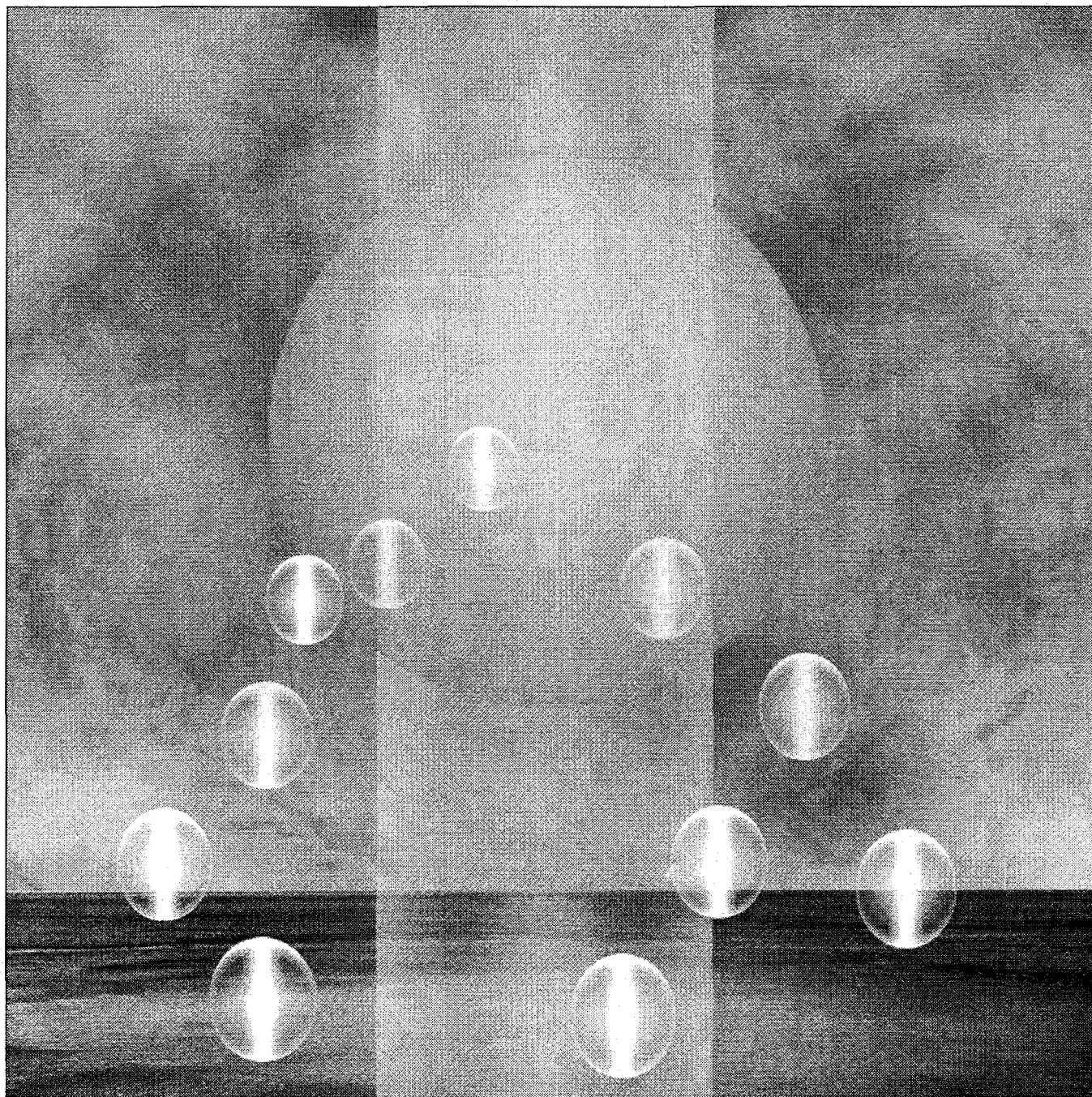


# Collaboration

Fall/Winter 2001–2002

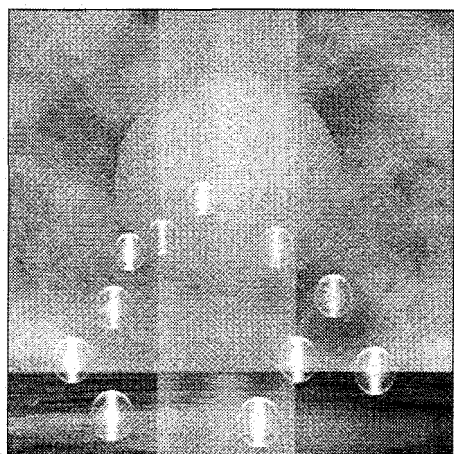
Journal of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

Vol. 27, no. 2



**Interviews with Tehmi Masalawalla, Richard Pearson, Gauri Pinto, Sunanda Poddar**

**AUM 2001 • Sri Aurobindo on self-consecration • Mother on surrender**



### About the cover

The cover image by Margaret Phanes is a symbol of the new consciousness. The spheres of light honor the elder sadhaks' role in helping the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother manifest this new consciousness on earth. Color and black-and-white prints are available; send email to Margaret Phanes (maphanes@pacbell.net) or see her web site at <http://home.pacbell.net/maphanes>.

### About the artists and photographers in this issue

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**Christophe Alward** lives in Pondicherry, India.

**David Hutchinson** (dbhutchinson@ucdavis.edu, <http://www.webcom.com/~dhutch/spirit.html>) is president of the Sri Aurobindo Association and a registered nurse in Sacramento, California.

**Lynda Lester** (lyndalester@earthlink.net, <http://www.scd.ucar.edu/staff/lynda>) is a technical writer and web usability specialist in Boulder, Colorado.

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**Anie Nunnally** (anie@earthlink.net) is a music teacher and member of the East West Cultural Center in Los Angeles. She is doing a series of interviews of elder sadhaks in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

**Margaret Phanes** (maphanes@pacbell.net, <http://home.pacbell.net/maphanes>) uses the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as inspiration for her digital imagery. She teaches digital photography and graphics at University of California Santa Cruz Extension.

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## This just in: Remembering Udar

**A**s this issue of *Collaboration* went into production, we received the news that Udar Pinto had left the body. The Fall/Winter 2000–2001 issue of *Collaboration* featured an interview with Udar by Anie Nunnally; following are two remembrances of Udar posted to the email discussion group Auroconf. (To subscribe to Auroconf, send e-mail to auroconf-request@aurobindo.org. In the body—not the subject heading—type **subscribe auroconf**.)

Udar (L. M. Pinto) left his body at 7:10 a.m. Indian Standard Time on 7 December 2001. He was laid to rest at 5 p.m. the same day in Pondicherry beside Nolini, Amrita, Pavitra, and Millie Di.

Born in Goa on 26 April 1907, Udar qualified as an aeronautical engineer in the United Kingdom in the early 1930s. Since there were no aeronautical jobs in India at that time, Udar came to Pondicherry to do business, where he became acquainted with Dilip Kumar Roy and some other sadhaks. He and his wife Mona had darshan of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, after which they became an integral part of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Sri Aurobindo gave him the name *Udar* (noble, sincere, upright and generous). Udar embodied those attributes and possessed an unshakable faith in the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. May the Divine Mother bless his soul's transition with the same loving care that was his lot in this life.

I will always cherish the affection and love that Udar gave me and my family throughout many decades of our association. He continues to live in our hearts and minds as a beacon of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's light.

—D.P. Soni, dpsoni@aol.com

I first met Udar on 24 December 1968. That night Maggi, Udar, and I joined Kusum at her new shop "Fleurs en Flacon," a few doors from the back of the Ashram on Rue St. Gilles. Our mission was to sing Christmas carols to the Mother. Udar brought his harmonica. After a few practice songs, we walked over and stood under Mother's window on Rue St. Gilles (where the original balcony darshan was given). And there in the empty street, under the South Indian sky—with Udar's soulful accompaniment on the harmonica—we sang "Silent Night" to the Mother of the stars and the earth.

I remember him lovingly—and imagine that about now Sri Aurobindo is greeting —Constance (David Walker), cnstnce@cruzio.com

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All photos of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, passages from the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and excerpts from the books published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram are (c) Sri Aurobindo Ashram unless otherwise noted, and are used here with the kind permission of the Ashram. The opinions expressed in *Collaboration* are not necessarily those of the editors or the SAA.

**Staff for this issue:** Larry Seidlitz, associate editor; Marta Belén, poetry editor; Lynda Lester, managing editor, layout, and production; Tom Parker and Sue Sheppard Ford, proofreaders; Kalpana Patel and Chandresh Patel, mailing.

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**Submissions:** *Collaboration* welcomes writing, photos, and artwork relevant to the Integral Yoga and spirituality. Submit material by e-mail to editor@collaboration.org; by fax at 916-451-9039; or by post to *Collaboration*, P.O. Box 163237, Sacramento, CA 95816 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 primary purpose of the Sri Aurobindo Association is to distribute information about Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, and Auroville and to support various projects related to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville, and Integral Yoga activities in America. Current officers: David Hutchinson, president; Vishnubhai Eschner, secretary; Marta Belén, treasurer; Lynda Lester, vice president, *Collaboration*; Chandresh Patel, vice president, Money-Power Project and Auroville liaison; Kalpana Patel, vice president, AUM 2001 and Sri Aurobindo Ashram liaison; Bhuvana Nandakumar, vice president, *Collaboration* archives and nonprofit organization; Theresa Boschert, vice president, special projects.

**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.



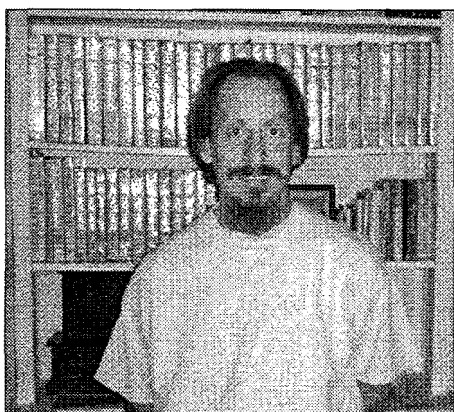
# From the office of Collaboration

## Notes on this issue

In this issue, we feature four interviews conducted by Anie Nunnally in Pondicherry with elder sadhaks of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram: Tehmi Masalawalla, Richard Pearson, Sunanda Poddar, and Gauri Pinto. Each interview gives us a glimpse into the life not only of a dedicated and experienced sadhak, but also into life at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram when Mother and Sri Aurobindo were still there physically.

Recent issues of *Collaboration* featured Anie's interviews with Amal Kiran (Summer 2000) and Udar Pinto (Fall/Winter, 2000–2001). These were greeted with so many positive and touching responses from readers that Anie felt inspired to interview more Ashram elders. She received a grant from the Foundation for World Education (FWE) to support this project. She visited the Ashram during the year 2000 to conduct the present four interviews, and plans to return again in 2002 to conduct more.

Given Anie's important contributions through these interviews, we felt it appro-



Above: Larry Seidlitz gets inspiration from Sri Aurobindo's books. (Photo: Vishnu Eschner.) Top right: Anie Nunnally wears a T-shirt with Mother's signature. (Photo: Lynda Lester)

priate to say something about her own interesting life. Anie was born and raised in Mississippi. Her mother, a musician, nurtured Anie's innate musical talents from a tender age and she literally sang her way through school, eventually graduating from the University of Southern Mississippi with a degree in music and drama. After college Anie moved to New York City to continue studying and performing in opera, concert, oratorio, and musical theatre.

In New York, Anie met Eleanor Montgomery, founder of the Sri Aurobindo International Center Foundation, who became a mentor to Anie in the early days of her yoga. Anie worked as a volunteer for the foundation (which became FWE late in the 1970s), and helped import and sell the Ashram's hand-made paper. In 1967 she moved to Los Angeles to become more deeply immersed in the yoga at the East West Cultural Center. There she helped Jyotipriya (Dr. Judith Tyberg) in her private school and with other projects and programs at the center.

In 1969 the Mother gave permission to Anie to come to live in the Ashram and Auroville, where she spent three-and-a-half years, seeing the Mother for private and public darshans. During her first darshan, the Mother looked deeply into her eyes and told her, "You have been with me many times, many, many times before." Anie returned to New York in 1972 and combined work in the corporate world with private music teaching and volunteer work at the New York center. She often visited Matagiri on darshan days and for retreats.

In 1985, after Mrs. Montgomery passed away, Anie learned that she had been appointed secretary of FWE. She then assumed the responsibility of selecting a new board of directors and reactivating the foundation, which had been dormant for some time. Her work as secretary and board member of FWE would continue for fourteen years, during which time it fostered many projects in Auroville, the Ashram, the U.S., and Europe.

From 1987 until 1993, Anie lived in the Woodstock, New York, area near



Matagiri. Since 1993 Anie has lived in Los Angeles, volunteering and studying at the East West Cultural Center. Each year she

hosts many guests from Auroville and the Ashram, and recently she has helped host fundraising events for Auroville land. We appreciate her fine accomplishments and look forward to her continuing service for the Mother.

\*\*\*

Rounding out the issue, we have included a current affairs section, source material from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother focusing on self-consecration and surrender, two articles on AUM 2001, poetry, a comic strip, and the "Apropos." We are delighted with the cover design created by Margaret Phanes.

## 11 September 2001: A meditation

This issue was produced in the wake of the devastating terrorist attack against the United States leading to the violent deaths of thousands of people. The event has created widespread sadness, fear, anger, and confusion. We sympathize and pray for those who lost their lives or their loved ones, and for us all who have had to witness this tragedy and must bear its repercussions. There has been much discussion and various points of view expressed about the incident on the online discussion group Auroconf. Perhaps the most apt comment posted was a quote from Sri Aurobindo regarding the even more horrifying events of his time:

"I am afraid I can hold out but cold comfort—for the present at least—to those of your correspondents who are lamenting the present state of things. Things are bad, growing worse and may at any time grow worst or worse than worst if that is possible in the present perturbed world.



The best thing for them is to realise that all this was necessary because certain possibilities had to emerge and be got rid of, if a new and better world was at all to come into being: it would not have done to postpone them for a later time.

"It is, as in yoga, where things active or latent in the being have to be put into action in the light so that they may be grappled with and thrown out or to emerge from latency in the depth for the same purificatory purpose. Also they can remember the adage that night is darkest before dawn and that the coming of the dawn is inevitable.

"But they must remember too that the new world whose coming we envisage is not to be made of the same texture as the old and different only in pattern, and that it must come by other means—from within and not from without; so the best way is not to be too much preoccupied with the lamentable things that are happening outside, but themselves to grow within so that they may be ready for the new world, whatever the form it may take." (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 1611–1612)

—Larry Seidlitz, guest editor

Larry Seidlitz ([larry\\_seidlitz@hotmail.com](mailto:larry_seidlitz@hotmail.com)) is a transpersonal psychologist and resident of the Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham Ashram in Lodi, California.

## New letters on yoga

### 9/11: 'No other way'

With each passing day, the "evolutionary crisis" to which Sri Aurobindo calls our attention becomes more obvious. It's almost a century now since he wrote about it, but since September 11, the world has been shocked by it. The world has changed. It is seeing it and feeling it: "Man has created a system of civilization which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity to utilize and manage . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Sri Aurobindo offers a solution: "A total spiritual direction given to the whole life and the whole nature can alone lift humanity beyond itself."<sup>2</sup> . . . "This movement of going inward and living inward is a difficult task to lay upon the normal consciousness of the human being; yet there is no other way . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Sri Aurobindo clarifies and outlines the strategy: "What has to be developed is there in our being and not something outside it . . . It is, besides, a step for which the whole of evolution has been a preparation and which is brought closer at each crisis of human destiny . . . What is necessary is that there should be a turn in humanity felt by some or many toward the vision of this change, a feeling of its imperative need, the sense of its possibility, the will to make it possible in themselves and to find a way."<sup>4</sup>

We know that for every disaster there is an equal or greater moment of grace.

—B Sullivan, [b4truth@juno.com](mailto:b4truth@juno.com)

### Notes

1. *The Life Divine*, p. 1053
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1059
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1027
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 1059–60

### From our readers

Thanks so much for the beautiful Spring 2001 issue. The poetry really reflected all that people feel, and the drawings and pictures were superb. I felt honored to be published alongside the others. So much personal insight by so many.—Wayne Bloomquist, [BloomquistJFB35@aol.com](mailto:BloomquistJFB35@aol.com)

Before I forget—and I forgot already for the past two days—congratulations on the new *Collaboration* issue with poems! I am really ready to spend more time reading poems. A beautiful issue with a great cover drawing and the continuation of great humor on the back page.—August Timmermans, [august.t@bu.ac.th](mailto:august.t@bu.ac.th)

Thank you for the wonderful Spring 2001 *Collaboration*. A touching poetry is-

sue charged with aspiration, love, and light. And thanks for the photo of Sri Aurobindo's room. Well done!—Joseph Kent, [sunli8@msn.com](mailto:sunli8@msn.com)

The poetry issue was beautiful and I felt quite an honor to be amongst such inspired and thoughtful work. To read the thoughts of such venerable people as Nirodbaran was a special honor. Thank you for including me.—Sharon Winnett, Billings, MT

The last issue of *Collaboration* that focused exclusively on poems was refreshing and quite nice. Thank you for the effort!—Nora Archambeau, [narchambeau@hotmail.com](mailto:narchambeau@hotmail.com)

It was such an encouraging and agreeable surprise to find five of my poems in the latest issue . . . the whole issue is delightful.—Shyam Kumari, [shyamkumari@eth.net](mailto:shyamkumari@eth.net)

I would like to express my appreciation to you and all those associated with *Collaboration* for the fine work you have done in recent issues. Thank you!—Richard Quine, [rlqglo@shasta.com](mailto:rlqglo@shasta.com)

Keep up the good work!—Miriam Belov, [miriam@wellnessagenda.com](mailto:miriam@wellnessagenda.com)

Just a note to thank you for the splendid editorial job you did on the poetry issue of *Collaboration* . . . All the drawings and photos were so appropriate and lovely and the cover drawing so charming. It delighted me to be reconnected, through their poetry, with so many of my old friends, many of whom I had not seen in years.—Anie Nunnally, [anie@earthlink.net](mailto:anie@earthlink.net)

Thanks so much for the excellence and consciousness you put into every issue of our collective magazine.—June Maher, [jmaher212@aol.com](mailto:jmaher212@aol.com)

Your poetry issue was excellent!—Eric Hughes, Mt. Tremper, NY



## Current affairs

### AUM 2001 held in Redwood City, California

In July, the All USA Meeting (AUM) was held at Mount Alverno Center in Redwood City, California, bringing together disciples of Sri Aurobindo and Mother from across the United States and around the world. Kalpana Patel, Theresa Boschert, Dian Kiser, Dave Hutchinson, and Chandresh Patel were the main organizers for the event. Many others assisted in various ways.

Two life-sized photos of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, one of Mother's saris, curtains from Sri Aurobindo's room, and beautiful flower bouquets graced the front corner of the main conference room, creating a powerful and luminous atmosphere. On the walls hung original paintings from Aurovilians that were available for purchase as part of the "Art for Land" program. Colorful embroidered wall hangings created by Aurovilian Maggi Lidchi adorned the hallway leading to the conference room. Attendees received gift packets containing information about the conference, a small book about Integral Yoga, photos, messages, and a beautifully crafted writing journal with pictures of Sri Aurobindo and Mother on alternate pages.

August Timmermans wrote afterwards to the Integral Yoga email group, "For me the most striking aspect of the AUM was the atmosphere created by the organizers—obviously, to me, through inspiration . . . A descent of their force filled and sustained the entire atmosphere of the Mount Alverno center, throughout the five days and four nights."

A photo album of the conference is available at <http://www.collaboration.org/Aum.html>.

Arabinda Basu, Lynda Lester, Alok Pandey, Guy Ryckaert, and Prema Nandakumar, were the keynote speakers. We are grateful to Arabinda Basu for coming on short notice when Kireet Joshi had to cancel due to illness. Devan Nair, who also had been scheduled to speak, likewise had

to cancel due to illness. We wished them both a full and rapid recovery.

Each of the keynote presentations was unique, inspiring, and marvelous. Arabinda spoke eloquently on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and yoga. Lynda gave a Powerpoint presentation that was wonderfully entertaining and laid out step by step the logic of transformation. Alok spoke beautifully about Sri Aurobindo's view of evolution, reciting quotes from *Savitri* to illustrate his points. Guy described the current land situation in Auroville, and emphasized the urgent need to purchase the remaining plots near the center of the township before speculators and skyrocketing prices disrupt Auroville's development. Prema gave an inspiring presentation about *Savitri*, in particular about the portrayal of women in the epic.

Photos and brief biographies of the speakers are on the web at <http://www.collaboration.org/aum/2001/speakers.html>. Audiotapes are available for purchase; see p. 30 for details.

In addition to the keynote addresses, the program featured numerous other presentations and activities.

Dakshina Vanzetti organized a forum of presentations by the various Sri Aurobindo centers and organizations in North America, as well as a subsequent discussion among center representatives regarding further coordination of their efforts. Gordon Korstange gave a slide show on Auroville, followed by a personal talk by S. Dhandapani, a Tamil who grew up in the shadow of Auroville, and whose life was forever changed in the process.

Chandresh Patel and Bill Leon spoke about the plans and work on the U.S. Pavilion in Auroville, Wayne Bloomquist offered a session on the triple transformation, and Nora Archambeau led a discussion on feminism in yoga. John Robert Cornell led a walking meditation, Bhavi Saklecha gave workshops on modeling with clay, and Kamal Trivedi organized physical activities.

Wendy Lines, Dakshina Vanzetti, Liz Inglis, and Gloria Posso performed in a beautifully choreographed dance, accompanied by music composed by Vishnu

Eschner and reading from *Savitri* by Larry Seidlitz. Julian Lines gave an entertaining reading of Sri Aurobindo's strange and humorous poem, "A Surrealist Vision of Science," accompanied by dance and movement by Illa Zadrozny.

Aurelio Hammer created deeply moving, otherworldly sounds with his unusual musical instruments and magical voice at various points throughout the conference, and during early morning "tune-ups" for smaller groups. Professional singers and musicians played an excellent Indian concert one evening, which brought most of the audience to the floor for several joyous dances.

Beyond the full schedule of talks and activities were other touching moments of the conference: special encounters with souls long-known but newly met, gatherings of old friends, intriguing insights into issues or projects discussed over meals, good laughs and practical jokes, and inner experiences of the soul or spirit in quiet contemplation.

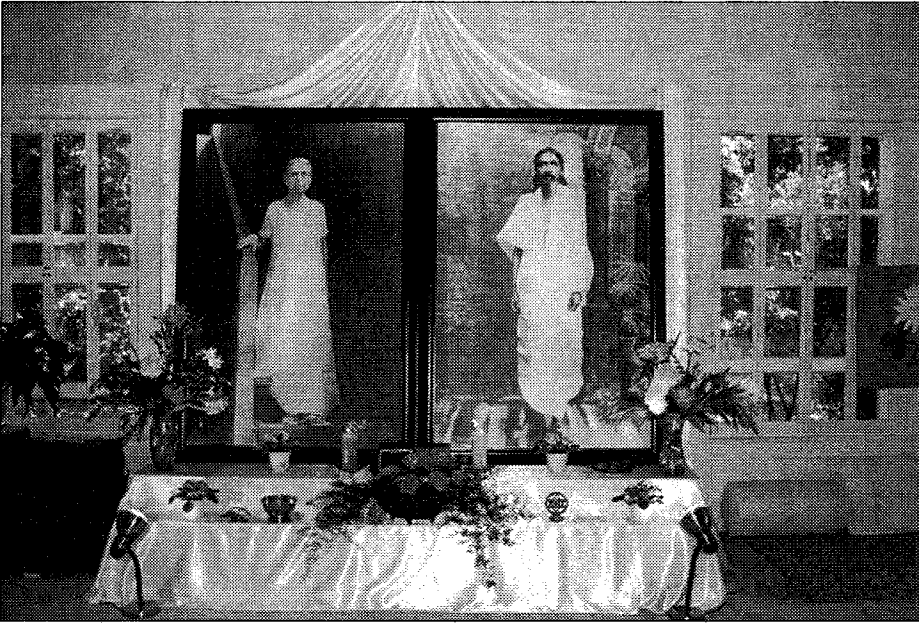
For more on AUM '01, see pp. 29–34.

### AUM photos come to SASP

The beautifully framed, life-sized photos of Sri Aurobindo and Mother displayed in the main hall at the AUM 2001 conference have been installed at the Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham (SASP) in Lodi, California. Standing on a new, specially constructed altar, they now lend a powerful new presence to the meditation room.

On a visit to Pondicherry last spring, Kalpana Patel discovered two small prints in VAK bookstore that she felt embodied the realization of the new creation, the theme of this year's AUM conference. She succeeded in having them enlarged in just three days so she could bring them back with her to the United States. They were framed in rosewood in time to be displayed in the AUM conference hall.

In the photo of Sri Aurobindo, he stands, inscrutable and silent, in what would become the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Playground. In Mother's photo, she is de-



*Photos of Mother and Sri Aurobindo from AUM 2001 have been installed at Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham in Lodi, California. (Photo: Vishnu Eschner)*

scending a staircase, conveying powerful love, determination, and grace.

SASP gives its love and gratitude to Kalpana Patel, Kamalnayan Trivedi, and Chandresh Patel for the exquisite and generous gift. The meditation hall is open to devotees daily, with regular meditation at 8:30 p.m. Please call 209-339-1342 if you would like to visit.

## **AVI meeting held in St. Petersburg, Russia**

The annual international Auroville International (AVI) meeting was held in St. Petersburg from 17–23 June 2001. Julian and Wendy Lines, Chandresh Patel, Bill Leon, and Roger Toll from the United States attended. Other participants included twenty-three Aurovilians, about forty people from Russia and nearby countries of the former Soviet Union, and approximately forty-five other friends of Auroville from around the world. Translators were available.

The meeting took place in a palace on the outskirts of the city, which also provided hotel accommodations for the partici-

pants. In addition, a presentation of thirty-eight exhibition panels made in Auroville on the Charter of Auroville, the Matri-mandir, the International Zone, and the national pavilions was opened to the public at a beautiful building in downtown St. Petersburg.

Although Sri Aurobindo and Mother are known to many Russians, not much is known about Auroville. The Aditi Publishing Company in Russia hopes to publish new and better translations and compilations of writings by Sri Aurobindo and Mother, and stimulate greater interest in Auroville. Next year the annual AVI meeting will be held in Northern California.

Photos and reports of the AVI 2001 meeting are available on the web at <http://www.auroville-international.org/indexframes.htm>.

## **New center established in Canada**

In February, a new center focused on the practice of the Integral Yoga was opened in Lindsay, Ontario, Canada, ninety miles northeast of Toronto. Although

some members of the group had been meeting previously for over a year, the center now is housed in a mansion with a large meditation room, meeting rooms, a library, numerous bedrooms, and a separate coach house. Presently its members meet for meditations on Monday evenings; there is a study circle on Tuesday evenings. Karma yoga activities are held on an ongoing, informal basis.

Members of the group are expected to meditate daily, attend weekly meetings, move toward vegetarianism, and study the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Roger Calverley, who owns the building, is presently the only member who lives at the center, but there is space and the opportunity for members to join and form a residential community.

Once or twice a year the center offers a free workshop entitled "Learning to Meditate." Interested persons may contact Roger at [calverleyr@yahoo.ca](mailto:calverleyr@yahoo.ca).

## **Centers email list is resurrected**

As a result of the centers meeting held at the AUM conference in July, an old email list has been revived and set up for the networking of Sri Aurobindo centers and related organizations in the yoga. Representatives of centers, study groups, or other Sri Aurobindo organizations may participate. To subscribe, send email to [centers@aurobindo.org](mailto:centers@aurobindo.org). In the subject line, type **subscribe** followed by your email address.

## **Wilmot Center and Lotus Press conduct outreach**

Wilmot Center and its associated business, Lotus Press, are involved in a national advertising campaign that should stimulate knowledge and interest in the work of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. Last year a flyer featuring the main writings of Sri Aurobindo was sent to approximately 100,000 subscribers of *Yoga Journal*. It



was also distributed to approximately 60,000 others through metaphysical bookstore newsletters. In addition, the flyer was distributed along with the *Selected Writings of Sri Aurobindo* CD at no charge to about 450 academics at major universities and colleges in the U.S., and another 550 of the CDs are allocated for appropriate recipients.

The campaign continued this autumn with a three-page, full-color spread featuring books on the theme of practical spirituality in *New Age Journal*, which is distributed to approximately 270,000 people. Other magazines are being contacted to publish editorial features on Sri Aurobindo.

On 18–20 October, Lotus Press will have a display booth at the Southeast Asian Academic Conference at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Wilmot Center handles inquiries, helps find appropriate academic recipients for the CD ROM, and distributes and receives flyers. Anyone wanting to participate in these initiatives may contact Santosh Krinsky at [santoshk@msn.com](mailto:santoshk@msn.com).

## Briefs

**Sri Aurobindo Saranam** in North Bend, Washington reports several events. In November 2000, it initiated the Sadhika Sangha, an online sangha of women in the Integral Yoga community. In July, it hosted a five-day pre-AUM retreat for the Sadhika Sangha, assisted by a grant from the Foundation for World Education.

In September, it initiated the “Victory” web site, dedicated to “creating and sharing formations in the physical plane for dissolving darkness and fostering Light — a site dedicated to the victory of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.” The URL is <http://www.all-1.nl/victory>, or alternatively, <http://devoted.to/victory>.

During the next year, the center plans to host an “Insight Dialogue” retreat for interested members of the IY community. Also, Sri Aurobindo Saranam is in the process of assembling a manual to be used by future AUM organizers. Persons inter-

ested in any of these projects may contact Aurela Sequoia at [asequoia@earthlink.net](mailto:asequoia@earthlink.net).

**Julian Lines** is working on a website founded by Matagiri board member Aditya Ahluwalia. While some aspects of the site are still being developed, you may enjoy seeing books, incense, and CDs from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville included among the products, as well as an interview with Georges Van Vrekhem from *Life Positive* magazine. The address of the site is <http://www.lifepositive.com>. Julian welcomes feedback about the site at [julian@lifepositive.com](mailto:julian@lifepositive.com).

**The Sri Aurobindo Association** has put the first twenty years of *Collaboration* on CD. The price is \$7.50. To order, send a check or money order to SAA, P.O. Box 163237, Sacramento, CA 95816.

On 24 November 2001, **Matagiri** held a darshan program of reading and meditation. After a shared vegetarian lunch, there was a talk on Sister Nivedita by Swami Atmarupananda from the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in High Falls, New York.

From 30 November–2 December, the **Seattle Sri Aurobindo Study Circle** offered a weekend retreat on the Integral Yoga with Rand Hicks. Rand coordinates the Integral Knowledge Study Center in Pensacola, Florida. For information on activities of the Seattle Sri Aurobindo Study Circle, contact Karen Litfin at [litfin@u.washington.edu](mailto:litfin@u.washington.edu).

**AUM 2002** is being planned for 31 July–4 August in Greenville, South Carolina. The Sri Aurobindo Center Southeast will coordinate the event. For more information, see <http://aum.collaboration.org> or send email to [aum2002@jhmhotels.com](mailto:aum2002@jhmhotels.com)

**The Auroville International (AVI) 2002** annual meeting will take place in July in northern California. The meeting is open to AVI board members from around the world and to other people with an interest in Auroville. The AVI web site at <http://www.auroville-international.org/indexframes.htm> will list information as it becomes available.

## Passings

### Micheline Etevenon

Micheline Etevenon died suddenly on 17 May 2001, at the age of seventy. She was secretary general of the Institut de Recherches Evolutives.

She and her husband, Pierre, a scientist, went to India for the first time in 1970. They soon encountered *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness* and met Satprem. When he was preparing to publish *The Mother's Agenda*, he asked Micheline if she would help and she readily agreed. Thus was the Institut formed, of which she was the driving force and tireless worker until her passing.—Eric Hughes



### Joe Spanier

Joe Spanier, who was devoted to Auroville, died the morning of 26 September in Boulder, Colorado, at the age of ninety.

Joe, who was Sam Spanier's first cousin and a lawyer by profession, lived in Manhattan with his wife, Muriel. They held a regular meditation in their apartment and participated in the founding of the Sri Aurobindo International Center in New York on West 58th Street.

Muriel moved to Matagiri near Mt. Tremper, New York, where she initiated the distribution of Sri Aurobindo's books in the U.S. with the Sri Aurobindo Book Distribution Agency (SABDA) and helped with the early issues of *Collaboration*. Joe visited Matagiri regularly and eventually lived there for a year.

Muriel had met the Mother on a previous trip to Pondicherry, and she and Joe returned to India as a couple after Mother's passing. They met with Satprem. Joe became active thereafter in trying to de-







fine a legal basis for Auroville's independence as a trust.

For years, Muriel and Joe traveled throughout the U.S. giving slide talks on Auroville, selling books, and importing Auroville clothes and handicrafts. Joe collected and sold fine art and wrote regular letters to the editor of the *New York Times* on various subjects.

In 1976, they moved to Boulder, Colorado, where their daughters lived. There they established the Sri Aurobindo's Action Center and published a quarterly newsletter, *Auroville Voice*.

After Muriel's death in 1993, Joe brought her ashes to Matagiri, where they were interred in a tree-planting ceremony. Sam has suggested that his ashes be brought to Matagiri and a memorial planned at a future date. —Julian Lines

*Items in this section compiled by Larry Seidlitz, unless otherwise noted.*

## Chronicles

### Interview with Tehmi Masalawalla

#### Poet and translator of The Adventure of Consciousness

by Anie Nunnally

**T**ehmi Masalawalla was one of the first sadhaks to live in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram's Golconde residence from as early as 1947. When I visited her room, I was immediately struck by the atmosphere that prevailed. She seems to live in a vast, internalized sea of calm and peace. Her energies are very inner-directed, while outwardly she remains poised and dignified. Her ascetic room denotes a being who does not have the need to live enveloped by the clutter of material objects. Golconde, in any case, is a minimalist's ideal, but photos of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, her books, and a small vase of flowers

seem to be sufficient for Tehmi's needs. The name *Tehmi* dates back to a well-known lady in Persian history, Tehmina, who was the wife of Rustom, one of the great warriors of ancient Persia.

Tehmi was born 17 January 1917 into a deeply religious Parsi family in Bombay. Her father used a brief French phrase, succinct and to the point, which he often repeated to the family and even hung on the wall of their home. It read, "Sans dieu, rien" ("Without God, nothing").

Her father was a surgeon and took a post as chief medical officer of the Bhopal Hospital in Bhopal, India. I mentioned to Tehmi that I remembered meeting her father in Golconde in 1968 and how elegant he was. She told me that the Mother had also commented on the aristocratic nature of her mother. Her mother was a doctor too and graduated from medical school in Ireland.

Tehmi recalled rich stories of her parents' home and her childhood in Bhopal. Bhopal was a Muslim city before India's independence, and the family lived in a large wing of the *begum's* (female Muslim ruler) palace. Tehmi and her brother had ample room in which to run and play, and used to scamper about freely in the hallways and on the large sweeping stairways and marbled balconies of the palace.

Tehmi recounted how *darbars* (official assemblies) would often take place, and sumptuous dinner parties would be held for all the dignitaries of the time. The children were not allowed to attend, but they would peek down from the balconies and view the dignitaries as they entered the palace—viceroys and other important gentlemen in their official attire and ladies wrapped in gold-trimmed saris and jewels.

Tehmi said the streets were sometimes filled with parades of camels and that the *nawab* (begum's son) had a stable of beautiful Arabian horses that were often paraded through the streets during times of pageantry and festivals.

Tehmi and her brother (who also became a doctor) were sent at ages eight and seven back to Bombay to live with their aunts, as there were no good schools in Bhopal at that time. Tehmi went to Queen

Mary School in Bombay and was finely trained in the arts, academics, and gymnastics by the excellent English teachers there. She told me that she excelled academically, achieving the highest marks, as she had an innate and natural ability to concentrate. She studied English literature at Saint Xavier's College in Bombay and was taught there by many of the Jesuit fathers. She obtained degrees at Bombay University. After graduation, she taught literature at Sophia College in Bombay. ☺

#### The flame of God

**Anie:** The Parsis I have met are all highly refined people and very developed in the fields of art, music, literature, poetry, and the sciences. Do you attribute these special qualities as having come from the practice of the Zoroastrian faith? If so, what is it in the religion that allows for this special development so prevalent among Parsis? Zubin Mehta, the internationally famous conductor and musician comes to mind as one example, plus all the fine Parsi poets including yourself and Amal Kiran here in the Ashram.

**Tehmi:** It is because of the Parsi symbolic worship of fire. The religion has a direct contact with the Divine with no intermediaries. There is a deep aspiration to express purity. The purity of purpose gives power and clarity to the mind and the vital.

**Anie:** What do you mean by "worship of fire"? Could you briefly describe the doctrines of Zoroastrianism and tell something of the history of how it developed?

**Tehmi:** The Parsis are described as fire worshipers because fire is their central symbol—the pure flame of God. There are fires burning in the temples at all times. The fires burn day and night and are never extinguished.

Zoroaster was one of the great prophets who lived during the Vedic period. He wrote twenty-one or more books on various subjects such as astrology, astronomy, and medicine, as well as the scriptures that he brought down. He went to a mountain top for forty years, and during his time there he practiced *tapasya* (spiritual disciplines). He brought down great words of wisdom and spiritual knowledge and be-



gan teaching and preaching in the courts of Persia (Iran). He and his teachings were highly revered and soon became widespread throughout Persia.

The Zoroastrians left Persia in search of religious freedom. From their temples in Persia, they brought burning lamps with them on their ship that crossed the Arabian Sea. They fled to the Udwada section of Gujarat in India, where the ruler of Gujarat welcomed them and gave them religious refuge. They promised to live as his own people. One of the Zoroastrian high priests asked for a cup of milk, which he then mixed with water. He said, "we shall live as one people, just as this milk has been mixed with water."



*Tehmi Masalawalla in her room at Golconde. (Photo: Anie Nunnally)*

### Early days

**Anie:** How old were you when you first discovered Sri Aurobindo?

**Tehmi:** I did not discover Sri Aurobindo right away. At age fifteen, I began to read Sri Ramakrishna and books on other Indian saints and mystics. Later on in my search, my father discovered Sri Aurobindo and gave me some of his books to read. I was still teaching then at Sophia College, but came to Pondicherry for a couple of visits. Some years after that, around 1948, I came to stay permanently. My parents joined me a few months afterwards.

**Anie:** Did you ever consider marriage and the family life?

**Tehmi:** By the age of sixteen, I had immersed myself totally in the spiritual search and was fully committed to living that life. I did not consider marriage or family. This came about quite naturally.

**Anie:** Would you describe your first darshan with Mother and Sri Aurobindo, or share any of the darshan experiences you had with them?

**Tehmi:** I saw the Mother twice a day.

She used to give darshan in the mornings in the meditation hall. In the evenings we would go up for darshan to the top of the staircase. My first darshan with Mother I saw her sitting at the top of the stairs wearing the most exquisitely beautiful blue sari. Her eyes were something indescribable. I was overwhelmed by the experience. She took us over immediately.

Sri Aurobindo's power was quite different. I saw him only when he gave darshans four times a year. We passed by him quickly one by one, but he transferred so much force into each of us in such a short amount of time. I remember one April darshan in the afternoon sitting in the courtyard waiting to go upstairs. I could feel, palpably, the entire courtyard rocking back and forth from the amount of force emanating from his presence. This is one of the reasons children were not allowed in the Ashram until a certain age. The force was too strong and they would often fall ill.

During my first darshan, as I was approaching the inner room, when I reached

the door I could feel two rays of light entering my chest. I was still standing at the door when I felt this. When I stood in front of Sri Aurobindo it was as though I was in a trance. I walked away still in that state.

Once, however, I was talking to the Mother prior to a darshan with Sri Aurobindo. I said, "Mother, I don't 'see' Sri Aurobindo during the darshans. Of course I see him physically, but I feel that I don't see him inwardly."

The Mother said, "Yes, it is true, this is very difficult."

"But Mother," I said, "others tell me that they 'see' him."

"Then perhaps they are only pretending."

After that next darshan, I "saw" Sri Aurobindo in a totally different way. The Mother had opened my inner sight and given me the ability to truly "see" Sri Aurobindo.

**Anie:** What was it like to live in Golconde in those early days?

**Tehmi:** I felt it was such a blessing. Since it was called a guest house, I thought surely Mother would put me somewhere else. When I went to her for an interview, I asked her, "Where shall I stay now?"

Mother said, "Why, you will continue to stay here in Golconde—Mona likes you very much."

So this has been my home for fifty-three years.

**Anie:** What work did the Mother give you in the beginning days and throughout your years in the Ashram?

**Tehmi:** I had grown tired of my teaching post at Sophia College and was hoping that Mother would not give me a teaching assignment. I just kept saying, "Let Mother give me any other work!" So she put me to work in the Carpentry Department supervising all the carpenters! I had a nice boss and could see the ocean from my office. My boss said, "Mother wishes that one should not read nor meditate during work hours," so often when I had no immediate work, I would just sit and dream.

I did this work for two years, and after



that I worked in the library. I also did hand painting on cloth for Mother's saris and shawls and the special cards she gave to people. I mostly painted roses, but other flowers as well.

One day, however, during pranam, the Mother asked me if I would take a class in the school. She had heard of my qualifications from some of the students. I accepted. I was a teacher of poetry and prose and taught sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds for twenty-five years. She also put me to work for the *Bulletin of the International Center of Education*. It was clerical work taking care of postings, getting addresses ready and accounts for subscribers. I still do this work with some help from others. At this time I only take care of receipts and subscriptions.

### **The Adventure of Consciousness**

**Anie:** How and when did the Mother give you the work of translating Satprem's *Adventure of Consciousness*?

**Tehmi:** When Satprem finished the book in French, Mother expressed a wish to have it translated into English. Jayantilal, with whom I worked in the *Bulletin* office, heard about this and told me about it. He asked me if I would be interested. He asked the Mother about it and she said, "Yes, she can do it." I had done my B.A. in French literature and had read almost all the major French writers in French. I had also translated Mother's *Questions and Answers* into English.

**Anie:** Did you have many meetings with Satprem regarding the book?

**Tehmi:** I had many meetings with Satprem, probably eighteen or more in all. He was very pleased with the translations and quite overwhelmed. He would go to the Mother with my work with praises about the translations. I also did the work rapidly. He used to come to Golconde and go over everything with me.

**Anie:** Satprem once told me that Sri Aurobindo dictated every word of *Adventure of Consciousness* through him and that he "just held the pen." Did you have a similar experience with the translation?

**Tehmi:** Yes, Mother and Sri Auro-

### **Your word**

Your word comes singing to my soul  
And passes over night's silent sea;  
I cannot keep it or control  
Or capture all it says to me.

But the deep caves resound with light,  
The terraces of being flame,  
And everywhere from depth to height  
Reverberates your beauteous Name.

The earth a-tremble to the core  
Bursts open its vast granite hold,  
Releasing through its broken floor  
Strange sacred fountains flowing gold.

—Tehmi Masalawalla

bindo were all the time with me. The Mother had told me that she and Sri Aurobindo would help me with the work. I could feel the help coming from above my head as I was engaged in the translating.

**Anie:** Did you translate other works of Satprem?

**Tehmi:** I translated his book *La Genèse du Surhomme* [*On the Way To Supermanhood*], and after that there were no other translations of his works done by me.

**Anie:** *The Adventure of Consciousness* was an important book for Americans in the 1960s and brought many people to the yoga. I still recommend the book for newcomers to the yoga, although I miss your translation, which is out of print. When the book first came out in 1964, the New York distributor sent a copy to my home in New York City with a note enclosed that read, "At the behest of the Mother!" It opened and widened my consciousness and was just the right book at the right time.

### **Atmosphere and sadhana**

**Anie:** Is there a difference in the atmosphere of the Ashram since Mother and Sri Aurobindo left their bodies?

**Tehmi:** There is no real difference. The presence is still powerful. I feel it ev-

erywhere. Some people feel that the force has dispersed, but it is very vital, very alive.

**Anie:** Is there a disadvantage in never having seen Mother and Sri Aurobindo in their physical bodies?

**Tehmi:** It is difficult for me to judge this, really. It meant so much to have the Mother's personal touch on a daily basis. She had so many ways of training our consciousness from the inside out. One was elevated to new heights and turned inside out by her. What power there was in her eyes and in her smile. Sri Aurobindo said that the Mother worked on people through her eyes and smile.

**Anie:** In what way has your sadhana changed since the Mother left her body?

**Tehmi:** For me the sadhana has remained the same. However, in the early years, all the work we did was done for the Mother and her alone. The Mother had given us our work and all our work was dedicated to her. No one questioned this, it was simply the natural way and the thing to be done. In the evenings we would go where the Mother was, to see her play tennis; she taught classes in French with us, did gymnastics. She participated in all the life of the Ashramites and students, from early morning balcony until evening time.

**Anie:** Have you faced many difficulties in your sadhana? How do you deal with such difficulties?

**Tehmi:** Yes, naturally there have been difficulties. The human nature is not so wonderful. Prayer is essential. Always pray to the Mother for help. Also one should look at oneself clearly and honestly in order to set things right in one's being. Only with her help and power and presence can one come through such times. In the early days when we were younger, often when the difficulties seemed insurmountable, we used to go to the Mother about the problems and she would set everything right again.

**Anie:** What changes do you see taking place in the future of the Ashram? Will it be very much different from what it is now?

**Tehmi:** I do not see any fundamental



changes taking place. Surface changes will be there, but at the core the people who sincerely practice the yoga will keep things going as the Mother would have it.

**Anie:** Now that you have reached almost eighty-four years, what has the yoga done for you at this stage in your life?

**Tehmi:** To live constantly in the consciousness of the Divine, to live consciously with the Mother and in the Mother at all times, no matter what I am doing, what I am thinking, has been the goal. To know that it is all her doing and not ours and that she is molding us and shaping us and will not turn away from us. That has been my constant experience all these years and remains so. That is why I have always been reluctant to go outside the Ashram or Pondicherry. Some friends have taken me to the Lake Estate, but that is as far as I have gone in fifty-three years. I do not wish to go out. I have found complete fulfillment in the Ashram life and am absolutely happy here.

I do not have many visitors now. Mostly people come to me in connection with the work that I am still doing. I do not even have, at this stage in life, very much of a sense of the personal "I" or the individualized self left in me. I am now prepared to accept and become whatever Mother chooses for me.

### Poems and a play

**Anie:** How did you receive the inspiration to write your poems and the mystery play that you wrote entitled *Demeter and Persephone*?

**Tehmi:** I wrote poetry in Bombay before coming to the Ashram. It was poetry from this period on which Sri Aurobindo gave his comments and from some of the poetry of my beginning years in the Ashram. The poetry used to come quite easily. The lines came to me during work and while doing ordinary things and I would then sit down and put the lines on paper. It was never forced. Some poems came in two- or three-line stanzas or quatrains.

**Anie:** When I read your book of poetry, I found the poems to be filled with great passion, feelings, and emotions, as if

the poet was describing a love affair with the Divine.

**Tehmi:** This is quite so, that is how it was.

**Anie:** Sri Aurobindo has made comments on your poetry and so has Amal Kiran. In closing I am going to quote here what they have said and include one of your beautiful poems [see p. 11].

After Nirodbaran read Tehmi's poems to Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo dictated the following message for Tehmi: "The poems are remarkable, especially the later ones. They have power of revelatory image and phrase and of expressing spiritual experience. Also, her later poems are very remarkably built, the thought is worked out in a perfect beginning, middle and end in a way which is not very common. Many poems contain a beautiful lyrical quality.

"The early poems too are very powerful expressions of the kind of experience she had and as poetry hardly inferior to the later ones. There are many remarkable lines and stanzas though they are not as well-built as the later ones."

Amal Kiran wrote, "You are a very fine poet. You have a genuine gift spontaneously sustained over years and some of your pieces are absolutely first-rate quality. And this quality is not only exquisiteness: there is a distinct vein of what must be called greatness—that is to say, the thought, the vision, the emotion have both weight and depth and are carried to us on a rhythmic tone bringing a touch of some infinite which suggests a beyond to all that can be uttered.

"Often, your expression is, as you have put it in your letter to me, 'quiet'—but nobody can mistake your quietness for absence of the stately, the wide-ranged, the deep-plunging.

"No doubt, your style is mainly lyrical and not ostensibly epical, nor are you markedly dynamic as a rule but there can be not only lyrical largeness coupled with intensity but also a lyricism quietly commanding as well as intense and such lyricism can, in addition, keep mostly its exquisiteness in front without ceasing to offer its own greatness."

*The Mother told Tehmi to use the name Thémis (the Greek goddess of justice and law) for the publication of her poems and her play Demeter and Persephone. Tehmi's book of poetry and her play are available through SABDA c/o Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India 605002.*

## Interview with Richard Pearson

**Teacher, botanist, captain, and editor of Flowers and Their Messages**

by Anie Nunnally

Richard Pearson was just eleven years old when he first came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram with his English father in 1946, after the close of World War II. He was born in the north of England on 1 November 1934 in a Yorkshire town called Shepley. The town was thus named for its reputation of being sheep country. As a child, Richard was close to nature and animals. He used to play in the grassy fields where wildflowers bloomed and goats, sheep, and other animals grazed.

His grandparents were of Russian Jewish heritage, and had left Russia for England. His father was born and educated in England. Both parents were nurses. Neither parent was keen on religion, but Richard joined the local church choir. He remembers the pastor saying that if they had any questions about God, they could write and ask him. Richard did so, but was not satisfied with the answers. So Richard thought *he* would write about God! Later, when he was in the Ashram, he showed his childhood writings to the Mother. She helped him with spellings and told him, "As you grow older your ideas about God also will change." Richard said he was a rather austere, shy young boy, and somewhat fanatical about being morally correct.

When Richard was still a schoolboy, his father joined the Royal Army Medical Corps as a nurse, and Richard saw little of him after that time until the war ended. Ri-





chard's mother was left to care for the two children on her own. Reacting to some changes in his family life, Richard said he became a rather difficult child.

During this period he was sent to live with other families and could not understand why he was moving around constantly. He was unhappy without his mother and with having to stay with so many strangers. His father had been posted in India and wrote to Richard's mother that he wanted to settle in India when the war was over. He asked if they would like to come and live there. Remembering the jungle and wild animal stories he had read about, Richard said, "It's a great idea!"

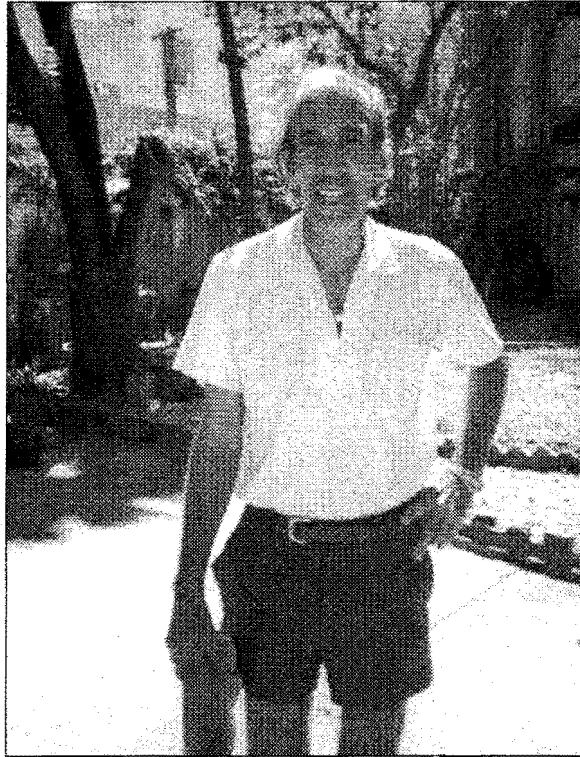
Ultimately his mother took him to stay in a boarding school in Somerset, England, "far from anywhere." It was a boy's school, and the headmistress was a terror. They were all underfed and lived in trying conditions. Richard became a kind of mentor and counselor to the other boys and answered their questions.

Although he was alone and without family, he never really felt alone. He felt that somebody or something was always with him, a presence that he could feel. He used to lie in the wheat fields alone in the evenings looking up at the sky. On one of these evenings, he had a profound and concrete experience of the infinity of the universe and the limitlessness of the sky. The more he would gaze, the more limitless was his vision. ☞

### Early days

**Anie:** How did you eventually come to the Ashram to live?

**Richard:** My father was a reader of philosophy. He collected books on spirituality and philosophy. He had plenty of free time in India and read Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Ramana Maharshi. Soon he discovered Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*. While in Calcutta, he went to the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan and met Rajen-da and Madan-da (who settled later in the Ashram). They encouraged him to seek



Richard Pearson. (Photo: Anie Nunnally)

permission to visit the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. So on 15 August 1943, he had his first darshan of Sri Aurobindo and was completely taken in.

I could not leave London until the war was over. In October of that year [1945], I left boarding school and stayed with my mother's family for a time. Afterwards I went to London to live with Norman Dowsett's family. [Norman Dowsett was a teacher in the Ashram school for many years.] My father had made an acquaintance with Norman Dowsett who was, at that time, in the Royal Air Force. I lived with them for four months and went to school in London.

Later I traveled with them to India by ship. We arrived in India on 21 February 1946. My father came to receive me at the port in Bombay. It was toward the end of the British rule and there was a "Quit India" movement at that time to get all the British out of India. We had to leave Bombay quickly. We traveled two days together by train destined for Madras, and took another train to Pondicherry. On the train,

my father took out his wallet. He showed me photos of Mother and Sri Aurobindo and said, "We are going to see these two great people." I felt mystified. We went straight to Norman and Leena Dowsett's house. On arrival a message came to us, given to them by the Mother, that we were to see her after breakfast!

**Anie:** Could you describe that meeting with the Mother and your impressions?

**Richard:** We went with Udar, Norman, Leena, and their children to Pavitra's room. My father said, "Fold your hands and say, 'Bon jour, douce Mere.' If she touches you, you can touch her feet." I was just this shy little boy from England. Suddenly a dog came charging into the room. This was the Mother's dog named Goldie. I was so fond of animals, but this took me completely by surprise. Then the dog left the room just as quickly as it had entered. At that moment the

Mother came in. It felt as though a strong gust of wind had swept into the room because there was such vitality in her presence. She said "Good morning, everybody," and shook each one's hand in a true English way. Everything happened so fast that I forgot all that I was supposed to say. She began to ask questions about our journey and if everything was all right.

**Anie:** Do you have any other impressions of the Mother?

**Richard:** One strong impression that I have of the Mother was that she was always dashing forward. One occasion I remember when she showed this quality was on the Playground during one of her Wednesday night talks. She had given a "bang" to our laziness, as no one was asking questions. She was in a warrior mood. She marched out with determination, as if to show us how one is to move forward.

The second instance was around 1956 during a rehearsal of the play *The Spiritual Destiny of India* in the Ashram school. The Mother had taken a keen interest in the play and had given her directions for



the smallest details. She was talking to the organizers and said, "And what shall we do next year?" That play had not yet taken place and the Mother was already planning ahead. This power of the shakti was truly impressive to me.

**Anie:** When did you begin classes in the Ashram school? What was your life like in those early days?

**Richard:** I began school the next day after meeting the Mother. I did not speak French, so I had to learn. Later, because the Mother spoke to us in French, it became such a fascination that I picked on anybody who could speak French well in

order to better learn how to speak the language. Sunil-da became my teacher and later my mentor. He was important to me and my intellectual growth and development. He taught me math, astronomy, and botany.

I left the Dowsetts' home within a few days and went to stay with Udar's family and took my meals with them. They taught me how to wear a dhoti. (My father had returned to Madras, where he was still waiting for final clearance from the army.) There I met Ambu, who became my model. I wanted to be strong like him and I learned asanas from him. He taught me how to wash my clothes, dress like an Indian, and take care of things. I made friends with Gauri's dog Spotted Beauty, a Dalmatian. They also had a donkey named Baudet. Udar had purchased it for the Mother and kept it in his garden. I asked Mother if I could look after it and she gave permission.

Gauri was my friend, but I did not have or take the time to make other friendships. I spent a great deal of time on their terrace looking out on the sea and began to write again. I began to see everything turning itself to the Divine: the waves, the clouds. Everything gave me the sense of self-giving and offering of itself to the Divine. I used to sit quietly and receive these impressions. Since I was so shy, I preferred to stay by myself.

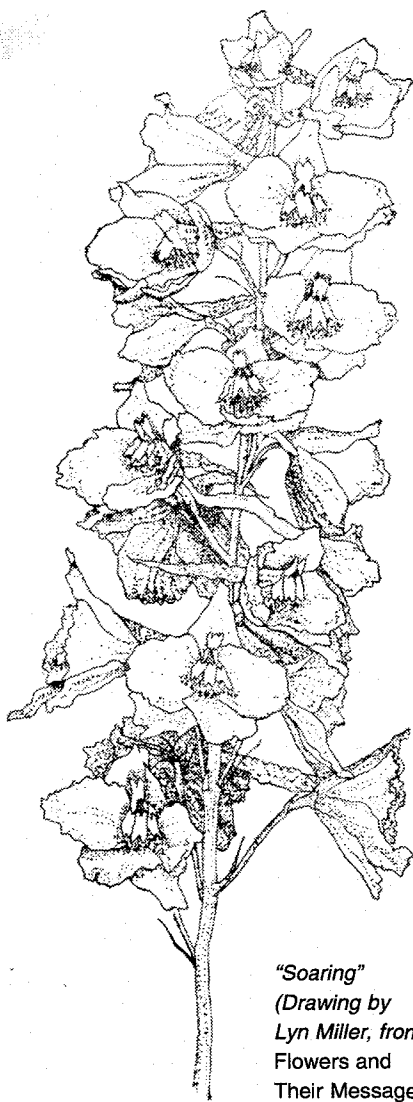
**Anie:** Will you please share your experience of the first darshan with Sri Aurobindo?

**Richard:** In the early days, there was no line except from the Meditation Hall. Everyone sat in the courtyard. We had a three-day holiday from school: the day before darshan, Darshan Day, and the day after, which was called Garland Day. It felt as though one walked in some other world. We entered the darshan room and it felt like a cool, dense forest, intense and quiet. Although I was short and there were tall people in front of me and I could not see, I could feel a solid peace—something very solid . . . a force, a light, intangible but inexpressible.

Even though they sat in the anteroom, one had a sense of being in the same room with Mother and Sri Aurobindo. For me as

*On this page: Delphinium, to which Mother gave the spiritual significance "Soaring": "Without care for time, without fear for space, surging out purified from the flames of the ordeal, we shall fly without stop towards the realisation of our goal, the supramental victory."—The Mother, Flowers and Their Messages, p. 92*

*On opposite page: Asystasia coromandeliana, to which Mother gave the spiritual significance "Trust in the Divine": "It is not possible to enter utterly into the spiritual truth of the Eternal and Infinite if we have not the faith and courage to trust ourselves into the hands of the Lord of all things and the Friend of all creatures."—Sri Aurobindo, Flowers and Their Messages, p. 24*



"Soaring"  
(Drawing by  
Lyn Miller, from  
Flowers and  
Their Messages,  
p. 92)

a child, Sri Aurobindo was like viewing a mountain. He was so majestic. When I was still quite young, I used to wonder what he was doing in his room all day and why we only saw him four times a year. The Mother seemed like a queen when she sat next to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo was truly regal. His presence was felt even before standing in front of him. There was a great coolness in the room. The very first time I entered the Ashram, I could feel this coolness and peace in the atmosphere. To this day when I am in a state of deep quietude, I can still feel this atmosphere of Sri Aurobindo's darshan strongly. Sri Aurobindo looked austere and impassive. The Mother was radiant and smiling!

There were some darshan days when the Mother would be in a trance. Sri Aurobindo would be smiling and gracious. One felt a warmth and sweetness from him.

Darshan days were quite different from other days when one met with the Mother. They were a much more powerful experience. Mother said that darshan is the culmination of the fulfillment of a great deal of work that had been done. One had to prepare for the darshan within oneself to receive the blessing.

Mother said, "Preparation in oneself



is what makes darshan so special.”

**Anie:** What did you do after you finished your courses in the Ashram school?

**Richard:** I had asked Mother if I should take my higher courses in England.

[In answer, Mother sent him the following letter, which is published in *Champaklal Speaks*, pp. 255–256.]

“I intended to let you go for your studies in England without telling you anything about it, because each one must be free to follow the path he has chosen. But after what you have written, I feel compelled to write to you.

“No doubt from the exterior point of view, you will find in England all that you want for learning what human beings generally call knowledge, but from the point of view of Truth and Consciousness, you can find nowhere the atmosphere in which you are living here. Elsewhere you can meet with a religious or a philosophic spirit, but true spirituality, direct contact with the Divine, constant aspiration to realize him in life, mind and action are in the world realized only by scattered individuals and not as a living fact behind any university teaching however advanced it may be.

“Practically, as far as you are concerned, there will be a great risk of drifting away from the experience you have realized and then you cannot know what will happen to you.

“That is all I wanted to say—now it is left to you to choose and decide.”

### Life in the Ashram

**Richard:** Of course, I did not go. The Mother then said I could study botany in the Ashram library and I received special permission from Medhananda to do so. Mother asked me to take on teaching an English class in the school while I was studying. At the age of eighteen, I was only slightly older than the students that I was teaching.

When the new lab opened, Mother told me to work there. This was my first training in physical work done for the Mother. I labeled bottles, packets, lab equipment, and chemicals. Then a separate room was given for natural history items such as seeds, feathers, dried fruits

of plants and trees, stones, and even an elephant’s head! I was given permission to keep and attend to wounded animals—snakes, crows, squirrels, and so on. When Mother received pressed flowers and other plants, she would send them to me to keep carefully. Mother would write and give me guidelines about so many things, particularly about teaching and outings.

I used to take the children on nature outings and would go on nature outings with Sunil-da.

**Anie:** I hear that you received the “Prix d’Honneur” from the Mother. Can you tell us something about it?

**Richard:** Well, from 1954 the Mother had started to give a special award of recognition, called “Prix d’Honneur,” to a student who showed exceptional qualities in all the activities and branches of education and whose conduct conformed to the ideal of the Ashram from all points of view. It was in 1955 that the Mother chose this honor for me.

**Anie:** Did you ever live with your father?

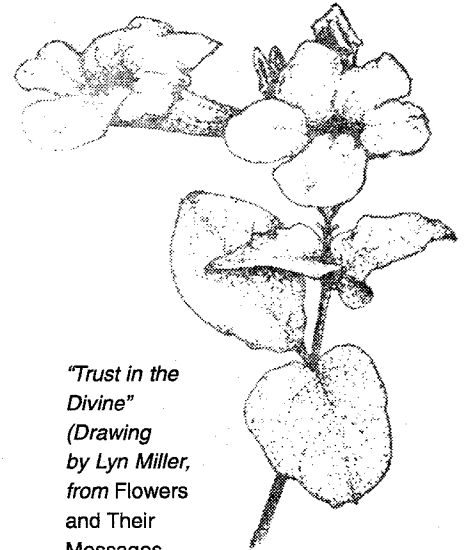
**Richard:** I lived with Udar’s family for a few months until my father arrived after being released from the army. The Mother gave him a room and I stayed with him until 1956, at which time he left. He started several schools on the lines of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo—one in Bhagalpur, one at the Delhi Ashram, and one in Bangalore. In 1962 he invited me to help him as a teacher in Bangalore.

**Anie:** Did you go?

**Richard:** I asked the Mother. She replied to me in strong and touching words. She said, “Richard, my dear child: I have absolutely no intention of letting you leave from here—we have need of you and your excellent work. I consider you like my son and I have great confidence in your future from the point of view of yoga. With my blessings.”

**Anie:** Tell me about your connection with physical education and how you became a captain?

**Richard:** In the beginning I was not so interested in games and sports, but I did love gymnastics and swimming. We also had more boxing than I enjoyed, because Biren Chandra, our captain and leader,



“Trust in the Divine”  
(Drawing by Lyn Miller, from *Flowers and Their Messages*, p. 24)

was a well-known boxer. Later when the Mother sat and watched the strong men, boys, and a couple of girls doing strengthening exercises after group was over, I used to practice roller-balancing in a corner by myself. Even later, our captain gathered together a select group to study, reflect, and discuss the means of applying Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s teachings in our life and activities both individually and collectively.

When my name was suggested for taking a group as a captain, the Mother refused to accept it. She told me I should not have to run from one activity to another. “Work done well is work done quietly,” she added. When the Captain’s Group was formed in 1963, however, it was the Mother who then accepted my joining. I was chosen to address the prayer to her in the Playground on the occasion of wearing our new uniform (24 April 1963).

### Kailas arrives

**Anie:** How did you meet Kailas and in what way did the Mother encourage your relationship?

**Richard:** Our meeting came at a time when I had overworked myself. I had no servant and was teaching and doing the labwork. I wanted to catch a beehive from a tree trunk, set about to do this on my own, and was stung. One sting became



septic and a stinger remained in my little finger. I had to go to the nursing home and Dr. Sanyal operated to remove the stinger.

The nurse who looked after me was Janina, the artist. She brought me back to life, as I was in a critical stage. I had no stamina and was very weak and thin. Mother gave Janina the force for this work. Janina showed me that the dark side of oneself is also oneself and has to be accepted and offered to the Mother.

Meanwhile, Dr. Sanyal had gone to New York for his own operation for Parkinson's disease; Kailas met him while he was there. He told her that when she was ready to come to the Ashram, he would arrange for a place for her to stay.

Janina passed away on her birthday, 17 July 1964, and Kailas arrived on 14 August. She was brought to the nursing home, as there was no vacancy anywhere in the Ashram. On Kailas's birthday, 11 June 1965, I went with her to see the Mother. Mother gave several large books to her, then turned to me and said, "Aren't you a gentleman?" She meant I should have thought of helping Kailas with the books, but I was so shy.

I was thirty years old at that time. Kailas taught me how to be open with myself. I was a different person before she arrived, always resisting everything and reluctant to show my feelings. I would not even stop to take tea. Mona Pinto used to say about me, "This boy never had a Mother!"

I did not have many friends and didn't know how to make social contact. Kailas would ask, "Is there anything you would like to discuss?" I wasn't accustomed to that kind of interaction, but began to find the value of sharing my thoughts and feelings with others. During that period, the Mother sent us a copy of *The Adventure of Consciousness* and asked us to read it together. This drew us closer together and we began to have fixed times for meditation and to share our meals. Kailas was so free, full of vitality and exuberance, that I began to change from a shy person to a sociable, joyous one.

Kailas and I had two things in common: a love of beauty and a love of flow-

ers. She knew their significances. She had started a sort of communion with the Mother through flowers that lasted for over four years. She started it by sending a dinner-size dish filled with "Purity" (jasmine) with a lotus-shaped small vase in the center, holding a rose of "Surrender," both of which indicated her aspiration. The Mother took them herself and filled her dish with flowers of "Divine Grace." This went on for as long as the "Divine Grace" was blooming. I watched this with great interest.

The Mother then changed the flowers to the "Supramental Psychological Perfection," again as long as they were in season, with the "Supramental Consciousness" in the center. Then the dish would come back with flowers of "Perfect Radiating Purity," "Purity in Action," and so on. The central flowers could change to the "Supramental Sun," anything connected with the supramental or sachidananda. The Mother would arrange these flowers herself.

After some time, I too started, when given permission, to send flowers for the Mother. The last flowers the Mother sent to me were in a garland of "Devotion."

I used to press all the flowers sent to us. We would send flowers covered with a beautiful cloth. In the Indian tradition, when flowers are given to the guru, they should not be seen, touched, nor smelled by anyone else. (Mother said, "When I give them [flowers], I give you states of consciousness."—*Flowers and Their Messages*)

### **Flowers and Their Messages**

**Anie:** When did the flower work begin and the work on the book *Flowers and Their Messages*?

**Richard:** I was always touched by the array of flowers arranged in trays when we went one by one to see the Mother. Mother would give us a flower and look deeply into our eyes, so very deep. I would take the flower straight home and keep it in a bottle or vase and keep it fresh for as long as possible. ("Answering with the flower's answer to the Sun, they gave themselves to Her and asked no more."—*Savitri*)

When I saw the book *Le Role de Fleurs* by Lizelle Raymond, a French woman living in the Ashram, published in 1953, I found the introduction to be a masterpiece. It was about how flowers were offered to the Mother and how she gave her blessings through flowers. "There are three ways of blessing of the Mother: by sight, by touch, and through flowers. And it is through flowers that her blessing is most effective," Sri Aurobindo is reported to have written.

I was very touched by the book. All the flowers were in order according to the French names given. When I saw it, I found some mistakes in the botanical names and in the significances. I wrote to the Mother asking if I could work on a flower book that would contain all the names Mother had given. Mother said, "Yes, this could be done."

This development began the new classification in 1957, but it was not completed until 1973. During the work, Pavitra sent messages to the Mother for me. He was another of my mentors. When I went to his room, as soon as I entered I would feel that I was in the Mother's room, so strong was her force. In his presence, I would feel the presence of the Mother. [Pavitra, a Frenchman, whose European name was P.B. Saint-Hilaire, was a highly skilled scientist and engineer. He was head of the Ashram school and secretary to the Mother. Pavitra's name, given by Sri Aurobindo, means "the pure."]

When Auroville was inaugurated and the idea for the twelve gardens was being worked out with Roger [Anger], Mother called me to bring as many hibiscus flowers as possible to Auroville. I went every Tuesday. At the first meeting with Mother, she explained that she wanted to choose a hibiscus flower for each of the gardens. The first day, she chose "Supramental Consciousness" for the Garden of Consciousness. "It is so luminous," she remarked.

Richard Eggenberger (named Narad by the Mother) helped me in bringing the flowers. The work on the flowers began with great vigor in the first gardens of Auroville when Narad started the nursery for





Matrimandir Gardens in 1969. He collected many varieties and beautifully built up the gardens.

Hibiscus flowers would come from the nursery for the Mother and would be left at the Ashram reception. Kailas and I would go and, if possible, paint these flowers before they went upstairs. Mother first called "Godhead" the Auroville flower, but then changed it to "Beauty of Supramental Love." She told me that this flower was similar to the rich, red color of Auroville soil. Many hibiscus were given names for Auroville: "The Success of Auroville," "The Firmness of Auroville," "The Concentration of Auroville," etc. Later, she changed the word Auroville to "New Creation."

The biggest gift from the Mother for the work with flowers was the commentaries she gave on the flowers. She would work on about five flowers per day at a fixed time. These were checked the following day by Tara. These commentaries, done in 1970 and 1971, were for the "flower book," which was still in progress. When they were translated by Tehmi into English, Narad came in the evenings, all the way from Auroville, to help with the botanical and common names, and descriptions of the flowers and the plants for *Flowers and Their Messages*.

Since Mother used flowers as a help for our spiritual progress, Kailas felt that the relevant quotations from the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo would help the reader. So she chose appropriate passages. Lyn Miller did the line drawings.

At later stages, I would go to the press to check certain details in the hand-set final proofs. The book was one of the early publications from Auropress.

## Memories of the Mother

**Anie:** Can you further share any stories about the Mother, more on your work for her, or special anecdotes that you remember?

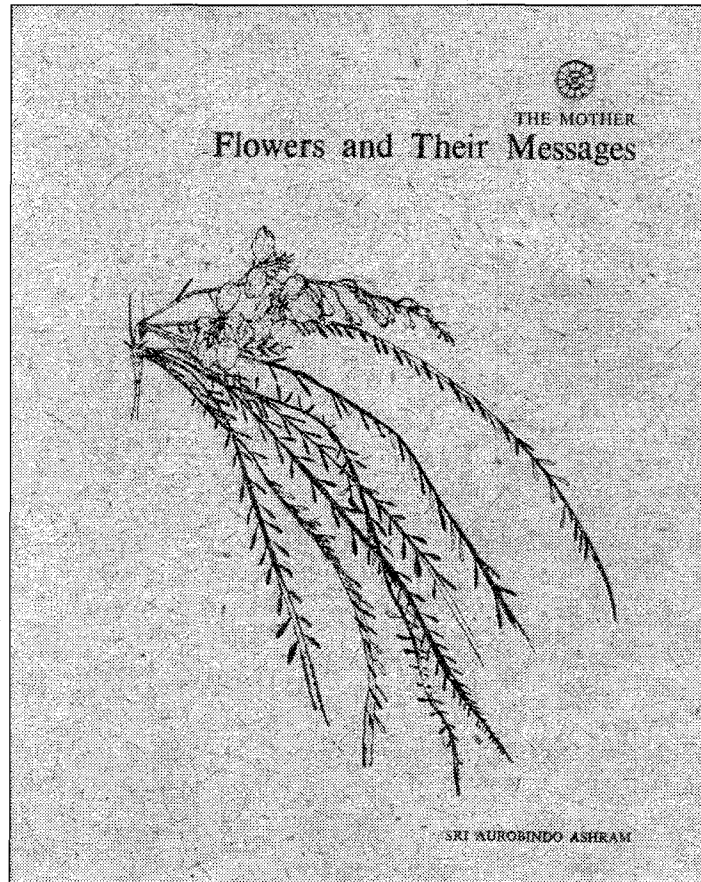
**Richard:** The Mother was so fond of flowers, according to Jyotin-da, that in the early days, before the Ashram had gar-

the fence was caught and even put behind bars for the offense, the Mother decided it was time to develop gardens. One of the first, Maret Gardens, was called "Atul's Garden" by the sadhaks after Atul, the very person who went to jail—and the one who was put in charge! Those were the days when houses or gardens could be haunted by spirits up to some mischief, so dear Atul-da had to deal with not-so-pleasant intruders!

After a few years, the townspeople, too, really came to know of the Mother's magical ways . . . of forcing "matter to express the Spirit." Once the Mother had decided that flowers would be grown in our gardens, she encouraged gardeners to try out all sorts of new varieties of flowers and vegetables. When a flower and vegetable show was arranged at the local botanical garden in Pondicherry, the flowers and plants displayed by the Ashram created an overwhelming presence of beauty and joy and peace—the beauty and bliss of the Divine Mother's grace! ("Flowers bring with them the smile of the Divine."—*Prayers and Meditations*)

Many were the stories Jyotin-da would tell. This is one that had baffled him when he tried to fathom the Mother's ways with her children. He

told me of a flower I had not seen, though I knew the tree. It was Jerusalem Thorn (*Parkinsonia aculeata*). He had taken it several times to the Mother when he saw it bloom, but she had not given it any significance. Others had tried asking her but in vain. It was during the early days of Auroville and there was a young girl in her teens who had come to the Mother on her birthday. She brought these flowers with their feathery leaves to Mother. Mother smiled as she took the flowers and exclaimed, "Oh, this is 'Lightness'!" The



Cover of *Flowers and Their Messages* (© Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1979)

dens, the old saying "beg, borrow, or steal" was the method used to procure flowers for the Mother for distribution. So with hurricane lantern, stick, and basket in hand, and a pair of nimble legs to climb over walls, our would-be gardeners went out by night or early morning. Perhaps in those days of rigorous sadhana, when you would not go for a walk or to visit another sadhak without the Mother's express permission, the end justified the means!

But when during one such "sortie" a sadhak who was not quick enough to jump



girl, with lovely blonde hair flowing over her shoulders, was studying to be a ballet dancer!

Pavitra once asked me, when I was enthusiastically trying to persuade him to ask the Mother about a particular significance, "Do you think the Mother gives the name for the flowers, or for us?" At that moment I truly believed she gave names only to the flowers, but after this and other such experiences, I am convinced that it is both terrestrial and an individual gift of the Divine Mother.

With the children who arrived with their parents after 1939, little by little a new energy was present in the Ashram. One of the first things the Mother did was to use the French name for the flowers when talking with the children. By 1943, when the school officially opened, French became the language of instruction, as Mother would speak in French. The greetings of "Bonjour!" and "Bonne fete!" have defied time and space, and even now form the beautiful bond that unites us all with her.

Also, the Mother encouraged all forms of art and handiwork: embroidery, painting, carpentry, leather work—all means of expressing beauty by consecrated service and work, obliging matter to obey the spirit! The Ashram artists were only a handful in those days—Anilbaran, Jayantilal, Krishnalal, Sanjivan, and a few others. They painted as their offering to her. Though interested in land or seascapes, they also painted flowers for the Mother to name and she kept them in Pavitra's room until they were later moved to the studio.

**Anie:** How did you feel when you went to the Mother on your birthday?

**Richard:** The following quotation from *Prayers and Meditations* would best describe what we felt when the Mother gave flowers for our birthday, the most special day, individually speaking, of the year. We saw her several times on that day and each time we would receive a special bouquet or garland and her special flower, her smile, and her presence.

"Each time that a heart leaps at Thy divine breath, a little more beauty seems

to be born upon the Earth, the air is embalmed with a sweet perfume, all becomes more friendly . . . At these blessed hours all earth sings a hymn of gladness, the grasses shudder with pleasure, the air is vibrant with light, the trees lift towards heaven their most ardent prayer, the chant of the birds becomes a canticle, the waves of the sea billow with love, the smile of the children tells of the infinite and the souls of men appear in their eyes." (*Prayers and Meditations*, 31 March 1917) ♪

### Richard and Kailas today

Richard and Kailas continue to offer their lives in service to the Mother. They are well known and loved in the United States and have visited many centers giving talks and beautiful slide presentations on *Flowers and Their Messages*. They live in the Ashram, but visit Auroville frequently. They receive and assist visitors and newcomers and both recently gave talks at the new Savitri Bhavan in Auroville, participating in the series of intimate sharings entitled "Remembering the Mother."

## Interview with Sunanda Poddar

### Keeper of Srismriti, the Mother's museum

by Anie Nunnally

**S**unanda Poddar has lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram since the age of sixteen, except for eight years when she worked in Africa for the Sri Aurobindo Book Distribution Agency (SABDA). Her name, given by her parents and unchanged by the Mother, means "full of happiness." Early on, Mother devoted much time to and showed great interest in this engaging and charismatic woman. Sunanda is the author of books and plays of fairytales for children, and was a teacher in Auroville and the Ashram school. She worked with her husband, the late Balkrishna Poddar, at SAB-

DA in the Ashram and in East Africa. Sunanda is a clairvoyant and pranic energy healer working with crystals. Since 1989, she has been the caretaker of Srismriti, the Mother's Museum. Here begins her extraordinary story. ♪

### Family background

**Anie:** Where were you born and what was your family life like? Were your parents spiritual people?

**Sunanda:** I was born in Nairobi, Kenya, on 24 February 1934. I was born into a family immersed in the inner, spiritual life, and my aunt performed routine Hindu religious ceremonies in her little temple. Before moving to Africa, both my parents worked for the freedom movement with Mahatma Gandhi at the grassroots level in the villages of Gujarat. They dispensed medicines where there had been floods and other problems such as epidemics.

They both became devotees of Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the late 1920s, and in 1929 they moved to Nairobi where my father's brother was living. They visited the Ashram long before I was born. They did not perform religious rites in our home, but meditation was a daily part of our family life. My father, Shivabhai Amin, was a lawyer and had his office and practice in Nairobi.

**Anie:** What were your special talents? Did they manifest early in your childhood? What were your childhood ambitions and dreams?

**Sunanda:** I was influenced by my parents' love of work with the freedom movement in India. I dreamed of becoming a doctor and settling in a village in India where there was no doctor so that I could treat the unfortunate free of charge. I was very idealistic.

**Anie:** Were you aware of a spiritual presence in your childhood? When did you first begin to aspire deeply for the spiritual life?

**Sunanda:** I loved the religious ceremonies my aunt performed, and I joined her in fasting and worship of the idols in her small temple. My parents did not want me to go to the temples, but explained to



me that God listened to your prayers at home, in school, on the road, or whenever you called sincerely. My family did not have much of a social life, and I did not have many playmates in childhood. I loved the garden in our home, and as a child I entered into fantasy play there and had long conversations with flower fairies and the god Shiva, who became my personal god. This life was so real to me that I thought everyone had a similar life (i.e., the life within).

As I grew up, I realized that my life with the fairies and Shiva was not like everyone else, so there was a remote search for something of which I was not fully aware at that time. The fairies were to remain with me for my lifetime, but Shiva ultimately was replaced by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

### Coming to the Ashram

**Anie:** When did you come to the Ashram for the first time and when did you have the darshan of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother?

**Sunanda:** It was in 1942 and I was eight years old. I came with my parents and was so taken with the Mother's beauty, her love, the flowers everywhere, and the quiet, nightly meditations under the service tree. I wanted to stay and go to the school that Mother was forming at that time, but there was not as yet a boarding facility and neither of my parents could stay with me there, so we had to return to Africa.

I had darshan of Sri Aurobindo that August 1942, but I don't remember how he looked. I remember the garlands we carried for the Mother and the tulsi (basil) garlands for Sri Aurobindo. The predominant feeling for me then was that of a very special event at a very special place where I felt that I wanted to be.

**Anie:** When did you return for your final stay?

**Sunanda:** I returned in 1951 when I was just sixteen. My father had sent me to the Ashram on a visit specifically to ask the Mother if I should take up medicine or law for my further education. I so much wanted to be a doctor, but my father want-



*Sunanda Poddar. (Photo: Anie Nunnally)*

ed me to take up law. I had left home on my own for the first time and was staying in Golconde. In fact, I was the youngest person to ever stay in Golconde.

The first day I went to the Mother's darshan, she gave me a flower and smiled sweetly. In the evening in the Playground, I stood with the visitors. As the Mother distributed *prasad*, she asked me, "Don't you want to join the other children in exercises?" I said "Yes, Mother, I'd like to." She said, "Tomorrow you give your measurements for shorts and shirts." That next evening one pair of shorts and a shirt were given to me and my new life began, without my even knowing about it or deciding about it on my own. This truly shows the greatness of the Mother. I joined a group but was not yet in school.

Everyday I would go to the library, which was in the main Ashram compound then. Vasanti-di was working there at that time. She would see me everyday reading poetry and books. Then in the afternoons I would go wherever I could see or be near the Mother.

### The Mother's presence

**Anie:** Could you describe what it was like to be in the Mother's presence in those days?

**Sunanda:** The Mother used to dress in a long gown with matching scarf on her head. When she came out on the terrace outside her room, the time was between 10 and 11 a.m. Her close companion, Chinmayee, carried a parasol to protect the Mother's head from the scorching sun. A crow would invariably come and hop onto the ledge of the terrace. Chinmayee would hand over some biscuits to the Mother, who in turn would feed them to the crow! I mostly looked at her lovely pastel colored clothes and matching parasols and her lovely smile.

In the evenings when she would give darshan at the head of the staircase, she was like a goddess from the scriptures. She wore saris and embroidered bands over her forehead. She looked taller than when I saw her during the mornings. She radiated light, light, and more light. She received our flowers and we bowed down



*The photo in which Sunanda confirmed the presence of fairies (see p. 22). In this low-resolution, black-and-white copy, little of mystery can be seen; the original version (full-page, in color) is quite magical. (Photo: Christophe Alward)*

to her feet. She looked into our eyes and smiled down on us as we looked up at her. Often her smile was like a silent laugh. She gave us some flowers and then we came down the staircase. I did not want to look at anyone because her image was in my eyes and I wanted to hold on to it for as long as I possibly could.

By 1951, things were quite different. The school and many other workshops were functioning at that time. The Playground was a must for everyone. There were many more people then than when I first came in 1942. Mother would come down to play tennis at 4 p.m. She would come down the staircase and look at us and smile. Her smile was very important to us. She would get into her Bentley car, Pavitra would drive. I would run as fast as I could to the tennis grounds with Pavitra driving slowly alongside so that I could see Mother arriving and getting out of the car. Then we would all sit and watch her play tennis.

### **A life decision**

**Anie:** When did you become officially connected to the Ashram and begin your classes in the school?

**Sunanda:** After I had been in the Ashram for two months, an interview was arranged for me by my father's friend Dhyuman. It was to be my initial personal interview. I sat on the ground and Mother sat on a low chair. The Mother said, "What would you like to ask?" Instead of asking her if I should study law or medicine, I found myself asking her if I should stay in the Ashram or go out of the Ashram to study. She said, "What do you want to do in life?" I told her that my father wanted me to study law but that I wanted to study medicine. Mother said, "We'll forget about law because you are not interested in it."

She asked me in great detail why I wanted to study medicine. I told her that it was not for money, but that I wanted to help the poor, unfortunate people of India for no charge. I told her that I had a great love for India and that Shiva was my personal god.

The Mother said, "I can see that you would make a good doctor—but what I see today you may not be aware of, and you may lose that if you go out of the Ashram." I asked, "Mother, if I stay, will you accept me?" She said,

"But I have already accepted you."

In those days, gold was given for its inner qualities of warmth and purity; the money-oriented reasons came later. I had two bangles, a chain and earrings. I said to Mother, "Please take my jewelry." I had no money and no other valuables to give her. That was the moment when becoming an Ashramite was final.

Mother said, "I will arrange for you to study medicine here." This was amazing to me because there was only one hospital in Pondicherry at that time: the General (Government) Hospital. So Mother went to Nirodbaran and asked him to teach me medicine! The Mother told him to do this and he did it. Then she said that I was to go to the main Ashram school as well. Nirodbaran gave me a huge, monstrous book to read on anatomy (this was all such a humorous thing). He said, "Here, you read this," and I did because Mother said to do it! I sat on the parapet near the samadhi with this ages-old edition, probably the one he used from the early 1900s, and religiously read page after page of the book.

This study went on for a few months, and after some time, Nirodbaran gave it up. Dr. Sen joined the Ashram and opened a clinic to treat students injured on the Playground. After group, I would work with him helping people who had gotten hurt on the Playground. Finally, Dr. Sanyal was given the job of training all the students interested in medicine. He took seven of us to the General Hospital to see a dead body and view the internal organs. I think this is what ended my interest in medicine. I was around eighteen or so during this period.

### **Visiting Mother**

**Anie:** You visited Mother on a regular basis for quite some time. How did you receive this special blessing?

**Sunanda:** There were three photographs in the Ashram reception hall—one on the east side, one on the west side, and one in the center of the room. In the photo on the left-hand side, I could not see Sri Aurobindo, I could only see Shiva. I would rub my eyes and open and close them in disbelief. I was feeling quite guilty





about this, as I had accepted Mother and Sri Aurobindo as my gurus and felt that I should only worship them and not Shiva.

I was also continuing to fast on Mondays. A girl from my group had asked me to have lunch with her. I told her I was not taking food. She gave me quite a lecture about not being faithful and that I was worshipping old dieties. I was so ashamed. At pranam, I told Mother that I wanted to see her. I mentioned my situation and she listened carefully. She asked me details about my worship of Shiva. I told her of my childhood in the garden and how I had grown up with Shiva. I asked her to help me see Sri Aurobindo. She had a small book by her table. She opened the book at random and said, "Here, read this." The sentence was Sri Aurobindo telling someone in a letter, "Shiva and I are one." The Mother said, "Don't worry about things, slowly a time will come when you will call us. She said, "It will be Ma, Shiva, Ma, Shiva at first."

Then I made a concerted effort to switch. I sat for meditation, then it happened and it was no longer disturbing to me. She also asked me other details of what I experienced when I was quiet and on my own. At that time, I told her of the visions that I saw at times. She asked me if I still had these visions and I told her that I saw many things. She asked me to write down things as I experienced them and to send them to her. She said that if sometimes I had something special to tell her, I should come to her room in the mornings before school. She wanted to help me give meaning and explanations to my experiences. I went to her room everyday after that from 1952 to 1954. I would tell her of my visions.

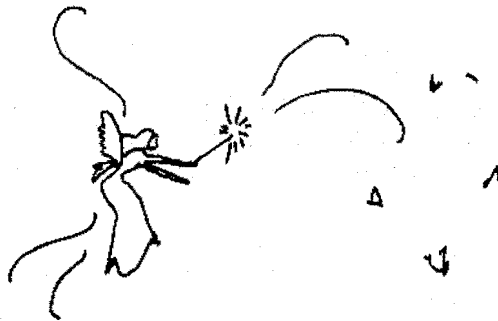
Sometimes I would go and spend time by the sea in the evenings. Once I saw an impression of the Mother's feet in the sand. I started praying that the tide would not roll in and wipe out the impression. Suddenly the impression rose above the ground and into the air. When I related this to the Mother, she smiled and was silent. A few months later on my birthday, along with flowers, there was a bundle wrapped

in cloth given to me by the Mother. It was a pair of her gold brocade *chappals* that had been made in the Ashram. I knew that this was connected with my vision on the beach and that she had given them to me as a result of that experience. So much was communicated through the Mother without the use of words. There would be an understanding of what was to be said through a flower you gave or that she gave to you.

I then began to speak to Mother about the fairies that I had been seeing since childhood. She would sometimes just listen and at other times explain things. [At that age, Sunandaben did not even know what the word *clairvoyant* meant—but she is one. She also has the gift of seeing auras and working with pranic energy. She can scan the body for diseases, blockages, and imbalances.]

### The world of fairies

**Anie:** Could you share something of your voyage into the world of fairies and how your fairy stories and plays were published?



Fairy. (Drawing by Lynda Lester)

**Sunanda:** I was staying in Golconde. Each day I would write about what had happened in my dreams and experiences. I would write in the mornings, and at night would tear the pieces of paper up and throw them in the wastebasket in my room at Golconde.

One day Mona came and said, "What is it that you are tearing up to such an extent and throwing away?" I was so embarrassed. I went to Mother and told her that something pushes me to write and then I

tear everything up and throw it away. She said, "Anything coming to you like this is not your writing and you've no business to tear it up and throw it away. Write everything down and bring it to me."

So that started another step in my connection with the Mother. I took my writings to her everyday. After a few days, she said there were some nice things in the papers. She said, "Why don't you tell stories to the children?" I asked her what stories I should tell. "If they are fairytales from the West, then I can surely do that, or Indian myths as well."

Mother said, "Neither. You will go to a classroom, sit there, and any children who want to listen to your stories can go to that room. The stories will come to you and you will tell them to the children."

There was such trepidation in my heart. I said, "Suppose they don't come to me?" But I said yes anyway and started telling the stories. I would have the experiences, write them down, and the next day tell the stories. My writings were passed on to the Mother, who gave them to Nolini. Nolini read them and found complete stories in them. Mother told him to separate the ones that could be published. There were no books for children in the Ashram at that time.

One day at the Playground (23-4-56; an auspicious date, due to the numerical sequence), Mother was giving *prasad*. She caught my hand and said, "Wait here." Why she had stopped me I did not know. Someone went inside and brought out a newly published book titled *Stories and Plays for Children*, and on the cover was my name at the bottom! My mother was so elated. I was just twenty-two years old. Balkrishna was there and had heard about the book. When I came away with the book, I wondered how this could have happened. Balkrishna told me he saw it while it was being printed. All the while everyone knew about this but me! [Sunanda continued to write and publish stories for children.]

**Anie:** Are the fairies complete material formations? How do they look? Are they like extensions of the plant world?

**Sunanda:** The fairies that I saw in the



garden as a child never seemed to be a big deal to me. In fact, I thought everyone saw them. They actually had physical forms. They weren't there all the time. Sometimes I would see them and sometimes not.

Yes, they generally looked like extensions of the plant world. They appeared as one would imagine flower fairies would look. They had wings on them and were always cloaked in pastel colors. I have never seen a fairy with very dark colors. Even the red ones were transparent with a lot of light play around them. They were always full of light and very luminous as if edged in light. They were often gold and silver. They were not even as large as a small baby. They were no bigger than about 9 to 12 inches. This is not a permanent world, but always a changing, newly forming world.

**Anie:** Do the fairies wear actual clothing? Do they have human-like faces? Do they speak? Do you still see them? Do you think that this world increased for you after you told the Mother about the fairies? Are the fairies the same as the beings called *devas* who preside over gardens?

**Sunanda:** Some fairies have human faces. Others have birdlike faces or flower faces. Some had crowns made with subtle light formations or flowers. The clothing was like gossamer, very transparent like dragonfly wings. They mostly communicated with feelings, but sometimes talked among themselves. I still see this world of fairies. They are the same entities as *devas*. They still come to me, although I am practicing yoga. Now there is more meaning in them for me. I see them as spirits of the vegetable kingdom—not just as playmates any more.

Not only did this world of fairies increase through the Mother, but a whole world of beauty, refinement, and the realization of her perfection in works was shown. Now I call them “beings”—overseers of the plant kingdom. Sometime the larger beings take the smaller beings into the tops of the trees. Christophe (the son of Svetlana) took a photo at Lake Estate. He had it blown up and gave it to a friend as a birthday gift because he took it in a

beautiful spot at a lovely time of day when the light was creating special effects on the ground. A mutual friend saw the photo and found something “mystical” in it. She brought it to me for confirmation. I confirmed the presence of fairies in the photo.

[I asked Sunanda to bring me the photo to the next day. I clearly saw the phenomenon. Sunanda had to point out some things, but I saw many of these subtle images myself and in some instances they were quite visible.]

**Anie:** What do you see as being the purpose for this extrasensory sight you have been given?

**Sunanda:** It has made me more aware of the consciousness of the subtle worlds. It has helped me to become more aware of the world around me as it relates to the worlds within. It has expanded my consciousness and even helps me when I heal people. It has given me an inner contact with plants and flowers and the entities behind them. It has put me in closer contact with the Mother. It is a gift from the Mother that has helped me to give meaning to my visions and contact with the inner worlds.

**Anie:** Have you ever seen Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the subtle worlds?

**Sunanda:** Yes, I have seen them on the subtle planes. They appear as human forms, but when they “walk” they advance without taking steps. They move as though in a gliding motion over the subtle surfaces. Generally Sri Aurobindo is seen in white, blue, and gold. The Mother has all the subtle pastel colors.

### Working for SABDA

**Anie:** Can you share the story of your meeting with, marriage to, and work with Balkrishna Poddar?

**Sunanda:** I was around twenty-three years old and teaching English in the Ashram school in the mornings. I asked the Mother for some additional work for the afternoons after school. Simultaneously, Balkrishna had asked the Mother for a helper at the Sri Aurobindo Book Distribution Agency (SABDA). The Mother gave this work to me. I started keeping the accounts and was introduced to book sales work.

Balkrishna and I developed a friendship. He had such a pure nature and was a most sympathetic man. Eventually marriage was discussed and we put this to the Mother who gave us the permission to marry. She asked us to open a SABDA branch in East Africa and to continue the book sales there. She said, “I will keep you as my children and will call you back to the Ashram. This arrangement will not be permanent.”

We remained there for eight years. Every two years we returned to the Ashram to report on the work to the Mother. For our upkeep, we both took jobs in local schools as teachers. We moved around in our small Volkswagen through all the large towns and small villages with books on top of the carrier. We arranged exhibitions on the Ashram and gave talks at schools and temples and conference halls, just the two of us with no one else. We trudged through the jungles of Africa, and with Mother's grace and protection we managed to escape a herd of charging elephants, swarms of locusts, and serious floods along the way. It was quite an adventure.

**Anie:** When you returned to the Ashram after being in Africa, what did you do?

**Sunanda:** I taught in Auroville in the Last School. There were several of us graduates from the Ashram school who went out to Auroville three times a week, then came back by 12:30 p.m. to the Ashram. The children were mixed ages, post-kindergarten. I did this for one-and-a-half years. Balkrishna had come back to continue his work for SABDA. I worked for SABDA in the background only.

However, in 1974 I gave up teaching and went to work full-time for SABDA. I helped to establish the SABDA branch on Rue de la Marine.

In August 1989, the old Nishta flat became available, and the Ashram decided to use it to display the articles of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Balkrishna had a heart attack in 1994. I had also begun to have some heart problems. I asked the Ashram to give me work where I would not have to deal with business. They put me in charge of the



museum under the able advice of Jayantilal, Krishnalal, and Vasudev. ❧

### Srismriti Museum

The Srismriti Museum is located in the large building across from the Ashram Playground. It is quartered in the flat that was once occupied by Nishta (Margaret Woodrow Wilson), the daughter of the twenty-eighth president of the United States. She had lived there in the late 1930s. Krishnalal, Sunanda, and Jayantilal named the museum *Srismriti*, which means "highest remembrance" in Sanskrit.

Sunanda's keenly developed sense of taste and aesthetics is most obvious in the way in which she has arranged and set up the museum. She also takes the greatest care to keep all objects polished, clean, and dust-free. It is a joy to see the case of small stuffed animals and tiny little animal figures in wood and porcelain, given as gifts by disciples to the Mother. They carry such a life force and all appear as though they are on the verge of moving. Their eyes even shine with a lifelike sparkle. There is an indescribable charm in this unique little curio cabinet, and the entire museum itself is a special darshan experience.

Sunanda would not allow me to take photographs inside, but I would like to take everyone along on a virtual verbal-description tour of all the precious objects that are housed there.

The first room is long and rectangular with nine curio cabinets. There is an immense ornate chandelier hanging overhead that was given to the Mother by the royal family of Hyderabad. It once burned wick oil lamps, but was converted to electricity.

In the first cabinet are photos of the Mother, including photos of her balcony darshans bearing her signature, a baroque glass platter with Mother's photo in the center, some of Mother's original sketches, and a magnificent late nineteenth century French clock.

The second cabinet has a collection of blessings packets, and articles used by the Mother such as combs, hairpieces, and European perfume bottles.

The third cabinet holds postage stamps of Mother and Sri Aurobindo issued by the Indian Government.

The fourth includes saris and shawls used by the Mother when she was writing *Prayers and Meditations* in the Ashram, Mother's gold watch, and Huta's painting of Mother at the organ.



*Chandelier in Mother's Museum from the palace of the prince of Hyderabad State. (Photo courtesy Sunanda Poddar)*

In the fifth cabinet one finds French boxes, hand-painted cards, and purses in brocaded fabric given as gifts to the Mother.

The sixth holds paperweights, clocks, hand-painted writing paper, a pen used by Sri Aurobindo and later given to the Mother, and desk calendars. One of the calendars used by the Mother was opened to the pages of March and April 1962 showing times set aside for Dimitri (4 February 1962) and Sam Spanier (12 March 1962)! There are some Egyptian scarab beetles and the head of a pigeon, both occult objects.

The seventh cabinet holds dishes and utensils used by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It also stores a fourteen-inch knife made by Harpagon especially for the Mother to cut her enormous eightieth birthday cake!

The eighth is filled with beautiful saris.

The ninth holds stationery, bookmarks, and notebooks used in Mother's French classes. It also has a typewriter given to the Mother by Rabindranath Tagore.

Also in this room is a stunning brass oil lamp with sixty-five wick lamps and an ornate brass peacock sitting on top that was given by the poet and film star, Harindranath Chattopadhyay. The room also holds chairs used by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo before 1926.

The second room has eleven cabinets filled with offerings to Mother and Sri Aurobindo by disciples, and the Mother's toy collection (wooden, paper mache, clay, and stuffed). It has mother-of-pearl shells, glass animals, and Czechoslovakian and Russian dolls in ethnic dress. There are miniature elephants in varying sizes carved from ivory, some so miniscule that a magnifying glass is needed to identify the shapes. There are also jeweled puja and ceremonial objects of worship such as Vishnu on Garuda; chariots in ivory; Ganesh, Radha, and Krishna in soapstone; and other deities in wood and brass. Mother's baskets, Japanese chappals, silver articles, geodes, stones, and shells are also displayed.

There is a handsome teakwood sideboard, a Buddhist cabinet, articles made by Ashramites for Mother's use, and a silk brocaded floral jacket given by the Hyderabad royal family. There are also articles given by the Mother for the theater department such as makeup, crowns, old upholstery for cloaks, and silver and ivory spoons.

The next room has a decorated setting using some of Sri Aurobindo's old furniture and belongings. There is a bed, a wicker chair with imprints on it from Sri



Aurobindo's head, clothing, a carpet, pens, paperweights made from elephant tusks, and the typewriter Sri Aurobindo used when preparing *The Arya*. There is also a footstool with indentations on it from Sri Aurobindo's feet, and a photo of Sri Aurobindo etched in glass. There are trays holding the earliest teacups that Mother used when she brought tea to Sri Aurobindo in the afternoons. There are dhotis, kurtas, shawls, bedcovers painted by sadhaks, and screens from Burma and India. There is a steel trunk with brass fittings that Sri Aurobindo used when he sailed to Pondicherry after his acquittal in Calcutta.

The final room houses the Mother's exquisite Japanese Collection. These artifacts were collected by the Mother or given as gifts during her stay in Japan from 1916 to 1920. They include such items as *kimonos* and *obis*, brush paintings, paintings on silk, teapots and pottery, fans, and dolls in traditional Japanese costume. Viewing the museum was an experience that remains profoundly etched in my memory.

### In closing

In closing, I asked Sunanda to give me an assessment of her fifty years in the Ashram and what the Integral Yoga had done for her at her present age of sixty-six years. This is her reply. ☺

**Sunanda:** I am here because I could not exist anywhere else. Mother has filled a void created in me in 1973 when she left her body by allowing me to see her presence in the subtle physical world, which she shows to me now and then. On the days when I sincerely want to see her, she appears to me vividly. She allows my travel in the subtle physical regions on various levels. I also see and feel Sri Aurobindo more vividly since 1973 than ever before. The other world, the side beyond the curve feels very near. The psychic, the soul, the Atman, Paramaatman exist in the shimmering, throbbing, scintillating light. There is no sense of separateness, no individuality. I could never tear myself from such an existence as I have here in the Ashram. How and why should I give it up?

## Interview with Gauri Pinto

*Teacher in the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*

by Anie Nunnally

**M**y return visit to Fenetres on Rue St. Gilles in Pondicherry, home of the Pinto family, found me again being greeted at the door by the furry likes of Starry, Jackie-Boy, Cutie, Tina, Brownie, Radha, and other of Gauri Pinto's numerous cats and dogs that she nurtures back to health so assiduously after rescuing them from the streets of Pondicherry. As we began our interview, Gauri served my favorite drink, Power Syrup, made in the Ashram. It is a blend of the essences of the hibiscus flower and roses diluted in water. The drink was introduced to me in 1968 by the Pinto family. It is a most refreshing, cooling drink in the tropics.

Our initial conversation centered around the rather violent cyclone that had just touched down in Pondicherry a few days prior to my arrival. My first rickshaw ride through the Government Park was startling; it looked like a war zone. All the leaves on the trees appeared to have been burned. Most trees were barren and empty of greenery, rendering the heat from the scorching sun all the more intense. Limbs were down everywhere and trees had toppled into the walls surrounding the governor's mansion as well as onto other buildings and houses.

Leaves, limbs, and branches were burning on the corners of the streets, filling the air with a billowing, acrid, choking cloud of smoke. Gauri said that the winds had been so powerful that all the moisture had been drawn from the leaves. The Ashram lost almost all of its "Transformation" trees. The winds, reaching up to 100 miles per hour, had churned up the waves from the Bay of Bengal with such force that stones had been sent hurling from the retaining wall clear across the beach boulevard as though a battle had been

launched. That road had to be closed off to traffic and pedestrians for more than eight hours. It was the worst storm to hit the area in thirty years. Ashramites spoke of the Kali Yuga in connection with the cyclone.

Gauri told me that she was born Judy Ann Pinto on 16 November 1937 to Mona and Laurence (Udar) Pinto. They had just had their first darshan of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo a few months earlier. The Mother had requested that the baby should be born in the hospital in Bangalore where Udar's aunt was a doctor, as there were no good hospitals in Pondicherry at that time.

After six weeks in Bangalore, she was brought home to Pondicherry, but was fragile and prone to sickness. There was much concern over the new baby's health, as she was not taking her food properly and was underweight. She did not sleep well during the night and kept her parents awake and concerned. Doctors were consulted and Udar and Mona entered into correspondence with the Mother regarding the matter.

When she was about two months old, Udar wrote asking if he could bring her to the Mother. The Mother replied, "I do not find it prudent, still, to bring the child into the Ashram atmosphere. It is better to wait one year more." This practice actually became a rule in the Ashram. Babies and infants were not allowed to go, as they could easily feel and absorb the power and could not support the force.

Gauri showed me a large envelope filled with correspondence that had been sent to the Mother seeking advice and help in connection with her eating problem. In many instances Sri Aurobindo would answer, as the Mother was so busy organizing the Ashram. In answer to one letter Sri Aurobindo replied, "Have you tried Horlick's Malted Milk Powder?"! (Horlick's is a British product that is popular in India.) In another letter, Mona stated that the doctor advised that the baby be starve-fed. This meant withdrawing the feedings until she became really hungry and on a settled schedule. Sri Aurobindo responded, "The Mother does not approve of starve-feeding the child." This correspondence was





so very touching—here was the avatar, Sri Aurobindo, who brought down *The Life Divine* and *Savitri*, giving out loving advice for a little baby who wouldn't eat! A. B. Purani, a close friend of the family, also became involved and offered his parental advice and wisdom on childcare.

Eventually her eating habits normalized and she gained the proper weight. Gauri told me that Ambu, the late Ashram hatha yoga teacher (to whom the Mother addressed her letters, "To My Faithful Baby"), was her nanny!

"Ambu looked after me, gave me oil baths, fed me and took me for walks while my parents worked for the Mother," Gauri said. She added that she was surrounded by so many Tamil *amahs* (maidservants) from the beginning that she learned very early in her childhood how to speak the Tamil language fluently. ~

### Early memories

**Anie:** What was your earliest recollection of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo? What were you told about the Mother in early childhood and when did you realize she was someone special, not like everyone else?

**Gauri:** When we used to go for the balcony darshans when I was still very small, I would say "Big Mama is coming, Big Mama is coming." I was brought up essentially with no religion. I was very close to nature and animals. When I thought of God, I saw Sri Aurobindo's image. Also, I did not think of the Mother as a human being. It wasn't planned out for me that she would appear as a Goddess, but that's how it was in actuality. The Mother told my mother that I was a very old soul.

When we would go up to see Mother on darshan days, she was like a mother to all of us. She taught us children so much. We would sit down before her and she would pet us on the head. We would go to the Mother and have lunch with her. The queues were long waiting to see Sri Aurobindo. We would see him four times a year. I saw him up to the age of thirteen, at which time he left his body in 1950. He was for me the personification of compas-

sion. There was always so much light around him. I always saw this light around him and a loving, compassionate smile on his face.

Once I was bitten in the face by a dog and became frightened of all dogs after that experience. My father's aunt came to visit and felt it was not good for me to be

them run about. One pup, however, went and sat at Sri Aurobindo's feet and stared up at him with a transfixed expression. Mother said, "That is the one Gauri should keep." Mother named it "Beau."

**Anie:** Did you have other children to play with? The Ashram school had not been established when you were of school



Gauri Pinto. (Photo: Anie Nunnally)

so afraid of dogs. On her next visit, she brought me a Dalmatian puppy. I was so scared that I jumped on the table to get away from it, but eventually I grew to love it. The Mother named the dog "Spotted Beauty."

When it was time for Spotted Beauty to be mated, the Mother arranged for the dog to go to "visit" her friend, Madame Baron, the wife of the French governor of Pondicherry. They had a male Dalmatian, so Spotted Beauty went to live in the governor's mansion! She gave birth to a litter of seven pups. I took them to the Mother and she was so charmed by the dogs that she took all seven into Sri Aurobindo's room. He did not touch them but watched

age. Where did you go to school and what was it like for you?

**Gauri:** When my father was sent to New Delhi by Sri Aurobindo in 1941 to work for the war effort for a few months, I was sent to a modern school there at the age of three years. My father told the Mother that he felt I needed some formal education. I had mostly only been around adults up to that point. When we came back to the Ashram from New Delhi, I was approaching four years of age.

The Mother put me with an English woman named Pavita. She was a very strict woman who used to go out and sweep the streets of Pondicherry! She had been the secretary to Paul Brunton. (Paul



Brunton was an occult journalist and author who wrote *A Search in Secret India*, *Secret Egypt*, and other philosophical books.) Pavita was the first teacher I remember, and it was not a good experience. I remember her as being rather stern and strict. She wanted me to be a genius and pushed me too hard. It killed my creativity. She did not have bad will, she just did not know how to handle small children. In fact, she later became a good teacher in the Ashram school when it started on 2 December 1943.

When the school opened, I was in a classroom with other children. It was so good to finally be with other children. The Mother herself would often read stories to us during her Wednesday evening classes in the Playground. She would characterize each animal and character in such a charming, loving way. However, one drawback for me when I began school was that I was held back in a class with younger children as I did not want Pavita to be my teacher any longer.

**Anie:** Could you further elaborate on why this was a drawback?

**Gauri:** Well, I developed a bit of a complex being older and taller than the other children in my class and I didn't try very hard.

### A new name

**Anie:** When and how was your name changed from Judy Ann to Gauri?

**Gauri:** Although I was very timid, I loved to dance and I particularly loved Indian dancing. I used to go to the library and listen to music. Whenever I heard music, I would begin to dance freely. I chose two people at the library to dance with me and I wore anklets with bells. I would change my name everyday. One day I would be Jasmine, the next day Lakshmi, and so on.

My mother and I used to go to the Mother each night before the meditations. One by one we would stand before the Mother. I would lift Mother's sari slightly so that I could see the anklets that she was wearing. I would tell the Mother my name for that day.

I was around five or so then. I loved

beautiful flowers and Mother kept tiny-sized "Psychological Perfection" flowers in a glass bowl next to her. The Mother taught me how to do math by putting the flowers into my hand, taking away one then adding two or three more. The Mother would look at my hands and say, "Mains de poupee" (*hands of a doll*). [Gauri is a tall, willowy woman with a refined and delicate face and hands and feet.]

One day I asked Mother for a name. She said, "I will give you a name if you promise you won't change it. I'll think about a name for you." Mother would determine the inner quality of a person and the meaning in the name she wanted to give that person. Then she would ask Sri Aurobindo to give the appropriate name in Sanskrit.

Later on I went to the Mother with

Ambu. After pranam Mother gave me the name "Gauri," which means "the fair one." Mother said she did not mean fair in terms of my skin but rather she wanted the name to convey "inner fairness," the quality of being fair. It was a very serious moment—Mother's eyes were so powerful as she looked into me. Then she said "Gauri" with the "au" pronounced like the French "o."

### Celebrating Christmas

**Anie:** How did the tradition of celebrating Christmas develop in the Ashram?

**Gauri:** The first Christmas we celebrated was in 1938 when I was just one year old. It took place in our house called "The Red House." The guests were Nishta (Margaret Woodrow Wilson), Ambu (our very close friend, the young hatha yoga



First Christmas celebrated in the Ashram, 1936 (L to R): François Sammer, one of the architects for Golconde; Nishta (Margaret Woodrow Wilson); Judy Ann Pinto (Gauri) being held by Mona Pinto; and Ambu, the hatha yoga instructor. (Photo courtesy the Pinto family)



teacher who looked after Nishta), and François Sammer (one of the architects for Golconde). Nishta made a big star to place on the top of the tree that year.

Later in 1943, when other children joined the Ashram, the Mother asked my mother to arrange the event for all the children. The Red House lawn was used and we arranged games, prizes, and gifts for the children. Hats were made and everyone wore a paper hat. All were made by Golconde residents. Even special crowns were made for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo! Dyuman used to come out into the streets and blow a trumpet on Christmas day and a special hat was also made for him.

When we moved to Fenêtres on Rue St. Gilles, the celebration continued there. When the house got too small, we shifted to the Playground where the Mother came to distribute the gifts to all the children and grownups. Finally when the theater was bought by the Ashram, the celebration was held there and the Mother came to give out presents and to admire the tree and all the decorations.

The Mother gave importance to Christmas. She told us that the initial celebration had come from the ancient Chaldean tradition (from the people who lived in the region of southwestern Asia on the Euphrates River called Mesopotamia, and among whom astrologers and magicians flourished). The wise men of that time observed that the calendar days toward the end of the year were growing shorter and shorter (at the Winter Solstice) and people became worried that they would be engulfed in darkness. Then they began to notice that around the end of the month the days had begun to grow longer and that there was a return of the light. Christ's birthdate ultimately became fixed



*Mother on Christmas Day, sometime in the 1950s. (Photo courtesy the Pinto family)*

to this time of year as a symbol of the return of the light.

Eventually the Mother stopped coming to the theater and asked my mother to distribute the gifts. She said to her, "I am there in you, so you do it instead." The chair on which Mother sat is placed in front of the tree each year. The tree is decorated by the residents and staff at Golconde, and the Christmas celebration remains a joyous event in the Ashram. We continue to distribute gifts to all Ashramites and guests.

### **School, visits abroad, and Ashram life**

**Anie:** Who were your teachers in the upper grades in the Ashram school? What are your memories of those days and what can you explain of the Free Progress System?

**Gauri:** Sunil-da was my botany teacher and he was absolutely wonderful. He was so innovative and imaginative. Tehmiben was also an excellent teacher. I learned many things from her. Mother once said to the teachers, "Why do you give exams?" Mother was very much against testing and homework, so the Free Progress System was introduced—but Mother said, "It is not for everyone, it is only meant for those who are capable and have the discipline to study on their own and decide what it is that they want to do." The Free Progress System has been a bit chaotic and has not always been properly implemented. It is still in the process of development after all these years. Most teachers develop their own methods of teaching from within and from their own inspirations.

**Anie:** Did you ever have ambitions to go outside the Ashram and experience the outside world, or marry and have children?

**Gauri:** I first went outside the Ashram in 1968 with my mother to visit relatives in London. The Mother said that going outside the Ashram would "enlarge my consciousness," and it has. I traveled again to London in 1975, 1986, and 1990, but the Ashram is my home and the Ashram life is my way of life—so considering the worldly life and marriage was never an option for me.

**Anie:** You have been a teacher in the Ashram school for forty-five years. Could you share some details of that experience?

**Gauri:** Becoming a drawing and English teacher was a turning point in my life. It helped to rid me of my timidity and helped me to gain confidence in myself. It is difficult to be a teacher in the Ashram. One must always be in control of one's vital impulses (temper, emotions, etc.). One must be self-observing and act in a yogic manner at all times.

It is necessary to remain aware that the work is being done for the Mother and that one isn't there just to teach subjects,



but also to help awaken the child's psychic being and to awaken their senses to inner and outer beauty. All these years I have taught English grammar, reading, literature, creative writing, comprehensive poetry, and drawing to students from eleven to fifteen years of age. The Mother strongly encouraged developing the child's artistic side and appreciation of beauty.

**Anie:** How is the school different today? What changes do you see?

**Gauri:** It is actually better today on the whole. People were more conservative and a bit dull in the old days. Now most of the teachers are former students who grew up here and have had more experience and are more interesting teachers.

**Anie:** What significant changes do you see in the Ashram?

**Gauri:** Well, specifically, Mother put so much emphasis on beauty—beauty in buildings and the crafting of things. One often wonders now if that is still the aim. Mother's guidance is so much missed in the area of aesthetics.

### Inspirations from the Mother

**Anie:** Would you speak about the inspirations you received from Mother's talks in the Playground or any stories of Mother that you would like to share?

**Gauri:** The Mother inspired us all to strive to be better human beings. Every Wednesday, during her talks in the Playground, she would give us a boost and encourage us to rise above ourselves. As teenagers, we would often become easily upset and sensitive to injustices. Mother would look into our eyes and all the pain would disappear. We learned so many lessons from Mother. She taught us how to be grateful. She would receive and accept all the little gifts we made for her with so much love and gratitude, even if they weren't made very well, and would show us, by her reactions, how to properly receive gifts.

Ambu used to tell a beautiful "gratitude" story about the Mother. Some young Bengali devotees were traveling by train

**Corrections:** In the Fall 2000 issue of *Collaboration*, this photo is identified as Mona Pinto. Actually, it is a photo of Gauri and her cat. Also, the street on which the Pintos live is not Rue Dumas, but Rue St. Gilles.



from Calcutta to Pondicherry to see the Mother. Also traveling on the train in their compartment was a simple village man. When they spoke of the Mother in his presence, the man was very moved. He asked them to bring an offering of one rupee from him to be given to the Mother. When they went to the Mother and told her the story and gave her the rupee, she said with great seriousness, "How can I ever repay this man?"

Once someone sent her a small sum of money along with a note saying, "Buy yourself a mango!" Although the Mother was not particularly fond of mangos, she sent for one and ate some bites of it to show her gratitude.

Mother taught us to appreciate beauty in all its forms—the reading of *Savitri*, other poetry, literature, music, and art. She was such a model for all us children. She gave importance to everything. She taught us also just how important it is to take care of material objects and to treat them with respect. I used to stand before the Mother and marvel, wonderstruck, at her own beauty. Once she sent me a birthday card that read, "Avec mes bénédictions pour developper et faire fleurir son culte, pour la beauté dans tous les domaines. Dans la

Lumiere et la Joie." (With my blessings for the development, flowering and cultivation of beauty in all its domains. With Light and Joy.)

In teaching us the four aspects of the Divine Mother, the Mother said, "There is another aspect . . . love!" She said this emanation had already been born on earth. She did not give a name, but left it to us to find out. Of course we all thought it was her. Her love brought everyone together here.

A personal example for me of her love took place once during a performance of *Swan Lake*, a play in the Ashram school. I fainted backstage. Mother came and took my hand and walked me up and down the area and hummed the most beautiful, soft, soothing melody to me. It brought me around and then I was fine. Another time she came to our house when I had typhoid fever. Dark forms had begun to envelop me. The Mother soothed my head and soon I recovered and there were no more nightmares.

**Anie:** What would you say that living in the Ashram has provided for you that you could not have received in the outside world? In closing, can you assess your sixty-three years of life here in the atmosphere of the Ashram?

**Gauri:** Definitely the environment of the Ashram is significant. The feeling of belonging, being loved by the Mother, guided by her, and living by her example has meant a lot. As stated earlier, she constantly encouraged us to reach higher and higher in everything we did. She took the time and gave of herself to everyone.

All life for us here in the Ashram revolved around the Mother. To grow in her presence was the gift. The aim was not money, nor wealth, but to grow inwardly was the constant focus. I am filled with tremendous gratitude for this wonderful experience of being here at a time when the Lord and the Divine Mother were on the earth. It took me some years to absorb and assimilate all that she had taught, and I am so grateful for the grace that her life here brought to all of us.



## *The yoga today*

### **AUM 2001 conference notes**

by David Hutchinson

From 20–24 July 2001, the annual All USA Meeting (AUM) was held in Redwood City, California, south of San Francisco. Gatherings of sadhaks always feel odd. We're a curiously disconnected bunch, at least in the United States, more isolated than unified. While not exactly hermits, it often feels like many at such a conference would be more comfortable sitting alone in a cave than in a dining room surrounded by other sadhaks.

Trying to organize—or just survive—a large meeting in the Integral Yoga is always a challenge. What qualities make for a successful meeting? What kinds of activities should take place? How much of the schedule should be fixed, and how much kept open for spontaneous encounters, experiences, inspirations?

The organizing committee wrestled with these questions all year, and part of

the joy of such wrestling is that it forced us to confront basic the question: how do we share this yoga, how do we create an atmosphere that allows the Integral Yoga to flower, where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother will descend, an atmosphere that fosters a deeper connection among diverse cultures, ages, backgrounds?

One answer is that such an atmosphere can't be created, because the essential ingredient is the consciousness of all who attend. A collective emerges, with aspirations of its own, midnight colloquies, afternoon volleyball, solitary prayers, strange and wonderful encounters.

The mix each year keeps changing. For the past few years, the Indian-born contingent here in America has been steadily growing, such that this year fully half the participants were Indian. One benefit is that chai is omnipresent, a necessary break from the bland, convent-style food we were served. (Food was not listed as a high point on many evaluations!)

#### **Local arrangements**

AUM took place this year at a retreat center atop a grassy hill, on the peninsula about halfway between San Francisco and San Jose. Mornings and evenings were calm and glorious, and from the top of the

hill you could look east over the bay to Oakland and Berkeley. The grounds were typical California dry shrub, with a few lawns, a swimming pool with slanting sun in the afternoon, a tennis/volleyball court, all circled by pines and firs that effectively hid the nearby suburbs.

The center itself was run by nuns, and not surprisingly, it was spartan and clean, with Christian symbolism here and there. It had the look of a 1950s high school, with plain walls, large hallways, blackboards in the meeting rooms. The main hallway was shaped like an "L." We had the registration table at one end and the book display table at the other, so that this area became a natural meeting place for wandering, lost, or newly arrived yogis.

The conference was organized by three people: Kalpana Patel, Theresa Boschert, and Dian Kiser (they'll deny this, of course). Chandresh Patel and I stayed in the background giving unsolicited advice, and a dozen others pitched in with everything from running the audio, setting up the altars, and writing out each day's schedule to volunteering with food. But the three main organizers did the lion's share of the work, holding the conference together with their firm management of details, personalities, and events.



*The AUM assembly converges for a photo op on the last day of the conference. (Photo: Jyoti Alexander)*





Kalpana brought four unusual and charged items to the AUM. First, she badgered the trustees of the Pondicherry Ashram until they allowed themselves to be videotaped as a kind of message for the AUM; the video was shown on the opening night. Second, she brought one of Mother's saris, which was placed on the main altar in the room where the entire group met. Third, she brought a set of curtains which had hung in Sri Aurobindo's room. And most striking of all, with her indomitable will and perseverance, and in an incredibly short time last year, she had a set of life-size photos of Sri Aurobindo and Mother made in Pondicherry. They stood to the left, as the audience faced the front, with one light on each picture and flower arrangements all around. The presence was indescribable.

Such sharings are a great gift of an AUM. Contrary to what the world seems to say, you discover that this yoga is real, that it is emerging in others, that beyond your expectations you share experiences, insights, understandings. And you see that outer details such as the music of your youth, personal happinesses and tragedies, vices and virtues, sit on the surface of an inner being that can touch and be touched. The walls of personality slide apart and there appears another child of the Mother, another soul standing pure in light.

### Presentations

This year we had five keynote presenters, each unique and truly surprising in their own fashion.

On the first full day, Arabinda Basu spoke on the theme of "Descent of the Immortal." What tickled me was how, after the self-deprecatory comment in the beginning about how he wouldn't be quoting chapter and verse, he then proceeded to salt his talk with extensive quotes from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother from memory. It was an engaging and personal talk, quite insightful in terms of the finer points of the yoga. It reminded me that study and application really do matter in this yoga, that it is possible to come to a wide and clear understanding of it through diligent work.

### AUM 2001 audiotapes available

Audiotapes from AUM 2001 are available. Each keynote presentation is on one ninety-minute tape. Tapes are available for the following:

- Arabinda Basu: "Descent of the Immortal"
- Lynda Lester: "Sri Aurobindo and Mother: A Revolution in Consciousness"
- Alok Pandey: "Evolution"
- Guy Ryckaert: "Manifestation"
- Prema Nandakumar: "Savitri"

Prices are as follows, including postage and handling: single tape/talk, \$5.00; two tapes, \$7.50; three tapes, \$10.00; four tapes, \$12.00; five tapes (full set), \$15.00. To order, please send a check to the Sri Aurobindo Association, Box 163237, Sacramento, CA 95816.

That afternoon Lynda Lester gave her presentation. I can safely say that there has never been anything like it at AUM, and possibly anywhere. The entire presentation was accompanied by a computerized slide show. She began with some personal history, to ground it in space and time; then showed a history of "revolution" through time, with musical accompaniment, from the earliest civilization to the present. From there she moved into an explanation of how the Integral Yoga, Sri Aurobindo, and the Mother are revolutionary; and ended on another slide show with music, a meditative excursion mixing images of Sri Aurobindo and Mother with fractals, spirals, and other art. The audience was alternately spellbound, gasping with astonishment, and rolling on the floor with laughter.

The second full day of the conference began with a talk by Alok Pandey on evolution, into which he sprinkled references from a dozen sadhaks, writers throughout history, and modern science, all delivered completely from memory. More than the scholarship, however, Alok conveys a unique blend of mental integrity and deep experience. In talking with him a few times during the conference, at meals or elsewhere, I was continually amazed at the sheer depth and fullness of his being. He is the kind of person that we ought to meet early in life—kind, intelligent, engaged,

profound—when we need role models, for you never forget such a person.

In the afternoon Guy Ryckaert spoke on the spiritual significance of Auroville, mixing slides and talk in a wide-ranging consideration of the beginnings of Auroville, the Mother's work there, the way in which different forces come together, and the many practical elements that come into play for such an experiment. Guy is a long-time resident of Auroville who has gravitated to the center of several efforts. Currently his central occupation is consolidating the land of Auroville, its physical base, for which there are multiple efforts: acquiring the land from private owners, working with the local, state, and national governments, and the management and development of land within the city itself. His talk was on "Manifestation," a work which he is doing in quite a concrete way with the very basis of the international city.

The final talk of the AUM was given by Prema Nandakumar, on the afternoon of the last full day. Prema's talk was on *Savitri*, but despite her impressive scholarly credentials she delivered a presentation that was anything but traditional. She talked about this yoga in a down-to-earth fashion, speaking directly to the women in the audience, and displaying a fierceness of spirit which made me think of an olympic athlete. Of all the talks at the AUM,



hers was the most surprising; you heard the echo of the Mother, of the force that creates, upholds, manifests.

On the final night of the conference we were treated to a dance presentation by DakshinaVanzetti of Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham (SASP), Wendy Lines of Matagiri, Gloria Posso of the Sri Aurobindo Learning Center, and Liz Inglis, with music composed by Vishnu Eschner (also of SASP). The dance blended elements of hatha yoga, martial arts, ballet, and modern dance, along with choreographed aspiration and beauty that touched everyone.

These are one person's reflections, but 130 people attended, each with individual experiences. I don't know what each of them felt, but for me it was a perfect gathering, harmonious, organized with a happy attention to the yoga, full of space to explore, vibrant with real joy. I think that the disconnected hermitism of our collective group of sadhaks in the US is coming to an end, and that we are entering an era of unexpected unity.

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## Behind AUM 2001

by August Timmermans

### Interconnecting

*Our souls are moved by powers behind the wall . . .<sup>1</sup>*

Looking at a photo taken after the All USA Meeting of Dave Hutchinson, Lynda Lester, and myself in front of the Cultural Integration Fellowship in San Francisco, I realize how full I still am of this AUM. How did I end up there? The answer surely relates to the three of us, and needs some explanation.

About sixteen years ago, I left Auroville and India with the determination to continue the practice of Integral Yoga in society. My eight-year experience in India had made me a genuine Asia lover; this eventually led me to settle in Thailand, where I feel at home for many reasons—a Buddhist background being one of them. In Thailand, my yoga has intensified over the past ten years to such an extent that the need to visit the Ashram and Auroville never really surfaces.

Some four years ago, a personal computer connected me unexpectedly to Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo email forum (Auroconf) on the Internet. The latter stimulates interesting discussions related to yoga.

Last year, I received a surprising note from David Hutchinson with the invitation to join him and Lynda Lester in moderating in the newly created Integral Yoga (IY) email list. It felt like a new door in the yoga had been opened: a collaboration in yoga on the Internet! Gratefully I accepted the invitation.

The IY list is still developing; some 110 subscribers are part of it, mostly hard-working individuals who want to concentrate with others to study the yoga a little deeper. (For information on how to subscribe, see <http://iy.collaboration.org>.) Participation on this list, as a member and a moderator, has given me surprisingly new insights in the yoga and about myself, and on how others are standing in the practice of the yoga. This collaboration with Lynda and Dave worked out well from the beginning, a mutual understanding without tensions, doubts, or conflicts. Rare and promising indeed.

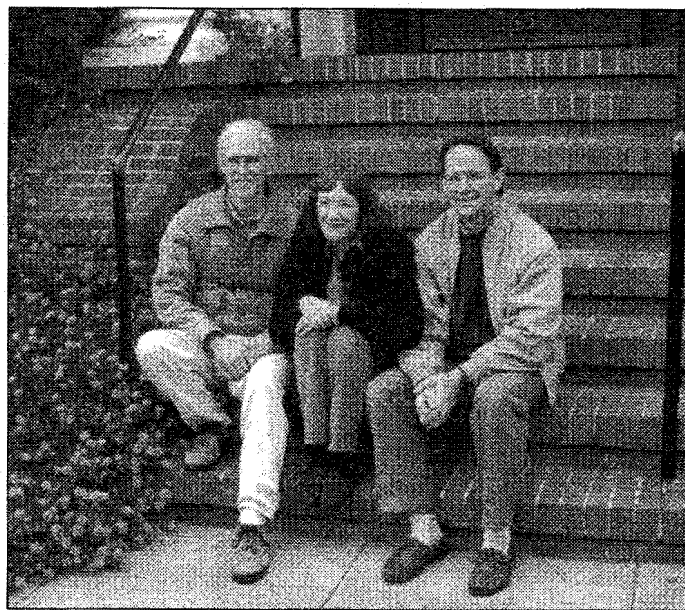
At this point, it is easy to indicate why I felt inspired to attend AUM 2001—to meet Dave and Lynda and all others I have learned to know from email exchanges who would attend as well. I was unaware of a greater surprise . . .

### Climbing Mount Alverno

*A vast Unknown is round us and within . . .<sup>2</sup>*

Having arrived in San Francisco one day earlier than the start of the conference, I planned to stay in a hotel until the next day, just to recover from the long flight from Bangkok. The next day I was happy to go to Redwood City. The helpful bus driver explained where to get off and told me to look for Emerald Avenue, where I would proceed with my solitary journey. Climbing Emerald's huge hill with my luggage was not an easy task; the fact that it was all residential area almost convinced me that I surely had disembarked in an entirely wrong corner of the USA.

But no—as I came to the intersection on top of the hill (well, almost the top), a car slowed down, a window opened, and a sweet voice of the Indian driver asked me, "Are you going to



*Dave Hutchinson, Lynda Lester, and August Timmermans at the Cultural Integration Fellowship after AUM 2001. (Photo: Passerby)*



AUM?" It turned out to be Ravi Garimella, one of the IY-list members with whom I had corresponded recently and had never met! What a kind surprise.

### A fish in water

*The separate self must melt or be reborn  
Into a Truth beyond the mind's appeal . . .<sup>3</sup>*

The welcome at AUM happened all in light, and from then on I felt no reluctance or timidity, just a happiness to be there—I felt connected with everyone in spite of not having seen them before. That is a spiritual fact.

On the way to my room, I saw Dave for the first time; it was like knowing him well already. A door opened, and Lynda appeared. Out of nowhere, we were suddenly together in the corridor, and while we all joked a little, it felt very right. Lynda apologized that there was only one shower for everyone on the floor. I quickly asked if guns were allowed in the building. No, no shooting for bathroom privileges! Our meeting was harmonious; we had communicated through email, but now there was the physical dimension that made it complete. They suggested we have a meditation together. This was the first collective meditation I'd ever had, and it was like joining together at our highest possible. A sense of gratitude surfaced.

### The descent

*A greater Personality sometimes  
Possesses us which yet we know as ours . . .  
Then the small bodily ego thins and falls . . .<sup>4</sup>*

I met one great person after the other; it all went smooth and with a happy consciousness. Better not to mention names at this point, because it is too easy to forget some. During the meals it was possible to interact more with people and to exchange personal backgrounds.

At the end of the first day, having talked and listened and dined, feeling tired and glad at last to lay myself to rest, I discovered soon that my roommate would not sleep silently—he seemed to be engaged in a fight with two crocodiles! I tried to figure out what to do. I focused on the yogic attitude of trying to disconnect from the physical and remain concentrated in the inner being. This worked only partly, as I was tired and concentration did not come easily. When I heard, through the walls, one of the next-door neighbors also snoring, I concluded that the Bliss Stopped Here. Or so I thought.

Something told me, "Don't think of yourself"—almost the exact line I discovered three days later in the meditation room where a text of the Mother was available for distribution. It said something like this: "Forget about yourself and you will become the divine being." It worked! My head area opened up and I felt peace coming in. The sensation intensified, and a honey-like force of peace and ananda filled my being.



At this point, being fully conscious, I noticed that it had become dead quiet all over the building: I heard no snoring anywhere. A descent of force and peace filled and sustained the Mount Alverno center. This lasted for twenty to thirty minutes. I also became conscious of spiritual lights, which I related to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Later, a white light with a golden glow touched my third eye, and a density of peace filled my total being. Something in me said that we, AUM members, meet during the nights as well, on the subtle plane. Having such spiritual experiences is not uncommon for me, but here, the experiences were stronger and wider, in the sense that they involved the collective.

The next morning I remembered the two life-size photos of Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the lecture room. I had sensed a Samadhi-like presence and felt an inner connection with the photos, and wanted to meditate there. Surprisingly, there was only one person who had the same idea, and it happened to be Dave. I sat down and asked if he would mind if I talked a little with him. I told him what had happened the night before. Later I heard from Lynda that she had a similar spiritual experience during the night, one of a solid descent, and she described the same spiritual lights.

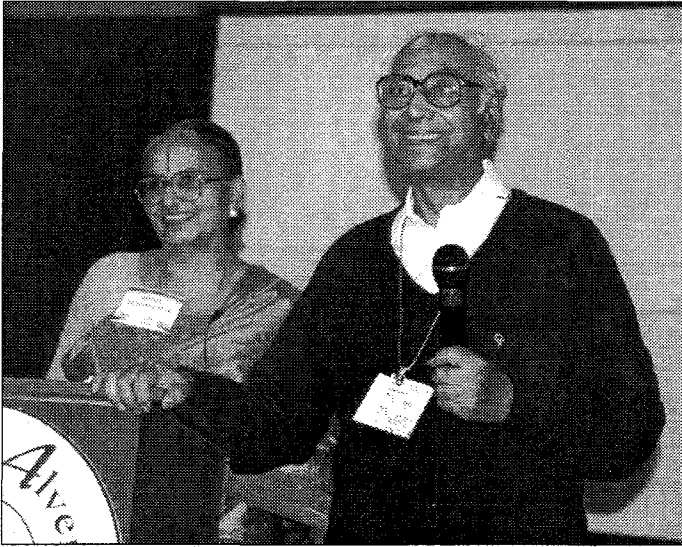
The meditation near the photos was special. When looking at the photo of Sri Aurobindo, I experienced a palpable touch in the heart.

### The lectures

*The Word that ushers divine experience . . .<sup>5</sup>*

The lectures are the major happenings of the AUM, and they also can be major vehicles for forces to descend—at least, that is my impression. All the speakers spoke from a profound and living inspiration.

Arabinda Basu's speech, "The Descent of the Immortal,"



Opposite page: Catherine Blackburn, Jean Korstange, Aurela Sequoia, Gordon Korstange, and Charles Flores experience the camaraderie of AUM. This page: Prema Nandakumar and Arabinda Basu take questions from the audience. (Photos: Lynda Lester)

was a strong presentation. He emphasized that in order to know the all in one and the one in all, nothing but the Atman realization is the key. He was convincing as he embodied Atman himself when speaking, and an atmosphere of one in all and all in one manifested.

Lynda Lester's presentation, "Sri Aurobindo and Mother: A Revolution in Consciousness," was a work of love for the Divine. Her lecture was one of beauty and truth presented through the use of computer-programmed visuals accompanied by inspiring music. Being an American and having grown up in a time and culture that can be called free and wild, she discovered, as many of our wild generation did, the truth of life and deeper reality in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo—two beings who revolutionized spiritual culture, stepping away from the tradition of asceticism and introducing matter to spirit, the higher consciousness fusing with life. The dimension that the Integral Yoga brings to life is literally revolutionary, the inner gaining control over the outer.

No wonder that Integral Yoga brings more color to our practice and living. This is unique to the yoga, I find—treading the balance between inner growth and living life as it is, fusing the two seemingly opposite poles into one of progress and liberation.

Alok Pandey, the third speaker who spoke on "Evolution," is such a colorful person. For him, the yoga means union with the Mother and her force. It is surrender. Life is lifted up by her force and inspiration, and becomes transformed. His speech was colorful and contained a great sense of freedom in expression while being infused with a healthy sense of humor. Off-lecture, he is as fascinating, being true to his own words. As is typical for Indians, speaking without reading from a paper came naturally to him.

Thus, Guy Ryckaert first made an apology that he needed to read from a paper. However, he also spoke in an egoless voice, feeling comfortable to present things as they are and in the way he felt was right. In a quiet tone, he explained how falsehood and division came into existence and how these must be conquered—and how life, within and without, must be brought back into the

balance of truth. His talk on "Manifestation" focused on Auroville as a spiritual community providing an environment for embodying the future humanity, and the Matrimandir being the vehicle of the transforming force that affects collective living. This presentation also contained computer-programmed visuals. The pictures of Auroville then and now were strikingly revealing in how the land has been transformed from a desert into a densely green environment.

Prema Nandakumar also spoke with the voice of Atman, the true Self—but it could be named Atwoman, because she pointed out how significant a woman's role in life and spirituality can be. No wonder, as her talk was on *Savitri*. Prema addressed the true qualities of womanhood with respect and dignity. She is well known for her in-depth studies of *Savitri*, and with a raised voice she captivated the audience in seriousness and laughter. From some women participants I heard that "we need more women speakers." For me, listening to my Indian friends reminded me of home sweet home, Mother India.

David Hutchinson's introductory notes on the first evening had revealed that we should be aware that we are among living yogis. "Maybe your neighbor, right here, is consciously connected to the inner realms of life and bringing in divine consciousness" was one of his remarks. He is right—we are in a collective that is growing within. During the conference, Dave gave in-between speeches that inspired and touched deeply, whether they were to start up the day or end the evening. His summary of AUM included a ten-minute collective meditation that changed the atmosphere.

### Volleyball reveals

*In the enormous spaces of the self*

*The body now seemed only a wandering shell . . .<sup>6</sup>*

Volleyball is one of those surprisingly revealing moments when we get loose in the outer being. Kalpana Patel was the guilty one who pulled my arm when I was talking to Kundan Singh about my first journey to India. She insisted I join the volleyball game outside—and actually I was ready for a physical outlet.

But it is still obvious that when it comes to playing sports and working as a team, sadhaks are a hopeless lot. While talking teamwork, they are actually thinking of how to make the next score. Not only that—somehow the touch with physical and vital reality seems to become one of disorientation or complete disconnection. When trying to meet the ball, someone can miss it because of having an instant out-of-the-body experience! Or the player receives an inspiration (I won't call it absent-mindedness)



just at the moment that the ball passes by. Teammate Guy insisted that we should not say “sorry!” after we had missed a ball, but in the end, he began saying “sorry!” too.

The good news is that such a sport activity is a kind of euphoric happening, and nobody knows really why.

### Enlightening nights

*A Silence overhead, an inner Voice,  
A living image seated in the heart,  
An unvalled wideness and a fathomless point.<sup>7</sup>*

Later in the evenings, Lynda, Dave, and I had the opportunity to be together. We liked to walk outside or sit somewhere under the pine trees talking, while being fully aware of the fresh scented air and the silent, pristine sky with its crescent moon and twinkling stars. Having known them from email exchanges only, it was marvelous to communicate now face to face. Talking of inner experiences and development happened naturally, without any reservations, and this gave a good basis for understanding each other and where we are in time and space in the context of the yoga.

I find these kind of exchanges rare, where one can freely speak from the inner and deeper without the ego coming in. It is profound that our friendship came from the yoga and will remain developing in the yoga.

My experiences of AUM during the nights were quite unexpected in that my third eye or ajna chakra had fully opened up. In spite of my wanting to sleep, the third eye remained open and active during all nights—mostly revealing unusual visions of three-dimensional images and transparent colors.

During one night, I observed visions in the ajna chakra, while the consciousness in the head opened up completely, all around, instead of being fixed to the body. The widening of consciousness made me feel “headless”—not sensing the head at all, but instead becoming one with infinite space and silence and peace while vaguely feeling connected to the body as well.

Later, back in Bangkok, I realized that AUM can be used for a deeper progress in the yoga, for the individual and for the collective as well. This inspired me to write this article.

### The last word is Divine

*Division ceased to be, for God was there . . .<sup>8</sup>*

Vishnu Eschner asked me to participate in a reading accompanied by music for the closing of the AUM on the last morning. This participation gave me the opportunity to give something back to this unique gathering. Aurelio Hammer, Vishnu, Larry Seidlitz (reciting the lines from *Savitri* that you see under each subhead in this article), and I (reading short texts by M. P. Pandit on yoga in *Savitri*) worked together to present a coherent whole of truth and music in meditative form.

The last sentence of the text was this: “The psychic alone has the consciousness that is directly in communion with the Divine.”

### A triple Being in progress

*All here gathers beneath one golden sky . . .<sup>9</sup>*

Why so revealing about personal spiritual experiences? This is one of the questions we have today about our individual and collective spiritual development.

Speaking or writing is like materializing the inner into the outer—of course, provided that such speaking is done in the right spirit and with the purpose of true exchange, in the light of yoga practice and for better understanding of what is happening to us. The AUM lecturers made a conscious and successful effort in this regard. When communication goes beyond the social and has the aim of yoga practice and widening of consciousness, there can be an imminent progress for all involved.

The force behind AUM is such where the individual and the collective can make inner and outer progress. The AUM atmosphere fully supported the inner and psychic being. Instead of having to protect one’s own atmosphere, the inner windows could remain open and communication happened from deeper within.

I concur with Lynda, who said that “AUM is a five-day darshan”—a darshan where one is allowed to speak and play and where progress is made, which is exactly the true and solid aim of our collective. Chandresh Patel said that “there is the Ashram, Auroville, and AUM”: a triple Being in progress.

### The team

*His wakened mind became an empty slate  
On which the Universal and Sole could write . . .<sup>10</sup>*

The organizers, Kalpana Patel, Dian Kiser, Theresa Boschert, Chandresh Patel, and David Hutchinson did a great job of karmayoga and yoga of devotion. It was obvious that much preparatory work had been done prior to the meeting. Throughout AUM, the organizers worked happily from early morning to late in the night, assisting whenever and wherever it was needed. The joy and quality of their work was evident and instrumental for this AUM to become profoundly inspiring and successful. Gratitude speaks.

### Notes

- |                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. <i>Savitri</i> , p. 161 | 6. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 82  |
| 2. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 110   | 7. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 49  |
| 3. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 307   | 8. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 232 |
| 4. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 47    | 9. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 660 |
| 5. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 327   | 10. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 81 |

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## Source material

### Sri Aurobindo on self-consecration

*This selection is from The Synthesis of Yoga by Sri Aurobindo, pp. 63–66.*

All Yoga is in its nature a new birth; it is a birth out of the ordinary, the mentalised material life of man into a higher spiritual consciousness and a greater and diviner being. No Yoga can be successfully undertaken and followed unless there is a strong awakening to the necessity of that larger spiritual existence.

The soul that is called to this deep and vast inward change, may arrive in different ways to the initial departure. It may come to it by its own natural development which has been leading it unconsciously towards the awakening; it may reach it through the influence of a religion or the attraction of a philosophy; it may approach it by a slow illumination or leap to it by a sudden touch or shock; it may be pushed or led to it by the pressure of outward circumstances or by an inward necessity, by a single word that breaks the seals of the mind or by long reflection, by the distant example of one who has trod the path or by contact and daily influence. According to the nature and the circumstances the call will come.

But in whatever way it comes, there must be a decision of the mind and the will and, as its result, a complete and effective self-consecration. The acceptance of a new spiritual idea-force and upward orientation in the being, an illumination, a turning or conversion seized on by the will and the heart's aspiration,—this is the momentous act which contains as in a seed all the results that the Yoga has to give. The mere idea or intellectual seeking of something higher beyond, however strongly grasped by the mind's interest, is ineffective unless it is seized on by the heart as the one thing desirable and by the will as the one thing to be done.



*Sri Aurobindo in Baroda, around 1906. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)*

For truth of the Spirit has not to be merely thought but to be lived, and to live it demands a unified single-mindedness of the being; so great a change as is contemplated by the Yoga is not to be effected by a divided will or by a small portion of the energy or by a hesitating mind. He who seeks the Divine must consecrate himself to God and to God only.

If the change comes suddenly and decisively by an overpowering influence, there is no further essential or lasting difficulty. The choice follows upon the thought, or is simultaneous with it, and the self-consecration follows upon the choice. The feet are already set upon the path, even if they seem at first to wander uncertainly and even though the path itself may be only obscurely seen and the knowledge of the goal may be imperfect. The secret Teacher, the inner Guide is already at work, though he may not yet manifest himself or may not yet appear in the person of his human representative.

Whatever difficulties and hesitations may ensue, they cannot eventually prevail against the power of the experience that

has turned the current of the life. The call, once decisive, stands; the thing that has been born cannot eventually be stifled. Even if the force of circumstances prevents a regular pursuit or a full practical self-consecration from the first, still the mind has taken its bent and persists and returns with an ever-increasing effect upon its leading preoccupation. There is an ineluctable persistence of the inner being, and against it circumstances are in the end powerless, and no weakness in the nature can for long be an obstacle.

But this is not always the manner of the commencement. The sadhaka is often led gradually and there is a long space between the first turning of the mind and the full assent of the nature to the thing towards which it turns. There may at first be only a vivid intellectual interest, a forcible attraction towards the idea and some imperfect form of practice. Or perhaps there is an effort not favoured by the whole nature, a decision or a turn imposed by an intellectual influence or dictated by personal affection and admiration for someone who is himself consecrated and devoted to the Highest.

In such cases, a long period of preparation may be necessary before there comes the irrevocable consecration; and in some instances it may not come. There may be some advance, there may be a strong effort, even much purification and many experiences other than those that are central or supreme; but the life will either be spent in preparation or, a certain stage having been reached, the mind pushed by an insufficient driving-force may rest content at the limit of the effort possible to it.

Or there may even be a recoil to the lower life,—what is called in the ordinary parlance of Yoga a fall from the path. This lapse happens because there is a defect at the very centre. The intellect has been interested, the heart attracted, the will has strung itself to the effort, but the whole nature has not been taken captive by the Divine. It has only acquiesced in the interest, the attraction or the endeavour. There has been an experiment, perhaps even an eager experiment, but not a total self-giving to an imperative need of the soul or to an



unforsakable ideal. Even such imperfect Yoga has not been wasted; for no upward effort is made in vain. Even if it fails in the present or arrives only at some preparatory stage or preliminary realisation, it has yet determined the soul's future.

But if we desire to make the most of the opportunity that this life gives us, if we wish to respond adequately to the call we have received and to attain to the goal we have glimpsed, not merely advance a little towards it, it is essential that there should be an entire self-giving. The secret of success in Yoga is to regard it not as one of the aims to be pursued in life, but as the one and only aim, not as an important part of life, but as the whole of life.

And since Yoga is in its essence a turning away from the ordinary material and animal life led by most men or from the more mental but still limited way of living followed by the few to a greater spiritual life, to the way divine, every part of our energies that is given to the lower existence in the spirit of that existence is a contradiction of our aim and our self-dedication.

On the other hand, every energy or activity that we can convert from its allegiance to the lower and dedicate to the service of the higher is so much gained on our road, so much taken from the powers that oppose our progress.

It is the difficulty of this wholesale conversion that is the source of all the stumblings in the path of Yoga. For our entire nature and its environment, all our personal and all our universal self, are full of habits and of influences that are opposed to our spiritual rebirth and work against the whole-heartedness of our endeavour. In a certain sense we are nothing but a complex mass of mental, nervous and physical habits held together by a few ruling ideas, desires and associations,—an amalgam of many small self-repeating forces with a few major vibrations.

What we propose in our Yoga is nothing less than to break up the whole formation of our past and present which makes up the ordinary material and mental man and to create a new centre of vision and a new universe of activities in ourselves

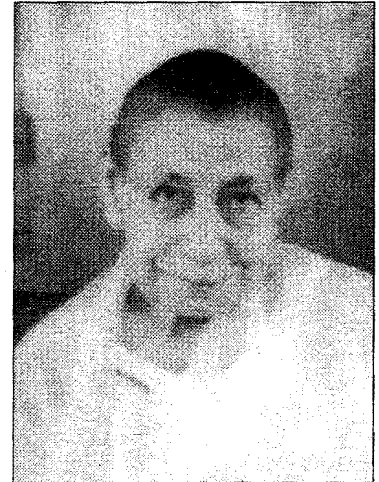
which shall constitute a divine humanity or a superhuman nature.

The first necessity is to dissolve that central faith and vision in the mind which concentrate it on its development and satisfaction and interests in the old externalised order of things. It is imperative to exchange this surface orientation for the deeper faith and vision which see only the Divine and seek only after the Divine.

The next need is to compel all our lower being to pay homage to this new faith and greater vision. All our nature must make an integral surrender; it must offer itself in every part and every movement to that which seems to the unregenerated sense-mind so much less real than the material world and its objects. Our whole being—soul, mind, sense, heart, will, life, body—must consecrate all its energies so entirely and in such a way that it shall become a fit vehicle for the Divine. This is no easy task; for everything in the world follows the fixed habit which is to it a law and resists a radical change. And no change can be more radical than the revolution attempted in the integral Yoga.

Everything in us has constantly to be called back to the central faith and will and vision. Every thought and impulse has to be reminded in the language of the Upanishad that "That is the divine Brahman and not this which men here adore." Every vital fibre has to be persuaded to accept an entire renunciation of all that hitherto represented to it its own existence. Mind has to cease to be mind and become brilliant with something beyond it. Life has to change into a thing vast and calm and intense and powerful that can no longer recognise its old blind eager narrow self of petty impulse and desire. Even the body has to submit to a mutation and be no longer the clamorous animal or the impeding clod it now is, but become instead a conscious servant and radiant instrument and living form of the spirit.

~ Personal aspiration is necessary until there is the condition in which all comes automatically and only a certain knowledge and assent is necessary for the development.—Sri Aurobindo



*The Mother. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)*

## Mother on surrender and yoga

Surrender is the decision taken to hand over the responsibility of your life to the Divine. Without this decision nothing is at all possible; if you do not surrender, the Yoga is entirely out of the question.

Everything else comes naturally after it, for the whole process starts with surrender. You can surrender either through knowledge or through devotion. You may have a strong intuition that the Divine alone is the truth and a luminous conviction that without the Divine you cannot manage. Or you may have a spontaneous feeling that this line is the only way of being happy, a strong psychic desire to belong exclusively to the Divine: "I do not belong to myself," you say, and give up the responsibility of your being to the Truth. Then comes self-offering: "Here I am, a creature of various qualities, good and bad, dark and enlightened. I offer myself as I am to you, take me up with all my ups and downs, conflicting impulses and tendencies—do whatever you like with me."—*The Sunlit Path*, pp. 21–22

~ You take up the path only when you think you cannot do otherwise.—The Mother



## The poetry room

### Seer

Wherever there has been an inspiring touch of the Divine, there  
has been the light  
and fruits flowing therefrom

I too set forth in silver grace through cities of the land and the  
mystery  
of the way, the psychic soul light my guide

Those early flights on the great highway

I learned to glide and toil in the vision  
traipsing the Great White Way, pondering mysteries of the Tao

And is not the way but a deepening  
of the heart, a heightening and broadening of consciousness  
in the waves of existence?

Most fortunate in this life is a seeker who finds the true spiritual  
seer,  
that rare angel offering golden guidance  
to illuminate the path, dispel clouds  
of fear, doubt, uncertainty

And it was after traveling a long time I encountered sublime good  
fortune  
in meeting the Divine guide  
in the City by the Bay

We received his gnostic light—his darshan  
at the San Francisco Ashram

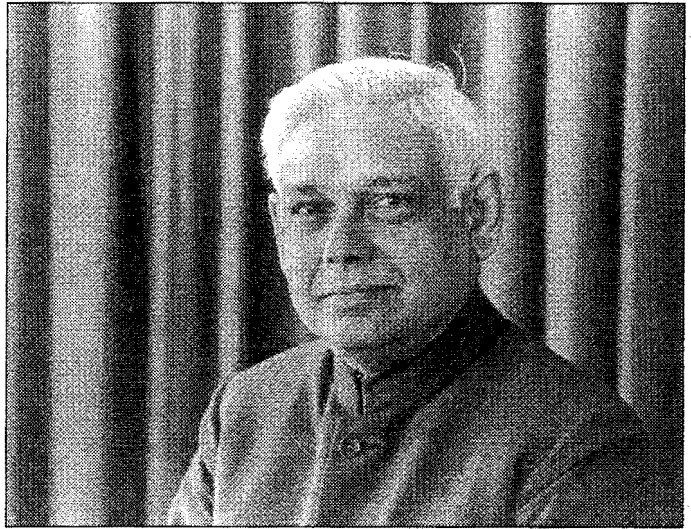
“When you choose the Divine, the Divine chooses you.”

Spiritual educator, illustrious savant, Sri Haridas Chaudhuri  
stirred our spirit depths, broadened our spiritual outlook

The joyous perceptor lifted our being, unclouded our mysteries  
in an unfoldment of integral truth vision

Sri Haridas scattered dawn seeds as a holy servitor  
for the supramental earth

We perceived the “felt meaning” in his lucidity  
at the California Institute of Integral Studies



Haridas Chaudhuri. (Photo courtesy Joseph Kent)

White hair, intense sparkling eyes, the genial master  
delighted his group with fables—the crow  
who flaunted his feathers in imitation  
of the bright coloured peacock

“One should not imitate or follow others  
to a point of absurdity.”

The frog in the well who emerged  
to see the ocean

“One must develop a broad universal outlook.”

Hours of illumined eloquence from a Vijnana seer  
who inspired our integral self-awakening

All those luminous Sundays  
and evening classes in his vision

All those flights in an adventure of consciousness

—Joseph Kent

*Joseph Kent (sunli8@msn.com) is a poet living in Berkeley, California who studied with Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri, founder of the Cultural Integration Fellowship (CIF) in San Francisco.*



## Leaves of alabaster

No moon is sightless ivory—  
No beam is darkly silver-marked

Bright, sky-touched.  
Upon green waters  
White bougainvilla  
Among the purple  
In mellow winds  
Dangling drift.

Hushed nights  
Stilled days  
In all  
Peace pervades.  
I go my mooned or moonless way  
Amid unborn colonnades—  
Each step a silent spark of next-ness  
Heaven-sent.

All cries of heart are mind  
Transmuted, fixed—  
A call and avenue of grace.  
In hand, the tiger's tail is never loose  
(Danger in full breath lives—)  
I cannot die.

Alone, I find companioned fields;  
Vast impertinent glories of the mud—  
Now faced without ideas,  
Traced with love.

Open, Moon! Thy alabaster trail—  
Weave now the gold- and silver-threaded prisoner's beams  
Asleep; awake; it is Beauty's deed that dreams.

—Gene Maslow

*Gene Maslow (1925–1998) was an artist from New York City who, after encountering the Integral Yoga, left everything to go to India. He spent several years in the Ashram, then at the Mother's behest became one of the first settlers in Auroville. He devoted his life to making the arts not just an instrument of beauty and delight but spiritual growth.*

*Nirodbaran, now 97, lives in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. He was a close disciple of and physician to Sri Aurobindo, who guided him in writing poetry. He is the author of numerous books and articles. He may be reached at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry India 605 002.*

## Vision of the Invisible

I gather fruits of thought on a timeless shore;  
The measureless silence breaks into a sound,  
A rhythmic fire that opens a secret door  
And the treasures of eternity are found.

Life then becomes a constant new delight;  
All figures and all things express the one  
Primeval beauty of the Infinite  
Lined with the gold of an immortal sun.

My moments pass with moon-imprinted sail  
Leaving behind an emptiness of dream,  
Where mortal breath reflects a shadow-pale  
Vision of the invisible Supreme.

They grow out of their sombre dwelling-cave  
Into the wide heaven of the luminous Whole,  
Till every movement is a diamond wave  
Upon the tranquil ocean of the Soul.

—Nirodbaran

## Your face

Out of your face there look at me  
Two fathomless inexpressible eyes,  
And from the heaven of their gaze  
Outpour a wine of gold sun-rise.

I lose myself in its nectar-flood,  
A star burning in caves of night.  
Remembrances of happy thoughts  
Come winging from a sleepless height.

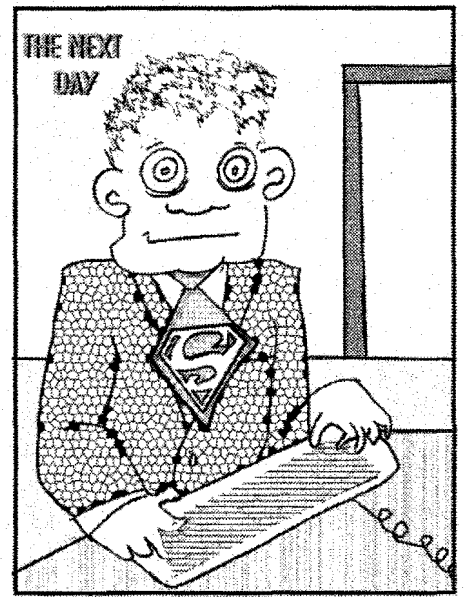
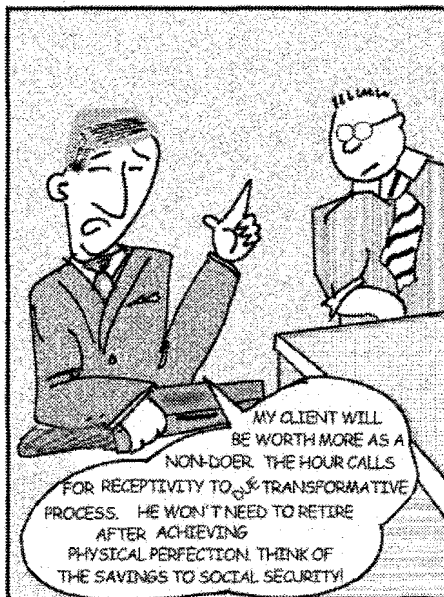
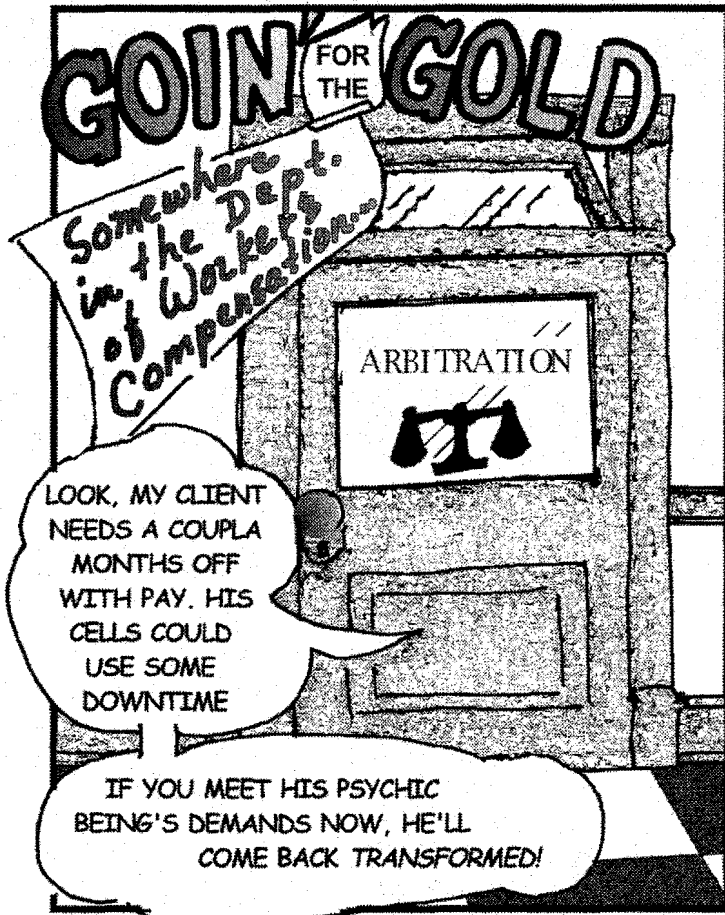
An ocean-like immensity  
Invades my narrow earthly stream  
With an ineffable calm and peace,  
Its waves are crested with a gleam

Of beauty, child of thy delight:  
The heart of dimness glows within,  
As the veil slowly fades away  
And new paths open to unseen

Vistas where mortal vision pales.  
An infinite silence born of Thee  
Awakes and an immortal rhythm  
Of measureless felicity!

—Nirodbaran

## Gnostic knots



Cartoon: Rick Lipschutz and Vishnu Eschner





## Apropos

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.—Marcel Proust

The larger the island of knowledge, the greater the shoreline of wonder.—Ralph Sockman

The great question now and forever is, "What do you stand for? What kind of price are you willing to pay to stand there?"—Diana Trilling

What is more mortifying than to feel that you have missed the plum for want of courage to shake the tree?—Logan Pearsall Smith

If a little knowledge is dangerous, where is a man who has so much as to be out of danger?—Thomas Henry Huxley

We're all in this together, folks, every cow and carrot among us.—Jon Carroll

What we need is a credit card for charging things to experience.—Tom Wilson

Many men would have arrived at wisdom had they not believed themselves to have arrived there already.—Seneca the Younger

I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam.—Annie Dillard

Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet leaves on the heel that crushed it.—Mark Twain

In the depth of winter, I finally learned that there was within me an invincible summer.—Albert Camus

You cannot discover new lands unless you leave shore for a very long time.—Andre Gide

The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now.—Chinese proverb

The need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind.—Maya Angelou

If you don't know where you're going, when you get there you'll be lost.—Yogi Berra

Those whom the gods love die young no matter how long they live.—Elbert Hubbard

I am a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it.—Stephen Leacock

Ageing is in no sense a punishment from on high, but brings its own blessings and a warmth of colors all its own . . . You are still of this life, yet you are rising above the material plane . . . Growing old serenely is not a downhill path but an ascent.—Alexander Solzhenitsyn

The truth is that as a person's real power grows and his knowledge widens, the way he can follow grows even narrower; until at last he chooses nothing, but does only and wholly what he must.—Anonymous

When you set priorities, you are literally writing history in advance.—Tom Skinner

The will to succeed is important, but what's more important is the will to prepare.—Bobby Knight

Youth, large, lusty, loving—youth full of grace, force, fascination, / Do you know that Old Age may come after you with equal grace, force, fascination?—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Discovery follows discovery; each both raising and answering questions; each ending a long search; and each providing the instruments for a new search.—J. Robert Oppenheimer

Above all, one must be convinced that the possibility of progress is unlimited. Progress is youth; one can be young at a hundred.—The Mother



Snow-covered trees in the depth of winter.  
(Photo: Dave Hutchinson)