

The Eternal Message of the Gita

SWAMI SIDDHESHWARANANDA¹

Source: *Vedanta Kesari*,
May 2004²

5. The Seer and the Seen

*Know that I am the Knower of the field
(kshetrajna) in all the fields (kshetras), O Bharata.
The knowledge of kshetra and of kshetrajna is what I
call true wisdom. (Gita, 13.2)*

If it is important to distinguish that which changes, the 'seen', from that which doesn't change, the 'seer', it is even more important, following the analysis to its end, to understand that this 'seer' is the ultimate Reality. For it is not the analysis of the 'seen', of the many different objects appearing in our field of enquiry, that can give us the wisdom we are aspiring for. The *Gita* teaches us that the only true knowledge consists in knowing both the 'seen' and the 'seer' *at the same time*.

The notion of a 'seen' implies the corresponding notion of a 'seer'. One cannot think of either term without necessarily having the other in mind. Now pure knowledge (*vijñana*) is not applicable to an object that could be opposed to a subject: It is non-dual, and for this reason Sri Krishna declares that He is the only true 'seer' of all objects perceived, mean-

-
- 1 A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, India, Swami Siddheswarananda (1897-1957) taught Vedanta in Europe from 1937-57—he was the Minister-in-Charge of Centre Védantique Ramakrichna, Gretz, France.
 - 2 This the 5th of a series of independent commentaries by the Swami on various themes of the Gita-teachings published in French from Gretz in their *Bulletin des Activités Culturelles* No. 6, February 1956. English translation and edit by André van den Brink.

ing that His vision is without any sense of multiplicity. This is no longer the vision familiar to us, the vision proper to the creature, necessitating the existence of an object seen. In the vision of the 'seer' such a relation does not exist, because it does not admit of any multiplicity. Therefore, we say that it is 'without object'.

The created being considers the vision to be 'his' and, by thus differentiating himself from the 'seen' of which he himself nevertheless never ceases to be a part, he creates multiplicity, so to speak: his vision is a vision of multiplicity. Ignorance (*ajñāna*), therefore, consists in appropriating the vision to oneself. In order to remove this ignorance Sri Krishna reveals that the Lord is the true 'seer'. It is enough to realize this truth so that the error may disappear once and for all. 'After numerous births the man who is full of wisdom comes to Me, knowing that all is Vasudeva, the Lord. Such a sage is rare to find,' says Sri Krishna (*Gita*, 7.19).

Swami Siddheswarananda (1897-1957) was a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, and for twenty years until his death, the spiritual head of the Centre Védantique Ramakrishna at Gretz, France. This commentary of the learned Swami on the various themes of the *Gita* was originally published in French in the *Bulletin of the Centre Védantique* during 1955-57. This article is the fifth instalment of a series of about a dozen articles, each independent in itself. English translation and editing was done by Mr. Andre van den Brink. 0

The *kshetraja*, the Knower of the field who is present in all the *kshetras* or fields, is without any conditioning (*upadhi*). Thus he cannot be said to be existent or non-existent, *sat* or *asat* (d. *Gita*, 13.12), nor can he ever become an object of perception. In fact, one of the criteria of absolute

reality is that It cannot be contradicted by anything. Now in all objects that are perceived the *upadhis* or conditionings change, and when a change is effected, the subsequent state is a contradiction of the previous state. Of course both states cannot exist simultaneously: The clay that serves to manufacture a jar cannot at the same time be used to make a jug. The two forms are mutually exclusive. When, in speaking of the nature of an object, we say that 'it exists' or that 'it doesn't exist'; the 'it' we are referring to is not an object of observation. We say, 'it exists', 'it is blue', 'it is big', but That whom we are attributing these qualities to is, in truth, intangible. We only perceive aspects of It.

Only the 'seer' never changes. The consciousness of Being, this immediate certitude which I had as a child, and which I have even now as a man, this consciousness of Being remains independent of any change. Who, then, is conscious of the modifications? 'That' cannot be an object of knowledge. Even when the ego-consciousness disappears, as in deep sleep or in swoon, the consciousness of Being does not disappear: It is a direct intuition which does not enter into the categories of existence or non-existence. We cannot hold it before us and say: 'This is the consciousness of Being.' It is the light of the 'seer' which permits us to know all the objects of perception.

In our ignorance, however, we identify ourselves with the 'seen'. The *Gita* denounces our mistake as follows: 'All actions are only accomplished by the *gunas*, the qualities of Nature, *prakriti*. He who is deceived by egotism thinks, "It is me who acts".' (*Gita*, 3.27) This initial error is developed in us as soon as we come into contact with the world and interpret this contact as 'ours'. In this way the 'I' arrogates all sensory and mental processes to itself.

This error will be exposed by a serious analysis of the

nature of an experience that we may have had, and of which I will give an example: I am in the Bay of Mont St. Michel and, one evening, I am walking along the immense beach, admiring the sun which is setting in the sea. At some distance the Mont St. Michel rises up before me, and my attention is successively going to the sound of the waves coming to die down at my feet, to the beauty of the sky, and to the mist gathering around the spire of the abbey. I'm afraid to venture on the quicksands, and I am experiencing a thousand other sensations. Of this 'seen' I am the 'seer'... until the moment when I wake up: Everything that I had thought to be real was only a dream!

What lesson can we draw from this experience? To the ego of the waking state it is clear that all beings and objects of the dream were unreal. However much the ego of the dream—the sailor that I then was—looked upon itself as the 'seer', in reality it was part of the 'seen' in the same quality as all the objects perceived and all the sensations experienced. The 'seen' and the 'seer' of the dream state are both simultaneously the 'seen' to the 'seer' of the waking state. Can we apply this conclusion to the objects and sensations of the waking state as well? The *Mandukya Karika* (II, 4) assures us that, by the very fact that these objects and sensations are perceived in the sensate world, they are unreal. And, in fact, if the ego of the waking state would examine without bias what its nature would be, it would realize that its various states, its various aspects, belong to the 'seen'. It would realize its unity with the whole of beings and objects perceived.

In this respect the dream experience is significant: On waking up the dream appears as a non-dual whole. In the series of objects of consciousness—the sound of the waves, the sky and the Mont St. Michel—the consciousness was not centred in me, the sailor, for nature and me formed but one

integral whole. To think that I, the sailor, was looking at the Mont St. Michel, would be as inaccurate, as absurd, as to think that the Mont St. Michel was looking at the sailor! Nature, *prakriti*, is one undivided whole. It is through ignorance, *ajñana*, that the consciousness is being claimed for oneself, thereby opposing oneself to the 'unconscious' objects. In fact, on waking up the 'I' of the dream appears to have had no more consistency than the objects which it believed to know. So with what right and with what logic would you attribute consciousness to this 'I'? As to the consciousness itself, neither the dream nor the waking state altered it; it does not become unreal on waking up, it only changes its expression. If the consciousness of Existence in the dream would prove to be unreal, then how could it reappear in the waking state? The consciousness of Being is Existence which never becomes non-existent.

This consciousness 'impregnates' the dream, so to speak, in its totality, without any partiality in favour of the 'I' who is in no way its home. The same applies to the waking state where it is observed that the 'I', in fact, doesn't have any stability. The 'I' is *nama-rupa*, 'name' and 'form'; it belongs to the things that can be known. The 'seer' is not the mind; his vision is without beginning and without end, and does not belong to that element of the 'seen' which we call 'the ego'. This imperishable 'seer' is the Eternal, the *kshetrajña* (the Knower of the field) mentioned in the verse that we are studying. In this verse the approach is epistemological: What is true knowledge? We expect from this knowledge that it will solve all contradictions, in particular the primordial contradiction in which the 'I' is opposed to the 'non-I'. For it is not enough to have the intuition that this duality is false: We need to know how to remove it. 'Ignorance,' Shankara writes in his commentary on verse 13.2, 'comes from inertia (*tamas*)

which carries us towards that which is contrary to the truth, raises doubt in us, and results in the non-perception of the truth.' It is the work of the intelligence, of the spirit of enquiry, which is to be used to put an end to the false attachments, to doubts, and to the non-perception of the truth. Through this search the active forces are brought into play in their greatest purity, resulting in the awakening of the higher reason or *buddhi*. The *Gita* teaches that, with the awakening of the *buddhi*, man obtains the Knowledge (*jñana*) which is a direct perception (*pratyakshavagamam*). Nothing can contradict this Knowledge, 'the most eminent of sciences, the most profound of mysteries, the supreme purification.' (9.2)

In the course of this investigation the *buddhi* has discovered that the ego is the source of all conflict. By claiming an absolute reality for itself, the ego appropriates the activity of the consciousness to itself. At once the many different representations of the world which the ego believes to perceive, come into existence—many, too, the different contradictions that follow. The power of ignorance (*avidya*) is such that it makes us believe that the ego is different from the objects known, that it is not an entity belonging to the 'seen'. This same ignorance causes us to transfer the properties of the 'seer' to the 'seen' and vice versa, so that the 'seer' who is eternal, is identified with the ego, and is believed to be perishable, while the qualities proper to the 'seer', such as permanence, are accorded to the object.

This mutual transference creates the conflict that is the source of suffering. Compare Shankara's commentary on verse 18.50 of the *Gita*: '... The Self is extremely pure, extremely clear and extremely subtle. But it is possible for the *buddhi*, being as pure, as clear and as subtle as the Self, to identify itself with that aspect of the Self which manifests itself as consciousness. The mind (*manas*) identifies itself with

the *buddhi*, the sense organs identify themselves with the mind, and the physical body identifies itself with the sense organs. Thus is explained the common, frequent error which consists in considering the physical body to be the Self.'

As long as man is possessed by his zest for life and for experience (by what Hubert Benoit calls 'the convergent aspect of life'), he will ignore the 'dance of Kali', the divergent aspect, identifying himself completely with the ego of the waking state. Thus he is unable to have access to the vision of the Real. However, a great discriminatory faculty is needed in order to see life as it is, without the least trace of emotion. If we really want to distinguish the 'seer' from the 'seen', we shall have to accept a total discipline, and not a discipline that is developed progressively—a total discipline, because it is not aimed at certain things in particular, but at our very way of looking at things. Here we are concerned with nothing less than a transcendence of the states, with a synoptic view of the reality. There are thinkers who may be found to try, while staying within the limits of the waking state, to go beyond *prakriti* (Nature) with the help of thought: Such undertaking will always be doomed to failure, because thought, too, is *prakriti*.

As to the discipline to be followed, it is summarized in the verses 24 and 25 of chapter VI: 'One should abandon without reservation all desires born from imagination and, with the senses under control, acquire little by little tranquillity by means of the reason, checked by the will. Let the mind remain in the Self and no longer think of anything else.' The state of *samadhi* (total awareness) is attained, when the attention has become without object and the consciousness without contents.

This consciousness which is not divided into subject and

object, is intemporal; it is the metaphysical intuition. Even if we say that the operations of the consciousness contain *asti* (Existence), *bhati* (Luminosity), *priya* (Love), *nama* (name) and *rupa* (form), nothing would be more wrong than to see them as different entities. The Reality is not a totalisation of concepts and perceptions, but a Totality. The majority of seekers, however, cannot do without such distinctions in order to proceed towards the truth. Vedanta proposes that they distinguish a substratum, Brahman, which remains eternally, and superimposed upon this substratum an apparent, changing reality, *Maya*, made up of *nama-rupa*, 'name' and 'form'.

When the attention is detached from *nama-rupa*, as described in the *Drig Drishya Viveka*, the 'seer' (*drig*) has as its 'seen' (*drishya*) the whole of the three states: He is the 'seer' of the many different states of Being (*avasthâtraya sâkshin*). As to the mind, that factor of division, it will then lose its preponderance and prestige. In the realization of this 'fourth' state (*turiya*) the 'seer' who is non-dual, and the 'seen' which is equally non-dual, are found to be no different from each other in any way: Both terms indicate the same Reality. 'Whose realization?', one may ask. No answer will satisfy the one who is asking this question. Remaining attached to one state in particular (I.e. the waking state), he is incapable of seeing the whole of manifestation as being non-dual (*advaita*). To know the *kshetra* (the field) and the *kshetrajna* (the Knower of the field) at the same time-this is what constitutes true *jñana*, supreme Knowledge.

While this realization is accessible to our *buddhi*, it is beyond the organs of perception and the processes of the mind (*Gita*, 6.21). But man is trapped in the workings of his mind: Plunged into ignorance, he can only accept the teaching of verse 13.2 through an act of faith, I.e. faith in the sacred

scriptures. The *Mandukya Karika* explains how the conclusions of Revelation are also those which philosophical enquiry is leading us to. For this reason it would not be justified to depreciate Revelation and faith, which hold a legitimate place in spiritual discipline. The teaching given by Sri Krishna in verse 13.2 is eminently metaphysical. At the same time His words constitute a Revelation: He identifies the 'seer' with Himself, who is the Lord.

Now that we have made it our objective to obtain the highest knowledge, we find that we are prevented from doing so by our psychological automatisms. That is why we have to accomplish, indefatigably, the inner work which our intellectual intuition calls forth and encourages. At the same time this inner work is bound to end in an impasse. The words spoken by Sri Ramakrishna in this context are most significant: 'When will I be free?-When the "I" ceases to be.' Now, then, it is not just through an analysis of the mental processes that this 'I' will go. On the contrary, the more it is studied, the more it asserts itself. It is only through a rigorous enquiry that we shall be able to grasp our experiences as an integral whole, and not as a combination of different fragments. The metaphysical intuition is an 'infused' knowledge which comes with the letting go of the ego, when everything has been renounced. (*Gita, 18.66*)

After this letting go only one vision remains: that of the Lord, that of the *kshetrajna* who is behind all the *kshetras*, including our ego. The power of ignorance (*avidya*) is employed to direct our attention to 'name' and 'form' (*namarupa*) which are constantly changing, and the reality then seems to be divided into innumerable 'seens'. To the sage, however, there is no such multiplicity in the 'seen', and his vision is not attended by mental tension. If the ordinary vision may be compared to a circle, the centre of which is

fixed, while its circumference represents the infinity of objects perceived, the vision of the sage, on the other hand, does not have a centre. Or rather, its centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere, according to the expression of Pascal which was frequently quoted by Swami Vivekananda.

In this perspective the apparent conflict between the 'seen' and the 'seer' is solved. The *kshetrajna* is the metaphysical Reality, the *akshara*, the Lord. Remaining in each 'seen', the 'seer', 'That which does not perish, when all has perished,' is the infinite possibility of 'seens'. Shankara says that 'our experience of the world is a continuous perception of Brahman'.



Circulated as a service by:
John Manetta
Beles 28 (Koukaki)
117 41 Athens, Greece
Phone: [+30] 210 923 4682
email: jmanveda@otenet.gr
website: www.vedanta.gr