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**SŪKṢMA AND BANDHUTĀ AS SUBTLE VISIONS OF THE WORLD.
THEIR ORIGINS AND THEIR PROJECTIONS IN THE ACTUAL
VISION OF THE WORLD**

Abstract: The notions of *sūkṣma* and *bandhutā* belong to the realm of the subtle world, implicit in the ancient *Tribhuvana* of the *Vedas*. This realm, as far as the subtle forms that constitute it, is analogue to the Platonic World of Ideas. The value of this ancient Indian vision for the modern man is that it gives us the inspiration to discuss some problems that have remained unsolved. The understanding of the unity of life in its essence, the notion of vertical causality, the notion of energy as well as the implications of the interdependence of phenomenal world, are critical for the worldview of the modern man, who has become dangerous for himself and self-destructive, as far as he has forgotten and disregarded the existence of his soul, its nature and its needs. In the historical context of the contemporary world, the human being has obliterated the cosmic being: *hiraṇyagarbha*, *jīvaghana*¹.

Keywords: *sūkṣma*, *bandhutā*, the *Vedas*, history of religions, Indian philosophy, neoplatonism.

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Introduction

The theoretical framework of this paper is situated in the context of early *Vedānta* and aims to formulate a sum of reflections concerning the contribution of the old Indian metaphysics towards the understanding of the anthropological and psychological condition of the human being.

The words *bandhutā* and *sūkṣma* reflect, inside the Indian spiritual horizon and a wide span of time, the same ontological level, which is the subtle one.

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¹ Cf. A. Danielou, *Hindu Polytheism*, New York, 1964, pp. 42-43: "When the universe is identified with the Cosmic Being, it is not the physical universe only that is meant but the entire universe with its mind, its guiding principles, the laws which rule its development, and the consciousness which pre-exist its appearance. The perceptible world of forms is no more the whole of the cosmos than his visible limbs and organs are the whole of a man [...] man and the universe appear as two parallel beings similar to one another... (cf. *Mundaka up.* 3.1.1)". T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Gaudapāda. A Study on Early Advaita*, Madras, 1955, p. 110 has pointed out the way in which this doctrine has been developed in later *advaita*.

The understanding of the unity of life in its essence and the notion of vertical causality are critical for the modern man, who has deleted the meaning of what we might call “cosmic being”: *Hiranyagarbha* and *Jivaghana*, including the sacrificial dimension.

The notion of Bandhutâ

The notion of *bandhutâ* refers to the world of the Vedic ritual², meaning the invisible connections, the bonds between cause and effect among the ritual order. More precisely, the theory of *bandhutâ* reflects the anthropology implicit in the *Brâhmana*: man as a connected being, in a close and meaningful relation with his universe; and certain ranges which belong to the determined symbolism inside that universe, and the theory of sacrifice with which each *bandhu* is particularly bonded: “The aim of the Vedic individual is the maintenance, maintenance of the cosmic order, *rta*, maintenance of the mutual support that binds gods and men, maintenance of the sacrificial ritual which is the instrument of that support, and maintenance of his own social rank and status”³. The notion and theory of *bandhutâ* stand for the homologous religious-ontological networking described by Mircea Eliade, and lie behind a wide range of reinterpretations⁴.

Etymologically, *bandhutâ* is connected to “relation”⁵. In the *Vedas*, the term is mentioned, for instance, in the following hymn addressed to Agni:

“To Agni, who is named *gopayana* or *lopayana* by the four *rishis*, Bandhu, Subandhu, Srutabandhu and Viprabandhu...”⁶.

In this case, the suffix *bandhu* is included in the names of the four *rishis*. This can be interpreted as a personification of the ritual powers active during the sacrifice by fire, devoted to the Principle or God of Fire himself.

The notion of *bandhutâ*, while evoking the power of resemblance⁷, provides the possibility to understand “the method of inquiry of the *Upaniṣad*”⁸. Gispert Sauch noted that the *Upaniṣads* continue “the liturgical reflection of the *Brâhmana*, although in a more interiorised and more symbolic way, following the trend already started by the *âranyakas*”. He also explains that the religious symbolism stands as “the basis of liturgical speculation”. Mircea Eliade analysed the capital importance in the history of religions of the logic of the symbol as a sort of language that tends to integrate the profane into the sacred and thus sacralise the whole reality. In Vedic India, the sacrifice as a ritual whole and each of its elements had a hidden symbolic

² Cf. RV I.129.4, the *bandhu*, connections between *sat* and *asat*.

³ Cf. S. J. De Smet, *Early trends on the Indian understanding of man*, in “Philosophy East and West”, Vol. 22, No. 3/1972.

⁴ Cf. S. Tilak, quoting L. Renou, *Câturdharmya: a Hermeneutic of Integrative Differentiation*, in R. Shema, A. Sharma (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought*, [New York], 2008, pp. 95-120, pp. 99-100.

⁵ Besides the etymological roots of the word *bandha*, regarding karmic liaisons, as well as certain yoga practices. Cf. S. J. Gispert Sauch, *Bliss in the Upaniṣads*, Delhi, 1977, p. 14. “Even in the most homely sense of the word, i.e., kindred”.

⁶ A. Langlois (trad.), *Rig-Veda ou Livre des hymnes*, Paris, 1984, Section IV-eme, Hymne XVI, p. 273b.

⁷ As Lilian Silburn defines it in *Instant et Cause: Le discontinu dans le pensée philosophique del’Inde*, Paris, 1955.

⁸ Cf. Gispert Sauch, *op. cit.*, p. 13 ss.

value, and the knowledge of this language was equivalent to a grasp of reality and of the secret forces of the universe. The enigmas, aphorisms, etymologies, colloquies, synthesis of various views, the discussion and series of questions and answers aim at finding out the relation between the sacrifice and the universe, at establishing a net of *bandhutā*, “relationships”, “homologous connections”, as Eliade calls them, that provide the control of the hidden reality⁹.

Moreover, De Smet reminds us that:

“In the Brahmanic pantheon each *deva* has a definite function and also specified associates and paraphernalia. These are his *bandhu*. [...] Between a *deva* and his *bandhu* there is a subtle connection (*bandhutā*), a mysterious bond which leads to their identification”¹⁰.

For this reason, the theory of *bandhutā* implies a tripartite division of the universe: sacrifice, man and universe as parallel and equivalent realms. The notion will grow more intense in the *âranyaka* speculation, until it will reach its apex in the *âtman-Brahman* relationship.

So this is a *bandhutā* not only in a connective sense, but also in a symbolic sense, as far as the symbol is the language of metaphysics and always points to self-realization¹¹. As a symbol, it is an indicator of a higher level of reality.

Within the notion of *bandhutā*, we are warned to take into account the principle of interdependence¹², the principle of articulation of reality, as well as an indication of the function of the ritual which maintains the order of the world. This interdependence has to be understood both in its liturgical and its ethical sense, which correspond to the subtle and sensitive levels, respectively.

This means that the notion behind the *bandhutā* aims at rescuing the symbol of Indra¹³. Moreover the notion of *bandhutā* aims at the use of an analogical intelligence, besides the analytical one, which is so prevailing in the western mind and western man. Between these two forms of the intelligence there is an abysmal difference: while the analogical intelligence has a cohesive, centripetal and integrative aspect, the analytical one fragments reality. Nevertheless, they are connected in the process of discrimination approved by *Vedânta*, and both are necessary for the integration of the man in himself and its world.

The notion of sūkṣma:

Radhakrishnan states that the notion of *sūkṣma*¹⁴ derives etymologically from the root *siv* (to sew), and is connected with *sûci* (pure) and *sûtra* (thread). Also, Williams explains it as minute, small, subtle¹⁵.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Cf. De Smet, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

¹¹ Cf. García Bazán, *Plotino y el lenguaje de la Metafísica*, in „Cuadernos de Filosofía”, 19, Buenos Aires, 1973.

¹² So strongly emphasized nowadays by the Dalai Lama.

¹³ Cf. Olivia Cattedra, *Indrajâlaneti: La red de Indra: una lectura moderna del antiguo mito védico*, in „Konvergencias Filosofía”, Año V, Num. 17, Abril 2008.

¹⁴ In the compound *sūkṣmasarîra*, Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. I, London, [1977], p. 517, with an unclear reference to the *Taittirîya Samhitâ*, XII, 16-17.

The word *sūkṣma* seems to be a later term, appearing as a synonym for *liṅga* or *avyakta*; this term seems to be more frequent in later *Sā-mkhya* and shivaite lore¹⁶. Śankara uses it in the *Upadesasāhasrī*¹⁷ and more specifically it appears twice in the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, I.4.2 and IV.1.9, in the context of a) the discussion of the inferred entity and b) the departing of the soul from the body.

a) In the first case as a synonym of *avyakta* in the context of the discussion about the inferred entity (*pradhāna*); Swami Gambhirananda translates: “rather the subtle (causal state) is meant (by *avyakta*) for it deserves that epithet”¹⁸. *Avyakta* refers to the body (meaning small, minute body), but raises a question: how can a body, which is dense, be called *avyakta* (unmanifested)? It is explained that the body referred to is the *sūkṣma*: “here the subtle one – the body in its causal state – is spoken of, for the subtle cause deserves to be mentioned by the unmanifested word. Though this body is gross and cannot in itself be called unmanifested, still the subtle elements from which it is produced can be called unmanifested”¹⁹.

Thibaut translates: “to this doubt the *sūtra* replies that what the term *avyakta* denotes is the subtle causal body”²⁰. Consuelo Martin translates: “but the subtle, *sūkṣma*, cause of the body is indicated with the term *avyakta* because so to call it is appropriate”²¹.

b) In *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, IV.2.8, 9-10, in the discussion about the soul leaving the material or corporeal body, appears the reference to this subtle body made of fire and light, therefore, a warm body²²:

S. Gambhirānanda translates in IV.2.9 *sūkṣma* by minute²³: in “nature and measure”, but with reference to the body of light, fire and warmth, that departs from the corporeal body. In the same *sūtra*, Thibaut translates as “subtle in measure”²⁴, while Consuelo Martin translates: “that body of warmth is subtle for nature and size, because it can be observed as such in the experience. That is why the subtle body (*sūkṣma*) is not destroyed when the body is (dense)”²⁵.

In the later development of *Vedānta advaita*, this term concerns a level of being as well as a level of consciousness, in the context of the microcosmic aspect of the manifestation: it implies the oniric experience, the subtle world and the subtle body. This subtle body, also *liṅga* and *avyakta*, is identified to the vehicle which makes the access to this dimension possible. The subtle body or *sūkṣma sarīra* has

¹⁵ Cf. Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Delhi, 1976, p. 1241.

¹⁶ Cf. Gordon White, *Why gurus are heavy*, in “Numen”, 31/1, 1984, pp. 40-73.

¹⁷ Cf. I.10.7; I.13, 21; I.16, 58; II.3.115; but in several of this quotations, *sūkṣma* stands for a qualification of the *Brahman-ātman*.

¹⁸ Cf. Śrī Śankarācārya, *Brahma-sūtra-Bhāṣya*, 3rd ed., Calcutta, 1977, p. 248.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Cf. G. Thibaut, *Vedānta-sūtras*, Delhi, 1980, I, p. 242.

²¹ *Brahma Sūtra, con los comentarios advaita de Śankara*, Madrid, 2000, p. 202.

²² We infer the name of *taijasa*, from *tejas*, fire.

²³ *Brahma Sūtra*, Gambhirānanda, p. 857.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 371.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 661.

its parallel in the old western traditions²⁶. The word *sūkṣma*, suggests a clear indication of the correlation between being and knowledge. Moreover *sūkṣma* defines the level of consciousness which allows the contact with the subtle world, according to the Vedic tradition²⁷.

Their projections

Bandhutā and *sūkṣma* imply an intermediary ontological level, close in many ways to the platonic World of Ideas²⁸. They refer to the importance of the universal constituents in the concrete World. In addition, *bandhutā* and *sūkṣma* can be seen as the starting point of a number of consequences highly relevant for the modern man and the modern world: the unity of life, the existence of the soul, its nature and needs, the principle of interdependence, *hiranyagarbha*, *jīvaghana* and their manifestations. However none of these notions are new for an Indian trained mind, but are inspiring for the contemporary man who became potentially damaging to himself and his world, the man as an *asura*, in the sense that Oscar Pujol develops this concept²⁹.

These notions rooted in the *Vedas* and developed in classical *Vedānta* were appropriated in the contemporary world through the practices of *yoga* and the concepts of the New Age, which in many cases distort the original Indian notions on which they are founded³⁰. For that reason, these two concepts require a strict and urgent review, in order to avoid deeper misunderstandings and the so-called “materialismo espiritual”³¹.

Moreover, the reflection on the subtle world as philosophical, metaphysical and epistemological dimensions³² can provide a contribution to the contemporary world-view. In this respect, four topics need to be thrown into relief.

1. The reconsideration of the notion of the oniric world and the theory of dreams and myth, going further than Jung and Eliade, for instance, in the line of research of Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Alex Wayman, Caterina Conio, Caterina Albanese, Marie Louise von Franz³³.

²⁶ Cf. García Bazán, *El cuerpo Astral*, Barcelona 1993; Patricia Muller, *Dreaming the Body: an Aesthetics of Asceticism*, in *Asceticism*, V. L. Wimbush, R. Valantasis (ed.), Oxford, 1995, p. 290; Shaman Hatley, *Mapping the Esoteric Body in the Islamic Yoga of Bengal*, in “History of Religions”, 46/4, 2007, pp. 351-368.

²⁷ Cf. Francis Clooney, *Thinking Ritually. Rediscovering the Pūrva Mimāṃsā of Jaimini*, in “Publications of the De Nobili Research Library”, XVII, Vienna, 1990.

²⁸ Cf. R. Panikkar, *Espiritualidad Hindú*, Kairos, 2005, p. 263.

²⁹ Cf. Oscar Pujol, *Naturaleza y Culto*, in Ch. Maillard (ed.), *El árbol de la Vida*, Kairos, 2001.

³⁰ Cf. C. Albanese, *The Subtle Energies of Spirit: Explorations in Metaphysical and New Age Spirituality*, in “Journal of the American Academy of Religion”, 67/2, 1999, pp. 305-325.

³¹ Although this is a term used in the context of the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism. Cf. Ch. Trungpa, *Más allá del Materialismo Espiritual*, Troquel, 1998.

³² We are following the perspective of the late Italian professor Caterina Conio, *The Philosophy of the Māndūkyakārikā*, Varanasi, 1971.

³³ Cf. A. Wayman, *Significance of Dreams in India and Tibet*, in “History of Religion”, 1/1967; Wendy D. O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and other Realities*, Chicago, 1984.

2. The relevance of ritual³⁴, as the power capable to organize the subtle world, which is the cause of the sensitive, material world. The material world is the effect, the result, of the subtle dimension. This relevance lies on the conception of vertical causality³⁵ as it is called in the neo-platonic tradition; and it is also connected with the background of the concept of *kratumaya* in *Chândogya Up.*, III. 14. Man transforms himself in the ontological reality which inhabits his mind, so state the *Upaniṣads*, and the same happens with the universal thought-forms, or the so-called archetype³⁶. It should be noticed that although the modern man does not understand this process of the vertical causality, it is still operating; therefore, the value of ritual is essential³⁷. This is the relevance underlying the notion of *bandhutâ*. Here the problem is that modern man has lost his symbolic, mythic and ritual capacity. This inability is based on the spiritual crisis of the human being, which in its turn becomes a spiritual obstruction³⁸. The human being leaves aside the power of ritual, disregards its usefulness for the recovering of the cosmic health in a proper sense.

The existence of the subtle world draws the attention to the continuity and coherence between the ritual dimension and the ethical action³⁹. And here we find again one of the possible connotations of the notion of *bandhutâ*. The attempt to define the ethical action involves an ontological perspective, rather than a moral one, in the context of the interpretation of Panikkar: “*karma* (action) is the constitutive essence of the creature” (exegesis of BG, VIII. 3). For an Indian mind, action is not simply a movement, or power consumption, or the phenomenon of change: the real action means to be “real”, which is why only God can be the last Agent; He alone is the Creator in the sense of Originator of being. In other words, action means sacred action, namely liturgical action in which God and man cooperate in order to accomplish the coming into existence of the realm of being.

3. Finally, the analysis of the subtle world, implicit in the study of *sūkṣma* and *bandhutâ*, leads to a reinforcement of the conjunction of the analogical and analytical hypostases of intelligence. This union is related to a more complex explanation of becoming, which includes the analysis of the link between revelation and reason. This analysis is particularly attractive for the modern man, to whom it offers more suitable answers. The human being circumscribed by the contemporary society is deprived of the power to sustain the leap of consciousness from the mind to the faith. That leap is required when the faith is not strong enough. We should

³⁴ Another critical concept in the world of ritual is that of *apūrva*, which “has to do with the connection between word and action, nor the connection between action and result”. Cf. Francis Clooney, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

³⁵ Which is clearly implicit in the *Upaniṣads*, for instance in the dialogue of Sanatkumara, *Chând. Up.*, VII.

³⁶ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Mitos, Sueños y Misterios*, Fabril, 1962.

³⁷ This conception is defined by Eliade as the dialectics of the ritual homologous connections. Cf. Idem, *Historia de las creencias y de las ideas religiosas*, Tomo I, Paidós, 1999, p. 307.

³⁸ Cf. Olivia Cattedra, *Los obstáculos en el Yoga clásico y en el Vedānta*, in “Epimelia”, XIII/2004.

³⁹ Cf. Chantal Maillard, *El crimen perfecto*, Madrid, 1992, p. 56.

bear in mind that we live in a world where faith, the real experience of faith, has been weakened.

Dream, myth and destiny:

The oniric experience allows us to verify the existence of the soul as it was taught by the revelation of the *rṣi* (*Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad* (IV.10.16), *Chândogyā Upaniṣad* (8.6.3), *Prasna Upaniṣad* (IV.5)⁴⁰). We can safely declare with the old masters (particularly with the seers of the *Upaniṣads*, and Gaudapâda more than Sankara) that the world of the dreams is the world of the soul.

The traditional and current analyses seem to focus on showing the ultimate ontological unreality of both wake and dream states⁴¹. Nevertheless they often leave aside some characteristics of the dream state, *taijasa*, explicitly mentioned in *Mândūkya Upaniṣad*⁴². Taking into account the upaniṣadic level of interpretation previous to Śankara, we should consider that, in spite of their ultimate unreality, there are certain relative realities to consider:

a) the name of the dream state, *taijasa*, describes the sense as the sense of light, and therefore the reality⁴³ of this particular level, which will be consistent with the interpretation of *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, IV. 2. 8-9.

b) *Taijasa* is also connected with the U of the syllable OM, and this U stands for *utkarṣah*, elevation or excellency, and also *ubhayatvam*, intermediacy (*Mândūkya Upaniṣad*, 10). Then, the U-“faculties” unveil the power to elevate and to intermediate (Gaudapâda, I.22).

Therefore these analogies imply that the characteristics inherent in the nature of the U, elevation and intermediacy, apply to the dream-state. Not any kind of dreams, but the dreams which allude to a more real dimension, with an open access to the memory of the soul, resting-place of the karmic *vāsana*⁴⁴. Ordinary dreams or residual dreams, in Freudian terms, place themselves in the position of particular dreams, which belong to the mind and to the experience of being awake, according to the *karma* of one individual identified with his or her ego⁴⁵. On the other side, out-of-common dreams, higher dreams or golden dreams are close to the mythic dimension, and they might be a bridge towards it. As such, they share certain ontological characteristics which are projected into the epistemological level and then, according to Caterina Conio, “they are useful for the interpretation of reality⁴⁶”.

Certainly this kind of analysis involves a lot of difficulties, based on the possibility to misunderstand the sub-levels of consciousness which are detailed in

⁴⁰ Cf. *Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad*, IV.10.16; *Chândogyā Upaniṣad*, 8.6.3; *Prasna Upaniṣad*, IV.,5.

⁴¹ Cf. R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*

⁴² Cf. Olivia Cattedra, *El maestro Gaudapâda*, Buenos Aires, 1994. See also Andrew O. Fort, *Dreaming in Advaita Vedānta*, in “Philosophy East & West”, 35/1985, p. 62.

⁴³ This complexity is also confirmed by the triple constitution of the *sūkṣma sarīra* through the three *kosa*, as opposed to the simple *kosa* of the other two *sarīra*.

⁴⁴ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Inmortalidad y Libertad*, Buenos Aires, 1977.

⁴⁵ Cf. M. S. Bhatt, *Vedic Tantrism. A Study of Rgvidhāna of Saunaka*, Delhi, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Caterina Conio, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

later *Vedânta*⁴⁷, but completely misunderstood in Western appropriations, and therefore exposed to extrapolations that might occur in Western modern hermeneutics. Nevertheless, these difficulties are the challenge that should be overcome by the pre-eminence of the inner soul's preparations and asceticism. The dreams' possibility to become a tool for the interpretation of reality resides in the ascetic dimension. The dream-state's intermediary condition reveals the influx of two categories of forces: those of the material world and those of the celestial or spiritual world. Consequently this level has an intrinsic tension which can provide a karmic resolution, but only by way of asceticism. Incidentally this aspect provides a new angle to compare Indian thought with neo-platonism⁴⁸. Finally this kind of dreams, the *taijasa* dreams, share into another kind of spiritual strength, as Pannikar suggests⁴⁹.

And it is in this sense that the brighter dreams allow us to understand the process of our own psyche, by which we mean the dynamics of the *vâsanâ* and *samskâra*, as a triple convergence or confluence of the *prârabdha-karma*, the possibility of a "dharmic" action, and *mokṣa*. Seen as a possibility and framed in a higher level of consciousness, this convergence contains a wiser and therefore a more genuine degree of consciousness which, in its turn, may reveal an endless conscious point in which the possibility to understand⁵⁰ the road to our own deepest self or *âtman* is open. And this is no utopian ideal, but a spiritual opportunity for creation instead of destruction. Because of this opening, we think the constitution of the higher dreams should be taken into account.

Our reflection leads to an affirmative answer. Yes, there are some world-views in the old Indian philosophy that can be extrapolated with caution, in order to meet the challenges of the contemporary society. The reconsideration of the subtle world and its connotations is able to improve our self-knowledge and our spiritual path, which concomitantly constitutes the core of the Indian lore. These connotations include the metaphysical level of being (as a more integral view of reality), the psychological level of being (as the theory of dreams), and the sociological level of being (as the understanding of the multiple causes and effects which shape the contemporary society).

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⁴⁷ Cf. T. M. P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, p. 110 (with reference to the *Brahmayoguin Upaniṣad*).

⁴⁸ Cf. Frederick M. Schroeder: *Plotinus and Interior Space* and S. Bhatt, *Plotinus and Vedânta*, in P. Mar Gregorios (ed), *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy*, New York, 2001.

⁴⁹ Cf. R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

⁵⁰ Cf. Caterina Conio, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.

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