

Collaboration

Fall 2009

Journal of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

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**Reflections of Dhanavanti, senior Ashram artist •
Sri Aurobindo, India and ideological discourse •
Spiritual Knowledge, Part 2 •
Transformation of the Mother's approach to painting •
Current Affairs • AV Almanac • Source Material • Poetry • Apropos**



About the cover

The entrance of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. (Photo by Larry Seidlitz)

The authors and poets

Maya Angelou (b. 1926) is a famous American autobiographer and poet. She is the author of many books and a popular lecturer.

Debashish Banerji (debbanerji@yahoo.com) teaches Asian Art History at Pasadena City College and Indian Philosophy and Culture at the University of Philosophical Research, Los Angeles. He served as president of the Sri Aurobindo Center, Los Angeles from 1991-2005 and is a co-founder/administrator of the weblog "Science, Culture and Integral Yoga" (www.sciy.org).

Jackie Barshak (jbarshak@hotmail.com) has been involved with the human potential movement and yoga in the U.S. for 35 years. She has a MA in art history, is an activist, and devotes herself to reading and study. She has been living in India for the past two years.

Dhanavanti (dhanavantinagda@gmail.com) is an artist living in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. Her life story is chronicled in this issue of *Collaboration*.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is a major American poet, though the vast majority of her poems were published posthumously.

Lynda Lester (lyndalester@earthlink.net) is president of the Sri Aurobindo Association, the publisher of *Collaboration*. She is also a gifted speaker on Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's vision.

Denise Levertov (1923-1997) was an accomplished poet and professor of literature. She was born in England but moved to the U.S. in 1947.

Martha Orton (martha.orton@gmail.com) is the author of *The Quest for Knowledge and Mastery*, a therapist in Virginia, and a faculty member of Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research (SACAR), which offers online courses and degree programs in Sri Aurobindo's thought.

Larry Seidlitz (lseidlitz@gmail.com) is a faculty member of SACAR in Pondicherry, and also editor of *Collaboration*.

Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) was an accomplished American lyrical poet, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1917 and other prestigious awards.

Tlaloc is an Australian who lived in Auroville from 1974-1976, later visited several times, and permanently settled in 2004. He presently works for Auroville's "Water Harvest," and recently made a movie and several short film clips for Auroville's film festival (see www.aurovillev.org).

Dakshina Vanzetti (dakshina.sasp@gmail.com) is a founding member of the Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham in Lodi, CA, a residential community for the practice of Integral Yoga. She also is president of Aurore, which distributes Sri Aurobindo's books as well as Ayurvedic body care products.

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From the office of Collaboration

In this issue our four main articles each focus on different subjects. The first, in our Chronicles section, is based on my conversations with Dhanavanti, a senior artist living in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram since 1943. Dhanavanti reflected on her lifetime of experiences including her education, darshans of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, teaching in the school, development and work as an artist, her work with Abhay Singh in the Atelier department, and present views of life and sadhana. I met Dhanavanti after receiving her book *Tapasyâ: Hymns in Colour* from a friend and being suitably impressed. This started a series of interesting conversations about her life and experiences, which I felt should be recorded for the sake of a wider audience and posterity. She graciously consented, and we worked together to produce the present article.

The second article, in Essays, is by Debashish Banerji about Sri Aurobindo's thought and ideological discourse in India. In this article, a revised and expanded version of his talk for the Fundamentalism and the Future Conference held in San Francisco, Debashish examines how Sri Aurobindo's pluralistic, inclusivistic writings emerged in the ideological discourse of his day, and how they have been subsequently misinterpreted and twisted to support present day ideological positions of the Hindu right, in turn fueling a backlash from India's Marxist left. Debashish suggests that a sectarian religious interpretation of Sri Aurobindo's thought is prevalent in India today, and is spilling over to affect the views of many in the Ashram. He suggests that we may all need to reexamine our perspectives in light of the plurality and wideness of Sri Aurobindo's vision.

The next article is by Martha Orton, the second part of her essay on spiritual knowledge in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and yoga. The first part, published in our last issue (Summer 2009), examined the nature of mind and mental knowledge, the nature of consciousness, and the aims of the path of knowledge leading to true spiritual knowledge and realization. In this second part, Martha examines the path of knowledge in detail, including the inward turning of the mind; the roles of purification, concentration, renunciation and offering; silencing of the mind; and developing the witness consciousness. It also examines the nature of the supramental knowledge and its relation to the mind.

The final essay is by Jackie Barshak on the transformation of the Mother's approach to painting. In this article, Jackie (who is recovering from a serious motorcycle accident in north India) reviews the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's perspectives on art, and shows how they are reflected in the Mother's later painting. She specifically contrasts two of Mother's paintings, "Lady on the staircase" from 1903, and "An apparition" from the 1920s, showing how Indian conceptions of art influenced the Mother's later painting.

In Current Affairs, we report on the passing of Professor Vyas of the Sri Aurobindo Foundation of North America, a vital center of Sri Aurobindo's thought in America. Next, Lynda Lester reports on the Fundamentalism and the Future conference held in September, and Dakshina reports on the new edition of the Sri Aurobindo Centers Guide and Newsletter. In Briefs, various U.S. centers report on new developments.

In AV Almanac, we have a report by Tlaloc on Auroville's first film festival by one of its enthusiastic participants. This project not only presents fine films, but provides workshops in creating them. A second article reports on a work plan drafted by Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) designed to take concrete steps towards achieving the aims and objectives of Auroville. This type of visionary work seems vital to Auroville's future flowering.

Our Source Material section contains some guidelines by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother for the Ashram, a useful complement to Debashish's comments and views. In the Poetry room, a wonderful poem by Sri Aurobindo is followed by others from a variety of fine women poets. An inspiring selection of Apropos quotes rounds out the issue.

The artists and photographers

Dhanavanti's sketches are from her private collection or from her book, Tapasyâ: Hymns in colour, published by Auroville Press in 2008 (available at SABDA).

Ireno Guerri (ireno@auroville.org.in) had been a professional photographer in Italy before joining Auroville in 1988.

Tine Zimm (tine@auroville.org.in) is a German Aurovilian who has been involved in green-work, AVI, and presently with l'Avenir d'Auroville. She also organises the Matrimandir Calendar.

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

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Current Affairs

Passing of Professor Vyas

by Sri Aurobindo Foundation of North America

It is with great sadness that we must inform you of the passing on August 27th of Prof. Jagdish Vyas, the President of the Sri Aurobindo Yoga Foundation of North America (SAYFNA).

For us Vyas-ji was "Mother's Lion," whose outer personality was a human reflection of all the Four Powers of the Mother. In him one found combined a masterful intellectual thinker, an indomitable warrior and fighter, a lover and harmonizer of the good, the true and the beautiful in people, and a tireless worker.

Truly one can say about him in the language of the Gita, *vasudevaha sarvam iti sa mahatma sudurlabhaha*, "That great soul for whom the Divine is All, such a one is very hard to find." To him there was nothing apart from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and so, never for even a moment, did he live apart from Them. In all ways and at every moment he turned to Them and burned as a living flame for Them. Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* was for him the very stuff of his existence, the food on which his whole being subsisted and the air that he breathed.

In this life itself he had reached that stage where it could be said of him:

Now other claims had hushed in him their cry:
Only he longed to draw her presence and power
Into his heart and mind and breathing frame... (*Savitri*)

Furthermore, his powerful heart was wide enough to include in its vast embrace his beloved Mother-land, the dharma-bhoomi of India, as well as his adopted karma-bhoomi, America. Here he worked tirelessly for many years, in the face of some of the greatest tragedies imaginable, to establish a dynamic center for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo where . . .

Only he yearned to call for ever down
Her healing touch of love and truth and joy
Into the darkness of the suffering world. (*Savitri*)

Her Work continues at the center. Others around Vyas-ji, who could not help catching fire themselves in his presence, have the immense Grace of being able to act as Her instruments in helping the center grow and manifest Her healing touch in the world. This is his lasting legacy as well as the most precious gift that he has asked from Her on behalf of America.

Although in appearance a great loss to us, in our heart of hearts we know and feel this one sole Truth behind his passing, that "His soul was freed and given to her alone."



Professor Vyas was a tireless worker for the Mother. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Foundation of North America)

Let us pray in calm silence and loving gratitude to Her for Vyas-ji and for his beautiful family which She keeps safe in Her loving embrace and which is also an integral part of our broader collective, Her Yoga-kula.

Sri Aurobindo Centers Guide and Newsletter

by Dakshina Vanzetti

In November 2009, after a gap of seven years, the second edition of the Sri Aurobindo Centers Guide and Newsletter (of North America) has been updated and published. It is being mailed out to 3600 Sri Aurobindo contacts in the U.S. and Canada. It includes listings and activities of 47 organizations dedicated to the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in the U.S. and Canada, from full-time centers open to the public, to small study groups held in private homes, to information offices and educational institutions. Also included in this edition are a number of online discussion groups, forums and internet courses on Integral Yoga which can be so helpful for those who live far away from a study group or center location.

The hope in providing this information is to make it easier to find out about activities going on in one's local area and to become aware of the work taking place around the country, as well as to encourage participation whenever possible. At the end of most of the listings there is a paragraph on how one can help—whether by offering time or skills, donating books for a library, study group participation, or financial contributions, etc. There is also a section at the very end of the guide which lists services and businesses that can be patronized whose proceeds help to support the work of some of the centers and other organizations.

If you would like to receive a copy of the guide, please call: 209-339-1342 ext.4, or email: dakshina.sasp@gmail.com.



Conference held in San Francisco

by Lynda Lester

The Department of Asian and Comparative Religions hosted a conference called “Fundamentalism and the Future” September 11-12, 2009, at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. Debashish Banerji, Rich Carlson, and Dave Hutchinson organized the conference, which was inspired in part by the controversy that has arisen over Peter Heeh’s *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. Debashish Banerji, Richard Hartz, Michael Murphy, and Savitri gave presentations, while the audience participated in a series of group discussions.

Topics covered included the intertwining of historical trends such as modernity, colonialism, nationalism, multiculturalism, religious pluralism, fundamentalism, and globalization. Also examined were relevant themes in Sri Aurobindo’s writings, as well as historical developments at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville.

Except for a few instances where the temperature rose a few degrees, I found the discussion at the conference to be cordial and sincere. It seemed to me that this was an earnest, dignified effort to address complex developments in the collective consciousness of both humanity and the Integral Yoga community. In addition to concern over the court cases brought against Peter Heehs, there were a number of people calling for dialog to bridge the differences that have arisen over this matter.

I came away with the realization that although our attempts to embrace truth and unity-consciousness may seem to have little effect in turbulent times, we can at least and most certainly elevate the level of public discourse.

Podcasts are available on the “Materials” section of the conference website: <http://www.fundamentalismandthefuture.com>.

Briefs

AUM 2010 will be held July 8-11 at Menla Mountain Retreat and Conference Center located in the Catskill Mountains near Matagiri Sri Aurobindo Center. Watch for further details.

The Sri Aurobindo Center South East is pleased to host a **2010 Integral Yoga Retreat**. We invite you to participate in a valuable opportunity to learn more about the many aspects of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s Integral Yoga. The conference offers valuable insights for people of all ages through activities, discussions and lectures. The retreat will also include daily physical fitness, meditation and experiential sessions. With powerful speakers from India and the United States, attendees will be richly rewarded with a better understanding of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s teachings and its practical application to our everyday

lives. Retreat dates: July 14-18, 2010. Retreat location: Furman University, Greenville, SC. Additional information to come. For questions please call 864-248-1571.

Awareness Through the Body Workshops. Consistent with its mission to support integral education both in practice and in theory, The Foundation for World Education is happy to announce a series of Awareness Through the Body (ATB) workshops which will be offered in the U.S. during the summer of 2010.

Awareness Through the Body is a program of carefully sequenced movement and meditation activities developed in Auroville by Joan and Aloka to enhance self-awareness and concentration. For almost 10 years they have been conducting regular ATB classes for children of all ages from 5 to 15, and have extended the work to adults both in and out of Auroville. ATB is a beautiful example of integral education. It develops concentration and self-awareness while addressing all the planes of the being. It is also fun!

The first series of workshops will be offered in Keene, New Hampshire and Brattleboro, Vermont from June 14 to July 4, and at a second location in the U.S. during the first two weeks in July. The workshops are open to anyone over the age of 18. For further information, see: awarenessthroughthebody.wordpress.com or email either Margo MacLeod at margowmacleod@gmail.com or Heidi Watts at hwatts@antiochne.edu.

Sri Aurobindo Study Circle of Cincinnati (SASCC) started on 15th Aug 2009, Weekly meetings: Wednesday 8-9 p.m., Sunday 10-11 a.m. Meetings include brief meditation and reading from the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. We celebrate all Darshan days. Please let us know if someone visiting Cincinnati from within US or abroad. We will be happy to host them. Contact: Radha Krishna (832-769-9940), Lakshmi Krishna (832-310-8605); Email: rgkrishna815@hotmail.com.

Institute for Wholistic Education, Racine, WI is now sponsoring several “online” study activities taking place daily:

Daily Twitter feed on Sri Aurobindo Studies: <http://www.twitter.com/santoshk1>

Daily Blog Post: Systematic study of *The Life Divine*, now in Chapter 12: <http://sriaurobindostudies.wordpress.com>

A 16 DVD introduction to Savitri, titled “The Conquest of Death: An Introduction to Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*, *A Legend and a Symbol*,” has been produced by Debashish Banerji. The series presents *Savitri* in terms of the main themes of Sri Aurobindo’s teaching, with introductions, recitations and interpretations. Set in nature and recited with Sunil’s New Year music for background, these presentations are aimed at introducing both the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and the consciousness transforming potency of his cosmic poem. For more information, visit <http://debashishbanerji.com/savitri.html>; Email debbanerji@yahoo.com.



AV almanac

Auroville's first film festival

by Tlaloc

One of its active and enthusiastic participants describes the event...

Auroville's very first film festival, launched during the last week of September, has just concluded with the awards night. Conceived by Auroville's Cinema Paradiso as a biennial event, we hope it will eventually be recognized among the international film festivals in India. This new experiment brought forth a wave of creativity from Aurovilians, guests and from our Tamil neighbors. There were over 100 entries; most of these were from first-time filmmakers.

The format was to work mostly with the schools in the city and its bioregion. So, for a start workshops were set up to train people who would then train the students in Auroville and in nearby village schools. And as often happens in Auroville, a very serendipitous event occurred. On the day the training workshops were going to take place, a (French) film lecturer showed up with an interest to teach people how to produce their own films! Far out! His name was Saguenail. He had developed this course in Portugal, and it was designed to teach novices how to produce their own films within a 10 to 12 day period. We had already scheduled someone else to give the classes, but as it turned out, he was more than grateful for this 'by chance' (does anything happen *by chance* in the City of Dawn?) arrival.

The great things about Saguenail's course were its philosophical and practical aspects. We were taught theory of film and what components were needed to create a film. Then, after learning theory we would go out and capture on film some of the concepts we were being taught. The hidden curriculum was team work. Each team got to do all the many functions involved in filmmaking, e.g., camera, sound, direction, etc. So parts of the curriculum included people working together and meeting Aurovilians and neighbors that we hadn't known before.

After this course, the new trainers now trained others. If they were not sure of what they had learned, working with the students certainly accelerated their learning curve. And the results? As the saying goes, the proof was in the pudding—some of the films the students made were truly creative, innovative and magical.

I think the maiden Auroville Film Festival was magical in another way. Normally at film festivals one finds plenty of critics. It is always easy to spot the faults in a film (or any other endeavor), but the filmmakers I have talked to all shared a common experience: they found that Aurovilians are generous and supportive to creative endeavors. They have had Aurovilians coming up to them



Children gather for the big event. (Photo copyright Ireno Guerici)

and telling them how much they enjoyed their films. Compliments are a form of magic because they have the ability to transform and empower and produce more creativity.

Since it was a film festival, there were judges (non-Aurovilian) and prizes (beautiful ceramic plaques created by one of Auroville's own potters, Adil). There were about 15 prizes (you can view the list of winners and see the winners of the short films at www.aurovillev.org). Actually, everyone was a winner because they were able to find a new hip form of creative expression. They had learned a bit of how the hardware (camera, mike, computers, etc.) and software (computer editing software) worked to spin the magic of making films. I truly believe that none of the participants will ever be a passive watcher of films again. They will wonder, "How did they make that shot or that transition," or "What a great edit!" And those in the audience were also winners because they were able to see the creativity that was expressed in these films. Many of them are waiting to try their hand at the next film festival.

At the conclusion of the awards ceremony, Marco, the initiator of the event, said, "This is not the end but the beginning." Yes, just the tip of the iceberg and below is the fermenting creative energy that will be able to showcase its movies every two years. Budding film directors, scriptwriters, actors and camera/sound crew are all in the waiting. Thanks to help from the Dutch group Stichting de Zaaier, the creative potential that this film festival has unleashed will be known in the not too distant future. The team plans to continue (and build up) the workshops, improve the editing component, and add acting and scriptwriting components. Promising actors and the rest are waiting in the wings as they develop their skills and creativity.

The Auroville Film Festival has opened up new horizons that some may like to explore now that they have been given the opportunity to try this great multimedia art/technology. And we're setting a theme for one of the categories for the next festival (2011)—Human Unity—which will encourage filmmakers from around the world to enter.



These are interesting times, when anyone, including children, can script, direct, shoot and edit their own movies. Well, that's all, folks . . . till the next Auroville Film Festival!

FAMC Work Plan: September 2009–April 2010

by the FAMC team

Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) recently drafted a work plan in order to take concrete steps towards achieving the aims and objectives of Auroville and circulated it to various working groups and the community at large for feedback.

For in this ideal place money would be no more the sovereign lord. Individual merit will have a greater importance than the value due to material wealth and social position. Work would not be there as the means of gaining one's livelihood, it would be the means whereby to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service to the whole group, which on its side would provide for each one's subsistence and for the field of his work. (The Mother, from "A Dream")

The ideals guiding management of funds and assets

No circulation of money in Auroville.
No sense of private property in Auroville.
A simple material lifestyle for all.
Self-sufficiency in meeting day-to-day needs.
No taxation.

Collective self-discipline

At an all-Auroville level the collective discipline is very weak. It is necessary to take steps to strengthen it so that we can begin to function as a self-conscious community. The FAMC wants to work in collaboration with the Auroville Council and the Working Committee to progressively raise the level of collective discipline. First steps in this regard have been taken.

Management

We want to strategize and look how to structure a management team for each large Auroville asset so that there is proper and efficient/optimum utilization of capital—teams that can help take Auroville to the next level in enterprises and commerce and that can plan a continuation strategy for successful projects.

Personal maintenance and housing

Equitable economy: To promote long-term sustainability as well as a sense of community it is necessary to encourage a simple lifestyle for *all* in Auroville. We want to initiate a dialogue with all commercial unit executives and those with large personal means to align their lifestyles to Auroville's ideals. It is felt that some people are setting a trend of consumerism in Auroville, and that there is a need to discourage this as others too tend to follow their example, thus increasing differences in Auroville. A forum for discussion on this topic will be created soon.

Kind economy: Creative ideas need to be found to reduce the amount of cash circulating in Auroville. We want to work with the Budget Coordination Committee in this matter. Open discussions on this topic will be initiated in the community, and we will request the Auroville Council to initiate and monitor these discussions.

Self-sustaining economy: The city services budget which takes care of our personal maintenance and the maintenance of our services has become heavily dependent on income from deposits in banks, etc. and on government grants. There is a need to progressively change this scenario towards a self-sustaining economy. The FAMC invites new ideas from all who have thought deeply on the subject.

Housing for all: We want to promote housing with collective funds for those who do not have personal means and work full-time for Auroville. The community of Aspiration is an example from the early days of Auroville, and Citadine is the latest experiment. The FAMC is keen to launch one or two more such projects this year. It is necessary to set up a Housing Revolving Fund for this purpose. We invite project managers, architects and builders to come together to collaborate with the Housing Group.

Services

Improvement of existing services: We want to support the city services as much as possible within the means available. We also feel the need to create a mechanism for the evaluation of the work of service units and to ensure that they maintain high standards. We want to work with the Board of Services for that purpose. Suggestions are invited from all.

Setting up of new services: We want to promote the setting up of new services that would ease the life of Aurovilians and make possible the pursuit of activities that promote personal growth. Suggestions are invited.

Land

Optimal use of Auroville's land: There is a lot of land in Auroville that is not fully utilized or is not attended to at all. To this purpose a Land Resources Development Task Force has been set up to propose to FAMC steps for the optimal use of highly valuable lands outside the Master Plan area. This is being



done in collaboration with the land caretakers. And meetings with FAMC and/or on site are taking place.

Recovery of Auroville's land: Recently quite an amount of Auroville land has been found to be in the possession of unauthorized persons. The LRM and LCC have done a good job of identifying these lands and getting possession back to Auroville.

Forest land and assets management: A policy of proper utilization of forest lands needs to be worked upon by the Forest Group. The BCC is working with the Forest Group on that subject and the FAMC is fully supportive of the process being followed.

Land registration transfer: Some lands within the Master Plan are held in the name of Aurovilians. We request the Aurovilians concerned to make this land relatable to Auroville without delay.

Commerce and entrepreneurship

Promotion of Auroville's entrepreneurship: The FAMC is keen to extend all support needed by commercial enterprises of Auroville. It is important to improve the environment for commerce so that new enterprises can grow. We want to help set up a business development group that will promote new enterprises within Auroville or joint ventures with outside parties. A mentoring system can be started by ABC to support new entrepreneurs. Bottlenecks in granting credit facilities or building permissions need to be done away with. We want to create an income generation plan with the goal of achieving self-sufficiency for Auroville.

New approach to contribution: There is a need felt to renegotiate the arrangement whereby commercial units contribute a third of their net profits to Auroville and are free to do as they please with the rest. This arrangement fosters the relationship as if of two parties, one giving and the other taking, leading to a distortion of the spirit in which business is to be done in Auroville. Commercial units are an integral part of Auroville. The FAMC will initiate a dialogue with commercial units to reach a new understanding of their role in Auroville.

Aurovilians working outside Auroville: There is an increasing number of Aurovilians who are not working inside Auroville or for Auroville units. It is necessary to clarify the participation in Auroville of all those who work outside of Auroville.

Finance

Development fund for housing and infrastructure: We want to find ways to make the money that is deposited in the Unity Fund and Maintenance Fund available for infrastructure and housing in Auroville. Some creative thinking needs to be done on how to go into that. To simply put all the money in the bank and use the interest amount is not in line with the endeavor for a new economy.

Contributions: The collection of money by way of small contributions levied by our financial systems, whether it be the percentage charged by financial services on grants or donations,



Housing for All. One of the aims of the 'Citadines' project, located just north of Matrimandir, is to provide housing and common living spaces to those residents who are fully dedicated through their work to Auroville's development. The project is fully funded through donations, hence money is not a criterion in granting these flats. Moreover, the 'builder-client' relationship no longer applies, as the architect and the contractor do not have to deal with the personal wishes of individuals. In this way, in its search for an ideal economy, Auroville will take complete care of its inhabitants who are committed to work for the city's development. It will allow the spirit of Service, which is the essence of Auroville's Charter, to be revived. When completed, the Citadines will consist of 108 apartments for singles, couples and families. The first phase of 30 apartments is nearing completion. The architect is young Aurovillian Sonali Phadnis, originally from Poona. (Photo by Tine Zimm)

contributions asked by the housing services towards new housing or exchange of the housing or contributions for land, or various charges for newcomers, all of these are not creating a feeling of togetherness. We want to change the overall approach to contributions.

Monitoring: At present Auroville's assets, particularly the lands held by forest projects as well as monthly budgets and other assets given to service units by the City Services, are being managed by individuals, and there is no community control over this management. While it is important that a decentralized structure should continue, it is also important that forests as well as services commit themselves to take responsibility for these assets and funds to be utilized for purposes that are spelt out.

Planning

Database: It is necessary to create an accurate database of all assets of Auroville, including Land, Housing and Human Resources.

Call for collective projects: We call upon the residents of Auroville to identify, prioritize, plan and develop large-scale projects aimed at the improvement of the Auroville's collective life.



Chronicles

Reflections of Dhanavanti, senior Ashram artist

by Larry Seidlitz

The following account is based on conversations I had with Dhanavanti at her studio. Dhanavanti has published two books of her art, Tapasyâ: Hymns in Colour (2008), and Meditation in Colour (1978, now out of print).

Dhanavanti began to stay in the Ashram in November 1943 at the age of nine. Her family had been coming each November for Darshan and they would usually stay for a month. This time while they were visiting, the Mother decided to start a school for the children who had gathered in the Ashram. Many of the children did not know how to spend their time, and the Mother thought that they should be given an education. Dhanavanti reminisces how simple things were in those days. Nothing was prearranged. The children were there, they needed an education, so the school started. Dhanavanti and her elder sister Kusam asked the Mother if they could join the school and it was done. She believes there were about 30-35 children then, and several Ashramites were assigned to teach.

Later, in 1958, Dhanavanti, her brother Pravin, and her parents became Ashramites. Dhanavanti was 24. Her elder sister, Kusam, was already an Ashramite, as the Mother had already given her regular work looking after the boarding when she was just 18 years old.

Dhanavanti remembers something very interesting about the Wednesday evening classes Mother started in 1953. These classes were open to whoever wanted to come. She recalls that even her parents would be there although they did



Dhanavanti in her studio during one of our conversations. (Photo by Larry Seidlitz)

not understand French, which was what the Mother spoke. Just the atmosphere of the class and listening to Mother's voice had a deep effect on all those present.

Dhanavanti recalls the darshans of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Everyone would wait expectantly for the grand moment, preparing themselves inwardly. For the last three or four days before the darshan she would be thinking all the time of being there in front of Them. She recalls that although Sri Aurobindo was not physically very tall or stout, when he sat there on the chair he appeared like the Himalayas, with his hair flowing like the rivers. He had a grandiose pose. Moreover, she always had the impression that in the way that he sat, with his arms out to the sides, and his feet coming close together below, that his pose had the shape of India. She would always see the shape of India in that pose. "And looking into his eyes was like looking . . ." she goes within for a moment searching for words . . . "I don't think God could be anything more."

For Dhanavanti, the Mother appeared completely different when she sat next to Sri Aurobindo at the darshan. At other times, she was like the queen, the leader and conductor of everything. But when she was beside Sri Aurobindo, she totally

effaced herself. It was as though she was saying, "look at him." So Dhanavanti would always look at Sri Aurobindo first, and only afterwards at the Mother. She explains that just like in his writings, every sentence "englobes" you, so with his eyes he would englobe you: "It was like being filled up, absolutely drowning in bliss."

Dhanavanti worked in the Ashram school as a teacher for 10 years, from 1954 to 1963. She recalls that on 7 April 1954 she was sitting in one of her classes as a student, when someone sent by Amrita-da came to say, "Mother is calling for you." She was a little nervous, wondering "Why would Mother be calling me?" But as she stepped nimbly up the stairs to meet the Divine she felt delighted, self-confident, and responsible. The Mother informed her that there were children waiting to enter the school, but the next term was still eight months away. She did not want the children to waste their time and energies. She asked Dhanavanti if she would teach them French—the medium of instruction in the Ashram school—so that the children could go to their respective classes well-equipped at the beginning of the next term. Dhanavanti said "Of course, Mother, if you want me to do that, I surely will." And from the next day it was all arranged: There was no gap between the decision and the execution. Dhanavanti explains that "Things were so simple in those days. The Mother wished and ordered and everyone worked to execute her wish in perfect harmony and full collaboration."

Dhanavanti started taking French class, and the next year she took Mathematics to teach to small children. Later she would also teach Science, English, and Art. For some years she taught French Auxiliary, which was for the new students who had to be made ready to start their other classes. These classes were a little difficult, because there would be students at all different grade levels, and each had to be brought up to the appropriate level. There was no book to teach such a class, so the teachers had to devise their own course work for each student. Although



challenging, Dhanavanti recalls that it was a joy, whatever work she was given she carried out with joy.

In 1954, Dhanavanti also started learning drawing and painting from Krishnalal and Jayantilal. She explains that Jayantilal's encouragement and guidance at the start helped her to persevere. She loved everything in Nature. She has never stopped marvelling at life. But what fascinated her most was the human face and the human body. But somewhere in 1956 she found a new meaning to art. She was in a questioning inner state looking for an answer. As she dived within she had a vivid experience she felt compelled to paint then and there. As she relates in her book, *Tapasya*, she then "realized that it was possible to express an inner state triggered by some happening in real life to get a pictorial answer to your question. It was indeed a revealing experience. LIFE becoming ART and ART LIFE" (Dhanavanti, 2008).

Then again, probably in the early 1960s, there was another turning point. She was ruminating over the words of Sri Aurobindo, "The heavens beyond are great and wonderful but greater and more wonderful are the heavens within you. It is these Edens that await the divine worker." She says "slowly, silently the depth and extent of their meaning became a web around me" (Dhanavanti, 2000). She went within and tried to put on canvas what she felt. As was her practice, she took these paintings to the Mother.

The Mother looked at them for some time.

Then she caressed my head and caressing, said, 'My child, you have something here. But when it passes from here...' she slid her hand from my head to shoulder, arm and caught my finger '...to here, something gets lost. So you have to be conscious to the tip of your fingers. Voilà.

She held my hands, looked into my eyes, poured all the force I would need on the entire journey of my life to carry on, to reach my goal" (Dhanavanti, 2000, p. 78).

Dhanavanti realized that her fingers have to be conscious and obedient instruments of the deepest, highest part of her being. In order to do this, she had to stop thinking, establish calm throughout the whole being, be centered within, and to allow the inner vision to express itself through her fingers. After this, the figures in her paintings became simpler, consisting of just a few significant strokes, each one fully expressive of some inner movement or subtle emotion.

While teaching in the school, Dhana-

She held my hands, looked into my eyes, poured all the force I would need on the entire journey of my life to carry on, to reach my goal.

vanti was also taking care of her mother who was not well. It was becoming difficult to both teach and look after her mother's increasing needs. This was in 1963. Towards the end of the year, Dhanavanti stated clearly her desire not to take classes in the next school term 1963-64. Her request was granted. Her mother passed away in April 1964. Dhanavanti told Mother she was now ready to do whatever she would want her to do. The Mother said, "You will work with Abhay Singh."

Abhay Singh was a dynamic man personally trained by Pavitra-da. and chosen to take over the charge of the Atelier from him because of Pavitra-da's responsibilities as Director of Education increasing day by day. He looked after the transports, which included purchase, maintenance and management of Ashram vehicles—cars, tractors, bus and lorry and organize the work of the drivers as well. There was the metal work which consisted mainly of

tinning the vessels of the dining hall, making cans, syringes etc. for the garden and other miscellaneous needs of the Ashramites. He managed a petrol bunk, a wood working unit, a construction unit and eventually a big garden.

Dhanavanti worked mostly in the office. She recalls that the first work she was given was to arrange a big cupboard filled with all kinds of car parts and related things. Long afterwards, Abhay Singh told her, "I always give this work to those who come to work with us, because if they don't like the work they just would not turn up the next day. But you came so I concluded here is someone who may stick. Slowly different kinds of responsibilities from different units started coming her way and she enjoyed learning new things

all the time. Gradually she was aware of all the goings on in the Atelier and took full interest in everything.

A b h a y Singh was a great organizer, and he was ex-

ceptional in his treatment of people. He would never get angry or mistreat anyone. And yet friction had started brewing every now and then with one of the Ashramites working in the Atelier. Abhay Singh had his own ideas about how things should be done and this person had his own. Abhay was trained under Pavitra-da, and always obeyed without question. Abhay was built this way—he was either a soldier obeying, or an officer in control. He could take both positions. Now Abhay was in charge and this person did not want to follow his instructions. So Abhay suggested to the Mother, "Mother, why don't you give him the responsibilities of this section of the Atelier. Let him look after it the way he wants." And she had replied, "No my child, I want all these departments under one roof, under one head, and that is you."

One day in 1968, Abhay and Dhanavanti cycled to a place called Eden Gardens. There was hardly any garden left

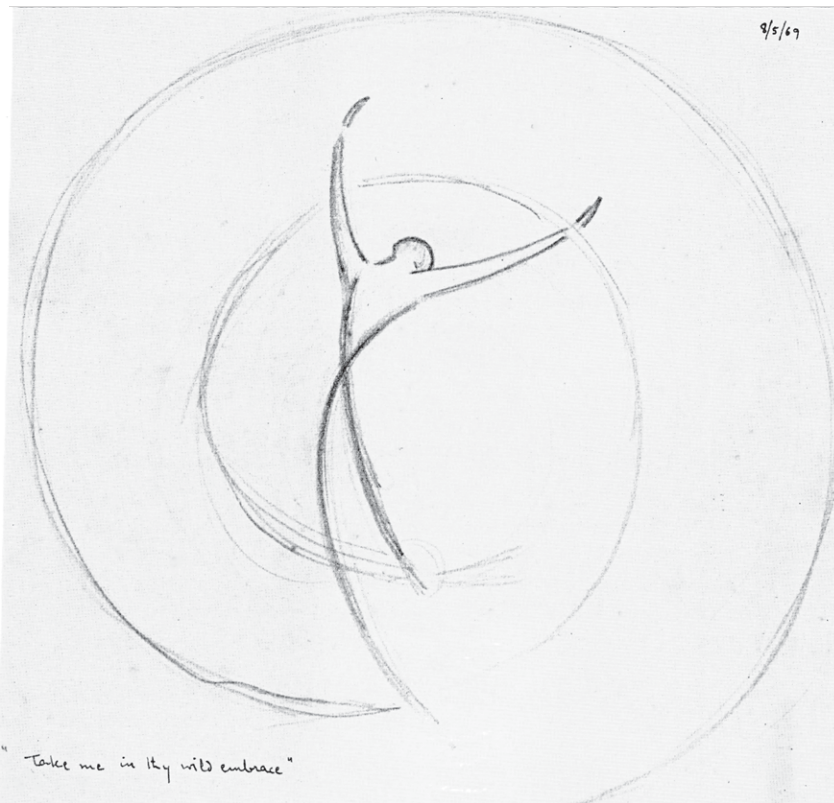


there. It was more of a jungle with thick underbrush. But once it must have been a very aesthetically planned landscape around a big bungalow, with beautiful statues of gods adorning the green of the garden. The place had an inviting throb. Returning to the Atelier, Abhay instructed the gentleman who often functioned as his public relations officer to find out the details about the land and its owner. Abhay's public relations officer had not yet reached the party when their messenger was in the office explaining to Abhay that many people were interested in the land but the owner wanted to offer it to us if we would accept it. It so

happened that the Ashram had previously rented a plot from the party and it was looked after Abhay. The party was so happy with the way in which the place was maintained that they wanted to offer it to Abhay. They made it clear that the land could not be sold for a certain length of time because of some legal issue. But they were ready to lease it for 18 years at Rs. 300/month. This was a very reasonable offer. Abhay Singh wrote to the Mother with the details and asked if she would like that he take up the project. The Mother permitted him to go ahead and so he did. Thus began the uphill task of rearing Nandanam—the garden of joy.

Listen to Abhay speak about Nandanam—it speaks also for him as a person. He wrote this for a magazine of Agriculture that published an article on Nandanam.

One fine morning we just happened to visit the place now called Nandanam. It radiated immense possibilities and in our heart there was enthusiasm and



'Take me in thy wild embrace.' Untitled sketch by Dhanavanti, from her book, *Tapasya: Hymns in colour.* (Courtesy Dhanavanti)

ardour to work hard. The two combined must bear results. We wrote to Mother asking if She would like us to take the land. She agreed.

To begin with—Her sanction. To continue—Her strength, Her zeal, Her perseverance. These are our tools and nothing else, because everything else just follows in. And we wish to continue with the same joy of creation to make Nandanam more and more fruitful, beautiful and peace-giving to all those who visit, in our endless effort towards perfection.

Many visitors to the garden had observed that they had been to other gardens that were well organised and beautiful, but that this place had a very special atmosphere. Dhanavanti explains, "a bubbling fervor, a whole-hearted commitment, sagacious, detailed planning, well-organized labour, calculated dispensation of wealth and the available facilities went into the making of this garden with a special

atmosphere."

"Difficulties were many, problems galore cropped up like weeds," she explains, "but Abhay was a man of solutions. Nothing could stop him from going straight ahead to his set goal. He had a swift, decision-making, practical intelligence that could make use of all the departments to complete each other and bear results profitable to all. It was a fantastic organization."

The first three crucial hurdles to cross before starting planting in Nandanam were: (a) de-weeding—an Ashram engineer who worked with Abhay designed a special tool which was attached to a tractor and pulled out

the recalcitrant weeds; (b) irrigation—a mould was prepared as per the need and channels in cement made on the spot were laid according to a carefully laid plan to reach all the parts of the land; (c) roads—there was a construction department and often there was debris to be transported and unloaded somewhere—this problem material came in handy to lay the roads.

The first thing planted was jasmine. It could easily go to the market for sale and it was useful because the Mother gave jasmine to the disciples in the evening. In Abhay's room there used to be six large plates several inches deep all filled with jasmine. It was like heaven. Gradually a variety of fruit trees were planted, some vegetables were grown, and roses were cultivated, both the Edward variety for making rosewater, and others meant for arrangement that Mother gave to people who went for pranams.

In 1977, Abhay retired from his position due to a disagreement with the Ashram trustees. They had decided to



take one of the departments from his control. He remembered Mother's direction to him that she wanted all the departments kept together under his authority, so rather than give up this one department, he decided to resign from his position as head of all the departments.

For about a year he was hopeful that the situation would be resolved, but it never was. Dhanavanti stood beside Abhay. She too recalled at this moment Mother's specific direction to her that she was to work with Abhay. After Abhay left his position, the Ashram did not specify any other work that either of them was to do.

Abhay stayed outside the Ashram for a short period looking after works related to Mother's Agenda. They were a small group living and working together. Dhanavanti accompanied him and took on whatever responsibilities came her way. Both of them enjoyed their work in no way different than working in the Ashram for the Mother. But Dhanavanti remembers Abhay telling her often, "Dhanavanti, this is only a temporary arrangement for us. Our real place and home is in the Ashram." Dhanavanti was happy to hear that, but also felt that if it was temporary, then the sooner they returned, the better it would be. Abhay was also suffering from a severe case of diabetes. They returned within three years, in 1983.

From then on, both of them kept themselves engaged in different activities, doing their work in the same spirit as they did previously, with the faith that "it is in our attitudes towards the work and the seeking and perseverance for perfection that the offering is made." The line between the ordinary and the spiritual had vanished, for all was spirit. In 1985, Dhanavanti started an embroidery production unit. This developed over the course of 10 years to include a number of local workers, who produced the very finest quality work available with Dhanavanti's original designs.



In this untitled sketch, the Divine Mother blesses her surrendered child. (Courtesy and copyright Dhanavanti).

Following this, she became involved for some years in the English translation of the poetry of a Gujarati Ashram poet, Sundaram, which eventually was published as a book (*Selected Poems of Sundaram*, Gujarat Sahitya Academy, Gandhinagar, 2001).

Then in August 2001, Ahbay Singh passed away. Independent as he always was, he collapsed as he was walking to his sister's place in the evening as was his custom after having had a full normal day of activity.

This was a challenging period for Dhanavanti, in part because she had to readjust and find herself and her role again. The painting shown on the cover of her book *Tapasyâ* depicts her psychological state at this time, and perhaps painting it helped her to clarify her situation. It shows a figure standing in the center of a circle which is white near the top, but in which red and orange flames are coming up from below and on the sides of the figure. The circle is positioned at the center of a swirl

(or whirlwind) of colors—blue, forest green, and reddish earth tones. She explains that she found that the solution to her situation was to stand firmly focused and centered in the Divine in this purifying fire as the whirl of powerful forces circulated around her. She looks back at this period as a movement of the Divine Force which helped to strengthen her and make her grow.

Dhanavanti explains that her art comes from such inner experiences, not from any outside influences. While she admits that she admires the work of certain artists such as Cezanne, Matisse, and Van Gogh, and that they may have had some influence on her, she never endeavored to emulate their styles or techniques. Similarly, various poems or lines of poetry may have an influence on her art, but she does not try to consciously depict specific lines of poetry or other ideas in her art. She adds that whenever she *has* tried to do this,

it has been a failure and she did not keep the work. Rather, the composition of her paintings wells up from deep within her being, and then sometimes afterwards she sees a parallel or reflection in Sri Aurobindo's poems or in the poetry or writings of her own or others.

Christine Devin, one of the Auroville team who published her book *Tapasyâ*, beautifully explains in the introduction to the book the character of her paintings:

Dhanavanti's paintings are mystical journeys, discoveries of the invisible, landscapes seen only by the inner eye. They constitute a unique artistic approach, because precisely it is an approach that is not only artistic. Born from meditation, they bear its serene and burning imprint. To look at them is to deepen one's vision (p. 6).

Dhanavanti relates that she has exhibited her art outside the Ashram on two occasions, and these exhibitions occurred



quite naturally without any endeavor on her part. The first time, there was a Bengali gentleman who had come to the Ashram and who saw her paintings and liked them very much. He asked why she has not exhibited them in Calcutta? He moved in a circle of people who could arrange such things, and so he arranged an exhibition there. Many people came and admired the paintings, but Dhanavanti had stipulated that no paintings should be sold. The purpose was just to give a wider exposure of her art to those within the art world so that they could be seen and appreciated.

Later (this was when Abhay had retired and Dhanavanti's work in Atelier ended), a friend of Dhanavanti's from Brazil was visiting the Ashram. Dhanavanti received a clear inner indication from the Mother to speak to this friend about Dhanavanti's situation in the Ashram. This friend invited Dhanavanti to come to Brazil and stay with her for a time, which was then arranged. Dhanavanti brought some of her paintings along, because she finds it easier to communicate when a painting is there as a focal, starting point. Later, this friend arranged an exhibition. Dhanavanti puts it differently. She says that Mother arranges things—somebody comes, and everything is taken care of. Dhanavanti also gave talks and workshops which involved a combination of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's teachings and painting. These were highly appreciated and regularly attended over the period of three months in which she stayed in Brazil. The exhibition also was quite successful, and there she sold some of the paintings so she could pay her expenses for traveling and staying there and to give gifts to the people who had helped her to put it on. What was left over she gave to the Ashram.

Dhanavanti wishes to keep her paintings together rather than let them be dispersed to different people. Presently they are kept in her studio where she paints and



In this untitled sketch, the Divine Mother takes the hand of her aspiring child. (Courtesy and copyright Dhanavanti).

lives. Mother had given her the studio to paint and told her that she would create many paintings there. Later, after Abhay Singh passed away, the Ashram constructed some rooms behind the studio for a kitchen and bedroom to make a complete living space for her. Her brother also helped her to furnish the rooms and provided other support. It is a beautiful spacious room adorned with many paintings and prominent photos of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The publication of her two books was one way she found where her art could receive some exposure. In this too, events seemed to organize themselves.

I asked Dhanavanti whether she could offer any advice or suggestions to our readers based on her many years of sadhana and service. Humbly she answered that she would not like to say anything in the name of Sri Aurobindo or the Mother, but what she herself has discovered is that the best contribution that anybody can make is to perfect himself. She

feels that if we would really perfect ourselves in every movement, physical and psychological, such that we would not even throw out a single negative thought or emotion into the air, that would be the greatest contribution we could make. In saying this, she recalls the line from *Savitri*, "One man's perfection still can save the world" (p. 531).

She elaborates that at first when she started feeling this way she thought that perhaps she was becoming more selfish or self-centered. Previously she used to have ideas of changing people and of accomplishing this or that. She now feels that the best offering she can make to the Divine is to have vibrations that are nothing but love. Moreover, she feels that if more people would sincerely try this, to become more and more conscious and simply live in their own light, without trying to do anything big outwardly, it would provide a much more solid basis for making

the new world.

Dhanavanti explains that she feels she is most active when she is just sitting in her chair and doing nothing else. She said that sometimes when she sits like that it feels as if she has the energies of an atom bomb. She says that we must become conscious of the power that is in every cell of our body, and that we must make a constant effort to use that power in the right way. She explains that usually when we say we must become conscious, we mean *mentally* conscious. But that is not sufficient: "We must become conscious 'there' (she pinches her skin). We must begin from 'being,' not from 'thinking' (she points to her head). When we begin from 'being,' we are rooted, and nothing can shake us." She admits that sometimes the power within her is still not always properly controlled. But she is convinced that a day will come when she will use that power solely for creative purposes. That is what we are here to do, on earth, in life.



Essays

Sri Aurobindo, India and ideological discourse¹

by Debashish Banerji

I

In the first part of this essay, I consider Sri Aurobindo's nationalism, and contextualize his nationalism within the theoretical consideration of the colonial-national interchange and the modern understanding of the nation. In the second part, I apply the implications of this nationalism to a consideration of Sri Aurobindo's social ideas—concerning the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville and in general, the social context of the Integral Yoga and his vision of the future, so that we may reflect on where we stand at present.

A congeries of religions

I would like to start our consideration with a reading from Sri Aurobindo, a passage from the chapter "The Evolution of the Spiritual Man" in *The Life Divine*:

In India, we have seen, there has been a persistence of the original intuition and total movement of evolutionary Nature. For religion in India limited itself by no one creed or dogma; it not only admitted a vast number of different formulations, but contained successfully within itself all the elements that have grown up in the course of the evolution of religion and refused to ban or excise any: it developed occultism to its utmost limits, accepted spiritual philosophies of all kinds, followed to its highest, deepest or largest outcome every possible line of spiritual realisation, spiritual experience, spiritual self-discipline. Its method has been the method of evo-



Debashish Banerji at Huntington Gardens in Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy Debashish Banerji)

lutionary Nature herself, to allow all developments, all means of communication and action of the spirit upon the members, all ways of communion between man and the Supreme or Divine, to follow every possible way of advance to the goal and test it even to its extreme. All stages of spiritual evolution are there in man and each has to be allowed or provided with its means of approach to the spirit, an approach suited to its capacity, *adhikāra*. Even the primitive forms that survived were not banned but were lifted to a deeper significance, while still there was the pressure to the highest spiritual pinnacles in the rarest supreme ether. Even the exclusive credal type of religion was not itself excluded; provided its affinity to the general aim and principle was clear, it was admitted into the infinite variety of the general order. But this plasticity sought to support itself on a fixed religio-social system, which it permeated with the principle of a graded working out of the human nature turned at its height towards a supreme spiritual endeavour; this social fixity, which was perhaps necessary at one time for unity of life if not also as a settled and secure basis for the spiritual freedom, has been on one side a power for preservation but also the one obstacle to the native spirit of entire catholicity, an element of excessive crystallisation and re-

striction. A fixed basis may be indispensable, but if settled in essence, this also must be in its forms capable of plasticity, evolutionary change; it must be an order, but a growing order.

Nevertheless, the principle of this great and many-sided religious and spiritual evolution was sound, and by taking up in itself the whole of life and of human nature, by encouraging the growth of intellect and never opposing it or putting bounds to its freedom, but rather calling it in to the aid of the spiritual seeking, it prevented the conflict or the undue predominance which in the Occident led to the restriction and drying up of the religious instinct and the plunge into pure materialism and secularism. A method of this plastic and universal kind, admitting but exceeding all creeds and forms and allowing every kind of element, may have numerous consequences which might be objected to by the purist, but its great justifying result has been an unexampled multitudinous richness and a more than millennial persistence and impregnable durability, generality, universality, height, subtlety and many-sided wideness of spiritual attainment and seeking and endeavour. It is indeed only by such a catholicity and plasticity that the wider aim of the evolution can work itself out with any fullness. The individual demands from religion a door of opening into spiritual experience or a means of turning towards it, a communion with God or a definite light of guidance on the way, a promise of the hereafter or a means of a happier supraterrrestrial future; these needs can be met on the narrower basis of credal belief and sectarian cult. But there is also the wider purpose of Nature to prepare and further the spiritual evolution in man and turn him into a spiritual being; religion serves her as a means for pointing his effort and his ideal in that direction and providing each one who is ready with the possibility of taking



a step upon the way towards it. This end she serves by the immense variety of the cults she has created, some final, standardised and definitive, others more plastic, various and many-sided. A religion which is itself a congeries of religions and which at the same time provides each man with his own turn of inner experience, would be the most in consonance with this purpose of Nature: it would be a rich nursery of spiritual growth and flowering, a vast multiform school of the soul's discipline, endeavour, self-realisation. Whatever errors Religion has committed, this is her function and her great and indispensable utility and service,—the holding up of this growing light of guidance on our way through the mind's ignorance towards the Spirit's complete consciousness and self-knowledge.²

This passage deals with the life of religion in India as a plural field, as what Sri Aurobindo refers to as “a congeries of religions.” It is a culture of seeking, not as a uniform religious body with fixed and rigid boundaries. Sri Aurobindo was writing this in the last years of his life. This passage comes from one of the six chapters added to *The Life Divine* towards the end of his life. One may say that Sri Aurobindo, at this point, is expressing his most comprehensive view of the field of spirituality and religion in India.

Co-optation

This passage is very important to acknowledge at the outset, because as time has passed, Sri Aurobindo has been increasingly marginalized or co-opted by a variety of mainstream discourses. He has been appropriated, for instance, by the Hindu right, along with Vivekananda. Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo are now seen as the founding figures of what is known as Hindutva³ in India. And along with this, happily accepting this identification, the Marxist left has turned on Sri Aurobindo as one of its “whipping boys.” So Sri Aurobindo has increasingly been reduced to

this image in modern and contemporary scholarship: either a champion, one of the founding figures or “mascots” of Hindutva, or “the whipping boy” of Indian Marxism.⁴

Now both of these are gross reductions. Sri Aurobindo in fact, had socialistic leanings, though he was generally averse to any ideological labeling. Thus, when necessary, he contested authoritarianism in the practice of Socialism. He stood against both Stalinism and Maoist China as regimes creating political conditions which stifled the freedom of individual growth. Yet, he was definitely not in favor of a rampant capitalism, identifying it as “economic barbarism.” So there are grounds for constellating Sri Aurobindo with certain socialistic thinkers in terms of his intellectual preferences. As far as religion and spirituality are concerned, as clearly evidenced by the passage from *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo was hardly a champion of any religious creed, attempting to cabin the approach to the Divine in terms of boundaries or a certain national history. In the passage of our consideration, he has very clearly conceptualized a field of plural religion and spiritual practice in premodern India.

However, he has been co-opted by the emergent political field of Hindutva in modern times. This has led to a certain perception, not only of Sri Aurobindo in mainstream Indian discourse, but also an acceptance of identity that has crystallized in his following, and at his ashram, as the champion or founder of this unitarian definition of Hinduism.

This image has sought its support in certain texts of Sri Aurobindo. These are usually early nationalistic texts which have been taken out of context and interpreted in modern times according to prevalent discourses of nationalistic religion. But when we view these very texts in their historical context we become aware of the discourse to which they belong. It is important to acknowledge that discourse, because discourse is performative, our utterances enact certain positions in a cultural conversation and everything that we say occurs in an existing mindset, with a

common language and a common understanding of words and ideas which allow for certain things to be said and certain things not to be said.

Colonial-National Interchange

In his early speeches and writings in India, Sri Aurobindo's texts are part of a discourse which is known today as the colonial-national interchange. We know that Sri Aurobindo returned to India from England in 1893 and soon launched into an anti-colonial movement. This movement was part of a larger rethinking of colonialism. Sri Aurobindo's writings do not appear out of the blue, he is not an isolated thinker. He enters into an existing cultural conversation that has a regional history of close to a hundred years before him, in what is today called the Bengal Renaissance. The cultural aspect of the Bengal Renaissance had been developing since the early 19th century and Sri Aurobindo entered into it in the first decade of the 20th century. He imbibed the discourse of the Bengal Renaissance and his language became part of its already existing rich language. And he provided his own answers to the internal conversation of the colonial-national interchange which framed that discourse.

In recent times, there has been an attempt to analyze this colonial-national interchange. Among the breakthrough texts that initiates this thinking is a book published in 1978 by Edward Said, a Palestinian writer, a text titled *Orientalism*. In this book, Said points out that the colonial gaze on colonized nations is one which construes the native as the “Other” of the materialist West, a romantic, spiritual, imagination-based being who cannot fully rise into intellectual discourse. As a result, on the one hand, he is glorified, valorized as a “noble savage,” and on the other hand, is thereby subordinated and suppressed, into the preserve of somebody who can be dominated, or of somebody who exists for the museological and touristic pleasure of the Western consumer.

This discourse has been further refined over time. Today we can say more



clearly that there existed in the colonial national interchange four distinct discourses. These four discourses acted independently and in a braided fashion together, sometimes as an amalgam. These four discourses can be thought of as emerging out of the European Enlightenment. I would give them the names of Enlightenment Positivism, Positivist Racism, Romantic Orientalism and Dialogic Orientalism.

The mainstream discourse of Positivism arising from Enlightenment Philosophy can be called Enlightenment Positivism. The faith at work here is that all human beings across the world are rational beings; that reason, the ordering and logical principle in the cosmos, or what may more properly be called the Logos, is God; and that this divine rationality is ubiquitous among all human beings. There is no superior and inferior here, there may be variations in training, but if the training in reason and culture is provided, all human beings would become equally “civilized.” They become what we would today call “Enlightenment Men.”

This is the first overarching discourse of post-enlightenment colonialism. Positivism in this Enlightenment sense does not make any distinction between human beings, colonizer or colonized. It moves towards the equalization of the field. It is burdened by what it calls the “white-man’s burden,” which it bears to bring the light of civilization to the brown, black, red and yellow peoples of the world. But nevertheless its motive is the equalization of the field of humanity in the name of a divine rationality. At the same time, it is a hegemonic definition of the field of humanity. That which it considers human is what is normatively human; everything outside that is somehow not properly human. That which cannot fit its mould is exiled from the domain of the human.

The second discourse is connected to the first. It may be called Positivist Racism.

Positivist Racism also starts with the precept that reason is the primary defining attribute of human beings. In this sense, it is also definitional in its approach to humanity, but it construes nonwhite people, non-western people, as racially different and inferior. Nonwestern people—we find here the invention of “the West” as a self-identifying civilizational essence tied to race and differentiated from “the East” or “the Orient”—just don’t have that definitional property of reason to the degree required to be given entry into the club of humanity. That is, the brown, black, red and yellow peoples of the world are “not quite/not white,” in Homi Bhabha’s celebrated description of the phenomenon.⁵ In other words, this is the basis of Apartheid, of races that cannot sufficiently measure up

The third world retains the character of somehow being the zone of “raw” or “uncooked” civilization, the site for the exploitation of material and human resources . . . what are today called the “cyber coolies” of the first world.

to the norm of humanity, which is the privilege of western white man.

In some form, both of these discourses are with us even today. They form the basis of what is known as neoliberal globalization, and within that paradigm, they constitute the behavior of the “first world” to the “third world.” The third world retains the character of somehow being the zone of “raw” or “uncooked” civilization, the site for the exploitation of material and human resources, of raw materials, unskilled labor or subjugated skills, what are today called the “cyber coolies” of the first world. And on the other hand, it provides the dumping ground of the first world’s toxic wastes, because it never can measure up to the fullness of humanity. The discourse of racism has been displaced into another discourse of subordination.

Along with these, almost as their necessary inverse, come two other discourses. They constitute the field of Orientalism. The first of these could be called Ro-

mantic Orientalism. This discourse starts by acknowledging the “Enlightened West” to be defined by materialism, and then projects its Other, the domain of romanticism and spirituality onto the “the Orient,” i.e. the colonized. The colonized is that Other because s/he fills the lack of Euro-America, its lost spirituality, rejected because not a part of its definition of the human. Thus the fascination of the Other as the romantic, exotic, primitive, spiritual native (in our case, Indian) characterizes Orientalism. But Orientalism is also conflicted. Just as the discourse of Positivism expresses itself as a binary, Orientalism also carries an internal conflict which divides it into two discourses. One of them is the mainstream Orientalist discourse that was so well brought out by Edward Said,

which characterizes the Oriental or “non-western” people as those who will remain and are meant to remain creatures of imagination and spirituality, never capable of political self-determination

or rational epistemology. They are therefore, essentialized, subordinated, yet also therefore, always glorified, put on a pedestal, but only in a museological and touristic sense. They will thus remain the West’s living preserves of its own archaic race memory and anthropological proof of the evolutionary progress of its enlightened civilization, for the wonder, exploration, exploitation and enjoyment of its own citizens. So this is that third discourse, which I have termed Romantic Orientalism.

The fourth discourse is where some promise starts emerging. This is a variant of Romantic Orientalism, what may be termed Dialogic Orientalism. This is constituted by the awareness among those within the West who perceive the origin of the Other within their own culture, who believe that spirituality is part of the definition of the human, which has been suppressed and neglected in the development of the progressive “logocentric” discourse of the Enlightenment. This anthro-



pological deformation needs to be corrected. Engagement in dialogue with the living potential of that in nonwestern cultures can transform and enrich the world, and create a new future.

Nationalist discourses

These four discourses find apposite halves or counterparts in the national discourse. Nationalism develops out of what has been termed interpellation.⁶ Interpellation means that one's response is determined by the way in one has been addressed. If someone calls another a "nigger," there are four options of response available to him. One is to turn one's back on the person and refuse to give an answer, in which case, one has targeted oneself to be marginalized and exterminated by the hegemonic discourse. One is put into a reservation and starved of resources until he disappears from the earth.

The second option is to respond by acceptance, that is, one responds by submission. One becomes the slave that one is being called. In our historical instance, by doing this one becomes a tamed subject of the ideological order of the Enlightenment, its world order. This is the world order determining our present epoch, what may be called the Modern. Modernity is another name for the omnipresent temporal order of the Enlightenment, the most systematic overarching ideology that is today encircling the globe. By accepting its interpellation, one is tamed into its order; one becomes neoliberal globalization's "third world." In the colonial-national interchange, there will be nationalists happy to do exactly that, they will struggle to free the nation to play its competitive part in the triumphal progress of Enlightenment Man and the technological world. A good example of this kind of leader in Indian nationalism is Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first

Prime Minister, who set the nation on its neoliberal track, the nation that must modernize itself by privileging technological progress, and become, though non-aligned, a model third world nation. Of course, in this nationalist approach there is a struggle against the strictly racial identification, but as I said earlier, under opposition, the Positivist Enlightenment discourse is only too happy to hide and displace its racialism onto the idea of "the third world."

Romantic Orientalism is its own form of interpellation. The exotic, primitive or romantic "savage" here bares his predictable teeth and fangs, that is, in our case, when the person referred to as "nigger" reacts with blind hostility. He contests the identification through aggression. This

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defiance through aggression is also an acceptance of interpellation. In its reaction is an implied consent, a wholesale acceptance of the term, hand in glove, inevitably fitting into the label that one chooses to oppose. This indeed, is one of the ways by which the contemporary nationalist construct of Hindutva has formed itself. It has formed itself out of historical precedents of aggression against colonial oppression in the name of an essentialized Orientalist identification of Hinduism as a construct of Otherness.

The fourth form of interpellation is that, in the nationalist discourse, which corresponds to the Dialogic Orientalist in the colonizer. This is where one counters the identification as the "nigger," through a dialogic critique of its causes and implications. In seeking out such a critique, the nationalist deconstructs the interpellation to reveal the roots of suppressed otherness in the colonizer. The romantic, the

spiritual, the primitive is shown to lurk within the colonizer, just as the rational is no less present in the colonized. But leveling the ground thus does not lead merely to an acknowledgment of "sameness," rather it opens up the possibility for alternate relations between what was privileged and what was subordinated in the psyche of the colonizer and the colonized, alternate forms of rationality and knowing, alternate notions of progress. It may also yield syncretistic, hybrid or synthetic forms of culture, not merely cosmetic in scope but attesting to a transformed definition of humanity. This mutually transformative dialogue leads to new possibilities for the future.

I would say that in early Indian nationalism, there occurred a bifurcation within the colonial-national interchange in which Sri Aurobindo found himself as a participant. This was a split between the first two and the latter two nationalist discourses,

with each pair acting together in an amalgamated form. The first of these pairs became the political discourse of the Moderates, who accepted the colonial order and sought only constitutional change. The second pair operated as the Extremists, who openly declared the need for independence from the colonizer on the grounds of a cultural difference in being and becoming (*swabhava* and *swadharma*). The Extremists held all means, including violence, to be legitimate to the attainment of this independence, but through their journalistic instruments, also opened a critical dialogue which penetrated into the roots of colonial hubris within the bastion of Enlightenment ideology. Sri Aurobindo himself was among those who engineered this break, leading to a separation between the Moderates and the Extremists. He is one of the major figures who ensured this bifurcation.

It is important to observe here that



though it split away from the Moderates, the Extremist discourse combined in itself the violent assertion of Otherness and the dialogic critique of modernity which characterize the second pair of nationalistic responses. Sri Aurobindo, as part of this Extremist discourse, was well aware of this braided or amalgamated action, and supported both approaches as necessary to the time and the goal of independence. He may have seen the need to affiliate himself with a more essentialized discourse of “Hindu India,” (what is now being called a strategic essentialism)⁷ because of the vitality that came from the combined effort of these two kinds of Nationalist discourse but he prioritized the critical approach, so that a dialogic understanding of cultural history and an acknowledgment of plurality were inserted into the identity of the emerging nation.

Nation souls and the Age of the World Picture

As may be expected, over time these two nationalist discourses have also bifurcated. This is an inevitable consequence of cultural historicity. Due to the ideological nature of modernity, its systemic ordering principle seeking to organize all humanity into a world schema—which is why Martin Heidegger refers to the modern age as the Age of the World Picture⁸—it exercises its rationality through its ability to classify the world in terms of center and periphery, using taxonomic schemes which can slot all entities as identifiable essences. The modern academy and the nation state become two of its principal administrative instruments for achieving this—the first through the creation of internal identity and conscience and the second through its social or ethnographic accounting and disciplinary mechanisms. The essentialized construct of Hinduism which Sri Aurobindo clearly eschewed in the passage we quoted from *The Life Divine* slips unnoticeably into the Hindu’s sense of personal identity through such reductionist means. Add to this the aggressive reaction to this insistent Orientalist Western interpellation, and it is not too

difficult to see how the first of the two latter Nationalist discourses develops into the dominant idea of Hindutva. Unfortunately, this construct is what is sweeping across the Indian nation at present posing as a majoritarian national identity and its shadow also hangs over the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It is important to realize that this is hardly what Sri Aurobindo had in mind or what he opened up through his own nationalistic response to the interpellation of the Enlightenment.

II

G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) was among the most influential philosophers who gave the western world the metaphysics of modernity, not merely as a conceptual scheme, a cosmology, but as a philosophy of history. In this philosophy of history, Rationality (which he identified as Consciousness) is immanent in Matter and “evolves” into more conscious forms of itself through time. Human history is marked by this evolution, which proceeds through dialectical experiments of synthesizing opposites from culture to culture, moving from lesser to grander expressions of individualized rational choice. The modern Age of Enlightenment is witness to the culminating stage of this evolution, when European White Man, or more specifically, German Protestant Man, has achieved the highest pinnacle of Rationality. The experiments leading to syntheses are carried out by the Time Spirit, *Zeitgeist*, which chooses different peoples to embody one of its experiments. Once an experiment is over, the “race” chosen for this task remains fixed in its cultural expression of this level of synthesis. In this “white mythology,” Hegel gave some of the lowest levels of static existence to the “Oriental” peoples of India and China. In his description of these racial or national essences, Hegel used the term *Volksgeist*, spirit of the people. This can be thought of as the root of the nation soul idea. Johann Herder (1744-1803), another German thinker and senior contemporary of Hegel, is usually credited with this idea, which goes to say that this idea of the nation soul arose in Germany as

part of late Enlightenment metaphysics around the turn of the 18th/19th century. From here, it very quickly spread throughout Europe and served to justify the race idea in colonialism.

An important thing to bear in mind, is that 19th century Europe was shot through and through with the idea of this racial philosophy of history. The whole of the 19th century—today we may find it difficult to believe—but 19th century Europe was pervaded by the sense of racism. It wasn’t something exclusive to Germany. It was in England, it was all over Europe. There was a sense that the world is made up of races, and these races can be arranged in a classification scheme which represents them eternally in their essential truth in terms of a hierarchy of scale. It was this racial essence which stood largely behind the European idea of the nation. This was the discourse of Racist Enlightenment and it was the predominant discourse of colonialism.

Thus we can see that idea of a nation soul arises out of the discourse of the Enlightenment and its extension in colonialism. Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, and other thinkers of the Bengal Renaissance have subverted this colonial discourse by inserting a spiritual content into it. This is the dialogic response to the interpellation of racial colonialism, whether Positivist or Orientalist. This is the acceptance of the interpellated discourse which becomes transformed in the retelling. What was attempted by these Indian nationalist spiritual thinkers was the extension of an alternate discourse in the forms of the West. It appeared to be new, but it may be seen as a case of old wine in new bottles. It was the spiritual knowledge and experience of the colonized culture being crafted in the discourse of the colonizer. Along with a spiritual inflection to racial essence came a transformed content to the nation soul. Sri Aurobindo elaborated this content in many of his writings, but it found its fullest voice in the chapter titled “True and False Subjectivism” in *The Human Cycle*. Here he pointed out that each nation soul, like a human soul, was a differentiation of One Reality and recognized other such nation souls to be unique differentiations of the



Same. He also saw these souls as not static but each evolving towards universality along a certain line or perspective of becoming.⁹

Internal dialogue

In considering Sri Aurobindo's nationalism, the complex internal dialogue between two forms of national discourse, the static and the transformative, I wish to read a passage from the celebrated Uttara Speech. This is one of the texts oft quoted by proponents of Hindutva to demonstrate Sri Aurobindo's advocacy for a Hindu nation.¹⁰ But such readings seldom look closely at the complexity of the text. These early nationalist tracts of Sri Aurobindo are particularly interesting due to their complexity and demand a close reading between the lines. Only when read in its own complexity and in comparison with later texts written by him, do we arrive at a clearer feel for his position.

The Uttara Speech was delivered to a Hindu religious group in Bengal in 1909. Let us consider the concluding paragraphs from it. He starts by acknowledging the nature of the group he is addressing. "This then is what I have to say to you. The name of your society is Society for the Protection of Religion."¹¹ The Society for the Protection of Religion—even the choice of the group to address is an acceptance of mainstream Hindu religion as part of a nationalistic response. Thus, it draws on the solidarity of people who are trying to protect Hinduism as a religion, an essentialistic "Indian" identification, against its deformation or exclusion by the West.

Sri Aurobindo affirms the mission of this society: "Well, the protection of the religion, the protection and upraising before the world of the Hindu religion, that is the work before us."¹² This has the ring of a slogan, a collective mission. But he immediately interposes a question to problematize this assertion, to make the mind dwell on its complexity. "But what is the Hindu religion?" he asks.

What is the Hindu religion? What is

this religion which we call Sanatan Dharma? Sanatan, eternal. It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it. Because it is in this peninsula that it grew up in the seclusion of the sea and the Himalayas.¹³

In other words, its identification with a subcontinental culture arises merely by dint of the fact that it evolved here. This was its regional evolution's stage, just as the marsupial evolved in Australia. The regional isolation of this peninsula allowed that cultural evolution a favorable site.

He continues:

Because in this sacred and ancient land it was given as a charge to the Aryan race to preserve through the ages.¹⁴

Here we find a change of tone, an appeal to the deep subjectivism of belonging. The language takes on a charged density. These are places where one witnesses a crossover from one discourse to another. But once again, he immediately questions the separative or privileging impulse. This is ubiquitous in Sri Aurobindo's texts—no sooner does he allow a charged assertion to settle, than he turns to a different view, which may qualify or modify the assertion. He immediately disabuses the listener of the illusion of possession:

But it is not circumscribed by the confines of a single country. It does not belong peculiarly and forever to a bounded part of the world.¹⁵

Thus, those who purport to protect this religion are reminded that it does not belong in any exclusive sense to them or their nation, but to the world. He goes on to describe the characteristics of this religion in terms that make it clear that it is not what one usually thinks of as a religion, but rather a non-sectarian, universal and unitive spirituality:

That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion because it is the universal religion which em-

braces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose. This is the one religion that can triumph over materialism by including and anticipating the discoveries of science and the speculations of philosophy. It is the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us, and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God.¹⁶

If we compare this passage with the one from *The Life Divine* with which we began our consideration, it is easy to see how this expands into that. Yet, if we did not conduct the kind of close reading of the rhetorical structure of the *Uttara Speech*, and we didn't have the more philosophical articulation of *The Life Divine*, it isn't difficult to see how this passage could be partially interpreted to be a definition of Hindutva.

It could also be taken to be the definition or apt illustration of a certain term that has entered contemporary Religious Studies—inclusivism. Inclusivism in the context of Indian studies is a term coined by Paul Hacker, and further extended by another modern Indologist, Wilhelm Halbfass, an erstwhile professor of Philosophy at the University of Philadelphia. According to Hacker, Hinduism is the inclusivistic religion par excellence, because it assimilates other religions and speaks for them. It co-opts and eradicates by inclusion rather than by exclusion. It claims to include Islam, include Christianity, etc. in that whatever these religions may affirm as their exclusive teaching, is preempted by Hinduism, which claims to already contain them. In Hacker's opinion, Hinduism is even more pernicious than exclusivistic religions because it is inclusivistic, it always already speaks for the Other, it swallows all Others up.

Once again, due to the braided nature of discourse in the Uttara Speech, its universalistic description of Hinduism is liable to be taken as an illustration of inclu-



sivism, were one to ignore its complexity or not put it beside the passage descriptive of the field of Indic spirituality from *The Life Divine*. In the latter instance, it is clear that what Sri Aurobindo refers to as the field of Hinduism is not an inclusivistic religion in this sense. Looked at in this light, in spite of his use of the phrase “including and anticipating” for the description of Hinduism in the Uttarpara Speech, we can say with confidence that what he holds out here as in *The Life Divine*, is the image of a plural religion, a culture of seeking, a culture of diverse approaches to the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo concludes the Uttarpara Speech by moving from his consideration of Hindu religion to talking about the nation, and to equating these two. Once more, the language gathers a charged density of mystic or prophetic emotion. He says:

This is the word that has been put into my mouth to speak to you today. What I had intended to speak has been put away from me, and beyond what is given to me I have nothing to say. It is only the word that is put into me that I can speak to you. The word is now finished. I spoke once before with this force in me, and I said then that this movement is not a political movement, and that nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today, but I put it in another way. I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the sanatan dharma, which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the sanatan dharma, with it it moves and with it it grows. When the sanatan dharma declines, then the nation declines. And if the sanatan dharma were capable of perishing, with the sanatan dharma it would perish. The sanatan dharma, that is nationalism.¹⁷

Here Sri Aurobindo can be seen conflating this plural field of spiritual culture, with the nation soul. The idea of the nation soul, as we have seen already, is a kind of

marriage between the ordering devices of the West, and the notion of the spiritual destiny of humanity that Sri Aurobindo inserts into the discourse of the Enlightenment. In other words, Sri Aurobindo's nation soul subverts the order of the Enlightenment by claiming an evolving spiritual essence which modifies and supercedes the static essence of rationality emerging in the Western discourse.

Modernity and social discourse

If we wish to look deeper at Sri Aurobindo's discussions of nation soul, we must turn to *The Ideal of Human Unity*. Here we find that nation soul as an essence, as something unborn, which always exists, which is ahistorical, is put side by side, and brought into contact, or into dialogue with the idea of an evolving nation soul. The nation soul is not static, the nation soul is a cultural history evolving towards universality along with all other nations. In his telling in *The Ideal of Human Unity*, the nation soul emerges at a point of time through a variety of historical processes. These processes give full-blown form to an idea which backgrounds and characterizes the history of that emergence and its further development.

In looking at evolving nation souls in this fashion, Sri Aurobindo also envisages the future. The future of the world, the ordering ideology of modernity, or its teleology, is what Sri Aurobindo addresses in his own way in *The Ideal of Human Unity*. Here he envisages the *telos*, the goal of the evolution towards unity, as World Union; and he proposes two possibilities. One is that of the World State, and the other is that of the confederation of nations. Of these, it is the plural idea, that of the confederation of nations, that he prefers, because this is the idea that allows for cultural histories, for the evolution of consciousness in a variety of ways towards that which is infinite.¹⁸ The Infinite One, this is the definition of Spirit, Brahman. The Brahman is not the finite one, the one that can be put within walls. The Brahman implies the infinite approach to the One, and the infinite expression of the One.

That can only be achieved through plurality.

The nation, then, becomes an entity that he hopes will enter into a plural confederation. But the nation itself is a plural state. Its soul is made up of a plurality of seeking, though united by some common concerns, and evolving towards universality. This idea again finds shape not in textual discourse, but in life, in living social discourse, in the social forms of community that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother envisaged and created. If we think of these forms, we realize that the forms Sri Aurobindo created, such as the Ashram that grew up around him and the Mother, were not merely isolated social forms, founded for the development of his own spiritual path, but also part of the nationalist discourse. This national discourse, the discourse of community, is in its own way a challenge to or a part of the contention against modernity. Modernity with its homogenizing forces, with its ability to isolate and disperse populations across the globe is contested by alternate societies, alternate social forms, what today we call intentional communities. But the idea of the intentional community as an alternate form to the drive of modernity was part of the discourse of Indian nationalism, not only present before Sri Aurobindo, but continuing after him. It is the idea of the spiritual community, the intentional community of Universal Man-making, *Visva-Bharati*, that was fielded by Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan, for example, prior to the birth of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Again, it is the idea of a spiritual community dedicated to truth and a simple life of offering to the Divine that was privileged by Gandhi in his vision of the postcolonial village, and in his own ashram at Sabar-mati. It is this idea of spiritual community that takes a certain form with Sri Aurobindo, which is not a pre-modern form, but a postmodern form. That is something important we need to realize. It is the privileging of a communitarian social form but in a way which puts it into dialogue with the forces of modernity.

Thus, when we consider the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, we see that it inherits its



foundations from the premodern form of the *gurukula*. But it also departs from many of the precepts of the *gurukula*. The tradition of the *gurukula* was formed at least as far back as the 10th century B.C.E. in India, so as to afford the individual seeker a “shelter,” proximity to a realized teacher and a social habitus to pursue his or her spiritual journey under the ideology of the teaching. The collective life was structured to minimize social concerns and expression was kept to a minimum. Of course, as with all social structures, the *gurukula* has undergone various changes and variations through time and, in the form in which it comes to us in the modern era, is often marked by its shadows—its “sheltering” aspect becoming an enablement for stagnation, mediocrity and corruption, its requirement of unconditional surrender to the guru becoming the basis of an authoritarian hierarchy, and its impendence of social and creative expression becoming a source of pathological behaviors.

Dialogic plural communities

In the history of the development of his spiritual community, Sri Aurobindo took quite some time to overcome his ambivalence and discomfort with calling it an ashram. He finally settled for it because he could find no other extant term for what he wanted. But he tried in a variety of ways to redefine the social content and boundaries of the ashram idea for those who were interested in following his teachings or being the community’s members. As with his literary and polemical texts, the social text of his Ashram must be understood as a dialogic form between premodern Indian and postmodern (even posthuman) international and utopian ideals, such as those of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, espoused in the French Revolution.

For one, the content he put into it made the idea of this new Ashram into a field of expression in which all the activities of life could find representation. Again, though it stood, like a traditional *gurukula*, with a guru (or in this case, gurus) at its center and as its center, this was understood as the foundation of a relationship in which the gurus existed to enable the freedom of their disciples at the Ashram. The law of the guru respected the law of becoming of the individual, helping him or her through guidance, encouragement, example and yogic force to grow into the realization of full freedom and delight which was the consciousness of the guru. In terms of the social form, Sri Aurobindo’s

As with his literary and polemical texts, the social text of his Ashram must be understood as a dialogic form between premodern Indian and postmodern (even posthuman) international and utopian ideals, such as those of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, espoused in the French Revolution.

ideal, expressed in *The Human Cycle*, was one of a habitus marked by plurality evolving in spiritual freedom to the point where no external authority was needed, a condition of spiritual anarchy.¹⁹ Translated to the Ashram, this meant an evolution of the social consciousness to a point where the guru within was active in individuals who needed no external control to express a perfect life of creative freedom and social harmony.

But such an enablement of freedom could not be one sided. It required an equally active participation of the disciple in the will to freedom. This is why, key to the discourse of the Ashram, is the notion, introduced by Sri Aurobindo, of the difference between a passive and an active surrender.²⁰ Surrender to the guru is the keyword of any *gurukula*, it is the surrender to a figure who controls absolute power. But an active surrender implies a dialogic will, a conscious and dynamic acknowledgment of one’s own will to freedom of

consciousness in the act of surrender. This becomes the indispensable key to the enablement rather than the crippling of the will. Indeed, a central problem with many ashrams and other intentional communities is that they become sites for the crippling of the will. Instead, the idea of an active surrender is one in which there is to be an enabling of every aspect of the will in its surrender, in its transpersonal growth facilitated by the guru. Everything in such an ashram is treated as an exchange causing growth of consciousness, causing flowering in a plural field, leading to states of increasing inner self-determination and spontaneous social harmony.

But if the necessity for the active surrender or the exchange of consciousness is absent on either side, whether in the disciple or the guru, one arrives instead at a stagnation of dependency and/or authoritarian domination.

When instead of evolving towards a greater freedom of collective expression arising from inner union, a passive surrender in the disciples demands literal solutions to every trivial concern, the ashram devolves into a religious order or cult. Instead of a plural field of becoming and embodiment, it begins to be dominated by parasitic forces who erect an unreachable icon and a cultic practice and demand boons of mundane satisfaction from it. On the other hand, what responds to them is no longer the guru but a number of intermediate authorities who rise to take advantage of the need for displaced or surrogate responsibility. The light that leaned down from Above recedes and what is left in its place is a ground reality of the rhetoric and politics of authorization, the control of substitute authorities in place of the freedom and beauty of Love and the regime of Theology in the name of Knowledge.

It is important to ponder these possibilities in the ideal and life of the Sri Auro-



bindo Ashram. In the later years of her life, the Mother took this ideal closer to the world at large with the creation of Auroville. Among other things, the Mother may have responded to some of the shadows of the ashram idea in setting up an alternate social field for the practice of the same yoga. Here, she insisted, there was to be no religious worship and no hierarchic authority. It is the aspiration for becoming, a growth of consciousness in individuals representing all forms of world culture, which alone would safeguard the progress to unity and harmony for this society. Thus, shorn of all premodern "Indian" formalisms, it represented a postmodern form, free of traditional commitments. But set up to be independent and in the proximity of the Ashram, what Auroville also represented is an opportunity for a dialogue between premodern Indian forms of spiritual culture with a long cultural history and a new postmodern international form built purely on the foundation of a spiritual anthropology, an integral psychology for achieving the same goals. As we know from the history of these organizations, that dialogue was sundered and remains largely unexplored.

Today, the rise of Hindutva as an identity construct in India combined with a religious interpretation of the Integral Yoga among many at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram threatens to define tight boundaries of belonging and normative behavior in the originating social context which was conceived by its founders as a laboratory representative of humanity and a world transforming practice. With the departure of the Masters and the early generations of disciples who lived in their atmosphere of plastic wideness, depth and height—a culture which enabled individual interpretation, practice, expression and an increasing inner growth into Oneness—what seems to be developing is a field of politics, group conditioning, cultic identity and majoritarian justice. Today the social habitus necessary to the flowering of the Integral Yoga may be in danger. It is time for all people of sincerity and aspiration, who have been touched by the light that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother brought to

humankind, to introspect deeply and to re-think our choices, alignments, responsibilities and actions.

Endnotes

¹ I have used the term "discourse" here in the sense given by the contemporary French thinker Michel Foucault (1926-1984). According to Foucault, a discourse may be thought of as a "system of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak." (I. Lessa, 2006)

² Sri Aurobindo, Chapter "The Evolution of the Spiritual Man," *The Life Divine*, SABCL:19, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, pp. 872-874.

³ Hindutva is a term coined by V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966) to refer to the ideology of Hindu nationalism. This ideology has been given a more concrete organized form in contemporary times by M.S. Golwalkar (1906-1973) and espoused by the "Sangh Parivar," a family of socio-political organizations. In the public expression of its ideology, Hindutva claims to be based on "Integral Humanism" and "Cultural Nationalism," following a unity-in-diversity idea. Such expressions however give the lie to its history of self-identification on the basis of a static understanding of Hinduism and religious opposition to non-Hindu sects, forms and practices.

⁴ See Peter Heehs, "The Uses of Sri Aurobindo: Mascot, Whipping-Boy or What?," *Postcolonial Studies* 9 (June 2006): 151-64.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, Oxon and New York, 1994, 2005, 131.

⁶ I have adapted the term "interpellation" from the French Neo-Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1918-1990). Althusser uses the term to describe the process by which an ideology addresses an individual thus effectively producing him or her as its subject.

⁷ Strategic essentialism is a term coined by literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivack to refer to a

strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority groups can use to present themselves. It refers to the idea that it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily 'essentialize' themselves and bring forward their group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain goals. Spivack, "Criticism, feminism, and the institution," interview with Elizabeth Gross, *The-sis Eleven*, 10/11, November/March: 1984-5, pp. 175-87.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" [1938] in William Lovitt (trans. & editor), *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Harper Torchbooks, 1977, pp. 115-154.

⁹ Sri Aurobindo, Chapter "True and False Subjectivism," *The Human Cycle, Social and Political Thought*, SABCL:15, pp. 37-47.

¹⁰ For instance, one may find a downloadable version of this text from the website "Hindutva Ebooks" (<http://bharateeya.wordpress.com/2009/07/12/uttarpara-speech-sri-aurobindo/>), where Sri Aurobindo is introduced as "a Hindu nationalist."

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, Uttarpara Speech [1909] in *Political Writings and Speeches, Karmayogin*, SABCL: 2, pp. 9-10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, Chapter "Summary and Conclusion," *The Ideal of Human Unity, Social and Political Thought*, SABCL: 15, pp. 548-555.

¹⁹ Sri Aurobindo, Chapter "The Group and the Individual," *The Human Cycle, Social and Political Thought*, SABCL: 15, p. 274.

²⁰ For example: "Note that a tamasic surrender refusing to fulfill the conditions and calling on God to do everything and save one all the trouble and struggle is a deception and does not lead to freedom and perfection." Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, SABCL:25, p. 8. See also the earlier part of this section in Op. cit., pp. 4-5.



Spiritual Knowledge, Part II

by Martha Orton

The path of knowledge

Sri Aurobindo writes of a path of knowledge in which human beings progress from living in the superficial consciousness of the surface mind to living in the truth-consciousness, the supermind, and then may even evolve beyond to the planes of Sachchidananda. This yoga of knowledge has as its object the realization of the Self, the knowledge of the Divine. He describes a series of stages, not firm in their distinctness, but merging one into another, in which characteristics or experiences of one may be encountered in another, as one progresses and the stages of realization advance in the evolution of consciousness.

The conscious pursuit of the path begins at the level of the surface mind, when an opening to higher consciousness becomes recognized in some way. The individual has some sense of that which is beyond oneself and seeks to know it better, experience it more fully. This opening is developed further by the process of going within, directing one's consciousness towards the inner being, coming into contact with the psychic being, the soul within. As the psychic being comes forward and influences the outer being more and more fully, the individual lives in the complete consciousness of living for the Divine, in preference to other aims in life, and all the parts of the being become directed towards the Divine. The spiritualization of the being opens the way to other levels of consciousness beyond the mind, which are more than levels of knowledge, but actually new, higher states of being. These involve bringing the individual progressively closer to the Divine, living increasingly in the truth and reality of existence, gradually transforming the entire nature of the being as the consciousness grows. Among these realizations is that of the



Martha explores the path of knowledge.
(Photo courtesy Martha Orton).

cosmic consciousness, in which the individual transcends the ego and all sense of separation, and experiences the oneness of the universe. The levels of consciousness which Sri Aurobindo identifies in the progression of transcending the mind are the higher mind, illumined mind, intuition, overmind and supermind. [These are explained and discussed in detail in *The Life Divine*, as well as in other works by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.] The fulfillment of the path of knowledge is the realization of the Divine, full and complete union with the Divine and the transformation of the being. Sri Aurobindo also describes a progression through supermind to the planes of Sachchidananda, the original existence-consciousness-bliss.

Looking inward

The process of seeking knowledge which Sri Aurobindo proposes consists of first looking inward and seeking to know one's self. He considers this to be an essential beginning and states: "Self-knowledge of all kinds is on the straight path to the knowledge of the real Self.... To this turning of the eye inward psychological self-observation and analysis is a great and effective introduction."¹ This looking inward helps the individual to come to know oneself and can, in time, also help to

develop an inner vision by which one comes to possess and realize that which is beyond oneself. One may come to experience a revelation of the Self, the Divine. Sri Aurobindo describes the knowledge which the spiritual seeker pursues and alludes to internal aspects of the process as follows:

The status of knowledge, then, which Yoga envisages is not merely an intellectual conception or clear discrimination of the truth, nor is it an enlightened psychological experience of the modes of our being. It is a "realisation," in the full sense of the word; it is the making real to ourselves and in ourselves of the Self, the transcendent and universal Divine, and it is the subsequent impossibility of viewing the modes of being except in the light of that Self and in their true aspect as its flux of becoming under the psychological and physical conditions of our world-existence. This realisation consists of three successive movements, internal vision, complete internal experience and identity.²

The realization which Sri Aurobindo describes is possible because of the involution of the Divine in matter. He explains that the Divine is inherent within all the manifestation, involved in it, and therefore is destined to emerge from it. Within the human being, this Divine presence is the psychic entity, "a spark of the Divine"³ around which develops an individualized psychic being. It is this psychic being that the individual discovers through going within and seeking the center of one's being, and it is the influence of the psychic being on the outer nature which facilitates the spiritualization of the individual, enabling the growth of consciousness to the higher levels of spiritual knowledge.

Purification, concentration and renunciation

The path of knowledge also engages the individual in three specific processes through which one undergoes change and



which facilitate progress: purification, concentration and renunciation. Sri Aurobindo explains the importance of purification of the mind in enabling the being's progress: "The object of purification is to make the whole mental being a clear mirror in which the divine reality can be reflected, a clear vessel and an unobstructing channel into which the divine presence and through which the divine influence can be poured, a subtilised stuff which the divine nature can take possession of, new-shape and use to divine issues."⁴

The mind and its understanding achieve their most perfect and effective state when purified from three sources of influence: the impact of desire on thought, the influence of the sense-mind, and within the understanding itself, an inequality "of the will to know" resulting in "partiality and attachment."⁵ These three can cause distortions in the understanding and impair its purity as an instrument at the service of our aspiration for knowledge. The

solution which Sri Aurobindo advises for the first problem is the development of mastery of the vital nature and the consequent elimination of false emotions. For the second, the solution is to silence the sense-mind and separate the understanding from it. To solve the third, the problem which derives from the understanding itself: "The remedy lies in a perfect equality of the mind, in the cultivation of an entire intellectual rectitude and in the perfection of mental disinterestedness."⁶ Each of these approaches to purifying the understanding involves an aspect of significant self-discipline, working to not merely control, but master, the mind. In this way, the purification of the mind is a step on the way to the larger spiritual mastery which the individual seeks. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the result of a purified understanding will be to make it "a perfectly flexible, entire and faultless instrument of intellectual thought and being free from the inferior

sources of obstruction and distortion ... capable of as true and complete a perception of the truths of the Self and the universe as the intellect can attain."⁷ In this way, through purification, the mind can become an effective instrument.

Sri Aurobindo also writes about the value of concentration to discipline the mind and help it to access and become the instrument of higher knowledge. He emphasizes a specific type of concentration, which is not simply to focus the mind clearly on one thing or another, but is the "removal of the thought from all distracting activities of the mind and that concentration of it on the idea of the One by which the soul rises out of the phenomenal into the one Reality."⁸ He describes concentration as having three powers by which it is

In order to move beyond the knowledge-ignorance and achieve spiritual knowledge, one needs to abandon identification with the body, the vital and its emotions, the surface mind and intellect, and the ego.

effective: the capacity "to know not things, but the one Thing-in-itself"; the ability to acquire understanding, knowledge and things beyond ourselves; and the ability to effect change within ourselves, such as transforming fearfulness into strength.⁹ The capacities of concentration can be seen as representing a considerable degree of mastery in human terms and as enabling increased control in one's life and circumstances. Necessarily, concentration works in concert with purification, so that the pursuit of knowledge, and the mastery which accompanies it, are directed towards realization of the Divine, not towards earthly power and self-interested gains. Concentration serves the pursuit of spiritual knowledge by reining in the wandering mind and focusing the thought and will on the divine reality which is the object of knowledge, and it also breaks down the barrier between the surface mind and the truth behind it.

To purification and concentration Sri Aurobindo adds renunciation. By renunciation he does not intend renunciation of life and the world or renunciation of material goods, or any of the other forms of renunciation usually associated with asceticism and the spiritual life. Instead, it is renunciation in its purest and most effective meaning—the renunciation of all attachment. Without attachment the individual can more readily reject all that is part of the falsehood, all that does not serve the pursuit of one's higher purpose. Without being attached to objects, people, personal power, or any of the other things human beings usually seek, one is free to consecrate one's life to seeking the Divine, offering oneself to the Divine and, inherent in this process, attaining true knowl-

edge through spiritual fulfillment. This is the process of giving up the ego, attachment and desire to attain the Self. The individual is free to unite with the Divine in the full knowledge of the Divine, which is only possible

through identification, and necessarily involves transcending ego and its associated problems of attachment and desire.

Silencing the mind

Sri Aurobindo writes not only of purifying the understanding, but also of silencing the mind. He cautions us not to attach too much importance to the value of the understanding. He writes: "In order that the understanding may not interfere with our attainment to real knowledge, we have to reach to that something more and cultivate a power exceedingly difficult for the active intellectual thinker and distasteful to his proclivities, the power of intellectual passivity."¹⁰ Therefore, although the individual may have effectively attained some level of mastery of his nature through the discipline of purification of the various parts of one's being, there is much more to be achieved, more to be mas-



tered in the pursuit of true knowledge. Sri Aurobindo explains: "In the first place we have seen that intellectual thought is in itself inadequate and is not the highest thinking; the highest is that which comes through the intuitive mind and from the supramental faculty."¹¹ He further explains that, with the intellectual mind active and also the influence of our lower mind, intuition cannot enter our consciousness without being subject to distortion. Part of the solution is "to effect the same separation between the intuitive and intellectual elements of our thought as we have already effected between the understanding and the sense-mind."¹² Because this is a complex and difficult task, Sri Aurobindo describes the following method:

The remedy is to train first the intellect to recognise the true intuition, to distinguish it from the false and then to accustom it, when it arrives at an intellectual perception or conclusion, to attach no final value to it, but rather look upward, refer all to the divine principle and wait in as complete a silence as it can command for the light from above. In this way it is possible to transmute a great part of our intellectual thinking into the luminous truth-conscious vision, — the ideal would be a complete transition, — or at least to increase greatly the frequency, purity and conscious force of the ideal knowledge working behind the intellect. The latter must learn to be subject and passive to the ideal faculty.¹³

Recognizing that mental passivity seems to some a denial of the mind and therefore of the capacity for knowledge, Sri Aurobindo emphasizes that the contrary is actually the case. It is only through silencing the mind and accessing that which is beyond it, that human beings come to attain true knowledge:

Only when the mind is thus entirely still, like clear, motionless and level water, in a perfect purity and peace of the whole being and the soul tran-

scends thought, can the Self which exceeds and originates all activities and becomings, the Silence from which all words are born, the Absolute of which all relativities are partial reflections manifest itself in the pure essence of our being. In a complete silence only is the Silence heard; in a pure peace only is its Being revealed. Therefore to us the name of That is the Silence and the Peace.¹⁴

The following lines from *Savitri* also describe the significance of silencing the mind:

This Light comes not by struggle or
by thought;
In the mind's silence the Transcendent acts
And the hushed heart hears the
unuttered Word.¹⁵

The witness consciousness

For each of the three paths that Sri Aurobindo describes—the paths of knowledge, works and devotion, which merge and actually become one triune path—he writes of the necessity of transcending human nature in order to live freely in truth. This necessity derives from the weight of inconscience on our nature, and the attraction of the lower movements of the mental, vital, and physical elements of our being, all of which have potential to impede our spiritual advance. In order to move beyond the knowledge-ignorance and achieve spiritual knowledge, one needs to abandon identification with the body, the vital and its emotions, the surface mind and intellect, and the ego. The aim is to create a separation between the true inner self, the soul, and the outer nature, thus enabling identification with one's true self and the growth of this identification through the progress of spiritual knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo writes of the disparity between the inner being and nature as the problem of soul and nature, Purusha and Prakriti. He explains that it is only when the soul is truly master of nature that they exist

in their right relation. In that state, Prakriti gives all her action and energy to do the bidding of the Purusha, and they are united in a harmonious higher working. In the individual, Sri Aurobindo explains that cultivating a sense of equality within the being and detachment from the workings of our lower nature helps us to transcend it and then to make all parts of the being subject to the soul. The equality which is to be sought involves detachment from ego, desire and the associated emotions and also from the intellect and its superficial knowledge. It leads to peace within the being and freedom from the pull of life and the lower nature. The detachment which Sri Aurobindo describes results in true equality within the being and the development of the witness consciousness, the mental Purusha within the individual. From the witness poise, one can observe the movements of thought and emotion, see them more truly, and therefore live and act more truly as well.

Offering

The concept of offering oneself integrally to the Divine, all of one's self, life, knowledge, works and devotion, is an essential component of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo. Through the progressive integral offering of one's entire being, the individual evolves in consciousness and grows towards unity with the Divine. While this may appear to be more a part of the paths of devotion or works, it is also just as much part of the path of knowledge. In the path of knowledge, the individual offers one's knowledge, such as it is, and one's aspiration for knowledge. This then becomes an offering of works and of love as the three merge into one. In this way offering becomes a progressive self-giving which grows to encompass all of one's being. It inherently includes the aspiration to unite with the divine origin. Through the process of offering, intimacy with the Divine increases and a growth of consciousness occurs, leading to the progressive realization of spiritual knowledge. Because the Divine is involved in life and matter, having made the initial sacrifice in offering



itself through the descent of divine consciousness into matter, the evolution of consciousness and the human response of offering are made possible. In essence, the Divine involution enables the human evolution. It is through offering, or “sacrifice,” as Sri Aurobindo often refers to it, that the individual grows closer to the Divine by receiving more of the Divine Force, until the Divine Shakti eventually takes up the work of the yoga for the individual.

For the practice of the Integral Yoga, it is helpful to understand that any and all sacrifice, conscious or unconscious, fully sincere or mixed or partial, leads ultimately to unity with the Divine, the fulfillment of the quest for spiritual knowledge. Even sacrifices offered to others or to any aspect of the Divine become offerings to the one Divine Presence because of its omnipresence. Nevertheless the progression from involuntary to voluntary sacrifice, concomitant with the growth of consciousness, is important. Once the offering becomes voluntary, spiritual growth both deepens and accelerates, even voluntary mental offerings that are somewhat superficial and mechanical create a more conscious connection with the Divine.

The action of the supermind

The evolution of consciousness is made possible by the involvement of the Divine in matter. This enables the divine element in the individual, the psychic being, to open the whole being to the influence of the Divine. It is through the awakening of the psychic being that the individual seeks to discover and unite with the Divine, and it is through this action that the individual calls to the Divine and becomes receptive to the Divine’s response and its descent of consciousness and force. Through the offering of one’s life, knowledge, will, works, and devotion, the bond between the

Divine and the individual increases and the Shakti gradually takes up the work of the yoga and showers Her force upon the individual. The result is a descent of the higher consciousness into the individual.

Through this process, higher levels of mind, new levels of consciousness, become possible, those which Sri Aurobindo identifies as the higher mind, illumined mind, intuition, overmind and supermind. The supramental consciousness is instrumental in the growth of consciousness and, through its intermediary consciousness, the overmind, descends into human life with transforming effect. It is through

Supermind is spiritual consciousness acting as a self-luminous knowledge, will, sense, aesthesis, energy, self-creative and unveiling power of its own delight and being. Mind is the action of the same powers, but limited and only very indirectly and partially illumined. —Sri Aurobindo

its action that higher levels of consciousness are possible and it is to this level of consciousness, the supermind, that seekers may arrive through the path of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo describes supermind and compares and contrasts it with mind as follows:

Supermind is spiritual consciousness acting as a self-luminous knowledge, will, sense, aesthesis, energy, self-creative and unveiling power of its own delight and being. Mind is the action of the same powers, but limited and only very indirectly and partially illumined. Supermind lives in unity though it plays with diversity; mind lives in a separative action of diversity, though it may open to unity. Mind is not only capable of ignorance, but, because it acts always partially and by limitation, it works characteristically as a power of ignorance: it may even and it does forget itself in a complete inconscience, or nescience, awaken from it to the ignorance of a partial knowledge and move from the

ignorance towards a complete knowledge,—that is its natural action in the human being,—but it can never have by itself a complete knowledge. Supermind is incapable of real ignorance; even if it puts full knowledge behind it in the limitation of a particular working, yet all its working refers back to what it has put behind it and all is instinct with self-illumination; even if it involves itself in material nescience, it yet does there accurately the works of a perfect will and knowledge.¹⁶

Therefore supermind can act in life and matter, undiluted and undiminished by the inherent nescience, and effect change there. It is to supermind, this

high state of knowledge and being, that the path of knowledge leads.

The culmination of the path of knowledge

The path of knowledge culminates in the fulfillment of the quest for knowledge, for it results in knowledge of the Divine and union with the Divine. It also results in the divinization of the being, the transformation of the being by the realization of the divine consciousness. Sri Aurobindo describes this as follows:

First, the end of Yoga of Knowledge is God-possession, it is to possess God and be possessed by him through consciousness, through identification, through reflection of the divine Reality. But not merely in some abstraction away from our present existence, but here also; therefore to possess the Divine in himself, the Divine in the world, the Divine within, the Divine in all things and all beings. It is to possess oneness with God and



through that to possess also oneness with the universal . . .

Secondly, it is to put on the divine being and the divine nature. And since God is Sachchidananda, it is to raise our being into the divine being, our consciousness into the divine consciousness, our energy into the divine energy, our delight of existence into the divine delight of being. And it is not only to lift ourselves into this higher consciousness, but to widen into it in all our being, because it is to be found on all the planes of our existence and in all our members, so that our mental, vital, physical existence shall become full of the divine nature.¹⁷

Therefore we see that the knowledge and mastery which Sri Aurobindo intends is far different from that which we generally conceive. It consists of knowledge not attained through the use of the intellect, reason and familiar cognitive processes, but rather through transcending the mind and also human nature. This occurs through an extensive integral spiritual process which involves all the parts of the being and incorporates them in the growth of consciousness and the actual transformation of the individual.

Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo views true knowledge as spiritual knowledge and as not attainable by mental processes. However, consistent with the integral nature of his vision, Sri Aurobindo describes all knowledge, including knowledge of the external world by the surface consciousness, as ultimately leading to higher, spiritual knowledge. He explains that the mind is replete with problems and limitations, which prevent it from being a true instrument of knowledge, and proceeds to explain how we can progress beyond these and attain spiritual knowledge. In doing so, Sri Aurobindo describes the processes of purification, concentration and renunciation that help to make the individual more receptive to the influence of the Divine,

both through the emergence of the psychic being within and through the descent of consciousness and force into the being. Other processes which aid the growth of spiritual knowledge include living within in the consciousness of the inner being, developing equality, mastering one's lower nature, developing the witness consciousness, and silencing the mind. The offering of one's knowledge, along with one's works and love, increases the bond between the individual and the Divine, and opens the being to the Divine and his Shakti. As the receptivity and sincerity of the being increases, the Divine Force takes up the work of transformation of the being. The path of knowledge culminates in knowledge of the Divine, a union by identity, and the integral and complete transformation of the being from its human to its divine nature.

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All quotations in this chapter are from: Sri Aurobindo, *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (SABCL)*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970, unless otherwise indicated.

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2. *Ibid.*, 290.
3. *SABCL*, vol. 22 (*Letters on Yoga*), 302.
4. *SABCL*, vol. 20-21 (*The Synthesis of Yoga*), 494.
5. *Ibid.*, 300.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 301.
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9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 301.
11. *Ibid.*
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13. *Ibid.*, 301-302.
14. *Ibid.*, 302.
15. Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1993), 315.
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Transformation of the Mother's approach to painting

by Jackie Barshak

By the time the Mother arrived in Pondicherry in 1920, she had already achieved recognition of her artwork in Europe. She had been a student at the Academy Julian in Paris and was known in circles frequented by the Post-Impressionists and Symbolists. In the Ashram, she continued drawing, but few paintings are known from this period. It is likely that Sri Aurobindo's critique of Western art practices influenced the Mother's later paintings, which she termed the Future Painting, the art of tomorrow breathed into a New World. The Future Painting as the Mother envisioned it would express the joy of the divine force and energy, and would inspire all creativity.

This article examines the Mother's art-making practices before and after her arrival in Pondicherry, using two paintings, "Lady on the Staircase," which predates her arrival in Pondicherry, and "An Apparition," dated circa 1920-30, in an effort to glean from the paintings the experiences and revelations that inform them. Consistent with Sri Aurobindo's view of art criticism, my critique will not be limited to an examination of technique, or to the forms and their allegory. Nor will my exclusive focus be on the paintings' aesthetic appeal, concept or interpretation of their visible language. My analysis will not be a formal reading or judgment of the paintings' merits. Rather, I will use Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's own principles of art criticism as criteria for reviewing the works. The Mother's artwork requires an expanded analysis that transcends the canon of contemporary art criticism.

Consistent with the Mother's view of the Future Painting, Sri Aurobindo wrote that a futuristic art criticism will emerge where art serves as a medium for revealing aspects of the Divine and reaching higher levels of spirituality, and where the inner



spiritual eye of the critic finds the soul of the work beyond what lies on the surface. The future artist, working from an inner vision, will create images that break through the ordinary receptivity of the mind, opening to the vast force of the Supramental consciousness. The criticism will reflect the artist's sense of being a channel, an intermediary between the material and higher worlds.

"Lady on the Staircase"

The Mother's 1903 painting "Lady on the Staircase" depicts a slender woman poised at the foot of a staircase in the vestibule of a fin de siècle house. Using Western art techniques, although she doesn't exclusively rely on them, the Mother takes the Symbolist's approach of rendering the forms informed by dreams and the imagination. Every detail is explored in the painting, the patterned flooring, the bust on the pedestal, the shapes on the balustrade. The Mother's use of depth perspective invites the viewer to explore the distance between the planes illuminating the details. By the use of a studio-like light, and a concern for overall effect, "Lady on the Staircase" strives to be picturesque. The figure, appearing static and silent, captures a given moment and point in space. Her arrested movement, made in receptive silence, is the moment when the inquisitive mind stops moving and opens to a higher force. The stillness and fixity of the forms suggest that it is a recreation of the space and silence of one of the Mother's spiritual realizations, and the figure, the embodiment of her own spiritual powers or psychic state. A figure, in an interior space, suggests a woman's intimacy with the inner life of her soul. The Mother often entered into trance to find the inspiration for her paintings. The figure captured in an intimate moment of her inner world may be the Mother interpreting and treating herself as a subject.

The Mother demanded the expression



"Lady on the staircase." (From the book, *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings, 1992*, courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

of a higher intuitive vision from her art. Her opening to spirituality was intensified by her art-making, just as her spiritual visions opened her to the art. In order to be successful, the Mother said, an artist must be the thing he wants to express, be entirely inside it and live it. The artist must first see it within, realize it in the inner consciousness, and create according to his inner vision.¹

In Pondicherry after 1920 the Mother turned her attention to making sketches and drawings, mostly portraits and landscapes. The few paintings executed in the Ashram are marked by a departure from Western art techniques and practices. Perhaps it was Sri Aurobindo's mentoring on the shortcomings of Western painting and his glorification of Indian art-making that influenced the Mother's later art productions. He found European styles of painting confined to the sensuous and the technical, reflecting a limited intuitive sensibility and lacking a deeper reality. Comparing it to Indian art, he was dissatisfied with European art's concentration on sensuous beauty and technique, and found the treat-

ment of forms to be overly intellectual and lacking in the expression of eternal truths. European art, he wrote, lacks a spiritual utility which he defined as the molding of the finite into an image of the Infinite. Along with his critique of Western art criticism, he found the European practice of reproducing forms from Nature shallow. The images, he wrote, rest on the surface and lack the support to go beyond themselves to the less definable. The European artist is content with reproducing what the eye sees. As Sri Aurobindo said of European art of the early 20th century:

The average Occidental mind . . . comes to Art with a demand for the satisfaction of the senses, the human emotions, the imagination moving among familiar things. It does not ask for a god or for a symbol of the beyond, but for a

figure admirably done with scrupulous fidelity to Nature and the suggestion of some vision, imagination, feeling or idea well within the normal range of human experience."²

Sri Aurobindo's ideal art stood closer to the Indian model. Unlike the European artist, the Indian artist is concerned with embodying spiritual experiences and impressions, not with recording or glorifying what is received by the senses.³ The Indian artist strives to express the soul and the higher states of the mind and emotions. To appreciate it, he said, "One has to look not at the form, but through and into it to see that which has seized and informed it."⁴ The highest goal of Indian art-making is "to disclose something of the Self . . . through one's expression, the Infinite through its living finite symbols, the Divine through his powers."⁵ This kind of art-making leads to self-purification and the growth of spirituality.

When the Mother returned to the medium of painting in Pondicherry, the experience she brought to the canvas changed



the work significantly from her earlier paintings. It is likely that Sri Aurobindo's critique of European art and his idealization of Indian art practices, in part, influenced the Mother's productions during her years in the Ashram. The earlier work is marked by attention to detail, technique, proportion, perspective and concern for the overall effect. The paintings executed during the Pondicherry period represent a departure from classical aesthetics with less emphasis on precision, technique, and the decorative. During this time she eschewed realistic representation, finding the style of realism lacking in soul and vision. Her break with classical and modern aesthetics led to a style of working that was more process-oriented and intuitive in which she let her inspired and informed Will guide the brush instead of using her intellect or technical means to find the way of expression. The Mother reveals that a higher power inspired her expressions in art. Being less concerned with creating a formal language, she focused on painting the New Light, a vibrating white light without shadows that expressed divine light, the light that spans eternity.

"An Apparition"

One of the Mother's light-soaked, shimmering visions can be seen in the painting "An Apparition," painted in Pondicherry, circa 1920–30. "The Moon Goddess," a study for this painting, was sketched earlier. In the painting, a figure stands on a stage drawn by a curtain. Her head is turned upward as she looks to some higher plane. Her posture, one hand reaching and disposed to receiving, one leg bent in *contraposta*, suggests she is springing out from a spiritual realization. A loose brushstroke forms the shapes and outlines the pose. There is an intensity and abandon in the figure's movement, as though she's yielding to some feeling or



"An Apparition." (From the book, *The Mother: Paintings and Drawings*, 1992, courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

desire. There is minimal articulation of the anatomical details; the body is outlined in loose curves. The Mother knew the human anatomy well but chose to depart from it to bring out something more than the figure's physical reality. The figure represents the embodiment and container for the soul. What one sees in the figure is not the rounded solid material but the "reproduction of the subtle embodiment...the purer and finer subtle body of an object."⁶ It is something the soul sees before the eye can catch it. The Mother works from within outward, drawing inspiration from the psychic realm or higher planes. An astral dream or cosmic vision, the setting is a version of a world above or beyond the known one. The theme is the divine self, directing us to see what is deeper in ourselves. It is a powerful work that suggests immense possibilities. The figure reveals a strong spirit that is neither of heaven nor of earth. In "An Apparition," the Mother steps out from any physical limitations of her earlier work. The painting represents a bridge to her higher spiritual dimensions.

The viewer brings a different mind to this work than to "Lady on the Staircase."

Along with realizations from her own divine nature, the work in Pondicherry was likely influenced partly by Sri Aurobindo's imperative that the artist be an agent between the higher planes and worldly existence. The Mother may have mined Indian art-making practices for the making of "An Apparition," for during this period she eschewed European art practices for an Eastern approach that rings of Sri Aurobindo's descriptions of Indian art.

Yet it was the Mother's essential sense of beauty that stirred and motivated her to fulfill her own art-making goals of painting a New World, apart from ancient Indian sensibilities. Her sense of beauty was enhanced by and emanated from her spiritual realizations, a complement to the aesthetic response to beauty intensifying

her spiritual opening. Beauty, the Mother wrote, is an aspect of the Divine manifesting itself in the domain of sensation, and the purpose of art is to give a freer and more perfect communion with the Supreme Reality.⁷

During her years in the Ashram, the Mother explored making the full use of art inspired from the higher planes. Although she did not consider her art expression the most important part of her life, her Future Painting leads us to the New Light, illuminating her vision of a New World of tomorrow.

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Source material

Rules in the Ashram

by Sri Aurobindo

This Ashram has been created with another object than that ordinarily common to such institutions, not for the renunciation of the world but as a centre and a field of practice for the evolution of another kind and form of life which would in the final end be moved by a higher spiritual consciousness and embody a greater life of the spirit. There is no general rule as to the stage at which one may leave the ordinary life and enter here; in each case it depends on the personal need and impulsion and the possibility or the advisability for one to take the step. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 847)

* * *

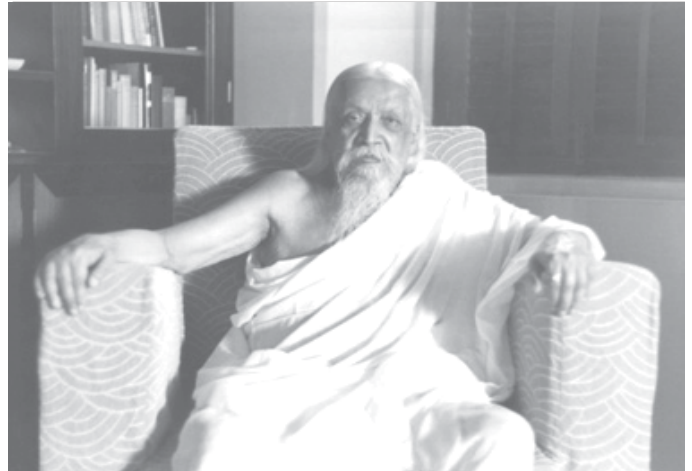
It is necessary or rather inevitable that in an Ashram which is a “laboratory”, as X puts it, for a spiritual and supramental yoga, humanity should be variously represented. For the problem of transformation has to deal with all sorts of elements favourable and unfavourable. The same man indeed carries in him a mixture of these two things. If only sattwic and cultured men come for yoga, men without very much of the vital difficulty in them, then, because the difficulty of the vital element in terrestrial nature has not been faced and overcome, it might well be that the endeavour would fail. There might conceivably be under certain circumstances an overmental layer superimposed on the mental, vital and physical, and influencing them, but hardly anything supramental or a sovereign transmutation of the human being. Those in the Ashram come from all quarters and are of all kinds; it cannot be otherwise.

In the course of the yoga, collectively—though not for each one necessarily—as each plane is dealt with, all its difficulties arise. That will explain much in the Ashram that people do not expect there. When the preliminary work is over in the “laboratory”, things must change.

Also, much stress has not been laid on human fellowship of the ordinary kind between the inmates (though good feeling, consideration and courtesy should always be there,) because that is not the aim; it is unity in a new consciousness that is the aim, and the first thing is for each to do his sadhana, to arrive at that new consciousness and realise oneness there.

Whatever faults are there in the sadhaks must be removed by the Light from above—a sattwic rule can only change natures predisposed to a sattwic rule. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 856-857)

* * *



Sri Aurobindo in 1950. (Courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

It is a little difficult for the wider spiritual outlook to answer your question in the way you want and every mental being wants, with a trenchant “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not”—especially when the “thou” is meant to cover “all”. For while there is an identity of essential aim, while there are general broad lines of endeavour, yet there is not in detail one common set of rules in inner things that can apply to all seekers. You ask: “Is not such and such a thing harmful?” But what is harmful to one may be helpful to another, what is helpful at a certain stage may cease to be helpful at another, what is harmful under certain conditions may be helpful under other conditions, what is done in a certain spirit may be disastrous, the same thing done in a quite different spirit would be innocuous or even beneficial... there are so many things to be considered: the spirit, the circumstances, the person, the need and cast of the nature, the stage. That is why it is said so often that the Guru must deal with each disciple according to his separate nature and accordingly guide his sadhana; even if it is the same line of sadhana for all, yet at every point for each it differs. That also is the reason why we say that the divine way cannot be understood by the mind, because the mind acts according to hard and fast rules and standards, while the spirit sees the truth of all and the truth of each and acts variously according to its own comprehensive and complex vision. That also is why we say that no one can understand by his personal mental judgment the Mother’s actions and reasons for action: it can only be understood by entering into the larger consciousness from which she sees things and acts upon them. That is baffling to the mind because it uses its small measures, but that is the truth of the matter.

So you will see that here there is no mental rule, but in each case the guidance is determined by spiritual reasons which are of a flexible character. There is no other consideration, no rule. Music, painting, poetry and many other activities which are of the mind and vital can be used as part of spiritual development or of the work and for a spiritual purpose: it depends on the spirit in which they are done. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 858-859)



A rule that can be varied by everyone at his pleasure is no rule. In all countries in which organised work is successfully done (India is not one of them), rules exist and nobody thinks of breaking them, for it is realised that work (or life either) without discipline would soon become a confusion and an anarchic failure. In the great days of India everything was put under rule, even art and poetry, even yoga. Here in fact rules are much less rigid than in any European organisation. Personal discretion can even in a frame of rules have plenty of play—but discretion must be discreetly used, otherwise it becomes something arbitrary or chaotic. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 861-862)

* * *

Rules are indispensable for the orderly management of work; for without order and arrangement nothing can be properly done, all becomes clash, confusion and disorder.

In all such dealings with others, you should see not only your own side of the question but the other side also. There should be no anger, vehement reproach or menace, for these things only raise anger and retort on the other side. I write this because you are trying to rise above yourself and dominate your vital and when one wants to do that, one cannot be too strict with oneself in these things. It is best even to be severe with one's own mistakes and charitable to the mistakes of others. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 862-863)

* * *

It is not a fact that all I write is meant equally for everybody. That assumes that everybody is alike and there is no difference between sadhak and sadhak. If it were so everybody would advance alike and have the same experiences and take the same time to progress by the same steps and stages. It is not so at all. In this case the general rules were laid down for one who had made no progress—but everything depends on how the yoga comes to each person. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 859)

* * *

It is no question of fault or punishment—if we have to condemn and punish people for their faults and deal with the sadhaks like a tribunal of justice, no sadhana could be possible. I do not see how your reproach against us is justifiable. Our sole duty to the sadhaks is to take them towards their spiritual realisation—we cannot behave like the head of a family intervening in domestic quarrels, supporting one, putting our weight against the other! However often X may stumble, we have to take him by the hand, lift him up again and get him to move once more towards the Divine. We have always done the same with you. But we could not support any demand of yours upon him. We have always treated it as something between him and the Divine. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 864)



The Mother. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

Aims in the Ashram and Auroville

by the Mother

What is the fundamental difference between the ideal of the Ashram and the ideal of Auroville?

There is no fundamental difference in the attitude towards the future and the service of the Divine.

But the people in the Ashram are considered to have consecrated their lives to Yoga (except, of course, the students who are here only for their studies and who are not expected to have made their choice in life).

Whereas in Auroville simply the good will to make a collective experiment for the progress of humanity is sufficient to gain admittance. 10 November 1969; *CWM*, vol. 13, pp. 203-204)

* * *

(Written for a UNESCO committee)

The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo's vision was entrusted to the Mother. The creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken. By the very nature of things, it is a collective ideal that calls for a collective effort so that it may be realised in the terms of an integral human perfection.

The Ashram founded and built by the Mother was the first step towards the accomplishment of this goal. The project of Auroville is the next step, more exterior, which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind.* (1969; *CWM*, vol. 13, p. 204)

* When Mother reread this text in 1972, she added the words "more exterior" in the last sentence.



I have always considered the Ashram and Auroville to be parts of an integral whole. I cannot see them as different entities. How then was a difference made by you, Mother? Or is it that I am wrong somewhere? To me it seems that there is a great need for a move towards integration in our outlook.

The Ashram is the central consciousness, Auroville is one of the outward expressions. In both places equally the work is done for the Divine.

The people who live in the Ashram have their own work and most of them are too busy to give time to Auroville.

Each one must be busy with his own work; this is essential for a proper organisation. (CWM, pp. 204-205)

* * *

Auroville and the Religions

We want the Truth.

For most men, it is what they want that they label truth.

The Aurovilians must want the Truth whatever it may be.

Auroville is for those who want to live a life essentially divine but who renounce all religions whether they be ancient, modern, new or future.

It is only in experience that there can be knowledge of the Truth.

No one ought to speak of the Divine unless he has had experience of the Divine.

Get experience of the Divine, then alone will you have the right to speak of it.

The objective study of religions will be a part of the historical study of the development of human consciousness.

Religions make up part of the history of mankind and it is in this guise that they will be studied at Auroville—not as beliefs to which one ought or ought not to adhere, but as part of a process in the development of human consciousness which should lead man towards his superior realisation.

PROGRAMME

Research through experience of the

Supreme Truth

A life divine

but

NORELIGIONS

Our research will not be a search effected by mystic means. It is in life itself that we wish to find the Divine. And it is through this discovery that life can really be transformed. (2 May 1970; CWM, p. 206)

* * *

The notion of religion is most often linked to the search for God. Should religion be understood in this context only? As a matter of fact, are there not nowadays other forms of religion?

We give the name of religion to any concept of the world or the universe which is presented as the exclusive Truth in which one must have an absolute faith, generally because this Truth is declared to be the result of a revelation.

Most religions affirm the existence of a God and the rules to be followed to obey Him, but there are some Godless religions, such as socio-political organisations which, in the name of an Ideal or the State, claim the same right to be obeyed.

To seek Truth freely and to approach it freely along his own lines is a man's right. But each one should know that his discovery is good for him alone and it is not to be imposed on others. (13 May 1970; CWM, p. 207)

* * *

To Be a True Aurovilian

1. The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances.

At the centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.

2. One lives in Auroville in order to be free from moral and social conventions; but this freedom must not be a new slavery to the ego, to its desires and ambitions.

The fulfilment of one's desires bars the way to the inner discovery which can only be achieved in the peace and transparency of perfect disinterestedness.

3. The Aurovilian should lose the sense of personal possession. For our passage in the material world, what is indispensable to our life and to our action is put at our disposal according to the place we must occupy.

The more we are consciously in contact with our inner being, the more are the exact means given to us.

4. Work, even manual work, is something indispensable for the inner discovery. If one does not work, if one does not put his consciousness into matter, the latter will never develop. To let the consciousness organise a bit of matter by means of one's body is very good. To establish order around oneself helps to bring order within oneself.

One should organise one's life not according to outer and artificial rules, but according to an organised inner consciousness, for if one lets life go on without subjecting it to the control of the higher consciousness, it becomes fickle and inexpressive. It is to waste one's time in the sense that matter remains without any conscious utilisation.

5. The whole earth must prepare itself for the advent of the new species, and Auroville wants to work consciously to hasten this advent.

6. Little by little it will be revealed to us what this new species must be, and meanwhile the best course is to consecrate oneself entirely to the Divine. (13 June 1970; CWM, pp. 207-208)



The poetry room

I walked beside the waters

I walked beside the waters of a world of light
On a gold ridge guarding two seas of high-rayed night.
One was divinely topped with a pale bluish moon
And swam as in a happy deep spiritual swoon
More conscious than earth's waking; the other's wide delight
Billowed towards an ardent orb of diamond white.
But where I stood, there joined in a bright marvelous haze
The miracled moons with the long ridge's golden blaze.
I knew not if two wakings or two mighty sleeps
Mixed the great diamond fires and the pale pregnant deeps,
But all my glad expanding soul flowed satisfied
Around me and became the mystery of their tide.
As one who finds his own eternal self, content,
Needing naught else beneath the spirit's firmament,
It knew not Space, it heard no more Time's running feet,
Termless, fulfilled lost richly in itself, complete.
And so it might have lain for ever. But there came
A dire intrusion wrapped in married cloud and flame,
Across the blude-white moon-hush of my magic seas
A sudden sweeping of immense peripheries
Of darkness ringing lambent lustres; shadowy-vast
A nameless dread, a Power incalculable passed
Whose feet were death, whose wings were immortality;
Its changing mind was time, its heart eternity.
All opposites were there, unreconciled, uneased,
Stuggling for victory, by victory unappeased.
All things it bore, even that which brings undying peace,
But secret, veiled, waiting for some supreme release.
I saw the spirit of the cosmic Ignorance;
I felt its power besiege my gloried fields of trance.

—Sri Aurobindo

202¹

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy – don't know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it, puzzles scholars –
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown –

Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –
Blushes, if any see –
Plucks at a twig of Evidence –
And asks a Vane, the way –
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –
Strong Hallelujahs roll –
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul –

—Emily Dickinson

164¹

We grow accustomed to the Dark –
When Light is put away –
As when the Neighbor holds the Lamp
To witness her Goodbye –

A Moment – We uncertain step
For newness of the night –
Then – fit our Vision to the Dark –
And meet the Road – erect –

And so of larger – Darknesses –
Those Evenings of the Brain –
When not a Moon disclose a sign –
Or Star – come out – within –

The Bravest – grope a little –
And sometimes hit a Tree
Directly in the Forehead –
But as they learn to see –

Either the Darkness alters –
Or something in the sight
Adjusts itself to Midnight –
And Life steps almost straight.

—Emily Dickinson

Leaves²

One by one, like leaves from a tree,
All my faiths have forsaken me;
But the stars above my head
Burn in white and delicate red,
And beneath my feet the earth
Brings the sturdy grass to birth.
I who was content to be
But a silken-singing tree,
But a rustle of delight
In the wistful heart of night—
I have lost the leaves that knew



Touch of rain and weight of dew.
Blinded by a leafy crown
I looked neither up nor down—
But the little leaves that die
Have left me room to see the sky;
Now for the first time I know
Stars above and earth below.

—Sara Teasdale

Beyond the end³

In 'nature' there's no choice—
 flowers
swing their heads in the wind, sun & moon
 are as they are. But we seem
almost to have it (not just
 available death)

It's energy: a spider's thread: not to
'go on living' but to quicken, to activate: extend:
 Some have it, they force it—
with work or laughter or even
 the act of buying, if that's
all they can lay hands on—
the girls crowding the stores, where light,
 color, solid dreams are—what gay
desire! It's their festival,
 Ring game, wassail, mystery.

It has no grace like that of
the grass, the humble rhythms, the
falling & rising of leaf and star;
it's barely
a constant. Like salt:
take it or leave it.

The 'hewers of wood' & so on; every damn
craftsman has it while he's working
 but it's not
a question of work: some
shine with it, in repose. Maybe it is
response, the will to respond—('reason
can give nothing at all/like
the response to desire') maybe
a gritting of the teeth, to go
just that much further, beyond the end
beyond whatever ends: to begin, to be, to defy.

—Denise Levertov

The rock cries out to us today⁴

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Mark the mastodon.
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.
But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no hiding place down here.
You, created only a little lower than
The angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness,
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spelling words
Armed for slaughter.
The rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face.
Across the wall of the world,
A river sings a beautiful song,
Come rest here by my side.
Each of you a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more.
Come, clad in peace and I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I
And the tree and stone were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your brow
And when you yet knew you still knew nothing.
The river sings and sings on.
There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing river and the wise rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African and Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the tree.



Today, the first and last of every tree
Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the river.
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the river.
Each of you, descendant of some passed on
Traveller, has been paid for.
You, who gave me my first name,
You Pawnee, Apache and Seneca,
You Cherokee Nation, who rested with me,
Then forced on bloody feet,
Left me to the employment of other seekers--
Desperate for gain, starving for gold.
You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot...
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru,
Bought, sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare
Praying for a dream.
Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am the tree planted by the river,
Which will not be moved.
I, the rock, I the river, I the tree
I am yours--your passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage,
Need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.
Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands.
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts.
Each new hour holds new chances
For new beginnings.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.
The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me,
The rock, the river, the tree, your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.
Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes,

Into your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope
Good morning.

—Maya Angelou

Untitled

I asked nothing.
I lived dedicated—one long tapering flame.
I brewed my own wine
intoxicated with earth and air.
I grew with the world, I suffered her miseries,
I wounded myself in the wars.
I hoped and dreamed with her great and her
visionaries.
My eyes met everywhere that primordial union
from which sprang forth the universe
And the music of the spheres ran in my nerves.
I sang in tune with the whirling worlds.

—Dhanavanti

That word

That word, that unique word,
That one revealing word—
May I find it.
Let all my life be a constant research
For that WHITE WORD!

...

In thy heart's deepest white core it lies
awaiting thy utterance.

...

“LOVE”

—Dhanavanti

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² From <http://allspirit.co.uk>.

³ From Carruth, H. (Ed.) *The voice that is great within us: American poetry of the twentieth century*, New York: Bantam books, 1970.

⁴ From <http://www.poetseers.org>.



Apropos

Never think that God's delays are God's denials. Hold on; hold fast; hold out. Patience is genius. —Georges-Louis Leclerc De Buffon

True religion is real living; living with all one's soul, with all one's goodness and righteousness. —Albert Einstein

Ethics cannot be based upon our obligations toward [people], but they are complete and natural only when we feel this reverence for life and the desire to have compassion for and to help all creatures insofar as it is in our power. I think that this ethic will become more and more recognized because of its great naturalness and because it is the foundation of a true humanism toward which we must strive if our culture is to become truly ethical. —Albert Schweitzer

Expect nothing, live frugally on surprise. —Alice Walker

People living deeply have no fear of death. —Anais Nin

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. —Annie Dillard

Love life and life will love you back. Love people and they will love you back. —Arthur Rubinstein

Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of. —Benjamin Franklin

Gratefulness is the key to a happy life that we hold in our hands, because if we are not grateful, then no matter how much we have we will not be happy—because we will always want to have something else or something more. —Brother David Steindl-Rast

Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live. —Dorothy Thompson

The personal life deeply lived always expands into truths beyond itself. —Anais Nin

Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. —Helen Keller

A man with the right attitude will make a house with the bricks thrown at him by his adversaries. SACAR student

Be glad of life because it gives you the chance to love, to work, to play, and to look up at the stars. —Henry Van Dyke

You don't get to choose how you're going to die. Or when. You can only decide how you're going to live. Now. —Joan Baez

Do not take life too seriously. You will never get out of it alive. —Elbert Hubbard

The truth is always exciting. Speak it, then. Life is dull without it. —Pearl S. Buck

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. —Mark Twain

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow. I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment. —Rabindranath Tagore

Life is a succession of lessons, which must be lived to be understood. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods. —Albert Einstein

Truth springs from argument amongst friends. —David Hume

Moral cowardice that keeps us from speaking our minds is as dangerous as irresponsible talk. The right way is not always the popular and easy way. Standing for right when it is unpopular is a true test of moral character. —Margaret Chase Smith

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. —Martin Luther King, Jr.

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him. —Victor Frankel

The price of the democratic way of life is a growing appreciation of people's differences, not merely as tolerable, but as the essence of a rich and rewarding human experience. —Jerome Nathanson

Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things. This is true even when our questions never give way to specific answers or give rise to specific practices such as prayer or meditation. We encounter spiritual issues every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die. We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is "spiritual" when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life. —Robert C. Fuller