

## THE KENA UPANISHAD AND SAVITRI (*Lecture 1*)

(A series of lectures by Rod Hemsell, August 2013)

### Day 1 (afternoon session)

#### Kena Upanishad, Part One

1. By whom missioned falls the mind shot to its mark? By whom yoked moves the first life-breath forward on its paths? By whom impelled is this word that men speak? What god set eye and ear to their workings?
2. That which is hearing of our hearing, mind of our mind, speech of our speech, that too is life of our life-breath and sight of our sight. The wise are released beyond and they pass from this world and become immortal.
3. There sight travels not, nor speech, nor the mind. We know It not nor can distinguish how one should teach of It: for It is other than the known; It is there above the unknown. It is so we have heard from men of old who declared That to our understanding.
4. That which is unexpressed by the word, that by which the word is expressed, know That to be the Brahman and not this which men follow after here.
5. That which thinks not by the mind, that by which the mind is thought, know That to be the Brahman and not this which men follow after here. (Complete works, Vol.18, p. 5-6)

### Day 1- Introduction

I would like to say something about the purpose of a workshop on Kena Upanishad and *Savitri*. This is something that I have been working on for a few months, and actually since February. We did some seminars in Auroville in March on Kena Upanishad. And I did six lectures here in Crestone in May, and two workshops in California. All of this process has the purpose of contextualizing *Savitri* in a certain way. The last thing I just wrote in this short introduction says: for me to point out to you, as I will be doing, the close parallels between the Kena Upanishad and the five cantos of *Savitri* that I will be reading (Book 2, Cantos 11-15), may seem like just a kind of academic contextualizing that is not really worth much. Like, “so what?”. Knowing the fact that there are parallels between those five cantos of *Savitri* and the Kena Upanishad does not change anything. You might say that if that is what it is, then it is just a foolish pastime of the intellect. And all of this contextualizing *Savitri* is a waste of time. Why don't we just read *Savitri* as we have done for a couple of decades? Let me try to answer that question, because I certainly do not intend to indulge here in academic comparisons.

Sri Aurobindo explains to us in his commentaries on the Kena Upanishad, and not just the ones that were formally published in 1914, but prior to that in various earlier commentaries, which you can read a little bit of in your handouts, he explains that he heard and saw and remembered the wisdom, the truth, that was communicated in those Upanishads. He *heard* the full illumined truth that they convey. And he then explains that this kind of hearing, and seeing and remembering, is a faculty and a technique that was known to those seers who conveyed the Upanishads. And those faculties and techniques are known as *sruti*, *drishti* and *smriti*. *Sruti* means hearing the divine truth which is usually spoken. *Drishti* means seeing that truth in its full glory as what it is. The absolute truth-vision. And *Smriti* means a kind of remembrance that you knew all along that that was what it was but it was not clear to your mind, and you never heard anybody say it before. So these faculties and techniques, put

together in the form in which they are spoken and heard is called *mantra*. And then Sri Aurobindo comments that no age of humanity since that time has produced anything like that. And ours in particular is the farthest from being able to hear and say and remember those truths. What has intervened in the meantime is a high level of development of the rational mind.

This was the beginning of Sri Aurobindo's career, his Yoga teaching. The teaching of the yoga of transformation began with that hearing, seeing, remembering of the divine truth. And he then became committed to conveying that divine truth. And not only that, but transmitting it directly as a *mantra*, as a *Sruti* and *Drishti* and *Smriti*. He realized that that divine truth can't be known by the mind. It can't be understood intellectually. That truth-vision is beyond the rational mind. So it can only really be conveyed through another power of communication, which conveys that other level of truth. And the result of all of that career is ultimately *Savitri*. There were several phases that were intermediate. The first was the commentaries on the Rig Veda and the Upanishads. These commentaries are not ordinary academic commentaries. Someone pointed out to me last night a paragraph in the commentaries that made almost no sense at all. There may be four or five sentences in a paragraph or verse and they all say the same thing. So what is going on there? They are sentences with subjects and predicates, and the mind kind of feels like it understands something, but it is not certain what exactly it means. But in fact that little paragraph conveys an extraordinary truth. If you read it aloud it has power. But that power is not easily accessible to the rational mind; it is another level of mind that gets stimulated and sees something. So when that happens, a seed has been planted. Mantras are known as seed-sounds. So this Kena Upanishad conveys the seeds of all the rest that Sri Aurobindo wrote. And there are several elaborate commentaries, and yet, as we will hear this week, they are not commentaries on the Upanishad at all. There is one chapter on the necessity of supermind, and in that he lays out the whole argument of *The Life Divine*. In *The Life Divine* he elaborates, over hundreds of pages, what he says in that commentary on what he heard in that mystical language that nobody else can hear. And finally we come to these five cantos in *Savitri* that we will read, which reformulate all of that which was the seed of this highest formulation possible through speech. A bold assertion! The five cantos we are going to hear are the highest formulation through speech of the highest truths of existence! The absolute truths. So in order to come to that point, a lot more is involved than just sitting and listening to *Savitri* and feeling the Mother's presence. If we think about what is being conveyed in those chapters throughout all those decades and finally in those late cantos of *Savitri* (even though it is Book 2, it was written toward the end, in the 40's), what is conveyed at every stage of that development is the methodology of the transformation of consciousness. The yoga of transformation is what is being conveyed. That's another methodology than the *sruti*; it's the methodology of transformation, which is conveyed by the methodology of *mantra*. And that methodology entails practice.

So one of the things that you will read in the handouts is an early commentary on yoga and the Upanishads in which he says that yoga, the process of transformation, is integral to the Upanishads. They are not just metaphysical poems that tell us about existence. He says in fact that nothing is more useless than metaphysical doctrine. So, what we want to grasp and receive and put into practice is the seed-knowledge for the transformation of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo took the pains to cultivate that bit of spiritual gardening in many different forms and stages. My belief, as a result of my study and reading of *Savitri* for decades, is that to reconnect *Savitri* with its seeds, and to trace the development (not only the mental development) of Sri Aurobindo, to trace the development of yoga from *sruti* to *sutra* to *tantra*, and then to hear the mantric transmission of that which was already taught in the form of *sutra*, and was already heard in the form of Upanishad, enables us to embrace and identify with this yoga of transformation in a much more comprehensive and substantial and realizable manner. I hope that that is the case because I have been watching people for all of these decades receiving the energy of the Mother and not understanding very much what to do with it, how it use it, what it means, why it

is there, how it came to be there. This energy that we enjoy in this atmosphere got to be here through the recitation of the *mantra*. Plain and simple. That Ray, that energy that is coming down, that we just heard about in those few lines, gets grounded and established by the *mantra*.

But then what? And how does it work? What's its purpose? Can we know? Is it worthwhile to try to know the answer to these questions? It is a phenomenon, but what's its potential? There are plenty of spiritual traditions that have *mantras* and people sit in relative bliss for a few minutes or hours, regularly. And that is the divine presence, no doubt. But is that it? So Sri Aurobindo figured out something else. When he touched the seed-sounds and he realized that they had the power for the transformation of consciousness he also realized something else simultaneously. He realized the answers to the questions of evolution. He solved the problem of evolution. He found a solution there. And when you read the first page of your handouts, he states it, he got it from the Sruti. He was able to do that not because the Upanishad said anything about evolution. There is absolutely nothing about evolution in the Kena Upanishad. Sri Aurobindo came to that point as a result of a very high level of intellectual development in England when evolutionary theory was the most talked about theme in academia. He came back from England with knowledge of Greek and Latin, and Darwinian theory, and Platonic philosophy, and he entered into the Indian ethos, and mythos, and pathos, and deeply into Sanskrit, and he had all these questions about evolution already in his mind, as did every thinking person in those times. And he put the two things together.

In many of the chapters of *The Life Divine* where he talks about evolution, he never contradicts Darwinian theory but he explains it in another dimension, he accounts for it, for the process of nature, by a kind of spiritual embrace of that which is and that which is not. And that which is includes that which can be. And nothing is not part of that oneness, that being, which is all, and nothing happens that is not the result of that energy of the all which is one. Some of that energy takes the form of atomic particles, and molecules, and cells, and organs, and life force, with intention and purpose, and systems, and some of that energy takes the form of words, and ideas, and understanding, and measurement, and explanation, and planning. But those are just three levels of that original All. He then concluded that there must be a next level that emerges, just like those three levels emerged, if in fact at the origin of the processes of nature an all-knowing luminous being first of all expresses itself mentally, and vitally, and physically, it has the possibility of expressing itself spiritually, supramentally, in a level of structure that is a kind of absolute of all those prior structures. A more powerful physical, a more lasting and enjoyable and blissful vital, and a more comprehensive total understanding of the meaning of the whole. And finally a consciousness structure that acts in the individual from the point of view of the whole. Whereas we act in the whole from the point of view of the individual. And thus we always feel separate because we all have a different point of view, degree of resonance, disagreement as a result of that, or at least a lack of understanding, completion, satisfaction, that ends up in frustration, and finally the whole system breaks down and we suffer and die.

So this arc of humanity, Sri Aurobindo decided was a temporal phase, and not the whole. And just like everything else has its cycles, this one also belongs to a greater whole, and eventually speciates, and the whole manifests a higher level of consciousness and force that is actually supramental, and eventually a new species. He decided that all of that possibility of understanding was contained in the Upanishad even though it doesn't say anything about any of that. So that is why I say sometimes that everything is there in the Kena Upanishad. If you understand that the development of Sri Aurobindo's ideas comes from that, then in a sense it contains everything. What we will hear more about this week is Sri Aurobindo's *commentaries* on the Upanishad. Those really do contain everything. To start with, to connect the Upanishad with the problem of evolution that still persists, the evolution of consciousness, the Upanishad, according to Sri Aurobindo's translation and interpretation, asks this question: how is it

that the mind knows what it knows? Let us just think about that for a minute.

We know many things, most of which we do not even need to think about, we know them so well. We know how to solve problems, analyze situations, make plans, do what we have to do to achieve goals. How is it that the human mind (and animal mind to some extent) gathers information through perception and experience and on the basis of that information understands what to do and how to do it in order to achieve its goals. How is it that the mind is shot like an arrow to its mark? We experience it all the time. It's the most natural thing. How is it that in this material-vital organism, a process like mind works the way that it does? It produces consciousness. And it acts accordingly. By what or by whom does this mind think? By what is the mind's thinking thought?! In other words: what is the principle behind mind?

And then he asked the question, what is the principle behind life. How is it that life-force organizes all this material for the sake of survival? How can organisms fulfill their potential? This is also a kind of consciousness: there is intention, purpose, development, fulfillment of the vital energies of existence. Which we experience all the time. How is it that this organization of life is possible, especially considering that molecules have no life or mind. They are not living organisms or mental beings, just elementals. By what force are these elementals driven to produce all these structures of life, and then all these structures of meaning? And how does the mind emerge on that basis and reflect on it and understand it. These are questions that are raised by the Upanishad. They were thinking about the meaning of existence, and the questions that are not easily answered by sensation, perception or rational speculation. The mythological structure of the Upanishad has got the God of physical energy doing everything that it can to try to solve this problem, and it disappears from its grasp. And the God of life, of dynamism also fails, it eludes its grasps. And Indra, the most illumined possibility of mind tries and it evades its grasp. It is a mythological formulation of the question of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo thought that was a good way to approach the problem of evolution. Today we analyze the physical, the vital, the mental and still we do not understand purpose, and conscious organization. We describe them, but we do not really explain them. There is something inherent in existence that obviously takes these various forms. There is a tendency towards these forms and processes in nature. How is it that such a thing is there, in those levels, and achieves these forms?

Try it! Observe your observation and conclusions. And then ask: how does that happen? How is it that my sensations (hearing, sight, taste... and that which unifies them: mind) give me the information? We come to phenomenology: how do we explain these phenomena of consciousness? They are so natural, we take them for granted. We are human beings and that is how we function. Why would we ask those questions then? 99% of human beings will think: what a silly question. But in the context of evolution we notice that this mind does not always function adequately. And in fact through the whole spectrum of evolution there is a vacillation between failure and success. It seems that organisms improve in the quality of their conscious structures from one-cell organisms to human beings, there is a development of faculties which results in an extraordinary degree of ability to anticipate problems, avoid catastrophes, have a comprehensive grasp of things that you cannot see at all, but yet you are able somehow to know. Sri Aurobindo says that the answer to this question about the mind is an underlying pervasive all-comprehensive self of consciousness that has produced all these because it contains all these potentials in principle. Sight, taste, smell,... are all faculties of consciousness. Sight cannot be explained by analyzing the eyeball and its connection to the brain. The principle of Sight throughout the animal kingdom, with many different structures evolved in different ways, implies that sight is a principle of consciousness, and in each of its manifestations guarantees the survival of the organism through obtaining information about the environment and itself. So Sri Aurobindo comes to the conclusion from these speculations of the Upanishad that there is this principle of consciousness, which

is a principle of the principles.

His interpretation of the Upanishad is that the Gods are the universal principles that serve the supreme consciousness. The life force, mind, physical body are expressions of Consciousness which is the principle of the principles. So Consciousness is then prior, and the force of evolution is its emanation in time and space in little energy packets that come about through vibrations, which come about by the Will of the Supreme in the form of sound, initially, and sound carries a meaning. Each increment of sound means a certain element or molecule or wavelength of energy transfer and communication, and those essential sounds interact and create vibrational forms, and they keep repeating because they have a meaning, and that meaning is an emanation of the containing Absolute whose will is to unfold itself in forms and qualities in time and space.

That is the Upanishad's answer to the problem of existence, which Sri Aurobindo interprets as the answer to the problem of evolution. Now in *Savitri* we will hear that he is invoking those Gods as Principles in the same way that the Upanishad does. He is invoking the Gods to reveal the central truths of existence. He is creating an imagery of Consciousness that can be identified with the universal principles, or Gods, and through them shift out of the analytical perspective to a more universalized cosmic perception of why things are what they are, which our mind cannot perceive. He is trying to bring about that Sight (*drishti*), following the formula that is already there in the Upanishad, using the same technique of rhythmic speech, the mantric technique. This is not a reasoning, it is a transmission of a realization, of perceiving and seeing, that he has attained and that is meant to plant seeds in us also. Then we come to the big question, a personal one: Are we individually ready to accept that imagery of consciousness that shifts us out of our familiarity with our mental, vital, physical habits into another realm of perception and understanding? Each person has to answer that question.

What we will hear during the week is a description of the path of the mind into the Supermind, and it will not be an easy path. It is not an easy path. There is nothing in *Savitri* that sounds particularly easy. In fact, we will hear things that we cannot either do or imagine. So to be able to choose this path already implies a shift of energy, purpose, intention... a transformation of consciousness from the human to the superhuman. This is the evolutionary arc that Sri Aurobindo is trying to show us and instigate and initiate. But he says it is the most difficult thing imaginable to do. And as we will hear in *Savitri*, it implies a kind of walk along the edge. You will hear that image: between extinction and transcendence. So this is pushing the boundaries.

The Upanishad does not go there. It solves the problem easily: the Gods are themselves emanations of the Supreme and can focus their energy on that which is beyond them, on the Supreme energy and light, the all bliss, the source. Now, Sri Aurobindo at this point does a turn. He says, Yes, that is the way to go to the source. But then, whereas the Vedantic tradition often ends there, you have to make yourself a deliberate conscious receptacle of that higher energy, and allow it to eliminate the mind, displace the mind, and displace the vital force, and replace it with the permanent Ray, the immortal Ray. It is unchanging, and can be realized in the body. That is the yogic task of Sri Aurobindo. So we will hear this path laid down very systematically and powerfully. And then, we will have to answer the question for ourselves.