



Sri Aurobindo

Visionary of a New Age

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The “Great Encounter”

6th February 1893.

The day on which Sri Aurobindo set foot on Indian soil again for the first time after a 13-year “exile” in England. After disembarking from the ship in Bombay, a “vast silence” greeted him, which was to remain with him for long months to come.

It was a strange and meaningful encounter, when in the same year some four months later, Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual son Vivekananda, also travelled from Bombay to America, to take part in an international conference of the religions in Chicago, where he was met with a wave of sympathy.

Sri Aurobindo and Vivekananda were passionate about their motherland of India, which was languishing under British rule in these final years of the nineteenth century; a country laid low by the utmost apathy. Sri Aurobindo’s aim was, by means of his spiritual strength, to bring a force of action to India stimulated by the Western way of thinking. Vivekananda, on the other hand, inspired like Sri Aurobindo by a will to restore the dignity of India, carried the message of Indian spirituality to the West.

This began to come full circle, and the separation between East and West, which was considered to be irreconcilable for so long, gave way to an increasingly intensive permeation into both hemispheres, which has reached a new peak in our time.

Aurobindo’s mind was fully focused on synthesis, and he expressed himself on this topic with these words: “But, for myself I would rather be disposed to dwell on oneness and unity than

on division and difference. East and West have the same human nature, a common human destiny, the same aspiration after a greater perfection, the same seeking after something higher than itself, something towards which inwardly and even outwardly we move. ... East and West have always met and mixed more or less closely, they have powerfully influenced each other and at the present day are under an increasing compulsion of Nature and Fate to do so more than ever before.”¹

During his years of education in England – in Manchester, London and Cambridge – Sri Aurobindo had absorbed Western learning to such an extent that he was able to speak from experience. During his studies at Cambridge University, he won all the prizes in Latin and Greek in a year, studied Goethe and Dante in their original languages, developed a great love of the clarity of the French mind, and carried out intensive studies of history.

Who was Sri Aurobindo?

Sri Aurobindo, who is nowadays known primarily as the discoverer of the supramental consciousness (the ‘supermind’), the originator of the Integral Yoga, and the visionary of a new evolutionary stage, was born on August 15th 1872 in Calcutta, and died on December 5th 1950 in Pondicherry. If we take an overview of his entire life, the plethora of external activities alone is impressive: In India, he worked successively as a teacher and college principal, scholar, poet, political leader, journalist, dramatist, Indologist, psychologist, literary critic, translator and creative interpreter of the Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita, and also as a master yogi. However, his endlessly rich inner life largely escapes the eye of the keenest observer. He once wrote

to one of his biographers: “The attempt is bound to be a failure, because neither you nor anyone else knows anything at all of my life; it has not been on the surface for man to see.”² The truly personal is only to be found randomly in letters, collected dialogues and notes. He preferred to work in the background. He avoided exaggeration and grand gestures, and dissociated himself from widely visible miracles in the fashion of certain gurus nowadays. He used his phenomenal spiritual power without publicising it.

It is possible to list the different facets of his manifold life-actions, refer to his comprehensive 36-volume work with more than 15,000 printed pages, perhaps crystallise the essence from it, and nevertheless be left with an unsatisfactory feeling that the substance of his revelation and his influence are still elusive. Satprem, a French follower of Sri Aurobindo, who wrote a superb and spirited introduction to his work entitled *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of the Consciousness*, points out that Sri Aurobindo ultimately remains a mystery. There is something about him that pushes all the boundaries and accounts for the intrinsic magic of his personality. Sri Aurobindo transcended the West as well as the East, having assimilated the best elements of both, and made something of them that is more than a pieced-together mix. Instead, something radically new arose from this synthesis, which still awaits discovery, despite a plethora of scholarly books about him.

An Authority on the West

Let us take a closer look at his life: he was exposed to great hardships from the outset. This began early when at the tender age of five years he had to leave his family home in Bengal and entered a school in Darjeeling run by Irish nuns. Two years later, his father, an anglicised country doctor with a very strong character and great intentions for his three sons, sent him to the West, to England, where he himself had studied. His foster parents, an Anglican clergyman and his wife, were given “strict instructions”, “that he was not to acquaint himself with any Indians and should not be subjected to any Indian influences”. This is a case of a child growing up completely outside the sphere of influence of his family, his own country and its traditions – a free spirit. This may be what characterises Sri Aurobindo the most: a regal feeling of an inviolable freedom.

Besides schoolwork, he spent his time with general reading: he was particularly fascinated by European poetry and soon began to write his own poems. This poetic stream in him runs even deeper than the philosophical side of his nature, which by his own testimony, first developed in him through yoga. Notwithstanding this, in the West, he is known in particular as the writer of the monumental works, *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. The fact that he also left behind an extensive work of poetry has been more or less ignored. If one wishes to become further acquainted with Sri Aurobindo, it might be especially worth reading his splendid Epos, *Savitri*, with more than 23,000 verses, in which the future fate of the world finds its expression.

On the face of it, the life of the three brothers in England was characterised by great privations, as the payments by the

father progressively failed to appear. In a letter from that period, Sri Aurobindo talks about a “time of the greatest suffering and poverty”.³ One may only assume that his own reviews of the suffering of his motherland, India, at this time, which he would have read about in newspaper reports, were felt even more intensely by him. During this period, his wish to commit himself to the liberation of India grew: “At the age of eleven”, Sri Aurobindo writes, “he had already received strongly the impression that a period of general upheaval and great revolutionary changes was coming in the world and he himself was destined to play a part in it. His attention was now drawn to India and this feeling was soon canalised into the idea of the liberation of his own country.”⁴ He became a member of an Indian study group which devoted itself to the emancipation of India, and which gave a number of revolutionary speeches. It was therefore no surprise to anyone when, after completing his second degree for the English administrative service in India and his repeated failure to appear at the prescribed Riding Test, he was dropped by the English authorities.

Early Years in India

Subsequent to a friend’s arrangement of a meeting with the Maharaja of Baroda, who was staying in London at the beginning of 1893, Sri Aurobindo took on an employment in the civil service of Baroda State. Other than this, Sri Aurobindo had to fend for himself completely in the years that followed: his father died during his passage back to India, due to the shock of a false report that his son’s ship had sunk. His mother no longer

recognised him as her mind had begun to deteriorate in the preceding years.

Besides his work in the administrative service and as a professor of English and French, he also carried out his own studies in his mother tongue, Bengali, and the original language of India, Sanskrit, in order to begin translations from the *Mahabharata*. It was certainly no simple matter, but this approach was typical of Sri Aurobindo: he was an individual who rarely moved along the paths mapped out for him and always had the courage to forge ahead. If something were believed to be difficult or even impossible, this only gave him a greater incentive to prove the opposite by his own doing. He had a deep, innate knowledge that there was nothing which could not ultimately be achieved through one-pointed concentration. This supported his positive attitude to obstacles and difficulties.

Politics and Yoga

At this time, Sri Aurobindo was still an agnostic, and his spiritual purpose had not yet revealed itself. However, in 1904, he took up yoga, not for personal reasons but to help him create an unshakeable basis of strength and energy in his struggle for the liberation of India. This led to a considerable improvement in the condition of his health and an incredible intensification of his poetic inspiration.

The years from 1905 to 1910 were characterised by a deep immersion in politics and yoga, two areas that were not mutually exclusive for Sri Aurobindo. He was particularly inspired by the conviction that spiritual fulfilment does not contradict life and the world, but to the contrary, that they should find their

own fulfilment there. In England, he had followed the liberation movements of Ireland, Italy, Germany and America with interest, and he now gained valuable inspiration from this. His starting point and the aim of his political programme was the concept of full independence for India; in fact, Sri Aurobindo was the very first freedom-fighter in India who had the courage to publicly promote independence in the journals he had founded, and later in the political arena. It is no coincidence but perhaps due to higher providence that Sri Aurobindo's 75th birthday fell on the day Indian independence would be established, precisely on 15 August 1947, Sri Aurobindo's 75th birthday.

Sri Aurobindo and M.K. Gandhi

One interesting fact is that Sri Aurobindo not only advocated the inalienable right of any nation to freedom and independence, but also – on this basis – the right to armed resistance. As Destiny would have it, India was able to gain her independence 40 years later by non-violent means, which appeared to justify Mohandas K. Gandhi's principle of *ahimsa* – or 'non-violence'. On the other hand, one would have to agree that Sri Aurobindo's attitude during the Second World War, when he publicly took the side of the Allies, was certainly more courageous, noble, true and ultimately much more justified than Gandhi's adherence to the principle of *ahimsa*. Had England followed Gandhi's request to lay down arms and limit the fight against Hitler, confining it to purely spiritual strength, the world would have fallen prey, perhaps for untold centuries to come, to an extremely cruel domination – enslaved and robbed indefinitely of any new beautiful and free future manifestation. Sri Aurobindo commented

on this problem: “It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance, to grow, to fulfil and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct.”⁵

Nirvana

December 1907 saw a period of political agitation and restless activity on the world stage. In terms of his inner world at this time, Sri Aurobindo, was being hurled in a direction which represented a revolution just as great as the external one that motivated it. In December 1907, after his yogic development had come to a standstill, he turned to a Yogi by the name of Lele, who was intellectually far inferior to him, but who nevertheless was initially able to help and to inspire him. Lele’s first instruction was: “Make your mind empty.” The aim was to achieve complete stillness of the mind and immobilise the whole consciousness. The means of doing this was to dismiss all thoughts coming into one’s head. Sri Aurobindo later wrote to a disciple: “The first result was a series of tremendously powerful experiences and radical changes of consciousness which he [Lele] never intended – for they were Adwaitic and Vedantic and he was against Adwaita Vedanta – and which were quite contrary to my own ideas.”⁶ To his complete surprise, Sri Aurobindo entered the realm of “the silent spaceless and timeless Brahman”⁷, an experience which was accompanied “by an overwhelming feeling and perception of the total unreality of the world”.⁸

“In the enormous spaces of the self
The body now seemed only a wandering shell.”⁹

“There was no One or many even, only just absolutely That, featureless, relationless, sheer, indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely real and solely real. ... But what this experience brought was an inexpressible Peace, a stupendous silence, an infinity of release and freedom.”¹⁰ Suddenly, Sri Aurobindo had entered into what the Buddhists called *Nirvana* [lit. “extinction”] and he had achieved the famed “release” [*moksha*], which in Hinduism is said to be the peak of spiritual life. However, the chasm between the mind and material had opened up again, and against the backdrop of this transcendent reality, the earth and life appeared to him “as a cinematographic play of vacant forms”.¹¹

Lele was appalled; this had not been his intention. However, when he saw that Sri Aurobindo’s experience could no longer be reversed, he advised him to give himself over to his inner guide, the Divine, “enjoining an absolute surrender to its will, a principle or rather a seed-force”, to which Sri Aurobindo unwaveringly and increasingly adhered, until, as he later wrote in a letter, “through all the mazes of an incalculable Yogic development bound by no single rule or system or dogma ... – to where and what I am now and towards what shall be hereafter”.¹²

The paradoxical situation thereby arose that on the one hand, Sri Aurobindo lived in complete inner silence, but on the other hand, he was compelled by the vortex of political activities to lead an outwardly extroverted life. In this state, he ran a daily newspaper and would give a dozen talks on the need for India’s Freedom within a period of three or four days. This “just happened”, and he no longer thought “with his head or brain”, but all “thinking” came from a “wideness generally above the head [where] ... the thoughts occur.”¹³

For the modern Western mind, this might appear to be an absurd assertion, but as Sri Aurobindo once wrote to a sceptic, it is “ ... impossible by the aid of the ordinary positive reason to test the data of spiritual experience and decide whether those things exist or not or what is their law and nature”.¹⁴ The only path was “to collect experience after experience”, and, based on an increasingly intuitive power of discernment, to put things in their right place.

Imprisonment – Cosmic Consciousness or Unity Consciousness

The force that had led him on this path continued to exert its pressure on Sri Aurobindo. Suddenly, only four months later, he was arrested by the English authorities together with a number of co-conspirators. The arrests were due to an assassination attempt on an English magistrate for which Sri Aurobindo was not responsible. Nevertheless, he would remain in custody for more than a year, a month of which was spent in solitary confinement, and in complete uncertainty about whether the gallows awaited him. His inner spiritual experiences assumed such an urgent dynamic during this detainment that he left the representation of his case completely in the hands of his defence lawyer, C.R. Das, devoting himself entirely to meditation and yoga. The result was the second greatest realisation in his life. The emptiness of infinity which he had felt as so overwhelmingly real since his “Nirvana experience”, and which had almost extinguished the outer world in its wake, became more open and “full”. The world and God passed into him and, as Satprem wrote, “... we find the world and God together again at every

level and in every point, as if they had never been separated except through an excess of materialism or spiritualism.”¹⁵ The place where this new change in consciousness came about was the Alipore Prison: “I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. ... I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them I saw Vasudeva, it was Narayana whom I found in these darkened souls and misused bodies.”¹⁶

At the final court-hearing, Sri Aurobindo’s defence counsel was seized by divine inspiration, and Sri Aurobindo was released thanks to the impact of his impassioned plea. The revolutionary movement in Bengal had been decimated during the period of Sri Aurobindo’s detention, but this did not stop his attempts to continue the freedom-struggle by founding new political journals and organising a nationalistic Party of Bengal. However, in February 1910, due to the threat of an imminent second arrest, he was forced to flee to French-administered Chandernagore, where he was safe from the British for the time being.

The Turning Point

His inner experiences in the Alipore Prison and in Chandernagore marked a decisive turning point in Sri Aurobindo’s life. He had scaled the heights of the human mind, and he had integrated everything for which the spirit of India had striven for centuries – yet he saw that it was not enough. His first insight was that his struggle to win the fight against the external oppres-

sors was far more encompassing than he had at first realised: “It is not a revolt against the British Government which anyone can easily do. It is, in fact, a revolt against the whole universal Nature.”¹⁷

What had happened to cause Sri Aurobindo to arrive at this insight? He had attained the highest light. He had climbed ever higher, and in his solitary meditation in jail at Alipore, where the voice of Vivekananda had advised him, he was able to look deeply within and to recognise the true extent of global ignorance, unconsciousness, suffering and death, which were yet to be transformed after countless centuries of human evolution. For fourteen intense days during his imprisonment, he was forced by his inner guide to view in his mind’s eye all possible scenarios of human torment. And he saw that he would find no peace of mind until he had found the means to bring an end to this universal suffering on the earthly-material plane. Thus, his concentrated efforts in the second half of his life were exclusively directed to discovering that “magic lever” which would bring the earth to its divine future.

Pondicherry – The Revolutionary of the Future

Under the guidance of a new inner calling, he left Chandernagore at the end of March 1910 to go to Pondicherry. The city was not far from Madras and was still under French sovereignty. He would remain there until his death. According to the legend, the town had served as the domain of the great Rishi Agastya. In later years, the British, who sensed that Sri Aurobindo was still a great danger, tried several times to capture and to deport him, but without success. The majority of his earlier political

associates did not understand Sri Aurobindo's withdrawal from the struggle for emancipation. The retort he gave to this was that he had only retired from politics because he required the "inner certainty" to bring to fruition the inner, spiritual work he had begun. He now wanted to concentrate fully upon his yoga.

In fact, Sri Aurobindo's inner journey would assume unexpectedly phenomenal revelations in the next few years, leading to the development of a still unknown principle of the highest consciousness – the supramental or the 'supermind'. In 1914, after a few very difficult and uncertain years with regard to external circumstances, he would receive an indispensable assistance in his transformational work. He became acquainted with his spiritual companion and kindred soul of the highest order, a woman of extraordinary psychic capacities, born in Paris on the 21st of February 1878, Mirra Alfassa, who later generally came to be known in India as "The Mother". From 1914 to 1921, he made his revolutionary insights known by publishing a philosophical journal entitled "Arya", which contained the majority of his work. The fact alone, that he published four, sometimes six, of his main works *simultaneously*, was an incomparable achievement – a fact that is unique in the whole history of spirituality.

The Later Years

In 1926, Sri Aurobindo withdrew completely after another decisive inner realisation. He then concentrated intensively on his work regarding the transformation of the whole human experience, down to the subconscious and the body. In 1926, he founded the Ashram which was intended to be an experimental site and laboratory for his integral yoga, which itself was the

result of his and the Mother's spiritual findings and inner work. It was not long before Sri Aurobindo's name would become widely known and begin to draw attention throughout India as well as from abroad. Shortly before his passing, on the 5th of December 1950 at the age of seventy-eight, Sri Aurobindo would be proposed for the Nobel Prize by Pearl S. Buck. Further significant events after his passing were marked by the founding in 1968 of a future laboratory named "Auroville", an international experiment to evolve a new being beyond the "human" species, representing a collective attempt to embody the ideal of a supramental transformation at the material level. Four years later, in 1972, there followed the publication of thirty volumes of Sri Aurobindo's *Collected Works*. Subsequently, six additional volumes including expanded, unexpurgated texts of Sri Aurobindo's writings would be added.

The Heart of the Matter ...

In his essay "The Revolt of the Earth" (1990), Satprem (1923-2007), who continued freely the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, wrote the revolutionary sentence: "Let us not delude ourselves; we are not at the end of a 'civilisation', the way we were at the end of the Roman Empire. We are at the end of the Human Empire."¹⁸

Recognising this state of affairs provides the key to the chaotic mystery of our time. In 1927, in the midst of his solitary work, Sri Aurobindo wrote about transformation as occurring in the "bedrock" of the unconscious and the body:

"Man is a TRANSITIONAL BEING, he is not final."¹⁹

Back then, when Sri Aurobindo wrote this thought-provoking sentence, he had clearly recognised that the most advanced tool of evolution, the intellectual, analytical, reasoning mind, could not create or build the next evolutionary step required of humanity on its own. A new force of consciousness based on that integral, non-mental Unity in which all opposites are harmonised, had to be accessed and integrated, and at last embodied in a New Being, in order to lead evolution further. Thus, on his inner search through ever higher planes of consciousness, Sri Aurobindo finally rediscovered that self-luminous Consciousness which the ancient Indian Rishis had already known and which he would call the supramental or the “supermind” – the Consciousness of a new, indivisible and indestructible One Knowledge of “Truth”.

Although the Western sceptical mind may insist upon asking for a more “scientific” definition or “proof” of this higher *supra*-mental state, it is impossible – except for a direct realisation by experience of this state – to give an exact definition or proof for it. Consequently, Sri Aurobindo’s observation will have to suffice here: “The supramental is simply the Truth-Consciousness and what it brings in its descent is the full truth of life, the full truth of consciousness in Matter.”²⁰ Thus: “The Supramental is *not* grand, aloof, cold and austere; it is not something opposed to or inconsistent with a full vital and physical manifestation; on the contrary, it carries in it the only possibility of the full fullness of the vital force and the physical life on earth.”²¹ What is important to realise is that for Sri Aurobindo, the supramental was no mere postulation of thinking, no hypothetical possibility, but an existentially experienced reality. He was therefore able to say with calm certainty in 1935: “I know with absolute certitude that the supramental is a truth and that its advent is in the very

nature of things inevitable.”²² In his case, the path to this discovery was that of a researcher and experimenter: “I think I can say that I have been testing day and night for years upon years more scrupulously than any scientist his theory or his method on the physical plane.”²³ And in August 1935 he wrote triumphantly: “Now I have got the hang of the whole hanged thing — like a very Einstein I have got the mathematical formula of the whole affair (unintelligible as in his case to anybody but myself) and am working it out figure by figure.”²⁴ On 21 July 1965, when the Mother would attain the same point in the yoga of the body as Sri Aurobindo had in his time, that is, when she had become able to awaken the initially completely unconscious cells of her body to a new consciousness by placing the physical cells in touch with the light and power of the supramental state of consciousness, she interestingly used almost the same words as Sri Aurobindo.

The pioneering discoveries of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother regarding a transformation of the very cells of the body, now make it possible to change the course of evolution as dramatically as it was the case with that decisive evolutionary step from inert matter to life and later from life to the thinking mind. Fascinatingly, according to the research of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (with later, continuing research efforts by Satprem) the body itself, so undervalued by world religions for thousands of years, now becomes a bridge of hope leading to a next stage of evolution with a New Being at its end. It is hardly possible at this stage to assess the evolutionary potential of those discoveries in the realm of the body, which literally might bring heaven on earth.

Impossible?

Sri Aurobindo replied thus to a sceptic: “Only you say that the thing is impossible; but that is what is said about everything before it is done.”²⁵

The Mother’s revolutionary experiences in the years between 1956 and 1973, as she followed in the footsteps of Sri Aurobindo with her “Yoga of the Body” or “Yoga of the Cells” – the results of which are documented in the 13-volume, 6000-page “Agenda” – seem to confirm this. This new line of evolution might even lead to a state of physical immortality, as incredible as that may still sound today. The Mother, through her concentrated inner work, is the first tangible indication that the message of hope which Sri Aurobindo has left us is not yet another disappointing chimera within a long line of unsuccessful endeavours toward a better future of humankind.

Satprem, who, after the passing of the Mother in 1973 attempted experimentally to continue as best and as courageously as he could the evolutionary research work initiated by Sri Aurobindo and continued by the Mother – is another indication of the reality of the matter. One of Satprem’s final works, *Evolution II* (1992), a “message in a bottle” to those interested in this work, includes the following propitious words: “... the great floodgate of the new evolution is open, I know it is, the passage is open, I know it is, it no longer is a promise for future times: it is *being done* [...] And who will close that solar floodgate again? It is now shaking the world more inexorably than all our Floods of old. It is the ‘favourable milieu’ such as there has never been, for we have reached the end of man and must hasten before he puts an end to his Earth; for now is the time when, at the end of our road, we are holding in our hands our own destruction or our own mutation.”

“So let us cast this last lifebuoy of hope in the direction of those who want it. For Hope is here, if we want it; the Way is here, if we want it – and the Time has come, whether we want it or not.”²⁶

Bibliographic links:

The Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo, downloadable as PDF:

<https://www.sriarobindoashram.org/sriarobindo/writings.php>

Mother's Agenda in 13 volumes:

https://www.aurobindo.ru/workings/ma/agenda_01/index_e.htm

(the original audio recordings can be accessed by clicking on the French version)

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