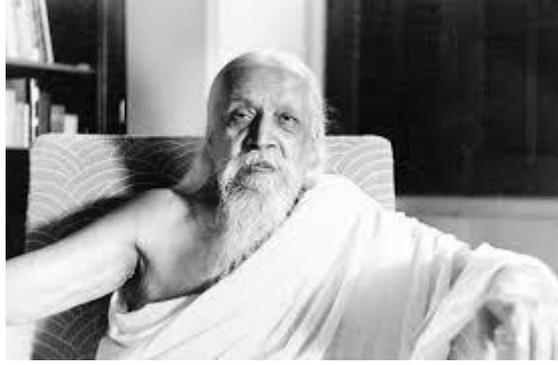


Sri Aurobindo and Yoga

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Introduction

India has given birth to hundreds of sages, saints, and philosophers who have worked to restore and renew her rich spiritual heritage periodically. This has ensured the continuity of spiritual tradition from Vedic times, a tradition that is vibrant even today despite external onslaughts and internal upheavals. There have been great fighters in modern India like Tilak, philosophers like Vivekananda, poets like Tagore, and ‘Mahatmas’ like Gandhi. But Sri Aurobindo was all these, and a yogi as well. Patanjali and Sri Aurobindo represent two ends of this unbroken and unceasing spiritual tradition.

Considered an incarnation of the mythical serpent king Ananta, who supports the earth, Patanjali is believed to have lived two thousand years ago. He was born to put the house of yoga in order and to systematize it for ease of comprehension and access. Hence if Shiva is the first yogi, Patanjali is next to him among yogis of the highest order. The system propounded by him is known as ashtanga yoga, the eight-limbed yoga comprising of *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *prayahara*, *dharma*, *dhyana*, and *Samadhi*.

Sri Aurobindo belongs to modern times. He was a poet, philosopher, freedom fighter, nationalist and above all a rishi and yogi in the Vedic tradition. Born on 15 August 1872 he had fourteen years of rigorous English education at St. Paul’s school in London and Kings College, Cambridge. His life after return to India in 1892 underwent several twists and turns. After working in various administrative and professional posts in Baroda and Calcutta, including that of a teacher at Maharaja’s College he plunged into revolutionary nationalist

politics, advocating extremist methods to free India from British rule. In 1908 while in the Alipore bomb case he had several mystical experiences which drastically transformed him into a yogi. Several years earlier he had started practicing yoga under the instruction of Vishnu Bhaskar Lele but it was only in Alipore that he realized his true destiny and finally abandoned his political and revolutionary literary activity. In 1910 soon after his acquittal, he secretly sailed for Pondicherry, his final home for practicing intense yogic sadhana. It was there that he became a silent but spiritually dynamic personality, fully focused on his new path which resulted in a new vision, a new philosophy, a new religious outlook, and a new experience. This transformation led him to proclaim that the advent of the Supramental on earth was inevitable. Bringing the Supramental consciousness and power down to earth was Sri Aurobindo's central work. He explained this process as well as his yogic experiences in his writings, which run into several thousand pages. These include *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Human cycle*, and *The Record of Yoga*.

The Four Aids

Śāstra: the recorded knowledge of the principles and process of realisation,

Utshāh: our persistent effort to follow the path laid out by the Shastra,

Guru: the teacher who through influence and example 'uplifts our knowledge and effort' and

Kāla: time: these are the four great instruments with whose help Yoga Siddhi can be achieved.

The secret to the supreme Śāstra of the integral Yoga exists in the heart of every living being. When every aspect of life, thought, and energy yearns for this knowledge, then it is revealed through many realisations to the seeker. If there is an effort, it is because the divine touch has been received, for it is only then that there is a thirst, a receptive spirit born in the individual. And once the divine touch is received then attainment of the divine is assured.

All knowledge exists within the individual and it is only a question of drawing it out. In the same way the perfection that man outwardly achieves is but a realisation of the already existing perfection within him; to teach is to reveal what already exists, and to become is to realise what we inherently are. Therefore, we can know and become the divine because we are the divine.

This revealing by which one unfolds is helped by the Word, *śruta*. This word can come to the seeker from within or without. There are only few who are capable of realisation, with only the help of their inner receptivity and do not need the additional help from guides from without like that of a "written book or a living teacher".

Generally, the word *from without* helps to awaken the need for self-unfolding. To follow the path set out by yogins who have realised and recorded their approach and experience is safe and will yield results and can be practiced by oneself or with the help of a living teacher. But the sādhak practicing the integral yoga must not limit himself to this narrow practice because he must remember no shastra; however great; can ever express the entirety of the eternal knowledge. Therefore, even if he does benefit from a specific shastra or many shastras, ultimately, he must carve his own path. For the seeker to be the sādhak of the infinite he must not be limited.

In India the tradition of realisation through the written shastra, which provides a detailed outline of a path of yoga is revered and therefore a breaking away from the set methods is shunned. But, in reality, the shastra is the record of a lone individual's path to realisation and therefore a second individual can take its help in his first stages of seeking, but later as he finds his bearings, his temperament, leanings, and the impulses of his nature will affect his journey and he in turn will create his own methods and principles of realisation.

An integral yoga will accept the teachings of the past, but it will not be limited by it. The integral yoga aims to renew the past teachings and make them relevant for the present and the future. Its aim is the same as the traditional shastra, but instead of following an established road it will create a path through unexplored domains. The needs of the present have changed and cannot be fulfilled with old methods and integral yoga will mould itself to suit the current needs. A perfect integral yoga can be achieved when every individual carves out his own path towards realisation.

To be able to proceed on this individualised path one must have a general knowledge of the possibilities. The sādhak must therefore make use of the shastra; for they are directions from an experienced yogi; to inform himself and then he can set out on his personal path to realisation.

The duration and the intensity of realisations depends from the very beginning on how eager the sādhak is; utsāha, how open, receptive, and determined his effort is. His ability to break away from his ego, which limits him, makes him capable of embracing the transcendent.

There are three stages in the process of integral yoga. In the first stage the personal effort dominates because as yet identification with the divine has not yet been achieved. But once this has been done, he must recognise that a force greater than himself is at work and not his egoistic self. At a later stage his own will becomes one with the divine will, and his physical, vital, and mental beings is transformed in a manner that of which the personal effort is incapable of. When the identification with the divine is complete, the sādhak is ready to be an instrument for the earth's transformation and spiritual progress.

We believe that all our actions and judgements are our own but in reality, it is the higher power that is acting in us. Only when we are enlightened do we realise that the ego is only an instrument. When this is realised, we see that, what we believe to be the “self-assertion of our being” is influenced by all the outward happenings and with this realisation the ego surrenders itself to the divine.

Like the secret shastra exist within us, so does the supreme guide or Jagad guru. He helps the individual identify with divine by revealing to him his own divine nature. Therefore, in the Integral yoga, it is of utmost importance to recognise him fully. The inner guide is hidden at first because our personal effort and ego veils him. As we grow in realisation, we see the “source of the growing light within us”. It is then that we realise that it is him who is moulding us in his own perfect and eternal image. We recognise that to become him is our secret goal.

If we can find the inner master and make ourselves receptive and trust the divine power to transform us, then the integral fulfilment is assured. But our egoistic nature cannot at once surrender itself to him in every aspect.

Man also finds it difficult to believe in something that he cannot conceive or relate to, it is easier for him to believe in something tangible, something outside himself. Most men need to pin their faith outside themselves, in a human representative of god to be able to make any spiritual progress. Therefore, according to the need of the person the divine manifests himself. The concept of Ishta Devata exists to fulfil the need of the individual to conceive god who is infinite and eternal in manner in which god is relatable.

Apart from an Ishta Devata, most people need a second aid as well to progress in their spiritual life; the living guru who is the representation of divine wisdom. For the sādhak these aids are not fixed dogmas but instruments, which help to awaken in him, a yearning for the divine and he must discard them once he no longer needs them.

With all of these aid, the sādhak realisation is certain. Time, the last remaining aid, can be either an enemy or a friend to the sādhak, at different stages of his progress. Once the sādhak starts on this path of the integral yoga, birth and death are but stages of his development. The ego sees it as a resistance while the divine views it only as a condition, when the divine will and the personal will become One consciousness, then time, *kāla* too is an instrument of realisation.¹

Integral Yoga

Sri Aurobindo has practiced intense yoga and sadhana and has given detailed explanation on his yoga. His yoga is the Purna yoga or the integral yoga. The integral includes the yoga for the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual aspect of the human

¹ The Synthesis of Yoga, **Part I: The Yoga of Divine Works**, *Chapter I: The Four Aids*, p-33

being. Sri Aurobindo's aim is the supreme and to achieve it one has to reach perfection in each of these fields when this is achieved the perfection of an individual is achieved. He further explains that when the stage of perfection we aim is achieved we realize that the truth that we are in search of is made up of three main aspects love, knowledge, power and beauty .these four qualities will be automatically and spontaneously expressed in the perfected being, "The psychic will be the vehicle of true and pure love the mind will be the vehicle of infallible knowledge, the vital will manifest an invincible power and strength and the body will be the expression of a perfect beauty and a harmony."²

Sri Aurobindo's yoga begins with the body or the physical. Both the physical and the mental are equally important and necessary, but he places the perfection of the physical first because he believes all creation begins with matter, and life is later stage in development. He explains "Perfection is the true aim of all culture if our seeking is for a total perfection of the being, the physical part of it cannot be left aside; for the body is the material basis, the body is the instrument which we have to use."³

Some philosophers and spiritual leaders feel that the body is unconscious, a burden and a hurdle that cannot be pushed away, discarded, or passed over. But in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, it as an instrument bestowed with life and energy that is an aid or a means to transformation. He believes that the body should be trained and strengthened accordingly. The body is in no way to be neglected. It is the starting point of sadhana. He does not speak alone, of the need for strength, he stresses greatly on the necessity of grace, beauty, and harmony, as beauty is the very spirit of the physical world.

The development of the physical also impacts positively the mental and the vital. The physical is the most essential for the descent of the divine consciousness because eventually it is the only means to bear and express the divine consciousness. Sri Aurobindo recognizes that the body has its limits, "we are bound by a poor and limited physical nature; we are bound consequently by a poor and limited life power."⁴

He believes that if perfection is set as the goal of life the body cannot be ignored but has to be made an essential part of transformation, "A total perfection is the ultimate end which we set before us, for our ideal is the Diviner Life which we wish to create here, the life of the Spirit fulfilled on earth, life accomplishing its own spiritual transformation even here on earth in the conditions of the material universe. That cannot be unless the body too undergoes a transformation."⁵ He also says, "The body itself must reach a perfection in all that is and does which we can now hardly conceive."⁶

² Mother, On Education, p-8

³ Sri Aurobindo, The Supramental Manifestation, p-8

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, The Synthesis of Yoga, p-508

⁵ Sri Aurobindo, The Life Divine, p-30

⁶ Sri Aurobindo, The Life Divine, p-30

Liberation from the cycle of birth or moksha is the aim of the humans in many spiritual teachings. But in Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga he believes there is reason for our birth, a meaning to this life. He believes that we are not merely born birth after birth on earth to live in such a manner as to realize moksha, but we are born to realize divine consciousness on the earth itself. On this idea Sri Aurobindo has based his integral yoga.

There are three stages in this yoga, the first is a downward movement where the supreme reality descends and penetrates everything however deep or dense it is. This is involution. The next stage is evolution, and it is an upward movement - the spiritual evolution. The human beings can do this because they are at the intermediate stage and not the final stage of evolution even though they mark the evolution of the consciousness, and so therefore, have the ability to reach the supramental. Once this stage has been attained, the final stage, the essence of Sri Aurobindo's yoga takes place. It is the most crucial stage, here the supramental consciousness is brought down on the earth and the whole humanity is divinized.

It is not enough that only the second stage or the attaining of the supramental consciousness is achieved. Sri Aurobindo does not believe in attaining the divine conscious for one-self alone and leaving the whole of humanity in its own plight. The goal is to bring salvation to one and all, to transform the world into the supramental. Sri Aurobindo's yoga is unique due to this aspect of his yoga and also due to his practice of perfecting and transforming the human being on the whole.

Sri Aurobindo explains about his yoga "...the acquisition of the divine nature by the transformation of this lower being in to the human image of the divine, adharmukti, and the complete and final release of all."⁷ He also tells what he means by transformation; transformation of the self, transformation of humanity, "By transformation I do not mean some change of nature- I do not mean, for instance, sainthood or ethical perfection or yogic siddhis (like the tantrik's) or a transcendental (cinmaya) body. I use transformation in special sense, a change of consciousness radical and complete and of a certain specific kind which is so conceived as to bring about a strong and assured step forward in the spiritual evolution of the being of a greater and higher kind and of a large sweep and completeness than what took place in a mentalized being first appeared in a vital and material animal world. A partial realization, something mixed and inconclusive, does not meet the demand I make on life and yoga."⁸

Conclusion

The goal of Integral yoga is to become aware of the Divine, to integrate the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of ourselves, and to manifest the Divine at earth. According to Sri Aurobindo, all life is Yoga, while Yoga as a sādhanā is a methodised effort towards self-

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, The Synthesis of Yoga, 508

⁸ The Synthesis of Yoga, p-587

perfection, which brings to expression the latent, hidden potentialities of being. Success in this effort unifies the human individual with the universal and transcendental Existence. Integral yoga reunites "the infinite in the finite, the timeless in the temporal and the transcendent with the immanent."⁹

References

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