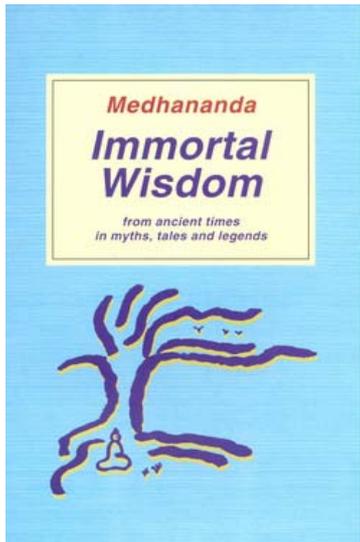


BOOK EXCERPT



The Gospel of Heracles

A Mediterranean legend

Medhananda

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Introduction

What we know about Greek religion comes from the myths and legends which have come down to us through late Greek writers: Apollodorus, Herodotus and Hesiod, and the late Roman poets: Ovid, Horace, Pindar and Pausanias — all writers of a time when the ancient religion had already become obscure. Most modern versions of the myths are based on Apollodorus (2nd century B.C.) who gives us in his 'Mythographus Bibliotheca' a rationalistic account of Greek heroes and Greek gods, a typical intellectual attempt to explain the mysterious. The result is about the same as if, desiring to know something about the Russian Orthodox Church, we should look it up in the Soviet Encyclopedia, or wanting to know something of Jewish Hassidic mysticism we should study only what Marx or Freud said about it. But a culture which produced the Pantheon and conceived of Pallas Athene must have been at least as religious as today's Orthodox Greek Christians. The Hesechiasts of Mount Athos were not the first Greeks to search for the Infinite, the Eternal, the Absolute. The proof of those ancient endeavours in the search for more spirituality, as opposed to the *legendae aureae* transmitted by later well-meaning but spiritually underdeveloped philosophers and poets, we can find in the so-called 'pre-Socratic philosophers,' Parmenides and Heraclitus, in fact in all true mystics, those who were not merely learned scribes but travellers of the inner emptinesses.

These early Greek thinkers and mystics were entirely dedicated to the inner life, and provided we forget that they were philosophers in the modern sense and disregard the

commentaries by our philosophy professors, we will not find them obscure at all. They do not belong to the intellectual, mental, interpretative branch of human endeavour generally called philosophy but to the direct total experience of the inner world. They are those — to use Jesus' words — who have entered the kingdom, or — in Plato's words — those who, in that dark cave of perception have turned away from the shadows of things and events and are looking towards the Light, the one single and solitary source in ourselves of all knowledge.

When a culture arrives at a stage where the knowledge of the mind questions the knowledge of the heart, the latter (religion) generally atrophies and dies. This has happened to Greece since 500 B.C. When the gods are interpreted allegorically or as nature gods, love as hormonal imbalance, and man's longing for immortality as childish regression, then the higher-than-mental states of the prophet and seer become madness and what remains is the learned scribe, the theologian.

So, if we care to look for the eternal religion in Greece, we should not consult the Greek philosophers after 500 B.C., or the Christian church fathers, but take the old legends and interpret them in the light of mystic experience: apply the same key which Sri Aurobindo has applied to the Vedas in order to discover their golden origin. The key is simple and opens all doors to legends and fairy stories, to the dreams and visions our forefathers left for us to rediscover.

The mystic is not concerned with fertility symbols or tribal history of deified kings and heroes, as some clever interpreters of legends seem to think.

The myths and legends of the past are not about nature gods or poetic personifications. Zeus is not the thunder; Poseidon is not the tempest; nor are Apollo, Diana, Semele figures of speech. Rather are they facts, events and powers of our inner life. They are not fathers in heaven or devils in hell; they are

states of consciousness and awareness.

For the mystics all knowledge of outer happenings is incidental, like straws to their inner awareness of themselves. Not things but meaning itself, not science or book knowledge but direct awareness are the concern of the mystic. Once we have understood this simple fact we can try to apply it as a key to a famous legend of the ancients, the myth of Heracles (or Hercules, as the Romans called him).

The Way of Heracles

The Greek name Hera means Earth, and *cleis* means glory: the glory of Hera, the glory of Earth. So let us forget Hercules — the man with the bulging muscles beloved of our renaissance art, the bullying hero, the killer of centaurs and men, the hunter, the tribal king of kings, the seducer of virgins and sire of unnumbered children — and look at Heracles the seeker of ultimate Truth. His strength was not the physical body but the aspiration which is in each of us and which makes us act: the Shakti as the Indians say, or the Shekhinah of the Jewish mystics; and his adventures were those not of a primitive hunter but of the evolving soul, the awakening consciousness of man.

Hera his mother

Behind Heracles stood Hera herself, the mother of gods and of men. Heracles, we are told, was the son of Zeus; and the pious Christian interpreters, the Jesuit fathers who had to give their princely pupils a Christian and at the same time classical education, never tired of telling how amoral those pagan gods were, how they took the outer form of the husband of an unfortunate queen and, thus disguised, sired a child in her. That any woman who could be aware of the Eternal in her husband was in a 'virgin' state of consciousness escaped the pious fathers. As a matter of fact the *hieros gamos*, the holy marriage producing the god-child or the divine king, existed in Egypt thousands of years before the virgin Miriam met the holy ghost in the form of an angel.

All around the Mediterranean, a king or prince was synonymous with a son of God. The daughters of royal houses were all priestesses and were taught in temple schools how to give birth to a divine child, how to call the holy ghost, the divine power into their husband and so into themselves. Thus a human birth became a divine birth. And yet among all those sons of God there was only one Heracles, worshipped in innumerable temples as a god for thousands of years before Jesus. When Alexander came to India, he found Heracles as Parasuram or Sri Hari in Indian temples. When Caesar conquered Gaul, he discovered in every village a statue of the man with the bow, the man with the club. Naturally to the Romans it was Hercules. Everywhere his birthday was celebrated in the fourth month on the day of the new moon, a day which became the birthday of the Buddha and also Easter. Hera's detestation of Heracles is a late invention and belongs to a generation of writers who could not understand why a protecting goddess or guardian angel should put difficulties in the way of her favourite. Not to make life easy but to make it difficult is the role of a hero-producing angel.

Milk

Not only did Hera, the goddess of the inner Light, the Lucina of the Romans, the mother of gods and of men, give him her name but she also nourished him on her breast. We are told that it was Zeus himself who put his son on her bosom. So the baby drank the milk of the gods, the ambrosia of the immortals, and the milky way of our galaxy was pointed out by the ancient storytellers as proof of this fact. What better way or apter symbolism could there be for an incarnation of a cosmic consciousness, a consciousness which discovers its universal foster mother and her milk even among the stars?

Is it not the destiny of man to travel in this milky way, to make space itself his habitat? Any mother, who like his human mother Alcmene (power of the moon) exposes her newborn child on an open field to the starry sky and raises him in this cosmic awareness, would, like her, certainly rear a hero destined to be a companion to the stars. And we are told that later as a man Heracles still preferred to sleep in the open under the stars. Milk and the milky way are primeval symbols of the maternal in our universe and of the fullness of bliss and beatitude it contains for the initiated, for him whom Zeus (higher mind) has put on the breast of the World-Mother. "I have fallen into the milk," exclaims the neophyte in the ancient mysteries when the great gates to this divine bliss open to him.

Sacred serpents

The second event to mark his heroic life was the subconscious meeting one night with two scaly blue serpents, sent by his divine mother. While their eyes spouted flames, Heracles' room was divinely illuminated by Zeus. The two fiery snakes are of course the same as those the god Mercury carries on his staff and which Pallas Athene carries on her aegis. They signify the soul fire, the longing, the awakening of the Kundalini, the rising soul force in the subtle body of a yogi. Significantly, this event took place on our hero's first birthday. The ancient ikons do not show the post-Homeric story of the strangled serpents but Heracles caressing the two snakes while they cleaned his ears with their tongues. A parallel story tells us of Athena ordering the snakes from her aegis:

Go and cleanse Teiresias' ears with your tongue

that he may understand the language of the (prophetic) birds.

The teachers

The young man's teachers, the legend narrates, were the gods themselves. Apollo the ray-shooting sun, for example, taught him archery. What archery means to the mystic we learn in the Kena Upanishad:

*Put yourself as the arrow
and from the bow of time
return into the parent sun.*

Eumolpus, the god of melody, taught him to play the lyre, and thus gave him the capacity to charm men, birds and beasts. Growing up in the mountains among the shepherds and hunters, he found the centaurs his best friends. For a mystic the centaur is a very transparent symbol: the horseman who unites with his animal vehicle and becomes a man-horse, a human soul riding an animal body and consciously guiding it.

Before Heracles set out for his labours, the gods, now his friends and protectors, gave him the psychological weapons for his undertaking: the conquest and knowledge of himself. Hermes as soul-leader, *psycho-pompos*, gave him the sacred sword of discrimination, a symbol of the highest mental level, *vijnana*, the faculty of distinguishing the eternal from the merely temporal and the infinite from the limited and finite.

His father Zeus gave him the shield of protection, a protection given only to those performing a god's labour. Hephaestus, the inner fire, gave him a club, the psychological power to calm an irate adversary or a wild animal; and Pallas Athene, his special friend and guardian angel, gave him the white robe of the eternal bridegroom, the lover of the gods.

Animals of the zodiac

Thus fortified and encouraged he could start on the first of his labours. Even in the oldest times the twelve labours of Heracles were identified with the twelve signs of the zodiac.

This does not mean that Heracles was merely a synonym for the sun god traversing in his yearly course the twelve signs, the 'houses of the sun.' Nor has this ancient zodiac in its mysterious and frightening powers anything to do with modern superstitions and degenerate beliefs. No, their significance was given by the early seers and mystics of mankind, the ancient fathers of the race who saw in the constellations a paradigm for all men to follow, an evolutionary sequence of events, a psychological course for the soul of man to pursue in his long way toward divinisation. The symbols were put there for a didactic purpose, like a picture book explaining to coming generations man's reason for being man and how he may become more than man. The twelve famous labours differ slightly in different traditions. The sequence given here is according to their original psychological meaning evident in the ancient version of the zodiac. The aim of the labours is Immortality, not of the body of course, but of the consciousness which uses the body and life and mind as instruments, and thus they constitute an assumption of power, an overthrowing of the ancient atavistic animal powers which have possessed those instruments since the beginning of life on earth. The labours represent *steps by which we take possession of our inner kingdom.*

The Yoga of Heracles

The first seven labours

The cleaning of the Augean stables, the birds, the hind, the bull, the mares, the boar, the lion — all have to do with the successful subduing of an ancestral animal power in ourselves.

Man is the product of a long evolution, and although evolution has always added new powers to his psychological makeup, it has done little to get rid of the old. There is still a reptile brain in us which nature has merely covered over with new circumvolutions, layers, neurons. The old animal is still there and can be disciplined only by our conscious effort. This effort, this yoga, is what distinguishes homo sapiens from his ancestors. Adam and Heracles, Gilgamesh and Rama are archetypes of these first conquerors.

If they had not been successful in their labours, then the animal powers which we, their late descendants, meet in ourselves would be much more formidable. Let us not forget that it was they who domesticated man. Today we can't even imagine the vitality, the explosive savagery of our ancestors. Only those who have tried to meet a wild animal in its own kingdom on equal terms know the difference in magnitude between the vitality, for example, of a wild bull and that of a domestic one.

The conquests of these ancient heroes were not in vain. We profit today from their labours as our descendants in some distant future will profit from ours.

It is clear that for a space-and-time-travelling mankind the last traces of animality will have to be eradicated. Only those who have conquered will be able to travel from star to star, the same stars the young Heracles longed for and for whose sake he conquered the animal demons in himself. Of course the bears and lions and bulls we meet when we try to take possession of our inner kingdom are now fairly well tamed, house-

broken, eager to obey the voice of the master in comparison with the vital giants and monsters our ancestors had to conquer in themselves.

Madness

Before Heracles set out on his first labour we are told that he was overcome by a divine madness sent to him by Hera, during which he killed his eight sons. A lot of nonsense has been written about this famous madness in order to extenuate or explain away the dreadful deed. But when we set out to reconstitute the true story of Heracles we promised ourselves to take all outer happenings as symbols for an inner spiritual life. In this light the killing of the eight children becomes plain. What does a disciple of the Truth have to do before he sets out on his spiritual pilgrimage? He has to get rid of his duties as a member of a family or a tribe, as a father, a son, a king, etc. The Greek names and destinies of the so-called 'sons' make this clear. One was destined to become a ruler of Argos, another the king of Thebes, etc. The choicest brides had been selected for them, creating alliances with Athens and Sparta. All this he had to renounce. Their names clearly indicate that the murdered children were his own filial duties towards the royal house into which he had been born. The very method of the murder also is indicative. He flung them into the fire, the soul fire, his flaming aspiration. Thus even today the Indian Sannyasin burns his past in a solemn holocaust when he takes his vows.

The guru

When Heracles' madness was over, the story continues, he shut himself up in a dark cave and avoided all human intercourse, to prepare himself in solitude for the super-human labour he was destined to accomplish. After this preparatory stage he went to the oracle of Delphi to inquire about the next step. The Pythoness, addressing him now for the first time with his eternal name Heracles rather than his family name Prince Palaemon (the wrestler), advised him to go to Tiryns where he should serve Eurystheus, his teacher and guru, and do everything he was told. She promised that he would be rewarded with immortality. In the later versions of the Heracles legend which have come down to us, Eurystheus is a jealous enemy of Heracles. But as his name indicates (Consciousness, Widener), and as the story shows, he was a clever teacher and guru, leading his disciple step by step, from labour to labour, on his difficult path to immortality.

The stable

The first labour Eurystheus recommended to the young Heracles was naturally the cleaning of the stable, a transparent symbol of the state into which an immortal soul is projected when it descends on earth and enters that animal skin which we call the human body. Jesus too was born into a stable. And in Genesis 3:21 we read:

and the Elohim made animal skins for the man and the woman and clothed them

before they were sent out of paradise and on to the earth. Thus man's awareness of the body as something foreign to his soul has been his first step towards immortality.

This awareness also calls for a cleansing process, a purification. Water was always considered the purifier, and immersion or baptism in it the first act of spiritual life. It

could have been the water of a river on earth, as the story of Heracles and the Bible story of Jesus tell us, or of the river of heaven, as Aquarius, the corresponding sign of the zodiac, implies. This cleaning of the stables, which we find also in Celtic and Nordic tales, is a remnant of a neolithic cattle-raising age. The king to whom the stable belonged was appropriately named Augeias, the bright ray, the shining one, and was said to be a son of Helios, the sun, a transparent symbol for our soul.

This purification of the vital being is necessarily followed by the next labour, a cleansing of the mental being.

The birds

Countless brazen-beaked, brazen-clawed, brazen-winged man-eating birds live and wade and breed in the darkest marshes (of our mental being) poisoning with their excrement the very air.

They represent ancient atavistic fears, fever demons from the lowest part of the mind, ageless bird-legged female sirens of anxiety, recurring nightmares, peace-disturbing trouble-makers, bedevilling thoughts, obsessive despairs. Heracles drove away these birds of ill omen using a rattle representing the sacred mantra, given to him by his friend, Hephaistos, the god of the psychic fire.

The hind

The third labour, the final conquest of the mind, was to capture thought itself, that fleeting golden-hooved hind so swift that even the goddess Artemis, the hind-like huntress of heaven, had not been able to outrun her. Tirelessly for a whole year Heracles, sitting in meditation, hunted her, following her tracks by day and night. Finally he surprised her asleep, thus conquering his mental processes and gaining the silence of the mind which characterises the master yogi, the liberated soul.

The bull

The pure and immobile consciousness, or as the Indians call it, Shiva, the silent mind, needs a tool, an obedient servant. So the next conquest was the bull, the vehicle of Shiva and also a form of Father Zeus, a symbol of the creative power of God, worshipped since immemorial times in Egypt as Apis and in Crete as the Minotaur. After a long struggle Heracles captured the divine fire-breathing animal, dedicated it to Hera and set it free, tamed. In later times every initiate into the Dionysian mysteries had to capture a bull which in his primeval theophany represented Zeus. This sacred fight with the bull has degenerated through the ages into the bullfight of today, a stunt show for the tourist business.

The horse

As in the history of mankind the domestication of cattle was followed by that of the horse, so our next labour is called the harnessing of the mares of Diomedes, a name indicating the yogic meaning of the conquest — Dio: God, and Medes or Metheus: mind. A Vedic hymn chants their capture by the ancient seers and rishis: *yoked let the ninety and nine bear thee, they who are yoked by the mind. O Vayu, come in thy car of happy light to*

the drinking of the Soma wine.

The wild horses which the yogi bridles are his inner energies, manifested in his breathing, and anyone who has tried to stop his breathing will recognize the apt imagery of rearing horses pulling out the stakes to which they are tied. But a 'Diomedes,' master mind, is the result of the harnessing of our vital steeds.

The boar

With a mind of light we can now descend into the dark foundation of our consciousness, and the animal which symbolises this descent and the subsequent lifting of this dark continent of our being into the light is the boar. In Greece it was sacrificed to the earth mother, and in Indian mythology as an avatar of Vishnu it is shown in its ikon tenderly lifting the earth out of its primeval slime. In the logic of the mythos the animal is our enemy at the beginning of the battle, then it becomes our obedient servant and finally, in a total identification, an integral part of our self.

The lion

After the lifting up of the subconscious into the light of consciousness, the seventh and last animal to be mastered is the majestic lion, the symbol of the ruler of this inner kingdom. The lion brings us truly royal gifts: the ancient virtues of courage and faithfulness, sincerity and generosity — all signs of a sovereign soul, conscious of its powers and nobility. In the Gospel of St. Thomas ✠ we find Jesus saying:

blessed is the lion which the man eats and the lion will become man and cursed is the man whom the lion eats and the man will become lion.

The Indian goddess Durga, like Inanna and Ishtar of Ur and Babylon, is called the Rider on the Lion, and in ancient Greece a coronation ritual called for the sacred king, after subduing a bull, to combat a lion to show that he was indeed the lord of his kingdom. The possession of a tiger skin in India a generation ago when tigers were still abundant was the outer sign of a raja yogi — a royal liberated soul. It is thus that we have to understand the wearing of a lion skin by Heracles.

The girdle

After Leo in the Zodiac comes Virgo, and the eighth adventure. The acquisition of Hippolyta's girdle was in reality no labour at all but a sacred marriage, the *unio mystica* or meeting of the now conscious incarnation with its soul, its protecting angel. In truth the golden girdle does not belong to the queen of the Amazons but to Aphrodite, and represents the Goddess of Beauty herself.

The legend tells us that when Heracles came to the country of the Amazons the queen presented him her girdle as a gift. The presentation of the girdle, as later the golden finger ring, is a symbol of marriage.

In Tahiti the sign of royalty was the red girdle, the *mara ura*, and not a crown, which belongs to a later age.

The sense of beauty, the feeling for beauty, the joy of beauty is not something we can

conquer; it is given. It is a thing to be repossessed rather, because receptivity to beauty always characterizes our psychic being. Yet like Heracles we have to cleanse the stables and domesticate the animals before we can enjoy unhampered the beauty around us. And once we possess the golden girdle it means that we are surrounded on all sides by beauty herself, a beauty to which we have been blind or indifferent in our untamed state.

The Hydra

But our labours are not yet ended. Even when we have repossessed our girdle and tasted the ecstasy and the bliss which beauty brings us, we discover that something threatens to steal it away, not animals like those we have conquered, but a real monster this time. For the ninth labour is the killing of the many-headed Hydra. Here for the first time was something Heracles really had to destroy; taming was not sufficient. It was part of himself, his own ego, his feeling of separateness, his sense of being somehow different from the all. This dragon or snake-monster appears in the myths of all peoples, and everywhere it represents the same psychological reality. In Christian mythology also we find the dragon, the root of all evil, slain by the angel Michael, a later version of Heracles. We quote from India, the *Vivekacudamani* of Shankaracharya:

Like a powerful and terrifying Hydra the feeling of I is rolled up around a precious treasure: the felicity of Brahman. It keeps it for its own use and lifts its three menacing heads above it. Only the knowing one may kill this monster. In obedience to the holy scripture, he cuts off the three heads with the invincible sword of self-realisation, and enters immediately into possession of the treasure: the eternal bliss.

Some versions of the Heracles legend place the killing of the Hydra right at the beginning, as the second labour, but quite obviously it represents a crowning conquest; at least as far as our conscious being is concerned, it belongs at the end of all the labours.

Cerberus or the scorpion

After this final gesture of self-conquest, the killing of the Hydra, the slaying of the ego, there still remains a part of our subconscious unsubdued, that part we have in common with all men, the mysterious kingdom of the dead — the ‘Inferni’ as their inhabitants were called in antiquity, or Hell as the name of the region was translated by our pious church fathers in a total psychological misunderstanding. Yet it was something a hero had to conquer in himself. Gilgamesh and Osiris, and Jesus too, all had to descend into their own underworld and liberate its inhabitants, our ancestors.

So we arrive at the tenth labour, the capture of Cerberus. Here again there is no slaying, only capture, because Cerberus was the faithful watchdog, the doorkeeper of this underworld which in our time Freud and Jung tried to explore for modern man.

We are told that Heracles, as a preliminary, went to Eleusys where he asked to take part in the Mysteries. Naturally he had to study the geography of the place he was to enter, and he learned, among other things, that the three-headed dog, the guardian of this world, was none other than Mother Hekate herself. Thus taught he had no difficulty, as indeed our subconscious is an aspect of the Great Mother. First Hades gave him permis-

sion to chain the dog. Then came a short struggle in which the dog tried to strike Heracles with its barbed tail (the scorpion), but Heracles was protected by his lion's skin. The story further tells us that Heracles was subsequently carried by the now obedient dog through the Elysian Fields.

According to another version (perhaps, the most understandable in its consequences) the now golden dog followed his possessor wherever he went. Thus Heracles entered and subdued his own subconscious, that part of himself which superstitious people fear as Death, or Hell.

When the apostle cries out, "Death, where is thy sting?," what does he mean by the sting? This sign of the zodiac, naturally, which the hero has to conquer.

According to Greek belief (Herodotus and Hesiod) heroes are a special creation of Zeus, and while common mortals go to Hades when they die, heroes go to the Isles of the Blessed, the Elysian Fields. 'Makarios the Blessed' is still a title for bishops in the East of Europe, and the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount originally mentioned these heroes. But in reality anybody can become a hero who chooses to and who conquers himself.

The cattle

The capturing of the cattle tells us of Heracles' conquests of heaven itself, which the hero, the yogi and the warrior have to enter in order to gain their immortality. To penetrate this mysterious realm beyond death and beyond life, Heracles needed a vehicle. So he waited until the setting sun had touched the western horizon and shot an arrow into it to make it stop there. With this shot we enter the sign of the archer and the eleventh labour. To shoot the setting sun in order to 'go west' and then to be invited into the glorious sunboat is an age-old story originating in Egypt.

And so Heracles travelled through Heaven to Erythreia, the red-gold land, the home of the golden cows. These cows, which he had to bring back with him, belonged to King Geryon the venerable Old One (one of the names of Helios himself). In the eleventh tablet of the Babylonian creation epic, Gilgamesh makes a similar journey to a sepulchral island across a sea of death, using his garment as a sail. This incident calls attention to many points of resemblance between the Heracles and Gilgamesh myths. Like Heracles, Gilgamesh kills a monstrous lion and wears its pelt, seizes a sky-bull by the horns and overcomes it, discovers a secret herb of invulnerability, takes the same journey as the sun and visits a Garden of Hesperides where, after killing a dragon coiled about a sacred tree, he is rewarded with immortality. The cows naturally are symbols and quite transparent. They are invoked in Vedic prayers as luminous troops of light, but are really images of a state of consciousness full of delight and plenitude.

The shining herd of dawn

"Our fathers," we are told, "found out the hidden Light by the truth in their thoughts, they brought to birth the dawn." And the hero, the yogi, is called the seeker of the cows.

Seeker of the cows... traveller to the seat of Heaven,

we are reminded by the Vedas.

It is the figurative language of the mystics and not the “nature worship of barbarians from the North” as some scholars think. The hero is he who has crossed beyond earth and heaven and made all existence his dwelling place. The supracelestial wideness has to be discovered by the “upsurging of the solar herds out of their secret cave.”

Cows in that early neolithic age were of course also a symbol of wealth. But the cows of the sun which Heracles had to steal were representations of the wealth which Jesus recommended to his disciples as worthy of being acquired. What are these treasures in heaven which we may earn and accumulate? Hera and Ishtar, Isis and Hathor appear as cows when they put on their most majestic forms, and in India the cow is still worshipped as the Mother, in spite of the well-meaning endeavours of innumerable missionaries to replace such ‘heathen’ images by more anthropomorphic ones.

But the cow goddess bearing the orb of the sun between her horns takes us back into a time when there were no sun gods; the sun was still feminine and one with the great Mother. Later ‘the cows’ in the plural were the golden evening or early morning clouds, symbols of a transfiguring illumination.

So it was quite natural that Heracles, who had already as a baby drunk Hera’s milk, should now meet and conquer the sky mother in her most heavenly and beautiful form, the cow. And here in heaven, on the summits of our being, the cow is that which is full of light and warmth, and the sweetness of love and bliss.

The apples

The last adventure of Heracles was fittingly the conquest of the golden apples of immortality. As is well known, the Tree of Knowledge from which Adam and Eve ate was not the only ‘forbidden’ tree in Paradise. Another was the Tree of Life.

And the Elohim said,

see, man has become like ourselves, knowing good and evil. Let us beware that he does not take fruits from the Tree of Life also, and also become immortal like us.

So the Elohim drove him out of the garden of Eden.

While the great religions content themselves with demanding from their adherents simple faith in eternal life, the yogis and mystics of all ages and peoples insist on actually tasting the golden apples. Only to them they are not allegories or wishful thinking, but a reality of inner life.

In the marvellous unanimity of ancient Egyptian and Babylonian iconography, of Indian and Germanic mythologies, of Mexican and Chinese symbolism, of ancient Celtic and modern Christian Christmas customs, the evergreen Tree of Life with its golden apples reminds us of a reality far stronger than anything of which Marx or Freud ever dreamed. The story tells us that on the way to the Garden of the Hesperides Heracles liberated Prometheus, who was being punished for bringing down the heavenly fire for mankind. But what Prometheus represents is the mental being, Metheus, that divine dwarf who is a prisoner of his own doing, chained to the rocks of the material world. At

the same time he is tormented by the eagles of Zeus, messengers from the lofty heights. They are bringers of the ideas and ideals which provide a kind of unfortunate, painful immortality to our mental being — on the one hand falsely and eternally accused, as Adam was, of revolting against the gods, and on the other hand praised for having brought down the heavenly fire.

In all mythologies we meet this ambiguous god: the mind, man's intellect. Trying its best to illumine man it plays Lucifer, the bringer of light but also the bearer of the dangerous illusion that man must mistrust the gods and can fight against them. Loki, the god of lies in the nordic religions, was the enemy of Baldur, the true light. So also Brahma, the false Brahman, thinks he is the only creator of the universe and able to measure the bliss of Siva.

Yet what would man be without his mind? It is a magnificent instrument but not the true ruler of our kingdom, the eternal seeker of the truth but not the knower. Our mental being, condemned to be attached to the material world yet longing for the heavenly heights, can only through heroic effort become liberated, aware of its divinity and its transcendence.

After a long pilgrimage Heracles arrived on the snowy summits of being far above human preoccupations, where the air is fresh and the vision vast. Here he met a brother mystic, an ancient yogi, a giant of awareness: Atlas (in Greek, the Daring One), a consciousness aware of the whole universe and daring to wear the firmament itself. Naturally the whole load of the universe fell upon his shoulders. Heracles knew that only such a vast consciousness could pluck the apples of immortality. Atlas agreed to help, but in the meanwhile Heracles had to take upon his shoulders the load of the vault with all its stars. A magnificent archaic sculpture from Olympia shows Heracles trying to do this. He is bent under the weight of heaven, but unseen behind stands his eternal guardian angel, Pallas Athene, who with one hand alleviates his load. So Atlas was free to go and bring him the marvellous fruits.

Thus, with the acquisition of the Golden Apples of Immortality and the awareness of his own eternity, Heracles completed the famous twelve labours. But to remain forever in a human form is not the highest aim. Even when we possess and are constantly aware of eternity, are a conscious immortal being, there is still

*an eternal becoming
a continuous
transformation
of outer forms
in which we are invited
to participate.*

How Heracles knew himself

Apotheosis

The so-called apotheosis of Heracles, his meeting with the cosmic fire, constitutes his last adventure in a human body.

Like the later Moses, he climbed a high mountain, an inner Himalaya; but unlike Moses he not only met the fire which is all things and which called itself "I am the I am," but he became one with it and was carried away by it and in it. As the pyre blazed up, a flash of lightning blinded all present. A fiery cloud passed under Heracles' body and bore it away. Zeus received his son. This fire, worshipped by our forefathers and sung in the Vedic hymns, must be well understood if we want to know what we ourselves are, what soul is, or god. We must understand that the universe is not a heap of matter but is energy, fire. Life is not the form of living beings we see, but a process, a wave, a flame — a rapid transformation. A soul also is not a body, not even an etheric body, but an energy, a longing, an aspiration, an eternal process. As long as you believe that you are a body, a form, you will die. The moment you really understand that you are a fire, an everlasting explosive transformation process, you will live forever in that flame which you are. And this is the meaning of Heracles' ascension in fire: Man, that dim little spark of star-fire he had been on this dark planet, finally became, itself, a shining star.

And proudly our stone-age parents could show their children the constellation, Heracles the hunter, and tell them how a human being like themselves could become a companion to the stars by the magic of his soul, that marvellous inner psychic fire that has the capacity to grow and embrace the universe.

Thousands of years later Jesus said: "I am the fire and he who is near to me is near to the fire." (The Gospel according to Thomas ✠) He promised his followers the baptism of fire. Yet later in the dark ages men refused the sacred fire from heaven and put it into hell.

Heracles the Hero

During antiquity Heracles was worshipped throughout the Mediterranean world. Each city added some exploit to his life to identify him with its own heroic ancestors. The legion of sons he was supposed to have fathered permitted any local dynasty to claim a direct ancestor who was a son of Heracles. The Romans also took him over as theirs, adding some incidents to his life and connecting it with their own history.

Hero

But Heracles has remained an eternal riddle to historians: was he man or god, hero or legendary king?

What is a hero?

Someone who overcomes his fear and behaves like a hero? Or someone who knows that he has nothing to fear?

Even a hen will fearlessly attack a big dog when her chicks are small. Are all hens therefore heroes? No, a hero is someone surpassing the ordinary man because he has himself chosen to be more than man. A hero is always a hero. In his sleep he never has nightmares, for in his presence the tigers become kittens and Cerberus a tame dog.

How did it happen that this marvellous story has been stripped of all meaning? Modern mythologists wonder about the different geographical locations and consider endless rationalisations. One says the apples of immortality were sheep, because ‘melon,’ or apple, can also mean sheep in Greek. Another, that Atlas was a teacher of astronomy and taught Heracles the names of the stars. Still others see in these labours ancient rituals rather than allegories, but few guess their deep significance. When Jesus was told by his disciples, “They think you are speaking in allegories,” Jesus answered, “They have physical eyes but their souls are blind.” They know the kitchen fire but not the fire they themselves are, the fire all is.

We hope that our presentation of the Heracles myth may become an invitation to our readers to look behind the few precious literary relics of the neolithic age to the basic movements of consciousness they imply. They are neither history nor geography, nor allegories; they are not childish fairy tales, or royal sacrifices. They are stories of the human soul, deeper and more knowledgeable than anything produced by modern man with his underdeveloped inner life, his primitive religious understanding, his degenerate belief that only material things matter.

If we have discovered some meaning behind this ancient legend, we have discovered at the same time something of the glory of Greek religion and of the spirituality of our stone-age forefathers, something which had been in danger of being lost in the night before history began. But the prehistory we discover may not have been as primitive as we thought.

We might also wonder how old a science yoga really is, this endeavour to spiritualize man; how long it took before this science discovered that man’s inner vision and spiritual experience had been leading him step by step on his way to become an image of God ages even before the so-called great religions abolished the hero and offered man salvation as a substitute. But who is a hero, after all? Sri Aurobindo answers that self-conquest is the first law of his nature “ ... whoever seeks to climb from level to level up the hill of the divine, fearing nothing, deterred by no retardation or defeat, shrinking from no vastness because it is too vast for his intelligence, no height because it is too high for his spirit, no greatness because it is too great for his force and courage.”

The hero is all that we thought:

the intrepid warrior
 the eternal fighter for truth
 the protector of widows and orphans
 the fearless killer of monsters and dragons.

But he is also much more; above all, he is the conqueror — but not of others:

*he
 is the one
 who has conquered
 himself.*