

Exegetical Notes and Translations III

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In this series of articles, we will be guided by the following general principle: the deeper one comprehends the Veda, the more one unravels the mysteries in the Upanishads. Our primary sources of inspiration are the Upanishads and the writings of Sri Aurobindo (Secret of the Veda) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (Perception of the Vedas). In this article, we meditate on the famous Suparna verse from the Rig Veda as an illustration of this general principle.

THE TWO BIRDS IN THE VEDA AND THE UPANISHADS

The famous verse *dvā suparṇā*... occurs in Rig Veda Mandala I.164.20. It is popularly known from its occurrence in the Upanishads, namely in the Mundaka Upanishad (Chapter 3, Verse 1) and the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad (Chapter 4 Verse 6). This verse is a Rik of the Rishi Dirghatamas from the great Asya Vāmiyam Hymn.¹ The Asya Vāmiyam is full of profound verses which have inspired the Rishis of the Upanishads and later seers, and these Vedantic Rishis have developed them in the light of their own experiences. Its striking verses have been referred to so many times in our spiritual literature that it forced a Western “scholar” to remark that it is “full of quotations”!

The Rishis of the Mundaka (and Śvetāśvatara Upanishad) in particular have taken this verse and then followed it with a verse coming from their own experience. We first give these two verses together as they appears in the Mundaka Upanishad and then examine the Suparna verse carefully as it occurs in the Rig Veda, which is the primary source.

**3.1 *dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā*
samānam vṛksam pari śasvajaate |
tayoh anyah pippalam svādu atti
*anaśnan anyo abhicākāṣīti ||***

Two birds perfectly winged (dvā suparṇā), syzygies (sayujā), companions (sakhāyā), embrace (pari śasvajaate) the same tree (samānam vṛksam). Of them, one (tayoh anyah) partakes (atti) of the nourishing (svādu), sweet Pippala fruit, while the other (anyah) participates not (anaśnan) but over-sees (abhicākāṣīti).

**3.2 *samāné vṛkse puruṣo nimagno*
anīśayā śocati muhyamānah |
juṣtam yadā paśyanti anyam
*īśamasya mahimānam iti vītaśokah ||***

The soul seated on the same tree of Nature is absorbed and deluded and has sorrow because it is not the Lord, but when it sees and is in union with that other self and the greatness of it which is the Lord, then sorrow passes away from it.

The second verse highlights the vision of the Upanishadic Rishi who

experiences the separation of the bird absorbed in its participatory experience in the world and hence clouded and bewildered the bird experiences sorrow. This is followed by the deep experience of its identity with the other bird, seated above in the tree in its detached poise of non-participation. This is indeed a capital experience in Sadhana and has dominated the vision of Vedanta; intrinsic in this experience is the clear perception of a highly distractive, dualistic and hence bewildering value of the enjoyment of worldly experience and a consequent sorrow arising from the separation.

We will leave these Vedantic verses here and embark on a journey into the profundities of the Rig Vedic verse. This journey reveals to us that the Rig Vedic experience expressed by the figure of the two birds is on quite another plane altogether and it is not always wise to use the Upanishadic light to comprehend the Veda; nor is the Upanishad a “commentary” on the Veda, as is often erroneously said.

The verse occurs as the first among a block of three riks which we will refer to as the Suparna riks. These are the Rik’s 20, 21 and 22 of Hymn 164, Mandala I. They go as follows:

***dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā*
samānam vṛksam pari śasvajaate | 1.164.20a
tayoh anyah pippalam svādu atti
*anaśnan anyo abhicākāṣīti || 1.164.20c***

Two birds perfectly winged (dvā suparṇā), syzygies (sayujā), companions (sakhāyā), embrace (pari śasvajaate) the same tree (samānam vṛksam). Of them one (tayoh anyah) eats² (atti) of the nourishing (svādu) sweet Pippala fruit, while the other (anyah) eats not (anaśnan) but over-sees (abhicākāṣīti).



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yatra suparṇā amṛtasya bhāgam

animeṣam vidathā abhi svaranti || 1.164.21a

inah viśvasya bhuvanasya gopāh

sa mā dhirāh pākam atra āvivesa || 1.164.21c

Where (yatra) the perfectly winged ones, in a poise of knowledge (vidathā), raise their chant (abhi svaranti) unwinking³ (animeṣam), to their portion of immortality, there, the Lord (inah), the Herdsman of the whole universe, the contemplative wise-one (dhirāh) entered and made a dwelling (āvivesa) in me, the ripened and matured one⁴.

yasmin vṛkṣe madvadāh suparṇā

niviśante suvate ca adi viśve | 1.164.22a

tasyed āhuḥ pippalam svādu agre

tat na ut nasat yah pīṭaram na veda || 1.164.22c

The tree on which dwell these perfectly winged ones, savouring the honey-fruit, begetting their children, on its summit, they say, is the nourishing Pippala, and none can attain it who knows not the Father.

The birds are a biune aspect of what in Essence is One. In Nature one of them is a manifestation of the immanent divine, which is the Swan seated in the inmost heart, while the other, which is the Eagle, is the transcendent divine which over-sees but refrains from a direct participation. The Swan comes and goes, nesting on the ground, alighting upon and even plunging into the waters while the Transcendent Eagle has its proper home on the tree-tops, vṛkṣāgre. The single bird is often described as the Sun which is both the bird that eats of the sweet fruit as well as its conjoint twin that eats not but over-sees, one being the Sun in the Akasha, or Void, above and the other, the Sun in the antarbhutasya khe, the abiding void in the inmost being.⁵

The plunge into the manifestation and the ensuing participatory experience of the Swan by no means implies a plunge into a state of moha and consequent bewilderment. In fact, it is a Divine act of participation and enjoyment, the Lila of Bhagavan⁶, but in a state of complete consciousness of its origin in the plenum. As the Maitri Upanishad (VI.34) expresses so beautifully,

hiraṇya-varṇaḥ śakuno hṛdyāditye pratiṣṭītaḥ

madgur haṁsas tejo-vṛṣaḥ so'sminn agnau yajāmahe

The golden hued Eagle established in the heart and the Sun, the Swan, the diving bird, effusing brilliance, in that sacred Flame may we worship and offer.

The Vedic Rishi sees a world within a world and expresses it with the creative Word, while the Upanishadic Rishi is speaking of the Sadhana of attaining an experience of it; mark the distinctness between the perception of immensities versus the practice of particulars. The Upanishadic Rishi has identified the participating bird as the shadow-self, which is the contingent self and is hence sub-jected but un-substantial. The immanent Atma, on the other hand, is substance, essence and not sub-ject.

We now examine a verse from the Katha Upanishad (I.3.1) which sheds more light on the biune aspects we are discussing.

ṛtam pibantau sukṛtasya loke guhām praviṣṭau parame parārdhe |
chāyā-tapau brahma-vido vadanti, pañcāgnayo ye ca tri-naciketāḥ ||

The two drink in the flow of the Rhythm of Truth (ṛtam) in the world of perfect acts, They have entered into and are housed (praviṣṭau) in the secret cave of the heart and the supreme paramount-half.

As shadow and glowing light (chāyā-tapau) the Brahman-knowers speak of them, as do the ones of the five-fires and the ones who have kindled the triple Naciketāgni.⁷

The twins are not separate; they dwell in the summits of creation and also in the secret cave within the heart. The chāyā, with its coolness, together with the glowing heat of tapas, affirms a unity of contrasted principles co-existing in Brahman; chāyā also means “a likeness” and is a reflection in a pure mirror of the transcendent divine and hence chāyā-tapau.

The Rishi has ascended to the summits and beholds the Lila of the One Bird, but his journey does not culminate there. In the summit he experiences the invasion and descent of the Consciousness of the Contemplative dhirāh, the Father, the Purushottama, who enters him in his condition of preparedness and receptivity and makes for himself a dwelling in the Rishi. One hears the Rishi Ayasya Angirasa chant *Turīyam svij janayad viśvajanyam*⁸. Ayasya becoming universal, embraces the births in all the worlds, bringing to birth a certain fourth plane of consciousness. From this summit, there is a triumphal re-entry and an assimilation, an upa saṁkramaṇa, through a gradation of modalities ending in a realization of the Bhagavan status of being the Universal participant. It is at such a point in experience that the Rishi of the Taittiriya Upanishad⁹, filled with this rapturous Presence, chants the Sama,

Hā, Uhā, Uhā, Ū; I am Annam, I am Annam, I am Food, I am the eater of Annam, I have scripted all this that exists, I am the first born of the Rta, ... , I have become all this Universe (aham viśvam bhuvanam abhyabhavām), suvarṇa jyotiḥ (all is a Golden-flaming light of the Sun).

The Rishi has now transcended both the fontal and the non-flowing (kṣarascākṣarasca) aspects of the Purusha; his consciousness pervades and up-bears all this that exists, as Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita Chapter XV says:

7. mamai' vā' mīśo jīvaloke

jīvabhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ

A portion of mine in this world of beings, eternal, has become the Jiva.

16. Dvāv imau puruṣau loke

kṣaraś cā' kṣara eva ca

kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni

kūṭastho 'kṣara ucyate

Two are the Purushas in this world, the fontal and the non-flowing, the fontal in all these elemental beings and the one stationed in the summit is the non-flowing, they say.

17. uttamaḥ puruṣas tv anyañ

**paramātme ‘ty udāhṛtaḥ
yo lokātrayam āviśya
bibharty avyaya īśvaraḥ**

*Other than these is the Uttama Purusha
called the Supreme Essence,
he who has entered into the three worlds
and who upbears it, the Lord, the unchanging.*

Rishi Dirghatamas’s compact Suparna riks, are a densified form of the *uttamam rahasyam*, the Supreme Secret of the Bhagavad Gita XV¹⁰.

How do we experience these great verses in our sadhana? The transcendent Eagle sits above and vigilantly watches as the Swan in the heart’s lake enjoys and creates the honeyed offering for the Gods pressed out from our “correct” and “incorrect” actions, *ubhe sukṛta duṣkṛte*. The Birds are in eternal conversation as is so vividly expressed by Sri Ramakrishna when he says: “Someone calls from within me – O my *Sakhā!* And immediately someone from above answers – O my dear *Sakhī!*”

In a constant awareness of this double divine, we are in perpetual Yoga and all that we do effuses the perfect effectiveness of *Īśvara*. Sri Ramakrishna explains this split poise exquisitely when, in his inimitable style, he says, “Let your left hand touch the feet of the Divine while your right hand works away”, thereby hinting that this awareness is also, in its integrality, experienced as a concrete sensation!

In summary, the two Birds who as comrades occupy the Tree of Life are the biune aspects of the Deity. In essence they are really the One Bird which is a vehicle of the Divine Light, Tapas, Love and Beatitude. These marvelous Birds with wings of Light and winkless eyes, with unbarred lids gazing beyond the realms of Space and Time, chant to the world of Knowledge, the Word, which is the celebration of their participation in immortal life. This great assenting Word is the Om emanating from the Turiya, the one Word which begets all this creation. The Rishi Dirghatamas has ascended to the acme of spiritual experience and in his ecstasy offers his totally prepared self as home and dwelling for the descent, the āvivesa, the influx of the Absolute Godhead.

We now close with a translation of a few mystical verses from the Taittiriya Samhita (IV.9) (Pandit Shripad Damodar Satvlekar (Editor)), which harmonizes beautifully with the above discussion.

**ṛce tvā ruce tvā samit sravanti sarito na dhenavaḥ |
antarhṛdaa manasā pūyamanāḥ ||
ghṛtasya dhārā abhi cākaśīmi |
hiranyayo vetaso madhya āsām ||
tasmīn suparṇo madhu kṛt kulāyī bhajannāste madhu devatābhyaḥ |
tasya āsate harayaḥ sapta tīre svadhā duhānā amṛtasya dhārām ||**

*The flame-chant for thee, the blazing splendour for thee,
as they flow together like nourishing cows,
In the inmost heart and in the mind,
becoming sifted and purified,
I beheld the flowing liquid-light.*

*In the midst of these is the Golden reed,
And in that nest-place, the perfectly winged one
creates honey for the enjoyment of the Gods,
and there sit the seven bright ones*

milking spontaneously the deathless stream.

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NOTES

¹ This hymn has 52 verses, all of a highly mystical and magnificent tenor, and is the last among the 24 of Dirghatamas’s hymns in the Rig Veda.

² or enjoys, or partakes.

³ or sleeplessly

⁴ pākam is usually translated as “infant” or a “fledgeling” in a positive sense of being simple and guileless, and literally means a “suckling infant”, coming from the √pa + ka. The word pākam also comes from the √pac which means “to cook, bake, ripen, mature, perfect” (see Monier-Williams, 1994, page 613-614 and page 575 for both derivations). The experience of the Rishi reveals a state of being ripe and baked for the invasion and a dwelling of the Godhead. The state is two-fold, an innocence at one level and a total ripeness and fitness for the fundamental experience at another. The Vedic word brings out this unique spiritual state of an extreme simplicity and openness together with an inner maturity. Examples abound in our spiritual literature: Naciketas, Dhruva, Prahlad, Satyakāma Jābāla ...

⁵ An interesting phrase that occurs in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.1.1, is hṛdayāsagre, i.e., the “apex of the heart”, or the “eye of the heart” from where the bird over-sees, or super-sees abhicākaśīti . Together they are seated on the summit if the point of view is macro-cosmic or in the deep within if it is micro-cosmic.

⁶ Bhaagam represents the Ananda as the creative enjoyment, taking delight in all that is created, in the share, the portion, in the partaking. From this arises the term Bhagavaan for the Lord.

⁷ For an excellent commentary on these verses, we direct the reader to (Coomaraswamy, pp. 167-172).

⁸ Rig Veda Book X, Hymn 67.

⁹ X.10.5.

¹⁰ We draw attention to the āviśya of the Purushottama in the Bhagavad Gita into the triple world and the āvivesa of the Father, the Lord, the Herdsman into the Rishi Dirghatamas.

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