

Sri Aurobindo and Integral Yoga

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ABSTRACT

At Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo devoted himself exclusively to Yoga. Glimpses of the goal of his yoga are there in his writings in the *Kamayogin*, especially in his renderings of the Isha and Kena Upanishads. Sri Aurobindo believed that man is an intermediate stage in evolution. Just as the ape evolved into man, man will become superman. Sri Aurobindo started the Journal *Arya* in 1914. In this monthly, he expounded his metaphysical masterpiece, *The Life Divine*. He wrote another series titled, *The Synthesis of Yoga*. In this he summed up the contributions of the past methods of yoga and outlined his own yoga of self-perfection for realizing the ideal of the Life Divine. *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* deal with sociological and political development of humanity in the light of spiritual evolution and oneness of origin in the Divine. His books on the scriptures, *Secret of Veda*, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, commentaries on the *Upanishads and Essays on the Gita*, inform humanity regarding how the ancient works refer to the spiritual evolution of consciousness and the truth of the divine manifestation in the world. In November 1926, when the overmind consciousness of Krishna descended to him, he retired into complete seclusion for an intense pursuit of is to Divinise terrestrial existence. The goal of this yoga is to lead a divine life in a divine body.

Keywords: Integral Yoga, Consciousness, Self, Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, Brahman, Divine, Supermind

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872. At the age of seven, he was taken to England for his education. He was in England for 14 years during which he acquired great proficiency in the classical languages, Latin and Greek and learnt a number of Continental languages too. He wrote poetry, and won all the prizes that were open to him, and distinguished himself both at St. Paul's School and at Cambridge where he studied. Rejecting the ICS, which he passed, he got himself disqualified by failing to appear for the riding test. He returned to India, proceeded to Baroda where he spent the next fourteen years of his life, in various positions in the Secretariat, in the Palace of the Maharaja, in the college first as a Professor and then as the Vice-Principal. Side by side with his official duties, he pursued his own studies in Indian scriptures and classics in order to acquaint himself with the Indian tradition. He also learnt Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati and Marathi. He read widely and many of his literary works were really begun – and some of them completed – during this period.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 made Sri Aurobindo assume the leadership of the extremist section of the National movement. He wrote fiery articles in the famous *Bande Mataram* journal and awakened the whole country to the need to win complete independence for India. The British Government had won arrested in the Alipur Bomb blast case and kept him in jail for one full year. It was during this incarceration that Sri Aurobindo had the realization of Vasudeva as the one lord of the universe and His consciousness as the stuff of the world. He was acquitted. Through the journal *Karmayogin* in English he exhorted his country men to follow the fundamental values of their ancient heritage. He received an Adesh, a divine command, from above to proceed to Chandernagore, a French-controlled near Calcutta. From there he shifted to Pondicherry on the 4th of April 1910.

While at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo had taken interest in Yoga. He came into contact with a Maharashtrian Yogi, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, and he was given a method of communing with the Divine seated within the heart and surrendering to Him. Sri Aurobindo also had the vision of the Godhead and the infinity of Brahman while at

Sankaracharya temple, Srinagar. All these movements culminated in the realization of the cosmic consciousness in Alipore jail in Calcutta.

At Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo devoted himself exclusively to Yoga. Glimpses of the goal of his yoga are there in his writings in the *Kamayogin*, especially in his renderings of the Isha and Kena Upanishads. MP Pandit states, "His was the path of affirmation, fulfillment of the Divine in this world which is His manifestation. Life is the field of this revelation of God and should be accepted as such. The object of human existence is to realize the divinity of man in a world essentially divine. This vision of truth is veiled by a thick crust of ignorance and yoga is the means to break through this crust and realize the true character of life." (7)

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Sri Aurobindo wrote almost all the 64 pages of the *Arya* every month by himself and carried on the project for six and a half years till 1921.

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Sri Aurobindo was a creative genius. He came with a Divine Mission. Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual collaboration, the Mother, devoted their entire lives on

earth towards the evolution of man. Sri Aurobindo perceived that this world of ours is a developing progression of an unfolding consciousness. Spiritual evolution is the goal of this process. Consciousness, the *city*, manifests on this globe in developing forms, stage by stage. The stage of matter was followed by the entry of life that in turn was succeeded by the mind. The next stage is the manifestation of the spirit, the Divine mind which is a principle of Truth-knowledge, Truth Will, Unity. Sri Aurobindo calls it the Supermind. Man is on his way to becoming a being with God-consciousness of which harmony, peace, oneness are the natural workings. Sri Aurobindo did 40 years of uninterrupted *Sadhana* to hasten the advent of Divine consciousness and the Mother until her Samadhi in 1973 was engaged in establishing on earth the New consciousness that would bring forth the Life Divine. In his magnum opus, the *Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo presented the metaphysics of his conception. It is a manifesto for the ideal of Divine Life for man. Sri Aurobindo's vision was all-embracing. He always stressed on the oneness of humanity. He foresaw the emergence of a supramental race.

Sri Aurobindo wrote books on the *Veda*, *Upanishad* and the *Gita* in order to know how they shed light on integral yoga. In the Vedas he felt that the arrangements of deities was in tune with his own experiences in Yoga. Unlike Sayana's ritualistic commentary on the Vedas, Sri Aurobindo revealed to the world the symbolic, mystical significance of the hymns. M.P.Pandit states: "Behind the deceptive exterior there lay a profound corpus of the history and record of the inner communion of the Rishis – and the Gods, Powers of the creative Godhead. The outer ritual way was throughout paralleled by an inner process of self-consecration and self-giving to the higher Divine powers of the Cosmos". (20)

Sri Aurobindo states in *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*: "In Ancient times the Veda was revered as a sacred book of wisdom, a great mass of inspired poetry, the work of Rishis, seers and sages, who received in their illumined minds rather than mentally constructed a great universal, eternal and impersonal Truth which they embodied in Mantras, revealed verses of power, not of an ordinary but of a divine inspiration and source. The name given to these sages was Kavi, which afterwards came to mean any poet, but at the time had the sense of a seer of truth,-

the Veda itself describes them as *kavayah satyasrutah*, “seers who are hearers of the Truth” and the Veda itself was called, *sruti*, a word which came to mean, “revealed Scripture”. The seers of the Upanishad had the same idea about the Veda and frequently appealed to its authority for the truths they themselves announced and these too afterwards came to be regarded as *Sruti*, revealed Scripture, and were included in the sacred Canon.”(1)

Sri Aurobindo’s commentaries on the *Isha* and the *Kena*, readings in the *Taittiriya*, translations of *Katha*, *Mundaka*, *Mandukya*, *Aitareya* and *Prashna* Upanishads expound the message of integral yoga as found in these scriptures. The world, for the rishis of the Upanishads, is a manifestation of the Divine, Brahman, and the universe is a manifestation of Brahman. Sri Aurobindo sees continuity between the Veda and the Upanishad. At Alipur jail he became intimate with the Gita. He published his translations of the *Isha*, *Kena* and other Upanishads in the *Kamayogin*. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar states: “Sri Aurobindo sees the central idea of the Upanishad as “reconciliation and ceremony of fundamental opposites”, the conscious lord and phenomenal Nature, renunciation and enjoyment, action in Nature and the soul’s freedom, the one stable Brahman and the multiple movement, the State of Being and the dynamics of Becoming, the active word and the indifferent Akshara Brahman, *Vidya* and *Avidya*, birth and non-birth, works and knowledge if “all this is habitation of the word”, it is only through the awakening of the consciousness of such constant Divine Participation that the individual can escape from the bondage of egoistic desire..! (442).

The greatest challenge is to break the barrier of the ego. Sri Aurobindo writes:

The first movement of self-realization is the sense of unity with other existences in the universe. Its early or crude form is the attempt to understand or sympathise with others, the tendency of a widening love... The oneness so realized is a pluralistic unity... The many remain to the consciousness as the real existences, the one is only their result.

Real knowledge begins with the perception of essential oneness –
one Matter, one life, one mind, one soul playing in many forms.

When this soul of this is seen to be Sachchidananda, then knowledge is perfected. For we see matter to be only a play of life, Truth...

Truth a play of sachchidananda, Sachchidananda the self-manifestation of a supreme unknowable...

We perceive the soul in all bodies to be this one Self or Sachchidananda multiplying itself in individual consciousness...

This is the vision of all existences in the Self and of the Self in all existences... (91).

Sachchidananda is the word. The human soul is involved in ignorance. One has to pierce the golden lid of apparent truth to see the real truth.

The *Kena* Upanishad is preoccupied with the problem of consciousness, the stair of consciousness, the powerful Brahman-consciousness. Sri Aurobindo states:

The language of the Upanishad makes it strikingly clear that it is no metaphysical abstraction, no void silence, no indeterminate absolute which is offered to the soul that aspires, but rather the absolute of all that is possessed by it here in the relative world of its sojourning.

All here in the mental is a growing light, consciousness and life, all there in the supramental is an infinite life, light and consciousness. That which is here shadowed, is there found, the incomplete here is there the fulfilled. The Beyond is not an annihilation, but a transfiguration of all that we are here in our world of forms...

It is not by abandoning life on earth ... it is here, *ihaiva*, in this mortal life and body that immortality must be won, here in this lower Brahman and by this embodied soul that the Higher must be known and possessed (PP 67, 126, 127).

For Sri Aurobindo the Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita are a syntheses of spiritual experiences. The Vedas invoke the powers of the cosmic godheads. The Upanishads culminate this synthesis further. Sri Aurobindo states:

The Gita starts from this Vedantic synthesis and upon the basis of its essential ideas builds another harmony of the three great means and

powers, love, knowledge and works, through which the soul of man can directly approach and last itself into the Eternal (P7).

To Sri Aurobindo, the Gita makes a crucial turn in the history of the development of Indian philosophy and religion. It unites diverse strands of thinking that had developed in the post-Upanishadic age. MP Pandit states "The *Gita* describes how sacrifice, self-giving, was the central level on which the creator has set the machinery of the universe into operation, how life is governed by the principle of sacrifice at every level of creation. Man is called upon to recognize this truth of inner sacrifice as the key to his larger development and enjoined to train his faculties of body, life and mind and heart in the yoga of self-consecration, *yajna*, to the Divine, the Divine in himself. the Divine in All, the Divine in Nature, thereby forging a solidarity with the whole of creation and embracing the Divine manifestation in a scheme of progressive self-enlargement and self-transcendental. (27-28) For Sri Aurobindo the Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita are a syntheses of spiritual experiences. The Vedas invoke the powers of the cosmic godheads. The Upanishads culminate this synthesis further. Sri Aurobindo states:

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Sri Aurobindo found in the Veda, Upanishads and the Gita links for the structuring of *The Life Divine*. Sri Aurobindo sums up the teaching of the *Gita* brilliantly in a single paragraph:

The arguments of the Gita resolves itself into three great steps by which action rises out of the human into the divine plane leaving the bondage of the lower for the liberty of a higher law. First, by the renunciation of desire and a perfect equality works have to be done as a sacrifice by man as the doer, a sacrifice to a deity who is the supreme and only Self through by him not yet realized in his own being. This is the initial step. Secondly, not only the desire of the fruit, but the claim to be the doer of works has to be renounced in the realization of the self as the equal, the inactive, the

immutable principle and of all works as simply the operation of universal force, of the Nature-soul, *Prakiti*, the unequal, active mutable power.

Lastly, the supreme self has to be seen as the supreme *Purusha* governing this *Prakiti*, of whom the soul in nature is a partial manifestation, by whom all works are directed, in a perfect transcendence, through nature. To Him love and adoration and the sacrifice of works have to be offered, the whole being has to be surrendered to Him and the whole consciousness raised up to dwell in this divine consciousness so that the human soul may share in His divine transcendence of nature and of His works and act in a perfect spiritual liberty. (Vol.13, pp.34,35).

As an avatar, Krishna has to enact the Divine manifestation and uplifting Arjuna to a higher level of consciousness. The reason for the Divine to descend into humanity, is to take humanity to the heights of Divine consciousness. Sri Aurobindo states:

There are two aspects of the divine birth, one is a descent, the birth of God in humanity, the Godhead manifesting itself in the human form and nature, the eternal Avatar; the other is an ascent, the birth of man into the Godhead, man rising into the divine nature and consciousness, *madbhavana ajath*, it is the being born anew in a second birth of the soul. It is that new birth which Avatarhood and the upholding of the Dharma one intended to serve. (140).

The Essays on the Gita is one of the best introductions to integral yoga. It was first published as a book in 1922. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar observes, "... *Essays on the Gita* has been frequently reprinted, and it is perhaps the most widely read of Sri Aurobindo's major prose works; and undoubtedly, it is both preparation and corroboration for *The Life Divine*. And its sweep of its comprehension, the resilience of its argument, the brilliant of its Nara-Narayana portraiture and the steady flow and sustained glow of its language secure for the work a place of special honour among the great commentaries on the world's greatest poem of spiritual philosophy". (450)

In a series of articles in the *Arya*, Sri Aurobindo analyzed the foundations of Indian culture. These articles have been published by the Sri Aurobindo

Ashram under the title, *Foundations of Indian Culture*. Three essays with the title, "Is India Civilised?" 'A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture' and 'A Defence of Indian Culture with sections on 'Religion and spirituality'. 'Indian Art', 'Indian literature' and 'Indian polity' had originally appeared in the *Arya* from 1919 to 1921. It was a response to the criticism of Indian culture by a Western literary critic, William Archer. Sri Aurobindo defends all aspects of Indian culture in these essays. Indian religious thought did not preach universal asceticism or an escape from life. Sri Aurobindo points out in the Indian way of life *Moksha* (Spiritual Liberation) comes out of the fullness of the other three, *Kama* (enjoyment), *artha* (material-well being) and *dharma* (right conduct). Sri Aurobindo notes that messengers of the spirit like Nammalvar, Andal, Manikkavasakar, Tukaram, Kabir, Mira, Sankara, Nanak who were ambassadors of the Divine. The three Acharyas, Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhwa provided to mankind original insights into the Upanishads. The five chapters on Indian literature, the first three devoted to the Veda, the Upanishads, and the two great epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the fourth to Kalidasa and the poets of the classical age, and the last, to Purana, and Tantra, to the Tamil poets, and spiritual men all over India provide a bird's eye view of the three thousand year old literary tradition. Sri Aurobindo turns to the Veda, which is "a remarkable, sublime and powerful creation" by *Rishis* touching "the most extraordinary heights and amplitudes of a sublime and mystic poetry". (p282). The constant feelings of the presence of the infinite is part of the Indian tradition. The Upanishads connect with the higher spiritual thought of ancient and modern world civilization. Sri Aurobindo states:

The ideas of the Upanishads can be rediscovered in much of the thought of Pythagoras and Plato and form the profoundest part of New-Platonism and Gnosticism with all their considerable consequences to the philosophical thinking of the west, and Sufism only repeats them in another religious substance". (283)

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana have their perennial appeal. Sri Aurobindo finds in Kalidasa a poet who ranks with Milton and Virgil but "with a more subtle and delicate spirit and touch in his art than the English, a greater breath of native power informing and vivifying his execution than the Latin poet, and

Abhijnana Shakuntalam is the most perfect and captivating romantic drama in all literature. (pp.298,305)

Sri Aurobindo in *Foundations of Indian culture* has given mankind the political, cultural, literary and metaphysical history of India. It must be made essential reading in the schools, colleges and universities of India.

Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus is *The Life Divine*. In it he presents the metaphysics for his conception and ideal of Divine Life for man. In this work, Sri Aurobindo states how consciousness evolves from matter to life to mind and to greater states of the mind illuminating in Supermind which is the acting power of Sachidananda or Brahman. The goal of integral yoga is to lead a divine life in a divine body. In the last chapter Sri Aurobindo visualizes the lines on which a Gnostic community, the forerunner of a new race with a new consciousness, is likely to come into being and grow.

Sri Aurobindo wrote a great body of poetry. His *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* is the longest epic in the English language and runs into twenty-three thousand lines and more.

Sri Aurobindo had a scientific approach to the problem of life. He believed that materialism and rationalism are necessary phases in the march of humanity. His integral yoga stressed on the idea that this world is not unreal, but real and it is Divine. Sri Aurobindo wrote about both individual and social evolution, the need to develop a strong body, the life energy, balancing the emotions and maintaining a strong mind. He integrated science with spirituality. He opposed the ascetic spirit. He said that India neglected matter and paid a heavy price for it. Sri Aurobindo asks us to revise our values and develop a 'universal religion' in which the individual's consecration is to the truth. We have to liberate ourselves from the mental consciousness. In poetry, Sri Aurobindo wrote about the role of mantra. In social philosophy, he wrote about the evolution of humanity from the symbolic age to the typical and conventional age, the age of individual revolt (which witnessed the French revolution) and then of the present subjective age. Humanity is moving towards the spiritual age. Future humanity will be organized spiritually. He envisioned the unity of mankind and humanity becoming one. He

exhorted human beings to develop a global outlook, global approach and a global consciousness.

SRI AUROBINDO'S INTEGRAL YOGA

The Upanishads state that man is essentially divine. The Upanishads point out, *Tat tvam asi*, Thou art that. They also state: *Sarvam Khalu idam brahma* – All this is Brahman. There is an intelligence that is behind every movement, *prajna netro lokah*. and that intelligence is none other than the Divine Consciousness itself, *prajnanam brahma*. Life is a field for the manifestation of the Divine consciousness.

Consciousness evolves from matter to life and further to the mind – *annam bahman, prano Brahman, mano brahman*. However the mind is only an intermediate stage. Man, the mental Purusha, is not final. Beyond the mind is the spirit, the spiritual Purusha, the Divine consciousness organized as the faculty of knowledge-will, the *Vijnana*. It is the level of the supermind. To realize and embody on earth this power of the supramental Truth is the next stage of Evolution. By intense Sadhana and surrender to the Divine Grace, the man can go to levels higher than the mind – Higher mind, Illumined mind, Intuitive mind, Overmind and finally the Supermind. Man, in short, can become Superman.

Sri Aurobindo's path is called Integral yoga or Purna yoga. Man's physical, vital and mental parts are offered to the Divine Shakti for transformation. The qualities required are aspiration for the divine life, surrender to the Divine, rejection of everything that stands in the way of this surrender and aspiration.

The first stage in this Sadhana is to understand that man is essentially divine. At the core of the being is the psychic being is the psychic being which is the soul in evolution and a spark of the Divine. By cleansing the vital movements of man – consisting of lust, passion, jealousy, anger, desire etc. he prepares for the Divine to be seated within him. Man's realization of the Divine in himself is not complete unless it is extended into a realization of the Divine in others. His vision becomes all-embracing. He understands that the self within him is the self in all. He comprehends that Brahman pervades everywhere. The goal of traditional Vedanta is to attain

self-realization. The goal of integral yoga The goal of integral yoga is to grow from the national limited human consciousness into a higher, wider Divine consciousness. The purpose of this transformation is to manifest the Divine in our life. The mind, the life, the body, the soul, all must be equally filled with the Divine presence. The integral yoga has three clear objects in view:

First, the realization of the Divine within oneself, the individual realization. Next, a felt seeing of the one Divine all around in the universe, the Divine which is identical with one's own self-the cosmic realization. And Third, an ascension into an order of the Reality which stands above both the individual and the universal manifestation, but bases them both the transcendental realization.

The goal of all the paths of yoga is mukti, liberation. In Sri Aurobindo's teaching, the universe is as real as the Divine of which it is a willed emanation. The integral yoga concentrates on the evolutionary line of ascent in the manifestation. The goal is a divine life in a divine body. Lower nature is transformed to light, power and delight of the divine truth.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother laid the foundations for the establishment of a supramental world.

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