall be but allowing Truth to manifest herself in his soul, he will find then that it is the nature of the Śruti to reveal perfectly its own message. For ultimately, as I have already insisted, we can know the subject of the Veda only by the soul and its pure faculty of knowledge, not by verbal scholarship, metaphysical reasoning or intellectual discrimination. By entering into communion with the soul of the thinker which still broods behind the inspired language, we come to realise what he saw and what he put into his words, what waits there to make itself known to us. By communion with the soul of the Universe which is behind the soul of the thinker and one with it, we get those experiences which illumine and confirm or correct by amplifying our vision of truth in the Śruti. And since no man should lightly hope that he has been able always to think, act and know by the supreme method, it is fitting always to bow down in utter self-surrender to the Master of All, the Lord, who as the Knower dwells in Himself as name and form and offer to him the truth we have found in the Śruti and the error we have imported in it to do both with the truth and the error whatever He wills in His infinite power, love and wisdom for the purpose of His eternal and infinite Lila.”<sup>4</sup>*

We will outline in a few strokes the process in terms of the *dharma* and *bhāva* involved in the *upāsanā*. A word is taken and meditated upon to enter into its core or root-sound. Then one seeks to clothe this core-sound in a new language, which happens in our case to be English. Great care must be taken in this investiture; if the apparel is too loose, burdened with the mental

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<sup>4</sup> Page 305, Supplement to the Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 27, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

trappings of the translator, it tends to obscure the body of the word, sometimes even completely clouding it. The mind on the other hand, priding in its economy of expression and scientific temper may try to close-knit the garment to fit the word. Even the best of fits is transitory since each word is living and embodies the Rishi's substance and is verily Truth in movement. The Word expands even as it permeates our substance and soon outgrows any vesture that one may have designed.

In the plenary Vedic sense, the Kavi (or poet) is a "*maker*", a "*fashioner of forms*"; the latin "poesy" as also the Sanskrit root "ku" mean, "to make". Brahman is both the original Word and the original Poet and Artist. And the Rishi, who is also a Kavi, forges the Word from his own substance, even "*embodies his very substance in the Word*", Sri Aurobindo's "Savitri"<sup>5</sup> being the pinnacle of such an embodiment.

The Rig Veda says that the mantras were "*fashioned in the heart and impelled by the mind*", *hṛdā taṣṭéṣu, manaso javéṣu* (*Rig Veda*. 10.72). The Word is fashioned into a vehicle bearing the Truth-seeds which fertilize the soil of human growth across all time-barriers. And there is a realm where the Vedic verses are permanently housed as living entities. In Sri Aurobindo's words:

*There in a hidden chamber closed and mute  
Are kept the record graphs of the cosmic scribe,  
And there the tables of the sacred Law,  
There is the Book of Being's index page;  
The text and glossary of the Vedic truth  
Are there;*<sup>6</sup>

And Rishi Dirghatamas says,

***ṛcaḥ akṣare parame vyoman yasmin devā adhi viśve niṣeduḥ  
(Rig Veda, 1.164.39)***

*The luminous Word,  
In the changeless Summit Space,  
Wherein, seated above the universe,  
Are the beings of Light.*

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<sup>5</sup> Savitri, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 28 and 29, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Savitri, Canto V, page 74.

Our journey to this temple of Knowledge is led by the mind, *manomayaḥ puruṣaḥ prāṇa śarīra netā*, but with our entire substance as the *samit*<sup>7</sup> to be offered up for the permeation by the Rishi's word-substance. Our first approaches commence with the gross *vaikhari*, gradually ascending to *madhyama* and the *paśyanti*, and finally reaching the *parā*. A sublime verse of Mundaka Upanishad (I.2.3-4) epitomizes this process in the image of archery, highlighting the identification of the substances of the target and the archer:

*Grasping the bow, the mighty weapon of the Upanishad, set there (sandhayīta) an arrow sharpened by assiduity and adoration (upāsā niśitam); draw with a consciousness of the same nature as That (tadbhāva gatena cetasā); the target (lakśyam) is That Imperishable; pierce it (viddhi) O Fair one (Somya)! The praṇavaḥ, Om is the bow, the self the arrow, Brahman the target they say; 'tis penetrable by the undistracted one (apramattena); like the arrow, do thou become of one substance (tanmayo bhavet) with the target. Mundaka Upanishad (I.2.3-4)*

There is a waiting patience at the portals of the temple and the seeking arrow of aspiration is unloosed. Energized and guided by a secret *śraddhā* the divining arrow of belomancy<sup>8</sup> is shot at a target hitherto unseen. Slipping soundlessly through the silent space of the mind, it penetrates the veil of the Word.

The arrow is then patiently extricated from the target and the first trickle of knowledge begins to gradually cascade into an "*inexhaustible fount of a hundred-streams*", *śatadhāraṃ utsaṃ akṣīyamāṇaṃ (Rig Veda, 3.26.9)*.

As to the transformative experience that follows, "*the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof*". The imagery of food and eating is not a mere figure of speech. As we partake of the Word with our substance, the Divine in turn participates in our substance. Indeed, in Sri Aurobindo's magnificent Upanishadic phrase

*The eater eating is eaten!*<sup>9</sup>

We now dwell on the word *sādhana* itself. It comes from the root *sādh*, which in turn has its origins in archery and it means "*to go straight to the goal, or attain an object sought after*". The word *sādhū*, derived from *sādh*, therefore means "*hitting the mark*" and so *sādhana* keeps us on the *ṛju panthāh*, the

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<sup>7</sup> The faggots for the fuel.

<sup>8</sup> The beautiful English word *belomancy* signifies "*divination by means of arrows*".

<sup>9</sup> A phrase usually considered "pregnant and terrible"; see page 266 Secret of the Veda, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 10, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

path which goes “*straight in concordance with the ṛta*” for *ṛta* is *the ordered Truth of active being*<sup>10</sup>. The speech of the Rishi is in complete harmony with this principle of *ṛta*, and is thus an embodiment of “truth”, *satyam*. In the *parā vāk* we see the synthesis of *satyam*, *ṛtam* and *br̥hat*, the Truth of Being, the dynamis of Reality and the Immense Vast.

As we dwell on the Immense Vast, our contemplation turns to Brahman, *the Word of creative power welling upward out of the soul*<sup>11</sup> and our cry of adoration rises to the one Reality, the Eternal, the Absolute, the Spirit, the Supreme Being:

That, which rises and goes far in the wakeful, which descends in the One in deep sleep, that Divinity; that, by which the deep contemplators, and the Ones whose thoughts have the energy and the impulsion, who make by the toil of their labour their formations in the fields of knowing and in the offerings; that occult power stored within the peoples from times gone by, that which is the knowledge that seeks, the awareness and the firmness of intent, the undying light within everyone; that Truth, by which the yesterday the today and the morrow, all are embraced and comprehended; that, by which the offerings are extended across the worlds by the seven priests; that in which the consciousness in all this is woven as their warp. May That be sculpted in my mind as a blessed intention.<sup>12</sup>

Our meditation now turns to the profound word *ṛta* or *Truth-dynamis*. In the fathomless depths, in the foundation of Truth (*ṛtasya budhnaḥ*), when Time was not and there was no room for Space, darkness engulfed in greater darkness, all was an unmanifest ocean and all this that exists was overlaid by total fragmentation, total chaos (*tuchyena abhu apihitam*); from thence emerged the first born of *ṛta*, *prathamajā ṛtāsya*. *Ṛta* is also the Will, the Grand Design of Brahman, the Self-intention, the tapas of Brahman. The emergence of Order in the chaos is the coming into being of the Cosmos.

Up in the vast empyrean, from the world of *Satya*, of the Truth of Being, emanates the flow of *ṛta*, *ṛtasya dhāra*, and its flow-lines become the cosmic order. *Ṛta* is the Dynamic Reality in the Universe, the Universal Rhythm manifested under the Sun of Truth. This World is truly whatever is beheld by the Eye of the Divine.

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<sup>10</sup> Life Divine, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 18 and 19, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Page 306, Secret of the Veda, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, (Birth Centenary Library), Volume 10, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> Inspired from the Mādhyandina recension of the Shukla Yajurveda, Hymn 34, 1-6.

In the highest seat, the supreme stride (*paramam padam*) of the All-pervading Divine, the home of *ṛta* (*ṛtasya dhāma*), all is Light. There this Sun shines not, nor this Moon nor these stars; there these lightnings strike not and this Agni burns not; there all shines by the glory of the Divine alone and there is the Ever-present Day. There too the Rishi beholds with his eye extended in heaven, Order overlaid by a Higher Order (*ṛtena ṛtam apihitam*), the Truth covered by a vaster Truth.

Nearer to us, *ṛta* pervades everything - you flow with it; born of it, you are seated in it, and indeed, you are It. You feel it pulsating in every breath, every thought, every activity, every perception, every sensation. You feel it flowing behind every thought as the silence that supports all sound. You sense it in the throb of the heart. It manifests as the sap of the plant, the ebb and rise of tides, the rhythmic changing of seasons, the inexorable rising and setting of the Sun; indeed anything that exists, that breathes or breathes not in this cosmos expresses *ṛta*.

*Sarasvati*, the Divine inspiration, the river of Consciousness, impels us along the perfected path of *ṛta*. *Agni*, the Divine Will, the intention, the design, is the urging of *ṛta*. *Indra*, the illumined Mind, leads us by the path of *ṛta*. *Mitra* and *Varuna*, possessed of *ṛta*, express the Truth and the Vast, *ṛtam-br̥hat*, and yoke the horses of the Truth. *Usha*, the Dawn announcing the Truth, engirdles all worlds following the pathways of *ṛta*, *ṛtasya panthāh*. *Brahmanaspati*, the Master of the expanding Word, founds the plane of illumination by expressing *ṛta* in his cry.

We close with Rishi Vamedeva's magnificent Swan-chant <sup>13</sup> which reaches to the Truth in a crescendo:

***Hamsaḥ śucisad vasur antariḡṣhasad hotā vedisad atithir  
duroṇasad Nṛsad varasad ṛtasad vyomasad abjā gojā ṛtajā adrijā  
ṛtam. (RigVeda 4.40)***

*The Swan,  
seated in the Pure,  
the shining One,  
seated in the mid-worlds,  
in the wide empyrean,  
The Caller of the Gods,  
seated in the sacrificial seat,  
The Guest,*

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<sup>13</sup> The "shape" of the translation is an attempt to give a visual effect to the sound of the Vedic word. We owe this approach to A.K. Ramanujam (Hymns to the Drowning, Penguin).

*seated in the body,  
seated in Man,  
and in the Void,  
Born of the Waters,  
Born of Matter,  
Born of Light,  
Seated in ṛta,  
Born of ṛta,  
The ṛtam.*

And we sign off, the Mother having the last Word (or the first among the many to come), *śrotavyasya śrutasya ca*:

*“Thou wantest that breaking all the old conventions of language, there may arise a Word fit to express Thee, a Word never heard before”.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Prayers and Meditations of the Mother, January 11, 1915.