

**The Tree of Cosmos – Its Roots and Branches :  
An icon of Epistemology and Ontology Retracing Evolution  
and Involution in Sanātana Dharma**

Joy Sen

**Introduction**

“Returning is the motion of the Tao; going far is returning.”

Lao Tzu in 'Tao Te Ching'

“It is probably true quite generally that in the history of human thinking the most fruitful developments frequently take place at those points where two different lines of thought meet.”

Werner Heisenberg

The present article forwards a logical discussion on an ancient archetypal image of the Tree of Cosmos. The Tree provides the roots and branches. It forwards movements between them tracing the order and process of evolution and involution in this world. It encompasses a discussion in three parts. In the first part, the basics are dealt with – the very basics of evolution. It is followed by a detailed discussion of the movements and dynamism in the image. The third part takes it forward to an expression, where the movements and dynamism forms the bases of the Vedas and the altars of realization.

**Part One**

**A Growing Idea**

The world of human evolution is treading the ladder of evolution. The upward journey is from the material to the spiritual. A simple example is that of love – the fundamental force that binds the universe – a couple; a family; an association; a large nation and more than that. But the journey begins somewhere, taking the first steps.

The ordinary steps of personal love, material love and other similar loves from an isolated standpoint is the beginning of the journey; the following ones are of intellectual love; and the more refined ones can be of moral, ethical and

humanitarian dimensions of love; and probably in the even higher steps, love becomes all-pervading and universal, which we begin to call spiritual and the truly altruistic planes of love. But all these steps could be seen as one whole – as one ladder, in and through which one power is manifesting in various levels. They are the same – a cascade!

There is the mention of the Cosmic Tree. At the root is that seed, that singularity itself which has bloomed to its diverse branches stratified in parts and levels. That root is spiritual love, the source of all other shades of love.

*Ūrdhva mūlam addhī śākhām (Gītā, Chapter 15, first śloka)*

It is affirmed that the binding force of unity is selfless love that we finally look for. This love is first cornered within an individual self-centered personality and then long, long later.....it expands to cosmic proportions. It essentially is that infinite self, the love of that higher reality that bounds this universe and all of us within that.

The infinity in itself is the power of endless permutation and combination of creative surges – and the bliss is in the enjoyment of the variety and scheme of things. This enjoyment is not in isolation but stitched to unity itself. It is like the manifold branches tied to their root.

It is said that the infinite scheme of evolution perpetually emanating out of that unity. Our purpose of life is to re-trace it back – from variety; from diversity; from the manifold to that unity.

### **Concept of Completeness**

It can be shown that the Tree represents that completeness, the totality – a complete hierarchy of human evolution moving from one lower level to the next higher one. He said there are other symbols too.....

The journey starts from the religion of the human at the crude material level, which is the cause – the darker shades of material existence. Then we move on to the refinement of that material religion at the moral, ethical levels; and even furthermore at the aesthetic-psychological (the trans-cultural level of humanity).

Finally, we as a group soul reach the highest perfection by penetrating the summit – the spiritual level. Reaching which the journey ends and then becomes complete.

### Parable of 'The Graduate'

The whole idea is like that of someone graduating out of school. But you take with you all the experiences in different years and levels of the school as you step beyond to higher levels of education. Then you, at times, come back to that school as a teacher, as a mentor. Your journey is made complete.

So transcendence is all immanence. Going beyond is coming back. That is the concept of completeness. Someone crosses the borders to become that beyond and from that beyond you get that complete seat, that complete viewport, that power to extend your universal embrace to assimilate all that have had been crossed or once transcended by being external to it.

'So it embraces all of it – like the rim of a circle embracing the spikes, the nave and the entire field, a perpetual living fire contains all within' (*Rgveda*, 2.5).

This is the completeness of being and becoming.

### Part Two

'The seer-wisdom realizes that supreme solar world in the form of a *Aśvattha* (*pīpal*) tree, where the branching of rays carrying the immortalizing waters (the *madhu*) reverts back to its roots at night and resurges again to flood the universe with the day light – they know the truth who are one with their Father in the heaven'.

Seer Dīrgha-tamā  
*Rgveda*, maṇḍala one, 164.20

The discussion on the 'Tree' as a complete archetype can be presented in the following sequence. The sequence begins with the seed and its germination; the cause (the previous seed) and effect (the future seed) of the growth of the tree; the cycles of its life, its turns, crests and troughs; the matching points; and the same plan, which is a pattern of the universe – the external reality and the inner universe – the reality within us. The sequence<sup>1</sup> can be forwarded in the following manner :

- **Parable of the seed and the cyclic process:** What does man see around him? Take a little plant. He puts a seed in the ground, and later, he finds a plant peep out, lift itself slowly above the ground, and grows and grows, till it becomes a gigantic Tree. Then it dies, leaving only the seed. It completes a circle – it comes out of the seed, becomes the tree, and ends in the seed again.

- **Cycles of cause and effect:** The universe with its stars and planets has come out of a nebulous state and must go back to it. What do we learn from this? That the manifested or the grosser state is the effect, and the finer state, the cause.

- **The rise and fall of waves:** The Tree produces the seed, which again comes up as another Tree, and so on and on; there is no end to it. Water drops roll down the mountains into the ocean, and rise again as vapor, go back to the mountains and again come down to the ocean. So, rising and falling, the cycle goes on. So with all lives, so with all existence that we can see, feel, hear or imagine. Everything that is within the bounds of our knowledge is proceeding in the same way, like breathing in and breathing out in the human body. Everything in creation goes on in this form, one wave rising, another falling, rising again and falling again. Each wave has its hollow; each hollow has its wave. The same law must apply to the universe taken as a whole, because of its uniformity.

- **The periodic nodes of turning or the tropics:** There is one more fact about this rising and falling. The seed comes out of the Tree, but has a period of inactivity or rather a period of very fine unmanifest action. The seed has to work for some time beneath the soil. It breaks into pieces, degenerates (dies) as it were, and regeneration (resurrects) comes out of that degeneration.

- **Out of what has the tree been produced?** Out of the seed; the whole of the Tree was there in the seed. It comes out and becomes manifest. So, the whole of this universe has been created out of this very universe existing in a minute form. It has been made manifest now. It will go back to that minute form, and again will be made manifest. This coming out of the fine and becoming gross, simply changing the arrangements of its parts, as it were, is what in modern times called evolution.

- **Involution precedes evolution:** We have to go one step further, and what is that? That every evolution is preceded by an involution. The seed is the mother of the Tree, but another Tree was itself the mother of the seed. The seed is the fine form out of which the big Tree comes, and another big Tree was the form, which is involved in that seed. The whole of this universe was present in the cosmic fine universe.

- **A priori-recognition of the involutory principle in an evolutionary process:** This involution and evolution is going on throughout the whole of nature. The whole series of evolution beginning with the lowest manifestation of life and reaching up to the highest, the most perfect man (Anthropic Principle), must have been the involution of something else. The question is: The involution of what? What was involved?

- **Unfolding of involved a priori universal intelligence as evolving individual and social intelligence:** The Tree comes out of the seed, goes back to the seed; the beginning and the end are the same....applying the same reason to the whole of the universe, we see that intelligence must be the lord of creation, the cause. At the beginning that intelligence becomes involved, and in the end that intelligence gets evolved. The sum total of the intelligence displayed in the universe must, therefore, be the involved universal intelligence unfolding itself.

- **Complete or perfect anthropic principle:** This cosmic intelligence gets involved, and it manifests, evolves itself, until it becomes the perfect man.

- **Macrocosm and microcosm are built on the same plan:** Applying the law we dwelt upon under macrocosm, that each involution presupposes an evolution, and each evolution an involution, we see that instinct – of the personal ego-animal level is involved or down turned reason. In this manner, each lower level is an evolution of a preceding involvement of a higher level. The latest scientific man admits that each man and each animal is born with a fund of experience, and all these actions in the mind are the result of past experience.

Evolving from a lower instinct level of animalism, intelligence plays an important role to involve reason. But reason is only a shadow of an immediate object, which is only highlighted by a light from above. The higher strands of this light are inspirations. Coming close to that source the changing shadows (or no shadows) are gone .....the vision is directly guided by the source. So evolution has to proceed further. And life goes on to reach these higher steps. This is sustainability. This is completeness. In the tree of a human life one traverses one's own evolution – from branches to roots: a movement from material instincts to refined values and subsequent spiritual truths.

The collective Tree of human lives is also the Tree of human history. In certain cases the Tree of human progress and development becomes an

embodiment of support and guidance. In the case of India, her progress and development has been an inverted one – a case of involution. Through her involution, we find the traversing from root to branches – a case of *ūrdhva-mūlam*, against which we can rightly posit the present retracing a complete hierarchy of the collective strength of a culture and a civilization owing much its roots, which is spirituality.

In the words of Sri Anirvan: “It may be debatable whether material history is the expression of an original idea; but it is an indubitable fact that spiritual history is always so. ‘It is of the One existence that yearning hearts speak in diverse ways’ – has said a Vedic seer (*RV*, 1.164.46); and this is true not only in an abstract way, but in a concrete form also. Like the mystic *Aśvattha* tree, ‘with its roots above and the branches below’, the Vedic tradition, in a broad sense, stands at the very source of almost all forms of spiritual cults. And the interpretation of this tradition can be attempted with best results if we do not place the Vedas on the isolated heights of the past, but with a total (complete) vision of the present retrace our steps to the roots discovering, with a penetrating insight, the links at every steps.”<sup>2</sup>

### Part Three

“The modern physicist experiences the world through an extreme specialization of the rational mind; the mystic through an extreme specialization of the intuitive mind.....to paraphrase an old Chinese saying, mystics understand the roots of the Tao (the archetype Tree) but not its branches; scientists understand its branches but not its roots. Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science; but men and women need both.”

Fritjof Capra  
Epilogue: Tao of Physics

“Considering this kind of creative process in analogy to that of the Rishi taking place in the mind of the Sthapaka (Architect or built-environmentalist), it will be clear that his vision was safely based on metaphysical conceptions, supported by continuous references to sacred scriptures and the effort to understand their esoteric meaning. This was not a simple intellectual acceptance or adherence (as known to our current system of degree and book-based education). The ancient artist had a deep feeling of being himself an integrated part of the cosmos and of participating in all its categories and

elements, a feeling acquired by innumerable generations in uncounted centuries of meditative experience.”

Alice Boner  
Vāstu-sūtra Upaniṣad

“The Vedic sacrificial altar was the origin of geometry.”

Swami Vivekananda  
Thoughts on Vedas and Upanishads

The first steps of the evolutionary journey are the steps where the individual personality traces the expanding steps to the cosmic and beyond. This follows the expansion of life represented by the *sūtra* (thread-line or Vāyu heading for transcendence). Hence it is *Kṛṣṇa* (Black or transcendence) *Yajurveda*. This is the ascendant and the path of deconstruction or the evaporating or Aryan path. The individual expanding to be the universal crosses the limits of the universe and crosses the domain of four quarters. This is the 'Lordship of four quarters'.

The involutionary journey i.e. transcendental un-manifest manifesting its universal manifest and everything (the individuals) are seen as the other half, the inverted domain, where the *sūtra* (thread-line or Vāyu as immanent or manifesting) is White or *Śukla* (Wheel) *Yajurveda*. This is the descendent and the path of construction. This is the descending or liquefying or Dravidian path (Southbound-UP), which is inverted, but equal and opposite of the Āryan path.

In the left-hand side part, the Black leads to White. Here involution follows evolution. This is the part that we are used to. In the right-hand side, the White leads to the Black. Here involution is the starting point to begin with. This is the inner hidden path.

### **The descendent following the steps of the ascendant**

The universal is acting through the individual. The impersonal is personified. The Brahman – the absolute, is personified as the head of priests – Brahman or Brahmanaspati. The descendent is now in the steps of the ascendant. The ordinary plane is ascending to the extra-ordinary. The extra-ordinary from behind, from above, from within is pushing everything forward. This is the inner role of Viśvakarmā, Tvasthā and Pūṣana, the triple-foundations that we have discussed in the first chapter. Now we shall see it from below. The hidden agenda of the descendent has to be interpreted from the point of view of the ascendant.

### The descendent (white) as the ascendant (black)

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, under the third chapter Madhu-kāṇḍa, the four cardinals are well laid out. The support from above (Madhu) is the aspiration of the soul (Agni). The cardinals of the four quarters are:

1. The eastern face is *R̥gveda*.
2. The southern face is *Yajurveda* (*Śukla* or operating as white-line).
3. The western face is *Sāmaveda* (the entry of the individual to the universal).
4. The northern face is *Atharvaveda* (The completing terminal of four quarters as Universal Brahmā or Mahat).

Beyond the four quarters is the fifth face. The upward face is Brahman itself (the transcendental Absolute). This is personified as Śiva (five-faced) and then Kumāra (six-faced). The fifth *Maṇḍala* of the *R̥gveda*, the *Śukla Yajurveda* and others have explained these transcendental faces of Śiva and the descending phase of Kumāra or Skanda or Subrahmanyam-svāmī (the principal R̥itwik). It is the twin polarity of Kumāra as ascending Vaiśākha and descending Kārtika that explains the seasonal circuits of Vaiśākha (spring) and Kārtika (autumn). But this has to be unlocked at the universal impersonal plane. There it explains the wheel or the Tao.

### The complementary which is the descendent

Now we have to look at the other half – the right hand part of Fig.1. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, we are provided with the reverse viewpoint. Here the descendent is making all preparations to manifest and reach to base-plane of the manifest. This is the anthropic principle. This is a priori or creation itself.

The altar takes

Jñāna-Pravāha

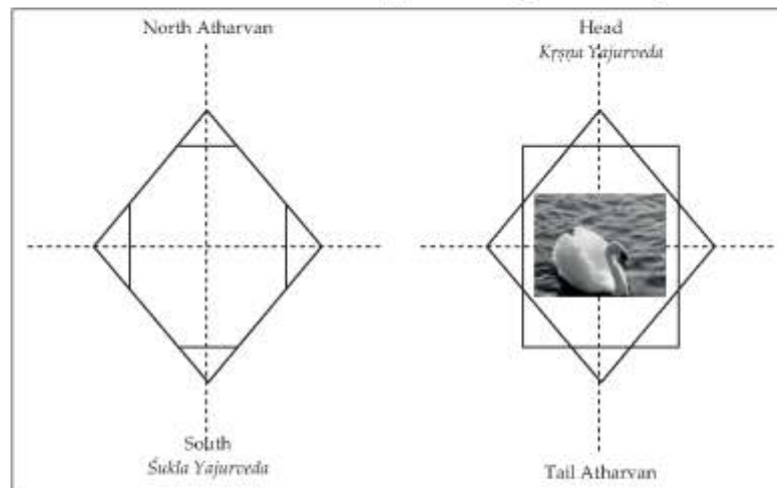


Fig.1: Juxtaposition of the two: Black (*Kṛṣṇa*) and White (*Śukla*)



the form of a bird – the inner original divine flame or the soul, who is Jātaveda – originally divine wisdom-carrier transplanted in matter and bounded existence. This is the sacrifice of the un-manifest towards the making of the path of inverted approach.

A set of inverted cardinals are made evident in the second chapter of this Upaniṣad (Section 2 – *mantra* 3). The cardinals of this inverted four quarters are explained by the two wings, the head and tail of the divine bird – the upward facing Ātman or Puruṣa or Haṁsa hidden within the inner cave (*Guhā-hitam*) of our individual existence, as a 'potential divinity' latent in all of us. The cardinals are:

1. The head face (conceptual north) is *Yajurveda* (*Kṛṣṇa* or operating as black-line).
2. The tail end (conceptual south or completing terminal of configuration) is *Atharvaveda*.
3. *Ṛgveda* and *SāmaVeda* are the sacrificial movements and posterior fruits [symbolized as *Dakṣiṇa* or movements from south (west-bound) and *Uttara* or movements from north (east-bound)]. They are the two wings – an opposite and complementary functioning of the built-in potential to fly (the tendency of an aspiring mind).

We therefore see how the creative movement is as a priori to the deconstructive movement. All creation is therefore not a fall of man but a precedent to the rise of man – his original divinity. This is the basis of the Vedic Altar.

The two together represents the journey from matter to spirit and from spirit to matter. They are:

1. Rarefaction by fire – *Ārya* (principle of *Aśva-krānta* or *Uttarāyaṇa*): It is a movement from earth – to water – (through fire) – to air (life) – to space and beyond. This is *Aśva-krānta* (the rising path – *Yūpa*, the deconstructive sacrificial altar).
2. Condensation by the life-giving waters – *Draviḍa* (principle of *Go-krānta* or *Dakṣiṇāyaṇa*): It is a movement from beyond – through space – into the creation of the five principles in the descendent (involution) and through 'life giving waters' (*soma*). This is *go* or

Viṣṇu-krānta (the step-down path – Ur-u-chrome – the constructive image-making altar).

### **Inversion of cardinals and their unity – two 'regulating lines'**

The East is the cardinal from which the sun rises every day. This is the beginning of things and *Pūrva* (say *pūrva-arcika* and *pūrva-mimāṃśā*), of all that is young and strong, beautiful, whole, fresh, full of hope and promise. But it is also a point that was once.

The West means decline, the end of the journey, of life, of hope, of activity, but also the end of worldly attachments, of joyful and painful bonds. It faces Night, the darkness of the great unknown, beyond which perchance a new day, a resurrection may be awaiting. Here the meaning of West is inverted.

The North and the South, in our northern hemisphere are connected with feeling of cold and heat, of darkness and light, of stability and volubility (say Egypt). In India, the opposite is the case: the south is the region of death, whereas the North represents the region of the Divine, of immortality. The complementariness between the ascendant (*Yūpa* or penetrating the Cage) and descendent (*Pañjara* or Cage in the making) is in effect the reciprocity of the backward and forward linkages.

- The upward expanding (rarefying or evolving) linkage from the microcosm-to-macrocosm is that involves deconstruction of individual personality) and
- The downward or contracting (condensing or involving) linkage from macrocosm-to-microcosm is that re-forwards the construction of individual personality or personification).

If the two are linked, then the descendent is not *Māyā* or Illusion but the precedent to the ascendant. This is again another way of equating image-making and hence image-worship within the image-deconstructing Vedic sacrifices. For the sacrifice is the death of all disjointed elements and actions in the individuality required from the re-creation of the jointed integral cosmos and thus it ensures the continuity (resurrection) of life.

The two courses of the Sun are considered to be diagonal (between two equinoxes and two solstices) and therefore are compared to the wind-lines, the diagonals crossing the square from corner to corner. These are lines (the two

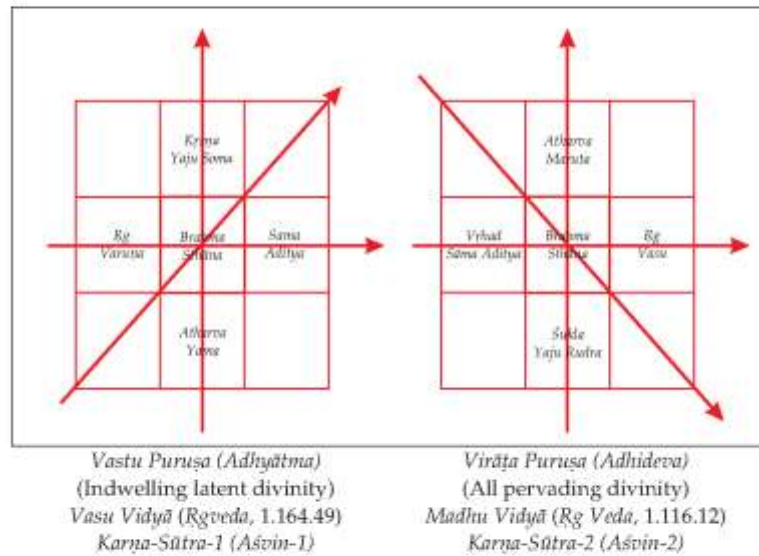


Fig.2: Juxtaposition of Evolution and Involution from Branch to Seed and from Seed to the Tree

*Karṇasūtras*) of great to greater powers and stress (limits of ex-tensions – *tana*), on the sensible material plane as well as metaphorically, when they symbolize the vivifying power of the Sun. In a plastic representation they give dynamic movement, speed and energy to all Forms. They are opposite and complementary – depicting the inner work of the twin riders of the vital (Aśvinis) and knowledge stream (*Vāka* or *Bṛhatī* or *Sarasvatī*). Together they compose the double – the *Jamala* of Brahman – and personify the impersonal. This is the complete Ṛṣihood – the legacy of the Brahma-Ṛṣis (*Śvetāsvatara-Upaniṣad*, 4.15).

### Conclusion

*Ubha Karṇa Hiraṇmayā* – 'Both are equal' – The essence of *Marma* or *Maramiya*.

In the *R̥gveda*, in *Maṇḍala* eight we get the evidences of the Cardinals:

- Both the diagonals are established and both the *karṇas* (ears) are penetrated.
- Both are crossed and that criss-crossing is the *Vajra – marma-vedha* (*R̥gveda*, 5.62.5; 1.61; 3.32.4). The descriptions of the criss-crossing by the twin riders (Aśvinis) are forwarded as One and form the basis of the *Maṇḍala*.

- Both circuits are gold-laden – *hiraṇmaya* as they, the twin riders reach unity – the diamond (*Vajra*) – the crystal of perfection.

One is the force of diverse forms or matter towards the one function – unity itself as one formless spirit and the other the manifestation of that formless to many forms and functions. They are equal and complementary.

The cosmic archetype of the Tree, the very mystical Aśvattha Tree of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, and later in the *Gītā* and that of the Bodhi-tree in Buddhism holds the key of the hidden complementarities. It is the science of a complete realization of the cosmos (*brahmāṇḍa*) as one own's body (*piṇḍa*) that perfectly bridges the universal soul (*mahat*) and the individual soul (*jīva*). In the words of Sri Aurobindo, the universal mind becomes the individual mind and the resulting state is what we call the Supramental and its divine power – the super mind.

Thus through the ancient archetypal image of the Tree of Cosmos – one is therefore able to correlate the roots and branches – the very icon explaining the domain. i.e., the epistemology and also the science of 'being and becoming' which is the ontology of retracing evolution and involution in *Sanātana Dharma*, the very timeless flow of Indian spirituality.

### References

1. The discussion is quoted from the two lectures on 'microcosm' and 'macrocosm' delivered in New York, USA on 19<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of February in 1896 by Swami Vivekananda.
2. Vedic Exegesis in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Volume one, RKMIC, Kolkata, 2001, pp.322-323.