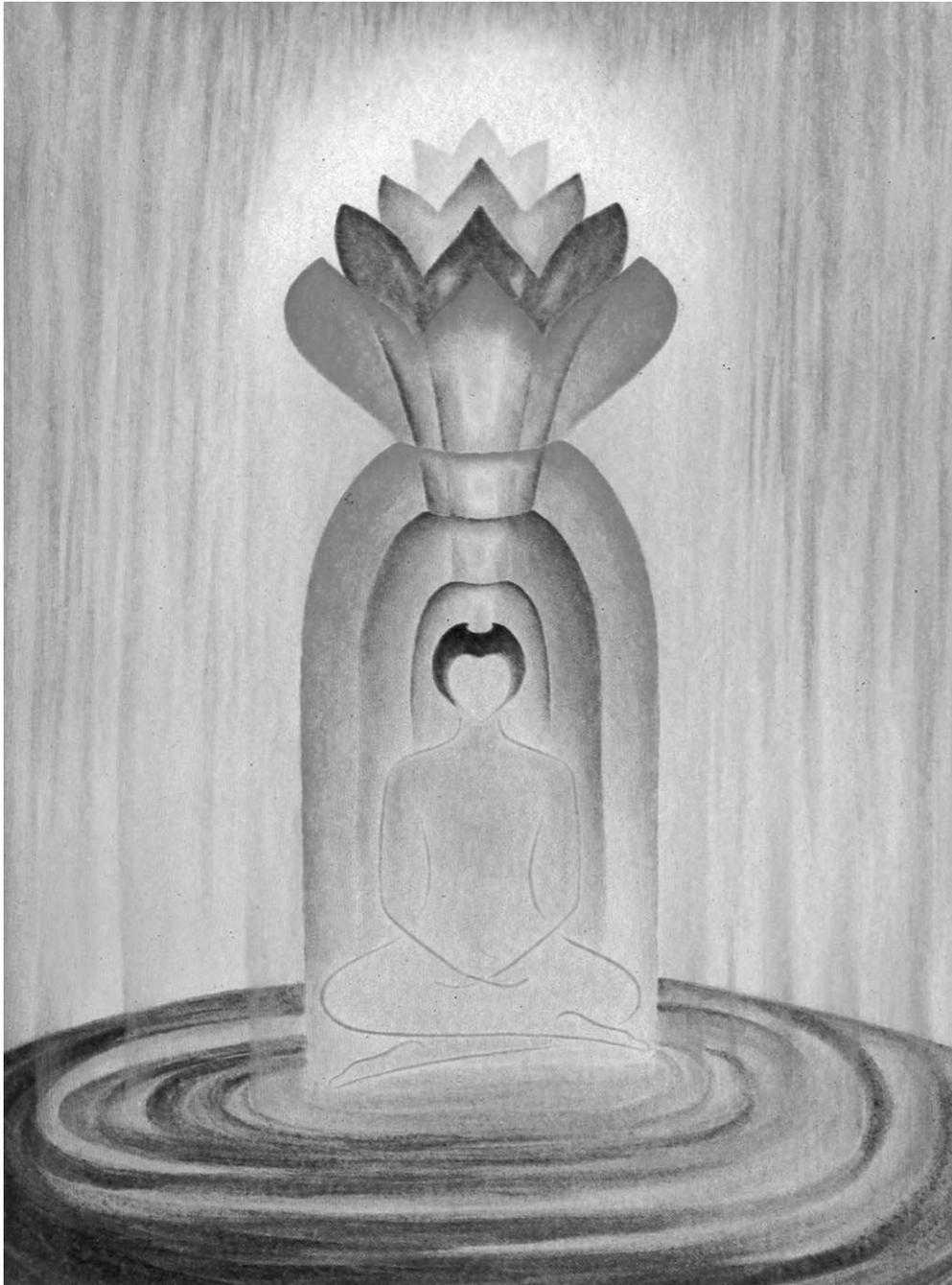


Collaboration

Winter 2010/2011

Journal of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

Vol. 35, No. 2



**Interview with Matthijs Cornelissen and Neeltje Huppes on the Indian Psychology Institute •
Richard Hartz on Reinhold Niebuhr, Sri Aurobindo and America's spiritual future •
Angelo Salerno on spiritual peace • Review of the journal NAMAHA •
Current affairs • AV almanac • Source material • Poetry • Apropos**



About the cover

This greyscale copy of a watercolor painting by the late Usha R. Patel, an Ashram painter, is from her book, *Love Treasures*, paintings based on Sri Aurobindo's book *The Mother*. It was published in 1985 by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and is used with their permission.

The authors and poets

Alan (alan@auroville.org.in) is a British Aurovillian who in 1988 helped initiate Auroville's monthly news magazine *Auroville Today*, and since then has been one of its editors.

Anurag Banerjee is the founder and chairman of the Overman Foundation. He has published books on Dilip Kumar Roy, Nirodbaran, and Bengali translations of Sri Aurobindo's poetry. He has an MBA, and is developing an integral approach to management. His email address is: anuragbanerjee2002@yahoo.co.in.

Matthijs Cornelissen (matthijs@ipi.org.in) and **Neeltje Huppés** (neeltje@auromail.net) are members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where they direct the Indian Psychology Institute and teach in the Ashram college.

Richard Hartz (richardahartz@hotmail.com) is a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where he works in the Archives and is a scholar on Sri Aurobindo's thought.

Kailas Jhaveri (richardkailaas@gmail.com) is a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Her biography, *I am with you (part 1)*, from which this poem was taken, was published in 2004.

Rachana Kaur is a young devotee from Hyderabad who has been coming periodically to the Ashram since her childhood.

Shyam Kumari is a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and is an author, poet, editor, and director of a Sanskrit school in Pondicherry. She may be reached at shyamkumari@auromail.net

Narad (Richard Eggenberger) (narada12@gmail.com) is currently working on the development of the Ashram website, where many of his writings are now available. He conducts 'OM choirs,' and is a horticulturist.

Sunil Narayan (odissi20@yahoo.com) is an Indian-American poet living in Beaverton, Oregon. He has published some of his poetry in various literary journals and on the web.

The late **Nishikanto** (1909-1973) was a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram whose poetry was highly regarded by Sri Aurobindo.

The late **Dilip Kumar Roy** (1897-1980) and **Indira Devi** (1920-1997) were early members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and later founded the Hari Krishna Mandir ashram in Pune. They composed music and were singers, and they have published various literary works together.

Angelo Salerno (salerno_51@hotmail.com) is a member of Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham in Lodi, California, where he works at Auromere Ayurvedic Imports and as a gardener.

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From the office of Collaboration

In this issue we feature in our Chronicles section an interview with Matthijs Cornelisen and Neeltje Huppes about the Indian Psychology Institute (IPI). Matthijs and Neeltje, originally from the Netherlands, came to India in 1976 and lived for 15 years at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch before joining the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. Well-known for their earlier work in Integral Education, they are presently involved in a variety of projects concerned with the development of a new approach to psychology based on the Indian tradition. To this end they founded the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Consciousness Studies in 2001, and the IPI in 2006. They have also organized several successful academic conferences on Indian Psychology, and Matthijs has edited several books on the subject, and has written numerous papers. In this interview we discussed the aims and activities of the IPI.

In our featured Essays, we present a thoughtful paper by Richard Hartz: "Serenity, courage and wisdom: Reinhold Niebuhr, Sri Aurobindo and America's spiritual future." Richard, an American living at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, is well-known in the US for his editorial work at the Sri Aurobindo Archives and his talks at various AUM conferences. In fact, this paper was presented at the AUM in 2010. Partly due to its depth and complexity which are not easily absorbed in a brief sitting, and partly for those who missed his talk, we felt that publishing the paper here was important. Richard explores Niebuhr's three key concepts—serenity, courage and wisdom—in their spiritual depth and complementariness, in light of Sri Aurobindo's thought. He also brings out the parallels between the two thinkers, and sheds light on the American mind and soul.

In addition, we also include a short essay by Angelo Salerno on peace. This essay nicely clarifies the distinctions between ordinary peace and true spiritual peace, which typically comes only with the practice of sadhana. Angelo is a member of the Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham ashram in Lodi, CA, where he has been residing for the past seven years. The article carries with it an air of authentic spiritual experience, and as such, is helpful in communicating the deeper quality of spiritual peace to the reader.

In our Source Material, we focus on a related theme, that of the higher or spiritual consciousness. We have selections from Sri Aurobindo's Letters on Yoga and a longer segment on the spiritual transformation from the *The Life Divine*. We also include an interesting talk by the Mother about the nature of "the spirit" or spiritual consciousness, in which she characterizes it as an intermediary between the human and the Divine.

We have included a review of the journal *NAMAH*, short for *New Approaches to Medicine and Healing*. We wrote this as part of a joint effort of the two journals to make our respective readers more aware of each other's journals. The journals are nicely complementary to each other and are likely to be of interest to each other's readership. After learning about the journal, we hope you will consider subscribing to *NAMAH*.

In Current Affairs, we have an article on a new organization called the Overman Foundation, which is based in Kolkata. The author and founder of the organization, Anurag Banerjee, is an energetic scholar in his mid 20s with several books already to his credit. The article describes the Foundation's spiritual aims and its practical activities, which are further discussed on its blog: <http://www.overmanfoundation.wordpress>. In this section we also note recent updates to the Ashram website and the IPI website.

In AV Almanac, we have reprinted a recent article by Alan, an editor of *Auroville Today*. It pertains to the youth in Auroville and their connection to the "Auroville spirit." He interviewed a group of 18-20 year olds about their experience of Auroville, how it may differ from their parents, and about their interests in going abroad.

We conclude the issue with a wonderful selection of poetry from both classic Aurobindonian and newer poets, and a stimulating assortment Aropos quotations.

The photographers

We wish to thank the various anonymous photographers who have contributed their photos for our issue. The photo of Sri Aurobindo on p. 25 was of course taken by the famous photographer Cartier Bresson. The flower photo on p. 24 was scanned from the beautiful Ashram 2 vol. set, *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers, by the Mother*, published in 2000. The photo of Reinhold Niebuhr on p. 16 appeared on the web blog <http://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com> without copyright notice or photo credit.

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Submissions: *Collaboration* welcomes writing, photos, and artwork relevant to the Integral Yoga and spirituality. Submit material by email to: editor@collaboration.org; or by post to *Collaboration*, 2715 W. Kettleman Lane, Suite 203-174, Lodi, CA 95242 USA. *Collaboration* cannot be held responsible for loss or damage of unsolicited material. Letters to the editor may be published unless you indicate otherwise. Letters and articles may be edited for style and space considerations.

About SAA: The Sri Aurobindo Association distributes information about Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, and Auroville, and supports projects related to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville, and Integral Yoga activities in America. Current officers: Lynda Lester, president; Vishnu Eschner, vice president; John Robert Cornell, secretary; Kalpana Patel, treasurer.

Contributions: Donations for the work of the SAA, Auroville, and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram may be sent to SAA. Donations are tax exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.



Current Affairs

Overman Foundation

by Anurag Banerjee

A new organization dedicated to the mission and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother has come into existence on 29 March 2010. It was established by Anurag Banerjee who is serving the organization as its Chairman. The objectives of Overman Foundation are as follows:

1. To promote spiritual progress in its absolute sense for everyone without any discrimination based on caste, creed and gender.
2. To spread the evolutionary vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother with respect to the establishment of a divine life in a divine body in all fields of life.
3. To spread and help to spread the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the towns and villages of West Bengal, the land of Sri Aurobindo's birth.
4. To conduct researches on the lives of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and the eminent sadhaks of the Integral Yoga and collect and preserve documents related to them.
5. To conduct seminars and workshops to promote the views of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on Integral Management and Social Unity.
6. To recognize the contribution of the scholars and workers of the Aurobindonian movement in various fields. (For this purpose, the 'Auro-Ratna' award has been created which would be given out every year based on the recommendation of the Advisory Board.)
7. To publish literature and books for the promotion of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

The Mother had once said:

Anyway, we have now arrived at a certitude since there is already a beginning of realisation. We have the proof that in certain conditions the ordinary state of humanity can be exceeded and a new state of consciousness worked out which enables at least a conscious relation between mental and supramental man.

It can be affirmed with certainty that there will be an intermediate specimen between the mental and the supramental being, a kind of superman [*surhomme*, alternatively translated as 'Overman'] who will still have the qualities and in part the nature of man, which means that he will still belong in his most external form to the human being of animal origin, but that he will transform his consciousness sufficiently to belong in his realisation and activity to a new race, a race of

supermen [alternatively, Overmen].

This species may be considered a transitional species, for it is to be foreseen that it will discover the means of producing new beings without going through the old animal method, and these beings—who will have a truly spiritual birth—will constitute the elements of the new race, the supramental race.

So we could call supermen [Overmen] those who, because of their origin, still belong to the old method of generation but who, because of their accomplishment, are in conscious and active contact with the new world of supramental realisation. (*Collected Works of the Mother*, Vol. 9, pp. 313-314)

Hence Overman Foundation has as its *aim* to inculcate the 'urge' to rise over our mundane aspects of life and delve deeper into our inner 'I.' The Foundation reaches out to society with an invitation to participate in its aspiration to conceive the new species of Overman—a transitory state in the creation of Superman. The organization firmly believes that it is the duty of every individual moved by this ideal to ardently seek the Divine, and amidst the trivialities of our surroundings, to strengthen this aspiration with the learning required to become an 'Overman.' The Foundation supports this learning through its sharing of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's spiritual work and teachings. The motto of all the members of the organization can be best summed up in the following words of Sri Aurobindo:

The coming of a spiritual age must be preceded by the appearance of an increasing number of individuals who are no longer satisfied with the normal intellectual, vital and physical existence of man, but perceive that a greater revolution is the real goal of humanity and attempt to effect it in themselves, to lead others to it and to make it the recognised goal of the race. In proportion as they succeed and to the degree to which they carry this evolution, the yet unrealised potentiality which they represent will become an actual possibility of the future. (*The Human Cycle*, p. 261)

The administration of Overman Foundation is monitored by its Advisory Board, whose members are Nirmal Singh Nahar (Founder-Trustee of Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Kolkata), Prof. Kittu Reddy and Krishna Chakravarti.

Research

On 4 September 2010, Overman Foundation has launched an online research facility through which relevant research materials are provided to interested researchers and scholars through post and email in return of which a nominal sum of money is charged as fees. It is the only research organization in India which provides such services. The treasure-chest of research materials available at Overman Foundation includes a vast collection of British Gov-



ernment documents and press coverage on Sri Aurobindo, rare books and articles in English and Bengali on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, hundreds of photographs of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, their family-members and disciples to name a few. The organization also possesses a number of unpublished correspondence of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and their disciples which are not issued but can be viewed only with due permission granted by the Chairman. At regular interval, some of the archival treasures are shared with interested readers through the blog: <http://www.overmanfoundation.wordpress>.

Treasures

Overman Foundation possesses several objects used by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, for instance, a full-length sari worn by the Mother. These rare treasures have been gifted to the organization by the inmates of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, as a token of appreciation and encouragement of the noble work done by it. These invaluable treasures are meticulously preserved at the Branch Office of the organization where a shrine is under construction.

Auro-Ratna Award

The 'Auro-Ratna Award' was initiated by Overman Foundation to recognize the invaluable contribution of the poets, writers, philosophers, scholars and members of the Aurobindonian movement who have worked tirelessly for the mission of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The first recipients of the award were K.D. Sethna alias Amal Kiran, Prof. Arabinda Basu and the late Jugal Kishore Mukherjee.

Forthcoming publications

Based on the materials available at Overman Foundation, a number of research projects in English and Bengali have been undertaken by Anurag Banerjee, the Founder-Chairman of the organization. Its first Bengali project, *Ananya Nishikanto*, which saw the light of the day on 24 November 2010 comprises of about 34 unpublished poems of Nishikanto Rai Chowdhury, the well-known mystic-poet of the Ashram whom Sri Aurobindo had called the 'Brahmaputra of Inspiration,' and a set of rare epistolary exchanges between Sri Aurobindo and the poet. Some of the organization's forthcoming projects in English include *Sri Aurobindo: His Political Life and Activities*, *The Alipore Bomb Trial Judgment*, *Nishikanto's Dream Cadences with Sri Aurobindo's Comments*, *The Mother: The Growth of the Flame*, *Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore* and *Sri Aurobindo on Ethics*.

Memorial services

Overman Foundation believes in remembering the noble inmates of Sri Aurobindo Ashram who had dedicated their lives for

the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Accordingly it organizes memorial services on the birth anniversaries of the departed souls. On 18 November 2010, a Memorial Service was held to commemorate the 107th Birth Anniversary of Dr. Nirodbaran Talukdar, known in the Aurobindonian community across the globe as Sri Aurobindo's scribe and renowned for his books like *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* and *Memorable Contacts with the Mother* to name a few. On 12 December 2010, a Memorial Service was held to commemorate the 85th Birth Anniversary of Sujata Nahar, former inmate of Sri Aurobindo Ashram who was also one of the co-founders of Mira Aditi Centre and author of the well-known series on the Mother's life titled *Mother's Chronicles*.

Website developments

The **Sri Aurobindo Ashram website**—<http://www.sriurobindoashram.info>—has been considerably upgraded and continues to be expanded. (This is one of two Ashram websites, the other is: www.sriurobindoashram.org.) This website has a plethora of content pertaining to the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, their disciples, and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. You can find concise descriptions of the life and work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, as well as searchable collections of both their collected works. The site also carries searchable collections of the works of many early and later disciples; this is one aspect that has been considerably enlarged. In addition to written works, there are audio recordings of conversations, music and/or recitations of the Mother and various disciples, such as Sunil, Nolini, Nirodbaran, Amal Kiran, Udar, Dilip Kumar Roy and others. The artists' section also has undergone expansion, and there currently are collections of the following Ashram artists: Sanjiban Biswa, Champaklal, Janina, Priti, Dhanavanti and Niranjan Guha Ray. Regarding the Ashram itself, there is extensive information about its life and its various departments, as well as photos. One can find the messages which were given for each of the darshans observed each year since 1927.

The website of the **Indian Psychology Institute**, and its sister organization, the **Sri Aurobindo Centre for Consciousness Studies**, have been upgraded considerably during the last few weeks. The website of IPI can be found at <http://ipi.org.in>. It contains articles by different authors on psychology related issues, as seen from the various consciousness-based perspectives of the many Indian spiritual and intellectual traditions. Of special interest may be the page where these articles are sorted by subject: <http://ipi.org.in/lists/topics-all.php>. The website of SACCS is available at <http://saccs.org.in>. It has texts by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Of special interest may be the two compilations of psychology-related texts which are available at: <http://saccs.org.in/texts/integralyoga-comp.php>. Also of interest may be the Thematic Index of the *Collected Works of the Mother*, which is available at <http://saccs.org.in/mcw-index.html>.



AV almanac

“Everybody who has grown up here feels a strong connection to the Auroville spirit”

by Alan

Reprinted from Auroville Today, November 2010, No. 257

For those adults who don't have teenagers of their own or who lack regular contact with Auroville teenagers, the youth of this community are something of an enigma. Glimpsed briefly on the roads or from across a crowded Solar Café, it is all too easy to stereotype them, both for better or worse. But what are they really like? What do they find to celebrate about this place and what frustrates them? And what is the nature of their relationship to Auroville?

To find out more, *Auroville Today* spoke to two classes of 18-20 year olds at Future School. Some had joined Auroville relatively recently, but almost half of them were born in Auroville.

All these students will graduate next year. When asked what they will do next, all reply that they plan to leave Auroville for a longer or shorter period, the most popular option being to pursue further academic studies in Europe. Anandi explains, “I want to go to university abroad and deepen my knowledge of music.” Why abroad? “Because over there you can meet and interact with many young people who share your interest.”

But is this the only reason why the students want to leave Auroville and go abroad? “No,” says Nisha, “Most of my life I've lived in Auroville so I have a curiosity about how it is outside. It's not that I feel I lack something here, but I want to step out of the box for a bit, just to see what else is out there. I don't want to miss out on something.” “I think that once you have experienced what is outside,” adds Vasanthi, “you can make a conscious choice about whether you want to be in Auroville or not.”

“I think my major reason to go abroad,” says Emanuele, “is to challenge myself, to see if I can live on my own for the first time.” Sushant agrees. “I want to see how the world will challenge me. I want to discover what I'm good at and how I can cope socially with being in a much larger group. When I spent a year out of Auroville at Kodaikanal School I learned to play the guitar. It made me realize you can discover a lot of new things in yourself if you step out of your comfort zone.” “Auroville is a beautiful place,” adds Amba, “but it is also a small bubble: we are not always aware of what is happening outside of our bubble. I think if you go out and learn something in Europe or America and bring it back, it creates a stronger connection with the outside world; it brings some-



From left: Sushant, Vasanthi, Amba, Anandi and Teresa. (Photo courtesy Auroville Today)

thing extra to Auroville.”

So those Aurovillians who argue that providing a first-class university education in Auroville would prevent an exodus of the young are probably wrong. Nevertheless, a few of these students would consider this option if it was available. “Probably I would stay in Auroville if there was higher education here,” says Nitzan. “I've lived in other countries, like Israel and the U.S., so I don't lack this experience. The educational approach I've been looking for I've found in Future School and Auroville in general. Education here is more authentic.” Vika agrees. “I'm very comfortable and familiar with the way things are taught in Future School and if there would be a higher level taught by the same people I would definitely stay on.”

In fact, all of them admit that they will miss certain things here. “This is home,” says Nisha, “it's like a big family here. When I come to school in the morning I see ten people on the road that I say 'hi' to. You kind of know everybody and you're comfortable with everybody.” “In the West,” says Nitzan, “you're surrounded by so many more distractions that you have a tendency to lose yourself in them. Here there are a lot of different opportunities in terms of doing sports or arts without having to pay for them. You can just go up to somebody and say you're interested in learning something and they will help you. This is one of the most beautiful things about this place.”

Teresa agrees, and she adds, “When I go for holidays to Europe and see the youth there I realize they are growing up in a completely different environment: what we have in Auroville is unique.” Anandi explains, “The Western world is easily manipulated by consumerism and appearances, but when I realize I am being pulled into that world I can step back: I recognize it's not me.” “People abroad tend to get caught up in the superficiality of materialistic needs,” says Vasanthi. “In Auroville we can step away from that.”

It sounds as if Auroville is something of a paradise, an ideal



From left: Nitzan, Nisha, Emanuele and Vika. (Photo courtesy Auroville Today)

society. Is there no downside for the youth?

“Educationally there’s a wide range of possibilities here but they’re not really established or developed enough and they lack depth,” says Anandi.

“The main downside for me,” says Emanuele, “is that because everybody knows you, if you make the tiniest mistake everybody will learn about it and judge you. Making mistakes is human, but some people keep bashing on us instead of looking at their own mistakes,” Sushant adds, “One *faux pas* or mistake can lead to a long-lasting label and from then on some names are consistently brought up as the ‘wrongdoers’ for all youthful indiscretions. At the same time, I realize the way we behave in a group can be loud and disruptive; for example, when we come to the Solar Café.” “I think some people who judge us may have done similar things,” says Vasanthi. “They may unintentionally project their mistakes onto us.”

Vika wonders, “Are the youth and adults two completely different entities? Aren’t we meant to learn from one another?”

“Often we find ourselves not knowing where to go,” adds Sushant. “We really try to find places where we can be ourselves without disturbing the neighbours.” But what about the Youth Centre and the youth community of Kailash? Aren’t these places where the youth can organise themselves and be themselves?

Sushant replies, “Kailash is a place where people live and not a place to hang out, which leaves us the Youth Centre.” Nisha considers that “something new has to come.”

Some adults seem to have a poor image of the youth in Auroville because they fail to live up to their expectations. “I guess the young people, like anybody else in Auroville, are confronted by this force which pushes us to confront ourselves,” says Rolf, one of their teachers. “The youth are working with these issues but they are judged on basically three or four external elements. A lot of other things they are and do may not always be properly valued. Judgments do not help us to connect and build trust.”

Of course, tensions and conflicts between youth and adults are common to many societies. But unlike most societies, Auroville has high ideals. Does this exacerbate the tensions here and make them more difficult to resolve?

Teresa replies, “We don’t feel that there is a substantial conflict between the youth and the adults. We try to respect each other’s needs and talk about a conflict when it arises so that we can find a compromise.”

But do they believe that some adults have problems with the youth in Auroville because they think they are not ‘spiritual’ enough, that they don’t know enough about the spiritual dimension of Auroville?

“It depends what you mean by spirituality,” says Vasanthi. “Maybe we cannot quote Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but if we are talking about our consciousness of ourselves and of our surroundings and, basically, how we connect to ourselves and to others, then I would say we are quite spiritual.”

“I’ve often been told that as a youth I should know more about Auroville and what Mother and Sri Aurobindo said,” says Sushant. “But we do try to understand the notion, the feeling, the general direction, in our attitudes and the way we live.” Anandi adds, “I think the most important thing is to get to the root of what Mother meant and be able to make decisions from that perspective.”

A recent article by a visiting researcher said that the Auroville youth had “lost faith in the faith,” that they had lost hope in the future of Auroville.

“I wonder who this researcher spoke to!” exclaims Nisha. “The way I see it the youth here are very open, very dynamic, so I think as long as we can keep this openness and don’t become rigid Auroville can develop into the future.” Vasanthi clarifies, “Auroville is more than just infrastructure; it’s also the spirit of the community which lives within us.”

“Auroville is not yet perfect,” says Anandi, “but here there’s an aspiration for a different kind of world. Once you’ve been in contact with that, going somewhere else is like taking a step back.”

“I think all of us feel connected and want to come back,” says Amba. “Whenever I am in Germany I want to return, basically to see the progress which is happening here, even if it’s only small. For example, the new roads make me happy. I want to be part of these changes.” Sushant agrees, “I want to participate in moving Auroville forward. It’s really hard to believe that Auroville might fail. We might not reach the ideal number or build the Galaxy but we’ll still reach somewhere.”

“It’s a process,” says Vasanthi. “There might not be the result that everyone expects but the best part is the journey. Everybody who has grown up here can feel a strong connection to the Auroville spirit and I don’t think it is possible for us to lose that connection. We will always carry it within us.”



Chronicles

The Indian Psychology Institute: An interview with Matthijs Cornelissen and Neeltje Huppes

Collaboration: What is the Indian Psychology Institute? What are its aims and its main activities?

Matthijs: Every culture uses a number of different knowledge systems to determine what is true and not true. In our global civilization, most people still use some religious knowledge system to guide their private lives, but for public life, science is increasingly dominant. The problem with mainstream science is, that it has a physicalist bias, and this makes it a rather unfit and clumsy tool for dealing with psychology, which is basically about consciousness. Mainstream psychology is presently rather limited and superficial because it has not understood how to deal with consciousness, whereas the Indian tradition has. The basic idea behind the Indian Psychology Institute is to see if some of the ideas and know-how from the Indian tradition can be made use of for the types of problems that modern psychology deals with.

Collaboration: What types of problems?

Matthijs: Problems of identity, personality, character, knowledge, cognition, memory, motivation, relationships, work, therapy, personal growth, organization, education, you name it. In all those fields, the Indian tradition is able to add something that is actually essential for a complete understanding. And of course, Sri Aurobindo synthesizes and reformulates that ancient knowledge within the framework of an ongoing evolution of consciousness, and that makes it really special. Sri Aurobindo's view of the complex, evolutionary manifestation of conscious-



Matthijs Cornelissen and Neeltje Huppes at their IPI office in Pondicherry. (Photo by Larry Seidlitz)

ness changes the whole perspective of what life is about.

Collaboration: How much do you focus on the earlier Indian tradition and how much on Sri Aurobindo?

Matthijs: We largely use Sri Aurobindo's thought, but while that may sound sectarian to those who don't know his work, Sri Aurobindo has made such a vast, such a comprehensive synthesis of the entire Indian tradition that the question of a limited, sectarian approach simply doesn't arise. We're not in any way against any of the other Indian systems. In practice I don't see very much scope for myself to study any of the other systems in depth, but if other people are interested they can certainly do so.

Collaboration: Okay, that pretty well covers your aims; what about your activities? What are the main things that IPI does?

Matthijs: We have organized, partially as IPI and partially as its predecessor, the Sri Aurobindo Center for Consciousness Studies, a number of conferences, and we are still doing that. Some of these we organize entirely ourselves and some of it we do as assistance to others. We also maintain two web sites: <http://saccs.org.in> which is exclusively about the Mother, Sri

Aurobindo and integral yoga, and <http://ipi.org.in> which is about Indian approaches to psychology in a more general sense. One of our main activities is that we give regular courses and workshops on Indian Psychology. Some of them are held in Pondy, and they attract mainly people from south India and some we give in Delhi for people from north India. Occasionally we have people

from abroad attend. For our weekly classes, people come mainly from Pondy and Auroville and so most of them are devotees, but otherwise it is clear from the aims of IPI that our main focus is on academics who feel that there is something more to psychology, but who somehow can't really argue why. To them we try to give the mental arguments, the intellectual and practical, psychological "tools" to deepen their understanding and inner mastery.

Collaboration: Is this something that involves just you two or are others involved as well?

Matthijs: The core group is small, but there are some others who are interested. Most others are embedded in the academic world, so their available time is more limited.

Neeltje: Some of the main professors in the main Indian universities have gotten interested in it and cooperate. That means that their students also get interested, and many of these students who have shown interest are themselves furthering it, so it is spreading quite a bit.

Matthijs: The first conference we organized was about Integral Psychology in 2001 and for that conference just four Indian psychologists came who were known to have this interest. Then I helped to organize the Indian Psychology section of



one of their conferences. After that we were asked to organize a conference fully devoted to Indian approaches to psychology. We thought initially that about 30 people would come. At the end, we had about 200 academics attend, and almost 100 papers were presented. There were people who were totally surprised that colleagues whom they thought they knew quite well had secretly this same interest. Many people responded, "Oh, you are also interested in this?" In subsequent conferences, we received well over 100 papers. So more people are interested than it had seemed earlier, and they include people in positions of authority. Earlier there had been just a few individuals who were openly interested, but it never became a sustained movement. It was just one individual here or there, who trained a few people around himself, but the whole action would fizzle out when that person wasn't there anymore. I think this is the first time that it is developing collectively on a larger scale and on a hopefully more permanent basis.

Last year for the first time there were several psychologists who gave courses on Indian Psychology in their university, systematically, just like other subjects. They were exceedingly surprised by the number of students who opted for the courses.

Neeltje: Now Indian Psychology is a subject at a number of universities including: Allahabad, Delhi, Mysore, and Bangalore.

Matthijs: I think it is very likely that the same thing will happen in the rest of the world, for students are interested. As India gets more status, because it develops economically, this will follow. That is a little strange, but I think it is a fact. People will start to take the Indian intellectual tradition also more seriously. A major breakthrough will come when people will begin to look at the Indian tradition as a source for psychological insight. Till now the Indian tradition has been mainly looked at as a source for philosophy, for language, for art and of course for personal enlightenment or mukti, but not as a valuable knowledge system in the academic field of psy-

chology. People are not used to look at it in that way. People in the West who have studied the Indian tradition have looked at it mainly as Indian Philosophy or Indian Religion, as an exotic, foreign culture, not as something that would offer valid knowledge about human nature in general. So I think this is the main change that is taking place.

Collaboration: When these courses are being taught in the universities, what kinds of things are being covered?

Matthijs: It depends completely on the person who teaches. In one place there is a lot of bhakti and music, and in another place that aspect is not there at all. This variety fits the Indian tradition.

Neeltje: But on the whole, these courses try to cover a comprehensive psychological content, issues such as personality, motivation, etc. but with all these issues explained in the framework of Indian psychology.

Matthijs: Yes, we try to convince people that they should not organize such courses in the form of studies of Jainism, Buddhism, Patanjali, and so on—not to organize them historically or by Indian school—but rather organize them around modern issues, and then see what the different schools in the Indian tradition can contribute to those issues. Or if they approach it as a study of the Indian tradition, then it should still not be looked at as history or as philosophy, but the course should stay focused around direct, human experience, because otherwise it becomes again something that people study about others, while psychology should be studied as a science that deals with ourselves.

Collaboration: Have you contributed textbooks or other materials for these courses?

Matthijs: In the last 10 years, quite a lot of articles and book chapters have been written on Indian Psychology, so teachers who want to start teaching have for each subject quite a lot of source material on this. But there is no standard textbook on Indian Psychology yet.

Collaboration: Do you have many of these articles available on your website?

Matthijs: Well, we do have some, but

the best ones are published in books and for those there is a problem of copyright, so it is a little difficult to tease them out. Some of the material may not be so easily accessible, but if people take the trouble then of course they can get at them. We have recently got permission to put many more articles on our web page, so we can expect the situation to improve over the coming months.

Collaboration: For some time you have been doing workshops here in Pondicherry and in Delhi. Can you tell us what those involve?

Neeltje: It is important to understand that Indian concepts are based on a deep inner experience and not just on a superficial mental knowledge. Western psychology, which is based on a materialistic world view is something that can be studied with the surface mind, whereas Indian psychology which is based on consciousness is different because we can't see consciousness outside, so unless we go within and experience it in ourselves we have missed the boat. That makes an enormous difference, and that is why up till now we have never thought of doing long-distance education. The experiential component is very important in getting to what Indian psychology is about.

Collaboration: How do you bring that out in the workshops?

Matthijs: There is a system and a method to it, but the most important part of it takes place implicitly in the atmosphere of the workshop. So, on the outside it almost looks as if we are giving lectures, because we do transact some content, but the content is always a means for getting people to think about themselves. So while it looks like a lecture, there is a lot of openness, questions and inviting of reactions as part of the process; the sessions are highly interactive. And we do introduce short exercises, like helping people to feel how it is to be centered in one's head or centered in one's heart, or what it means to be silent and stand back and watch your thoughts without getting carried away by them. Most people get that part. We give them exercises and they take them home, and in the morning they practice them for



five, ten, or twenty minutes, which then helps them for the rest of the day.

The fun part for me is that we have a group of about 15, 20, sometimes 35 people who are all totally different; we basically tell them the same thing; and then they all learn something entirely different; they all discover something special, something that is different for each person. We help them with finding their uniqueness during the workshop. An important part of the workshop is that everybody has to work on some kind of individual project, which may start with factual information—we do provide quite a bit of reading material and so on—but this information has to be applied by them to something of their specific interest.

Neeltje: The project is chosen by the people individually, they choose their own center of interest.

Matthijs: For example, one may work on “how do I open my heart center,” another one may work on “how do I get more

silence in my life,” or “how do I get over my depressions,” or “how do I improve my relationships.” So they try to approach their issue using these methods and to see how they work. We ask them to keep a diary of what works, how it works, what is the progress that they have made, etc.

Neeltje: Another important component is that during the weekends, we hold with each participant an individual discussion about their questions, their progress, their difficulties, etc. That half hour is very valuable in the overall work.

Matthijs: There is mixture of a number of factors. We do transact some content, but that content is almost a tool or an excuse for something else to happen in which their own activity is important. Besides this, the atmosphere is important. The main workshop is always in Pondy, and that itself contributes something to the workshop, and I think everybody

appreciates it. Even some hard core scientists told us that it is better that we do our courses in Pondy, because it adds something to these workshops. And even in Delhi, we do it again in the Delhi Branch of the Ashram, which has its own atmosphere, and that also helps.

The effect we see may also to some extent be due to the fact that in the group activities there is no judgment, and people are really free to attune to their own states, to their own *svabhava*. We pay a lot of attention to the fact that everybody has to grow in his own way.

Neeltje: There is a stress on free progress, an inner free progress.

Matthijs: Also, on the weekends, in addition to the “lectures”, we have people

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communicate in small groups and to work on their own stuff on their own.

Collaboration: So do these workshops occur in a series of consecutive days, or are there some gaps in between?

Matthijs: When we started out with a workshop of 10 consecutive days, people liked it, but our experience was—and others who do inspirational workshops tend to have the same experience—that afterwards the effects simply fizzle out. So what we did was to make that 10 day course shorter, we turned it into a week, and then we added to that six weekends which were spread out over the following year. And of those six weekends, we did one set in Pondy and one set in Delhi. For those Delhi weekends, we go to Delhi, and the participants come either from Delhi or from elsewhere in north India. And for those in Pondy, people come from Pondy itself or from other places in south India.

This pattern has worked out very well. Because after the workshop people get confronted: “In the workshop I was happy, but now I’m not.” “There I felt good, now I get irritated.” They get all those conflicts, and it is those conflicts which actually make them grow. So people say, “when I come for the weekend, I get high, my tank is full, then I come home and for a little while all goes fine, but then my tank gets empty again, and before long another weekend session comes and I fill up again.” That cycle of going through this frustration and noting the differences is painful, but also very useful, I think.

Neeltje: With this approach the inner growth gets sustained.

Collaboration: Do you discuss these issues in the groups?

Matthijs:

Both in the groups and individually. We make rounds in the group just to share, whatever the people want to share with the group, but everybody also has issues that they

only want to share individually. They may of course even have issues that they don’t share at all. We have some discussions with the whole group, some in smaller groups, and some individually. For the reports, we always say, “write the report first just for yourself, then write a second version for others, because if you start writing for others, then you filter out too much of the really important stuff.”

Collaboration: Do they write a report for each weekend session or just at the end?

Matthijs: Theoretically, they are supposed to write each time, and some of them do. We encourage them to do it each time, but many find that difficult. Everyone writes at the end of the course.

Neeltje: There are people who are very regular and they say that having to write every month helps them to sustain their progress. They are grateful that they have been asked to do it.



Matthijs: Writing about these inner processes is actually extremely difficult. Imagine if you yourself meditate for half an hour and then sit down and write about what happens during that half an hour, it may take hours, perhaps days to get it fully right. But I think the attempt is useful. Some people say that one should not talk about these things, and there is an obvious point to that. But I think much depends on how the story is received. We make it very clear that one's experience and one's judgment about it should be kept separate. It is quite seldom that we have people in the group boasting about their experiences. If it does happen, it fizzles out very fast.

Neeltje: Respect for each other is very much a part of the process.

Collaboration: Do you provide some guidelines for these discussions?

Matthijs: No, not explicitly; it develops largely by our way of responding. We try to react in a way that helps everybody to go as deep and be as honest as they can be. Never forcing them to say more than they want, but encouraging them to think and feel more deeply than they are used to.

Neeltje: If they see the other participants are serious, they also try and naturally get more respect for each other. Some might think, "Oh, what kind of question is this, he wants to show off." But when we really go seriously into that question, they see how the person is helped. Then the next person is more open, and the whole idea that you should criticize others goes out completely.

Matthijs: People do get encouraged by seeing how other people grow, because in groups like this there are always some people who make a huge jump, which is wonderful to see.

Neeltje: Also, they really help each other out. After seven in the evening, we go and have our dinner at home, but they make their own groups, sometimes until 12 or 1 o'clock at night, which is for some of them a good support.



Neeltje Huppel, assistant Divya Parasher, and Matthijs Cornelissen at the IPI office. (Photo by Larry Seidlitz)

Another thing which we didn't mention is that each of these weekends has a theme. For example, the first one is "parts of the being," the second one is "motivation and knowledge," and then the third one is "relationships," etc. So there is a kind of focus for these.

Matthijs: This allows us to go deeper into the main issues, and also, from our side, we want to develop material and a better understanding. So when we can, we try to encourage people to participate who are involved in academics or in professional practice. During the last two years we also encouraged people to write reports that potentially could contribute something to science. But it is still a complicated issue how this is to be done. We are still trying to work that out, because Indian Psychology will only get somewhere when we find our own way of doing research.

Mainstream psychology only does research *about* yoga or *about* the effects of meditation, but that research is based entirely on Western methods of acquiring knowledge, and it actually misses out on

the essence of it, as far as I am concerned. Most of the research on yoga or meditation is on its effects on blood pressure, or improving relaxation, or reducing stress, but that has never been the aim of yoga or meditation!

Instead one should see what are the intrinsic methods by which the Indian tradition has developed its inner knowledge. How has Sri Aurobindo acquired that fabulous amount of psychological insight that he obviously possessed? How did he do that? From where did that knowledge come? Can we do something similar to take that kind of knowledge further?

Neeltje: And to help other people...

Matthijs: Many people have used, for example, meditation and yoga to help in psychotherapy, because it works. We met somebody in Delhi who is very enthusiastic for psychoanalysis, for traditional, hard core psychoanalysis. She is

known for that. She admitted, somewhat hesitantly and blushing, but still she admitted, that the only times that she had felt really satisfied that her clients had improved were when they were doing at the same a Vipassana course. In the West it has now become very common to use Vipassana or other things like Hatha Yoga together with psychotherapy. But people have not used it, as far as I know, for the development of psychological knowledge and know-how, except a little bit in transpersonal psychology, but that is a strange hybrid if I may say so. What we try to do is quite close to what transpersonal psychology does, but we try to stay a little more consciously and deeply within the Indian tradition when we develop this knowledge.

Collaboration: So are you trying to bring out reports of their experiences of these things?

Matthijs: We have, for example, asked someone to collect reports from different Indian spiritual traditions about spiritual experiences and the effect of sadhana on



life and work. We are trying to see whether we can put that in some form that is publishable. We have also had people work on the relation people have with their guru, which is very interesting. There are lots of studies about the relationship of people with their psychotherapist, but obviously the relationship of a sadhak with his guru is different. There is some traditional writing about it, but that kind of writing tends to be prescriptive and idealistic, and sometimes it is quite over the top. It is not always realistic about how people actually look at their guru. For example, in the Ashram, do people see the Mother as the Divine, or as someone who helps them reach the Divine? One can have so many different relations with what Sri Aurobindo calls "the Master of the work!" One can also take up more down to earth things. We had a participant who had terrible fights with one of her family members, and she got completely over that. That made so much difference to her whole life, that in the next year we had a few applications from people who knew this person, and who were marveling at how she had changed. In such cases it would be interesting to see what the ingredient is that actually helps people to get out of one pattern of behavior into another.

Collaboration: How do you see this type of workshop fitting into your larger aims for Indian psychology? Do you see Indian psychology being taught in the classroom, or is this more the way that it should go?

Matthijs: My sense is that for a long time there will be a use for hybrid programs, where part is done in the academic setting and part in workshops outside the academic ambience. We have to work that out, I'm not quite sure. Some people have asked us for the syllabus of our course, but the syllabus is clearly not the main point. The main point is the inner processes that take place during the workshops. We are now trying to get different people to describe what actually happened to them, people who have seen it, who have some insight, so that others can get a sense of the way we do it. Not that others should do it in the same way, but such a

description could serve as an inspiration, as a source of ideas. There is a lot in common between spirituality and science. In science also, people are trained not only in the technicalities of their subject but also in becoming a scientist. In yoga, that transformative aspect of the training is probably more important, that's all.

Neeltje: The subject matter is not an end in itself, it is a means for a growth in consciousness.

Matthijs: In many ways, the person who gives the course is more important than the content he uses. In science it is actually also like that, but it is rarely made explicit.

Collaboration: How do you see this approach expanding more broadly.

Neeltje: It is happening. In the beginning we have already discussed how it has spread in Indian universities. It also gets a different flavor there according to the person who teaches.

There also is a desire to get this greater depth in business, because at the moment there are so many of these inspirational speakers. We know several people that are looking at how to get this deeper approach in business, so it is not just that you organize a weekend workshop so that on Monday your people work a little bit harder, but it is truly for the sake of an inner development, which in the end can spread into the whole business.

Matthijs: It is fascinating that within the field of psychology, there are many people that are trying to use this knowledge outside the academic world, who use it in their professional work, because they work with people and they want their work to be successful. At the moment, Indian methods and ideas are mainly used in therapy and in business, because therapists and business people know that it works and they are not so obsessed with method. But for science to progress, we need to get the methodological issues sorted out and find a rigorous way of being subjective. Then only science itself can get into it on a big scale.

Presently, a problem with management applications is that it is very easy for an opportunistic element to creep in, be-

cause it is the one area of psychology where people can make serious money. It is only when we combine the sincerity and intellectual rectitude that are typical for good science with a methodology that is really appropriate for subjective knowledge, for understanding consciousness, that we will begin to see real progress.

There would be much scope for the application of such an extended, more humane psychology in fields like education, because the present educational system is still based on behavioral studies which were done on rats and pigeons in the 1950s. These behavioral studies on cognition were based on a learning theory in which motivation was "operationalized" in terms of deprivation: rats were deprived of food so that they would be better motivated to learn randomly chosen behaviour when rewarded by well-calculated measures of food-pellets; children who feel deprived of inner emotional strength can be cajoled into learning anything as long as they are offered grades as reinforcement; and finally we end up with a society in which adults are willing to do any kind of work, as long as they get rewarded by money. If we could develop instead an educational system that was based on the intrinsic need of the heart to love, of the mind to learn, and the soul to grow, then society would really start moving.

Collaboration: Do you have people in these areas now coming to your workshops?

Matthijs: Yes.

Collaboration: So you see the potential for expanding into these areas?

Matthijs: Again, yes, there is an infinite potential, but we have to see how we can expand while remaining sincere.

Neeltje: Every year we are getting more and more participants.

Matthijs: But it takes long for a person to change; to really get the essence of it takes a long time. But in the end, the whole society has to be remodeled on the basis of spiritual psychology.

Neeltje: Or at least on the basis of consciousness.

Collaboration: You bring up the length of time it takes to change, but you



have a relatively short program. How does that work?

Matthijs: Many people are already familiar with these things before they come. Also, every year, about one quarter of the participants wants to do it another year. And that is alright. In a way, it blocks places for new participants, but those who repeat tend to go much deeper; the impression we get is that people often change more in the second year than in the first.

Neeltje: I can only continue doing this work thinking that it is not the numbers that count. It is similar to Mirambika, the school we started at the Delhi branch of the Ashram. You actually see the whole societal change growing much faster than you thought, because all the people connected with it have an influence around them. You do what you can, and all the time you try to feel whether it is still what it is meant to be—now I am talking like a devotee—is it in the direction that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother want it to go? So inwardly there is a whole other process that helps you to stay on line and do what really has to be done. And They have their ways of making use of the people that have gone out again into the world. You see that some of them all of a sudden get into situations where they can spread what started here. But it is absolutely not our doing, but Their doing.

Matthijs: For me personally, sadhana is more important than work. And sometimes there seems to be a conflict. Sometimes you have people come from outside, and they ask, “Have you done this, have you done that, have you contacted these people?” They want it to spread fast, because they are used to advertisement in business. But we are not doing that. We are trying to keep it as sincere and small scale as we can, and yet hope that the example will spread in its own way, and I think it works. But it is an area of tension. The Ashram as a whole is very much introverted and not used to this sort of thing, and we are already a little bit on the edge of that.

Neeltje: We got permission to do this, and we would have never done it if we didn't get permission. You try to do it as

sincerely as you can, and honestly leave the result to the Divine.

Collaboration: Are many of these people who come already on a spiritual path, or do you see people turning to spirituality?

Matthijs: We have the whole range. We have people coming with a complete mental faith in their scientific approach, and then slowly, or sometimes even quite suddenly, it changes. There are other people who come with the whole Sanskrit tradition solidly fixed in their head, they know everything before they come, and then slowly you see that they open up. There are other people who come with quite a bit of spiritual experience right from the beginning. For some, you offer the intellectual tools to give a mental shape to things they already know experientially. Other people come because they look for a more fulfilled life but know hardly anything of the Indian tradition. For them you open a window into a totally new world. The whole range is there. It is really a very wide group.

You have people who have the whole spiritual stuff hidden, but ready, and you just open the door and it all comes out. We had a young man last year, an engineer. We told the participants to stand back and watch their thoughts, and so he watched his thoughts. Next he silenced his thoughts. And he told, “It works marvelously, I can do sports better, I can deal with people better, I even do my engineering job better: I let my body, my heart, my mind work on their own, and when I don't interfere with what they do, they all do their job better than before.” Amazing! Within a month, everything had changed for him.

Other people move no more than half an inch. It is very interesting to see, and sometimes you feel that Mother is watching us fumble around with a very sweet smile.

Collaboration: Where do you see this going for you in the near-term?

Matthijs: I have no idea. I can very well see it expanding pretty fast, but maybe not.

Neeltje: I think I said it before. You try to do it as sincerely as possible, try to be receptive and listen as much as possible.

Of course, we all distort the messages that come to us, but we try to stay close to their intention, and She does give the indications. In the end it is Their program, and we try as much as possible to be good instruments.

Matthijs: As we go forward, we also learn and grow and we are all the time confronted with our own mistakes and shortcomings.

Neeltje: That is the divine economy: you grow, and the people around you grow, and your work will grow. That has been my experience: She puts you in a place, and all the time you are confronted with yourself, and like that, you grow, and because of the work you do, you make others grow, and the environment grows. She knows how to spread it. And we are in between.

Matthijs: Sometimes you can see things quite clearly. In 2003 I wrote a letter to someone about the things I expected to happen in the next few years, and they all happened exactly like that. But at the moment I don't know. There are too many options, too many possibilities. I think it will expand quite fast, that is my feeling, but whether that will be here with us, or Mother will find better instruments elsewhere, I have no idea.

Collaboration: Are there people coming up in your workshops that might carry this forward?

Matthijs: Sure. I have a lot of hope for people who are in engineering and information technology, because in India, psychology has not attracted the brightest students. It is a kind of last choice. So I expect more from people who are bright, who got into engineering or IT, and then get fed up with that because it is too limited, and then start looking for something else. I think that is the group that is most promising, and slowly more people seem to be coming from there. And they do change. We had an IT engineer, who decided to leave the technical side of his field, and who got a dream job in the human resource department of another big IT company, in spite of the fact that he had no training or education in that direction. He was very clear that he wanted to get out of his tech-



nical position and into one in which he could help people to grow. This new company is seriously interested in helping their people to grow, and is willing to spend money on that.

Neeltje: The students that do these Indian psychology courses at the universities, if they are really turned on, they look for more.

Matthijs: A few of these are now getting into positions where they can do a lot. Some of the young people that have come through the program are now teaching on their own, so that all helps things to turn around. We'll see. It is a slow process.

Collaboration: One question that keeps coming to my mind is how do you see the relationship between what you are doing and the older guru-disciple relationship and method of spiritual teaching that has been the tradition in India? Do you see it as an alternative to that?

Matthijs: No, more as an extension of it. It integrates well with it. In the Ashram we have a guru, but our guru is not physically present. I used to think that this was rather exceptional and that it was like this only in our Ashram, but it appears to be quite common that people have a guru but do not meet him daily. Many people have a guru who is not alive any more, and yet, they still feel guided by him or her. Even many who do have a living guru see him physically only once a year or so, but still, they feel guided throughout the rest of the year. So this is a far more complicated and subtle relationship than it looks. It is not that you necessarily stay with your guru in the same house. You can go to your IT job while your guru is in another city, or has left his body 100 years ago.

Neeltje: But also, I would like to stress that I never feel myself in the role of a guru. Let that be very clear. I know my own weaknesses, I know where I am in sadhana. In fact, sometimes I try to exaggerate the other side so that people don't try to take that relation. I don't know if that was the point of your question.

Collaboration: No, it is more that the guru-disciple relation is an established institution in India, and I was wondering whether there was any problem with that.

Matthijs: No, till now, this has not been a serious problem. There are many people in our courses who have their own guru. If there is any conflict, we always tell people beforehand, before they take the course, "Discuss it with your guru and do it only if your guru is happy with it. Otherwise you shouldn't do it." So far we have never had a conflict with that. And, as Neeltje said, we have no pretense of being gurus. No way!

Neeltje: Also, we do encourage other approaches. When they do their reports, for instance, we say, "If there is any other literature you would like to bring in, please bring it in." The whole idea is that it is truly an integration. Although we draw mostly on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother for our texts and our examples, we make it clear that this is one approach, and that for a particular individual something else might work better. There is a great variety of people in this world, and one approach cannot be suitable for everybody.

Matthijs: Sometimes this issue actually does arise. For example, you may have someone who has done a lot of Buddhist meditation, and who believes that the ultimate Reality is impersonal, not personal. But in our language, we often illustrate things with examples from our own more personal relationship with the Divine. Then you have to become aware of the issue, notice that there is someone in the group who doesn't look at things in the way you happen to do it. Then you may have to say the same thing in another way, in another kind of language. And after a while, most people get it. They may have to translate what we say into their own language, or we may translate it specifically for them, but after a while it becomes clear that what we seek is beyond such differences, and there is no serious disharmony.

Collaboration: Another aspect of my question is how is your approach different than the traditional model?

Matthijs: I'm not sure if we bring in anything different, but Sri Aurobindo has brought in lots. The main thing is that in the traditional paths—and this is very well described in the introduction to *The Synthesis of Yoga*—the only issue is one's

personal liberation, and for that you don't need to know much about psychology, you only need to find one good way out, and you can do that by any method. So most traditional paths advocate one single, specialized method, and that is good enough, because that is all they need. Whereas what Sri Aurobindo has done is to open up the whole spectrum, and for that you need this knowledge, and that knowledge, and this other also. For one person bhakti may be best, but other possibilities may also be there in him. For someone else it may be easiest to find the Divine by going above the mind. We encourage people to try once in a while to look for the Divine in another way than they are used to, and experience the difference. Whatever way is in harmony with one's nature at a given moment, one should follow. If another way adds something, then use that as well. So you break open these artificial boundaries and limitations. For some people, that in itself is a great relief. Sometimes we get people who are very fixed in one of the traditions. Initially, they may be skeptical and a little scared, and then they slowly discover that it just widens things up. Sri Aurobindo's approach doesn't in any way invalidate what they had been doing, it just offers the possibility of widening, and for most people that is a good experience. I'm not sure it works for everybody like that, but for most people in our courses it seems to work. And that is very satisfying to see.

For academic use, I think that Sri Aurobindo has done an enormous amount of spade work by looking at the whole spectrum of underlying psychological patterns and focusing on how that knowledge can help towards a complete and integral transformation of life. Most spiritual schools seem to have developed a more limited range of psychological, spiritual and occult knowledge. There are very few, if any, that have such a broad and deep understanding of how human nature works because they do not aim at the complete divinization of nature. The integrality of knowledge that Sri Aurobindo developed is only needed if one aims at a total transformation of one's whole way of being.



Essays

Serenity, courage and wisdom: Reinhold Niebuhr, Sri Aurobindo and America's spiritual future

by Richard Hartz

If we study America's religious past for clues to its spiritual future, we have to acknowledge at the outset the prominence of the Judeo-Christian element in that past. On the other hand, freedom, pluralism and dialogue are at the heart of what America represents. The various religious cultures of the Native Americans have in common a message of harmony with nature which we ignore at our peril. Nor can we disregard the growing presence of religions from all parts of Asia. In the early nineteenth century, some of the Transcendentalists were among the first Americans to be inspired by Eastern spirituality, as so many have been since. The Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 was the beginning of organized interfaith dialogue and a landmark in the spread of Asian teachings to the West. However, the most dramatic surge in religious diversity has occurred as a result of the influx from the non-Western world since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965.

As a non-Christian who has spent equal time in the United States and India, I keep all this in mind when I read the works of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971). A Protestant theologian and political philosopher active in the mid-twentieth century, Niebuhr belonged formally to America's religious mainstream. But he was critical of many things in both liberal and conservative American Protestantism, and his insights into the social and political problems of his day were perhaps more influential outside the church than within it. During his lifetime, interreligious dialogue in



Richard Hartz contemplates Niebuhr's philosophical thought (Courtesy Richard Hartz)

America did not extend much beyond conversations among Protestants, Catholics and Jews. Now, however, Niebuhr must be reassessed in a more radically pluralistic and multicultural age confronted with issues he could not have anticipated.

By comparing his thought with that of Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), the foremost spiritual philosopher of modern India, I intend to suggest Niebuhr's continued relevance in a larger framework than that of the Protestant Christianity and American secularism to which he primarily addressed himself. At the same time, I hope it will become clear that the writings of Sri Aurobindo, which so far have attracted little attention except in India, have been neglected much too long.

American exceptionalism

The founding documents of the United States guaranteed religious freedom and made possible the eventual emergence of a pluralism such as could hardly have been conceived in the eighteenth century. We now take this for granted. Yet, considering the strength of religious feeling throughout much of the history of the colonies and the early republic, it could easily have been otherwise. It has been argued that it was mainly the timing of the Revolution that saved the United States from becoming an officially Christian nation.¹ Independence was achieved when

the new country had leaders who were under the influence of the European Enlightenment. Evangelical Christianity was then in a state of temporary exhaustion between the so-called First Great Awakening of the 1730s and '40s and the Second Great Awakening which swept through the land in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It may have been partly in reaction to such excesses of religious enthusiasm that some of the founding fathers were drawn to the abstract Deism reflected in the Declaration of Independence. Under these circumstances the nation came into being as a distinct political entity.

But adopting a secular constitution could not stop Americans from seeing themselves as a chosen people, a self-image with decidedly biblical overtones. Reinhold Niebuhr discerned "a deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America."² He warned of the danger this poses, now that the country finds itself wielding unprecedented power in the world community. The Puritans had arrived in New England convinced of their God-given mission to create a society free from the vices of Europe. Their doctrine of human depravity was at the opposite pole from the Jeffersonian optimism that prevailed at the time of the Revolution. Yet Niebuhr notes a peculiar affinity between the New England Calvinists and the Virginian Deists in their understanding of our collective character and destiny. For all their differences, both of these groups which shaped the national mentality and institutions believed that America had a divinely bestowed mission "to make a new beginning in a corrupt world."³

The resulting illusions of unique national virtue and innocence are now commonly known as "American exceptionalism." Though this expression does not occur in *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr's book is a critique of the exceptionalist mindset that remains as relevant today as when it was published in 1952. "The American dream is not particularly unique," Niebuhr admits. "Almost every nation has had a version of it." Nor is the

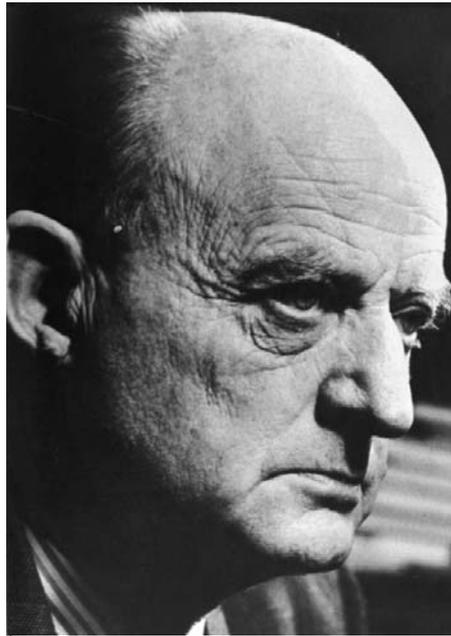


dream itself necessarily a bad thing, apart from the collective egoism that attaches itself to it. But recent circumstances have made the United States unusually susceptible to temptations of what Niebuhr calls “managing history.” Illusions about the ability to do so invariably involve, he observes, “miscalculations about both the power and the wisdom of the managers and of the weakness and the manageability of the historical ‘stuff’ which is to be managed.”⁴ The underlying problem is that “modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management. It is a drama in which fragmentary meanings can be discerned within a penumbra of mystery....”⁵

Prosperity and happiness

One of the illusions to which Americans are especially prone is the belief that our universally envied prosperity, whose causes include a good many fortuitous factors, is entirely the reward of our own merit. By this self-flattering assumption, Niebuhr noted, we “have complicated our spiritual problem for the days of adversity which we are bound to experience.”⁶ He saw that the chances of such adversity were increased by a bourgeois ideology which overestimates the self-regulating capacity of the market. The glorification of the principles of *laissez-faire*, Niebuhr pointed out, “makes for tardiness in dealing with the instability of a free economy.” He added presciently: “Some believe that the lessons taught in the great depression of 1929 have been so well learned that a recurrence of such a catastrophe is impossible; but it is not altogether certain that this is true.... From the viewpoint of Europe, whose economic health has become so dependent on the American giant that a tremor in our system creates serious shocks in the world economy, we remain an irritatingly incalculable element in world stability.”⁷

Due to the resources and opportunities offered by a huge continent, America has long been able to alleviate social ten-



Reinhold Niebuhr (Courtesy <http://rjosephhoffmann.wordpress.com>)

sions and reduce internal dissent by resorting to the safety valve of territorial, economic and technological expansion. Unfortunately, as Reinhold Niebuhr warned over half a century ago, “This expansion cannot go on forever....”⁸ Thus, America cannot avoid facing in an acute form the crisis of Western modernity, whose centuries-long expansionist thrust has been halted by the finiteness of the globe.

The problem with modernity lies not in the idea of progress itself, but in the preoccupation with the externals of progress to the neglect of its inner dimension. That misplaced emphasis has led to a dangerously unhealthy imbalance. At this point, the religious resources of the American tradition might have been expected to come to our rescue. Religion, if anything, should be able to serve as a corrective to the greed and materialism of an unsustainable way of life—the so-called “American way of life” which a recent U.S. president declared “is not negotiable.”⁹ The difficulty, however, is that religion was complicit almost from the beginning in the creeping materialism that has become virtually synonymous with America in the eyes of its critics.

Niebuhr analyzes how the austere Puritans gradually became infatuated with worldly comforts and luxuries. Once they had survived the initial ordeals of life in the wilderness, the settlers found that the natural abundance of this fertile continent was conducive to a more plentiful existence than they had ever imagined. In the course of time, gratitude for God’s blessings gave way to a more self-congratulatory attitude. This was partly due to the doctrine of “special providence,” the belief that particular acts of divine intervention reward virtue and punish vice. If so, clearly God was pleased with the Puritans and they had good reason to be pleased with themselves. This, in Niebuhr’s view, was one of “two elements in the Calvinist creed, which transmuted it from a faith which would take prosperity and adversity in its stride to a religion which became preoccupied with the prosperity of the new community.” The related Calvinist belief that “godliness is profitable to all things”¹⁰ contributed to the same attitude.

For the American Puritans, therefore, virtue was the source of prosperity. The Jeffersonians, on the other hand, expected prosperity to lead to the flowering of the social virtues. Starting from the anti-Calvinist conviction of the innate goodness of human nature, they reasoned that if everyone had ample means to satisfy their legitimate needs and desires, the motives for crime, exploitation and conflict would disappear. Regrettably, as Niebuhr remarks, this excellent theory overlooks “the perennial conflicts of power and pride which may arise on every level of ‘abundance’ since human desires grow with the means of their gratification.”¹¹ In any case, whether virtue was thought to be the basis of prosperity or prosperity the basis of virtue, their close association in the otherwise contradictory Puritan and Jeffersonian currents of American culture fostered moral confusion. The outcome of it all, Niebuhr maintained, was “a preoccupation with the material circumstances of life which expressed a more consistent bourgeois ethos than that of even the most advanced nations of Europe.”¹²

With his lifelong passion for democra-



cy and social justice, Reinhold Niebuhr was certainly not unsympathetic to the spirit of Thomas Jefferson's great proclamation in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Nevertheless, Niebuhr voiced concern about the place that the pursuit of happiness, as commonly understood, has come to occupy in American conceptions of the aim of life. "Happiness" has a broad range of meanings. Jefferson's own idea of personal happiness was far from hedonistic, influenced as it was by Epicurus' identification of happiness with a tranquility achieved through self-discipline. But for most members of an increasingly materialistic society, "happiness" depended on external conditions. The Industrial Revolution linked happiness to the growing ease and luxury produced by the continual advance of technology. As heirs to this legacy, modern Americans are exceptionally ill-equipped to deal with a decline in their accustomed level of opulence. Yet sooner or later, setbacks are inevitable in a situation where, as Niebuhr observed, "the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity."¹³

"The real question," he wrote, "is whether a religion or a culture is capable of interpreting life in a dimension sufficiently profound... to achieve a serenity... which is something less but also something more than 'happiness.'"¹⁴ This is a question that a nation shopping for happiness in a world of vanishing resources, environmental crises and international instability might do well to start asking itself.

The Serenity Prayer

Reinhold Niebuhr not only diagnosed America's addiction to a delusive happiness resting on crumbling foundations; he also provided a practical way to attain an inner serenity less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of history. He offered this remedy almost inadvertently, yet a remark-

able number of people have found it to be effective. It takes the form of a mantra known as the "Serenity Prayer." These are Niebuhr's most famous words:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.¹⁵

The immense popularity of the Serenity Prayer has brought it well-deserved attention, but sometimes in contexts that obscure its relation to the subtleties of Niebuhr's thought. The great theologian's celebrated prayer has a deceptive simplicity that conceals its depth, especially when his already concise sentence is further shortened to the version that was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous and is in general circulation:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.¹⁶

Niebuhr's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, tells us that her father's friends "were amused by the irony of having the austere Niebuhr associated with feel-good Hallmark sentimentalities." She remarks: "All too often the Serenity Prayer has been construed as a way to say something clever about life's difficulties, rather than as a true petition for grace and wisdom in an impossible world...." She acknowledges that Niebuhr "was happy to have his prayers used in whatever context people wanted or needed them, and he respected the intense gratitude that AA members expressed for the Serenity Prayer."¹⁷ At the same time, the fact that toward the end of the Second World War the prayer was printed on cards given to soldiers going into battle reflects an aspect of its original spirit that tends to be forgotten in its current association with the "twelve-step programs" of the self-help culture.

In any case this well-known sentence is quintessential Niebuhr, though it has often been cited without attribution or erroneously ascribed to a variety of other sources. In fact there is no serious rival candidate for its authorship, and whatever reasons have been given for doubting that

it is Niebuhr's are unconvincing. It is true, though, that there is some confusion about when it was written. Elisabeth Sifton traced it to 1943 in her fascinating memoir, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*. But recent research pushes its date of origin back to the early or mid-1930s, since variants of it—evidently due to oral transmission—began to appear in print by 1936. An essay published by Niebuhr in 1934, "The Assurance of Grace,"¹⁸ shows that he was preoccupied around that time with precisely the ideas that are packed so succinctly into the Serenity Prayer.

No doubt, writing this brief prayer was a minor incident in the eventful period of Niebuhr's life to which it seems to belong. He could not have foreseen then how it would take on a life of its own. So when he was questioned about it years later, it is not surprising that he was unable to pinpoint when he had composed it. His typically modest and candid answer was that it "may have been spooking around for years, even centuries, but I don't think so. I honestly do believe that I wrote it myself."¹⁹ No doubt, some of the ideas contained in the Serenity Prayer had indeed been "spooking around" for a long time—at least since the days of the Stoics. However, this only means that its originality lies not in its separate ingredients, but in their unique combination. The resulting formula expresses a distinctive attitude which is nothing if not Niebuhrian.

What Niebuhr stressed throughout his life was "the importance of accommodating the vision of perfection to an imperfect world, without losing the urge to perfect the world."²⁰ To lose the urge to perfect the world is defeatism. On the other hand, to imagine that the world will easily let itself be perfected is a sentimental illusion. Defeatist pessimism exaggerates the obstacles to change, while sentimental optimism underestimates them. Both are equally fatal to responsible action. In the language of the Serenity Prayer, we need the courage to change what can and should be changed. Elsewhere Niebuhr speaks of softening the incongruities of life; we must try to narrow the gap between



how things should be and how they actually are. But there will be things we cannot change, for “all such strategies cannot finally overcome the fragmentary character of human existence. The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it.” Niebuhr goes on to suggest memorably that only a larger context provided by hope and faith can save us from despair:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.²¹

Reinhold Niebuhr and Sri Aurobindo

Some aspects of Reinhold Niebuhr’s thought show surprising resemblances to that of an older contemporary of his in India. Sri Aurobindo formulated his philosophy against a very different cultural background, but like Niebuhr he applied the insights of an ancient spiritual tradition to the problems of the modern world. Niebuhr had apparently heard of Sri Aurobindo, but we have no clue to what, if anything, he knew about him. In August 1951, unaware that Sri Aurobindo had passed away the previous December, Niebuhr and some others sent a letter addressed to him from Freedom House, New York. There was nothing personal in this appeal from prominent Americans concerned with the preservation of freedom “in a world of expanding and aggressive authoritarianism.” It was an individually typed, addressed and signed copy of a request to “leading citizens of the free world,” inviting each recip-

ient to endorse and comment on an accompanying “Declaration of Freedom.” This document was intended “to clarify for ourselves and for all people who love freedom, the values for which we struggle.” The letter to Sri Aurobindo was signed by Leo Cherne, Norman Cousins, Archibald MacLeish and Reinhold Niebuhr.²²

Conceivably, Niebuhr might have first heard Sri Aurobindo’s name from his close friend, Sir Stafford Cripps. Cripps came to India in 1942 on behalf of the British government with a proposal which, if accepted, might have led to a smoother transition to Indian independence after the war than what eventually occurred. At a crucial juncture, when his mission still had a chance of success, Cripps was grateful to receive a far-sighted offer of support from Sri Aurobindo, who had been a leader of the independence movement early in the century before he withdrew from politics. A year or so after Cripps’ return from India, Niebuhr visited England and they spent a good amount of time together.²³ But if Cripps ever mentioned Sri Aurobindo to Niebuhr, it would have been only in passing and in a political connection. There is no reason to believe that Niebuhr knew anything of Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy. This is a pity, for an acquaintance with it might have induced him to take a more favorable view of Indian spirituality and widened his outlook on the non-Western world.

Niebuhr was not hostile to Indian mysticism in the spirit of religious exclusivism that even today is all too common among Christians. In a passage in his first major work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he quotes Ramakrishna as saying: “I have come to the stage of realisation in which I see that God is walking in every human form and manifesting himself alike in the sage and in the sinner.” Between references to Jesus, St. Francis and Paul, Niebuhr cites the words of this nineteenth-century Indian saint to illustrate “the capacity of the religious imagination to view the immediate and the imperfect from the perspective of the absolute and the transcendent.”²⁴

Often, though, he speaks less sympa-

thetically of the religions and societies of India and of Asia in general. He writes, for example:

Spiritually the Orient is informed by religions which are either mystic and pantheistic such as Buddhism and Hinduism; or humanistic and collectivist such as the Confucianism of China or the Shintoism of Japan. Pantheistic religions can find no significance for the individual in the integral unity of his spiritual and physical life. The purpose of religious redemption is the annulment of individual existence and its incorporation into a divine unity.

After contrasting this with Confucianism—which, despite its humanistic character, also allegedly fails to grant the individual a “significant place in the scheme of things”—Niebuhr concludes: “There is thus no spiritual basis in the Orient for what we know as the “dignity of the individual.”²⁵

Such sweeping depreciations might make us suspect a Eurocentric bias, except that it is not only Asian culture which Niebuhr faults for inadequately supporting individuality. For the same reason he criticizes even the classical Western worldview, in contrast to the biblical tradition. Even today, he asserts, the concept of individuality “belongs to that class of certainties of modern man about himself which his own history has gradually dissipated.”²⁶

But as regards the Orient and particularly the social effect of the mystical religions of India, the notion that these religions provide no spiritual basis for the dignity of the individual is not entirely consistent even with Niebuhr’s own statements. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, he points out that all mystic religions “have the characteristic of accentuating individuality insofar as individuality is inherent in the capacity for self-consciousness emphasized in mysticism and is something more than mere bodily particularity.” On the other hand, he goes on to assert that “all mystic philosophies ultimately lose the very individuality which



they first emphasize, because they sink finite particularity in a distinctionless divine ground of existence.”²⁷ But the admitted accentuation of individuality by these philosophies, in all but the most advanced and uncommon stages of spiritual realization, surely cannot be ignored in considering their implications for the value of individual existence. India’s “spiritual individualism,” as Swami Vivekananda called it,²⁸ has always counterbalanced the social tendency, common to all ancient cultures, to subordinate the individual to the demands of the collectivity.

In any case, it is not true that all mysticism culminates in the self-annihilation of the individual in the absolute. The view of Sri Aurobindo, who is widely regarded as the greatest mystic of modern India, is that “the right relation of the soul with the Supreme” is “neither to assert egoistically its separate being nor to blot itself out in the Indefinable.”²⁹ This broadly agrees with the Judeo-

Christian position championed by Niebuhr. Nor is it an idiosyncratic view within the Indian tradition, since it is supported by no less a scripture than the Bhagavad Gita.

But even if this were not so, what matters today is not what a tradition may have said in the past about individuality or anything else, but how the heirs of that tradition are reshaping it under present conditions. Sri Aurobindo was one of India’s leading thinkers in the twentieth century, as Niebuhr seems to have been vaguely aware. It is significant, therefore, that Sri Aurobindo considered the “deeper truth which individualism has discovered” to be of the utmost importance. The individual, he wrote, “demands freedom, space, initiative for his soul, for his nature, for that puissant and tremendous thing which society so much distrusts and has laboured in the past either to suppress altogether or to relegate to the purely spiritual field, an

individual thought, will and conscience.” He added:

That is an idea, a truth which, intellectually recognised and given its full exterior and superficial significance by Europe, agrees at its root with the profoundest and highest spiritual conceptions of Asia and has a large part to play in the moulding of the future.³⁰

Reinhold Niebuhr’s passing comments on Eastern religions and what he calls “the sleeping cultures of the Orient”³¹ are based on superficial stereotypes, not on first-hand familiarity or intensive study. In contrast to his masterly analysis of the phases of Western civilization, he accepts misleading Orientalist

transcendent, individual and universal aspects. In Niebuhr’s prayer, the transcendent (“God”) is addressed in the second person; the individual perspective is represented by ourselves, speaking in the first person (“us”) as separate conscious beings; what remains is the universal, referred to in the third person by the all-inclusive designation “things”. These three dimensions of existence also correspond roughly to three levels of consciousness. God is suprarational; we are at least partly rational; outside things, as well as the most problematic part of human nature in oneself and in others, are largely infrarational. Niebuhr and Sri Aurobindo both distinguish the suprarational, the rational and the infrarational using the same terms and similar ones, such as “ultrarational” in

Niebuhr’s case and “supramental” in Sri Aurobindo’s. Their points of agreement are due to a great extent, I believe, to their shared recognition of the interaction of

The Serenity Prayer is concerned with the relations among three entities—God, us and things: “God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed...” These sum up all that we can imagine or experience as reality in its transcendent, individual and universal aspects.

generalizations and largely overlooks the creative responses of contemporary Asia to modernity. But we need not be detained by his misconceptions about things of which he had insufficient knowledge. Instead, let us take the message distilled in the Serenity Prayer and use it as a starting-point to explore what Niebuhr unexpectedly has in common with Sri Aurobindo, notwithstanding the inevitable differences between a Protestant theologian and this pre-eminent modern exponent of the spirituality of India.

God, us and things

The Serenity Prayer is concerned with the relations among three entities—God, us and things: “*God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed...*” These sum up all that we can imagine or experience as reality in its

these three domains in the infinitely complex phenomenon we call life.

The Serenity Prayer supposes some tension between “us” and two types of “things”—those we can change and those we cannot. “God” is invoked to help us resolve this tension. But God is not part of our normal human experience and the existence of any such being can rationally be doubted. Accepting this reservation about the need for God, we could modify the opening of the prayer to express a more self-reliant attitude: “*May we accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed...*” Without God and grace it is no longer a prayer, but otherwise the original idea would seem to be intact.

Minus the grace of God, what remains of this formula is reminiscent of Stoicism. The distinction between what is under our control and what is not is central to the ancient Stoic discipline. Stoicism teaches



us to cultivate tranquility of mind by systematically training ourselves not to worry about things that “are not up to us,” as Epictetus puts it at the beginning of his *Handbook*.³² This largely frees us from being troubled by external circumstances and reacting to the behavior of people or the turns of events with anger, grief or other negative emotions. A good deal of the benefit that so many derive from the Serenity Prayer may be due to the dose of Stoic philosophy they receive from it.

Reinhold Niebuhr appreciated the nobility of Stoicism and its refusal “to lobby in the courts of the Almighty for special favors,” as William James criticized Christianity for doing. Niebuhr considered the Stoic outlook to be true “as far as it goes”;³³ but he thought it did not go far enough. The Stoics developed highly effective methods of strengthening the rational element in human nature against our irrational tendencies. However, humanity seems to have a deeply ingrained, persistent and ultimately irrepressible intuition of something that reason cannot fathom, but which is not merely irrational. Summarizing the relationship of the human being to God and the world as seen in the Jewish and Christian traditions, Niebuhr states:

It is not assumed that God’s purposes can be fully measured by any measuring rod of human ideals. In one of the greatest books of religious poetry, the book of Job, man questions the justice of God in terms of human standards, but is finally overwhelmed by the majesty and mystery of existence.... Something of that idea, i.e., that the world is intensely meaningful, even though its meaning transcends human comprehension, runs as one strain through all profound religion.... It expresses a trust in life even when the immediate facts of life seem to outrage our conception of what life ought to be: “Though he slay me yet will I trust him” (Job 13:15).³⁴

Confirming that this is indeed a strain that runs through profound religion everywhere, Sri Aurobindo writes along similar lines in his *Essays on the Gita*, even alluding to the same biblical verse:

[I]f we accept at all, as the Gita ac-

cepts, the existence of God, that is to say of the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, yet always transcendent Being who manifests the world and Himself in the world,... then the human being has to start from a great, a difficult act of faith. Finding himself in a world which is apparently a chaos of battling powers, a clash of vast and obscure forces, a life which subsists only by constant change and death, menaced from every side by pain, suffering, evil and destruction, he has to see the omnipresent Deity in it all and conscious that of this enigma there must be a solution and beyond this Ignorance in which he dwells a Knowledge that reconciles, he has to take his stand upon this faith, “Though Thou slay me, yet will I trust in Thee.”³⁵

Serenity, courage and wisdom

The supplication for the grace of God in the Serenity Prayer is not, then, an empty formality. Serenity was intimately associated with grace in Niebuhr’s experience. Those “who live with any degree of serenity,” he wrote, “live by some assurance of grace.” He added: “In every life there must at least be times and seasons when the good is felt as a present possession and not as a far-off goal.”³⁶ The experience of grace that intervenes at these times can be interpreted as “the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. The unachieved is in some sense felt to be achieved or realized.”³⁷ A sign of the mysterious workings of the power that shapes our lives is that adverse circumstances are often most favorable for tasting “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.”³⁸ This is not a mere consolation prize for those who are defeated by life. It is “the good” itself, the very aim of our existence, momentarily “felt as a present possession.”

But the serenity that temporarily reconciles us to the world as it is could easily undermine our commitment to transforming the world into what it should be. Therefore Niebuhr prayed simultaneously for

serenity and courage. The kind of courage he had in mind, like his serenity, was rooted in a deeply religious consciousness. He explained that “there must always be a religious element in the hope of a just society. Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible.” In the same paradoxical vein, he continued: “The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realised by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted.”³⁹

In the Serenity Prayer, Niebuhr expressed his sense of the need to balance ethical striving and the courage to work for change, on the one hand, with a relaxation of moral tension and resigned acquiescence in the world’s unavoidable imperfections, on the other. This acquiescence is inwardly liberating, though it may seem an admission of defeat in the struggle to realize our vision. The key to resolving the potential contradictions between serenity and courage lies in the third and rarest achievement aspired for in the prayer: wisdom. To the extent that wisdom is within human reach, Niebuhr ascribes this, too, to grace:

Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power. Our most reliable understanding is the fruit of ‘grace’ in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge....⁴⁰

The Serenity Prayer and Integral Yoga

The dialectical interplay of opposites that pervades Niebuhr’s thinking is equally characteristic of Sri Aurobindo’s. Sri Aurobindo writes in *The Life Divine*, for example, that “it is the right way of self-af-



firmation and self-negation taken together in place of the wrong, because ignorant, way of the ego... that we have to discover."⁴¹ This discovery could be said to underlie his method of spiritual practice as expounded in *The Synthesis of Yoga*. As we will see in a moment, there is a structural correspondence between the three sections of the Serenity Prayer and the outline of an important part of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. The reason for this correspondence is, I believe, that Niebuhr was trying in his own manner to find, like Sri Aurobindo, "the right way of self-affirmation and self-negation taken together." His prayer reflects this. Serenity requires self-abnegation; courage manifests a mood of self-affirmation; only wisdom can discover the right way to harmonize these apparent contraries.

Sri Aurobindo noted that it "is common ground to all thinking humanity" to suppose that the human being "is capable of self-development and of some approach at least to an ideal standard of perfection which his mind is able to conceive, fix before it and pursue."⁴² Admittedly, it is only for a minority that this is an absorbing preoccupation and there are differences of opinion about how far human nature is perfectible even at best. But the sharpest disagreements are about what kind of perfection should be pursued. Depending on the relative importance given to the inner and the outer life, various ideals have been adopted in Eastern and Western civilizations from ancient to modern times. At one extreme is the quietism of the ascetic religious ideal which takes the world to be irredeemable and seeks salvation in the serenity of the spirit. At the other extreme is the activism of the ascetic mundane ideal of a rational society to be achieved through gradual progress or a revolutionary upheaval.

There have been attempts to arrive at a balance between the religious and mundane ideals, between quietism and activism, between serene acceptance and courageous struggle, between the pull of self-negation and the push of self-affirmation. But Sri Aurobindo felt the need for a new formulation of the ideal of an integral

perfection—at once spiritual and this-worldly, individual and collective—in which "all the aim of human existence in all its parts" would be "fulfilled, even while it is transfigured."⁴³ He developed his "Yoga of self-perfection" as a discipline for realizing this ideal with regard to the transformation of the individual.

The first major step in this discipline involves the cultivation of equanimity—or "equality" as Sri Aurobindo terms it, translating literally the Sanskrit word used in the Bhagavad Gita. The practitioner must become capable of "an even acceptance of all God's workings within and around him."⁴⁴ This has several stages which need not be described here. But a point worth noting is that—like Niebuhr's serenity, which is a gift of grace—Sri Aurobindo's equality, though it may be achieved to some extent by personal effort, is complete only when our being is filled with "the eternal tranquillity of the Infinite."⁴⁵

The second part of the Yoga of self-perfection, almost the antithesis of the first, is concerned with the development of all the sides of our personality and the heightening of all our capacities for thought, feeling and action. This is to be achieved through "a searching and subtle self-knowledge" and "a vigilant and insistent will of self-modification and self-transformation."⁴⁶ There could hardly be a clearer indication of the intent of reconciling self-negation and self-affirmation than the juxtaposition of these first two divisions of the Yoga with their contrasting emphases on passivity and activity.

In the second division, the parallel with the Serenity Prayer is less exact than in the first. Courage is only one of the many dynamic qualities that are to be cultivated, but it is representative of them all. If the discipline of self-perfection is to be an effective preparation for world-changing action, the cultivation of this psychological attribute is clearly most essential. Sri Aurobindo gave enough importance to courage to justify distinguishing two forms of it. "Passive courage" or fearlessness must be complemented by an "active courage" consisting of "the daring to undertake any enterprise however difficult or

apparently impossible and carry it through in spite of all dangers, suffering, failures, obstacles and oppositions."⁴⁷ One is reminded of Niebuhr's ultrarationally inspired "courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible."

The wisdom that "unifies, marries contrasts in a single harmony" is sought in the third part of the discipline of self-perfection. The key to the entire Yoga is the transition from a life precariously guided by reason, the faculty that "divides, fixes details and contrasts them,"⁴⁸ to a life illumined by a deeper wisdom that unites and harmonizes. Yet the ability to distinguish things is not lost, but enhanced by the flowering of the faculties of a suprarational consciousness. However, there is little point in speaking of these exceptional faculties as long as our reasoning mind itself is subject to infrarational influences that distort its workings and vitiate its conclusions. The principal factor usually responsible for the mixture of reason and unreason in our thinking is the intrusion of the ego.

Pessimism, optimism and the future of America

The problem of the ego preoccupied both of our thinkers. Expressing themselves in the context of their respective traditions, Sri Aurobindo and Reinhold Niebuhr agree on the nature of the human ego as a false center of existence. Sri Aurobindo puts it philosophically:

This is the sign of the original ignorance which is the root of the ego, that it can only think with itself as centre as if it were the All... This mental self-sufficiency of man creates a system of false accountantship which prevents us from drawing the right and full value from life... To recognise that we, or rather the results and appearances we call ourselves, are only a partial movement of this infinite Movement and that it is that infinite which we have to know, to be consciously and to fulfil faithfully, is the commencement of true living.⁴⁹



In an essay on Augustine, Niebuhr states from a Christian perspective much the same view of the nature of the ego:

Man, according to the biblical view, may use his freedom to make himself falsely the center of existence; but this does not change the fact that love rather than self-love is the law of his existence, in the sense that man can only be healthy, and his communities at peace, if man is drawn out of himself and saved from the self-defeating consequences of self-love.⁵⁰

Niebuhr's somewhat misleading reputation as a pessimist is largely due to his keen insight into the role of the ego in human life even at its most virtuous. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he comments:

In analysing the limits of reason in morality it is important to begin by recognising that the force of egoistic impulse is much more powerful than any but the most astute psychological analysts and the most rigorous devotees of introspection realise. If it is defeated on a lower or more obvious level, it will express itself in more subtle forms. If it is defeated by social impulse it insinuates itself into the social impulse, so that a man's devotion to his community always means the expression of a transferred egoism as well as of altruism.⁵¹

Sri Aurobindo summarizes precisely the same results of rigorous introspection when he speaks of the "balancing of egoistic and altruistic motive in our conduct":

Often enough altruism is there chiefly in profession or at best a quite superficial will which does not belong to the centre of our action; it becomes then either a deliberate or else a half-conscious camouflage by which egoism masks itself and gets at its object without being suspected. But even a sincere altruism hides within itself the ego, and to be able to discover the amount of it hidden up in our most be-

nevolent or even self-sacrificing actions is the acid test of sincere self-introspection, nor can anyone really quite know himself who has not made ruthlessly this often painful analysis.⁵²

When we move from the individual to the collective scale, things only become worse. Niebuhr described collective egoism as "compounded of the egoistic impulses of individuals, which achieve a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when they are united in a common impulse than when they express themselves separately."⁵³ For Sri Aurobindo, likewise, "a collective egoism, result of the united egoisms of all," was "often an uglier and more barbarous fetish than the egoism of the individual."⁵⁴

Yet these sobering perceptions did not lead Sri Aurobindo to despair about humanity. Nor did Niebuhr's similar unmasking of an all-pervasive egoism cause him to renounce his qualified optimism about our destiny. "An adequate religion," he pointed out, "is always an ultimate optimism which has entertained all the facts which lead to pessimism." Elaborating on the grounds for this optimism, he explained, that it "is based upon a faith in a transcendent center of meaning which is never fully expressed in any partial value and is never exhausted in any concrete historical reality. But though it is not exhausted in any such reality it is incarnated there."⁵⁵

More specifically, Niebuhr's ultimate optimism was translated into a hope that the divisions, inequalities and mutual misunderstandings of humankind can be progressively overcome:

There are no limits to be set in history for the achievement of more universal brotherhood, for the development of more perfect and more inclusive mutual relations. All the characteristic hopes and aspirations of Renaissance and Enlightenment, of both secular and Christian liberalism are right at least in this, that they understand that side of Christian doctrine which re-

gards the *agape* of the Kingdom of God as a resource for infinite development towards a more perfect brotherhood....⁵⁶

Sri Aurobindo foresaw a similar possibility of human unity with an equally spiritual basis:

A deeper brotherhood, a yet unfound law of love is the only sure foundation possible for a perfect social evolution, no other can replace it... for the Spirit, the inmost self, the universal Godhead in every being is that whose very nature of diverse oneness it is to realise the perfection of its individual life and nature in the existence of all....⁵⁷

America's destiny is inseparable from the destiny of humanity, but has its special potentialities of fulfillment and its own dangers of going astray. Niebuhr saw as assets the "youthful belief in historic possibilities in our American culture" and the "confidence that problems can be solved." But he cautioned that, in the challenging times ahead of us, "the only possibility of success for our nation and our culture... lies in our capacity to make sacrifices and to sustain endeavors without complete certainty of success." He believed that "America's moral and spiritual success in relating itself creatively to a world community requires... a reorientation of the whole structure of our idealism," coming to terms with "the limits of all human striving" and "the fragmentariness of all human wisdom." Among other things, there must be "a generous appreciation of the valid elements in the practices and institutions of other nations though they deviate from our own," as well as "a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream, and a recognition of the values and virtues which enter into history in unpredictable ways."⁵⁸

As for Sri Aurobindo, he regarded the "sufficiently widespread eagerness and openness of mind to new things" in America as a "considerable advantage." He added a qualification that seems as valid today as when it was written early in the



last century:

We have to see whether this will be sufficient to open the mind also to deep and true things. The spiritual future of America is not yet decided; it is in the balance. There is a great possibility before her, but it depends on Americans themselves whether she will make good and realise it.⁵⁹

Notes

¹ Garry Wills writes in *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 7: "It is probable that the great break with history signified by Dis-establishment could have taken place at no other time in American history than the founding era."

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 69.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹ George H. W. Bush at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, pp. 49–50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 7.

¹⁶ This is the version that is almost always reproduced, with minor variations, when the prayer is printed in a calligraphic form or illustrated (as in the images at <http://photobucket.com/images/serenity%20prayer/>).

¹⁷ Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*, pp. 294, 342, 346.

¹⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp.

61–71.

¹⁹ http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2008_07/serenity.html

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 70.

²¹ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, pp. 62–63.

²² Document in Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives.

²³ Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*, p. 276.

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 39.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, pp. 124–25.

²⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 21. Sri Aurobindo similarly observes the modern paradox that the "discovery by individual free-thought of universal laws of which the individual is almost a by-product and by which he must necessarily be governed... seems to lead logically to the suppression of that very individual freedom which made the discovery and the attempt at all possible" (*The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination* [Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997], p. 21).

²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, p. 15.

²⁸ www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_8/sayings_and_utterances.htm

²⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1999), p. 22.

³⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, pp. 24–25.

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, p. 123.

³² William Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 86.

³³ Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), pp. 47–48.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁸ Philippians 4.7.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, p. 321.

⁴¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2005), p. 649.

⁴² Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 616

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 622.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 722.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 692.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 739.

⁴⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), p. 1469.

⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays Divine and Human* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), p. 424.

⁴⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 80.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 130.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, pp. 27–28.

⁵² Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, p. 628.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. xii.

⁵⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, p. 255.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 85. Quoted in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. xi.

⁵⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, p. 220.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, pp. 135, 145, 133, 79.

⁵⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006), p. 388.



On peace – A brief introduction

by Angelo Salerno

A talk given at a recent Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham monthly retreat

This is a brief introduction on the subject of ‘peace’ in the context of Yoga, especially for any of us who may not be so familiar with the Integral Yoga or with Sri Aurobindo’s teaching. I would like to make a distinction in this context between ‘spiritual peace,’ and the ordinary notion of ‘peace,’ common to most. The main difference I would like to draw between them is that the ordinary notion of peace is dependent upon external conditions while the spiritual peace is intrinsic to the higher or spiritual consciousness to which we may rise or open to in the process of yoga.

When everything is going our way, and our basic needs and desires and enjoyments are met and satisfied on a stable, routine basis, and there is no external conflict or disharmony strong enough to disturb it, then we may say to ourselves that we are contented, fulfilled, at peace. But when the external conditions upon which our peace was based give way, then our peace is gone. For many in the world this peace is a hope or a dream, not easily, if ever, achieved. For those who find some measure of peace in life, it is easily lost. For life being such as it is, a field of constant change, the peace and security we do find is constantly under siege. We lose our job, our health, our friends or loved ones due to ill health or tragic circumstances, our money or possessions, things to which we have grown accustomed and attached. We lose these things, and consequently, we are disturbed, and lose our peace. And as these things are, to some degree at least, inevitable in life, this peace is by nature fragile, insecure, and unreliable.

On the other hand, the peace of the spirit is self-existent and depends upon



Angelo at the Lodi Ashram. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham)

nothing. As I said earlier, it is naturally intrinsic to the higher or spiritual consciousness and is a fundamental attribute of the Divine Presence. It is in every way superior to the ordinary human peace just described, and gives a settled sense of liberation and deliverance, rest and release. The divine peace is not easily described or communicated to someone who has not experienced it, as the ordinary human peace, though it is an approximation and imitation, ultimately pales in comparison. It is above and superior to the dualities of life such as pain and pleasure, joy and grief, etc., and to one who has this peace, though on the outside there may be loss, misfortune, or apparent tragedy, within or above, this peace is not lost or affected and remains. It is secure against the variety of time.

By the process of yoga, we can experience this peace ourselves by rising into the higher spiritual planes of consciousness where it is found, or opening to the Divine Presence and receiving it as a gift from God. Peace is the basis of our own true spiritual nature and through yoga it can be recovered. When the Mother was asked once how could one get or experience this peace, she answered that the first necessity was to feel the need for it, to want it, to ask, to aspire. As for the Divine’s part, we can be sure of his answer, in time, and in proportion to our receptivity. To quote the Mother, “If you ask from within for peace, it will come.”

Further than this, in the context of the Integral Yoga is the establishing and descent of that higher spiritual peace into the stuff of our mind, our heart, our life, and into the very cells of our body. And as we grow deeper and higher in the spirit, this peace also deepens, widens, and extends into the infinite and eternal. It is this peace, established in the nature, which will form the basis and foundation for the further transformation of the nature and the descent of the other powers of the higher consciousness including the divine force, strength, light, knowledge, love, and bliss leading ultimately to the complete divinization of the being and of life on earth.



Joy of integral peace. “Calm and tranquil, an unfailing smile.” White with light pink. (Courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

In peace there is besides the sense of stillness a harmony that gives a feeling of liberation and full satisfaction...

It is quite usual to feel an established peace in the inner being even if there is disturbance on the surface. In fact, that is the usual condition of the yogi before he has attained the absolute samata in all the being...

When the peace is fully established everywhere in the being, these things [reactions of the lower vital] will not be able to shake it. They may come first as ripples on the surface, then only as suggestions which one looks at or does not care to look at but in either case they don’t get inside, affect or disturb at all. (Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, pp. 644-649)



Source material

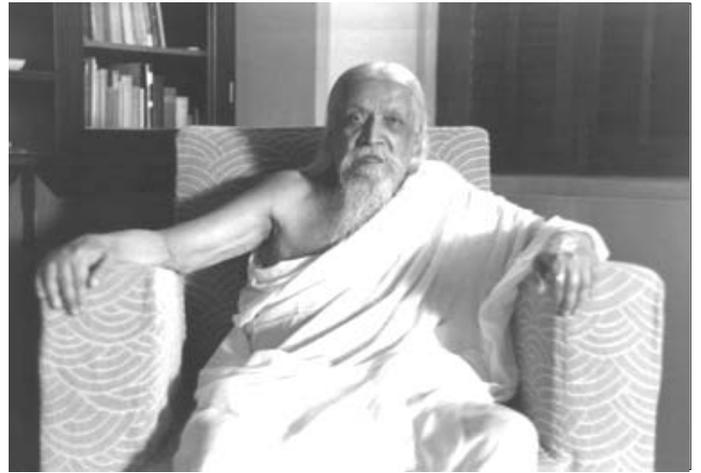
The Higher Consciousness

by Sri Aurobindo

There are two states on consciousness in either of which one can live. One is a higher consciousness which stands above the play of life and governs it; this is variously called the Self, the Spirit or the Divine. The other is the normal consciousness in which men live; it is something quite superficial, an instrument of the Spirit for the play of life. Those who live and act in the normal consciousness are governed entirely by the common movements of the mind and are naturally subject to grief and joy and anxiety and desire or to everything else that makes up the ordinary stuff of life. Mental quiet and happiness they can get, but it can never be permanent or secure. But the spiritual consciousness is all light, peace, power, bliss. If one can live entirely in it, there is no question; these things become naturally and securely his. But even if he can live partly in it or keep himself constantly open to it, he receives enough of this spiritual light and peace and strength and happiness to carry him securely through all the shocks of life. What one gains by opening to this spiritual consciousness, depends on what one seeks from it; if it is peace, one gets peace; if it is light or knowledge, one lives in a great light and receives a knowledge deeper and truer than any the normal mind of man can acquire; if it is strength or power, he gets a spiritual strength for the inner life or Yogic power to govern the outer work and action; if it is happiness, he enters into a beatitude far greater than any joy or happiness that the ordinary human life can give. (*Supplement*, pp. 415-416)

* * *

A word about your sadhana. It seems to me that the key to your future development is contained in the experience which you say you often attained for a few days at K. "A state which was full of knowledge, calm serenity, strength and wide consciousness—all questions automatically solved—a continuous stream of power passed into the body through the forehead centre—extremely powerful, having undisturbed samatâ, calm conviction, keen sight and knowledge." This was the consciousness of the true Purusha in you aware of his own supramental being and it is this which must become your normal consciousness and the basis of the supramental development. In order that it may so become, the mind has to be made calm and strong, the emotional and vital being purified and the physical consciousness so opened that the body can hold and retain the consciousness and power. I notice that at the time you had it the body also expressed it. This is a sign that the capacity is already there in your physical being. The calm and strength will descend from above, what you have to do is to



Sri Aurobindo. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

open yourself and receive it and at the same time reject all the movements of the lower nature which prevent it from remaining and which are ruled by desires and habits inconsistent with the true being, the true power and the true knowledge. Of course the superior power will itself reveal to you and remove all the obstacles in your nature. But the condition is that not only your mental but your vital and physical being must open and surrender to it and refuse to surrender themselves to other powers and forces. As you yourself experienced at that time, this greater consciousness will of itself bring the development of the higher will and knowledge. Psychic experiences of a proper kind are of course a great help but in your case it may be that any rich development of the psychic will only come after or in proportion as this consciousness with the calm knowledge, will and samatâ takes possession of the different parts of the being. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1208-1209)

* * *

The realisation of the Purusha consciousness calm, free, observing the play of forces but not attached or involved in them is a means of liberation. The calm, the detachment, a peaceful strength and joy (âtmarati) must be brought down into the vital and physical as well as into the mind. If this is established, one is no longer a prey to the turmoil of the vital forces. But this calm, peace, silent strength and joy is only the first descent of the Power of the Mother into the adhar. Beyond that is a Knowledge, an executive Power, a dynamic Ananda which is not that of the ordinary Prakriti even at its best and most sattwic, but Divine in its nature.

First, however, the calm, the peace, the liberation is needed. To try to bring down the dynamic side too soon is not advisable, for then it would be a descent into a troubled and impure nature unable to assimilate it and serious perturbations might be the consequence. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 287)



In the practice of yoga, what you aim at can only come by the opening of the being to the Mother's force and the persistent rejection of all egoism and demand and desire, all motives except the aspiration for the Divine Truth. If this is rightly done, the Divine Power and Light will begin to work and bring in the peace and equanimity, the inner strength, the purified devotion and the increasing consciousness and self-knowledge which are the necessary foundation for the siddhi of the yoga. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 604)

* * *

The feeling you had in the afternoon of the cessation of thought and the sensation of something within you going up above the head is part of the movement of the sadhana. There is a higher consciousness above you, not in the body, so above the head which we call the higher spiritual or divine consciousness, or the Mother's consciousness. When the being opens then all in you, the mind (head), emotional being (heart), vital, even something in the physical consciousness begin to ascend in order to join themselves to this greater higher consciousness. One has when one sits with eyes closed in meditation the sensation of going up which you describe. It is called the ascension of the lower consciousness. Afterwards things begin to descend from above, peace, joy, light, strength, knowledge etc. and a great change begins in the nature. This is what we call the descent of the higher (the Mother's) consciousness.

The unease you felt was because of the unaccustomed nature of the movement. It is of no importance and quickly goes away. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1130-1131)

* * *

Yes, when things begin to descend, they must come down on a solid basis. That is why it is necessary to have peace as the first descent and that it should become as strong and solid as possible. But in any case to contain is the first necessity—then more and more can come and settle itself. Once these two things are settled—peace and strength, one can bear any amount of everything else, Ananda, Knowledge or, whatever it may be. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 1191)

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Your description of the solid cool block of peace pressing on the body and making it immobile makes it certain that it is what we call in this yoga the descent of the higher consciousness. A deep, intense or massive substance of peace and stillness is very commonly the first of its powers that descends and many experience it in that way. At first it comes and stays only during meditation or, without the sense of physical inertness or immobility, a little while longer and afterwards is lost; but if the sadhana follows its normal course, it comes more and more, lasting longer and in the end as

an enduring deep peace and inner stillness and release becomes a normal character of the consciousness, the foundation indeed of a new consciousness, calm and liberated. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 1197)

* * *

The Power above the head is of course the Mother's—it is the power of the Higher Consciousness which is preparing its way of descent. This Higher Consciousness carrying in it a sense of wide and boundless existence, light, power, peace, Ananda etc. is always there above the head and when something of the spiritual Force comes down to work upon the nature, it is from there that it comes. But nothing like the full descent of the peace, bliss etc. can come so long as the being is not ready. Very usually the first preparation is to work on the mind and vital and physical nature in such a way that the soul, the psychic being can have a chance of manifesting itself and influencing the rest of the nature; for that purpose all the main darkensses in the mind and vital have to be combated and thrown out and the physical also prepared in a material way so that the descent may be possible. This is what has been done so long in you. It has to be made stronger and more complete,—but sufficient has been done for it to be possible to prepare the descent of the higher consciousness. There are two things that take place; an ascent of one's consciousness to the higher levels in and above the head, and a descent of the higher consciousness which is above into one's mind, vital and body. How it is done or by what stages or how long it will take varies with each person. But this new consciousness is very different from the ordinary one and many things happen in its coming which would not happen to the mind and might seem strange to it—e.g. the dissolution of the ego and the opening into a wider self or spirit not limited by the body, to which the body is only a small instrument and nothing more. One must therefore dismiss all fear of new things and accept with calm and confidence each field of new experience, relying on the Divine Mother Force for guidance and support and protection throughout the change. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1207-1208)

* * *

When the Peace is established, this higher or Divine Force from above can descend and work in us. It descends usually first into the head and liberates the inner mind centres, then into the heart centre and liberates fully the psychic and emotional being, then into the navel and other vital centres and liberates the inner vital, then into the Muladhara and below and liberates the inner physical being. It works at the same time for perfection as well as liberation; it takes up the whole nature part by part and deals with it, rejecting what has to be rejected, sublimating what has to be sublimated, creating what has to be created. It integrates, harmonises, establishes a new rhythm in the nature. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1166-1167)



If the rift in the lid of mind is made, what happens is an opening of vision to something above us or a rising up towards it or a descent of its powers into our being. What we see by the opening of vision is an Infinity above us, an eternal Presence or an infinite Existence, an infinity of consciousness, an infinity of bliss,—a boundless Self, a boundless Light, a boundless Power, a boundless Ecstasy. It may be that for a long time all that is obtained is the occasional or frequent or constant vision of it and a longing and aspiration, but without anything further, because, although something in the mind, heart or other part of the being has opened to this experience, the lower nature as a whole is too heavy and obscure as yet for more. But there may be, instead of this first wide awareness from below or subsequently to it, an ascension of the mind to heights above: the nature of these heights we may not know or clearly discern, but some consequence of the ascent is felt; there is often too an awareness of infinite ascension and return but no record or translation of that higher state. This is because it has been superconscious to mind and therefore mind, when it rises into it, is unable at first to retain there its power of conscious discernment and defining experience. But when this power begins to awake and act, when mind becomes by degrees conscious in what was to it superconscious, then there begins a knowledge and experience of superior planes of existence. The experience is in accord with that which is brought to us by the first opening of vision: the mind rises into a higher plane of pure Self, silent, tranquil, illimitable; or it rises into regions of Light or of Felicity, or into planes where it feels an infinite Power or a divine Presence or experiences the contact of a divine Love or Beauty or the atmosphere of a wider and greater and luminous Knowledge. In the return the spiritual impression abides; but the mental record is often blurred and remains as a vague or a fragmentary memory; the lower consciousness from which the ascent took place falls back to what it was, with only the addition of an unkept or a remembered but no longer dynamic experience. In time the ascent comes to be made at will and the consciousness brings back and retains some effect or some gain of its temporary sojourn in these higher countries of the Spirit. These ascents take place for many in trance, but are perfectly possible in a concentration of the waking consciousness or, where that consciousness has become sufficiently psychic, at any unconcentrated moment by an upward attraction or affinity. But these two types of contact with the superconscious, though they can be powerfully illuminating, ecstatic or liberating, are by themselves insufficiently effective: for the full spiritual transformation more is needed, a permanent ascension from the lower into the higher consciousness and an effectual permanent descent of the higher into the lower nature.

This is the third motion, the descent which is essential for bringing the permanent ascension, an increasing inflow from above, an experience of reception and retention of the descending Spirit or its powers and elements of consciousness. This experience of descent can take place as a result of the other two movements or automatically before either has happened, through a sudden rift in the lid or a percolation, a downpour or an influx. A

light descends and touches or envelops or penetrates the lower being, the mind, the life or the body; or a presence or a power or a stream of knowledge pours in waves or currents, or there is a flood of bliss or a sudden ecstasy; the contact with the superconscious has been established. For such experiences repeat themselves till they become normal, familiar and well-understood, revelatory of their contents and their significance which may have at first been involved and wrapped into secrecy by the figure of the covering experience. For a knowledge from above begins to descend, frequently, constantly, then uninterruptedly, and to manifest in the mind's quietude or silence; intuitions and inspirations, revelations born of a greater sight, a higher truth and wisdom, enter into the being, a luminous intuitive discrimination works which dispels all darkness of understanding or dazzling confusions, puts all in order; a new consciousness begins to form, the mind of a high wide self-existent thinking knowledge or an illumined or an intuitive or an overmental consciousness with new forces of thought or sight and a greater power of direct spiritual realisation which is more than thought or sight, a greater becoming in the spiritual substance of our present being; the heart and the sense become subtle, intense, large to embrace all existence, to see God, to feel and hear and touch the Eternal, to make a deeper and closer unity of self and the world in a transcendent realisation. Other decisive experiences, other changes of consciousness determine themselves which are corollaries and consequences of this fundamental change. No limit can be fixed to this revolution; for it is in its nature an invasion by the Infinite.

This, effected little by little or in a succession of great and swift definitive experiences, is the process of the spiritual transformation. It achieves itself and culminates in an upward ascent often repeated by which in the end the consciousness fixes itself on a higher plane and from there sees and governs the mind, life and body; it achieves itself also in an increasing descent of the powers of the higher consciousness and knowledge which become more and more the whole normal consciousness and knowledge. A light and power, a knowledge and force are felt which first take possession of the mind and remould it, afterwards of the life-part and remould that, finally of the little physical consciousness and leave it no longer little but wide and plastic and even infinite. For this new consciousness has itself the nature of infinity: it brings to us the abiding spiritual sense and awareness of the Infinite and Eternal with a great largeness of the nature and a breaking down of its limitations; immortality becomes no longer a belief or an experience but a normal self-awareness; the close presence of the Divine Being, his rule of the world and of our self and natural members, his force working in us and everywhere, the peace of the infinite, the joy of the Infinite are now concrete and constant in the being; in all sights and forms one sees the Eternal, the Reality, in all sounds one hears it, in all touches feels it; there is nothing else but its forms and personalities and manifestations; the joy or adoration of the heart, the embrace of all existence, the unity of the spirit are abiding realities. (*The Life Divine*, pp. 911-913.)



On the Spirit

by the Mother

“As Mind is established here on a basis of Ignorance seeking for Knowledge and growing into Knowledge, so Supermind must be established here on a basis of Knowledge growing into its own greater Light. But this cannot be so long as the spiritual-mental being has not risen fully to Supermind and brought down its powers into terrestrial existence. For the gulf between Mind and Supermind has to be bridged, the closed passages opened and roads of ascent and descent created where there is now a void and a silence. This can be done only by the triple transformation to which we have already made a passing reference: there must first be the psychic change, the conversion of our whole present nature into a soul instrumentation; on that or along with that there must be the spiritual change, the descent of a higher Light, Knowledge, Power, Force, Bliss, Purity into the whole being, even into the lowest recesses of the life and body, even into the darkness of our subconsciousness; last, there must supervene the supramental transmutation,—there must take place as the crowning movement the ascent into the Supermind and the transforming descent of the supramental Consciousness into our entire being and nature.” (The Life Divine, SABCL, Vol. 19, pp. 890 – 91)

What is the role of the spirit?

One might say that it is both the conscious intermediary between the Supreme and the manifestation, and the meeting-place of the manifestation with the Supreme.

Spirit is capable of understanding and communicating with the highest Godhead and at the same time it is the purest, one might say the least distorted intermediary of the highest Godhead in the outermost manifestation. It is spirit which, with the help of the soul, turns the consciousness towards the Highest, the Divine, and it is in the spirit that the consciousness can begin to understand the Divine.

It might be said that what is called “spirit” is the atmosphere brought into the material world by the Grace so that it may awaken to the consciousness of its origin and aspire to return to it. It is indeed a kind of atmosphere which liberates, opens the doors, sets the consciousness free. This is what enables the realisation of the truth and gives aspiration its full power of accomplishment.

From a higher standpoint, this could be put in another way: it is this action, this luminous and liberating influence that is known as “spirit”. All that opens to us the road to the supreme realities, pulls us out from the mud of the Ignorance in which we are stuck, opens the doors to us, shows us the path, leads us to where we have to go—this is what man has called “spirit”. It is the atmo-



The Mother. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

sphere created by the Divine Grace in the universe to save it from the darkness into which it has fallen.

The soul is a kind of individual concentration of this Grace, its individual representative in the human being. The soul is something particular to humanity, it exists only in man. It is like a particular expression of the spirit in the human being. The beings of the other worlds do not have a soul, but they can live in the spirit. One might say that the soul is a delegation of the spirit in mankind, a special help to lead it faster. It is the soul that makes individual progress possible. The spirit, in its original form, has a more general, more collective action.

For the moment the spirit plays the part of a helper and guide, but it is not the all-powerful master of the material manifestation; when the Supermind is organised into a new world, the spirit will become the master and govern Nature in a clear and visible way.

What is called “new birth” is the birth into the spiritual life, the spiritual consciousness; it is to carry in oneself something of the spirit which, individually, through the soul, can begin to rule the life and be the master of existence. But in the supramental world, the spirit will be the master of this entire world and all its manifestations, all its expressions, consciously, spontaneously, naturally.

In the individual existence, that is what makes all the difference; so long as one just speaks of the spirit and it is something one has read about, whose existence one vaguely knows about, but not a very concrete reality for the consciousness, this means that one is not born into the spirit. And when one is born into the spirit, it becomes something much more concrete, much more living, much more real, much more tangible than the whole material world. And this is what makes the essential difference between beings. When *that* becomes spontaneously real—the true, concrete existence, the atmosphere one can freely breathe—then one knows one has crossed over to the other side. But so long as it is something rather vague and hazy—you have heard about it, you know that it exists, but... it has no concrete reality—well, this means that the new birth has not yet taken place. As long as you



tell yourself, “Yes, this I can see, this I can touch, the pain I suffer from, the hunger that torments me, the sleep that makes me feel heavy, this is real, this is concrete...” (*Mother laughs*), that means that you have not yet crossed over to the other side, you are not born into the spirit.

(*Silence*)

In fact, the vast majority of men are like prisoners with all the doors and windows closed, so they suffocate, which is quite natural. But they have with them the key that opens the doors and windows, and they do not use it.... Certainly there is a time when they don’t know they have the key, but long after they have come to know it, long after they have been told about it, they hesitate to use it and doubt whether it has the power to open the doors and windows or even that it is a good thing to open them! And even when they feel that “after all, it might be good,” there remains some fear: “What will happen when these doors and windows are opened?...” and they are afraid. They are afraid of being lost in that light and freedom. They want to remain what they call “themselves.” They like their falsehood and their bondage. Something in them likes it and goes on clinging to it. They still have the impression that without their limits they would no longer exist.

That is why the journey is so long, that is why it is difficult. For if one truly consented to cease to exist, everything would become so easy, so swift, so luminous, so joyful—but perhaps not in the way men understand joy and ease. In truth, there are very few people who do not enjoy fighting. There are very few who could accept the absence of night, few can conceive of light except as the opposite of darkness: “Without shadows there would be no picture. Without struggle, there would be no victory. Without suffering there would be no joy.” That is what they think, and so long as one thinks in this way, one is not yet born into the spirit. (*Collected Works of the Mother (CWM)*, Vol. 9, pp. 428)

* * *

1 – There are two allied powers in man: knowledge and Wisdom. Knowledge is so much of the truth, seen in a distorted medium, as the mind arrives at by groping; Wisdom what the eye of divine vision sees in the spirit. (Sri Aurobindo, Thoughts and Aphorisms)

Someone has asked me, “Why are the powers allied?”

I suppose that we are so used to seeing all the elements in man quarrelling among themselves that the idea of their being “allied” causes astonishment. But these quarrels are only apparent. All the powers which come from the higher regions are in fact necessarily allied—they are united, they have agreed to fight the Ignorance. And Sri Aurobindo says clearly enough—for those who understand—that one of these powers belongs to the mind and that the other belongs to the Spirit. This is precisely the profound truth that Sri Aurobindo wants to reveal in his aphorism: if

the mind tries to obtain the second power, it is unable to do so, since it is a power that belongs to the Spirit and arises in the human being together with the spiritual consciousness.

Knowledge is something that the mind can obtain through much effort, although this is not the true knowledge, but only a mental aspect of knowledge; whereas Wisdom does not at all belong to the mind, which is altogether incapable of obtaining it, because, in fact, it doesn’t even know what it is. I repeat, Wisdom is essentially a power of the Spirit and it can arise only with the spiritual consciousness.

It would have been interesting to ask what Sri Aurobindo means when he speaks of “the truth seen in a distorted medium.” First of all, what is this “distorted medium,” and what does the truth become in a “distorted medium”?

As always, what Sri Aurobindo says can have several levels of meaning—one is more specific, the other more general. In the most specific sense, the distorted medium is the mental medium which works in ignorance and which is therefore unable to express truth in its purity. But since life as a whole is lived in ignorance, the distorted medium is also the earth-atmosphere which, in its entirety, distorts the truth seeking to express itself through it.

And here lies the most subtle point of this aphorism. What can the mind arrive at by groping? We know that it is always groping, seeking to know, erring, returning upon its previous attempts and trying again... Its progress is very, very halting. But what can it grasp of the truth? Is it a fragment, a piece, something which is still the truth, but only partially, incompletely, or is it something which is no longer the truth? That is the interesting point.

We are used to being told—perhaps we have also repeated many times—that one can only have partial, incomplete, fragmentary knowledge which therefore cannot be true knowledge. This point of view is rather trite: one need only to have studied a little in life to be aware of it. However, what Sri Aurobindo means by “the truth seen in a distorted medium” is far more interesting than that.

Truth itself takes on another aspect; in this medium it is no longer the truth, but a distortion of the truth. Consequently, what can be seized of it is not a fragment which would be true, but an aspect, the false appearance of a truth which has itself melted away...

The truth is a whole and everything is necessary. The distorted medium through which you see, the mental atmosphere, is unsuited for the manifestation or the expression or even the perception of all the elements—and one can say that the better part is lost. So it can no longer be called the truth, but rather something which in essence is true, and yet no longer so at all in the mental atmosphere—it is an ignorance.

So, to summarise, I shall say that knowledge, as it can be grasped by the human mind, is necessarily knowledge in ignorance, one could almost say an ignorant knowledge.

Wisdom is the vision of truth in its essence and of its application in the manifestation. (*CWM*, Vol. 10, pp. 1-3)



Journal Review

NAMAH— New Approaches to Medicine and Health

Reviewed by Larry Seidlitz

This quarterly journal (typically 50 pages) is published by Pradeep Narang on behalf of the Sri Aurobindo Society. The managing editor is Vijay Poddar; other editors include Drs. Alok Pandey, Soumitra Basu, and Vandana Gupta; Dr. A.S. Dalal is also on the editorial board. The journal's website is at: <http://www.namahjournal.com>. We elected to review this journal as part of a mutual effort to make our respective journals better known to each other's readers.

Many *Collaboration* readers may already be familiar with the writings of frequent contributors to *NAMAH*, such as James Anderson (who is on *NAMAH*'s journal team and an occasional contributor to *Collaboration*), as well as those of Alok Pandey (author of *Death, Dying and Beyond*, and frequent speaker on Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's teachings) and Soumitra Basu (author of *Integral Health*). Along with these, other frequent contributors include Dr. K.H. Krishnamurthy, an expert on medicinal plants used in Ayurveda, and Dr. Vandana, an expert on flower essences. Each issue typically also includes a piece on health or healing by Sri Aurobindo or the Mother.

There is a fairly wide range of content. Articles may focus on physical or mental health; on the insights and applications of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's views on health, illness and transformation; on alternative paradigms of health and illness; on various types of diseases; on various approaches to healing and well-being, such as homeopathy, ayurveda, naturopathy, hathayoga, and flower remedies. There typically are book reviews and editorial letters or perspectives.

To help flesh out these general topics

and give a better idea of the nature of the journal, it will be useful to describe in greater detail some of the articles appearing in recent editions. In each of the last two issues, there are articles by James Anderson, each of them interesting and personal excursions into the depths of his being. While Anderson's articles, like those that have appeared previously in *Collaboration*, share commonalities of theme and style, each focuses on different aspects and discoveries in his inner journey. For example, in "The riddle of life" (July 2010 issue), he discusses his exploration and transformation of his vital nature, whereas in "The secret Will" (October 2010 issue), he examines his inner discernment of the inner and higher will from the divided and transient "willings" of the lower nature, and the alignment of the nature with the true will. Clearly these two issues are interrelated, but yet each article focuses on different aspects of the problem, and each gives unique insights into the work of the sadhana in Sri Aurobindo's yoga. One would be hard-pressed to find another author who is able to articulate with such insight and clarity the yogic process of inner exploration, discovery, and mastery.

We also find in these two issues several insightful short articles by Soumitra Basu. In "Metaphysics and health—the evolution of the concept of Integral Health" (July 2010 issue), Basu discusses how several "seed-ideas" from the opening page of Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*, provide key principles and insights into Integral Health. These seed-ideas are "God, Light, Freedom, Immortality." He shows us how each of these four concepts underlie or constitute central tenets of the integral approach to health, with important practical ramifications for both understanding health and disease and treating disorders.

In "The healing space" (October 2010 issue), Basu considers the importance of the design of the physical space which is used for healing. He notes that it should not be constructed "as a consumer package in a corporate set-up," but rather "is constructed primarily by elements in con-

sciousness. The bricks and mortar are only external props." He discusses the importance of ethical and aesthetic aspects of the space, as well as its consonance with the geography and topography of its location. He then describes some features of the design of the healing space that can facilitate different types of healing, depending on the nature of the disorder. He discusses various design elements that would be conducive to the healing of disharmonies at the physical, vital, and mental levels. Unfortunately, the article is more of a teaser than an in-depth treatment of the issue, but it suggests some interesting ideas for future study and consideration of a typically overlooked or superficially regarded, but important aspect of healing practice.

In another article, "The question of immortality" (October 2010 issue), Basu discusses various perspectives on the nature of immortality and its relations to integral health. The first of these has to do with the spiritual and mystical tradition of the realization that an intensely developed consciousness along one or several dimensions can outlive the individual's lifespan. It may inspire others, not only through the individual's example, but "as a concrete presence in the consciousness, an internal energizer, a motivator to replicate, innovate and act out ideals and values in consonance with the Time-Spirit." Another aspect is the capacity of certain exceptional individuals of "voluntarily 'willing' one's death by soul-choice through yogic endeavor." He suggests that this capacity, if made more commonly accessible through yogic practices, could obviate the ethical dilemmas related to passive and active euthanasia. A third aspect is that the distinction between the immortality of the soul and the mortality of the bodily frame emphasizes the need for the development of the consciousness of the psychic being, which can bring the psychological experience of immortality, as well as a greater harmony and integration of the outer being. The fourth aspect has to do with the quest for the immortality of the human species. He notes that the human species is endangered from several



directions. He further notes that Sri Aurobindo saw the necessity to evolve a new physical form in consonance with the supramental consciousness as the way to transcend the need for the dissolution of the physical form. For this to occur, the first necessity is organize the being around the psychic center, a key aim of the integral health paradigm.

In the last of a series of four conversations between Nancy Whitlow and Dr. Vandana, “Flower essences from SAIHR (IV)” (July 2010 issue), Vandana discusses her therapeutic experiences using the essence of the flower of the Eucalyptus, whose significance according to the Mother is ‘Abolition of the Ego.’ She first describes the physical characteristics of the flower and the circumstances in which she obtained it to prepare the essence. She notes here that to make the remedies, you must make it near the plant when you pluck the flowers. “You cannot pluck a branch, carry it away a distance and then make the remedy. The vibration must be very pure, nothing in between, only the flower and the water.” She also mentions that the remedy does not help everyone, it tends to help only those who have a particular need for it, and who are at the right stage in their development for the dissolution of a particular rigid pattern.

Vandana then describes her use of the remedy with several clients. In one of these clients, “She said it opened knots inside her which had been there ever since she could remember. And it allowed the light (which had always been there) to enter these knots. And then it was as if all the parts of her being that were dense became filled with tiny, tiny dots of light, moving in an ocean. It made her free. This remedy helps you to relax. It helps you to dissolve patterns.”

A different girl would often fly into rages which were followed by depression. After giving one dose to this girl, Vandana could see the change occurring before her eyes in her office: “It was as if suddenly something, some framework had dropped. She was free.” At the time of the visit, the girl had a severe headache, and within a minute the headache was gone. And after

that, her anger outbursts dramatically decreased in frequency and intensity. Vandana mentions that some people who have taken the remedy have had dreams of seeing their past and their patterns of the way they were acting and living, bringing a clarity and detachment that enabled them to shift the pattern.

Another person had a severe psychiatric illness involving anxiety and depression, which apparently ran in the family. This person would get severe headaches, as have others who benefitted from this remedy, and she also had a urinary problem. Both of these physical problems, which were related to her psychological disorder, went away after taking the remedy. She also began to sleep better, she became more calm, and her interactions with others became more harmonious. Although she herself did not see these improvements, her husband did. This person had been taking the remedy periodically for a period of 5-6 years, and it would always help. Then it seemed to stop helping, and it was substituted with a different remedy, ‘Divine Will acting in the subconscious,’ which had been working successfully since that time. This article is not interesting not only for the light it sheds on this particular flower remedy and its profound results, but also for its wider implications on healing, on the relations between mind and body, on the relations between nature and mankind, and on the spiritual dimensions of our existence.

In an article pertaining to Ayurveda, “Jeeraka or cumin and caraway,” the late Dr. K.H. Krishnamurthy discusses the botanical properties, medicinal uses and “household remedial” uses of these two commonly used seeds. Whereas the botanical and biochemical properties it discusses may be of interest primarily to practitioners of Ayurveda or nutritionists, the medicinal and remedial uses of the seeds is of interest and practical benefit for the general reader. For example, we learn that cumin is used in Ayurveda for the treatment of indigestion, dysentery, enlarged spleen, flatulence and vomiting, and is used more widely in various decoctions and preparations as household remedies

for hoarseness of voice, nausea during pregnancy, increasing milk secretion after childbirth, colic in children, and bodily pains and runny nose due to colds, among other uses. Caraway seeds are used in Ayurveda for heart disease, swelling, vomiting, poor digestion, and chronic fever. It is used in various mixtures as a household remedy for vomiting, prickly heat, jaundice, increasing the appetite, mouth ulcers and bleeding gums, diarrhea, and colds. The article is more detailed and informative than these brief highlights, but this is perhaps sufficient to show the practical value of this type of article—there are hundreds of such medicinal plants in Ayurveda—which occurs fairly commonly in the journal.

I have related here just a few of the main articles in these two issues, but they also contain other interesting articles. Both issues also contain selections from the Mother’s conversations, one on “Illness and its causes,” and the other on “The two ends of existence,” which discusses spiritual perfection and human perfection and the importance of combining them for an integral perfection. The July issue includes an article based on extended excerpts of conversations of Sri Aurobindo on homeopathy, which have been culled from Nirodbaran’s *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* and *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, and Purani’s *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*. Both issues also contain reviews of interesting books, and both contain short letters on relevant issues.

Readers who are interested in alternative approaches to health will find that this journal will expand your knowledge of various modalities, as well as deepen your understanding of the fundamental principles and processes that underlie these approaches. There is a strong emphasis on approaches that are based on or influenced by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, but there are also more general articles that examine ancient approaches such as hathayoga and Ayurveda. There is an interesting mix of articles, letters and book reviews that will interest and benefit all those who aim for integral development of their being—spiritual, mental, vital and physical.



The poetry room

The Witness and the Wheel¹

Who art thou in the heart comrade of man who sitst
August, watching his works, watching his joys and griefs,
Unmoved, careless of pain, careless of death and fate?
Witness, what hast thou seen watching this great blind world
Moving helpless in Time, whirled on the Wheel in Space,
That yet thou with thy vast Will biddest toil our hearts,
Mystic,—for without thee nothing can last in Time?
We too, when from the urge ceaseless of Nature turn
Our souls, far from the breast casting her tool, desire,
Grow like thee. In the front Nature still drives in vain
The blind trail of our acts, passions and thoughts and hopes;
Unmoved, calm, we look on, careless of death and fate,
Of grief careless and joy,—signs of a surface script
Without value or sense, steps of an aimless world.
Something watches behind, Spirit or Self or Soul,
Viewing Space and its toil, waiting the end of Time.
Witness, who then art thou, one with thee who am I,
Nameless, watching the Wheel whirl across Time and Space?

—Sri Aurobindo

On Sri Aurobindo's passing—5 December 1950²

Why hast thou forsaken me,
O mighty splendour of the Supreme,
descended on earth to uplift the race?
Why hast thou forsaken me,
when I sought only Thy Light
to guide me on Thy path of Delight?
I longed to sit at Thy lotus-feet
to learn my lessons of life,
and Thy way its ordeals to face.
Why hast Thou left me then,
alone and helpless to strive
and surmount its tempests,
its deep and turbulent waters,
O Lord of my sublime existence?
Following Thy luminous trail,
I yearned to soar to the supernal heights,
and roam in the infinite Vasts of Thy glory
with Thee as my omniscient guide unerring.
Why then, O my magnetic beacon-light,
hast Thou forsaken me?

Where shall I find now
Thy deep understanding and
divine compassion?

—the incontestable certitude
of Thy victory of Truth decreed?
Thy transporting vision of the Future
and Thy transmuting touch reassuring?
Where shall I seek Thy inspiration
to uplift me on its wings high-soaring?
How shall I see the splendour and glory
of Thy creative Force, All-transforming?
Or find the plenitude of Thy Bliss Supreme?

On the day of Thy transcending
the mortal remains of Thy living,
I asked Thee again and again
with tears incessantly streaming
from the depths of my being:
O Lord of self-effulgent Light,
O Lord of Bliss everlasting,
Why hast Thou forsaken me,
who sought none but Thee
to lead me on Thy path of Bliss?

*

Deep came Thy reply,
ringing sure and clear,
echoing in my vacant heart:
"I've not left you, be sure,
O my daughter of Delight.
I shall ever be by your side
and lead you through
every ebb and perilous tide;
Leave all your worries aside,
I alone shall be your guide.
Fear not. Be free and candid.
Do my will and act as I bid
in the luminous silence
of your surrendered self.
I shall answer your every call,
The moment is yours, mine the goal!

All doubts ceased, questions erased
in thy all-powerful Presence sweet.

*

Then on the seventh day after Thy passing,
I saw Thy resplendent face
ever reassuring in The Mother sweet—
Her eyes of Light penetrating my being.
Following me wherever I be
with Her look, Her smile,
Her Presence, all-embracing!

*

Years rolled on and half a century gone,
Rich with experiences of Thy decisive Presence.
With absolute conviction now can I say:
Thou art living, indeed present,



My Master and Guide,
with our mighty Mother by Thy side,
Secretly leading the whole world
by Thy unerring golden Light
towards the advent of the New Race.
Salutations to Thee, O Lord ineffable,
and to the Mother ever-gracious!

—Kailas Jhaveri

From The beggar princess³

Oh, who stole softly into
The temple of my heart
And woke me from my slumber
With all His tender art?

A riot of wind then wafted
The rumour of some far shore.
I heard a deep-toned flutelet
That opened in me a door...

An auspice Gleam then entered
And kindled my twin thrilled eyes...
And my life acclaimed the Stranger,
Augur of a new sunrise

But the Herald was a visitant
Disturbing to my peace,
Even as the moon to the ocean,
Yet a weaver of harmonies.

As I mused, the alien-intimate
In a mystic smile broke out...
When, Lo, a curtain lifted
And I spied an angel rout!

A sunken world revived then
With the flow of time reversed
And I saw we ran to the Rasa
Where nightly for Him we rehearsed

The parts for us predestined
By our soul's one Lord again,
Who was born to us as Beauty
In this our sphere of pain.

In Him we found our Guru,
The drop revealed the Deep,
When merged Mira's restless heart in
His soft heart of song and sleep.

—Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi

A light on earth⁴

I looked upon the outer sheath I wore,
A countenance well-known, both friend and foe
Yet stranger to a wisdom held before,
Beyond the many births so long ago.

I did not ask of God my soul to fill
With moving poetry nor tore my breast
In anguish when the Muse's voice was still,
Beyond my self I knew that I was blessed.

A moment came when a high voice was heard
That counselled me to find the secret cave
Where the sacred Om, first and final Word,
Uplifted me as on a giant wave.

And in that hour of divine largesse
Awaking from a momentary trance
I saw the child-god roam and play at ease;
His face I saw in every human glance

And in the presence of a transformed earth,
Returned to beauty from the grasp of man
Nature looked on all with joyous mirth
Like a deer pursued who all the hounds outran.

I was at peace and all the world was still
Yet vibrant with a golden inner core,
Guided by a great unerring Will
A light so vast one must kneel to adore.

This universe in wondrous vision seen
At the cosmic edge where night and day are one,
A place recalled where once my soul had been
A light on earth more brilliant than the sun.

—Narad

Full moon is here

I hewed in Her cosmic forests,
Life after life, from dawn to dusk.
My act done, I stood at Her door;
Yet, instead of paying, she danced away
To Her empyrean. I begged for a glimpse of Her,
Ever in vain.

I sowed my love in the fields of self,
And ploughed and toiled from dawn to dusk.
My fields were green and full of sap,
I cut and winnowed the harvest.
Yet, life after life, the kernel escaped,
I gathered only the husk.



And in my eyes, humbled and empty,
I faced my inexorable Mistress:
She turned Her cruel face from me.
Even then an infinitesimal something
Nurtured my being; and after ages
The spark grew into a golden-tongued flame.

Then I planted a garden for Her,
Pulled out weeds and showered
Every flower-face with my love.
I picked out each withered leaf
And swept the paths free of thorns and stones,
Lest they lacerate Her lily-soft feet.
At last spring laughs from the boughs
And nectar-laden is the heart of buds.
Drunken is the crooning of the bees
And the wind wanders in a swoon.
My task done to the best of my ability
I lay aside my pick and shovel.
Eager and expectant I listen in silence
For Her quiet footfall and sudden laughter.
Tonight the flowers are most bewitching
And beauty is perfect in my garden.
O my elusive Eternal Bride!
The full moon is here—
Isn't the season to harvest near?

—Shyam Kumari

Sacrifice of the heart

A capsule of love is sitting in my heart
It grows like the thick hairs on your mountainous chest
I sit in a meditative state, chanting your name till Sūrya arises
Calmness and warmth, the two things he taught me

Saranyū runs away from him every night, frightened and
secretive
Sunlight rushes into the world as the Aœinaiu storm through
the sky in their chariots
I close my eyes to prevent any pain from occurring
But open to see nothing while your breath trickles down my
neck

Your scent of trees with pine needles containing clear sap
The birds singing a song of romantic mating
No! Don't feed me your sap, my lord!
Rub it onto my lips as if they were your sweat

We slither into the corridor under a grassy hill
All the way into another world of playful fairies
Little moss-covered wooden homes surround a clear clairvoy-
ant lake

Lamps adorn the water, unmoving but showing me the whole
earth

I do not know what you want me to do tonight
But I caught myself obeying your every command, a hornet in
your catacomb
Ensnare my seducing eyes to make me see just your body
which crushes me into glass pieces
Your voice screams like a wolf when mating

When you are done I am gone: an existence leaving behind
encapsulated love
Your soul is not in your body so devour it!
I am the reason for you to continue living in a demon-filled
world
Sūrya gave me love to give to you!

Your tears become little drops of pearls for which the fairies
hurriedly gather
The door for this world is sealed shut as you dwell in a cage of
timeless ecstasy.

—Sunil P. Narayan

The chariot of life

I lived in my surface being
Filling the moments with cheer
Unaware and incognizant
About my life's jolting steer.
Each thought, an alien signature
Every vibration, a foreign contact
Source of this immense universe
Slowly invades the native inhabitant
Past the grounds of friable reason
Or through the frail thirsty emotion
Living for others I forgot myself
For an experience of the lost self.
Within kept burning the secret fire
As a hidden formula of an early revolution
To oust the tenants from surface nature
And mold the being in a true Person.
"Oppose, none can in all the worlds,
When He utters the final Word."
This the voice within spoke to me
And lifted my wounded self to heal.
Now I know from the depths of resistance
That "I" only shadows the real existence.
Altered will be the life's cosmic traverse,
Since He dwells in all the beings' strife,
And infallibly guides our chariot of life.

—Rachana Kaur



The soul's cry⁵

I can stop not, O master,
I would reach the goal;
I fly faster and faster—
A fire-winged soul.
I stir with my flaming flute
The eternal vast and mute—
Its rhythms through my luminous brush
On an endless canvas rush;
I play and paint all the while
In its great-winged burning style.

In my flawless lines flows
Heaven's stream of delight,
And the bloom-gold glows
In my flower-flight.
A spirit—daring, far-leaping
From ranges to ranges sweeping
A vermilion passion, my life
Overtopping mountain and cliff,
Tears the veil of Time
With its victor sunrise rhyme.

Inspirations come
From a God-white source—
And my heart-beats drum
To their wide-open force:
Each second and every hour
A stark uplifting power
Releases my soul like a dove
On the ways of freedom and love
To the touch of thy crimson kiss,
To thy rose-rich intensities.

The response of your smile
Illumines my art;
Your starhood's proud will
Is to mate with my heart;
I am a clear point and clean
Of thy bounding bold javelin,—
I hurry through cloud and snow,
Piercing the demon foe,—
Driven by thy hand in the fight
Vindicating the claim of the Light.

It is now my decision
To play in your play
Only with your vision
Of crystal-crownèd day.
Now my body's a bowl that brims,
With thy nectar-drenching dreams;
And my thoughts are forming, changing;

A myriad rainbows are ranging;
My heart now bears the boon
Of thy peaceful silver moon.

My muses are many of mould
But their aim is for One—
My soul is sleepless morning gold,
A sun-fire swan—
In your depths of unfathomed blue
Fronts the virgin coral hue
And pearls my nude mermaid-speech
That glowing grows inner-rich,
The core of a quivering clear
Ruby-rapture atmosphere.

Into thunder-light's splendour,
Into wild rocky ocean,
Into storm-swift surrender
I cast my motion,
On the shimmering slender green top
I am dancing with the dewdrop
My life plays with all—and with all
It blends its fluted footfall;
All my channels I fill
With an intimate One-ward thrill.

O, Lord of beauty,
Tune, tune thy lyre,
Teach me my duty
To thy spirit-fire;
Come to me in all thy grace,
Let us stand here face to face,—
Till a music of heavenly mirth
Shall deliver my grief-pursued earth
From dreams and bear my soul
To its paradise-radiant goal.

—Nishikanto

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Apropos

The Divine Grace and Power can do everything, but with the full assent of the sadhak. To learn to give that full assent is the whole meaning of the sadhana. —Sri Aurobindo

Indeed the starting point is to observe oneself, not to live in a perpetual nonchalance, a perpetual apathy; one must be attentive. —The Mother

It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them. —Alfred Adler

Love does not cause suffering: what causes it is the sense of ownership, which is love's opposite. —Antoine de Saint-Exupery

The truth is often a terrible weapon of aggression. It is possible to lie, and even to murder, with the truth. —Alfred Adler

Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher. —Japanese Proverb

Know how to listen and you will profit even from those who talk badly. —Plutarch

Be silent, or say something better than silence. —Pythagoras

A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help. —Albert Schweitzer

It is better to laugh about your problems than to cry about them. —Jewish Proverb

Only in love are unity and duality not in conflict. —Rabindranath Tagore

But you can catch yourself entertaining habitually certain ideas and setting others aside; and that, I think, is where our personal destinies are largely decided. —Alfred North Whitehead

Faith consists in being vitally concerned with that ultimate reality to which I give the symbolical name of God. Whoever reflects earnestly on the meaning of life is on the verge of an act of faith. —Paul Tillich

As for the future, your task is not to foresee it, but to enable it. —Antoine de Saint-Exupery

We live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities. —Oscar Wilde

To live a pure unselfish life, one must count nothing as one's own in the midst of abundance. —Buddha

Even when no one is seeing, God is watching your actions always. Do everything with this awareness. —Sri Sathya Sai Baba

Nothing in the affairs of men is worthy of great anxiety. —Plato

If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities. — Maya Angelou

When the character of a man is not clear to you, look at his friends. —Japanese Proverb

The first duty of love is to listen. —Paul Tillich

Happy is the man who has broken the chains which hurt the mind, and has given up worrying once and for all. —Ovid

He who asks questions, cannot avoid the answers. —African Proverb

Meditation is the discovery that the point of life is always arrived at in the immediate moment. —Alan Watts

If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change. —Buddha

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; What is essential is invisible to the eye. —Antoine De Saint-Exupery

Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught. —Oscar Wilde

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle. —Plato

Religion is the last refuge of human savagery. —Alfred North Whitehead

Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come. —Rabindranath Tagore

The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future, or not to anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly. —Buddha

The public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing. —Oscar Wilde

We come nearest to the great when we are great in humility. —Rabindranath Tagore

Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but looking outward in the same direction. —Antoine de Saint-Exupery

When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you. —African Proverb

If everyone demanded peace instead of another television set, then there'd be peace. —John Lennon

What you don't see with your eyes, don't witness with your mouth. —Jewish Proverb

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. —Albert Schweitzer

Laughter is a form of internal jogging. It moves your internal organs around. It enhances respiration. It is an igniter of great expectations. —Norman Cousins