

Madhu-Vidya: The Holocoenotic Vision of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Swarnalatha Rangarajan

Swarnalatha Rangarajan is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, India.

Nurturing the reverential mind is the bedrock of environmental awareness. The complex dimensions of the environmental crisis show that it is not merely a political, economic, or social crisis but also a moral and spiritual one. The re-examination of religions that focus on the philosophical and religious understandings of man's embeddedness in nature has come to occupy an important place among the new knowledge systems that are being sought to address the environmental crisis. Historian Lynn White observed, "More science and technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."¹ The mechanistic model of the universe desacralized the earth with its undue emphasis on objectivity, rationality and the demythologization of religion and history. Contemporary debates about the environment seek to provide holistic, relational, and earth-revering frameworks by bringing together diverse cross-cultural, inter-disciplinary dialogues that reflect a systemic way of thinking in terms of interrelatedness, context, and inter-being. Richard Tarnas observes that the spiritual challenge of our times is to engage in a dialogic mode between humanity and other forms of life and with the cosmos itself. He argues that this larger dialogical imperative calls for a deep perception of the earth and her level of consciousness, the *anima mundi*— "the soul of the world, of the community of being, of the all-pervading, of mystery and ambiguity, of imagination, emotion, instinct, body, nature, woman."² According to Walsh, "the interconnected, holocoenotic (each part effects ever other part) nature of our biosphere" and our contemporary social, economic, and cultural systems "show that whatever we do unto others we also do unto ourselves."³ Out of this vision of the world as both nature and spirit has emerged the syncretic space of ecospirituality.

Arne Naess emphasized the need to explore religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism to cultivate an intrinsic connection with the earth's self. Naess calls his own ultimate philosophy Ecosophy T. It is deeply influenced by Gandhian nonviolence, Mahayana Buddhism, and Spinozan pantheism among other religious and spiritual traditions. According to Naess, ecological wisdom plays an important role in facing the environmental crisis. Ecological science, concerned with facts and logic alone, cannot answer ethical questions about how we should live. He felt the need to explore philosophical beliefs that lead "from the immediate self into the vast world of nature."⁴ Deep ecology seeks to develop this vastness of being by focusing on deep experience, deep questioning, and deep commitment. It calls for a radical shift in consciousness and a deep recognition of what Naess calls, "*naturans egenverdi*" or the intrinsic value in nature.⁵ It does not see the world as a collection of isolated objects but as an intricate web of relations. This mode of being in the world, which Buber calls the I-Thou relationship and Naess refers to as "the widening and deepening of the individual self,"⁶ can be realized through the perception of the world in a gestalt perspective.

The reverential ecology of the Upanishads offers a holocoenotic worldview in which the interdependence and interconnections of the parts with the whole is an essential expression of cosmic and individual harmony. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, one of the principal Upanishads in the Vedanta tradition, resonates with the gestaltic "relational, total-field image" that Naess advocates in rejection of the "man-in-environment" image.⁷ The *Upanishad* bridges the Cosmic and the Individual through its myths of cosmic creation, dialogues, and dialectical exchanges. The paper's special emphasis is on the canto, *Madhu-Vidya* or the "Honey Doctrine," which reinforces the Upanishadic wisdom of the interpenetrating realities of the individual self and the cosmic self. In this all-embracing vision, *Prakriti* (all forms of animate and inanimate nature) is also seen as the 'Self' and revered.

The seers of the Upanishads were able to conceive of higher order gestalts in nature and were able to point at the state where man contemplating nature spontaneously experienced reality as a part of a totality without the interference of the "epistemological ego," which reaches out to dissect and analyze. The Upanishads represent the cumulative non-dualistic wisdom of Advaita Vedanta. The *Brahman*, the ground of being, is seen as manifesting itself at all the planes of mineral, vegetable, animal, and human kingdoms, both separately as well as a whole. The manifest universe is considered the *spanda* — the throbbing pulsation of the *Brahman* which is the source of all manifestation.

The great forces of nature (the “*Pancha Mahabhutas*” of earth, sky, air, water, and fire) as well as the other orders of life, including plants and trees, forests and animals, are all bound to each other within the great rhythm of nature called “*Rta*,” which encompasses everything from the flow of seasons, the functioning of the human body to the configuration of the planets and their rotation. Vannucci observes, “*Rta* determines one’s place in the universe, one’s duties and one’s functions and therefore one’s dharma as well as one’s rights.”⁸ The earth was worshipped as a mother goddess, resonant hymns like the *Prithvi Sukta* of the *Atharva Veda* stand testimony to this. The Vedic consciousness was rooted in the ecological concept of stewardship and also spelled out the dharmic code of “*sarva bhuta hita*”—the greatest good of all. Dwivedi observes that dharmic ecology upholds the concept of “*vasudhaiv kutumbakam*” (from *vasudha* (the earth) and *kutumba* (the extended family, which includes human beings, animals, and all living beings), which clearly states that “only by considering the entire universe as part of one’s extended family, can one develop the necessary maturity and respect for all other living beings.”⁹ The concept of ownership was heresy; veneration of the earth and the moderate consumption of resources were seen as the dharma of the householder as these lines from the *Prithvi Sukta* suggest:

O Earth who furnishest a bed for all.
 Let what I dig from thee, O Earth, rapidly spring and grow again.
 O Purifier let me not pierce through thy vitals or thy heart.¹⁰

The Upanishad begins with the grand cosmic metaphor of the *Asvamedha Yagna*—the horse sacrifice, which finds mention in the *Ramayana* and other epics. The ceremony was traditionally undertaken for expansion of territory, increase in progeny and the well-being of the country. It involved the letting loose of a royal horse that was followed by the king or his warriors. Anyone who hinders the horse’s progress is required to fight with the royal army to prove his supremacy. When the horse completes a successful circuit of the neighbouring kingdoms and returns to the capital, it is offered as sacrifice and the king who performs the sacrifice assumes the title of the emperor. However in the first *brahmana* of the Upanishad, the horse sacrifice is given a cosmic interpretation and its body is identified with the great scapes of nature. The dawn is the head of this sacrificial horse, the sun its eye, the wind its breath, the open mouth the fire, the sky is the back, the atmosphere is its belly, the earth the hoof, seasons the limbs, the months the joints, days and night the feet, the stars the bones, the clouds the flesh; the food in the stomach is the sand, the rivers the blood vessels, the liver and the lungs are the mountains, the herbs and the trees are the hair. The two sacrificial vessels which are traditionally placed in front of and

at the back of this horse are day and night, which arise out of the eastern and western seas. The idea of sacrifice as a means to account for creation goes back to the *Purusha Sukta* of the *Rig Veda*, wherefrom the members of the *Purusha*, the primordial cosmic person with a thousand heads, eyes, and feet, some part of the world is made. The *Purusha* by his sacrifice becomes the whole world; this cosmogony leads one to the vision of the Upanishads that “the spirit in man is one with the spirit which is the prius of the world.”¹¹ The *asvamedha* is also a profound example of what Gary Snyder refers to as the “deep world’s gift economy.”¹² Snyder stresses the importance of reciprocation since humans receive everyday, the gifts of the Deep World, from the air we breathe to the food we eat. To understand the true meaning of gift economy is to realize that one is living, “in the midst of a great potluck feast to which we are all the invited guests, and we also are eventually the meal”¹³ The body of nature is a perennial sacrificial site and one attains ecological realization when he/she perceives that energy-exchange between the hierarchies of various living systems is about “eating each other—almost as a sacrament.”¹⁴ By sacrificing the whole universe in place of the horse and also acknowledging his/her own part in this ritual, the individual sacrifices his ego, the fragment self which denies the perception of the cosmic oneness. “In every *homa* the expression *svaha* is used which implies the renunciation of the ego, *svatvahanana*.”¹⁵

The Upanishads distinguish between *a-para vidya* (lower knowledge) and *para vidya* (higher wisdom). Knowledge leading to the realization of the Absolute is considered *para vidya*. Everything else, including the textual knowledge of scriptures, is relegated to the realm of worldly knowledge, namely *a-para vidya*.

Madhu-Vidya: The Honey Doctrine, the fifth *brahmana* of the second chapter of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, is in the realm of *para vidya*. The leitmotif of sacrifice is continued in this story of Dadhyan, the seer, and the Asvin twins, divine beings associated with medicine and healing. The twins desire the secret teaching from the sage, but Indra, the head of gods, warns Dadhyan that his head would be cut off if he imparts the knowledge to anyone. So the Asvins take off Dadhyan’s head and substitute for it a horse’s head. Dadhyan declares the honey doctrine and consequently Indra carries out his threat, after which the Asvins restores to Dadhyan his own head. The danger and threat associated with the telling of this tale and its inaccessibility, even to the gods, is an indicator of the high value that is placed on this esoteric doctrine.

The Honey doctrine establishes the subtle relationship between the cosmic and the individual through images from the natural world. It is a powerful statement of the Upanishads that demonstrates how everything in this universe is organically related. Not only are the objective world and the subjective individual organically connected but also are the macrocosms and the microcosms, which are animated by the same consciousness. The Upanishad refers to the luminous ground of being that animates both the cosmic and the individual aspects of creations as the “*tejomayo'amrtamayah purusah*” (the shining immortal person).

Honey is used as a metaphor for the relational field. The first stanza reads:

This earth is honey for all creatures, and all creatures are honey for this earth.
This shining immortal person who is in this earth and with reference to oneself,
This shining, immortal person who is in the body, he indeed, is just this self.
This is immortal, this is Brahman, this is all.¹⁶

The Upanishad provides the vision of a grand gestalt of inter-being in which the five basic elements, the *pancha mahabhutas*, work in tandem for the well-being and abundance of the cosmos. The earth is absorbed into the ‘being’ of everything, and everything is absorbed into the ‘being’ of the earth. Like the earth that makes “everything a part of its own ‘being’ by absorbing everything into itself . . . so does every ‘being’ in the world suck the earth into itself and make it a part of its own being.”¹⁷

In the succeeding stanzas, the sun, moon, water, fire, air, four quarters, lightning, clouds, and space are described using the metaphor of honey. The bees and the honey are established in a relationship of inter-dependence. Honey becomes the grand metaphor of the cosmic nourishment that is present alike in the earth as well as in the individual. The seed in the individual, which is considered to be the immortal *Brahman*, is connected to the fertility of the water principle. The power of speech in the individual which is seen as a manifestation of *Brahman* is correlated to the fire principle. *Prana*, the breath and the vital principle in the individual is connected to the air principle. The eye is connected to the sun, so is the mind to the moon. The space in the heart of man, the *Hridayakasha* which is the seat of the higher emotions of harmony, love and peace, is connected to the limitless space of the universe. All these things are animated and interpenetrated by a single vital connecting principle namely, the immortal *Brahman*—the locus of all beings in whatever form.

Deep ecology provides a comparable platform. To understand the relational field, Naess points out that it is important to break away from

conceptions of the things as isolated entities out there. In the relational field:

A person is a part of nature to the extent that he or she too is a relational junction within the total field. The process of identification is a process in which the relations which define the junction expand to comprise more and more. The 'self' grows towards the 'Self.'¹⁸

Arne Naess refers to the growth towards this vast accommodating "Self" as "Self-Realisation (spelt with a capital S). The word in Norwegian translates itself as *Selv-realisering*, which indicates an active condition, not a place one can reach.¹⁹ It is a concept or a guideline: a way to see actions as part of a greater gestalt. If the self is expanded to include other people and species, the larger world becomes a part of our own interests. Naess finds this process of "Self-realisation," what he describes as, "a direction, starting from the self, moving towards the Self."²⁰

The quintessence of the Honey doctrine is given in verse fourteen, which begins with the statement, "*Ayam atma sarvesam bhutanam madhu; asyatmanah sarvani bhutani madhu*" (This self is like honey for all beings and all beings are like honey for this self).²¹ Krishnananda offers an organic interpretation of this metaphor by bringing in the picture of the great cosmic food chain: "The Cosmic Being is feeding upon the individual and the individual is feeding upon the Cosmic. They are inter-related like the mother and the child and much more correlated with each other in an organic unity . . ."²² When Arne Naess speaks about "organisms as knots in the field of intrinsic relations" and points out "the intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constituents of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same thing," there are resonances with the ancient *Madhu-Vidya* principle.²³

From ontology, *Madhu-Vidya* moves to the articulation of ethics in the last five stanzas. It speaks of "*dharma*" (the individual ethical code/ societal code/ moral code) as being the honey for all beings. Stanza twelve speaks of "*sathyam*" (truth) as being the honey for all beings. When the honey of these ethical precepts is savoured, *Madhu-Vidya* declares that mankind will be like honey for all beings, and all beings will be like honey for mankind. The culminating stanza brings out the micro/macro merger by saying that the Self is the lord of all beings. As all the spokes are held together in the hub of a wheel, so too in the Self, all beings, all gods, all worlds, all breathing creatures, all selves are held together. It is useful to compare this vision with the ethical vision of Deep Ecology which believes that: "The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human

life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.”²⁴ The moral imperative of deep ecology believes that a deep altruism will emerge when mankind drops the illusion of an ego-driven, independent existence—this is also the central vision of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*.

The fourteen verses of the Honey doctrine are incantatory in nature, characterized by repetition. A single word is replaced with every progressive incantation, which is essentially hologrammatic in nature, and each replacement is a signpost in the sacral gestalt which completes the esoteric knowledge of the self. Paula Gunn Allen writes about the significance of “repetition” in American Indian literature:

Repetition has an entrancing effect. Its regular recurrence creates a state of consciousness best described as “oceanic.” . . . In this way the participants become literally one with the universe, for they lose consciousness of mere individuality and share the consciousness that characterizes most orders of beings.²⁵

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad belongs to the category of an animistic text which does not distinguish between nature and culture, thereby being a self-evident illustration of environmental ethics. It is the best example of what Christopher Manes refers to as the, “‘animistic subject,’ a shifting, autonomous, articulate identity that cuts across the human/non human distinction. Here human speech is not understood as some unique faculty, but as a subset of the speaking of the world.”²⁶ Exegesis in this case does not alienate or silence nature but becomes the superior speech, *para vak*, which seamlessly unifies the universe in a vision of peace. By way of conclusion it is apt to quote Swami Krishnananda once again, “This is the Madhu-Vidya in quintessence—the contemplation of all things by the contemplation of anything.”²⁷

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NOTES

- ¹ White 1996, p. 12.
- ² Tarnas, 1991, p. 408.
- ³ Walsh, 1992, p. 77.
- ⁴ Naess, 1989, p. 3.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ⁸ Vannucci, 1994, p. 48.
- ⁹ Dwivedi, 2000, 10-13.
- ¹⁰ Griffith, 1895, p. 75.
- ¹¹ Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 39.
- ¹² Snyder, 2006, par. 37, <<http://www.resurgence.org/2006/snyder239.html>>.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, par. 39.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 22.

- ¹⁵ Radhakrishnan, 1953, p.50.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 201.
¹⁷ Krishnananda, 1983, p. 161.
¹⁸ Naess, 1989, p. 56.
¹⁹ Ibid., p. 9.
²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Radhakrishnan, 1953, p. 205.
²² Krishnananda, 1983, p. 167.
²³ Naess, 1989, p. 28.
²⁴ Ibid., p. 29.
²⁵ Allen, 1996, p. 250
²⁶ Manes, 1996, p. 18
²⁷ Krishnananda, 1983, p. 168.