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**His was a spirit that stooped from larger spheres
Into our province of ephemeral sight,
A colonist from immortality.
A pointing beam on earth's uncertain roads,
His birth held up a symbol and a sign;
His human self like a translucent cloak
Covered the All-Wise who leads the unseeing world.**

Savitri Book One, Canto Three

***A Passage from Savitri,
Book One, Canto Two:
From Sri Aurobindo's letters to Amal Kiran ****

*Near to earth's wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit,
Winging through worlds of splendour and of calm,
O'erflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.
Ardent was her self-poised unstumbling will,
Her mind, a sea of white sincerity,
Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.
As in a mystic and dynamic dance
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies,
Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault,
Moves in some prophet cavern of the Gods,
A heart of silence in the hands of joy
Inhabited with rich creative beats
A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
Or golden temple-door to things beyond.
Immortal rhythms swayed in her time-born steps;
Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
In this earth-stuff and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives.
The great unsatisfied godhead here could dwell.
Vacant of the dwarf self's imprisoned air,
Her mood could harbour his sublimer breath
Spiritual that can make all things divine:
For even her gulfs were secrecies of light.
At once she was the stillness and the Word,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire,
A continent of self-diffusing peace.*

*In her he met a vastness like his own;
His warm high subtle ether he refound
And moved in her as in his natural home.*

In 1936, Amal Kiran, who at that time was the only person to whom Sri Aurobindo had shown certain passages from *Savitri*, asked the Master: "Are not these lines, which I regard as the *ne plus ultra* in world-poetry, a snatch of the sheer Overmind?"

Sri Aurobindo replied :

This passage is, I believe, what I might call the Overmind Intuition at work expressing itself in something like its own rhythm and language. It is difficult to say about one's own poetry, but I think I have succeeded here and in some passages later on in catching that very difficult note; in separate lines or briefer passages (i.e. a few lines at a time) I think it comes in not unoften.

This was in 1936. In 1946 Sri Aurobindo remarked about his attitude ten years earlier:

At that time I hesitated to assign anything like Overmind touch or inspiration to passages in English or other poetry and did not presume to claim any of my own writing as belonging to this order.

Considering this, and and considering also that several lines of other poets which he had hesitated about were later adjudged by him to be from the Overmind, it seems certain that this passage which he had ascribed to the Overmind Intuition, a plane defined by him as not Overmind itself but an intermediate level, would have been traced by him to the supreme source if he had been privately asked about it again.

These 31 lines of the 1936 version were subsequently changed slightly here and there, and expanded to 51. In 1946, in answer to another query from Amal Kiran, Sri Aurobindo made another important comment on this passage describing *Savitri* :

The image of the bird and the bosom is obviously not new and original, it images a common demand of the human heart and does it by employing a physical and emotional figure so as to

give it a vivid directness in its own kind. This passage was introduced because it brought in something in Savitri's relation with the human world which seemed to me a necessary part of a complete psychological description of her. ... As for the line about the strength and the silence of the Gods, that has a similar motive of completeness. The line about the "stillness" and the "word" gives us the transcendental element in Savitri, for the Divine Savitri is the word that rises from the transcendental stillness; the next two lines render that element into the poise of the spiritual consciousness; this last line brings the same thing down to the outward character and temperament in life. A union of strength and silence is insisted upon in this poem as one of the most prominent characteristics of Savitri and I have dwelt on it elsewhere, but it had to be brought in here also if this description of her was to be complete.

* *Based on SABCL 29, pp. 765-6*

About Savitri

Introduction by Huta *

In 1954, the Mother revealed to a small group of sadhaks:

Savitri is occult knowledge and spiritual experience. Some part of it can be understood mentally, but much of it needs the same knowledge and experience for understanding it. Nobody here except myself can explain Savitri. One day I hope to explain it in its true sense.

On the morning of January 18, 1968 the Mother started to explain *Savitri* to me, and on January 28 she gave the name "About Savitri" to this work. I may indicate how we proceeded. The Mother read out the passages from *Savitri* and then after a deep contemplation gave her comments, which I tape-recorded and later transcribed. I also prepared paintings inspired by the passages, according to her instructions.

Our work continued up to 9 August 1970, when the Mother had to suspend it on account of her health. The last passage she could comment on is halfway through Book One, Canto Four.

The Mother arranged for her explanations of Book One Canto One to be published in February 1972, along with the paintings corresponding to each passage which I had made according to her guidance and inspiration. Three more volumes of "About Savitri", containing the Mother's explanations of Canto Two, Canto Three and the first half of Canto Four are in preparation and awaiting publication.

The Mother's wonderful comments give a unique insight into Sri Aurobindo's masterpiece, in the light of her own experiences during the time when our work was going on. My profound gratitude to Sri Aurobindo and the Divine Mother for their Grace and Love.

Huta

* For a more detailed account by Huta, see Invocation 7 pp. 5 - 6

Savitri

The supreme revelation of
Sri Aurobindo's
vision.



[The Mother gave this message for "About Savitri" – her explanations of Savitri, illustrated by paintings done according to her instructions by Huta.]

About Savitri - 2(a) :

Book One, Canto Two, first part

*Awhile, withdrawn in secret fields of thought,
Her mind moved in a many-imagined past
That lived again and saw its end approach:
Dying, it lived imperishably in her;
Transient and vanishing from transient eyes,
Invisible, a fateful ghost of self,
It bore the future on its phantom breast.
Along the fleeting event's far-backward trail
Regressed the stream of the insistent hours,
And on the bank of the mysterious flood
Peopled with well-loved forms now seen no more
And the subtle images of things that were,
Her witness spirit stood reviewing Time.*

This is the way in which the poem is built. We will know the story of her life because she remembers. At that celestial moment of her existence she remembers all her past life, and then it will be told to us.

*All that she once had hoped and dreamed and been,
Flew past her eagle-winged through memory's skies.
As in a many-hued flaming inner dawn,
Her life's broad highways and its sweet bypaths
Lay mapped to her sun-clear recording view,
From the bright country of her childhood's days
And the blue mountains of her soaring youth
And the paradise groves and peacock wings of Love
To joy clutched under the silent shadow of doom
In a last turn where heaven raced with hell.
Twelve passionate months led in a day of fate.
An absolute supernatural darkness falls*

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*On man sometimes when he draws near to God:
An hour comes when fail all Nature's means;
Forced out from the protecting Ignorance
And flung back on his naked primal need,
He at length must cast from him his surface soul
And be the ungarbed entity within:
That hour had fallen now on Savitri.*

For those who have come upon earth fully conscious of their entire being and conscious of their Origin, there is at first a period when this consciousness gets veiled by the physical life and the body-consciousness. It withdraws deep inside and waits for the hour when the outer circumstances will make it necessary for that inner self to manifest and to become fully active in the body. And generally, as life is organised, it is some more or less dramatic event that makes this change not only possible but needed.

Even in those who have come fully conscious, because they are compelled to take birth in the body of a child, their consciousness withdraws for many years, more or less, and has not the full activity that it had in other worlds. But some circumstance, some event tears off the veil and the inner consciousness takes back its place and its activity. It is that that is fully described in these lines of *Savitri*.

It is only when the outer crust of the ordinary life is violently broken by some unexpected and tragic event that the inner consciousness has the opportunity of taking the place of this outward movement and governing fully the whole being. From the point of view of the growth of consciousness, that is the justification of all these dramatic events. An eventless life is not often a very progressive one.

*A point she had reached where life must be in vain
Or, in her unborn element awake,
Her will must cancel her body's destiny.
For only the unborn spirit's timeless power
Can lift the yoke imposed by birth in time.
Only the Self that builds this figure of self
Can rase the fixed interminable line*

*That joins these changing names, these numberless lives,
These new oblivious personalities
And keeps still lurking in our conscious acts
The trail of old forgotten thoughts and deeds,
Disown the legacy of our buried selves,
The burdensome heirship to our vanished forms
Accepted blindly by the body and soul.*

The true self of Savitri belonged to the Eternal Consciousness and naturally was free. But when accepting to take a body upon Earth, this true self is covered by so many layers of different consciousness that unless it takes a very complete resolution to manifest and to overcome all the obstacles, it cannot act freely. Now she was put in front of the expected catastrophe in her life, which externally would put an end to the joy of her existence, and there was only one way to overcome this fatality. It was to make the highest Spirit and its Power intervene directly, in order to counteract the laws of destiny.

-

*An episode in an unremembered tale,
Its beginning lost, its motive and plot concealed,
A once living story has prepared and made
Our present fate, child of past energies.
The fixity of the cosmic sequences
Fastened with hidden inevitable links
She must disrupt, dislodge by her soul's force
Her past, a block on the Immortal's road,
Make a rased ground and shape anew her fate.
A colloquy of the original Gods
Meeting upon the borders of the unknown,
Her soul's debate with embodied Nothingness
Must be wrestled out on a dangerous dim background:
Her being must confront its formless Cause,
Against the universe weigh its single self.
On the bare peak where Self is alone with Nought
And life has no sense and love no place to stand,*

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*She must plead her case upon extinction's verge,
In the world's death-cave uphold life's helpless claim
And vindicate her right to be and love.
Altered must be Nature's harsh economy;
Acquittance she must win from her past's bond,
An old account of suffering exhaust,
Strike out from Time the soul's long compound debt
And the heavy servitudes of the Karmic Gods,
The slow revenge of unforgiving Law
And the deep need of universal pain
And hard sacrifice and tragic consequence.*

By the power of her origin and the legacy of the One, she must overcome all the laws established in manifestation, conquer the resistance of all that has been organised since centuries and millenniums, and show that the Supreme is All-Powerful over his own creation.

In all the world as it is now, death and dissolution reign. She wants to abolish their law in order to establish the Supreme Life and Consciousness. It is the story of that conquest that will be told in the epic.

*Out of a timeless barrier she must break,
Penetrate with her thinking depths the Void's monstrous hush,
Look into the lonely eyes of immortal Death
And with her nude spirit measure the Infinite's night.
The great and dolorous moment now was close.
A mailed battalion marching to its doom,
The last long days went by with heavy tramp,
Long but too soon to pass, too near the end.
Alone amid the many faces loved,
Aware among unknowing happy hearts,
Her armoured spirit kept watch upon the hours
Listening for a foreseen tremendous step
In the closed beauty of the inhuman wilds.*

It is a very vivid description showing that a stupendous power and energy is needed to face circumstances when you know them in advance. Man is

always complaining that he has not been given the power to know what will happen to him. But there is not one man in a million who would have the strength, the quiet calm, to face circumstances if he knew them in advance. This is just to give the description of that condition. It is because Savitri is conscious of the Divine in herself that she knows what will happen and yet has the quiet strength to face it.

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*A combatant in silent dreadful lists,
The world unknowing, for the world she stood:
No helper had she save the Strength within;
There was no witness of terrestrial eyes;
The Gods above and Nature sole below
Were the spectators of that mighty strife.
Around her were the austere sky-pointing hills,
And the green murmurous broad deep-thoughted woods
Muttered incessantly their muffled spell.
A dense magnificent coloured self-wrapped life
Draped in the leaves' vivid emerald monotone
And set with chequered sunbeams and blithe flowers
Immured her destiny's secluded scene.
There had she grown to the stature of her spirit:
The genius of titanic silences
Steeping her soul in its wide loneliness
Had shown to her her self's bare reality
And mated her with her environment.
Its solitude greatened her human hours
With a background of the eternal and unique.*

It is because no human being knew what she knew that she could get exclusively supported by the power of her Spirit. She did not have to face human anxiety, because human beings did not know. So she was exclusively wrapped in the Power, the mighty Power of the Spirit. And that is why she could quietly face the dreadful circumstances.

The forests, the hills, were a very good background for the circumstances, because they were the expression of a powerful Nature, silent and

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magnificent. She felt supported by this beauty and this grandeur, which was not throwing upon her the vibrations of anxiety.

*A force of spare direct necessity
Reduced the heavy framework of man's days
And his overburdening mass of outward needs
To a first thin strip of simple animal wants,
And the mighty wideness of the primitive earth
And the brooding multitude of patient trees
And the musing sapphire leisure of the sky
And the solemn weight of the slowly passing months
Had left in her deep room for thought and God.
There was her drama's radiant prologue lived.
A spot for the eternal's tread on earth
Set in the cloistral yearning of the woods
And watched by the aspiration of the peaks
Appeared through an aureate opening in Time
Where stillness listening felt the unspoken word
And the hours forgot to pass towards grief and change.
Here with the suddenness divine advents have,
Repeating the marvel of the first descent,
Changing to rapture the dull earthly round,
Love came to her hiding the shadow, Death.
Well might he find in her his perfect shrine.
Since first the earth-being's heavenward growth began,
Through all the long ordeal of the race,
Never a rarer creature bore his shaft,
That burning test of the godhead in our parts,
A lightning from the heights on our abyss.*

Here it is revealed that the way out of Death for the creation is Love - Love, not as it is falsified and deformed in the human consciousness, but Love in its essence and its pure Origin. It is this Love that found the way to manifest through the consciousness and the life of Savitri.

All manifestations of Love in the world had always been deformed and

reduced to need and desire. For the first time a human consciousness was capable of manifesting Love in its simple and magnificent purity - the Love that is entirely and totally divine, free from all desire and all selfishness, all narrowness and all egoism: the Love that exists for the joy of loving and is at once giving and receiving, at the same time in the same vibration. This is the Supreme Power that is capable of transforming the world and making it ready for the Divine Manifestation.

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*All in her pointed to a nobler kind.
Near to earth's wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit
Voyaging through worlds of splendour and of calm
Overflew the ways of Thought to unborn things.
Ardent was her self-poised un stumbling will;
Her mind, a sea of white sincerity,
Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.
As in a mystic and dynamic dance
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies
Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault
Moves in some prophet cavern of the gods,
A heart of silence in the hands of joy
Inhabited with rich creative beats
A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
Or golden temple door to things beyond.*

It is a description of a being that is not shut up in the small limits of humanity. It contains the consciousness of the Beyond.

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*Immortal rhythms swayed in her time-born steps;
Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight
Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives.
A wide self-giving was her native act;*

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*A magnanimity as of sea or sky
Enveloped with its greatness all that came
And gave a sense as of a greatened world:
Her kindly care was a sweet temperate sun,
Her high passion a blue heaven's equipoise.
As might a soul fly like a hunted bird,
Escaping with tired wings from a world of storms,
And a quiet reach like a remembered breast,
In a haven of safety and splendid soft repose
One could drink life back in streams of honey-fire,
Recover the lost habit of happiness,
Feel her bright nature's glorious ambiance
And preen joy in her warmth and colour's rule.*

This is the poetic description of her nature - the nature of her being that comes from higher and more perfect worlds, the worlds that intend to manifest upon earth but have first to prepare earth in order that she is ready to manifest them. That is just why Savitri has come down: to prepare the earth for the coming of the New World.

In this description there is a strong stress on peace and joy, equanimity and constant smile. The more things are seen in their totality, the more limitations are overcome, the more time and space become present, the more the joy can be constant and the peace unshakable. It is only the narrow limits created by separateness that have created this suffering, this anguish and this anger. With the descent of a higher consciousness comes a happy smile and a quiet peace that are never disturbed.

Sri Aurobindo has announced that Savitri has prepared the world, and now the consciousness that she carried in herself has come down upon earth and is preparing to manifest.

*A deep of compassion, a hushed sanctuary,
Her inward help unbarred a gate in heaven;
Love in her was wider than the universe,
The whole world could take refuge in her single heart.
The great unsatisfied godhead here could dwell:*

*Vacant of the dwarf self's imprisoned air
Her mood could harbour his sublimer breath
Spiritual that can make all things divine.
For even her gulfs were secrecies of light.
At once she was the stillness and the word,
A continent of self-diffusing peace,
An ocean of untrembling virgin fire.
The strength, the silence of the gods were hers.
In her he found a vastness like his own,
His high warm subtle ether he refound
And moved in her as in his natural home.
In her he met his own eternity.*

This is the description of Love in its essence, not the Love that is known upon earth and is mixed up with so many egoistic movements that it has got out of recognition and is become only the expression of selfish desires. It is the Love that is as vast as the Universe, equal to all and to everything, and asking nothing in exchange for what it gives.

(to be continued)

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[We are thankful to Huta for permission to present this uniquely valuable material recorded by her, in serial form in our journal. Please note that for this work, the Mother made use of the first one-volume edition of Savitri which appeared in 1954.]

The Legend of Savitri: a mythic background

*Talk by Professor Manoj Das
at Savitri Bhavan on March 12, 2000*

In his Author's Note to Savitri Sri Aurobindo mentions that the tale of Satyavan and Savitri is "one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle." Professor Manoj Das is uniquely qualified to speak on the mythic background to the Savitri story, and its connection to other myths belonging to the same cycle.

When it was suggested to me that I should speak on *Savitri* here, I knew very well that several profound talks had already been given, based on one aspect of the great epic or another. Some friends may be interested in the mythical background of the very theme of *Savitri*, I thought. When I say the theme of *Savitri*, I mean the theme of a mystic approach to death and its possible conquest. As you all know, in Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*, in the first chapter, it has been clearly stated that there are five original time-defying aspirations which mankind has tried to realise since the dawn of human consciousness. Practically all human activities can be grouped under these five pristine goals of conscious life, which are: God, Light, Freedom, Bliss and Immortality. For each of these lines of development, these lines of quest, we can find sufficient matter in India's mystic heritage to construct almost sagas of human endeavour and adventure. Today I will confine myself to the last of these five aspirations of humanity: the quest for immortality.

When we start to speak of myths, at once we are reminded of the fact that myths are often the victims of popular misunderstanding and wrong understanding. What is a myth? I will very briefly touch on the nature of myth, to the extent that it is relevant to the subject today, otherwise that becomes a very long and very profound topic in itself. Very briefly speaking there are two kinds of myth. The first represents a sudden revelation, the sudden spiritual realisation of a mystic, which he puts into a form; the form

may be a story, or just a simple description which may be given a visual form by one of his disciples. In the course of time the truth of the realisation behind the form is forgotten and, depending on how the raw form is understood, new stories and legends are attributed to it. A classic example of this process is the image of the dark goddess Kali dancing on the breast of the white Siva, which many of you would have seen. Not only seekers from the West are puzzled by this image, even most modern Indians can't understand it, and wonder what kind of bizarre composition is this, Kali dancing on Siva! Now, let us go back to a remote time, when a rishi is meditating on certain issues of life, life vis-a-vis this earth. And a sudden experience dawns upon him, an experience concerning the relationship between eternity and running time. This is a subject which has always exercised the minds of great philosophers, intellectuals, scientists and of course mystics. We belong to time, a cycle of time, which has a past that we have already passed through, the present we are passing through now, and a future which lies ahead of our experience. Now this passing time, this time made up of moments, days, hours, weeks etc., is, we are told, a projection into space of a time in which there is no past, no present, no future, it is one unified time. Practically, mentally, this is a mindboggling concept: how can there be one time? And how can it be projected onto space and become time past, present and future? Suddenly the rishi visualises the relationship between eternity and time, the image comes to him like this: Siva, lying supine, unmoving, represents eternity. Siva means the eternal. The name Kali is a form of *kal* or time - in Sanskrit *kal* means time. And Kali is the *prakriti* bound to time, with one leg raised, in eternal movement, wearing human heads as a garland representing all the destruction and creation that goes on. And she is dark - because we never know what is going to happen the next moment. Bound to this space and time, we do not know where we are going to place the next step, we do not know whether we will stand or if we are going to fall down; so her whole movement, which is a precise rendition of what is to come, remains veiled from our knowledge, from our ken. Hence the image of dark time as a dynamic posture of Kali, marching forward, firmly founded on eternity. Now when the rishi comes to communicate this vision of his, probably one of his artist disciples makes a picture of it. And in times to come the original idea, the truth and the revelation which descended into the seer for a moment, has receded into the background. New stories, new legends must

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be formed to justify this picture. How do you otherwise explain to seekers what is this grotesque, this fantastic composition?

Now this is how myths sometimes hide in seed form within them a profound revelation of consciousness. Needless to say, they have nothing to do with happenings in the gross physical world. There is another kind of myth which has for its contour gross physical events which did take place along the annals of time-bound history, but in this case there is always a very close intermixture of what happened on the surface and what happened within. That is to say, such stories are allegorical, wholly or partly. I will give you another example, and here we come very close to our topic, the quest for immortality, the revolt against the phenomenon of abrupt, brusque and arbitrary interference of what is called death into our life as human beings.

I am sure you all know the story of Nachiketas, a boy who is a witness to his father's performance of a *yajna*, or fire rite. This is a particular kind of sacrifice by which one gets rid of all one's attachments, by giving things away. Through the medium of the physical symbol of aspiration that is fire one is really offering one's attachments one after another, each represented by some physical object. The rishi in question is getting rid of all his possessions, he is giving away everything he has. While performing the *yajna* he is making a donation of all that he has to other people, to people in need and to other rishis. And his young son sees all this. In this myth, the surface story and the inner truth run parallel. The little boy thinks, "My father is also very much attached to me, and once this auspicious moment of *yajna* passes, if he has not got over his attachment to me, he will not be completing the very function of his *yajna*." So quietly the boy comes closer to his father and says, "To whom did you give me away?" - as if to remind him that he ought not to forget to dedicate him to a right master. The father, the Katha Upanishad tells us, says, "Oh, I give you to Yama."

That is what the story tells us on the surface. And, we are told, Nachiketas quietly walks to the abode of Yama, the God of Death. The god is not at home. For three days and three nights Nachiketas waits for the return of the god of Death. When he comes, the god is so pleased with this little boy's patience and perseverance that he offers him three boons in lieu of his three days of endurance. The first boon the boy asks is, "Let my father feel complete peace and happiness in his heart, because he has given his dearest object, that is myself, his son, to you. Nothing should remain in his heart to give him

any anguish." "Thou hast asked, it is already fulfilled", Yama replies. "Give me the knowledge of the heavens" is the second boon Nachiketas asks for, and he is given the knowledge of the heavens. As a third boon he asks "Tell me the mystery of death. What happens to one's being, (the word 'soul' is not being used yet) what happens to one's being after the body has collapsed? Is that the end?" Taken aback, Yama says, "I did not expect this from a little boy like you, and the answer to this question is very complex and difficult. I suggest that you withdraw this question and ask for some other boon - prosperity, long life, lasting happiness... something which will be tangibly enjoyable to you." But Nachiketas very humbly, smilingly, politely, keeps on insisting: "O compassionate God, I know you are not only the god of Death but also of Dharma, (the keeper of the inner law that sustains man along the path of his ultimate destiny). You can never deviate from your word. You must oblige me by granting that boon." Yama ultimately yields and reveals to him what he asks for. And this seems to be the first time in the Upanishadic domain that we come close to the knowledge of the soul.

First, Yama says, we are told, that when you speak of a human being, it is not just a human body, not just a life energy, not just a thinking mind. Far greater and superior to all this, there is the soul, and that is the timeless and deathless wealth which you have. And this soul is immortal, hence one can achieve immortality only when one becomes alive to one's soul - when one has discovered one's soul and started living in the soul, no longer being exclusively identified with the body or the thinking process or the feeling process. This is the first time in the record of India's spiritual exploration that we come across this great achievement in Man's quest for immortality. And here, in this myth, the story part and the allegorical part must be read together. No father can ever say, at a particularly auspicious moment, words like that to his son, as if he is cursing him: "I am giving you to Yama." What he means is, "I offer you to this project of research on the mystery of death, take up this quest, take up this exploration, and discover what exactly Yama stands for, what death means." And this waiting for three days and three nights: Yama's abode is not a geographical location, and Yama is not an entity who will be going out and be away from home for some time, so that a visitor has to wait for him. No, for three days and nights Nachiketas is in trance, he is in a condition of perfect meditation, and as a result of this he is able to come into contact with this deity and invoke the grace of Yama, and

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in this way the knowledge of the soul has come to him. This is the allegorical part of the whole story which the Upanishads would never declare openly, because the very term Upanishad means 'to sit close by': only the initiate who deserves to come closer to the guru would be given that knowledge, for others it is just a story. But the quest for immortality, we see, is embedded in the earliest myths of India.

It is very difficult to say, chronologically, exactly which one is the earliest, but we can definitely identify the first half a dozen myths of India, and one of the earliest is the myth of Samudra Manthana, The Churning of the Ocean. Long before human beings were created, the earth was dominated by the earlier children of Nature, the Asuras, the titans. Now just as with mankind, amongst which are godly human beings, devilish human beings, mediocre human beings, but all constitute humanity, so among the titans there were demons, there were giants, some were virtuous, but they were all titans, very powerful beings. They were powerful not only physically, but had great daring and craving for glory, for tyrannical merciless authority - these things characterized the titans. In other words they were the very crude representative symbols of ego, which gradually, with the passing of the age of titans, came to mark human consciousness and continues to dominate us today in greater or lesser degrees. But the titans were the direct incarnations of the very institution of ego. And while on one hand there were the titans, on the other hand there were the gods. Even the early gods - this is all symbolic - even they had not achieved immortality. So the process of achieving immortality began with the churning of the ocean. Again it is a symbolic story. As you know, the ocean represents consciousness, both in Indian Vedic mysticism and in other ancient cultures too; and as Sri Aurobindo explains in so many letters, when you dream of the ocean it is a symbolic vision of one's consciousness, what is happening in one's consciousness. The lotus in Sri Aurobindo's symbol, resting on the waves of water, that is the avatar manifesting in consciousness. I won't go into all the details of the symbolism, that would be too time-consuming. The churning began with the Mandara mountain as the churning rod - that again has its own symbolism; and Vasuki the Serpent King being used as the rope for churning - Vasuki the serpent is always the symbol of energy: just as Kundalini is the symbol of occult energy in the human make-up, so in the earth it is Vasuki which holds the centre of earth-energy. Ananta or 'Infinite' is another name for

Vasuki. So Vasuki is being used: that is, with this great energy, an exploration of consciousness is going on, in exactly what way we do not know, but the symbolic vision is of the churning of the ocean, in quest of the nectar which would bring immortality to these struggling beings. But it is significant that the power of ego is being made use of, the titans are being made use of for this purpose by the gods. A conjunction of these two mighty primeval powers seems indispensable. Both are powerful, but the titans are marked by physical prowess, whereas the gods are marked by prowess of consciousness, idealism, commitment to progressive trends. And when the nectar ultimately comes out of the churning process, the Divine has to see to it that it does not fall to the lot of the titans, because they should not become immortal. If they did, that would be the end of this creation, it would become a great theatre of ego and arrogance and mutual strife and competition for no other goal than establishing egoistic superiority over one another. Hence what we see here is neither moral or immoral, it is supra-moral. The Divine has to go beyond all these concepts and see to it that immortality does not fall to the lot of the titans.

That is the earliest myth about the quest for immortality that we come across. The tale of Nachiketasa comes later; by that time, humanity has been created. But then, there are hundreds of examples to demonstrate that even when one has realised the soul, even then, one does not accept death as something which is simply to be ignored. Just because I have realised my soul, I know that I am immortal in my soul, I know that this body will fall one day, I do not stop bothering about the phenomenon of death altogether. Something still rankles.

You know the famous encounter recounted in the Mahabharata, between Yudhishthira, the eldest Pandava, and Dharmavaka, who is again Yama in the form of a heron. Dharmavaka puts a series of questions to Yudhishthira. They are wonderful questions and so are the answers. To this very day we find them so psychologically sound. Questions like this: "What is it, by giving up which one never grows poor?" The profound wise man's answer will be no different from the one Yudhishthira has given. The answer is 'Desire' - because my poverty can be measured in terms of how many desires I have, how many are fulfilled and how many are not fulfilled. If I have a desire for five cars and I have only one car, I am poorer by four cars. If I have no desire at all for any car then there is no question of my being poorer. Let me

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not narrate the whole series of questions and answers here, for that will consume all the time at our disposal. The last of the questions Yudhishthira is asked is, "What is the most surprising experience in life?" Yudhishthira answers, "At every moment we see human beings dying, yet those who are alive conduct themselves in a manner as though they themselves were never to die. What is more surprising than this?" But in several places Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have given a hint: that somewhere deep within us the knowledge of immortality lies hidden. It is because something in us knows that we ought to be immortal that we are ever reluctant to accept death as the ultimate truth. And that is why, despite all the knowledge of soul and everything, the revolt against death continues and acceptance of death has never been so spontaneous as it ought to be after the realisation of the soul. It is because there is also a truth in that revolt.

The fight against the phenomenon that is death has been carried on along several different lines: scientific, occult and spiritual. I won't go into the first two. Coming to the spiritual line alone, we find the next significant example of this victory over death in the life-story of a young rishi called Markandeya.

One reason why this is very significant is that in the Mahabharata it is Markandeya who relates the story of Savitri. And Markandeya's own life was marked by a grand experiment in winning a victory over death. Markandeya was the son of a rishi called Mrikanda, who was childless; as such he undertook *tapasya* - askesis - to get a child. He was offered two alternatives: he could either have a child who is a genius, but will live for only twelve years, or a child who will live for a hundred years, but be a stupid fellow. He was asked to choose. And in that elated moment Mrikanda chose for the first option. He said, "Let me have a child who will be worthy of rishi." So the child was born, and named Markandeya, which means 'son of Mrikanda', and it is said that at the age of six he was taking classes on the Rig Veda - not as a student, but teaching students and other rishis. Such prodigies are always possible - in our own time you may have heard of a child prodigy, known as the child of Lubeck: in his fourth year, when he was four or five, he was giving talks on the fourth dimension to professors. Such prodigies are possible; but in this case it was not a freak, but a child born with a consciousness which was quite mature, and who had the knowledge and wisdom inherited from his past experiences in earlier lives. Probably his vital memory too was entirely present with his present incarnation. And by the time this wonderful boy

Markandeya was ten years of age his father's smile had disappeared. By the eleventh year his father and mother were weeping all the time. Just before he reached his twelfth year the boy, intrigued, asks his parents, "What is the matter? For the last two years I don't remember having ever seen either of you smile?" And the father breaks down and tells him what has happened and says, "Now I know I was a fool to have asked for the first choice, I would have been happy even with a stupid son!" Then Markandeya corrects him saying, "I did not expect to hear such a statement from a rishi of your stature. Temporarily your consciousness has been clouded by ordinary foolish human feelings. You should have told me sooner, but now anyway let me tackle my destiny myself."

So Markandeya goes away from his family to a solitary spot, he sits down there and concentrates in himself until he becomes completely one with eternity. There is a yogic discipline by which one can completely identify oneself with eternity, transcending the ego-oriented identity of oneself and one's time-bound destiny. Now when one becomes one with eternity in every atom, in every molecule of one's being, in the fullness of one's consciousness, with nothing tied to the phenomenal world, so that nothing at all belongs any longer to the temporary, transitory time, then one's individuality ceases to exist for some time, one is no longer a person, a person who can be identified by any kind of features or qualities. So the folklore version of this story says that at the appointed hour the messengers of the god Yama came and tried to throw their noose around Markandeya to drag him away; but suddenly Shiva stood up and destroyed these messengers or scared them and they fled. The fact is that at the moment of death - this is universally accepted by mysticism - at the moment when a person is leaving his body, some subtle emanations are always present around him. There have been many people whose statements we have no reason to disbelieve who have glimpsed such emanations. So these emanations come, but they can't see Markandeya, he is invisible, he is simply not there, he has become completely identified with eternity at the moment when he is supposed to die. And once that moment has passed, his physical destiny is simply nullified. Once that moment has passed and the messengers, the emanations, have departed without having located Markandeya, he comes out of his trance. And it so happens that at just that moment seven great rishis are passing by. Markandeya bows down to each of them, and each of them blesses him, saying, "Live long". So in this way Markandeya is endowed with a very very long life, in course of

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which in the Vana Parva of the Mahabarata we find him visiting the Pandavas while they are in exile. While they are discussing the great character of Draupadi (for Draupadi is perhaps the strongest woman character ever created in the entire world literature) Yudhisthira asks Markandeya, "Have you ever, O great sage, come across any other example who can match Draupadi in strength of character?" And Markandeya answers, "Yes, O King, there was another princess and her name was Savitri, she was the daughter of the King of Madra." (Madra was in what is now Afghanistan.) "She married Satyavan, the prince of Salwa." (Ancient Salwa corresponded to the modern Rajasthan desert, it was a great green country in those days.) And then he tells the story of Savitri. So we find Markandeya first narrating the story of Savitri, a very significant link between the great task undertaken by both.

Now, this effort by Savitri had been preceded by another wonderful effort made by another lover, Ruru. Before writing *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo had written another poem on this theme, and so successfully executed it, in *Love and Death*, the tale of Ruru and Pramodvara. In his poem Sri Aurobindo makes her name Priyumvada. Ruru and Pramodvara love each other and they are about to marry when one day, as Ruru in the early morning is preparing a bouquet to present to Pramodvara, she is bitten by a snake. As Ruru looks at her, she falls down. Ruru comes running to her as Pramodvara's eyes say, "Why did this happen to me? I did not bargain for this, I have no desire to pass away from your company!" Stunned but determined, Ruru takes up the body of Pramodvara; he would not allow the body to be cremated or buried. For the first time we see a relation between Love and Death; for the god of Love, Madan, moved by the tremendous anguish of Ruru, offers to help him to find out what has happened to Pramodvara's soul. And with the help of god Madan, to cut the story short, Ruru enters the nether worlds, where the newly dead spirits are still lingering. And there, after a lot of dialogue with the god of Death, a compromise is struck: Ruru would sacrifice half the length of his remaining life, and Pramodvara would leave the realm of death and come back to life.

Pramodvara comes back to life. It is a certain conquest over death, but still a compromise, not a complete victory. When Markandeya speaks of Savitri, we come to the possibility of a complete victory. This is a long way from the beginning, from the *samudra manthana*, the churning of the ocean,

to the episode of Savitri. But as we know, the full greatness of the legend of Savitri is brought out by Sri Aurobindo who raises it from a legend to a symbol. He shows it as purely a battle in the vast world of Consciousness, and the victory has to be a fact of consciousness, an achievement of consciousness. And moreover an achievement of consciousness that is not at the cost of anything which has been created. What I mean is, when I realise my soul, and realise my immortality through my soul, I am ignoring the aspect of my body, the other areas of my being. What Savitri is concerned with is a conquest where ordinary life and the life divine must come together. I am sure many of you will remember the lines in the Epilogue where the significance of this conquest has been brought out in a few words:

*All now is changed, yet all is still the same.
Lo, we have looked upon the face of God,
Our life has opened with divinity.
We have borne identity with the Supreme
And known his meaning in our mortal lives.
Our love has grown greater by that mighty touch
And learned its heavenly significance,
Yet nothing is lost of mortal love's delight.
Heaven's touch fulfils but cancels not our earth ...
All that I was before, I am to thee still, ...
Our wedded walk through life begins anew,
No gladness lost, no depth of mortal joy.
Let us go through this new world that is the same,
For it is given back, but it is known,
A playing-ground and dwelling-house of God* (p. 719-20)

In other words, this change is not at the cost of the physical life as it is, not at the cost of the world which Mother Nature has created with so much effort and over the aeons. Mortal love, despite all its weaknesses, is after all a projection, a diluted projection of Divine Love.

What is great here is that this mortal love, which the ascetic tradition pooh poohs, laughs at, ridicules - and undoubtedly there is much in it which deserves to be ridiculed - but in the totality of its perspective even this mortal love can become divinised, and it can also play a subtle role through which one could realise the love divine.

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So this is the most significant aspect of this line of development, man's life vis-a-vis death, which comes to the forefront in the episode of Savitri. So far as the soul's immortality is concerned, the Indian concept may have its parallels elsewhere also, for example in Greek mythology, where we find the story of Alcestis and Admetas. Admetas is destined to die, but again the occult guardians yield to a compromise: if someone else is prepared to die for Admetas, then he would continue to live. No one is prepared to do that but Alcestis, his wife. She comes forward and dies in his place. Hercules, the great hero, on one of his many great missions, comes to their palace. Now according to Greek tradition, if a death has taken place recently the guest should not be informed about it; the guest should be treated as if nothing had happened; all the attention must go to the guest. It should not be revealed to him that some tragic incident had preceded his arrival at home. So he is not told that Alcestis, his would-be hostess, is no more. But as he is departing from the palace he comes to know about it. He rushes and catches hold of the carrier of the soul of Alcestis and forces him to surrender the soul back to the body of Alcestis, which is still lying there. Here again, as in the tale of Ruru and Pramodvara, there is also a kind of sacrifice that Alcestis makes for the sake of her husband's life.

Then I am sure you all know the legend of the Sphinx, one of the most significant of Greek myths. You see, many of mankind's early myths and legends are lost to us. Most of the Hebrew ones, apart from those preserved in the Old Testament, are lost. But between these two great treasuries of myths, the Indian and the Greek, we sometimes come across wonderful meeting points. One wonders if some of the followers of the rishis had migrated there or I don't know how it happened. Now the Sphinx episode is such a magnificent myth! Along the lonely road, on the hilltop, lives a strange creature, with a woman's face, the body of a lion, the paws of a dog and a serpent for its tail. And whoever happens to pass by is stopped by this Sphinx and asked a question: "What is the creature who walks in the morning on four legs, as the day grows on two legs and in the evening on three legs?" You must answer it. If you cannot answer it by sundown, you will lose your life. However wise a traveller may be, however he may scratch his head, he will never come across the answer to the question: "What is the creature who walks in the morning on four legs, as the day grows on two legs and in the evening on three legs?" And by sundown, whoever has failed to answer

- and everybody failed - the Sphinx pounces on the helpless traveller and tears him asunder. But one day Oedipus happens to be passing by, and when this question is put to him, he instantly replies, "I am the answer." The Sphinx is taken aback. "What do you mean, you are the answer?" "I, Man, is the answer. Man in his infancy crawls on all fours, two hands and two legs, so in the morning he walks on four legs; as the day of his life grows he walks on two legs as an adult; in the evening of his life he takes recourse to a stick, a third leg; so in the evening he walks on three legs. So I myself am the answer." The moment he has answered, the Sphinx jumps down to its own death.

This is an expression of the Upanishadic truth, that the day a person knows his true self, death dies for him. Death is an illusion, and as Sri Aurobindo says, "Death is a question Nature puts continually to Life, and her reminder to it that it has not yet found itself." So the day a human being has found him or herself, death dies for him. The illusoriness of death is indicated by the very composition of the Sphinx: it is not a reality, it is a conglomeration of objects that cannot possibly be put together. And just like an illusion death also disappears. That is the essence of the Upanishadic truth embedded in the graeco-roman myth of the Sphinx.

So, friends, this is just a brief introduction to the mythical background of *Savitri*, but I hope that somehow it helps us to appreciate the profundity of all the experiments and the efforts and askesis, all the *tapasya* which lies behind the divine prospect which Sri Aurobindo puts forth through his treatment of the legend of *Savitri*.

Savitri, Books Eight and Nine

Talk by Dr. M.V. Nadkarni

at Savitri Bhavan on March 5, 2000

This talk was the concluding session of the Savitri Study Camp held in the Beach Office Hall of the Sri Aurobindo Society from February 23 onwards. As has now become customary, the final session of the camp was held under the trees in the Savitri Bhavan garden - a very joyous meeting of many Savitri lovers. Dr. Nadkarni gave a summary of the themes studied during the camp, covering Books Eight and Nine of the epic.

Last year when we met here, we read the concluding part of Book Seven, Canto Seven. Now it looks to me as if those magic lines have created a vibration which has brought here many more people than were here last time. Those magic lines were about the cosmic consciousness which Savitri attains. And once she attains the cosmic consciousness, as we have seen in this study camp when we began the study of Book Eight, then begins Savitri's yoga with death.

I don't call it a confrontation with death. You and I confront death, but Savitri doesn't. She does the yoga of death. And she undertook this yoga not for her own sake, but to free us from the hold of death. She does that to make a spiritual community possible, she did that to make Auroville possible, and we are very very happy that when we read about Savitri dealing with Death in Books Eight and Nine, we are once again here in this wonderful atmosphere of Savitri Bhavan.

There are several peculiarities about Book Eight: one of them is that it is the shortest book in the poem; another is that it consists of only one canto, which is not called Canto One: it is called Canto Three for various reasons. And the most important and interesting thing about it is that this book has 177 lines, of which 108 remain exactly what they were in the very first draft of *Savitri* made by Sri Aurobindo in October 1916. The poem as a whole underwent expansion many, many times. Some cantos were revised and

expanded 18 times, or more. But this particular canto has 108 lines that are exactly the same as Sri Aurobindo first wrote them down in 1916. He subsequently changed 25 lines and added 44 new ones. We know from Nirod-da's reminiscences that during the last year when they were working on *Savitri*, after Sri Aurobindo had finished dictating the long passage which comes before the concluding paragraph of Canto Two of Book Six, he looked at Nirodbaran and asked, "What now remains to be done, any other parts?" Nirod-da answered, "Yes, the Book of Death and the Epilogue". And Sri Aurobindo seems to have said, "We'll see about that later." Well, that 'later' didn't come, and there are all kinds of speculations about why it didn't come, but there is so much in *Savitri* that there is no point in speculating about things which are not there. I think we will concentrate on what is there, and as you see this is called Canto Three. Here the editors have given a helpful note: *"The Book of Death was taken from Canto Three of an early version of Savitri which had only six cantos and an epilogue. ..."* In that early version this part was Canto Three. So they have retained this title to highlight the fact that this book has not received much subsequent revision at Sri Aurobindo's hands. They say: *"It was slightly revised at a late stage and a number of new lines were added, but it was never fully worked into the final version of the poem. Its original designation, 'Canto Three' has been retained as a reminder of this."*

And of course there are other reasons too. As you know, the action that is described in *Savitri* takes place within one day, within 24 hours. This was the day when Satyavan was to die, and the dawn of that day is described in Book One, Canto One. The time span between about 6am and 9am is described in Canto Two of Book One. After that comes the flashback of Ashwapati and his yoga, Savitri's birth and growing up, etc. - and we are still waiting at the time of Book One, Canto Two for the flashback to finish. So now here, in Book Eight, the flashback is over, and we are ready to continue the story from where we left it at the end of Canto Two of Book One. Now comes the narration that describes what happens between about 10 am and noon of that day. And therefore naturally this would be Canto Three, because it continues where we left off at Canto Two. So there are various ways in which we can understand why this is Canto Three.

As we will see, this is a brief canto and what happens in it is very simple and straightforward: that day in the morning Savitri approaches Satyavan's

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parents and seeks their permission to accompany Satyavan as he goes out for his daily work in the forest. They go off together and Satyavan is very delighted, as Savitri has never before gone out with him into the forest. She has heard about it often from Satyavan. Satyavan has many friends there: the trees and birds and deer, the lakes and hills are all friends, he grew up in that environment, and now for the first time he is taking Savitri with him to explore it.

Please remember that this is what is called *jeshtha amavasya*, *jeshtha* which is the hottest month of the year, and *amavasya* the darkest night of the month; and Satyavan has almost forgotten that he should not be speaking so much, he shouldn't be exposing himself to the sun. But he is excited, he has forgotten time and he has gone up to a tree, he says, "I'll just finish one last bit of work - I just have to finish cutting some dry wood for the kitchen and the sacrificial fires ..." He is going up and chopping the branches of the tree, and suddenly his entire body is racked with pain. As you know, Savitri was the only one who knew that this was the day when Satyavan must die. Nobody else knew about it. So Savitri is as it were waiting for death to strike. She knows this is going to be the day, but she does not know exactly at what time it was going to happen. And then Satyavan comes and lies down on the ground with his head on Savitri's lap. I'll read a few lines so that you can get the flavour of this poetry, which was written 35 years before most of the rest of the epic.

*But as he worked, his doom upon him came.
The violent and hungry hounds of pain
Travelled through his body biting as they passed
Silently, and all his suffering breath besieged
Strove to rend life's strong heart-cords and be free.
Then helped, as if a beast had left its prey,
A moment in a wave of rich relief
Reborn to strength and happy ease he stood
Rejoicing and resumed his confident toil
But with less seeing strokes. Now the great woodsman
Hewed at him and his labour ceased: lifting
His arm he flung away the poignant axe
Far from him like an instrument of pain.*

*She came to him in silent anguish and clasped,
And he cried to her, "Savitri, a pang
Cleaves through my head and breast as if the axe
Were piercing it and not the living branch.
Such agony rends me as the tree must feel
When it is sundered and must lose its life.
Awhile let me lay my head upon thy lap
And guard me with thy hands from evil fate:
Perhaps because thou touchest, death may pass."...
But now his sweet familiar hue was changed
Into a tarnished greyness and his eyes
Dimmed over, forsaken of the clear light she loved ...
But once before it faded wholly back,
He cried out in a clinging last despair;
"Savitri, Savitri, O Savitri,
Lean down, my soul, and kiss me while I die."
And even as her pallid lips pressed his,
His failed, losing last sweetness of response;
His cheek pressed down her golden arm. She sought
His mouth still with her living mouth, as if
She could persuade his soul back with her kiss;
Then grew aware they were no more alone. (p. 564 - 565)*

There is another presence, a third presence, and the two concluding lines of the canto tell us who this presence was:

*She knew that visible Death was standing there
And Satyavan had passed from her embrace. (p. 566)*

Satyavan is dead, the God of Death is facing them and another character is introduced in this epic poem: Yama, the Lord of Death. Now a great deal has been said about the God of Death, in the Puranas, in the Upanishads, in the Gita, in the Vedas and so on. But Sri Aurobindo's characterisation or understanding of the God of Death here is in many ways unique. In the Vedas Yama is very often given as another name for the Supreme Lord; and he has also very often been described as 'the controller of *dharmā*', *dharmaraja*. He is the one who controls righteous conduct. These two

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aspects Sri Aurobindo does not emphasize. Here he emphasizes another aspect, which is of Yama as the power which resists the manifestation of the Divine.

Here Yama represents the rock-most bottom of the inconscient. But as we know, beneath this rock-most bottom, the bottommost part of the inconscient, there is the superconscient - but Yama has not yet realised this. As we will see in the succeeding cantos and books, there is a very very interesting development here. As Savitri proceeds, confronting the God of Death, the God of Death is made to realise himself, and for the first time he is being given an opportunity to realise his true self. Under Savitri's grace as it were, the God of Death realises he is really the God of Love masquerading as the God of Death. In other words, Death has really no essential reality. Behind it there is some other truth.



Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have spoken a great deal about the conquest of death, as we all know. The physical conquest of death on earth is very often regarded as one of the aims of the Integral Yoga which Sri Aurobindo and the Mother developed. But at a first glance, this might seem to be the most materialistic aim any yoga could have. Most yogas regard the body as the most material part and have therefore concentrated on the soul and its immortality. Now here is a group of people who look as if they want to cling on to the body, so they have made the immortality of the body the aim of their yoga.

This is only a popular myth. In fact Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have revealed many new secrets about death. We won't have time to talk about them in detail here, but I do feel that it is essential to refer to some broad outlines of their approach to death. For one thing, they have very clearly



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said that victory over death is possible only if two conditions are fulfilled: first, that we have no egoistic attachment to the body and bodily life; and secondly, that we be entirely free from any fear of death. Death can be conquered if you have no attachment to the body, and if you have absolutely no fear of death. Now I have spoken about both these conditions in the course of this camp in Pondicherry and supported them by quotations from Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's writings. They point out that both these things become possible by growing into the immortal part of our being. There is a mortal part of our being, as it is, and an immortal part of our being. We must grow in the consciousness of the immortal part of our being.

Now very often the question is asked, 'What is the proof that man has an immortal soul?' And secondly, 'What exactly is the content of this immortality, what do you mean by immortality?' Sri Aurobindo has written very glorious paragraphs on this and tells us that once you grow in the consciousness of your soul, once you have felt the breath of your soul, once you have experienced what your soul is, you will never raise this question of whether the soul is immortal or not. For you will instantaneously feel immortality, you will feel the immortality of the soul as a matter of experience, just as when you stand under the sun and feel the sun's heat and rays come pouring down on your body you don't say 'I need proof that there is a sun', for you can feel the sun on your entire body. In exactly the same way the experience of immortality is entirely natural to somebody who has experienced his soul. And they go on to say what the content of this immortality is. And this is very interesting. They say that there are two kinds of immortality. One they call timeless immortality, and the other is time immortality. One is to be aware that you have a being which was never born and which is therefore never going to die, it is always timeless, the soul described in the Gita. But there is another kind of immortality, and unless you have this other kind of immortality as well, you are likely to look upon your life in this world as meaningless. Once that begins you are likely to withdraw from this life, and that is totally against what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have been advocating: because you are immortal, because you have an immortal being, that doesn't mean that your becoming is false - your becoming also is equally true. And there is an experience that even in this becoming, first you are a little child, now you are a young man, now you are an old man, then you leave, give up this body, and then you come back again. In all this becoming

there is a consciousness, you can develop a consciousness that all this is a Becoming of the Being. It's not as if Being is true and Becoming is false; Being and Becoming are both divine, and unless you have this kind of integral approach to immortality, then yoga generally ends up by discarding this world, dismissing the world as a thing of no consequence. And as you know very well, Sri Aurobindo and Mother's yoga does not encourage this kind of approach.

They also point out why death comes. Many people think that once you begin yoga you begin to fall ill more often than other people. Sri Aurobindo has denied this widespread assumption. The basis for this assumption is that once you take to yoga seriously, your inner parts, the higher parts of your being, begin to change. Their evolution is accelerated. But the body, which is the most inert part of our being, has so far been denied the touch of the Divine. We have always said, 'O God, your domain ends here, you can't go beyond this; beyond this is the body'. And so the body has always remained untouched, uninfluenced by anything that comes from above. And therefore it has always remained inert, dull, tamasic and does not change in tandem with the rest of our being. Inevitably, once that happens there develops an imbalance between the inner and outer being, and once this imbalance develops then comes illness. And it is the same imbalance that later on results in death. So the reason that human beings die is not that death is an inalienable fact, a fact that cannot be changed, it is simply because the body has not yet learned to change, to evolve and keep pace with the soul as it is developing.

We are here to evolve, to change, and therefore it is not mortality but immortality that is our birthright. You will be quite surprised if you look up the evidence from biology: biologists have come to the conclusion that mortality is an accident, immortality really characterises all forms of life. Now I won't go into this, this is not the time, and I don't know enough about biology to convince you about this. But there is the literature, and it is growing, more and more evidence is coming up which suggests that death appeared at a late point in the evolution of multi-cellular organisms; even now, there are many simpler forms of multi-cellular organism which do not die. Death became necessary later for certain reasons and it has become habitual, but death is not a permanent feature of life, life is the important thing. Sri Aurobindo develops this theme beautifully, that death is a process of life.

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We are looking at death from the wrong end, regarding death as the most important thing. Death is not the important thing, it is life that is the most important thing, and death is only a process of life. Life has been given to us so that the soul can develop, the soul can grow. And as the soul keeps growing, the body, as I said, cannot keep pace with the soul and therefore the soul, which is anxious and eager to grow more, eventually finds itself saddled with a body which can no longer serve its purpose. So instead of allowing the body to be a drag on the soul, why not discard the body and take another body, another set of circumstances, another time and place for a new set of experiences so that you can keep growing? This is why death has come. Death has come because the body has been saying "Sorry, I cannot keep pace with your other development." Now what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother believe is that it is possible to make the body supple enough, to make the body consciousness light enough, to make the body transparent enough, to make the body plastic enough, so that the body need not be out of step with the rest of the human spirit. The Integral Yoga therefore believes in offering the body to the descent of the Divine. And now, after 29th February 1956, circumstances are propitious for this change to happen. The force, the grace, the power that is necessary for the body to adapt, for the body to acquire these new features, that consciousness has already come down. So this is their attitude towards death: death is accidental just as pain and suffering are accidental. They came in because at a certain point in our evolutionary journey they became necessary, and they will continue as long as they are necessary. It is only by growing in consciousness that we can prove to Death that he is no longer necessary, and then he will be more than ready to say goodbye and disappear.

Now this is a very profound knowledge, and Sri Aurobindo and the Mother want man to conquer death, not because they would like us to be attached to any single body, but as a sign of our being's perfect mastery over our becoming, so that we become masters of all levels of consciousness. That is central to their philosophy of death, of the physical conquest of death. As I said, this is not a materialistic goal. It is probably the most spiritual goal conceivable - that the spirit should triumph over matter, even at the level of the body. And during my talks over the sessions of this camp I have developed this theme of what is the real issue of mortality, immortality and the conquest of death.

Now we have just looked at Book Eight. As I said, it has only one canto.

Now we come to Book Nine, which has two cantos. The first of them is called "Towards the Black Void". Now the Mother has spoken and written in many places about what happens to a human being when he dies, to what regions he goes. She and Sri Aurobindo have also written about what happens to a person who is very evolved, what happens when a very evolved person dies, and the journeys, the terrains they go to are different terrains. But here it is Satyavan who is dead, and Satyavan is a godlike being, a very fully evolved being, so his afterlife journey cannot be that of any ordinary man. His is a special journey and it becomes more special because here in a way it is Savitri who is taking Death on a tour of self-discovery, so that the various areas of death are exposed one by one. We shall find that this continues over a stretch of 6 to 8 cantos, and here we are just at the beginning of it.

Death, as you know, feels that he is so powerful and human beings are so weak, that he feels disdain and scorn and just dismisses Savitri as of no consequence at all. But before that happens, before Death can speak, when the Lord of Death has just arrived, Savitri simply refuses to look at him. Now the first thing that happens when you refuse to look at the God of Death, is that he becomes a little nervous. You see, the God of Death first captures you just by his presence, by terrorizing you. Savitri shows that she will not be intimidated; she takes her own time, the God of Death tries to attract her attention, but she does not move. At that moment a great power descends into her:

*Then suddenly there came on her the change
Which in tremendous moments of our lives
Can overtake sometimes the human soul
And hold it up towards its luminous source.
The veil is torn, the thinker is no more:
Only the spirit sees and all is known.
Then a calm Power seated above our brows
Is seen, unshaken by our thoughts and deeds,
Its stillness bears the voices of the world:
Immobile, it moves Nature, looks on life.*

(p. 571)

There follows a long description of this new power that comes to her and finally settles in her. For Savitri is no ordinary housewife. As we saw

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throughout the whole of Book Seven with its seven cantos, Savitri has already realized the supramental consciousness, realized the cosmic consciousness, and all these powers are available to her whenever she needs them. And now the most crucial moment of her life has come, the moment for which she was born. Savitri is born just for this confrontation with Death. At this moment this change comes to her and she is totally transformed. The first section of Book Nine, Canto One is essentially a description of this transformation, of the change that comes over Savitri.

Then comes a description of the God of Death:

*Something stood there, unearthly, sombre, grand,
A limitless denial of all being...*

He is a limitless denial of all being. This represents what in Sanskrit is called *antaka*, one who denies, one who negates, one who annihilates all being.

*A limitless denial of all being
That wore the terror and wonder of a shape.
In its appalling eyes the tenebrous Form
Bore the deep pity of destroying gods;
A sorrowful irony curved the dreadful lips
That speak the word of doom. Eternal Night
In the dire beauty of an immortal face
Pitiying arose, receiving all that lives
For ever into its fathomless heart, refuge
Of creatures from their anguish and world-pain.
His shape was nothingness made real, his limbs
Were monuments of transience and beneath
Brows of unwearying calm large godlike lids
Silent beheld the writhing serpent, life.* (p. 574)

So when Death looks at life, the whole of life writhes like a helpless serpent. This is how Sri Aurobindo describes the terror that the form of Death inspires in the hearts of all beings. And then he says:

*The two opposed each other with their eyes,
Woman and universal god. ...*

Then the God of Death has waited long enough. Yet he cannot take

Satyavan's soul without Savitri's consent, because her entire being has captured Satyavan and is holding him, so that the God of Death is unable to take him out of the body. And therefore he speaks:

... "Unclasp", it cried,
*"Thy passionate influence and relax, O slave
Of Nature, changing tool of changeless Law,
Who vainly writh'st rebellion to my yoke,
Thy elemental grasp; weep and forget.
Entomb thy passion in its living grave.
Leave now the once-loved spirit's abandoned robe:
Pass lonely back to thy vain life on earth."* (p. 575)

"Please," he is saying, "release Satyavan from your iron grip so that I can take him away." And what about Savitri? She is to "weep and forget".

Savitri is not willing to do anything that he wants her to do. But finally she does release Satyavan, and the God of Death casts his noose and captures Satyavan's soul. But as they are walking away Savitri follows. First goes Satyavan, following him the God of Death; but Satyavan has no will of his own now, the God of Death is controlling him. And following them is Savitri.

The brings us to Canto Two. This is a fairly long canto. I will read out just a few excerpts, to give an idea of what Death stands for and what his attitude is. The God of Death does not even look back, because he is confident that Savitri will soon stop. Once he crosses over into his own realm, no living human being can ever follow. But lo and behold, the faster he goes and the farther he moves away into this weird realm of his own, he still finds Savitri following him. He cannot understand, and he begins to create a kind of psychological terror to make Savitri afraid so that she will leave. I'll read that part. This warfare between Savitri and the God of Death is going on without any exchange of words. They are not speaking to each other. Just quietly the God of Death is creating this terror, expecting Savitri to retreat:

*A mystery of terror's boundlessness,
Gathering its hungry strength the huge pitiless void
Surrounded slowly with its soundless depths,
And monstrous, cavernous, a shapeless throat
Devoured her into its shadowy strangling mass,*

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The fierce spiritual agony of a dream.

Savitri felt as if she was being sucked into a cavernous throat of darkness.

*A curtain of impenetrable dread,
The darkness hung around her cage of sense
As, when the trees have turned to blotted shades
And the last friendly glimmer fades away,
Around a bullock in the forest tied
By hunters closes in no empty night* (p. 583)

When it suits him, Sri Aurobindo can arrest an entire mood, an entire scene in a small image. In the old days when killing animals was quite fashionable, what people used to do was to visit the haunt of a tiger or a lion they wanted to shoot. But they didn't have the courage to face it directly, so they would tie a bullock or calf in a very prominent place, and then climb up into the top of a tree to be at a safe distance. There they would train their guns on this bait, and after nightfall the tiger would come for its food, whatever calf or bullock they have tied there. Then while the tiger is busy eating, they can show their skill and kill the tiger. This used to be the sport of the leisured class in the good old days. Even now you find reports of this kind of thing in the newspapers. But here Sri Aurobindo says that Savitri was now like that poor calf, tied there to the tree. When this is done, there is still some light; then early evening comes and the light recedes and what at one time were clearly seen to be trees now become simply blotches of darkness, it is no longer possible to distinguish one from the other, darkness has settled in. And the poor animal is sensing the presence of the tiger and helplessly expecting to be attacked at any moment. This is what the God of Death wanted Savitri to feel. It is not an empty night. It is a night full of terror, and full of the tiger that the animal senses and expects. Savitri is made to feel like that by the God of Death.

This gives us some picture of what the God of Death does and how he tries to terrorise Savitri. This God of Death is a very clever person, he is very sophisticated, and when he begins to talk to Savitri, there is not only disdain and scorn, he also has many a convincing punchline here and there, and a beautifully epigrammatic style. He is trying to convince Savitri that she is too small a person, too insignificant a being, to take on something like

Death with its vast power. After all who is Savitri? Savitri represents human beings, and what are human beings? Human beings are mere two-legged worms, crawling on a speck of dust in this infinity of space. "What can you do?" he says, "I have created this world, this world is mine, this world has arisen from the inconscient. I can snuff it out any time I want." That is the attitude the God of Death takes.

You can also see that when Sri Aurobindo writes for the God of Death, there is no compromise. He writes as powerfully as when he writes for Savitri. This is the hallmark of the poet. He has no personal favourites. So I have always said that if you want to find valid criticism against Sri Aurobindo, please do not go anywhere else, you have it all in *Savitri*. Sri Aurobindo himself has provided it. There are other kinds of criticism but most other criticisms are based on misunderstandings or non-reading of Sri Aurobindo. But here is somebody who knows exactly what Sri Aurobindo has said and criticises expertly. That is the God of Death. And look at this epigram, I don't know whether Shakespeare can match the sheer brilliance of it, which sums up in two lines the miracle that man is and his ultimate insignificance.

*A fragile miracle of thinking clay,
Armed with illusions walks the child of Time* (p.586)

A fragile miracle made out of clay - that's what we are. Some people have more of this clay and others have less, but basically we are all made of clay. But a miracle who has been to the moon, who is thinking of sending his children next holidays somewhere between the earth and Mars, who can fly into the sky, who can talk to friends in New York and London, wherever you want, at the touch of a finger ... everything we have is a miracle, but what kind of miracle? A fragile miracle, finally made out of what? Thinking clay. As it says in the Bible, ultimately dust thou art, to dust thou returnest. We are still dust, but dust that has started to think, matter which has learned how to think, and that's why what you have up here is called 'grey matter'. It's matter still. So he says:

*A fragile miracle of thinking clay
Armed with illusions walks the child of time.*

Man is a child of time, he is born in time, therefore he dies in time, he is just a child, and what does he have for defending himself with? Illusions! And

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his greatest illusion is the one which is spelled G.O.D... That is his greatest illusion, and immediately Death goes on to say:

*To fill the void around he feels and dreads,
The void he came from and to which he goes,
He magnifies his self and names it God.*

Children suddenly wake up in the middle of the night, the parents are nowhere near... (Indian parents are always there, but in western countries, right from the early childhood, the child is made to feel independent. He sleeps in a room of his own.) He gets up at night and there is nobody. There is a thunderstorm, he feels scared by the fluttering of a curtain... then what does the child do? The child looks at the doll which he sleeps with, there is always a doll, some stuffed toy, and this stuffed toy gives the child a certain psychological relation, some kind of courage; he starts petting the toy, and then goes to sleep. We are exactly like that. When we wake up in the middle of our life without finding any mummy or daddy that we can call to, we need a toy, we need a doll. The name of that doll is God. God is this doll that you have made, God is this illusion you have armed yourself with:

*To fill the void around he feels and dreads,
The void he came from and to which he goes,
He magnifies his self and names it God.
He calls the heavens to help his suffering hopes.
He sees above him with a longing heart
Bare spaces more unconscious than himself
That have not even his privilege of mind,
And empty of all but their unreal blue,
And peoples them with bright and merciful powers. (p. 586-87)*

When man is in trouble, he goes down on his knees, raises his hands, looks at the sky, without realising that in the entire creation there is no creature more intelligent than he! There is nothing there, it is only empty. Up there, above, there is the blue of the sky, and the scientist will tell you that the blue of the sky is also unreal. And this is man, he believes that God is sitting there ready to help... rescue party, first aid party etc... There is nobody there. So he says, "These are the various illusions with which you have grown up, Savitri, but you can't take me in, I have created this world out of the

inconscious. I let it be at my pleasure, and when I don't want it I will snuff it out, there is nothing you can do about it, you are so helpless. You continue to walk in this land which doesn't belong to you. Go back. Human beings must live within their limitations, there they can be happy. Do not try to exceed yourself."

But after all, exceeding oneself is the badge of humanness. If you don't exceed yourself you are not human. In all of *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo keeps talking about this divine discontent that man has been blessed with. Today it has made science and technology possible, and this same discontent will one day make it possible for man to wake up from within, and walk like a living god on this earth. This discontent that man has, is a sign of his inner divinity. And that is why those who oppose the manifestation of God always advise you that you have a nice little corner to live in, that is where you belong, so stay there: eat, reproduce and live and die, but don't try to exceed yourself. Savitri represents this human aspiration of overreaching, going beyond what man has so far achieved. The God of Death can't stand that and therefore he says:

*For the sea roars around him and earth quakes
Beneath his steps, and fire is at his doors,
And death prowls baying through the woods of life.* (p. 587)

And all that he is saying amounts to one thing:

Hope not to win back to thee Satyavan (p. 587)

"Don't ask for Satyavan."

This debate between the God of Death and Savitri goes on and there are many many wonderful passages here. The God of Death, ultimately, finally, when he has used all his terror tactics and Savitri remains undaunted, starts to reason with her. He says, "Savitri, I don't know whether there is a God. But suppose there is a God and you want his immortality, in God's immortality there is no Satyavan. You have to be by yourself to achieve immortality. You have to be what is called in India *kaivalya* - you have to be just yourself, there is no other. There is no Satyavan there, there is no love there, there is no action there, you just have to be by yourself. But what you are asking for, Savitri, is a world where there is room for love, where there is a place for

action, a place for will. All this cannot coexist with immortality." And Savitri keeps challenging the God of Death, denying whatever he is saying.

This goes on until we come to a point where she says:

I am, I love, I see, I act, I will. (p.594)

"For me," says Savitri, "to be, to live, means to love; to live means to will; to live means to conquer. To embrace God in all his perfection, that is what living really means to me." And the God of Death retorts, "But what about knowing? If you really know then there is no scope for love; if you really know, there is no scope for building anything wonderful." Then Savitri replies,

When I have loved for ever, I shall know.

There are two kinds of love: one is a limited love, the love of the ego, and the other is the love of the soul. That does not bargain. When I love, I will know that this entire world is a manifestation of one supreme reality. And then she says:

*I know that knowledge is a vast embrace:
I know that every being is myself,
In every heart is hidden the myriad One.* (p. 594)

"God manifests in every being, so as God lives in me and lives in every being, the love I have is this thirst for union with the One. And that cannot have compromises, that cannot be transient. O God of Death, do not wage this war of words and reason with me. I will persist and I will continue. No matter where you take Satyavan, I will follow you."

So I think with this I have given you a flavour of these two books, and we should stop at this point, and once more thank all the friends who have made this wonderful meeting possible. Thank you very much.

Answer to readers' query

Several readers asked us about the ball which Savitri holds in her hand in the Mother's sketch published in the last issue. It looks like the earth, but in Huta's painting the ball is golden. We passed the enquiry on to Huta, who answered :

It is the earth. But when I asked the Mother what colour to paint it - usually we took a deep blue colour for the earth - she told me it should be golden. For, she said, Savitri has come as an incarnation of the Supreme Mother; this is the earth as she envisions it and wills it to become. This is why she has come down into the human form.

Announcement

We are happy to announce the forthcoming publication of a book which will be of great value and interest to all students of *Savitri*. Entitled *Perspectives of Savitri*, the volume has been compiled by R. Y. Deshpande, the editor of *Mother India*. The book is running to 600 pages and contains 24 essays by authors such as Nolini Kanta Gupta, Nirodbaran, A. B. Purani, Dilip Kumar Roy, M. P. Pandit, Amal Kiran, V. K. Gokak, Ravindra Khanna, Sisirkumar Ghose, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, and many others whose names may be less well-known but who have made significant contributions to our understanding of the epic. Many of these essays have already been published elsewhere, but it will be an invaluable aid to students to have them all together in a single volume. This first volume, which is to be followed by a second, is being published by Aurobharati Trust, Pondicherry, and should be available around mid-August.

About Savitri Bhavan

We dream of an environment in Auroville

that will breathe the atmosphere of Savitri

that will welcome Savitri lovers from every corner of the world

that will be an inspiring centre of Savitri studies

that will house all kinds of materials and activities to enrich our understanding and enjoyment of Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic

that will be the abode of Savitri, the Truth that has come from the Sun

We welcome support from everyone who feels that the vibration of Savitri will help to manifest a better tomorrow.