

## “Integral Yoga” - The Unique Vision of Sri Aurobindo

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### Abstract

This paper explores the Yoga as discussed by Sri Aurobindo in his magnum opus *The Life Divine*. Particularly the term ‘integral’ has been viewed from various perspectives in an attempt to justify its semantic undertones. Integral yoga ‘integrates’ what? Is it acceptable? One is already aware of the existing multifarious systems of Yoga in the Indian tradition. Apart from the *Rāja*, *Haṭha*, *Kuṇḍalinī* and *Tantra Yoga*, there is *PûrnāṅgaYoga* of the Bhagavad Gītā which itself is a synthesis of *Karma*, *Jñāna* and *BhaktiYoga*. Here the question arises, is there any need of yet another synthesized version of *Yoga*? Evidently, Sri Aurobindo believed it to be so. Hence he has pointed out the deficits of each and every form of existing yoga disciplines. He has elaborated on his theory of creation, the ‘involution’ and ‘evolution’ of consciousness and has shown how only a path of ‘integral’ yoga can fully comprehend the Truth. These are the topics discussed in this paper. In the conclusion an attempt has been made to justify Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy in terms of modern western philosophy of mind.

**KEYWORDS:** Tantra, Veda, Evolution, Mind, Supramental, *Koṣa-s*, *Sacchidānanda*, Gnostic being

### Introduction:

An impulse towards perfection, a thirst for pure Truth and eternal Bliss is a constant human aspiration for man is never satisfied by his victorious analysis of external nature. Sri Aurobindo perceives that this thirst can only be quenched by the earliest formula of Wisdom which also promises to be the last - God, Light, Freedom, and Immortality – found in the eternal *śāstra* Veda. Verily ‘integral’ Yoga is based on the *vedic* utterance ‘*sarvamkhalvidambrahman*’ but the interpretation which Sri Aurobindo gives of the above Truth has never been envisaged before by any other seer.

### The Integration of Matter and Spirit in Creation:

In *The Life Divine* he has first negated the extreme positions that ‘only Matter is real’ and ‘only the Spirit is real’, both, and has integrated Matter and Spirit into one Reality.<sup>1</sup> He is an absolute Monist but sharply different from the Advaita Vedanta of Shankaracharya. The latter perceived the ultimate reality Brahman to be unchangeable existence - Sat, pure consciousness -Cit, and eternal bliss -Ānanda. It is a transcendental concept beyond space, time, universe and all finite manifestations that have only a temporal and phenomenal reality devoid of eternal essential existence. Brahman is different from the changing universe which is illusive in nature – ‘*brahmasatyajagatmithyā.*’. God is Brahman qualified by the power of *māyā*. It is the immanent material and efficient cause of the universe but God disappears with the dawn of transcendental consciousness. Shankara tried to explain creation through his doctrine

of *māyā*. But for Sri Aurobindo the Absolute or Sacchidānanda as he calls it, is both the transcendental as well as the relativeimmanent reality. If the Absolute is pure consciousness, devoid of power or force, it becomes passive and static; how then can it explain Matter for the interplay of energy or force is the inherent building block of Matter. If only pure Spirit is asserted together with a mechanical, unintelligent Energy, like the Purūṣa and Prakṛti of the Sāṃkhya, then the relation between the two becomes unintelligible. And this anomaly can only be resolved by assimilation of the “inertly driven Activity”, Prakṛti, with the Purūṣa or “the immutable Repose” as he calls It. So Sri Aurobindo believes power or force to be the ‘real’ power of the Absolute. Both consciousness and force are real in it. He says if pure consciousness has no capacity then it is a “dead consciousness”. For him Sacchidānanda is pure existence (*sat*), pure consciousness plus pure force (*cit*) and pure bliss (*ānanda*). Both consciousness and force being real, Sacchidānanda is both static and dynamic, being as well as the becoming, transcendent and immanent or both Shiva and Kali. In his words, “Force is Existence. Shiva and Kali, Brahman and Shakti are one and not two who are separable. Force inherent in existence may be at rest but exists nonetheless. Therefore, eternal status and eternal dynamis are both true of the Reality.” This is the integration of the creative-kinetic energy of Matter and the pure immutable static consciousness Spirit that we find in the integral Yoga.

To understand the creative aspect of the Absolute and to fully realize the implications of the fact that there is no fundamental opposition between Spirit and Matter, we must be aware of the most striking aspect of the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo that is his theory of evolution. Creation means the ‘descent’ of Divine into matter and lower forms of realities, which he calls ‘involution’. While evolution means the gradual manifestation of higher, spiritual and supramental grades of realities or consciousness. First of all the Spirit involves in matter devoid of even life, like the sun, earth, water, etc., constituting the cosmos. Then matter seems to be the utmost negation of consciousness but he calls it the ‘inconscious’ and not the unconscious; for, consciousness is involved, implicit and unmanifest in it. Spirit is matter in its latent condition. The next step in cosmic growth consists in the appearance of life in the form of vital breath or *prāṇa*. There is only plant life in the initial stage, which is followed by animal life. But implicit in animals we find traces of the third evolute of the series, that is, the mind. The mental consciousness is explicit for the first time in man and so man is referred to as the ‘mental being’. The faculty of reason and intellect belong to the mind. With the help of the intellect men have the capacity to discover principles and theories. The rational individual gains knowledge through logical reasoning and steps of syllogisms. But knowledge in man is limited. The mind cannot have a direct perception of reality but only gather a fragmented idea through many intermediaries, viz., nerves, muscles, light and condition of the body. The mind cannot apprehend the thing-in-itself. All our knowledge is based on this limited instrument - the mind. However disciplined our intellect may be, it always gives us relative and finite knowledge and obscures higher grades of consciousness. The cosmic evolution has reached at the age of mind. But if evolution is a fact, and if Sacchidānanda reveals itself in evolution, then the emergence of higher consciousness in man is inevitable. This was the vision of Sri Aurobindo. Though we are limited in consciousness and power there is the potentiality of omniscience and omnipotence in us. For, even in this limited frame of mind we feel an undeniable, mysterious, ‘aspiration’ towards

something infinite and eternal, which is an empirical fact. When the mind totally surrenders itself (*samarpan*) to the power of the divine Śakti – the Mother – it undergoes the transition into the remaining intermediary realities between Spirit and Matter: from ‘mind’ to ‘higher mind’; ‘higher mind’ to ‘illuminated mind’; ‘illuminated mind’ to ‘intuitive mind’; ‘intuitive mind’ to ‘Overmind’; and from ‘Overmind’ to ‘Supermind’. When Supermind evolves into Sacchidānanda the apparent yawning gulf between all phases of matter, life, mind and Spirit is abridged.

This is the evolution of the soul in man. This is also a cosmic Yoga constantly going on in nature. For, integral Yoga is not only the privilege of man though only he has the potentiality to hasten it up consciously. Sri Aurobindo perceives the whole nature – stones, plants, animals, all creation to be rushing towards their ultimate spiritual and divine source Sacchidānanda. In man, all the experiences that he undergoes at every moment, internal and external, painful and pleasurable, successful and vain, all eventually leads to his betterment, a growth of his consciousness. Hence he says, ‘All life is Yoga’.

In fact, there can be nothing else but evolution or Yoga now – the urge to be *yukta* with the Divine; for creation or the involution of Spirit in matter is over for this *caturyuga*. This evolution and involution, the ascent towards a higher consciousness and the descent of the latter transforming the lower states, is what he describes as the ‘double ladder of consciousness’. The ‘involution’ of Spirit into matter being over only the ‘evolution’ of creation into the Absolute remains.

### **An Integral Transformation of the Body:**

This Yoga demands an integral divine transformation on the part of the yogi in terms of his physical, vital, and mental, these triple modes of existence. The yogi must spiritualize even his physical body with new powers and activity to make possible the divine manifestation in it. The ‘*cinmaya deha*’ of the Vaishnavas or the ‘*dīvyā / jyotīrmaya deha*’ mentioned in the Veda alludes to this transformation of the gross body. But they also say that this bodily instrument be dropped after the sought spiritual fruition.

This is where Sri Aurobindo defies the spiritual tradition, which views the body as an obstacle, a cage from which the soul has to be freed forever. He believed ultimate Truth to be attained in and through the body and for that the body, together with the vital breaths and the faculty of mind, has to be transformed spiritually to a higher state of being. This belief is contra-Vedic and very much along the lines of Tantra and we shall soon see how he has integrated the essences of Tantra and the Veda into this Yoga.<sup>2</sup>

So first, ‘the three steps of nature’ has to be integrally divinized. That is, in terms of Yoga, the *annamaya koṣa* (the food sheath), the *prāṇamaya koṣa* (the sheath of vital breath), and the *manomaya koṣa* (the mental sheath) needs to be harmonized. It is no integral Yoga which makes the final annulment of the gross or vital or the mental states of existence an indispensable criterion for perfect spirituality. Only after the *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya* and *manomaya koṣa*-s are ‘supramentalised’, the assertion of a higher than mental life takes place: for Yoga recognizes two more sheaths or progressively subtle dimensions of the evolving consciousness – the *vijñānamaya koṣa* and the *ānandamaya*

*koṣa* – which are described as the vehicles of knowledge and bliss. This knowledge is not of systematized mental reasoning but a pure self-existent and self-luminous Truth. This bliss too, is not a supreme pleasure of the heart but also a self-existent ‘delight’ independent of all objects.

These two *koṣa*-s constitute our causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*), the superconscious plane where we must ascend, for, as is indicated by the name, it is also the source and effective power of everything in the actual evolution that has preceded it. The *sādhaka* after he ‘ascends’ to the heights of *ānandamayakoṣa*, having realized the Divine must also ‘descend’ upon the earth to possess and transform it. The inconscient nature or *AparāPrakṛti* when thus transformed becomes the *ParāPrakṛti* – the Mother, the Śakti of Shiva the Absolute. The three *guṇa*-s of the inconscient are then thus transformed into their divine equivalents: *sattva* becomes *jyoti*(the spiritual Light); *rajas* becomes *tapas* (the tranquilly intense divine Force); and *tamas* becomes *sāma* (divine rest, Śānti). So, in accordance with the Sāṃkhya terminology it may be said that, it is not enough to rescue the Puruṣa from the clutches of Prakṛti; but one must transfer the allegiance of Puruṣa from lower Prakṛti and its ignorant forces to higher Prakṛti or the Mother.

Such an ideal aim consequently leads to the integration of the uninvolved renunciant *Sannyāsī* into *saṃsāra*, the material world. He is then not to withdraw from this mundane world of dualities and remain rapt in his state of spiritual Isolation. But spiritual life can and should return upon the material base and use it as a means of its own greater fullness. Not only to rise above ordinary human existence but “to bring the supramental power of that divine consciousness down into the ignorance of mind, life and body, to transform them, to manifest the Divine here and create a divine life in Matter”, is the revolutionary aim of this Yoga. Sri Aurobindo says, “The Vedantic formula of the Self in all things, and all things in the Self and all things as becomings of the Self is the key to this richer and all-embracing Yoga”. He upholds this Yoga to effect a spiritual transformation not for the individual alone. Personal *mukti* is not its goal but the “bringing down of the divine Ananda – Christ’s kingdom of heaven, our Satyayuga upon the earth.” This Yoga necessarily demands the supramental being to come forth and work in the world, for the world; like the yogis, “Janaka, Ajatshatru and Kartavirya who sat on the thrones of the world and govern the nations”.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Integration of the Various Methods:**

In *The Synthesis of Yoga* he discusses all the methods of Yoga and points out their limitations reminding us also of the need for an integral method. Hatha Yoga selects the body and vital functioning as its instruments for perfection by its processes of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. It opens up for the yogi abnormal faculties which are denied to normal man. But, he observes, this is a difficult and elaborate process bestowing at most increased vitality and long-life which are ultimately of little purpose.

Raja Yoga aims at liberating the mental being as well as the physical being by attaining mastery over the entire apparatus of the *citta* – the stuff of mental consciousness. It focuses on the quieting of the restless mind (*citta vṛttih nirodha*) which leads to utmost inner concentration or ‘the ingathered state of the consciousness’ called Samādhi. But the weakness of the system lies in its excessive reliance on these ‘abnormal states of trance’

and the *sādhaka* tends to withdraw into a subliminal plane at the back of normal experiences instead of descending and possessing his whole existence.

The triple path of Yoga, viz. *Jñāna, Bhakti* and *Karma* as said in the *Gītā*, when they are not practiced exclusively but as involving the other two, is said to be the Complete/*Pûrnāṅga* Yoga for here we come most readily to absolute knowledge, love and service to the One in all beings. But that is still not enough for it does not ask for the ‘descension’ of the One into the many and the necessary transformation of all, though it definitely helps and adds to the goal of our Yoga.

He observes that the various methods of Yoga cannot be synthesized by combination in mass or by successive practice. For the needed synthesis we must discriminate and seize upon the central principle common to all the methods, neglecting the forms and outsides of the yogic disciplines. He observes, “... there still exists in India a remarkable Yogic system which is in its nature synthetical and starts from a great central principle of Nature, a great dynamic force of Nature; but it is a Yoga apart, not a synthesis of other schools. This system is the way of Tantra.”

Tantra differentiates itself from the Vedic methods of Yoga fundamentally because in all of the latter the lord of the Yoga is Puruṣa or pure consciousness. But in Tantra it is Prakṛti, the creative Energy that is worshipped. Hence the central Tantric principle of the sole worship of Śakti also suffers the limitation of being one-sided and exclusive, just like the worship of Puruṣa in Vedānta. Here, Sri Aurobindo integrates Tantra and Vedānta forming the central principle of his Yoga where ‘Conscious-Soul’ is the Lord and ‘Nature-Soul’ is his executive Energy. He says, “Puruṣa is of the nature of Sat, the being of conscious self-existence pure and infinite; Shakti or Prakṛti is of the nature of Chit – the power of the Puruṣa’s self-conscious existence. The relation of the two exists between poles of rest and action. When the Energy is absorbed in the bliss of conscious self-existence, there is rest; when the Puruṣa pours itself out in the action of its Energy, there is action, creation and the enjoyment or Ananda of becoming.” This is the whole concept of the Absolute or Sacchidānanda according to Sri Aurobindo.

### **The Integration of Immanence and Transcendence:**

His concept of the Supermind as the anchor between Sacchidānanda and creation is of utmost significance. The Absolute is both a transcendent and immanent reality. The immanent aspect of the Absolute is called the Supermind. This is the integration of the principle of God in his philosophical system. No other thinker before him has thus envisaged God as a real entity keeping in view a metaphysical structure which is totally Monistic. In its transcendental aspect the Absolute is self-absorbed Existence, Consciousness-Force and Bliss. In its immanence it is the creative Supermind – God, the Creator of the universe and the One that evolves and manifests Itself in the cosmos. The Absolute is ‘Being’ and Supermind is the ‘Becoming’ and being and becoming are not opposed to one another. According to him, “Becoming can only know itself wholly when it knows itself as Being; the soul in the Becoming arrives at self-knowledge and immortality when it knows the Supreme and Absolute and possesses the nature of the Infinite and Eternal.” He emphasizes, “The infinite multiplicity of the One and the eternal unity of the many are the two aspects of one reality...”. ‘Supermind’ bestows finitude in

time and space to the infinite possibilities of Sacchidānanda that is beyond time and space, for if all the powers are manifested simultaneously there will be 'chaos and not cosmos'. But Supermind is not a different entity from Sacchidānanda; only the latter condensed and finite, extended in space-time. It is this Supermind which Sri Aurobindo also calls 'Conscious-Force', 'Knowledge-Will', 'Truth-Conscious', 'Rta-Cit' and 'Seer-Will'. The cosmos and Sacchidānanda are two extreme principles while Supermind is the intermediate connector and link between the two. When an evolving soul ascends to the status of the Supermind, he becomes a Superman or a 'Gnostic Being'.<sup>4</sup> He realizes omniscience, omnipotence and eternal blessedness. This is the destiny of man: to be transformed into the Superman. When such a divine being lives on earth he attains the 'life divine'. It is the perfected state in which the body becomes luminous, mind omniscient and life immortal. This is what Sri Aurobindo describes as the 'supramental manifestation' on earth. For him Mokṣa or salvation means to be thus 'supramentalized' on earth itself. His supramental consciousness sweeps over all ignorantly suffering mankind lending knowledge, power, truth and blessedness to all.

When a Superman is born on earth the evolution and ascent of humanity is accelerated. In course of time, a greater number of such Supermen emerge who engage themselves in saving, redeeming, empowering and hastening the evolution all individuals. This is why he has said that this Yoga we follow is not for ourselves but for the entire creation. It is a cosmic Yoga and that is the 'Will' of the Divine. This is indeed a great message of hope for us for, as a realized being himself, he promises to be the vanguard of our spiritual quest and fulfillment.

#### **The Integration of four aids to Yoga:**

Sri Aurobindo mentions the combined working of four aids – *śāstra*, *utsāha*, *guru* and *kala* – in order to make possible the above-mentioned transformation.

It is *utsāha* which consists of the personal efforts to be put in by the sādḥaka. It is a total annihilation of the ego and a complete surrender to the higher power. It is directing the consciousness 'inwards' as against its general tendency to always rush 'outwards' and to realize our higher self which will lead us to what he describes as total 'self-consecration'. It is the process of cleaning or purification of the mind and an 'opening' of the whole being towards the Divine. In this process, initially the individual consciously strives to prepare himself for the spiritual descent. But in the later stage personal efforts dwindle more and more as higher Nature (Śakti) takes over the limited frame of mortality, progressively possessing and transmuting it. In his words, "There are two powers that alone can effect in their conjunction the great and difficult thing, which is the aim of our endeavor, a fixed and an unfailing aspiration that calls from below and a Supreme Grace from above that answers."

#### **An Integration of Nationalism into Internationalism:**

Finally, he seems to have integrated his fiery nationalistic zeal into his lofty spiritual ideals. His revolutionary activities for the independence of India he says, was not petty politics. He was working out the divine Will for the upliftment of the Aryan race from its *tāmasika* state of subjugation and coward self-abnegation. He wanted to re-ignite in the

people of dependent Bhārata the spirit, strength and wisdom of the Veda. He gave a definite shape to the wake-up call of Swami Vivekananda saying, 'Let the lion of Vedanta roar'. But the choice of India as the redeemer of the rest of the world was not an arbitrary one; nor did he epitomize our country because he himself was an Indian by birth. He believed that just as an individual is 'chosen' in time by the Infinite for some better purpose, similarly, in this *caturyuga* (*satya*, *dvāpara*, *tretā* and *kali*) it is India which has been 'chosen' by the Divine to lead the rest of the humanity towards Light.

A resurrection of the Veda, his perception of the world and the destiny of the individual soul may be said to his landmark contribution towards the revival of the cultural heritage and growth of our nation. His perception of India as the very soil where a spiritual renaissance of mankind is to germinate, contributes in an unparalleled way to the growth of the spirit of nationalism and leadership in the people of our country. In *The Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, he leaves his message for the youth of this country. He believed that education should not limit itself in the boundary of printed words. His dream was to create in the people of this country the commitment of '...utmost service to people in war or in peace, and in political and social activities..'. His electrifying essays published in the news journals *BandeMataram* and *Yugantar* had magically rekindled in us the extinguished fire of the Aryans. He reminded us of our lost glory and implored that we should strive to be great, not for ourselves but for our motherland so that Bhārata can stand again with Her head held high among the rest, like She was before when the world looked up to Her for Knowledge. He exemplified his own life, the trials and tribulations he went through especially in the prison (1908), which he had recorded in the *Kara Kahini*.<sup>5</sup> But it is in this prison itself where he had felt like a 'caged animal', that he underwent the process of enlightenment and self-realization which lead him to the life of an ascetic in Pondicherry. His exemplary life bestows in us the strength and hope to face any test of time with honesty, patience and faith. He believed that for the nation to become this strong and virtuous, even the highest and completest education of the mind is never enough; the education of the body is equally necessary. He bequeathed to us not only wisdom but also an aura of militant nationalism.

He emphasized on physical training and sports, which in the superficial level may seem to be forms of mere amusements. But ultimately these serve to be the means to a much higher end: that is the development of discipline, morale, sound character, a right attitude towards competitors and rivals, the sense of fair play and an equal acceptance of victory or defeat. He inspired the nation to excel in all fields endowed with the knowledge of the Spirit and the strength of the Mother so that eventually India may contribute 'towards the bringing about of unity and a more harmonious world order towards which we look as our hope for humanity's future'. Thus, under his umbrage of strength and wisdom our country continues to grow with dynamism even to this day.

### **Conclusion:**

It may be observed from the purest philosophical standpoint, that the discussed integration of matter and consciousness by Sri Aurobindo offers modern thinkers an outstanding insight into the problems of mind, matter, life and consciousness. Philosophers of Mind have offered various theories to bridge the chasm between 'mind' and 'matter' ever since Descartes created the rift between the two. Substance dualism was

followed by Parallelism, Monism, Epiphenomenalism, Idealism, Materialism, Behaviorism, Functionalism, Interactionism, *et al.*<sup>6</sup> Today mind/ consciousness has crossed the domain of Metaphysics and overwhelmed 20th C Physics. E. Schrodinger, Max Planck, N. Bohr, W. Heisenberg and D. Bohm are a few of the renowned quantum physicists who remained engrossed in the enigma of consciousness. An iconic classification of the easy and hard problems of consciousness was made by D. Chalmers.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly the 'easy' problems like - How does sensory impulses get integrated in the brain? How do we see and reach out for an object? How are we able to articulate and express our feelings, thoughts and other internal states? - can still be explained, at least in principle, in terms of neurobiological and computational mechanisms. But the 'hard' problems - how and why sentient organisms have 'qualia' or 'phenomenal' experience? Why is it that some internal states are 'felt' such as emotions and feelings? How can physical electro-chemical brain states become 'conscious'? How can something material react with something immaterial? Is there a causal connection between bodily and mental states? -These are the conundrums that remain to be explored.

In Sri Aurobindo's framework, ultimate reality is Sachhidānanda and it is neither a Monism nor a Dualistic theory as per definitions. 'Only matter is real' and 'Only Spirit is real' – both are denied. Yet, both matter and spirit are admitted as real. Even though conceptually one, Sachhidānanda explains all manifest natural diversities of the phenomenal world. Here Sachhidānanda is: Existence + (Consciousness + **Force**) + Bliss. It is not just Sat + Chit + Ānanda / *aka* 'Brahman' of Advaita Vedanta.

Thus, all theories based on the materialistic paradigm of Science can be logically explained in this framework: e.g. the 'hard problem' of 'explanatory gap' faced by neuroscientists. The concept of 'Conscious' Energy explains Newtonian Physics as well as the 'quantum leap' of subatomic particles of Quantum Physics. Integral yoga appears to integrate Classical Physics and Quantum Physics too. It resolves all conflicts of dualistic theories from Descartes to *Sāṃkhya*; and also abstractions of Monism like Advaita Vedanta.

In this metaphysical super structure Matter and Consciousness exist purely as the extreme poles of a '*continuum*'. A *continuum* is a sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct and opposite. Thus, the 'matter- consciousness continuum' incorporates all within its spectrum, from stones to 'Superman' or the 'Gnostic being' as Sri Aurobindo says. This paper therefore proposes that the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo is one of the most flawless theories in the Philosophy of Mind.

Gilbert Ryle made all wonder whether there is at all a 'ghost in the machine',<sup>6</sup> a student of Integral Yoga would conclude that there definitely is one; however, the 'ghost' and its 'machine' are essentially the same.<sup>8</sup>

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