

Spirit and Intellect

by

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It has been pointed out that, while it is often affirmed that the spirit is not other than *Atma*, there are nevertheless instances in which this same *spirit* seems to be identified only with *Buddhi*. Is there not something contradictory here? It would not be enough to see in this a simple question of terminology; for if such were the case, one could as well go further and accept indiscriminately the multiple more or less vague and improper senses given to the word “spirit”; whereas, on the contrary, we have ourselves always carefully endeavored to avoid them. And the only too evident inadequacy of western languages as regards the expression of ideas of a metaphysical order certainly must not hinder one from taking all the precautions necessary to avoid confusions. What justifies these two uses of the same word—let us state it at the outset—is the correspondence which exists between different “levels” of reality, which makes possible the transposition of certain terms from one of these levels to another.

The case in question is comparable, in short, to that of the word “essence,” which is also susceptible of application in several different ways. Insofar as it is the correlative of “substance,” it designates, from the point of view of universal manifestation, *Purusha* envisaged in relation to *Prakriti*. But it can also be transposed beyond this duality, and it is perforce thus when one speaks of the “Divine Essence,” even if, as usually happens in the West, those who use this expression do not go beyond pure Being in their conception of the Divinity.¹ Similarly, one can also designate as essence that which constitutes the ultimate reality, immutable and unconditioned, of that being; and the reason is that the first is in the final analysis nothing other than the expression of the second in regard to manifestation. Now if one says that the spirit of a being is the same thing as its essence, one can also understand it in both the one and the other of the two senses. And if one places oneself at the point of view of absolute reality, spirit or essence obviously is not and cannot be anything other than *Atma*. Only, it must be noted that *Atma*, including within itself principally all reality, cannot by that fact enter into correlation with anything whatsoever. Thus, as long as it is a question of the constitutive principles of a being in its conditioned states, what one envisages as spirit as, for example, in the ternary “spirit, soul,

1. The use of the term *Purushottama*, in the Hindu tradition, implies precisely the same transposition in relation to that which *Purusha* designates in its more common sense.

and body,” can no longer be the unconditioned *Atma*, but that which, as it were, represents it in the most direct manner in manifestation. We could add that this is no longer even the essence correlative to substance, for, if it be true that it is in relation to manifestation that the latter must be considered, nevertheless substance is not itself within manifestation. Properly, therefore, it can only be the first and loftiest of all the manifested principles, that is to say *Buddhi*.

It is thus necessary, once one places oneself at the point of view of a state of manifestation such as the individual human state, to introduce what one might call a question of “perspective”; when we speak of the universal, distinguishing it from the individual, we must understand here not only the unmanifested, but also that which in manifestation itself is supra-individual, that is to say, informal manifestation, to which *Buddhi* essentially belongs. Similarly, in the individuality as such, including the entirety of the psychic and corporeal elements, we can only designate as spiritual the principles that are transcendent in relation to the individuality, which again is precisely the case of *Buddhi* or the intellect. This is why we can say, as we often have, that for us, pure intellectuality and spirituality are at bottom synonymous. Moreover, the intellect itself is also susceptible of transposition as in the cases above, since one generally has no difficulty whatsoever in speaking of the “Divine Intellect”. In this connection, we will again note that even though the *gunas* are inherent in *Prakriti*, one can only regard *sattva* as a spiritual tendency (or “spiritualizing,” if one prefers), because it is the tendency which orients the being towards the superior states. This is, in sum, a consequence of the same “perspective” which presents the supra-individual states as the intermediary degrees between the human state and the unconditioned state, even though, between this latter and any conditioned state whatsoever, even the most elevated of all, there is really no common measure.²

What must be particularly emphasized is the essentially supra-individual nature of the pure intellect. Moreover, it is only whatever belongs to that order that can be truly called “transcendent,” as this term normally can be applied only to what is beyond the individual domain. The intellect is therefore never individualized; furthermore, this corresponds to what is expressed, from the special point of view of the corporeal world, when it is said that whatever the appearances may be, the spirit is never really “incarnated,” which is equally true in all the senses wherein the word “spirit” can be employed.³ It follows that the distinction which exists between the spirit and the elements of the individual order are much more profound than all the distinctions which can be established between these elements, and notably between the psychic

2. Cf. F. Schuon, “Des modes de la réalisation spirituelle,” *Etudes Traditionnelles*, April-May 1947, p. 119, note 3.

3. One can even say that it is this which marks, quite generally, the clearest and the most important distinction between these terms and the false meanings which are too often attributed to this same word.

and corporeal elements, that is, between those which belong respectively to subtle and gross manifestation, both of which are after all only modalities of formal manifestation.⁴

This is still not all: not only does *Buddhi*, insofar as it is the first of the productions of *Prakriti*, constitute the link between all the states of manifestation, but from another angle, envisaging things from a principal viewpoint, *Buddhi* appears as the luminous ray emanating from the spiritual Sun, which is *Atma* itself. One can say, therefore, that *Buddhi* is also the first manifestation of *Atma*⁵ even though it must be clearly understood that *Atma* itself remains always unmanifest, not being affected or modified by any contingency.⁶ Now light is essentially one and is not of a different nature in the Sun and in the Sun's rays, which are not distinguished from the latter except in an illusory mode as regards the Sun itself (even though this distinction is no less real for the eye which perceives the rays and which here represents the being situated within manifestation).⁷ By reason of this essential "connaturality," *Buddhi*, in the final analysis, is not other than the expression of *Atma* in the manifested order. This luminous ray which links all the states among themselves is also represented symbolically as the "breath" by which they subsist which, one will note, is in strict conformity with the etymological sense of the words designating the spirit (whether this be the Latin *spiritus* or the Greek *pneuma*). And, as we have already explained on other occasions, it is properly the *sutratma*, which amounts to saying that it is in reality *Atma* itself or, more precisely, it is the appearance which *Atma* takes from the moment that, instead of considering only the supreme Principle (which would then be represented as the Sun containing in itself all the rays in an indistinguished state), one envisages the manifested states also. This appearance, moreover, is such only from the point of view of the beings within the manifested states; and it is this appearance which seems to give to the ray an existence distinct from its source, for it is evident that the "outwardness" of the manifested states in relation to the Principle can only be purely illusory.

4. This is also why, strictly speaking a man cannot speak of "his spirit" as he speaks of "his soul" or of "his body," the possessive implying that it is a question of an element properly belonging to the individual order. In the ternary division of the elements of the being, the individual as such is composed of soul and body, while the spirit (without which it could not exist in any manner) is transcendent in relation to it.

5. Cf. *La Grande Triade*, p. 80, note 2.

6. According to the Upanishadic formula, he is "That by which everything is manifested, which is not itself manifested by anything."

7. Light is the traditional symbol of the very nature of the spirit; we have remarked elsewhere that one also encounters, in this regard, the expressions "spiritual light" and "intelligible light," as if they were in some way synonymous which, again, obviously implies an assimilation between spirit and intellect.

The immediate conclusion which results from these considerations is that as long as the being is not only in the human state but in any manifested state whatsoever, individual or supra-individual, there can be for him no effective difference between the spirit and the intellect, nor consequently between true spirituality and true intellectuality. In other words, in order to reach the final and supreme goal, there is for such a being no other way than the ray itself by which the being is tied to the spiritual Sun. Whatever the apparent diversity of ways that exist at the point of departure, they all must be united sooner or later in this one “axial” way. And when the being has followed this latter to its end, he “will enter into his own Self”, from which he had never departed except in an illusory manner; since the Self, which analogically one calls spirit, essence or some other preferred name, is identical to the absolute reality in which all is contained, that is, to the supreme and unconditioned *Atma*.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Man is the microcosm in the strictest sense of the word. He is the summary of all existence. There is no creature that is not recapitulated in man. There is nothing in the universe lower than body or higher than soul.

Soul and (the spiritual) body were created together, and the soul therefore precedes the body only, in dignity, not in space or in time. But the body as we know it, material and corruptible, came into existence after man's sin, and because of it. It was man, after he had transgressed, who made to himself this fragile and mortal body. This is signified by the fig leaves, which are a shade, excluding the rays of the sun, as our bodies shade our souls in the darkness of ignorance, and exclude the light of truth.

But where, then, is that spiritual and incorruptible body which belonged to man before his sin? It is hidden in the secret recesses of our nature, and it will reappear in the future, when this mortal shall put on immortality.

Johannes Scotus Erigena.