

The Greek Mysteries
of
Apollo and Dionysus

From the beginning of civilization the worship of man was directed to the Sun as the source of light, warmth and life. The wisest of these men, were the men who had brought with them a memory of the ancient clairvoyance perceived behind this material fire and visible light to the non-material fire and an unintelligible light. The first and most potent of these the sun, they identified with the male principle, the creative spirit, the intellectual essence of the universe, and the second, the moon, with the female principle, the formative soul, the plastic substance.

The Sun mysteries of antiquity were established through knowledge acquired during initiation concerning the voyage of man to worlds of spirit and his encounter with the spiritual equivalents of light and darkness. What has been handed down to us in myths and legends consists of the content of the experiences undergone by an initiate in these mysteries in a way that could be communicated to the common people.

Such knowledge flows towards us from unrecorded times and echoes in the Vedic hymns under the form of *Agni*, the universal fire, which penetrates everything. The Rama of ancient legend was born into the Solar Dynasty and was a direct descendant of the Sun, and Krishna the 'Radiant one', was revealed to Arjuna as the radiance of a thousand suns.

This Sun worship also unfolded in the religion of Zarathustra who as an initiate into the Sun mysteries called this greatest of all celestial lights Ormuzd, or the God in light, and His adversary, the God in darkness - Ahriman. Later in the Zoroastrian tradition the initiate encountered Mithras the male fire and Mitra the female light. The initiate of Mithras felt that the physical Sun could not compare with what he perceived during initiation in the hidden grotto, the vault depicting the stars. There he invoked the Sun of mercy, the Fire of Love, Conqueror of evil, reconciler of Ormuzd and Ahriman, Purifier and Mediator who inhabits the soul of the holy prophets.

In Egypt adepts led their acolytes to the Pyramid of Gyza wherein the hopeful experienced the Temple sleep or journey of the soul to the underworld. During this initiation the acolyte travelled in the boat of Isis toward this same Sun under the name Osiris. For the Egyptian, darkness was a form of Antipathy a negative judgement – Light on the other hand expressed sympathy or a positive judgement.

Likewise, Moses underwent his Sun initiation on Mount Sinai where he experienced the power of lightning and fire in the burning bush. In this case it was the fire of wisdom that dispelled the darkness of ignorance. But it was left to the Greeks to cast these spiritual experiences into a sharper mould. To the clearer thinking Greeks, the light or Sun was the light of reason which was one and the same as the true love or Eros. Darkness on the other hand was foolishness hate, and an inability to grasp the first principles.

Consciousness

Each epoch experienced therefore, the mystery of light and darkness of Sun and Moon differently according to evolution and the development of consciousness. The consciousness of the Indian fluctuated between two states; that of sleep and wakefulness. On the one hand sleep meant an entering into the world beyond the senses where one met with the spiritual sun and on the other wakefulness meant an entering upon the world of Maya where one became entangled in the darkness of matter. The Indian preferred the sleep state whose consciousness relied on the Etheric body, or life body, and he only entered into the 'awake' state when he needed to do something in the physical world.

The Persian on the other hand lived equally in both sleep and awake states. He didn't shun the 'awake' state, and could live in both. In his awake state he perceived the God that existed in the darkness, in the material world and he called it Ahriman. In his sleep state he saw that there was a God in Light who existed in the Astral world and he called this Ahura Mazda or Ormuzd. The Persian could see this because he used the vehicle of his Astral body, whose physical manifestation in the human being exists in the senses.

The Egyptian on the other hand began to live less in the sleep state and more in the awake state. This means he didn't live in darkness and light as much as he lived in the world of sympathy and antipathy mentioned earlier. A negative judgment was antipathetic, a positive one was sympathetic. The Gods judged humanity and this judgement either resulted in sorrow or joy. The Egypto/Chalden used his sentient soul or the 'feeling' aspect of his soul as an instrument of perception.

The Greek consciousness descended more into the awake state. The memory of the initiate's journey to the worlds of spirit during sleep became less and less clear to him. The physical world and all its splendour and beauty became fascinating to him. The Greek therefore did not live in sympathy and antipathy but in thoughts. The light of reason or the Darkness of Error. The Greek lived in his intellectual soul or his intellect in order to make sense of the world.

Each initiation could therefore be said to have been 'coloured' by the state of consciousness of the epoch in which it was experienced. And it must be imagined that even after an epoch is over the same initiation rituals continued, petering off as they became no longer understood.

We know that the men of antiquity travelled from mystery centre to mystery centre in order to gain experiences and initiations in this or that mystery. When the Greeks travelled to Egypt in Alexander's train, they came into contact with the Osiris Isis mystery. The Greek brought back to his people an experience that had once been appropriate for the feeling soul, as it was experienced by the soul that was now conscious of the intellect.

It is in this way that the Egyptian mysteries of Osiris and Isis are reborn as the Greek mysteries of Apollo and Dionysus, the classic dyad of harmonic of the Eternal and the Divine or the Spirit and the Soul.

Apollo.

The myth is told as follows:

Leda, the daughter of the TITANS Coeus and Phoebe, was seduced by Zeus and because of this she was hunted over the whole earth by Hera, until she came to the island of Asteria (Delos) where she gave birth to Artemis the moon Goddess (Isis of the Egyptians) and soon after to Apollo, golden haired like the sun who would become god of music and the lyre, the god of prophecy, music and healing.

Apollo is said to have burst forth out of the deep night at Delos to be greeted by all the goddesses. The new-born god's very first action was to throw off his swaddling clothes and proclaim to the gods who had gathered, "Please give me my beloved Lyre and Bow; I'll cast prophecy to men, and make them know Zeus's perfect counsel."

He then set forth for Delphi where he came across a serpent who was laying waste to the country. He killed the monstrous serpent with his arrows and made the land safe and established his temple at Delphi.

Now let us try to understand this myth as an experience of the inner soul during initiation into the Sun mysteries of the Greek.

Firstly, all female archetypes point to the soul of the human being. Leda is therefore representative of the soul of the initiate. Zeus the great the omnipotent, on the other hand represents higher Wisdom or the higher man of the initiate. The Titans are the forces of the lower man, the animal nature. Hera signifies ordinary consciousness. Apollo is the sun—the ego.

Now let us put it all together. The Soul or Leda is the daughter of the lower man or the lower nature. She unites with the higher wisdom that is Zeus, but her ordinary consciousness fears it will be discarded when a higher consciousness is attained. The soul Leda finds a suitable place in which to give birth to the Ego or spirit Apollo. The Sun of this new Ego the Eternal enters into the acolyte during initiation and lights up in the soul enabling thinking to begin. The bow and the lyre signify the Temporal earthly soul that must be used by the eternal ego. The ego utilises the soul to penetrate with insight - sharp clear thinking that for its function leads to death and destruction of the brain itself, but brings about harmony to the disordered life of feeling. The lyre is the nervous system and brain that is played upon by the ego, the bow is the sharp thinking which is a consequence of this harmonic interplay.

This was taught to the initiate thus:

Apollo formed the twenty-eight moon-aspects, and thereby laid the groundwork for the twenty-eight nerves in man. Through Apollo, the nervous system was built onto the spinal column, thereby forming the whole upper body of man. For what appears as muscle can maintain its form only because the nerves are its shapers.

Thus the Greek knew that through the earlier sun-activity appeared what took form as brain and spinal column, and on this spinal column the twenty-eight aspects of Isis and Osiris work from outside. Therefore the Greek said that Apollo now worked upon

the nerves so as to achieve thinking within man. The Greek saw the nerves like the strings of a lyre.

The killing of the serpent represents a victory of the Eternal over the Temporal. The initiate experienced that knowledge came from death. Thinking is nothing more than destruction, but a necessary one. The destroyer of the serpent, is the symbol of the initiate who pierces nature with thought and subdues it to his will, transcending human animality. He purifies and expiates the soul and body.

We can see how the initiate into the Apollonian mysteries had come a step further in his soul experiences than the Egyptian initiate when we consider that the higher nature Osiris was killed by Typhon the lower nature and the soul Isis had to cherish the fragmented body until the higher nature could be born again as Horus. This had to be left unfinished for it had to be added to by the Greek who could now make use of the higher nature to enlighten thinking not just feelings.

In the beginning, this Solar male initiation was only in the company of a few cosmogonic gods who ruled over the local divinities in Greece. The Temples of Apollo were situated in the high mountains. The hopeful student would travel to the city of Delphi at Hellas, surrounded by precipices and overhung by the two crests of Parnassus. From afar the hopeful students could see the gleaming bronze Victories, brass horses and innumerable gold statues that were placed along the sacred way, arranged like a guard of heroes and gods around the Temple. In a cavern behind the temple there was a fissure from which escaped cold vapours. These cold vapours induced inspiration and ecstasy. Plutarch relates that in very ancient times a shepherd, having sat down at the edge of the crevice, began to prophesy. When his predictions became true the priests took possession of the place and dedicated it to the god. From this came the institution of Pythia, intermediaries, young or old women called the Pythia or Pythonesses, whom they had sit over the fissure upon a tripod. The vapours rising from the abyss gave these women convulsions, strange attacks and provoked in them an ecstatic vision. 'Ecstasis' refers to the "feeling" or "subjective" dimension. In this sense, to "stand outside oneself" is to commune with the life-feeling to the point that the feeling-enjoyment "outshines" the limitations of self. The priests interpreted, translated and arranged their often confusing oracles according to their wisdom and experience. Strange as it may seem, it is from this teaching that there came order, harmony and civilization, the clear logical thought that we have attributed to the Greeks!

However in the forests and deep valleys Apollo was eclipsed by the brilliant procession of feminine divinities the lunar goddesses Artemis, Astarte, Demeter and Ceres who ruled the mysterious earth forces, calling forth dangerous passions and the blind power of nature at variance with the cool reason of thinking taught at the Apollonian mountain-top Temples. The women priestesses of these feminine divinities conducted voluptuous rites, and a chaotic practice of occult arts.

The time had come in which the feminine had to give way to the masculine and so warring between the rivals and their followers followed in bloody battles. The priests of the Sun over and against the priestesses of the Moon.

The priestesses of Hecate were successful in reviving the old cult of Bacchus, they took the name Bacchantes, to mark their supreme domination of man. There were bloody sacrifices of human victims while naked figures danced lascivious dances in the depths of the forest invoking Bacchus the double sexed one with a bulls face. The primitive Bacchantes were the druidesses of Greece and they were all powerful.

On the other hand, the priests of Apollo and of Jupiter perched high upon their rugged mountains topped with sharp peaks, overhung with frequent storms were powerless against these Druidesses who began to threaten the very altars of the sons of light.

It was Orpheus of Arpha, a Dorian from Thrace who had achieved Egyptian initiation and whose name means the one who heals with light who managed to calm the tempters of the people with his melodies and his calm authority bringing to them the cult of Dionysus. He was responsible for establishing the supremacy of Apollo in Delphi and became known as the son of Apollo. He reconciled the religion of Zeus with that of Dionysus who functioned as another aspect of Apollo.

Dionysus

Apollo shared the temple at Delphi with his resonant complement and younger half-brother Dionysus, commonly known as the god of the vine and celebration. But Apollo and Dionysus were the active divinities of the Temple and were equal sons of the One Great Brightness, dyadic half-brothers of Father Sky.

When Orpheus saw that the people were neglecting the solar gods in particular Apollo he was inspired to bring to them another aspect of his nature since to Orphic thought, Dionysus and Apollo were two different revelations of the same divinity. Apollo was the Eternal Ego, the inspirer of medicine, law and poetry, justice and the harmony of ego and soul through bodily purification, while Dionysus represented the Divine soul that seeks truth with the heart, and wills concerning the interior of things. He held the mysteries of life, of past and future incarnations, of the relationships between soul and body, the heaven and earth.

The Initiation into the Solar cult of Dionysus caused the initiate to have experiences that were expressed as follows:

Zeus, the fertile god of brightness is his father and Semele, a Theban princess, his mortal mother. The great goddess Hera, Zeus's wife, was extremely jealous of her lover's wanderlust and tried to destroy the pregnant Semele. In her anger, Hera tricked Semele into asking Zeus to show her his true nature. When the god of infinite brightness let himself be seen, Semele, a mere mortal, was consumed. But Zeus gathered the unborn child and put him into his own thigh. Soon after, Dionysus was born from Zeus's left leg (note: twice-born, once of flesh and once of spirit) and placed him into the hands of Hermes, who took him to his mother's family.

Hera was not fooled and sent the Titans to destroy the child. The Titans ripped Dionysus apart and ate his dismembered pieces. Zeus raged, hurled his bolts of lightning and reduced the Titans to ashes. It is said that out of those ashes humanity

was born, so that although every man and woman may be full of that Titanic strife, they also carry a spark of divinity within them always.

But the Titans had not consumed all of baby Dionysus. A sliver from his heart was saved and from it he was resurrected. Zeus sent Hermes, the divine messenger, to take the young child to the forested Mt. Nysa to hide the baby from Hera's jealous rage.

To further conceal Dionysus from Hera when they arrived at Nysa, he was changed into a young goat. The forest nymphs raised the young goat-Dionysus on the nectars of the forest. The satyrs (half-goat, half-man) taught him flesh-feelings, pleasure, and in time exuberant sexuality. The Muses taught him poetry, song, and dance, while the sileni (half-man, half-horse, found near the source of springs) taught him wisdom. Surrounded with such blessing and help, he grew quickly. During this growing period Dionysus, in the form of the young goat, was referred to as Dendrite. Dendrite spent his early years at Mt. Nysa until he was at ease with feelings. Alive with native animal feelings, brimming with energy, flush in pleasure, full of breath, simple in countenance, his confidence was grounded in blessing as grandmother Rhea ("divine Flow"), Zeus' mother, the mother of brightness, then initiated the mature Dendrite into the secret women's mysteries. By her initiation, he was changed from his goat form back to his "human" and godly form, known everywhere as Dionysus, dio-nysa, the god of Nysa, a forest of celebration.

Let us now look at the real experience of the initiate that is depicted in this myth.

Dionysus is the son of Zeus (Divine) unites itself with the earthly soul, a mortal mother. Hera Semele the ordinary consciousness is jealous of this union of the soul with the higher consciousness and stirs up the lower nature of man (Titans) to tear the immature Ego or Eternal element to pieces. The divine Ego is present in man in the intellect. But the higher consciousness nurses and cares for the immature child until it is ready to be reborn. It is born twice. At first it is attached to the lower nature and is half lower and half higher until it encounters Rhea or the feminine wisdom of the Sophia and is initiated by her and becomes human.

Notice that as a goat he is called dendrite a word that has become a medical term for the tree-like nerve endings. Here we see his connection, like Apollo to the brain and nerves.

Rhea's key role in the divine transformation indicates how the divine wisdom must be bestowed by a goddess, not attained, "known" or conquered. Dionysus emerges from Dendrite in the midst of a divine submission and baptism into the secret women's mysteries the mysteries of the Divine Sophia.

Dionysus' goes on to teach concerning ecstatic celebration (and wine-making). Some might find a contradistinction between the Apollonian mysteries related to reason, to the heavens and to order and the chaotic, ecstatic mysteries of Dionysus. But one must consider what the priests and adepts came to know. If man was to fully descend into the world of mater so that he could grasp his intellect he needed the aide of wine. Wine brings the consciousness of a man fully into the body, fully into his nervous system. Not at the time he drinks it, but afterwards.

The festival of Dionysus was celebrated at Thessaly in the enchanted valley of Tempe. To this place the hopeful postulants would travel, suffering all forms of tests until they reached the Temple as the sun dawned. The most advanced of them was then taken into the Temple and put into a trance. Here he experienced the marriage of Persephone and Dionysus in spirit. His soul, the daughter of heaven Percephone unites with his ego – the Eternal Dionysus.

For the months of winter, a cycle of four Dionysian festivals was central to the ancient religious calendar. The first of these was near the winter solstice, and the climax of this cycle was the Great Dionysia, near the spring equinox, where the people of Athens re enacted the story of Dionysus.

Under the reign of Peisistratos (influenced heavily by Onomakritos, Court Seer and famous Orphic Rhapsodist and initiator), the people marbled the seats on the curved hillside below the Acropolis of Athens to honour the Orphic telling of the story of Dionysus. This is the first appearance of public theatre in the Western world.

The play was originally called "Tra-godia" -- "goat song" -- it is the story of how we grow from being torn-apart to being of dual nature to reaching the ultimate attainment of Ego-hood.

On the wall in the temple of Apollo is written his two famous sayings: "Gnothi Seaton" and "Medan Agan" -- commonly known as "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess."

The way to self-knowledge was followed through initiation rituals of antiquity. From epoch to epoch man learned more concerning himself and his place in the cosmos. This internal process of self-discovery was the discovery of the ego that would ultimately lead to the discovery of the higher Self the spirit – “Know Thyself” or “Gnothi Seaton. ‘Nothing in excess’” reminded the human being that he must not shirk the calling to initiation but also that he must be careful not to go beyond his abilities. "Medan Agan" "Do not leave the middle,"

GNOTHI SEATON

MEDAN AGAN