

AGNI as KUNDALINI

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The cult of fire as the inner immortal ruler which raised the mortal to the immortals, as the link between heaven and earth, the messenger between gods and men, the divine sacrificial priest whom man evoked at break of dawn, reached its apotheosis in rgvedic times. Subsequently it was reduced to a mere ritual bereft of its pristine significance. Yet it was not completely lost since the knowledge of the secret fire reappears in classical Indian speculation embodied in the later Upanisads, in the Tantras and in works on Hathayoga.

Although the word kundalini is not used in the Rgveda, nevertheless direct and indirect references to the discovery and actual arousal of such a dynamic power as leads to immortality, can be found in several addresses to Agni and thus points to the antiquity of such a lore.

Agni is repeatedly declared to be that which lifts the mortal to highest immortality and is constantly praised in that quality. Whether these insights into the spiritual meaning of the fire had already been systematised into a science is another question to which the vedic samhitas can provide no definite answer. They only hint at certain ways of approach – by exertion of concentrated thought, or by mantras and certain results, the discovery of the nectar of immortality. The highly symbolic language lends itself to surmises but not to certainty. Expressions like "wind's steed" (vatasya asvo), "wind's friend" (vayoh sakha)¹ and "he endures the fire" (agnim bibharti)² as well as others which will be discussed here are undoubtedly pointers to a certain body of knowledge concerning powers latent in man, though they do not demonstrate how far that science

had been developed.

Kundalini is the dynamic power (sakti) inherent in the material body and of the nature of fire. This fire aspect is borne out clearly in such passages as the following: "By meditating thus on Her who shines within the mula-(adhara-) cakra with the lustre of ten million suns..." (Satcakra-Nirupana XIII). Kundalini is the power of Siva, the transcendent Consciousness (cit). There is no real difference between kundali and Siva; whereas Siva is changeless, the static aspect of Consciousness, kundalinl-sakti is the kinetic, active aspect of the same transcendent reality. The word kundall or kundalini is derived from the verbal root kund ('to encircle") and means literally 'the one who is coiled up', i.e. the serpent.³

The impact in the human being of the action of the serpent fire can be summed up as the movement from heterogeneity to homogeneity, from chaos to cosmos. Its lying dormant is an expression of matter in its primordial, formless, un-organised state. But when aroused and rendered active it becomes the means whereby matter is energised and organised into one harmonious whole. It is noteworthy that the combined efforts of mind and life-force produce that cosmos. The serpent (ahi) of legendary fame, Vrtra, which Indra smites with his thunderbolt, may have been an early rgvedic presentation of the idea of kundalini. For Vrtra is the constrictor, that which holds the waters, or the riches of heaven, back from flooding the earth, but which when brought under control by the mind or Indra who strikes its head with his thunderbolt or light of clear consciousness, lets out that which it had kept hidden.⁴

Heaven itself, declares the seer of hymn 1.52.10 in glowing hyperbolic language, "reeled back in terror" when Indra's thunderbolt with might rent asunder the head of Vrtra; the latter being described as the "constrictor of both worlds". A.A. Macdonell is of the opinion that there was an earlier meaning to Vrtra because of the use of the word in the plural which "can hardly be derived from a

generalization of the proper name Vrtra but must be based on an earlier meaning such as 'obstruction', then 'obstructor' ".⁵

A somewhat similar idea of obstruction is found in the Babylonian creation myth where Marduk dismembers the dragon Tiamat or chaos and from this action the world comes into being. Similarly, from the dismembered body of the giant Ymir (as also the vedic Purusa) in the Norse cosmogony the world is fashioned. But whereas these myths deal with the creation of order out-of-chaos on the cosmic level, the idea of kundalini creating a cosmos out of chaos applies to the individual or microcosmic level.

The ambivalence of the kundalini energy, its life and death giving power, is hinted at in one of the earlier works on Hathayoga, the Goraksa-Sataka (58) where the word itself is used:

kanda-urdhvam kundali saktir astadha kundalakrtih bandhanaya ca mudhanam yoginam moksada smrta. "Above the 'bulb' the kundali power, eight times coiled, is said to lead the foolish to bondage and to grant emancipation for the yogins." In the Rgveda, Agni in his manifold manifestations is the mighty energy ("thou Agni art highest vital power", II. 1.12), the life and death bestowing flame, the healer and the killer, at the root of all things, including man (cf. II.1). He is the treasure found far away (III.9.5) in heaven or the highest firmament (1.143.2), but also deeply hidden (guha, 1.141.3) or crouching in the 'cavern', holding dynamic might in his hand (1.67.2). This particular aspect of the vedic fire, insofar as it may reveal a connection with the science of kundalini, has hardly been investigated.

Several descriptions in the Rgveda bear a resemblance to those of the later literature on kundalini and are worth examining in that respect. Hymns 1.148, 1.141.3, VII.1.1, VI.16.13 all have the idea of 'churning up' the fire, which could be taken as examples of the vedic method of kindling fire, but when juxtaposed with such texts as those of the

Yogakundalini-Upanisad and the Hathayoga-Pradipika may also bear another meaning.

In stanza 3 of the rgvedic hymn 1.141, the process of drawing the fire is described, and though it may be argued that only fire by attrition can be referred to here, since the fire is produced by means of strength (savas) , there is no certainty that this strength is purely physical, that it does not refer as well to mental concentration which is also a 'power', required both for kindling the fire physically and raising the kundalini. Hymn VII.1.1 mentions the arani as producing fire, but also 'deep thought':

"Men absorbed in deep meditation, have with their hands' fast motion produced auspicious Agni from the kindled-wood."⁶ This could be contrasted with the Yogakundalini-Upanisad (1.11-12):

"The wise man ... should, by his own effort, move [the vital energy stirring up kundalini] from right to left again and again for a period of two muhurtas i.e. 48 minutes] without fear."⁷ The moving from right to left bears a strange resemblance to the kindling of fire by friction. On the other hand, the idea of physical force necessary for the production of fire according to the vedic method may be compared with the moral force or courage necessary to arouse the inner, spiritual fire which prepares man for the nectar of immortality by granting him vigour and courage. This is clearly expressed in the rgvedic hymn III.25.2:

"Agni, the knower, procures heroic might, procures vigour, enhancing it for immortality."⁸ A curious statement of Agni reclining upon 'auspicious mothers' is made in hymn 1.141.2:

"Self-sustaining, wondrous, eternally rich in nourishment is he; secondly, he reclines upon the seven auspicious mothers; thirdly, the songs of praise make him manifest so that, from that

mighty one, the tenfold provider may be drawn forth."⁹

The meaning of the seven 'auspicious mothers'¹⁰ is controversial. Sayana explains them as the rain which fertilizes the seven worlds. In this particular context the mothers could be taken to refer to the 'wheels' (cakra) of potent energy, the seven main centres of the life-force which are pervaded by latent fire but become active only when kundali rises, stirs them up and bathes them completely. According to the rgvedic hymn 1.141.5 Agni, pure, unharmed, pervaded the mothers, and in them increased in size; such a description could be read as kundalini rising along the cakras, (activating each of these, such action in turn reacting upon the fire itself; this, according to Kundalini-Yoga is supposed to confer upon the consciousness a deepening and a widening beyond imagination. This idea could be indicated by the words *urviya vivavrdhe*, "he waxes widely".

In the last pada of 1.141.2 the word *yosana*, given out as 'maiden' in dictionaries, may, following Sayana's hints, be equivalent to *stuti* or 'hymn'. Already the first stanza of that same hymn had declared that the songs of the rite or voices (considered as cows) have caused their breath to fall on him (i.e. Agni) that the inspired thought (*matih*) may thus 'succeed' (*sadhate*). All these strange metaphors may imply that by means of their rhythmic chants the priests were able to draw forth or 'milk out' the treasures of Agni, those treasures which are elsewhere described as 'immortal bounty' (1.72.1), as *vaja*, for whomsoever strives after immortality (III . 25. 2)¹¹; 'treasures' very similar to those granted by kundalini.

Concealment and power and treasures latent in Agni are the three basic ideas worth further investigation. Con-centration, patience, steadiness, are part of that will power which has to be exerted to arouse kundalini and which as the words *Isanasah* and *savasa* of hymn 1.141.3 give us to understand are similarly qualities necessary to 'bring forth' Agni:

"Whenever from the depth of his mighty form priests with power brought him forth through their prowess as when of old Matarisvan churned him up in order to stir the ambrosia as he lay hidden."² Agni's concealment, churning, and the goal, expressed above as for the sake of stirring the ambrosia, or as in hymn III.25.2 "striving after immortality", attest to an early knowledge of the fire not in its mere physical aspect which by itself is no means of attaining immortality, but in its psycho-spiritual sense in which was envisaged a purposive activity which made the seers designate it as the "ruler of thought" (IV.6.1)¹³ and as that power which can be aroused by thought and enhanced by songs (VIII.44.19)¹⁴ If Agni were purely the physical fire what could be the meaning of the following wish: "As cows reach their dwelling at eve, so [may] we [too reach] the kindled-god." (1.66.5)¹⁵ In hymn 1.65.1 the story is retold of the gods tracking Agni "like a thief lurking in a dark cave". In another hymn (1.67.2) he is found "seated in secret place". The sight of Agni "deeply hidden" may "strike the gods with fear" because of the mighty power which they realise he holds in his hands. No other power save that of kundalini can arouse such awe.

Yet this first part of 1.67.2 lends itself to a different translation, for ama means 'strength, power, violence' as well as 'terror'; thus, "he established the gods in power" is a possible rendering. Either translation, however, accentuates the idea of might. Furthermore, it is clearly stated that men absorbed in deep reflection find him there, i.e. concealed or abiding in the cavern.

This hiding place also described as kha ('cave', IV.11.2) or vavra ('cavern', IV.1.13) is the innermost centre whence emerges the visionary thought which enlightens and makes the seer what he is. Kha is a cavity or hollow, and from this depth Agni is begged in hymn IV.11.2 to draw out or release

the inspired vision (manisa) lying latent therein. These words are the equivalent of the 'heart' and therefore of the 'hollow' in the heart as used in the Upanisads. This discovery of Agni hidden in the cave is furthered by the pronouncing of certain sacred mantras formed within men's heart (I.67.2).

Meditating in their heart, that centre where Varuna set kratu, or divine understanding (V.85.2) which alone gives depth and power to any thought or enunciation, that state of consciousness which reveals divine wisdom (1.105.15), they find the effectual words to strike the right keynote; through its vibratory power this keynote evokes a response from the centre where Agni-Kundalinl is lying at rest. We have here a combination of thought concentration which effects the sounding of the required note which in turn will result in arousing Agni or discovering him "crouched in the cavern".

Such is the typical method of the rgvedic seers whose knowledge of sound seems to have been much deeper than is generally conceded. Hymn VIII.44.19 states that "by means of thoughts" "those who understand", the wise ones, stimulate Agni. So let our songs, adds the verse, i.e. let the power of the word or sound, "enhance thee". Such a verse confirms the vedic belief that the fire can be aroused and stimulated by the vibratory power inherent in sound, if the concentration is deep enough.¹⁶ The whole idea which hinges upon concentration of mind can thus be brought into line with the later doctrine that through concentrated thought acting upon the prana which presses upon the cakra at the base of the spine, kundalini is aroused. Hymn 1.67.4 gives further insights:

"Whoso has perceived Agni abiding in secret and whoso has watched the direction of the ritual (rta) [a term which also means 'law' and 'truth'], when, working in accordance with the ritual they release him [i.e. Agni], to such a one has he promised riches."¹⁷

This verse, it may be argued, refers only to the sacrificial rite, but it may be counter-argued, the arousal of kundalini strangely resembles a ritual, an inner ritual that bestows blessings or riches that are not merely material, and immortality, can be gathered from many of the verses that describe him. "Agni is the rich lord of riches", declares hymn 1.72.1, but those treasures he grants are of the immortal kind. In him the sacrificers discovered hidden the thrice seven seats by which they lovingly protect the nectar of immortality (I.72.16).¹⁸ The state of immortality seems thus concealed in Agni: he is the "lord of abundant amrta" (VII.4.6) and is made the centre of immortality by the gods (III.17.4).

In like manner kundalini, when it pervades the top cakra dissolves the last barriers of limited consciousness and opens up full cosmic awareness untrammelled by any limitation of time and space and thereby confers immortality.

The very emphasis on concealment and on power, not merely necessary to draw forth Agni, but actually conferred by Agni on his devotees, granting them that energy which strives after immortality (III.25.2) should indicate that there is in question not something purely physical or imaginary, but a very potent force hidden in the human being; in other words, the kundalini dynamic energy may be described here in a language that precedes that of the Tantras and which therefore had its own vocabulary different from that of later periods.

The idea of 'law', 'righteousness', 'truth' as well as 'rite' contained in the vedic word *rta*, points in the same direction. Agni is lord of the ritual, but the ritual is a microcosmic expression of the cosmic law. The danger of arousing kundalini-sakti without being morally prepared has been sufficiently emphasised not to need any comment here,¹⁹ except to point out the vedic linking of the idea of law, righteousness and Agni. In this respect, hymn 1.67.4 could be interpreted thus: On whomsoever watches the stream of holy law, on whomsoever performs righteous deeds and

thereby reflects the true order of things, Agni will call down blessings.

Agni rises from the "womb of the ritual" (IV.1.12) which is the expression of the law, the balance between the outgoing and ingoing forces, the law of give and take, of offering and receiving, for he is "born in order" (VI.7.1). The idea of law and sacrifice as combined in the thought of Agni can be seen in the following:

"By the path of rta we invoke that performer of sacrifice." (I.128.2) Therefore he can be found only insofar as man abides by law. Sacrifice is part of the Great Law, life itself is a ritual. It is characteristic that Atharvan, one of the early seers who is related to have drawn Agni out of his hidden dwelling, practised austerity:

"Atharvan first laid down the paths through sacrifice." (I.83.5)²⁰

This Atharvan, furthermore, is reported to have "churned up Agni from the lotus flower" (VI.16.13)²¹, a doubly significant verse as the verb 'churn' is used in connection with the 'lotus', the latter being explained in the Mahabharata as a metaphorical expression for the 'heart' or heart cakra. When it is remembered that the cakra were in the post-vedic age compared to lotus flowers, this verse could be taken as evidence that Agni is already being described here in his kundalini aspect: he is churned up from the cakra in order to be manifested.

The question of sacrifice is bound up with that of tapas, a word which unfortunately lends itself to many shades of meaning. A.C. Bose's definition stresses "...not self-mortification, but self-awakening by activating the spiritual power within oneself"²². It is not mere austerity or mere heat, though the physical reaction to contemplative exertion does result in heat, but fundamentally the spiritual energy liberated from the innermost centre of the human being through the process of concentration, absorption, enstasis. In the Yoga-Sutra (II.1.32), tapas

is connected with purification, contentment, self-study or discipline, austerity and surrender to the divine will, all spiritual practices which throw some light on the real meaning of the word. In Yoga-Sutra 11.43 it is stated that through fiery aspiration (tapas) and through the removal of imperfections, the perfecting of the bodily powers and sense organs is brought about. Through the practice of tapas impurities are destroyed.

But tapas was also considered as that power which underlies the process of cosmic unfoldment for through its creative and liberating dynamism the worlds were brought into manifestation. According to hymn X.129.3, through the flame-power of tapas the universe was made manifest:

"Enwrapped in voidness, that which flame-power (tapas) kindled to existence emerged."

Again in hymn X.190.1 we have:

"Cosmic Order (rta) and truth (satya) were born of blazing tapas." It was through his "glowing with tapas" that Indra won heaven (X.167.1). The practice of tapas thus leads to the conquest of light, in other words, to an awakening to a higher state of consciousness. The verbal root of pari-tap, as used in the above quotation, means "to burn all around", or "to set on fire", a setting on fire obviously beyond the physical kindling, since it leads to heaven (svar). The fire of the spirit, which in one hymn of the Atharvaveda (VII.61.1) the poet invokes "that we may kindle the fire of the spirit by this very fire" must be referred to in the rgvedic hymn VIII.60.16 where Agni is reputed to "cleave through the rock with his tapas and radiance". This fire is that spiritual energy which cleaves through the rock of matter, or inertia and arouses man to inspired deeds. In accordance with typical vedic imagery and myths whereby the sun is rent from his hiding place in the mountain cave and the kine or rays of light are set free, we may have here a reference to Agni's action as kundalini cleaving through the various plexuses of the body. This

recalls hymn X.136.7 where Vayu, the master of prana, is said to pound or grind and churn up the 'unbendable' (kunamama) – material nature summed up in tamas or inertia, one of the three primary qualities or energies of prakrti which has to be brought under control and therefore made a pliable tool before the yogin can become master of his self.

Cleaving through the rock, pounding the unbendable, and churning – these are three ideas that point to the significance of Agni's work, namely a bringing forth, out of the rock-like nature of that which the fire must overcome, of the treasure locked in matter or entombed in the body: the very action of kundalini. Here again we are reminded of the myth of the dragon-serpent Vrtra which has to be slain or brought under control before the real work of moulding chaos into cosmos can be accomplished. In the mythological language of the Rgveda, as a result of the taming of that which obstructed, the waters are released and the sun is set up on high, i.e. the spiritual element is set free, and by means of the sun Indra modifies the darkness. Furthermore, Indra finds the nectar of immortality in its triple splendour stored away in heaven (VI.44.23).

Agni is said to have been brought by Matarisvan "from far away" (1.128.2). Apart from the fact that the word Matarisvan is a name and, moreover, very probably a name borne by one of the first men to have achieved supreme realisation, it has a specific meaning which may throw some light on that particular aspect of Agni under consideration. It is composed of two parts, matari and svan (from svi 'to swell'): that which swells or expands in the mother, here presumably the fire or dynamic energy which animates all things in the mother, Aditi, or primordial substance.

Agni, "when formed in his mother is matarisvan" says hymn III.29.11, but, the verse continues, he becomes the "gust of wind" in his wandering.²³ Matarisvan, as the messenger of Vivasvan who represents the divine, solar origin of the human race since Yama (the son of Vivasvan)

is the father of mortal man, brought forth Agni from afar (VI.8.4). He brought him forth "churned about" (III.9.5) "from far away, from the gods". The idea of "far away" or "from the gods" should preclude any purely physical origin of the fire as hidden in wood, or stone and brought to manifestation by friction. This fire is the gift of the gods and makes of man an immortal: "Thou raisest the mortal to highest immortality" (1.31.7) ²⁴.

That immortality is also kept in Vata's home (X.186.3), an interesting remark as Vata or Vayu is the Lord of prana, and the right wielding of prana in turn arouses kundalini which releases the nectar.

Agni, as the gods' tongue, is the guardian of this ambrosial liquid, the "undeceived keeper of immortality" (VI.7.7) and in him is hidden "the thrice seven seats" whereby the gods, of one mind, protect the amrta (1.72.6). This is quite a revealing verse if we consider Agni as kundali. The word pada may mean 'step, abode, locality' and possibly 'state' and 'ray' of light. Griffith translates this part of the verse as "thrice seven mystic things contained within thee". Does the enumeration imply degrees of a deepening state of bliss-consciousness, so that pada would here mean states of enlightenment such as are experienced when kundalini 'bathes' each cakra, and such as open up in man and take him step by step to supreme consciousness? The Rgveda, as always, gives no answer.

As Agni pervades all things and is the immortal 'guest' or "king immortal of mortals" (III.1.18), the envoy from the gods, he is naturally the conductor to that thrice hidden abode, that mysterious seat where the unborn (aja) holds sway, which hymn VIII.61.9 describes as the "lofty, unshakable" home of Varuna. It may be surmised that the immortal essence which is Agni's flame and gift and which the Yajurveda (XXXIV.1-6) explains as "the light immortal in all creatures without which no single action could be performed" hints at the twofold course of life – involution

and evolution: thus the hidden potentiality has to be lifted out of the subconscious or dark level of nature or man where it is embedded as the reflection of heaven on earth, to the realms of light and divine freedom, for actual realisation. Unconscious in nature, it becomes conscious in man. in other words, only when the full union is effected between prakrti and purusa, between energy-fire and light-spirit, or kundalini and Siva – when Agni has linked heaven and earth in man – can there be conscious liberation. For Agni in the Rgveda, as the supreme agent in matter and in man, raises up the potential immortality hidden in nature and nature's child, man, to the loftiness of actual immortality, i.e. unlimited consciousness. This is the great work of Agni,²⁵ as it is that of kundalini.

NOTES

- 1 Rgv. X.136.5. Cf. Yogakundali-Upanisad: "Praria is the vayu that moves in the body".
- 2 Rgv. X.136.
- 3 For a study of kundalini see A. Avalon, *The Serpent Power* (London, 1919).
- 4 The slaying of Vrtra would symbolise not the "production of rain" as Wilson would have it, but the conquering of matter, after which the "light of heaven" is won. Cf. Rgv. VIII.89.4; 1.51.4; 1.52.8; II.19.2.
- 5 A.A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (Strassburg, 1897), p.159,
- 6 Rgv. VII.1.1: agnim naro didhitibhir aranyor hastacyuti janayanta prasastam.
- 7 Cf. also Hathayoga-Pradipika (III.112): "the serpent should be made to move daily for about an hour and a half, morning and evening".
- 8 prkso vapuh pituman nitya a saye dvitiyam a saptasivasu matsru, trtiyam asya vrsabhasya dohase dasa pramatim janayanta yosanah (1.141.2).
- 9 agnih sanoti viryani vidvant sanoti vajam amrtaya bhusan (III'.25.2) .
- 10 In this respect cf. Rgv. IV.19.3 where a similar idea is transferred to Vrtra.
- 11 Cf. Rgv. VIII.43.32 (vibhavasuh) and 1.44.10.
- 12 nir yad im budhnan mahisasya varpasa Isanasah savasa kranta murayah, yad im anu pradivo madhya adhava guha santam matarisva mathayati (Rgv. 1.141.3).

- 13 tvam hi visvam abhyasi manma (Rgv. IV.6.1). :'*
- 14 tvam agne manlsinas tvam hinvanti cittibhih tvam
vardhantu no girah (Rgv! VIII.44.19).
- 15 vayam vasatya astam na gavo naksanta idham.
- 16 Cf. Rgv. 1.127.7; X.122.5.
- 17 ya im ciketa guha bhavantam a yah sasada dharam rtasya vi
ye crtanti rta sapanta ad id vasuni pra vavaca asmai
(Rgv. I 167.4).'
- 18 trih sapta yad guhyani tve it pada avidan nihita
yajffiyasah, tebht raksante amrtam sajosah...(Rgv. 1.72.6)
- 19 The Gandharva-Tantra lists the requirements for a sadhaka
to be accepted as such, as intelligence, sense control,
harmlessness, good deeds, purity and faith. See A.
Avalon, The Serpent Power, p. 201. Also Satcakra-
Niruparia (50) .
- 20 yajnair atharva prathamah pathas tate (Rgv. 1.83.5);
cf. X.92.10; 1.80.16; X.57.12.
- 21 tvam agne puskarad adhy atharva niranmantha (Rgv.
VI.16.13).
- 22 Hymns from the Vedas (London, 1966), p. 8.
- 23 It may be of interest to note that as kundalinl rises it
is reported to produce a hissing sound like the wind.
- 24 amrtatve uttame martam dadhasi (Rgv. 1.31.7).
- 25 Cf. Rgv. 1.31.7; VI.7.7; 1.96.6.