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The Yugas: Divine Agents of Change

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Abstract:

Why are we now in the midst of a paradigm shift? The Vedic concept of the yugas has an explanation. Its message is that we move through vast cycles of time in which, with increasing discernment, we can penetrate the veils behind matter. In Satya Yuga—the Golden Age or Age of Truth—humanity is at one with cosmic law and "comprehends all mysteries of creation, even God beyond creation." In Treta Yuga—the Silver Age or Age of the Mind—humanity "understands divine magnetism, the force behind electricity, and uses telepathy and other time-annihilators." In Dwapara Yuga—the Bronze Age, or Age of Electricity and the Atom—humanity understands the subtle forces just behind matter, such as electricity and "atomic structure", and uses "space annihilators in communications and travel." In Kali Yuga—the Iron Age or Age of Gross Materialism—there is "no comprehension of anything beyond the material world." According to the calculations of avatar Swami Sri Yukteswar, we are exiting Kali Yuga and beginning the slow ascent upward again, into Dwapara. Hence, the time is ripe for us to investigate a reality invisible to the senses.

Primary Text:

Why are we now in the midst of a paradigm shift?

For several hundred years we have viewed science as the determinant of knowledge, the universe as mechanized material, society as a competitive struggle for existence, and time as a linear progression, with unlimited material progress to be achieved through economic and technological growth. This view has dominated Western culture and influenced the rest of the world. It has sustained the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.¹ Now it is dissolving like smoke. We have pulled back the curtain of the mighty Oz and glimpsed the instruments in the control booth. A new paradigm, heralded

¹ The foregoing description of the paradigm is drawn from Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982): 30-31.

by Albert Einstein and described by theorists such as David Bohm, Rupert Sheldrake, and Karl Pribram, is revealing a universe quite different from the one we interpret through the five senses.² Is there a reason why, all over the globe, thinkers at the cutting edge of physics, biology, medicine, psychology, and other fields are now ready to investigate a reality invisible to the senses?

The Vedic concept of the yugas has an explanation. Its message is that we move through vast cycles of time in which, with increasing discernment, we can penetrate the veils behind matter. From a pinnacle of attunement with what Plato called the Forms and Einstein called the Ideas of God, we descend, step by step, to a dull awareness, separated from each other and unaware of subtle realities, only to repeat the process with another slow ascent.

According to the calculations of early twentieth-century avatar Swami Sri Yukteswar, we reached the lowest depths of awareness in 500 A.D., the nadir of the lowest age, Kali Yuga.³ Since then we have been climbing slowly upward, and in 1900 A.D. we entered Dwapara Yuga, an age in which we could begin to understand the subtler laws of electricity and the atom.

Even a cursory glance at history reveals the relevance of this paradigm. In 500 A.D. Europe was plunged into what used to be called the Dark Ages, with barbarian hordes sweeping across the continent, plundering and destroying, running rampant over the last broken pillars of the Roman Empire, and drawing a cloak of darkness and ignorance over the lights of learning still flickering from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Babylon. Civilization was at its nadir; life was short and violent, and awareness so blunted that desensitized feelings were the order of the day. The piles of skulls assembled by conquerors, the helpless agony of the tortured and raped, the dull misery of the weak and oppressed, the routine mistreatment of wives and children vie as symbols for the day.

Since then we have been climbing slowly upward: more awareness of our connection to one another and to the planet, more empathy for the suffering of even those removed from us in time and space, more awareness of the suffering earth as a body in which we are all the cells.⁴ Beginning around 1900, we saw not only an increasing awareness of our oneness with all other life but a subtler understanding of the first level of laws behind matter. The telegraph, telephone, radio, and television have all annihilated the limitations of space, and the fax machine and World Wide Web are drawing the net of our interconnections ever tighter. The oxcart has given way to the automobile, then to the

² See, for example, *The Holographic Paradigm and other Paradoxes: Exploring the Leading Edge of Science*, ed. Ken Wilbur (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), for an overview of all the theories; Michael Talbot, *The Holographic Universe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) for the interconnection of Karl Pribram's theories of the brain and David Bohm's theories of the implicate and explicate order; Fred Alan Wolf, *The Dreaming Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) on our reality as a dream; and, of course, the classics that heralded the paradigm shift: David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980; rpt. Ark Paperback, London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (New York: Bantam, 1976); Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (New York: Bantam, 1979); Rupert Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1981) and *The Presence of the Past* (1988; rpt. New York: Random House, 1989).

³ *The Holy Science* (Los Angeles, CA: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1977). In my understanding of these concepts I am greatly indebted to Donald Walters and David Steinmetz.

⁴ Where I use the words empathy, consciousness, or awareness, Sri Yukteswar uses dharma, which means "right action" founded on morality or devotion to duty.

airplane and even the satellite. No longer do we live in a world of bent bodies creeping behind carts over the face of the earth. We live in a world where invisible realities have pierced the veil of the visible, where electricity has been tamed and forced into channels, where the atom has been seen and split and even investigated to the edge where matter joins mind.

Yet we have barely entered this new age, Dwapara Yuga; and if the theory of the yugas as interpreted by Swami Sri Yukteswar is correct, we can expect 10,800 years or so of an ever-growing peace and harmony, not because of any material influences that we can now understand but because an ever more subtle attunement to cosmic law will create a world-wide shift of consciousness in which we see that of course there are subtle levels of reality, of course we are all a part of the same consciousness taking different forms on different levels.

The transition is not yet complete. We are still engaged in the dance of Shiva, the destruction of old forms necessary before the creation of the new. This dance can be painful on the ego level as we watch our certainties swept away, yet we can take comfort if we identify with the currents of change, the stream of what is trying to happen; if we understand that a new truth is struggling violently to be born: the truth of our reality as consciousness. When we know this truth in every cell of our beings, the material world with its agonies of separation and conflict will disappear for us into the reality of our essential oneness, just as the Berlin Wall suddenly dissolved because what was defended with torture and death so few years before was now, suddenly, swept away on a new tide of thought and feeling.

Like the new theory of the holographic mind, the old idea of the *yugas* provides a framework for data previously considered inexplicable, such as the suggestions that high civilizations may have flourished and declined in the past. Engineer and scientist David Steinmetz, who has assembled evidence in his study of Sri Yukteswar's calculations, has a slide of an ancient invention that seems to be a battery, another slide of an Egyptian pictograph that seems to be an electric light, and a wealth of other examples from museums and literature, such as Plato's dating of the sinking of Atlantis at about 9,600 B.C., during the age that Sri Yukteswar posited as Satya Yuga, the highest; and the mention of flying machines and what seems to be an atomic bomb in the ancient Hindu epic the Mahabharata, set near the opening of the last cycle of Dwapara Yuga about 5,000 years ago.⁵

He also remarks that as each cycle gets under way, there is a transition phase or period of mutation preparing for the new energies. In our case, the period of mutation began about 1600 with what is usually called the Renaissance of Science. During this three-hundred-year cycle, philosophers and scientists took the investigation of matter to its limits. Inventions such as the telescope and microscope peered further into the realms of matter; physical measurement replaced dogmatism with the vindication of Galileo over Aristotle; the movements of objects and laws of matter were described by Newton; and a

⁵ Steinmetz, who is also a minister with Ananda Sangha, delivers lectures on these concepts. I am indebted to him for his permission to use his ideas in this article.

new science of the mind sprang from the ruminations of Descartes, Hobbes and Locke.⁶ Describing this new scientific paradigm, Basil Willey explains,

At the beginning of our period the question "What are the characteristics of real things?" had been answered by mathematicians and physicists. The reply had been that the "real" (as far as the physical world is concerned) is that which is extended and movable in space and time.⁷

During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, science and reason ruled supreme. The Industrial Revolution began, rendering obsolete in so many ways the reliance upon muscle and exertion; and, though Bishop Berkeley challenged Locke's objective model and suggested a subjective reality in which the interpretation of matter depended upon consciousness, thinker and essayist Dr. Johnson was able to scoff at Berkeley's idea by kicking a stone and saying, 'I refute it thus'.⁸ In the nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution created massive changes, annihilating space with the railroad and old lifestyles with the factory; and by the early twentieth century, just as we officially entered Dwapara Yuga, the great shift occurred. Einstein challenged Newton's world of material objects and causation with the relativity theory; Freud defined the unconscious as an unseen reality influencing observable behavior and thought; and Edison's inventions plunged us into the wonders of electricity. Soon Hiroshima would announce the age of the atom, and quantum physicists would be drawing conclusions like Berkeley's.

The theory of the yugas says that such changes do not happen by accident: that there is a plan operating and that events occur synchronistically with the expansion or contraction of consciousness. This theory implies that the level of consciousness creates reality and that level will determine, ultimately, what happens on a material level, whether it is the murder of Christ in the depths of Kali Yuga or the collapse of the Berlin Wall with the increasing light of Dwapara. This theory says that consciousness is the ultimate reality at work in the universe and that change must happen at the level of consciousness if it is to happen at all.

It is not surprising, then, that many of the most advanced thinkers in divergent fields of inquiry today are penetrating the veils behind matter and the ordinary conscious mind. Like the ancient rishis of India, today's scientists, artists, and philosophers are peering into the heart of matter and finding consciousness—not by accident but because in both cases there was a readiness in the cosmic order for matter to be unveiled; and, as Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "The readiness is all".

⁶ Descartes, in discovering *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think; therefore I am") was asserting the reality of consciousness; but, unfortunately, the effect was to split consciousness from matter and make matter seem more real. Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) stressed that matter was the only reality and knowledge entered in through the senses: that, in fact, "fancy" (imagination or intuition) was only "decayed sense". Locke in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) asserted that all thoughts come from sense impressions or the combinations of other thoughts, an idea that re-duced the mind to a machine perceiving an objective reality.

⁷ *The Seventeenth Century Background* (1934; rpt. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953): 84.

⁸ An often quoted anecdote from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*.

Ken Wilber, Willis W. Harman and Christian De Quincey explain the notion of a 'continuum ontology'. Described elsewhere as the perennial philosophy, this Great Hierarchical System of Being proposes that reality manifests in a set of nested dimensions, each higher dimension being more inclusive and therefore 'closer' to the absolute Spirit. Ken Wilber's suggests that "reality . . . consists of different grades or levels, reaching from the lowest and most dense and least conscious to the highest and most subtle and most conscious".⁹ The idea of the yugas gives us an additional framework with which to contemplate this hierarchy. The more clearly we understand the continuum of consciousness, the more fully we can cooperate when a higher awareness that is struggling to be born, either in our individual selves or on the entire planet.

Stanislav Grof stresses that in the current age, we will solve our problems not by pursuing old methods but by changing our consciousness:

Does it not seem possible that our efforts at peace fail because none of our present ap-proaches have addressed the dimension which seems to be at the center of the global crisis: the human psyche? . . . The main obstacle we face as a species is found in the present evolutionary level of our consciousness. . . . For this reason, it is important to learn as much as we can about the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the predicament we are all facing.¹⁰

Outline of the ancient Indian cycles of change

(as calculated by Swami Sri Yukteswar and further explained by David Steinmetz)

The dates given correspond to the midpoint of the 200-300 year transition or mutation point into the new cycle.

Satya Yuga—the Golden Age or Age of Truth—humanity is at one with cosmic law and "comprehends all mysteries of creation, even God beyond creation"; peace and harmony are perfect; 4,800 years in duration, transitions around 11,500 B.C. and 7,700 A.D.

Treta Yuga—the Silver Age or Age of the Mind—humanity understands divine magnetism, the force behind electricity, and uses 'telepathy and other time-annihilators': 'more peace, less hypocrisy'; 3,600 years in duration, transitions around 6,700 B.C. and 4,100 A.D.

Dwapara Yuga—the Bronze Age, or Age of Electricity and the Atom—humanity understands the subtle forces just behind matter, such as electricity and 'atomic structure', and uses 'space annihilators' in 'communications and travel', 'no safety in this age, war on greater scale', 2,400 years in duration, transitions around 3,100 B.C. and 1700 A.D.

⁹ The Scientific Exploration of Consciousness: Toward and Adequate Epistemology, IONS Research Report CP-6 (1994): 44, 43 .

¹⁰ The Holotropic Mind, written with Hal Zina Bennett (New York: Harpercollins, 1993): 219-20.

Kali Yuga—the Iron Age or Age of Gross Materialism— 'no comprehension of anything beyond the material world. No peace in any kingdom'; 1,200 years in duration, transition around 700 B.C.

Interpretation of the Four Levels of Awareness

Someone in Satya Yuga consciousness would simultaneously experience the stream of past, present, and future, the thoughts and feelings of all beings, and the totality of the cosmic plan. As someone unified with cosmic law, he could easily materialize objects from the air, levitate, appear in two places at once, raise the dead, materialize or dematerialize a body from its atoms. Such feats, though considered impossible by the credo of materialism, have been recorded not only of Jesus but of Satya Sai Baba and various saints in Paramhansa Yoganada's *Autobiography of a Yogi*.

Someone in Treta Yuga consciousness would communicate not by language but by thought transference. If he were on an intergalactic starship, he would operate a transporter beam through the power of thought and beam someone up from any time and place as he moved at a speed many times that of light, in and out of wormholes, not by nuclear power but by activating the magnetic forces behind matter and gravity. He would assert the primacy of cosmic laws such as peace and unity and see himself as their agent.

Someone in Dwapara Yuga consciousness would live in a world that has investigated and split the atom, discovered and harnessed electricity. He would understand that events or healing could be influenced by visualization or prayer; and, increasingly, understand how to use these non-physical methods to manipulate physical reality. He would use machines to travel quickly through the earth, air, and water; he would employ methods to communicate instantaneously by electricity (though not by telepathy). He would feel his consciousness or aura reaching out beyond his body to others, and he would catch some of their thoughts and feelings. His increased empathy would inspire him to practice cosmic laws such as love and peace.

Someone in Kali Yuga consciousness would experience himself as isolated in solid walls of flesh and bone. He would find it hard to understand anything other than the concrete facts presented to his senses, such as a flat earth, a world twenty-five miles wide, and other people as separate, alien entities, their thoughts bewilderingly other as they presented themselves as objects to use or be used. His spiritual world, if it existed at all, would be one of heavy forms, such as Gothic cathedrals; or rigid rules and hierarchies, such as the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and Inquisition. Cosmic law would be incomprehensible or non-existent except as rules enforced by authorities.