

## Chapter 4

# Aurobindo and Integral Yoga

Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose was born on August 15, 1872 in Calcutta, India. His English middle name betrays his father's admiration of British culture. In fact, his father, Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose, was a product of Macaulay's India who went to study medicine in England and returned to India completely Westernized in his world-view, so much so, that he found everything in India abhorrent. He wanted his three sons to grow up in England and not be influenced by any form of Indian culture, so he took them at a young age to England and enrolled them in a boarding school in Manchester. Aurobindo's biographer, Satprem wrote, "He did not even want them to know anything of India's traditions and languages. Sri Aurobindo was therefore provided not only with an English first name, Ackroyd, but also with an English governess, Miss Pagett, and then sent off at the age of five to an Irish convent school in Darjeeling among the sons of British administrators. Two years later, the three Ghose boys left for England. Sri Aurobindo was seven." (Satprem, 20)

In England, the three boys were under the care of an Anglican clergyman "with strict instructions that they should not be allowed to make the acquaintance of any Indian influence." (Satprem, 21) Aurobindo's life in England reads like pages out of novels of Charles Dickens that give us a glimpse of boarding schools in Victorian England. Later, Aurobindo wrote, "During a whole year a slice or two of sandwich, bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny savaloy formed the only food." (Aurobindo, 26.2)

While in England, Aurobindo was an ideal student winning all the prizes and mastering all of the major European languages. He learned Greek and Latin as well as the classics reading widely. His knowledge of English poetry, French literature and European history was prodigious. He rapidly advanced winning scholarships and finally entered Cambridge University. His father wanted his sons to qualify for the coveted Indian civil service. But Aurobindo quickly learned that India was a British colony and in college he, along with his brothers, became a member of a secret society of Indian stu-

dents called "Lotus and Dagger" in which each member pledged to work towards the liberation of India from British rule. This was inevitable. The very thing his father wanted to prevent with regard to his sons happened. While in England, Aurobindo took every opportunity to learn about India. However, Aurobindo's knowledge of India was not based on any systematic study but was piecemeal and romantic. It is perhaps this secret society that sowed the seeds of a militant response to British rule that he was later to adopt unsuccessfully.

At the age of 20, Aurobindo was to return to India and join the Indian Civil Service (ICS) as his father wanted him to do. He passed the examinations for the Bachelor of Arts degree from King's College with flying colors. To qualify now for the much coveted ICS, all he had to do was to pass a horse riding test, which he could have easily done. He deliberately missed this test and went for a walk instead. He prepared to sail for India but again missed the ship, which, by a strange circumstance, sank in the ocean en route, and all the people died. When this news reached Aurobindo's father, he had a heart attack and died on the spot. Aurobindo had boarded a later ship and when he landed in India, he was shocked to learn of his father's death. A strange cascade of events then followed.

"When he landed at the Apollo Bunder in Bombay, he was seized with a spontaneous spiritual experience, *a vast calm descended upon him.*" (Satprem, 39) Shortly after, he found a job as an English and French lecturer at a college in Baroda. From there, he started to write a series of articles urging for the eviction of the British from India. This is quite a contrast from the dreams his father had for his sons future.

At the college in Baroda, Aurobindo found the relative solitude of the academic in which he could dive into books. He was a voracious reader. One of his colleagues recalled later that "Aurobindo would sit at his desk and read by the light of an oil lamp till one in the morning, oblivious of the intolerable mosquito bites. I would see him seated there in the same position for hours on end, his eyes fixed on his book, like a yogi lost in contemplation of the Divine, unaware of all that went on around him. Even if the house had caught fire, it would not have broken his concentration." (Satprem, 40)

Not only did he read English and French literature, but he began an ardent and systematic study of Sanskrit along with the ancient texts. One of his colleagues teased him about his reading and wondered whether he was just skimming these books or actually reading them. So he took a book at random from his desk and asked him what was in it. "Sri Aurobindo concentrated for a moment, and then repeated the entire page without a single mistake. If he could read a hundred pages in half an hour, no wonder he could go through a caseful of books in such an incredibly short time." (Satprem, 41) A similar ability was demonstrated by Vivekananda in his life.

What intrigued him more than anything else was the study of Sanskrit and yoga which he took up at the age of 21. But his initial studies were academic. Only later was he able to go deeper.

In 1905, the British partitioned the province of Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal (which is now present day Bangladesh). The British government knew that through partition, they could weaken the movement for independence. Because of this, Aurobindo quit his position in Baroda and moved to Calcutta where he began writing articles calling for the independence of India in the periodical *Bande Mataram*. In 1906, he became editor of this periodical and also the leader of the Nationalist Party. A year later, he was arrested and charged with sedition and released after a trial with a warning. Both Aurobindo and Gandhi found the vehicle of the weekly periodical an essential means to formulate their thought and philosophy.

To many in the independence movement, India became Mother India and was elevated to the level of a goddess. The partition of Bengal and later the partition of India and Pakistan were seen symbolically as chopping off the arms of Mother India. To many, even now, these political actions of the British awaken horrible memories. The name of Aurobindo's periodical *Bande Mataram* literally means "Salutations to the Mother." If there was a goddess he worshipped secretly all his life, it was definitely Mother India. In the Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry, we can see even today, a giant map of India as a background in the large meditation hall.

The journal was a powerful vehicle for Aurobindo to articulate his ideas. A contemporary of the day, Nirmal Dutt wrote that *Bande Mataram* "gave vent to what was boiling in men's hearts. It said things which others did not, could not or dared not articulate. It campaigned for the freedom of India, freedom from the hands of the British. To utter such things was rank sedition in those days, but somehow it touched the hearts of a people lulled into slavery for so long." (Heehs, 123)

In 1908, at the age of 36, Aurobindo met Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, a Maharashtrian yogi, who taught him the secrets of meditation. Aurobindo wrote later, "It was my great debt to Lele that he showed me this. "Sit in meditation," he said, "but do not think, look only at your mind; you will see thoughts coming into it; before they can enter throw these away from your mind till your mind is capable of entire silence." I had never heard before of thoughts coming visibly into the mind from outside, but I did not think either of questioning the truth or the possibility, I simply sat down and did it. In a moment my mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside. I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain and in three days I was free." (Aurobindo, 26.84)

Free from what? We have already indicated in our previous chapters on the Vedānta philosophy regarding the bondage of the human being. We are all prisoners of our thoughts and emotions. We move in the same automated grooves in a mechanical way, day in and day out. Later, Aurobindo would describe this habit mind as the ordinary mind, the level that most people inhabit. His integral yoga would identify five more levels of mind beyond this layer. The yoga philosophy of Patanjali begins with a clear assertion

that the goal of yoga is to transcend the whirlpool of thoughts in the mind: *yoga chitta vritti nirodah*. But how to do it? These are given in outline in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, but Aurobindo takes it further and later fashions his famous integral yoga. Expanding on his experience with his guru Lele, he wrote "From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free Intelligence, a universal Mind, not limited to the circle of personal thought as a labourer in a thought factory, but a receiver of knowledge from all the hundred realms of being and free to choose what it willed in this vast sight-empire and thought-empire." (Aurobindo, 26.84)

This episode was a turning point in Aurobindo's life. He now had intimate knowledge of yoga and not merely academic knowledge. The experience was to form the basis of his theory of supermind, or supramental consciousness. He discovered a universe of higher potentialities for every human being. He described this as follows. "I mention this only to emphasise that the possibilities of the mental being are not limited and that it can be the free Witness and Master in its own house." (Aurobindo, 26.84)

Let us note the imagery and words that are used in this description and how they resonate with the struggle for Indian independence. Aurobindo uses the words "free Intelligence" and "Master in its own house" both of which are suggestive of the larger drama on the political field. Similar imagery occurs in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and the idea of *svarāj* or "self-rule" became a mantra in the independence movement. But Gandhi would not come on the scene until much later.

In the summer of 1908, Aurobindo along with his brother Barindra were arrested as terrorists in the Alipore Bomb Case and jailed for one year pending a trial. During his period of imprisonment, he began an ardent study of the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. This study formed the basis for his later writings.

After a year in prison, Aurobindo along with his brother were tried for sedition and plotting to bomb the parliament. Aurobindo was acquitted for lack of evidence while his brother was implicated along with others and sent off to the Andaman islands for life imprisonment. Shortly after, Aurobindo began a new journal called *Karmayogin* in which he wrote a series of articles on yoga and literature. Fearing that he may again be arrested for sedition and face the same fate as his brother, he left Calcutta and settled first in Chandernagore in French India and later in Pondicherry also in French India. For the remaining 40 years of his life, he never left Pondicherry. At least he was alive on August 15, 1947 when India finally achieved independence from British rule. He died on December 5, 1950 at the age of 78.

Aurobindo's central thesis was that the human mind is still undergoing a process of evolution. He envisioned the evolutionary process through a series of gradations of the mind, first to the higher mind, then to the illumined mind, then the intuitive mind, followed by the overmind and finally the supermind, or as Vivekananda described it, superconsciousness. The tool to enhance this evolutionary process was his integral yoga. The traditional la-

bels of philosophy and religion he defined as follows. "Philosophy is the intellectual search for the fundamental truth of things; religion is the attempt to make the truth dynamic in the soul of man. They are essential to each other; a religion that is not the expression of philosophic truth degenerates into superstition and obscurantism, and a philosophy which does not dynamise itself with the religious spirit is a barren light, for it cannot get itself practiced." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 578)

#### 4.1 Sanskrit studies and layers of the mind

Following his meeting with Lele and experience of silence, Aurobindo realised there were many layers of the mind with which we are not familiar with. He identified several planes of the mind. Beyond the ordinary mind is the higher mind, which is the level of reflective consciousness. In our daily dealings, if instead of reacting to events, we reflect, we can steer the course of our life in a higher direction. According to Aurobindo, "this higher degree is frequently found in philosophers and thinkers, and is already less opaque, freer." (Satprem, 203) But this is just the first level of gradations leading to supramental consciousness. Beyond the higher mind is the illumined mind and the means of entry to this level is silence. "As the higher mind learns to accept silence, it gains access to this domain; its substance grows clear, and what came drop by drop now comes in a stream." (Satprem, 204)

Aurobindo states that if an individual rises to this level of consciousness, there is a flowering of creativity. In his conversation with Dilip Kumar Roy, he said "I have seen both in myself and others a sudden flowering of capacities in every kind of activity come by the opening of consciousness - so that one who laboured long without the least success to express himself in rhythm become a master of poetic language and cadences in a day. It is a question of the right silence in the mind and the right openness to the Word that is trying to express itself - for the Word is there ready formed in those inner planes where all artistic forms take birth, but it is the transmitting mind that must change and become a perfect channel and not an obstacle." (Satprem, 205)

Thus we find here in Aurobindo's thought and life, a yogic theory of creativity. What we do in all creative endeavour, whether it is in science or literature or art, we can do deliberately. We can proceed in a scientific way through yoga. This is Aurobindo's integral yoga.

But beyond the illumined mind, there are higher levels. Sri Ramakrishna expressed this beautifully when he said, "However high a bird may soar, there are regions higher still." The intuitive mind is described as "truth-remembrance" by Aurobindo. It is the luminous flash by which the scientist sees the whole proof of a mathematical theorem, or the artist beholds a vision.

Beyond the intuitive mind lies the overmind. "When consciousness rises to that plane, it no longer sees "point by point" but calmly, steadily, in great masses. There is no longer the diffuse light of the illumined mind or the isolated flashes of the intuitive mind, but to use the wonderful Vedic phrase, "an ocean of stable lightnings". The consciousness ... is unsealed, it sees in a single glance large extensions of space and time." (Aurobindo, 24.1154)

This is what Aurobindo calls the supramental consciousness, or supermind. The Vedic rishis composed the Upanishads from this level of consciousness. Aurobindo calls it "mantric poetry" and the word *kavi* originally meant a "seer of mantras" or "seer of truth" or someone who has experienced revelation, in this sense of the word. There is an important place for art in Aurobindo's integral yoga.

His biographer, Satprem explains. "We can reach this overmental consciousness through all sorts of ways, through religious intensity or poetic, intellectual, artistic, heroic intensity - through anything that helps man surpass himself. Sri Aurobindo gave a special place to Art, which he considered one of the great means of spiritual progress; unfortunately, artists and creators generally have a sizeable ego standing in their way, that is their big difficulty." (Satprem, 212)

We see here the importance of creative and intellectual pursuits as being subordinate in the path of yoga. As we noted earlier, Indian philosophy is not an academic pursuit but a matter of realisation. The same is the case with art, science and literature. They are not goals in and of themselves but rather a means to a higher realisation.

Aurobindo's method of study was deep and profound. It was through such a study he was able to enter into the inner meaning of ideas. His book, "Secret of the Veda" which he later wrote in Pondicherry, was based on his discovery of the psycho-analytic dimension of the verses of the Rig Veda.

A specific example can be given by the first verse of the Rig Veda, which is perhaps the oldest verse known to have been recorded by humanity:

*Agnimile purohitam yajnasya devam rtvijam hotāram ratna dhātāmam.*

British Indologists such as Oldenberg, translated this as "I magnify Agni (the god of fire), the Purohita, the divine ministrant of the sacrifice, the Hotr priest, the great bestower of treasures." (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 7) A more faithful and literal translation is "I adore the Fire, the sacrificial priest, luminous vibrations of Truth, the fierce warrior, the bestower of delight." (Murty, 10) But Aurobindo parsed each word of this verse and discovered its hidden meaning. Agni is not the god of fire. In fact, Aurobindo's view was all the Vedic gods were really energies that reside in every human being. Fire, as energy, resides in every human being. But what aspect of fire is being invoked in this verse? Aurobindo says it is the fire of enthusiasm. Why is this fire described as a 'sacrificial priest'? Because, the fire of enthusiasm is an intermediary between the learning mind and higher knowledge.

Without enthusiasm, we cannot raise our level of consciousness to a higher vibration of Truth. Why is fire compared to a warrior in the same verse? Aurobindo answers that the fire of enthusiasm slays the demon of lethargy and in this sense, it is a warrior. What happens when the fire of enthusiasm slays the demon of lethargy? The mind discovers jewels of knowledge that give rise to the feeling of higher delight. Putting everything together, Aurobindo offers the following translation. "I adore the fire of enthusiasm, the gateway to higher knowledge, the destroyer of lethargy, the bestower of delight." (Aurobindo, 10.53) Thus, the most ancient prayer known to humanity is a prayer to remove our laziness. It was seen as a problem more than 5000 years ago. It is a problem even now.

But he soon tired of this intellectual approach to knowledge and wanted something deeper. He turned to yoga, not in its traditional sense but in a deeper, practical sense. Perhaps yoga can be used to liberate India from British rule. In his famous Uttarpara speech, he said "The agnostic was in me, the atheist was in me, the sceptic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all ... I felt there must be a mighty truth somewhere in yoga ... So when I turned to the yoga and resolved to practise it and find out if my idea was right, I did it in this spirit." (Aurobindo, 2.7)

Aurobindo's philosophy is a combination of yoga and creativity. His voluminous literary output spanning more than forty years can be said to be of two types. A large portion of his writings deal with integral yoga, which like Vivekananda's four yogas, emphasizes how they should be combined in daily living. His two-volume work titled "The Synthesis of Yoga" is a testament to this view. The other component of his output is literary, including poems and plays and his two-volume work called "Savitri" based on the mythological story in the Mahabharata.

There is much to study in his writings. His writings on Indian philosophy, especially his psycho-analytic commentary on portions of the Rig Veda as well as the Upanishads make for fascinating reading. His two-volume work "The Life Divine" is based on the Isa Upanishad which is one of the principal Upanishads containing only 18 verses. Even though the upanishad is very short, Aurobindo found in it an entire philosophy for life. The work can also be seen to be a basis for his integral yoga.

In fact, it is said that Aurobindo found his entire philosophy in the very first verse of this Upanishad:

*isāvasyam idam sarvam yat kinca jagatyām jagat  
tena tyaktena bhunjīthā mā grdhah kasyasvid dhanam.*

A faithful translation of this verse is: the ruling force dwells in everything, in every bit of it, even in anything that is changing or moving. By that renunciation, enjoy. Do not covet the wealth of anyone. (Sarvagatananda, 5)

At first glance, there are two words that are in opposition to each other that have been juxtaposed. They are 'renunciation' and 'enjoy'. In the earlier

chapter, we had discussed briefly the idea of renunciation as Vedānta's solution to the problem of *Māyā*. There, we already indicated that renunciation is often interpreted negatively, as a form of giving up possessions. But what is meant is a psychological process and not a physical action.

The sense of ownership is dominant in the human being. This sense leads to selfishness and aggrandizement. By the latest statistics, more than 99 percent of the world's wealth is in the hands of less than one percent of the total population. This flagrant aggrandizement is responsible for global poverty and if there is no philosophy to foster a spirit of philanthropy, the situation will only get worse and the world will implode upon itself. This will not be due to any natural disaster but is man-made. Human greed is the fundamental problem and the opening verse of the upanishad cautions us against this danger. At the same time, it offers a remedy. "By that renunciation, enjoy." By changing our attitude, we can actually enjoy more. Vivekananda explains this as follows.

Suppose there is an art auction in which paintings are for sale. But, not being very rich, we go there to look but not to buy. "Who enjoys the picture?" Vivekananda asks, "the seller or the seer? The seller is busy with his accounts, computing what his gain will be, how much profit he will realise on the picture. His brain is full of that. He is looking at the hammer and watching the bids. He is intent on learning how fast the bids are rising. That man is enjoying the picture who has gone there without any intention of buying or selling. He looks at the picture and enjoys it. So this whole universe is a picture, and when these desires [of possession] have vanished, we will enjoy the world, and this buying and selling and these foolish ideas of possession will be ended." (Vivekananda, 2.149)



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