

The Vital Centre of the Human Being, Seat of Brahma

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Courtesy of Sophia Perennis Book*

This text is the third chapter of *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*, translated from French into English by Richard C. Nicholson

The “Self” as we have seen in the previous chapter, must not be regarded as distinct from *Atma*, and moreover, *Atma* is identical with *Brahma* Itself. This is what may be called the “Supreme Identity”, according to an expression borrowed from Moslem esoterism, where the doctrine on this and on many other points is fundamentally the same as in the Hindu tradition, in spite of great differences of form. The realization of this identity is brought about through *Yoga*, that is to say, through the intimate and essential union of this being with the Divine Principle, or, if it is preferred with the Universal. The exact meaning of the word *Yoga* is in fact “union” neither more nor less,⁵ despite the numerous interpretations, each more fanciful than the last, which orientalists and theosophists have suggested. It should be noted that this realization ought not strictly speaking be considered as an “achievement”, or as “the production of a non-preexisting result,” according to Sankaracharya’s expression, for the union in question, even though not actually realized in the sense here intended, exists none the less potentially, or rather virtually: it is simply a matter of the individual (for it is only in respect of the individual that one can speak of realization) becoming effectively conscious of what really is from all eternity.

That is why it is said that it is *Brahma* which dwells in the vital centre of the human being; this is true of every human being, not only of one who is actually “united” or “delivered”- these two words indeed denoting the same thing viewed under two different aspects, the first in relation to the Principle, the second in relation to the manifested or conditioned existence. This vital centre is considered as corresponding analogically with the smaller ventricle (*guha*) of the

* http://sophiaperennis.com/guenon_manbecoming.html

Sophia Perennis has recently translated and published a comparative work between Christianity and *Advaita*, largely based on Guénon’s *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta*:

A monk of the west, *Christianity and the Doctrine of Non-Dualism*. Sophia Perennis (2004)

⁵ The root of this word is to be found, scarcely altered, in the Latin *jungere* and its derivatives: and the English word “yoke” shows this root in a form almost identical with the Sanskrit.

heart (*hridaya*); but it must not be confused with the heart in the ordinary sense of the word, that is to say with the physiological organ bearing that name, since it is in reality the centre not only of the corporeal individuality, but of the integral individuality, capable of indefinite extension in its own sphere (which occupies, moreover, but one degree of existence), and of which corporeal modality constitutes only a portion, and indeed, as we have already stated, only a very limited portion. The heart is regarded as the centre of life, and in fact, from the physiological point of view, it is so by reason of its connection with the circulation of the blood, with which vitality itself is essentially linked in a very special way, as all traditions are unanimous in recognizing; but it is further considered as a centre of a higher plan and in a more symbolical sense, through its connection with the universal Intelligence (in the sense of the Arabic term *El-Aqlu*) as related to the individual. It should be noted in this connection that the Greeks themselves, and Aristotle among others, assigned the same part to the heart, also making it the seat of intelligence, if one may so express it, and not of feeling as the moderns commonly do; the brain, in actual fact, is only the instrument of the mental faculty, that is, of thought in its reflexive and discursive mode: and thus, in accordance with a symbolism which we have previously mentioned, the heart corresponds to the sun and the brain to the moon. It goes without saying, moreover, that in describing the centre of the integral individuality as the heart, the greatest care should be taken not to regard what is merely an analogy as an identification: between the two there is strictly speaking a correspondence only, in which, it may be added there is nothing arbitrary, but which is perfectly valid, although our contemporaries no doubt may be led by their habits of thought to disregard the profound reasons for such a thing.

“In this seat of *Brahma (Brahma-pura)*,” that is to say, in the vital centre of which we have just been speaking, “there is a small lotus, a place in which is a small cavity (*dahara*) occupied by Ether (*Akasha*); we must seek That which is in this place, and we shall know it.”⁶

That which, in fact, dwells at the centre of the individuality is not merely the ethereal element, the principle of the four other sensible elements, as might be supposed by those who confine themselves to its most external meaning, that relating to the corporeal world only. In the latter world this element does in fact play the part of a principle, but in a wholly relative sense, inasmuch as this world is eminently relative, and it is precisely this acceptation which has to be analogically transposed. It is indeed only in the capacity of a “support” for this transposition that

⁶ *Chandogya Upanishads Prapathaka, VII, Khanda I, shruti I.*

Ether is mentioned here; the conclusion of the text expressly denote this, since if nothing more were really being referred to, there would obviously be nothing to seek. And it may further be added that the lotus and the cavity in question must also be regarded symbolically, for such a “localization” is in no wise to be conceived literally once the point of view of corporeal individuality has been transcended, the other modalities being not longer subject to the spatial condition.

Nor is what we are at present considering merely the “living soul” (*jivatma*), that is to say, the particularized manifestation of the “Self” in life (*jiva*) and consequently in the human individual, viewed here more especially under the vital aspect which is one of the conditions of existence specifically determining the human individual state, and which applies moreover to the sum-total of modalities comprised in that state. Metaphysically, in fact, this manifestation should not be regarded separately from its principle, which is the “Self”; and although this appears as *jiva* in the sphere of individual existence, in illusory mode therefore, it is *Atma* in its supreme Reality. “This *Atma*, which dwells in the heart, is smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a grain of mustard, smaller than a grain of millet, smaller than the germ which is in the grain of millet; this *Atma*, which dwells in the heart, is also greater than the earth (the sphere of gross manifestation), greater than the atmosphere (the sphere of subtle manifestation), greater than the sky (the sphere of formless manifestation), greater than all the worlds together (which is, beyond all manifestation, being the unconditioned.)”⁷ This is so, in fact, because analogy is necessarily applied in an inverse sense, as we have already pointed out, and just as the image of an object is inverted relatively to that object, that which is first or greatest in the principial order, is apparently at any rate, last and smallest in the order of

⁷ *Chandogya Upanishad Prapathaka III, Khanda 14, sruti 3* In this context one cannot help recalling the Gospel parable: “The Kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof” (*St Matthew* xiii, verses 31 and 32). Though the point of view is certainly a different one, it is easy to understand how the conception of the “Kingdom of Heaven” can be transposed metaphysically: the growing of the tree stands for the development of possibilities: and there is no single feature of the parable even to the “birds of the air”, representing in this case the higher states of the being, which does not recall a similar symbolism occurring in another text of the *Upanishads*: “Two birds, inseparably united companions, dwell in the same tree ; the one eats of the fruit of the tree while the other looks on without eating.” (*Mundaka Upanishad, Mudaka, III, Khanda I, shruti I; Shwetashwatara Upanishads, Adhyaya, IV, shruti 6*). The first of the birds is *jivatama*, who is involved in the realm of action and its consequences; the second is the unconditioned *Atma*, which is pure Knowledge; and if they are inseparably associated, this because the former is only distinguishable from the latter in an illusory manner.

manifestation.⁸ To make a comparison with mathematics by way of clarification, it is thus that the geometrical point is quantitatively nil and does not occupy any space, though it is the principle by which space in its entirety is produced, since space is but the development of its intrinsic virtualities.⁹ Similarly, though arithmetical unity is the smallest of numbers if one regards it as situated in the midst of their multiplicity, yet in principle it is the greatest, since it virtually contains them all and produces the whole series simply by the indefinite repetition of itself. The “Self” is only potentially in the individual so long as “Union” is not achieved,¹⁰ and that is why it is comparable to a grain or a germ; but the individual, and manifestation in its entirety, exist through it alone and have no reality except through participation in its essence; while it immensely transcends all existence, being the sole Principle of all things.

When we say that the “Self” is potentially in the individual, and that “Union” exists only virtually before its realization, it goes without sayings that this must be understood only from the point of view of the individual himself. In point of fact, the “Self” is not affected by any contingency, since it is essentially unconditioned; it is immutable in its “permanent actuality”, and therefore there cannot be anything potential about it. Moreover, it is important to distinguish very carefully between “potentiality” and “possibility”. The first of these two words implies aptitude for a certain development; it presupposes a possible “actualization” and can only be applied therefore in respect of “becoming” or of manifestation; possibilities, on the contrary, viewed in the principial and unmanifested state, which excludes all “becoming,” can in no way be regarded as potential. To the individual, however, all possibilities which transcend him appear as potential, since so long as he regards himself in separative mode, deriving his own being seemingly from himself, whatever he attains is strictly speaking but a reflection and not those possibilities themselves: and although this is only an illusion, we may say that for the individual they always remain potential, since it is not as an individual that he can attain them, for, once

⁸ The same idea is very clearly expressed in the Gospel “So the last shall be first and the first last” (*St Matthew xx, 16*)

⁹ Even from the more external point of view, that of ordinary elementary geometry, the following observations can be made: by continuous displacement the point engenders the line, the line engenders the surface and the surface engenders the solid; but in the contrary sense, a surface is the intersection of two solids, a line is the intersection of two surfaces, a point is the intersection of two lines.

¹⁰ In reality, however, it is the individual who dwells in the “Self” and the being becomes effectively conscious of this when “Union” is realized; but this conscious realization implies a freeing from the limitations that constitutes individuality as such, and which, in a more general way, condition all manifestation. When it is said of the “Self” that it is a certain sense indwelling in the individual, this means that one has taken up the viewpoint of manifestation, and this is yet another example of application in an inverse sense.

they are realized, no individuality really exist any longer, as we shall explain more fully when we come to speak of “Deliverance”. Here, however, we need to place ourselves outside the individual point of view, although, even while declaring it illusory, we none the less recognize in it that degree of reality which belongs to it within its own order; even when we do come to consider the individual, it can only be in virtue of his essential dependence upon the Principle, sole basis of that reality, and in so far as, virtually and effectively, he is integrated with the whole being; metaphysically, all must ultimately be related to the Principle, which is the “Self.”

Thus, the dweller in the vital centre is, from the physical point of view, ether; from the psychic point of view, it is the “living soul” and thus far we have not transcended the realm of the individual possibilities; but also, and from the metaphysical point of view, above all, it is the principial and unconditioned “Self.” It is therefore, in the trusted sense, the “Universal Spirit” (*Atma*), which is in reality *Brahma* Itself, the “Supreme Ruler”; and thus the description of this center as *Brahma-pura* is found to be fully justified. But *Brahma*, considered in this manner as within man (and one might consider It in like manner in relation to every other state of the being) is called *Purusha*, because It rest or dwells in the individuality (we are dealing, let us repeat once more, with the integral individuality, and not with individuality restricted to its corporeal modality) as in a city (*puri-shaya*), for *pura*, in its proper and literal sense signifies “city.”¹¹

In the vital centre, dwelling of *Purusha*, “the sun shines not, nor the moon, nor the stars; still less this visible fire (the igneous sensible element, or *Tejas*, of which visibility is the peculiar quality). All shines by the radiance of the *Purusha* (by reflecting its brightness); it is by its splendor that this whole (the integral individuality regarded as “microcosm”) is illuminated.”¹² So too, we read in the *Bhagavad-Gita*¹³; “One must seek the place (symbolizing a state) whence there is no return (to manifestation) ... This place neither sun, nor moon, nor fire illumines; it is

¹¹ This explanation of the word *Purusha* should of course not be regarded as an etymological derivation; it belongs to *Nirukta*, that is to say to the science of interpretation chiefly based on the symbolical value of the elements out of which words are built up. This method is generally not understood by orientalists: it is however fairly closely comparable to the method found in the Jewish *Qabbalah*, and it was not even entirely unknown to the Greeks, examples being found in the *Cratylus* of Plato. As for the meaning of *Purusha*, it may be pointed out that *puru* expresses the idea of “plenitude.”

¹² *Katha Upanishads Adhyaya II, Valli 5, shruti 15 ; Mundaka Upanishad Mundaka II, Khanda 2, shruti 10, Svetashwatara Upanishad, Adhyaya VI, shruti 14.*

¹³ It is well known that the *Bhagavad-Gita* is an episode of the *Mahabharata* and in this connection it should also be remembered that the *Itihasas*, namely the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, being included in the *Smriti*, are therefore something quite different from mere “epic poems” in the profane sense of the expression as understood by Westerners.

there I have my supreme abode.”¹⁴ *Purusha* is represented as light (*jyotis*) because light symbolizes Knowledge: and it is the source of all other light, which is but its reflection, no relative knowledge being able to exist save by participation, however indirect or remote, in the essence of supreme Knowledge. In the light of this Knowledge all things are in perfect simultaneity, for, principally, there cannot be anything but an “eternal present”, since immutability excludes all succession; and it is only in the sphere of the manifested that the relations of possibilities which, in themselves, are eternally contained in the Principle are transposed in terms of succession. “This *Purusha*, of which the size of a thumb (*angushthamatra*, an expression which must not be taken literally as denoting a spatial dimension, but which refers to the same idea as the comparison with a grain),¹⁵ is of a clear luminosity like a smokeless fire (without any admixture of obscurity or ignorance); it is the Lord of the past and of the future (being eternal, therefore omnipresent, in such wise that it contains in its permanent actuality all that appears as past or future relatively to any given moment of manifestation, a relationship that is moreover, capable of transference, beyond that particular mode of succession which is time proper); it is to-day (in the actual state which constitutes the human individuality) and it will be to-morrow (and in all cycles or states of existence) such as it is (in itself, principally, to all eternity).”¹⁶

¹⁴ *Bhagavad-Gita* XV, 4 and 6. In these texts one can observe an interesting similarity with the following passage from the description of the “Heavenly Jerusalem” in *Apocalypse* XXI, 23 : “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it and the Lamb is the light thereof.” From this it can be seen that the Heavenly Jerusalem is not unrelated to the “city of *Brahma*”; and for those who are aware of the relationship between “the Lamb” of Christian symbolism and the Vedic *Agni*, this comparison is still more significant. In order to preclude any false interpretations, it can be said, without unduly stressing the last point, that we are in no wise trying to suggest that *Agnus* and *Ignis* (the Latin equivalent of *Agni*) are related etymologically; but resemblances such as the one that connects these two words often play an important part in symbolism; and moreover, in our view, there is nothing fortuitous in this, since everything, including forms of language, has a reason for its existence. It is also worth noting, in the same context, that the vehicle of *Agni* is a ram.

¹⁵ A comparison could also be made with the “endogeny of the Immortal,” as it is taught by Taoist tradition.

¹⁶ *Katha Upanishad* Adhyaya II, Valli 4, shrutis 12 and 13. In the Islamic esoteric doctrine the same idea is expressed, in almost identical terms, by Mohyiddin ibn Arabi in his *Treatise of Unity (Risalatul-Ahadiyah)*: “He (*Allah*) is now such as He was (from all eternity) very day in the state of Sublime Creator.” The only difference concerns the idea of creation, which is only to be found in those traditional doctrines that are in some way or other attached to Judaism: fundamentally it is nothing but a particular way of expressing the idea of universal manifestation and its relation with the Principle.