

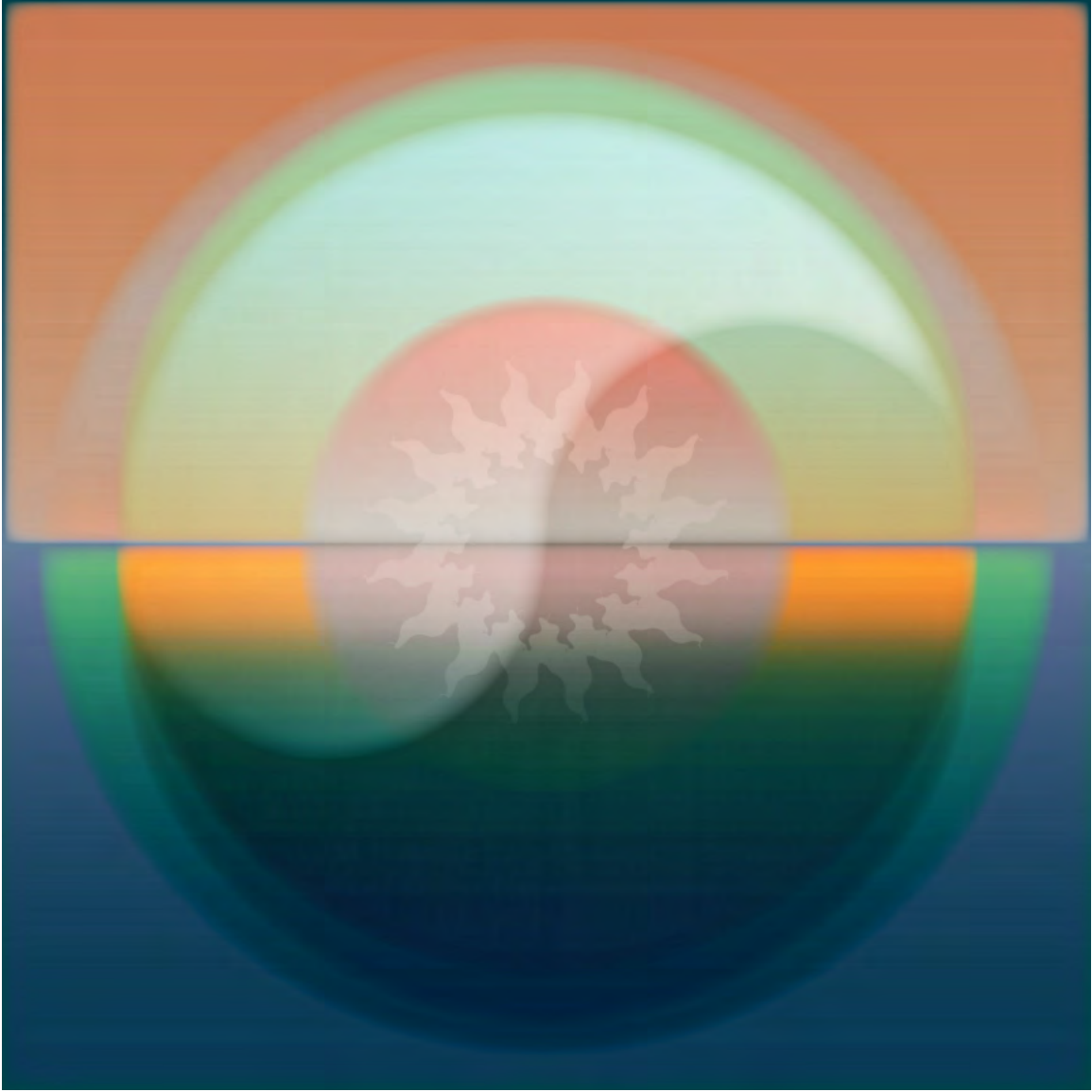
SPRING 2023

VOL. 48 NO. 1

Collaboration

JOURNAL OF THE INTEGRAL YOGA OF SRI AUROBINDO AND THE MOTHER

The
Divine
Feminine



"Surrender." Digital art by Margaret Astrid Phanes

*Without him, I exist not;
without me, he is unmanifest.*

—The Mother, *Words of the Mother I*,
Collected Works of the Mother,
vol. 13, p. 32, May 6, 1957

Collaboration

SPRING 2023

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Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham relics room. Image: SASP

Contributors

SUSAN CURTISS was introduced to Sri Aurobindo in 1980 and since then she has been practicing transpersonal counseling psychology with a focus on the psychic being in the healing of trauma. Her passion is researching the gnostic Shaker communities as evolutionary forerunners of Sri Aurobindo's collective yoga.

ROD HEMSELL is an educator and author who has lived in Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram from 1968 to 1983. During this time he traveled widely, spoke about Auroville and Sri Aurobindo's philosophy at centers and universities in India, and published articles and essays. He has studied philosophy and education at the undergraduate and graduate levels, was also co-founder and executive director of the University of Human Unity project in Auroville.

LYNDA LESTER edited *Collaboration* for ten years, is a past president and current board member of the Sri Aurobindo Association, and has given many presentations on Integral Yoga. A video of her talk "The Union of Spirit and Matter: Science, Consciousness, and a Life Divine," hosted by La Grace Integral Life Center in its New Perspectives series, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQS1UnqXhgs>

GARY MILLAR has lived most of his life in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He now resides in the lap of

Annapurna in western Nepal, where Vedic traditions still live in the local villages. He has authored two books in visual anthropology: *Rig Vedic Annapurna* and *Sacred Nature and Himalayan Womanhood*.

MARTHA ORTON completed a Ph.D. in Sri Aurobindo studies and has written extensively on Integral Yoga. She has been a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother for many years.

BAHMAN A. K. Shirazi is a member of the *Collaboration* editorial team. Through the teachings of Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri, who brought Sri Aurobindo's teachings to the West, he discovered Integral Psychology and Integral Yoga, which have provided the inspiration and guidance for his academic and spiritual paths ever since.

PRAPANNA SMITH lived for five years between 1987 and 1995 in American Integral Yoga ashram settings, and in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, from 1998–2001, as a teacher at the Sri Aurobindo International Center of Education. From 2001–2010, he led a first attempt to introduce Integral Education to the U.S. He holds a doctorate in educational leadership.

MIRA M. WHITE received her bachelor of fine arts and masters of fine arts degrees from the California College of Arts and Crafts. She is a multimedia artist who has taught and exhibited for more than 40 years in both the United States and France, teaching mainly in art centers and private studios. She dreams in paint!



EDITORIAL

The Divine Feminine

THIS ISSUE OF *Collaboration* focuses on the divine feminine as a powerful presence and force in our world. In the Integral Yoga, this presence is known as the Divine Mother. However, there are many names and forms that the presence of the divine feminine takes since it has prominence in many diverse cultures around the world. The recognition of this force has deep historical and even prehistoric roots. Although the representation of male divinity has been emphasized in some traditions with the result that recognition of the divine feminine has been suppressed; nevertheless, the reality of the divine feminine persists and remains prominent. In fact, both feminine and masculine representations of divinity can be compatible and exist in a harmonious relation. Sri Aurobindo describes this sublime compatibility eloquently in a sequence of passages from *Savitri* (Part I, Book I, Canto IV, “The Secret Knowledge”) about the play of the disguised divine masculine and divine feminine in the manifestation. He sums up at one point with the line: “This whole wide world is only he and she.”

The consciousness of the divine feminine has been sensed and experienced in all cultures and can be regarded as the overarching consciousness which orchestrates the life of our world and the universe—the consciousness that exists above all and which cares for all. This wonderful consciousness has been called by Sri Aurobindo simply—the Mother. This divine presence and force exists at transcendent, universal, and individual levels. Most people experience it at the individual level in the inner being—the heart of hearts. More specifically this presence is felt especially by the psychic element in our nature, the psychic being, the spark of the Divine within us all. It is this that resonates with the truth of the divine presence and, in the language of the

Integral Yoga, effectuates the progressive surrender to the Divine. Sri Aurobindo has written extensively about the significance of the Divine Mother and he has also written about the importance of the soul’s offering of itself to her divine presence and reality. The progressive offering, which in effect constitutes one’s surrender to the will of the Divine, ultimately becomes surrender to the Divine Mother. This action in the being greatly enables one’s progress, as the divine Shakti takes up the work of the yoga for the sincerely surrendered individual.

The articles in this issue cannot begin to express fully the range, scope and significance of the divine feminine in our world. Yet, we hope that they will give some indication. Among the expressions of the divine feminine in the current issue is a poem, “Infinity’s Star,” by Rod Hemsell, from his recently published book, *Journey to the House of Light* (Raya Publishing, available from major booksellers), a series of poetic expressions focused on nature and spirit as they mirror each other in the journey to oneness and transformation. The book also includes beautifully evocative photos by Edith Stadig.

Lynda Lester has contributed the text of a talk given on “The Transitional Being and Mother’s Yoga of Matter.” This describes how evolution is both spiritual and physical and includes discussion of the Mother’s work on the very cells of her body. Lynda notes that the Mother’s evolutionary work in the body was based primarily on surrender to the Divine, a practice which all can include in their daily lives.

Gary Millar has contributed a lovely poem, “O Wild Cherry Tree,” which reflects the joy and beauty of springtime, and also an essay, “The Divine Feminine in Nature,” about a pilgrimage experience in the



Image: GoranH / Pixabay

Himalayas, where he has lived for many years. In this essay, Gary offers a vibrant description of that journey. Martha Orton has also contributed a poetic tribute to the Divine Mother, “Divine Presence.”

Many readers of this journal will have heard of Jyotipriya, the spiritual name which Sri Aurobindo gave to Judith Tyberg. Bahman Shirazi has contributed a deep appreciation of Jyotipriya, “A Tribute to Jyotipriya,” and her role in establishing the Integral Yoga in the U.S. Another person who has made a significant contribution to the Integral Yoga in this country, Dakshina Vanzetti, is beautifully honored in a powerful remembrance by Prapanna Smith. For many of us, Prapanna’s heartfelt tribute will bring back vivid memories of Dakshina and her role with Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham and beyond, including her many talents and accomplishments, not only as an artist, but also as a leader with courage and conviction empowered by faith.

Continuing her exploration of the Shakers and their founder Mother Ann Lee from the previous issue of *Collaboration*, Susan Curtiss notes that the age-old longing of humanity to transform its nature and become

one with God found an astonishing expression in England’s American colonies. Mother Ann attempted to bring spiritual knowledge into a living community wholly committed to a form of a perfected divine life.

This issue also includes enlightening quotations from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which focus particularly on the reality of the divine feminine and its significance in life.—*Martha Orton for the editorial team*

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Mother's Mission

THE MOTHER

WHEN AND HOW did I become conscious of a mission which I was to fulfill on earth? And when and how I met Sri Aurobindo?

These two questions you have asked me and I promised a short reply.

For the knowledge of the mission, it is difficult to say when it came to me. It is as though I were born with it, and following the growth of the mind and brain, the precision and completeness of this consciousness grew also.

Between 11 and 13 a series of psychic and spiritual experiences revealed to me not only the existence of God but man's possibility of uniting with Him, of realising Him integrally in consciousness and action, of manifesting Him upon earth in a life divine. This, along with a practical discipline for its fulfilment, was given to me during my body's sleep by several teachers, some of whom I met afterwards on the physical plane.

Later on, as the interior and exterior development proceeded, the spiritual and psychic relation with one of these beings became more and more clear and frequent; and although I knew little of the Indian philosophies and religions at that time I was led to call him Krishna, and henceforth I was aware that it was with him (whom I knew I should meet on earth one day) that the divine work was to be done.

In the year 1910 my husband came alone to Pondicherry where, under very interesting and peculiar circumstances, he made the acquaintance of Sri Aurobindo. Since then we both strongly wished to return to India—the country which I had always cherished as

my true mother-country. And in 1914 this joy was granted to us.

As soon as I saw Sri Aurobindo I recognised in him the well-known being whom I used to call Krishna.... And this is enough to explain why I am fully convinced that my place and my work are near him, in India.

—*Words of the Mother I, Collected Works of the Mother*, vol. 13, p. 38



"Supramental Mother." Painted by Sri Aurobindo.

The Divine Conscious Force



Painting by Dakshina Vanzetti.

THE ONE WHOM we adore as the Mother is the divine Conscious Force that dominates all existence, one and yet so many-sided that to follow her movement is impossible even for the quickest mind and for the freest and most vast intelligence. The Mother is the consciousness and force of the Supreme and far above all she creates. But something of her ways can be seen and felt through her embodiments and the

SRI AUROBINDO

more seizable because more defined and limited temperament and action of the goddess forms in whom she consents to be manifest to her creatures.

...

Four great Aspects of the Mother, four of her leading Powers and Personalities have stood in front in her guidance of this universe and in her dealings with the terrestrial play. One is her personality of calm wideness and comprehending wisdom and tranquil benignity and inexhaustible compassion and sovereign and surpassing majesty and all-ruling greatness. Another embodies her power of splendid strength and irresistible passion, her warrior mood, her overwhelming will, her impetuous swiftness and world-shaking force. A third is vivid and sweet and wonderful with her deep secret of beauty and harmony and fine rhythm, her intricate and subtle opulence, her compelling attraction and captivating grace. The fourth is equipped with her close and profound capacity of intimate knowledge and careful flawless work and quiet and exact perfection in all things. Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, Perfection are their several attributes and it is these powers that they bring with them into the world, manifest in a human disguise in their Vibhutis [humans embodying some power of the Divine] and shall found in the divine degree of their ascension in those who can open their earthly nature to the direct and living influence of the Mother. To the four we give the four great names, Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati.

—Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother with Letters on the Mother, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 32, p. 14 and pp. 17–18



"Global Flight." Painting by Mira M. White

The Transitional Being and Mother's Yoga of Matter

Author's note: This article is based on a talk given at the Cultural Integration Fellowship in San Francisco on March 29, 2015.

LYNDA LESTER

IN INTEGRAL YOGA, the divine feminine is seen as the self-existent, self-cognitive, self-effective power of the Divine whom we know as the Divine Mother. She is the conscious force of knowledge, will, harmony, and love that upholds the universe and links the world to the transcendent Supreme. Mother of creation, she manifests all things in herself, supports the

million processes of life, and mediates between the human personality and Absolute Being. It is she who drives evolution and transforms our ordinary nature into divine nature. She is the apotheosis, the ultimate essence of the divine feminine.

Mirra Alfassa, who embodied this quintessential force, was an artist, occultist, and advanced spiritual being who

Sri Aurobindo explained that without her, all his realizations would have remained theoretical; no organized manifestation would have been possible. It was she who showed the way to a practical form.

first met Sri Aurobindo in 1914 and returned permanently to Pondicherry in 1920 to become his close spiritual collaborator. Sri Aurobindo recognized her as a full incarnation of the Divine Mother and wrote the famous book *The Mother* about her. Soon she became known by seekers simply as “the Mother.” Years later, Sri Aurobindo explained that without her, all his realizations would have remained theoretical; no organized manifestation would have been possible. It was she who showed the way to a practical form.¹ Her embodiment, he said, was a chance for the world to receive into it a new consciousness, which he called supramental, and to undergo the transformation that would make that possible.²

Together Sri Aurobindo and the Mother labored for 30 years to bring down the supramental consciousness into earth-nature, and when he passed on, she continued this work for another 23 years. To grasp the sheer

magnitude of this work, which was nothing less than the divinization of matter, we must understand the evolutionary vision they shared.

AN EVOLUTIONARY LEAP

According to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, evolution is the gradual development of incarnate, physical forms that increasingly embody higher and more powerful modes of consciousness. Humans, who are mental beings, are about halfway up the ladder. But the world is on the threshold of a great leap to the next level of consciousness, a supramental cognition that exists above the mind; and a new species is emerging in which the faculty of supermind will be native.

The Mother, who experienced it, said that the supramental is a limitless golden immensity, a luminous, eternal, omnipotent force as vast as the universe. Its powers are light and bliss and beauty and perfection. It contains within it an infinite multiplicity of colors and vibrations, forces and forms, but all these diversities are held as integral harmonies in a boundless, undivided reality. The essence of the supermind is oneness; there, the feeling of separation vanishes.

Nature is now working out the transition from mental to supramental consciousness in humanity. But these evolutionary transitions generally take a long time, and so Sri Aurobindo and the Mother developed what they called the Integral Yoga to help us along, that we might accomplish in one lifetime what might otherwise have taken many lifetimes or ages.

Interestingly enough, however, the further they advanced in their work, the more they saw all the stages that had to be crossed between mind and supermind. They realized that entering directly into supermind would produce such an abrupt change that the human body would be unable to support it. Hence they saw the necessity of a transitional being or an intermediary race between humanity and the coming supramental species. Mother called this intermediary race the *surhomme*, which has been translated as superman or overman.



The Mother in 1967. Image: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi.

In fact, Mother was born human; and through yoga, she became a living example of this transitional being. It was an inconceivable evolutionary leap—but to comprehend how inconceivable it was, we need to look at the difference between mind and supermind.

MIND AND SUPERMIND

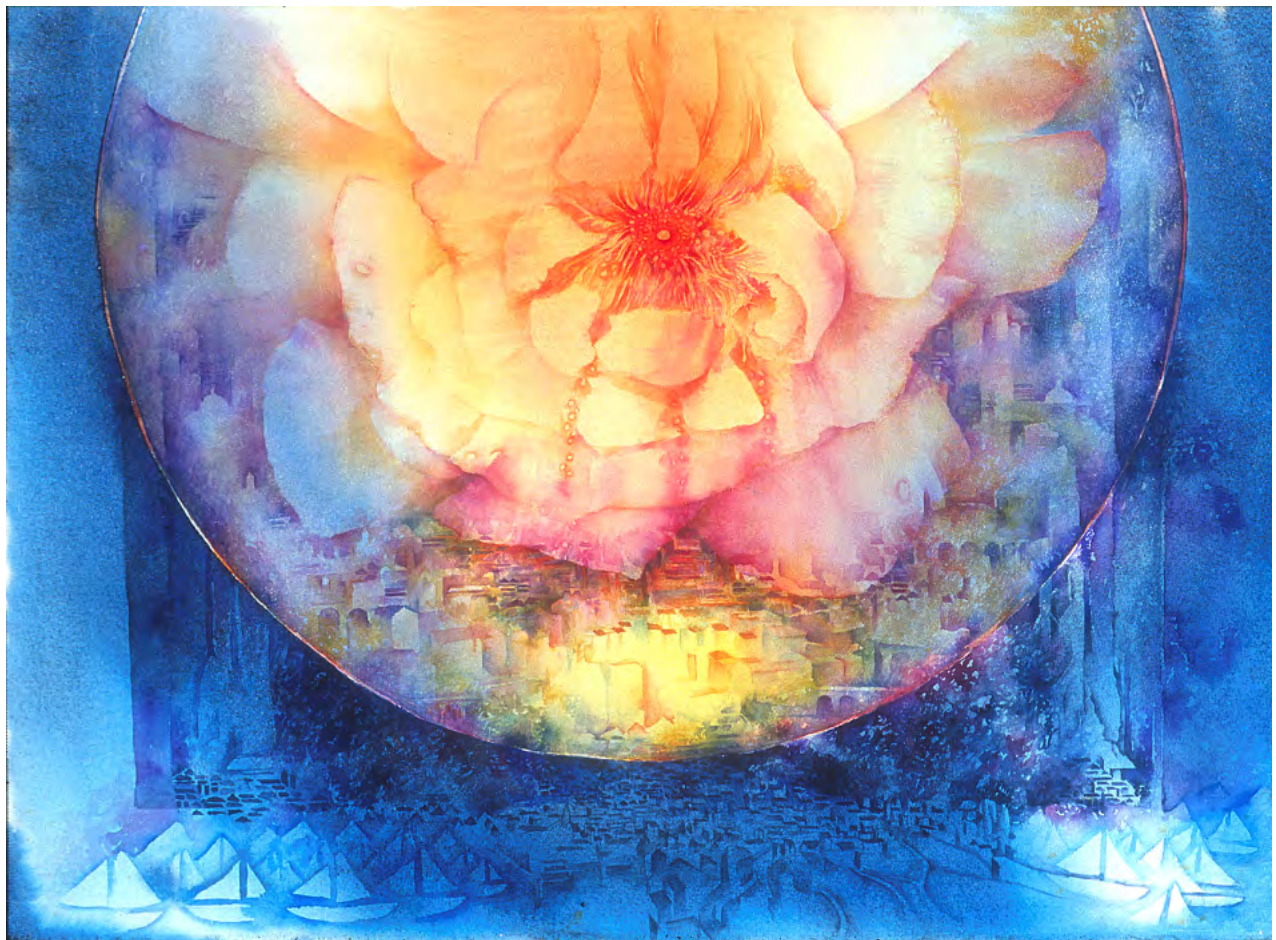
Mind is the power of consciousness to measure, limit, separate, and differentiate. It cuts out forms from the whole and divides it into smaller and smaller pieces—by deconstructing, analyzing, and taking things apart, or by constructing, synthesizing, and aggregating—but always dealing with discrete elements and separate components. Mind can see the whole as the sum of its parts, but it can't see the unified reality behind; it can't possess the Infinite.

But the supermind can. In the supermind, reality is indivisible, for supermind is a consciousness of unity. In the supermind, oneness is simultaneous with multiplic-

ity; all powers work in harmony without opposition or collision, according to the one Will inherent in all—because supermind is the wisdom, power, light, and bliss by which the universe is upheld.

Now, all this oneness and sublimity may sound like just another description of enlightenment and most of the spiritual realizations of the past; but those realizations were not supramental. They took place at the highest level of spiritualized mind, a level of consciousness just below supermind that Sri Aurobindo called *overmind*.

The overmind is luminous and full of power, but it's also where cosmic separative awareness begins. Therefore many spiritual traditions, assuming this was the highest consciousness attainable to seekers, have seen an unbridgeable gap between spirit and matter—because separative awareness leads to the great fall from knowledge into ignorance, suffering, and death.



The supramental is a limitless golden immensity, a luminous, eternal, omnipotent force as vast as the universe. Its powers are light and bliss and beauty and perfection. Image: "Our Journey," painting by Mira M. White

Supermind is the missing link between the spiritual heights and the material base of existence, and it has what the overmind does not: the power to integrate spirit and matter.

Some Indian spiritualities have thought that the overmental power of *maya*, deemed a power of illusion, is what created the universe. And since they believed the world was an illusion, and an illusion full of misery at that, they decided the best thing to do was to turn away from embodied life—to seek enlightenment and obtain release from the cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation.

But for Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the universe is not an illusion created by overmind *maya*; it's real, and it comes into being through the dynamic manifesting power of the supermind. Supermind is the missing link between the spiritual heights and the material base of existence, and it has what the overmind does not: the power to integrate spirit and matter and divinize earth nature.

However, in order for this to happen, matter itself must become capable of bearing this massive, omnipotent force of light and love. Yet matter as we know it is hard, resistant, closed, and unconscious—it must be taught to wake up.

THE YOGA OF MATTER

Meanwhile, Sri Aurobindo had once told the Mother, “We can't both remain upon earth, one of us must go.” He said she could not withdraw because her body was better than his and could better undergo the transformation.³

And in 1950, he left the body.

It then became Mother's task, working alone, to bring supramental consciousness into matter. She turned herself into a living laboratory, using her own body as a test bed, an intermediary by which earthly substance could be transmuted. Her yoga was material—she called it the yoga of matter, the yoga of physical vibrations, the yoga of the cells—and it presented a unique set of problems.

Mystics of all ages have universalized their inner consciousness and felt themselves to be one with all beings and with the Divine; and Mother and Sri Aurobindo had supramentalized their mind and vital energies long ago—but how do you universalize a body?

How can a body spread out to infinity and be one with everything without losing its shape or dissolving into nonphysical reality?

The body is made from material structures—muscles, bones, organs, nerves, blood. How do you cosmicize your elbow? How do you make your knees omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent? Because we're talking here about the divinization of matter, not just of the inner consciousness.

And of course tissues and bones are made up of even smaller units, the cells, that function autonomically, far below the level of awareness, obeying habits that go back millions of years—repeating endlessly, mechanically, instinctively.

So what Mother had to do was go down, down into the cells, and change their subconscious functioning into a conscious activity under the direct guidance of the Divine. You can see that it would be a monumental work—and in fact, that's what she was doing for 23 years: cell by cell, teaching her body to open to the supramental light, teaching each cell a new way of supramental being.

But the ordinary human body cannot bear the touch of the supermind, which it feels to be strange, terrifying, and devastating. So, often when Mother made the transition from old cellular habits to a supramental functioning—a transition she called the “transfer of power”—the normal working of her body stopped. Nerves, heart, brain, respiratory system—her physical was in a permanent state of crisis. She went through a series of emergencies that looked like critical illnesses.

But in Integral Yoga, each difficulty is a means for greater progress; and through these ordeals, Mother came upon an astonishing discovery. It had to do with how the body is deeply, hypnotically, fantastically affected by the mind.

DIFFERENT MODES OF MIND

As humans, we're mental beings, and everything we perceive—thoughts, emotions, sensations, forms—is perceived with mental consciousness. But mental consciousness has various modes: there's the

In Mother's body, the supramental consciousness, working through the mind of the cells, began to touch and transform matter and to change it into a new kind of substance.



Mother turned herself into a living laboratory, using her own body as an intermediary by which earthly substance could be transmuted. Image: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi.

intellectual mind with its rationality, philosophy, and logical thought; the emotional mind, with its feelings, justifications, and desire-based reasonings; and the physical mind with its obstinate materialism.

For the physical mind, what's real are solid objects, external happenings, deterministic causes and effects—and, of course, scientific discoveries and doctors' opinions. It is also a mind of habit and repetition, endlessly looping small, programmed subroutines.

Moreover, because the physical mind was formed under the pressure of suffering and struggle, it's stamped with an almost indelible sense of incapacity and defeatism. It pessimistically foresees every possible disaster and disease and accident.

The further down into the physical mind, the worse it gets. And way down at the bottom, where primal mind meshes with bodily matter, is the mind of the cells. This

is a material mind that lives in a constant state of alarm and anxiety, a trembling that comes from fear ingrained in matter. It's apprehensive, it's automatic, and it's closely related to physical illnesses.

And what Mother discovered, to her astonishment, was that the cells of the body obey this material mind. Therefore, if you can bring it under control, the body too will change—to the extent that what seemed to be absolutely irrefutable physical disorders and illnesses can vanish in a moment. Mother did many experiments and found this to be true.

She found that if she could still the material mind and make it receptive to the Divine, problems in the body that seemed incontrovertibly real and concrete changed instantly. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo said that once the physical mind is transformed, the transformation of the body will follow naturally.

A NEW SUBSTANCE

So we come back to the nature of the mind: Mind imposes a grid on omnipresent reality and views the pieces it's made as separate objects. Matter as we know it is a mental perception of omnipresent reality chopped into bits.

We call these bits "atoms." Incredible as it may sound, according to Sri Aurobindo, atomic matter is the one unified reality perceived through mental consciousness. What we call matter is the substance of that reality divided by the action of mind. That substance is like a flowing sea—it's not divided in itself, it's only divided in the observing consciousness. So if the material consciousness is supramentalized, matter will be perceived as un-atomic substance—a unitary self-extension of omnipresent reality.

And so it was that in Mother's body, the supramental consciousness, working through the mind of the cells, began to touch and transform matter, and as it did, it began to change it into a new kind of substance. Mother began speaking of this new substance as true matter, unified matter. She said, it's more powerful, more luminous, more resistant than ordinary matter. It has certain subtler, penetrating qualities and a kind of innate

capacity of universality. Its refinement allows the perception of vibrations in a much wider way. Mother said it removes the sensation of division that's found in mentalized substance—the sense of separation disappears quite naturally and spontaneously.

As the supramental consciousness permeated Mother's body, the body's capabilities increased a hundredfold. It was no longer even individual in the separate sense—its boundaries seem to be gone, as if it were spread out everywhere, without limits. Her body consciousness felt like a movement of waves, she said—vast as the earth, infinite, like an eternal vibration with no beginning and no end, filled with power and carrying the universe in its undulatory movement.

MATERIALIZATION OF THE PSYCHIC BEING

Now, in Integral Yoga, one of the first necessities is to discover one's innermost being or deepest self. This is the actual presence of the Divine within us, often called the soul. Sri Aurobindo borrowed a word from the Greek, *psyche*, and called it the psychic being. A self-aware portion of the Divine, the psychic being is immortal: it evolves from life to life, starting out as a spark and growing into a complete individuality expressive of a unique, fully realized divine personality.

Each time the psychic being incarnates, it draws to itself physical, vital, and mental elements to create a complex form through which it experiences and enjoys material existence. And till recently, that's all it had to work with—physical, vital, and mental elements were the only ones that had evolved in earth nature. But since Mother did her work, there's a new element it can gather around itself: supramental matter.

And one day in 1968, Mother noticed that there seemed to be a new intermediary form developing between her psychic being and her body. Two years later, she realized that in fact it is the psychic being that's going to materialize itself and become the supramental being, that is to say, the next species in evolution.

According to Georges Van Vrekhem, who's written some wonderful books on the Mother, the psychic being will do this by clothing itself in supramental matter, transformed earthly

substance that's sufficiently refined to give it an enduring and immortal shape. But this will only be possible when a sufficient quantity of gross matter is transformed by the process of supramental permeation. This supramental permeation is happening now, and it's contagious. Mother started it and it continues. It's a direct action from matter to matter that can be perceived and felt, not with the mind, but with the supramental sense.

AN ARCHETYPAL SUPRAMENTAL BODY

Georges Van Vrekhem also says that in the course of her experiences over 23 years, Mother gradually evolved an archetypal supramental body made out of supramentalized matter. As I understand it, this supramental body, which is immortal, is living in what

In the course of her experiences, Mother gradually evolved an archetypal supramental body. Image: "New World Rising," painting by Mira M. White.





The New World is developing and gathering force just behind surface reality as it comes closer and closer to full manifestation. Image: "New World Forming," painting by Mira M. White

Mother called the true physical, the subtle physical. She also called it the New World. This is a world that's developing and gathering force just behind surface reality as it comes closer and closer to full manifestation—because before things appear, they take form in the subtle physical and then precipitate out.

But again, in order for this New World and Mother's supramental body to fully manifest, there has to be a certain critical mass of receptivity in people on earth and a sufficient supramentalization of matter—which there wasn't in 1973 when she left the body, but which there may be in years to come.

WHAT WE CAN DO TODAY

In the meantime, for those of us who are not ready for full supramental transformation, is there anything in Mother's yoga of matter that can translate into something we can understand and realize in our own lives? Yes, there is.

First of all, Mother's yoga was based most of all on a single methodology: surrender to the Divine. Surrender is something we can make part of our own practice: we can work each day to progressively offer ourselves, all we are and have, in every part of our being, in every moment, to the light, love, and beauty of the Divine. Because as Sri Aurobindo said, the first word of the supramental yoga is surrender; its last word also is surrender.

Second: We can learn to live in the consciousness of our soul, the psychic being, the Divine within—to bring it forward, to unify our being around it, to live in it more and more. This is something we can do here and now that is directly relevant to supramental transformation—for we know now that it is the psychic being that will manifest the supramental body.

Third: We can awaken our physical consciousness and improve our bodies to the highest degree possible—through fitness training, sports, hatha yoga, movement awareness, disciplined health habits—so that our bodies can be capable of serving as fit instruments for the higher consciousness. Because, Mother said, the skills developed in physical training are exactly those we must have to be fit for receiving and manifesting the new forces. Physical mastery, she said, leads to an improved body in which the cells acquire a plasticity and receptivity that makes the material substance more supple for the permeation of supramental power—that permeation we were talking about.

So now we come back to the idea of the transitional being, the *surhomme*, and how that relates to us. Sri Aurobindo said, humans are born for transcendence. Our inmost need is to be greater than what we are, to be more than human, to be divine.

And Mother said that all those who strive to overcome their ordinary nature, who try to realize materially the deeper experience that brought them into contact with divine truth, all those who try to realize physically and externally the change of consciousness they have found within themselves—all are apprentice *surhommes*.

She went on to say that each time we try not to be an ordinary person but to express in our actions that higher truth, rather than being governed by the general ignorance, we are apprentice *surhommes*. And according to the success of our efforts, we are more or less able, more or less advanced on the way.

Thus it is through our own practice of yoga, sincere surrender, and receptivity to the inner touch of the Divine Mother that this work may continue in us, leading us individually and collectively ever closer to the New World.

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NOTES

1. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 1 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram), p. 4.
2. Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother with Letters on the Mother, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 32, p. 32.
3. Perhaps around February 1927; see Mother's conversation of July 26, 1969 in *Mother's Agenda*, vol. 10.

LYNDA LESTER edited *Collaboration* for ten years, is a current board member of the Sri Aurobindo Association, and has given many presentations at AUM Integral Yoga conferences.



Image: "Her Morning Rose," painting by Mira M. White

Infinity's Star

ROD HEMSELL

She knows the flower that she is:
She is its meaning and its form
She is the force and the presence
The beauty and the love that unfold to sight
The touch that reaches toward the light
And quivers in the cells of mind's illumined eyes
The breath that fills us with the energy of life
The fragrance that spreads in waves of sweet delight
And binds us in her vision's orbiting view
Revealing the paths that lead to worlds afar
Where all our lives converge in oneness's heart
Beyond the limits of life and death reborn
Like planets returning to infinity's star
Our souls circling round divinity's sun renew.



The Divine Feminine in Nature

Editor's note: Writing of a pilgrimage on a mountain in the Himalayas, Gary describes his deeply personal and vivid experience of the divine feminine as expressed in nature. This experience is enhanced by the practice called “churning the breath,” as well as by evoking imagery from the Vedas. The following is an extract from *Lost Self-Conception of a Nature-Womanhood*. © Gary Millar 2022

GARY MILLAR

IN HIMALAYAN CULTURE womanhood is still a symbol of a divine mother nature. Perhaps the most visible element of this living association is with mountains. This is normally experienced in a pilgrimage up a holy Himalayan mountain ...

I climb the holy mountain. She is close. Breaths fan my heart center with each step. Suddenly the path narrows, forest growth brushes against me: my mind says “ferns,” but my inner heart translates this as “Her skirt.” It brushes against my sense and I begin to relax. Hiking up a trail is exhilarating when the folds of Her clothing touch.

A spring leaf-fall crunches beneath each step as I push my way through undergrowth, bringing a feeling of Her personality. Deepening breaths from the climb help concentrate perception. During the climb, woodland sounds are everywhere and pointedly awaken me. Leaves rustle nearby. Alertness comes. The mind says

“pheasant,” but my heart says, “Lo, She is near.” Forest sounds are mantric. I stop, listen, and enter a mystic garnet-green world that re-adjusts my life and everything else.

She is the Forest-Lady who touches the heart center in primal self-discovery traditions. In this prehistoric experience, what we do naturally and what happens naturally are the framework for relationship and inner closeness with Her. This is the magic of mystic nature experience from the Age of Mysteries, still living in the Himalayas.

She climbs with me. Nature as Womanhood. Daughter-Dawn, Sister-Night, Day-Wife, Growth-Mother, and Woman-Sage are Her aspects, found in hymns from the dawn of history. All day and night She is near in the ancient poems called the Rig Veda.

In the Age of Mysteries, womanhood and nature were seen as one: they were the same mystic symbol. In



Image: Oliver M. Brax / Pixabay

Greece, Egypt, Persia, India, and Asia there remains something of this primordial perception at nature-seats still acknowledged as holy. This holiness is in the ground! It has not gone away and probably never will. Earth is our Divine Mother; motherhood in this mystic view is the experience of the feminine gender in every species. These poems, now named hymns, describe different elements and aspects of womanhood and its experience in this same Earth Mother symbolism. This manifestation, this world, nature, our womanhood is an original divine feminine experience.

The relationship with this Nature-Woman is based in calm. No excitement, no fatigue or mental machinery or noisy modernity fit into this experience because concentration is required. She is perceptible everywhere in nature, but with concentration.

I climb to a sacred lake on the pilgrimage mountain in the holy Himalayas. The mountain is a living nature experience for village peoples on its slopes. On the trail, spring water gushes forth from rock. Local dwellers build a tiny “house” around it and cover it with flowers and incense on this mountain’s birthday celebration. Openings of every kind, here at the house entrance, are

Pilgrimages clear a space inside that, with consecration, will allow a mystic fire-kindling to develop.

holy: in front of them we are opened! Here flowers dapple Her green, and water springs forth! I stop and drink.

By now the deep breathing, described in primal nature experience as “churning the breath,” has warmed the heart center. The company and closeness of the Divine Mother surrounds me as I walk in the folds of Her tree-dangling moss-skirt. As I cross a patch of flat soft grassland, mountain views of vastness appear. The panorama extends to a holy river far, far below. The local name of this river means “the first descent of the Divine Mother’s consciousness.” Then another climb into trees.

Up and up I climb, matching the steps and breaths and watching their meeting place in the heart center, seeking Her inner place nearer the heavens. The breaths have been churning for an hour by now, and the heart center feels glowing. Towering oak trees bejeweled with dangling orchid earrings decorate the trail. These ancient oaks are here seen as holy Tree-Mothers. Streaks of light accent their jewelry, and I am surrounded by their long, large arms. The day has arrived with early sun and a blue sky.

This is the world of My Lady, the beautiful bejeweled Woman. I constantly brush against Her fern-skirt alongside tiny white perfumed bush-blossoms. Our time together is precious. We always meet at the lake, and then decide what to do, but mostly it is just spending time together. Life passes quickly and meaningful experience is hard to keep, so there is an intensity in these meetings that inspires, as if it were the last time we will see each other, forever.

This climb to the lake is a preparatory period to open my consciousness: a beginning of what we share in the heart center that ultimately kindles Her mystic presence. The inner fire that develops in this relationship is a living intelligence described as a wood fire in the Rig Veda. An experience of nature with inner psychological parallels is still chanted in Himalayan tradition. Pilgrimages clear a space inside that, with consecration, will allow a mystic fire-kindling to develop. But with concentration. This is Her teaching method.

Soon enough the steps, the breaths, the forest trail, and my own determination converge at the lake. My

I have given up trying to understand why or how this relationship works the way it does. I left home in search of it when not yet 20. It took most of my life to find out that I always knew Her.

normal psychological rigidity has been loosened by now. I stop. I wear Her color as a red hat. And She is there!

She is stunning in morning light! This tiny circular lake is a primal self-discovery seat where practices are done. Her water holds a consciousness of deep calm. This is how I know She is here: I am calmed.

This lake has a view with a center. Upon arrival I stand on a slight crest, above Her volcanic flue outline. She welcomes me with a watery smile that tingles in my heart. She is beauty personified with some of the highest mountains in the world as Her white sentinels behind. White mountains, blue sky, and green forest are what She wears today. I am blessed. I descend stone steps from antiquity, and by Her side splash water on my face. Her touch is cool and refreshing and I am happy. We are together again in Her lake aspect.

As nature She has many aspects. Her various womanhood parallels are for me most living in my experience of nature. I have given up trying to

understand why or how this relationship works the way it does. I left home in search of it when not yet 20. It took most of my life to find out that I always knew Her, everyone has always known Her, but this knowing is too simple for a complex and abstracted modernity. But through simple but mystic means with breath, sound, and image, in nature experience and as womanhood, She is always near and has always been near! All this is still living at the village level in Himalayan culture as daily symbols and experience.

In this symbolism, the mystic experience is present from each direction. From womanhood we can have nature experience, and from nature experience we can find a living, divine, mystic womanhood. In terms of a mystic self-conception, however, we start in nature.

GARY MILLAR began his spiritual journey in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and now lives in view of Annapurna in western Nepal.

Image: suju-foto / Pixabay



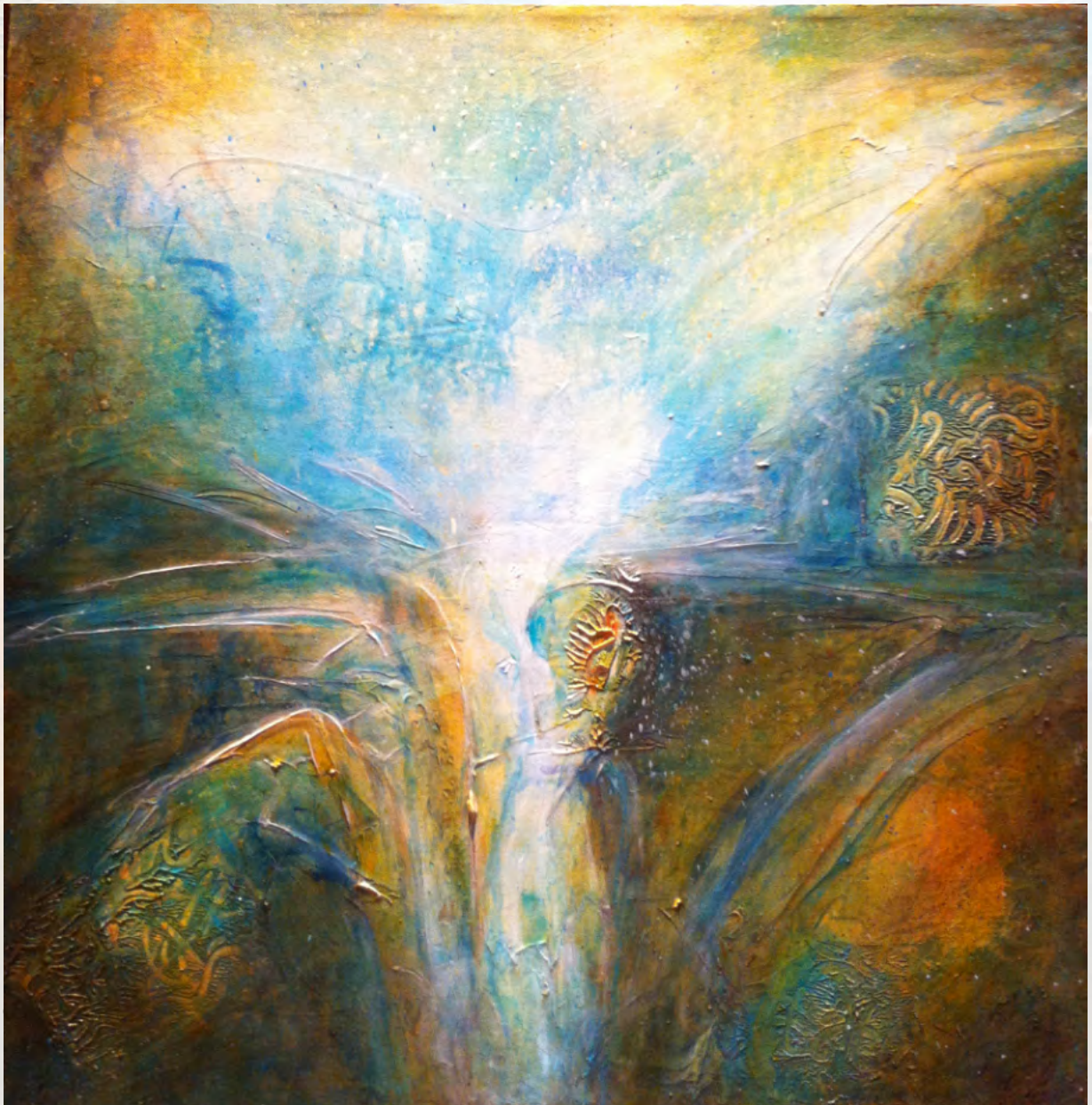


Savitri: The Mighty Mother

SRI AUROBINDO

Above the stretch and blaze of cosmic Sight,
Above the silence of the wordless Thought,
Formless creator of immortal forms,
Nameless, investitured with the name divine,
Transcending Time's hours, transcending Timelessness,
The Mighty Mother sits in lucent calm

Image both pages: Painting by Sabra Low



And holds the eternal Child upon her knees
Attending the day when he shall speak to Fate.
There is the image of our future's hope;
There is the sun for which all darkness waits,
There is the imperishable harmony;
The world's contradictions climb to her and are one:
There is the Truth of which the world's truths are shreds,
The Light of which the world's ignorance is the shade
Till Truth draws back the shade that it has cast,
The Love our hearts call down to heal all strife,
The Bliss for which the world's derelict sorrows yearn:
Thence comes the glory sometimes seen on earth,
The visits of Godhead to the human soul,
The Beauty and the dream on Nature's face.
There the perfection born from eternity
Calls to it the perfection born in Time,
The truth of God surprising human life,
The image of God overtaking finite shapes.
There in a world of everlasting Light,
In the realms of the immortal Supermind
Truth who hides here her head in mystery,
Her riddle deemed by reason impossible
In the stark structure of material form,
Unenigmaed lives, unmasked her face and there
Is Nature and the common law of things.
There in a body made of spirit stuff,
The hearth-stone of the everliving Fire,
Action translates the movements of the soul,
Thought steps infallible and absolute
And life is a continual worship's rite,
A sacrifice of rapture to the One.

—Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, *Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo*,
vol. 33–34, pp. 661–662



A Tribute to Jyotipriya

BAHMAN A. K. SHIRAZI

SRI AUROBINDO'S TEACHINGS and yoga were initially introduced to the United States primarily through the works of three prominent teachers: Frederic Spiegelberg, Haridas Chaudhuri, and Judith Tyberg. In 1951 Spiegelberg, a German-born professor of Indian civilization and a pioneer in comparative religious studies at Stanford University, invited Haridas Chaudhuri and Judith Tyberg to join him as faculty of the newly founded American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. Chaudhuri was an Integral Yogi and professor of philosophy from Bengal, while Tyberg was a former teacher and dean of studies at Theosophical University in Southern California who had traveled to India to study at Benaras Hindu University. Spiegelberg also invited others to join the faculty, including Alan Watts, the British philosopher and comparative theologian.

The Academy was a major contributor to the San Francisco cultural renaissance of the 1950s, as many well-known poets, writers, and artists of the time attended the Academy's public colloquia to learn about Asian cultures and spiritual traditions.

This brief essay is a tribute to Dr. Judith Tyberg (1902–1980), a unique and distinguished teacher whose life was dedicated to Integral Yoga after meeting Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the late 1940s. In this tribute I will highlight some of the main events and



Jyotipriya at the East-West Cultural Center in her later years. Image: Sri Aurobindo Center LA

turning points in her life, as well as her unique qualities as a spiritual teacher, to honor her pioneering spirit and outstanding accomplishments. Much of this essay reflects the extensive work of Dr. Tyberg's biographer, Mandakini (Madeleine Lucien-Brun).



Jyotipriya taught at elementary and high school levels at the Raja Yoga School in Point Loma between 1922 and 1940, and became assistant principal of the school from 1932 to 1935. Image: Label Curatorial

Dr. Tyberg first heard about Sri Aurobindo while in India in 1947 and soon afterwards had her first darshan with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. After returning to the U.S. in 1950, she spent the last three decades of her life in the service of the Divine through the East-West Cultural Center (EWCC), which she founded in 1953, teaching classes in various languages, the arts, culture, Indian spiritual traditions, comparative religious studies, and Integral Yoga. Dr. Tyberg, who was given the name Jyotipriya (Lover of Divine Light) by Sri Aurobindo, stands out in this group of visionaries as the first American woman to bring Sri Aurobindo's teachings to the U.S. and to establish one of the first Sri Aurobindo centers in America.¹

From the beginning, Jyotipriya's life was immersed in a spiritual atmosphere. Her parents were Theosophists of Canadian and Danish descent² who had moved to a newly founded spiritual community in Point Loma,

California, the newly founded world headquarters of the Theosophical Society. According to the East-West Cultural Center's website, "All throughout the nine months of Jyotipriya's gestation in the womb, her mother chanted a Vedic hymn to the newly embodied soul. At an early age, Jyotipriya could recite sections of the Gita by heart."³

Jyotipriya's upbringing had many parallels to that which the Mother envisaged as ideal for childhood education. The children grew largely apart from their parents, among young companions from all parts of the globe. They learned self-discipline, teamwork, and responsibility for their own unfoldment, and their days were filled with a host of intellectual, dramatic, and fine arts activities.⁴

The Theosophical settlement in Point Loma was known as Lomaland, a utopian community dedicated to the philosophical and humanitarian goals of Theosophy.

Dr. Tyberg, who was given the name Jyotipriya (Lover of Divine Light) by Sri Aurobindo, stands out as the first American woman to bring Sri Aurobindo's teachings to the U.S.



Jyotipriya as a young woman. Image: Label Curatorial

It initially housed Theosophical Society headquarters and also had a school, a cultural center, and residential facilities. In 1920, Jyotipriya began her studies at Theosophical University, where she received her bachelor's degree in mathematics and languages, and a master's degree in religion and philosophy. She also taught at elementary and high school levels at the Raja Yoga School in Point Loma between 1922 and 1940, and became assistant principal of the school from 1932 to 1935. From 1935 to 1945 she served as dean of studies at Theosophical University, where she received her doctorate degree in Sanskrit studies in 1944.

Between 1929 and 1943 Jyotipriya began studying Sanskrit and Hindu literature with a teacher at the Theosophical Society at Point Loma and contributed articles and book reviews to *The Theosophical Forum*. In 1940 she became head of the Sanskrit and Oriental Division of the Theosophical University and published the first edition of her book, *Sanskrit Keys to the Wisdom Religion*. A special pioneering feature of this book was that the ancient Devanagari script was printed by Linotype for the first time. Jyotipriya was invited to various Theosophical centers in Europe in 1935 and 1936, and in 1940 she became a member of the American Oriental Society.

Dr. Tyberg left the Theosophical Society in 1946 and started a new adventure, living independently of any organization. During this period she also started a Sanskrit center and bookstore where she taught Indian philosophy, religion, languages, and culture. She developed a large network of association with other Orientalists, lectured at colleges, churches, and cultural organizations, and conducted study circles.

TRAVEL TO INDIA

In 1946 Jyotipriya attended a lecture sponsored by the University of Southern California and given by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, vice chancellor of Benares Hindu University (later the second president of India from 1962 to 1967). In January 1947 she wrote a letter to the president of Benares Hindu University seeking admission to pursue advanced studies in Hindu religion and philosophy; she traveled to India in June 1947 as a distinguished scholar. There she met a young philosophy lecturer by the name of Arabinda Basu, who introduced her to the works of Sri Aurobindo. Basu gave her a typescript of the not-yet-published *Secret of the Veda*, which provided her the answers to the questions

Jyoti walked away wondering what had happened to her. In the days to come, she was to recognize in the Mother “a Goddess friend of old” and a deep love for the Mother filled her heart.

she had been seeking all her life. Soon Jyotipriya wrote a letter to Sri Aurobindo describing her lifelong quest for truth and asked for his permission to visit the Ashram. According to Mandakini’s articles originally published in *Mother India* and reprinted as the East-West Cultural Center’s tribute to Jyotipriya:

... after two days, a strange thing happened—Jyotipriya began to smell jasmine flowers everywhere she went, though there were none anywhere to be seen. And even more curious, the fragrance would grow more intense whenever Arabinda Basu would speak about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. With her logic at a fail, Jyoti, at last, cycled over to ask Basu if there could be some possible explanation for such a curious phenomenon. His reply: “You’ve contacted Sri Aurobindo, haven’t you? Well, now he has contacted you. Soon you’ll be receiving a letter.” And in the correspondence that did soon follow, Jyotipriya was informed that she was welcome to visit the Ashram at any time.⁵

During the darshan on November 24, 1947, Jyotipriya had a profound experience of being “stretched out to infinity” while waiting in queue to pay respects to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother:

I just felt God, a marvelous feeling of expansion. I was out of myself, it was so beautiful, it was with me for days. He did something to me, because all down my spine there was this electric current and whirling movement. He made me so aware of the soul within me. Even though I had all these aspirations which were in the soul, I became aware of something so different that was alive in me. I really knew what was my soul.^{6 7}

Jyotipriya also had an equally profound experience when the Mother touched her head. She felt as if “electric forces” went right through her being. Mother’s hands were “sizzling.” Jyoti walked away wondering

what had happened to her. In the days to come, she was to recognize in the Mother “a Goddess friend of old” and a deep love for the Mother filled her heart. The affection was mutual.⁸

Eventually Jyotipriya went on to stay at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for a few months in 1949, which she felt was her spiritual home and where she established close relationships with well-known ashramites. During this time, she developed a close relationship with the Mother. In her first private meeting with the Mother, she expressed her longing to devote her life to beauty and truth. The Mother reassured her that she had chosen to serve the Divine long ago, and that Sri Aurobindo and she had anticipated her arrival for a long time. It was at this time that Dr. Tyberg requested to be given a spiritual name, and Sri Aurobindo chose for her the name Jyotipriya.

RETURN TO THE U.S.

Jyotipriya finished her studies at Benares Hindu University with highest honors in 1949 and returned to the United States in March 1950 after a last darshan on February 21. Upon returning to California, she kept a busy schedule giving lectures in Southern California and in the San Francisco Bay Area as well. Once she wrote in a letter to Nolini Kanta Gupta and said that her schedule was packed beyond her control. “[I am] trying to plan some kind of schedule, but evidently something or somebody else is also planning just a little bit ahead of me, so I just take the calls for lectures as they come in It seems I am destined to do public work for the Divine.”⁹ During her talks she would have energetic experiences that guided her and focused her while feeling the atmosphere of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the presence of the Mother.

Soon after arriving in the United States, Jyotipriya became professor of Indian religion and philosophy at the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco.¹⁰ The Academy was initially funded by Louis Gainsborough, a San Francisco businessman who had traveled around the world and realized that Americans had a scanty knowledge of Asian cultures and spiritual

In 1953 in Los Angeles, Jyotipriya established the East-West Cultural Center, which became a Sri Aurobindo center and has been in operation to the present day.

traditions. He commissioned Frederic Spiegelberg to recruit the faculty for the newly founded Academy. Spiegelberg, in turn, invited Jyotipriya, whom he had met at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry the previous year. Unfortunately the Academy soon ran into financial difficulties and after teaching there for two years, Jyotipriya returned to Los Angeles and established the East-West Cultural Center (EWCC) in 1953 in the home of a friend.

On Thanksgiving Day 1955, which coincided that year with Sri Aurobindo's Siddhi Day, Jyotipriya's devoted students presented her with a substantial donation that was used towards the purchase of a property for EWCC. The Center has been in operation to the present day, after changing several locations, and became one of the Sri Aurobindo centers in California in 1977.

According to Mike Ashcraft, Jyotipriya spent the last 28 years of her life

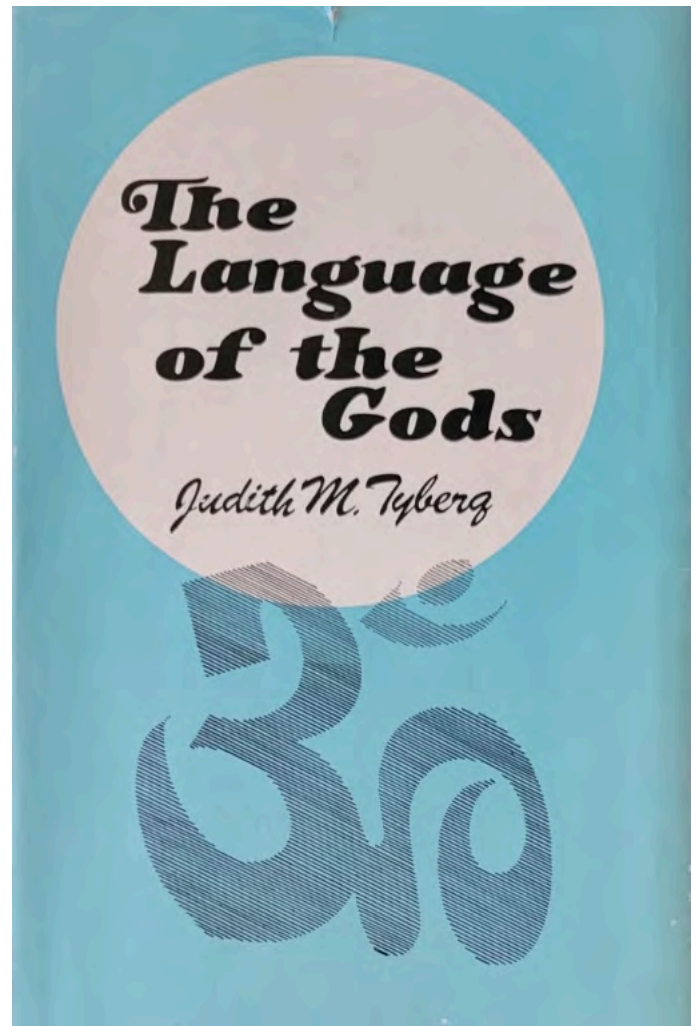
teaching gifted children, holding regular programs for the public about India and especially Sri Aurobindo's thought, and providing all manner of spiritual celebrities from around the world a place to lecture and/or perform. The East-West Cultural Center became a node for a vast, international network of people who brought Asia to the West before the heyday of the 1960s.¹¹

Among the Indian teachers who were guests at EWCC were the likes of Swamis Muktananda, Satchidananda, and Vishnudevananda, who often directed their Western students to Jyotipriya.

Jyotipriya faced many challenges managing EWCC. These included financial difficulties of running a spiritual organization with limited resources in an expensive area such as Los Angeles. In 1960 she wrote to the Mother: "It is hard for most people in India to

understand the costs involved in living here in America. The standards for a Center of Educational Work are very high and exacting. We must have the latest improvements in gas, electric fixtures, etc., etc., or we lose our licenses to carry on."¹² Other challenges included disseminating spiritual teachings to a population with little background in Asian culture and religions, and sometimes having to deal with members of the public who were not sincere in their spiritual quest or not quite ready for the high level of teachings that she offered. Jyotipriya was able to handle all challenges with courage, joyfully and tirelessly.

Jyotipriya kept "cheerfully going on" right up till the end—conducting satsangs, accepting a new professorship, and initiating students into Sanskrit's "wisdom-treasury" until the final days of her life. For indeed, it was in the joy of teaching that she would transcend all



The Language of the Gods, published in 1970, was the culmination of Jyotipriya's 45 years of Sanskrit teaching.

Jyotipriya spent the last 28 years of her life teaching gifted children, holding regular programs for the public about Sri Aurobindo's thought, and providing all manner of spiritual celebrities from around the world a place to lecture and/or perform.

pain. *The Language of the Gods*, published in 1970, was the culmination of her earlier publications on Sanskrit and her 45 years of Sanskrit teaching.¹³

In the 1970s, Jyotipriya was also quite active outside of EWCC, teaching courses on Sanskrit, philosophy, literature, Indian religion, and Sri Aurobindo's thought at the College of Oriental Studies in Los Angeles, where she also served as dean of the Undergraduate School. She was also a faculty member at the Los Angeles branch of Goddard College.

Mike Ashcraft observed the following about Jyotipriya's role of leadership as a woman besides being a teacher of Sanskrit which, prior to her time, had been a male-dominated area of scholarship:

Although Judith Tyberg resembled other western women spiritual leaders of her time, she made a marked contribution to her era. The counterculture revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which so transformed the landscape of western cultures, relied heavily on appropriation of Asian texts, ideas, and rituals. The revolution integrated disparate elements to form a major alternative worldview to that which had been generally accepted in the west. Before the hippies, before the rise of recreational drug use, before all these hallmarks of that moment in western history, Tyberg was steadily working away at her Los Angeles Center, making others aware of the rich heritage that South Asia had bequeathed to the world. Once the cultural revolution was in full swing, her East-West Center was a landmark on that revolution's map. While her personal ethic did not approve of the excesses of the counterculture, Judith Tyberg stayed at her post until her death, providing instruction and inspiration to anyone who cared to listen.

Jyotipriya's special relationship with the Mother allowed her to be a selfless servant of the Divine Mother. Perhaps one of the most important moments of her life

came about when she was able to travel back to Pondicherry, her spiritual home, in 1972, and have her final physical darshan with the Mother before the Mother left her body the following year. Eight years later in Los Angeles, Jyotipriya left her body on October 3, 1980, after 78 years of a life saturated with spirit from birth. She lived an exemplary life as a spiritual teacher and leader, and as an American pioneer on the path of Integral Yoga.

Notes

1. It should be noted here that Dr. Judith Tyberg was not the first American woman to study the teachings of Sri Aurobindo. Margaret Woodrow Wilson [1886–1944], the daughter of the U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, discovered Sri Aurobindo's writings at the New York public library in the 1930s, and in 1938 joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, where she stayed for the rest of her life.
2. Mike Ashcraft. *World Religions and Spirituality Project*. <https://wrldrels.org/2021/06/14/judith-tyberg/>
3. Mandakini, "Jyotipriya—A Tribute." <https://sriurobindocenterla.wordpress.com/jyoti/>
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. It is remarkable that Frederic Spiegelberg, who met Jyotipriya at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, also had a similar experience while standing in queue during a darshan in 1949. In a letter I discovered in the Spiegelberg archives, he described his experience as being seen through his whole being by Sri Aurobindo, and also receiving a miraculous healing experience that ended recurring nightmares he'd had throughout his life before that moment.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *The American Academy of Asian Studies*. <http://www.mysterium.com/aaas.html>
11. Mike Ashcraft.
12. Mandakini, "Jyotipriya—A Tribute."
13. Ibid.

BAHMAN A. K. SHIRAZI is a member of the *Collaboration* editorial team.



Russian artist Nicholas Roerich, influenced by Eastern philosophy and Russian symbolism, painted "The Mother of the World" in 1937. Image: Public domain

Divine Presence

MARTHA ORTON

*M*other of many forms and names
Transcendent, universal, beyond,
truly Mother to us, creator,
nurturer and solace of our lives,
constant maternal guide and hope,
unfolding multifloral petals
of sublime beauty beyond imagining
with fullness of love beyond measure,
prompting, driving us to evolve,
flame and fire of our hearts bliss,
fire and flame of our hearts' seeking,
be with us always,
fulfill our small constricted lives,
through your vast expansive consciousness,
your limitless vision and power,
Truth embodied, Reality known,
Eternal.



Dakshina:

A Life of Dedicated Service

Editor's note: After a life of dedicated service offered to the Divine, Dakshina Vanzetti, head of Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham (SASP) in Lodi, California, passed away on February 17, 2022, after several months of illness. Dakshina was the radiant heart of SASP, a residential ashram for the practice of Integral Yoga, and her luminous spirit drew aspirants from around the world to its charged atmosphere. More than a hundred friends, relatives, and well-wishers attended a memorial service held on April 2, 2022, to share fond memories and celebrate Dakshina's exceptional life. Prapanna Smith delivered the following eulogy.

PRAPANNA SMITH

WHEN FACED WITH two monumental decisions, the first in 1992 and the second in 1995, Dakshina chose the truth. As a consequence, many who knew her from then on watched as she underwent a substantial transformation into the remarkable person we saw her become. Indeed, Dakshina took up her share of the burden of life and offers to us all an admirable case study in what it means to be a practitioner of Integral Yoga—as we shall soon see.

THE EARLY DAYS

Born to an old Boston family on July 26, 1957, Dakshina's birth name was Tawny Louise Garfield. She was a direct descendant of President James Garfield, and one of her great grandmothers was Native American. She started ballet as a young girl at seven or eight years of age; dancing would become for her a lifelong love.

When Dakshina was about 18, she married Ricardo Vanzetti. He introduced her to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, for which she was always grateful; and although they went their separate ways, they remained legally married until he passed away a few years later. She retained his last name, Vanzetti, for the rest of her life.

On June 21, 1977, just short of age 20, Dakshina joined the Atmaniketan Ashram, which those of us from that period refer to as "the old ashram." She lived in its German and India



Dakshina in 1975. Image: Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham (SASP)

branches for a time, during which she performed a great deal of skilled physical work including roof repair, carpentry, masonry, gardening, and harvesting. Friends found her to be always supportive, sweet, multitasked, hard-working, strong in devotion, and kind.

She also had a strong aesthetic sense. In fact, she learned to chant, perfecting her abilities with her dear spiritual sister Linda Schertzer, with whom Dakshina spent hours singing Sanskrit hymns and *slokas* [couplets of Sanskrit verse]. Eventually Dakshina became a student of Karunamayee of the Delhi, India, branch of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, who was her mentor in music and chanting.

VIGNETTES ABOUT DAKSHINA

Many colorful characters showed up in the U.S. branch of the Atmaniketan Ashram in Pomona, California, when I was a member. But if there was one person who personified them all, it was Ananta, also known as Frederick Bushnell, the Boston Brahmin whose father was the attorney general for the state of Massachusetts from 1941 to 1945.

One day in 1993, I found Ananta behind the men's house with a huge, half-full bottle of wine. I asked him to hand it over. He refused.

"Well then," I told him, "I have no choice but to tell Dakshina."

So I went and got Dakshina.

"Ananta, you know you can't be drinking alcohol in the ashram!" Dakshina said gently, and asked him to give her the bottle. He did—but it was empty. He had pounded that bottle down in the few minutes it took for me to find Dakshina! It's worth noting that she displayed no anger in the moment, patiently chiding him for his behavior.

Many of you may know that Dakshina was lover of fictional literature, historical novels, and especially fantasy literature. She enjoyed reading about characters overcoming their challenges. Dakshina introduced fellow ashramites Vishnu Eschner and me to the work of Guy Gavriel Kay and we all read *The Fionavar Tapestry*. I also recall seeing a book of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series in the SASP dining hall a few years ago.

Another interesting thing to share is that in that time and even now at SASP, habitual viewing of TV was discouraged. But Dakshina loved to watch figure skating, ice dancing, and gymnastics during the



Dakshina (top) doing karma yoga, 1979. Image: SASP

Olympics and other national and international competitions.

When she and I watched *Saturday Night Live* during the 1992 presidential election, Dana Carvey played President George Bush in mock *SNL* debates. Dakshina roared with laughter! That was the first time I had ever seen her laugh with such exuberance, and it felt to me that her laughter was a release—the first indication of a profound change she would undergo in the decades to follow.

DAKSHINA'S CHANGE OVER TIME

In the early days, Dakshina had always been reserved in her demeanor and aloof in her dealing with others.

Dakshina was a tireless doer of Mother's works. Hers was a life of karma yoga. She was always on the go—practically, creatively, and spiritually.

Exchanging hugs with her just wasn't part of the program. She would keep a distance, fold her palms in front of her, and simply say with her sweet smile, "Namaste." It seemed as if she were in a shell, closed off for her own protection. Eventually she would break free from that shell, blossoming into the person we all knew and loved; and later, hugs with Dakshina happened all the time, as many of you know. In recent years, whenever I came to the ashram for meditation and to visit with her, we exchanged hugs.

Everyone who knew Dakshina prior to 1995 is in full agreement that she changed a great deal in subsequent years. During a recent Zoom conference, Regina Ulrich, Linda, Vishnu, and I—four of her oldest friends—shared our memories of Dakshina. Regina said that she has always felt that Dakshina "went through the fire and was tempered by it." Regina and Linda both said that Dakshina was someone they could lean on. She was to them a hero, just as Mother wants us all to become.

Another interesting fact is that Dakshina wasn't accustomed to confiding with others the details of her inner life. I think it was because she chose to live by the words of the Mother, who said that it isn't advisable to talk about one's spiritual experiences with others. What Dakshina did sometimes say, though, was that she tried to come into an inner contact with Mother and seek to know what Mother wanted her to do. And Dakshina's heroism was evident by the fact that she was a tireless doer of Mother's works. Hers was a life of karma yoga. She was always on the go—practically, creatively, and spiritually. It seems as if her entire adult life was an offering to Mother. And the fact that she made great strides of progress in her own sadhana [spiritual practice] is evident, given everything she touched and did, especially in the decades following the early nineties.

Finally, it is a testament to Dakshina's character that she did not seek to become a guru in her own right, as someone else might have done.

IMPORTANT INFLUENCES

There are two important contemporary influencers in Dakshina's life we should mention. The first is Karunamayee, who was for many years Dakshina's

devotional singing mentor. Karunamayee was an educator, performing artist, composer, and guide. She radiated a profound love of the Divine that came through in her personal interactions with others, and especially in her life as a devotional singer. Dakshina sat for many hours with Karunamayee learning new chants and perfecting her own voice. Whenever Karunamayee came to the U.S., Dakshina helped organize her itinerary and would take classes with her. Recordings of some of those sessions still exist today. Much of Dakshina's creative expression through music and song was due to Karunamayee's influence and teaching.

Next, it's impossible to speak about Dakshina's life without acknowledging the important influence and example of Sri Ramkrishna Das, affectionately known to us as "Babaji" and "Babaji Maharaj."

Before coming to Pondicherry [now Puducherry], India, to spend the remainder of his life in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Babaji had passed some 16 years in an ashram in the city of Ayodhya, India. He had become the heir apparent to his guru and was slated to become the abbot of the ashram and guru to many devotees and disciples. Amazingly, he walked away from all that prestige and fame, telling everyone there that he would become a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and practice sadhana in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. I remember when I first met him in 1991. He seemed like a child in the body of an old man. For more than five decades, from 1945 until his passing in 1998, Babaji worked in the ashram dining hall serving food and cleaning dishes and utensils.

One thing Babaji said repeatedly to everyone that came to him was that "only Mother is the guru." He would then point to the many ashram calendar pictures of Mother that covered every square foot of the walls in his small room. In his home state of Orissa [now Odisha], there are hundreds of integral schools, dozens of relic centers, and many devotees of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, all because of Babaji's influence and example.

For him, the practice of *nama japa*, the repetition of the name of the Mother, was a key feature of his sadhana, and he instructed everyone to do the same. He

told those who came to him to always remember the Mother and call to her, by repeating, “Ma, Ma, Ma.” He wrote a little booklet about it entitled *Nama Japa in the Yoga of Transformation*.¹ Govinda Rytlewski, a member of SASP, told me that Dakshina took Babaji’s instructions to heart, with nama japa being an essential part of her sadhana for many years. In one of the collections of questions and answers, Mother said, “In all pursuits, intellectual or active, your one motto should be, ‘Remember and Offer.’”² According to Babaji, repetition of Mother’s name was a sure way to do so.

In the challenging years from 1992 to 1995, Dakshina, Vishnu, and I were in regular contact with Babaji. It went like this: From California, we would write him a message in the evening and fax it to Regina in Pondicherry. Regina would take it and read it to Babaji, who would dictate a message. The next morning, we would wake up to find Regina’s fax with his reply.

We brought all matters of importance to Babaji’s attention, and received from him many beautiful, inspiring messages. In nearly every communication he would tell us to remember the Mother, repeat her name, offer everything to her, and everything would be all right. His support was decisive for us all. He always encouraged us to carry on through the difficulties we faced during those years. The importance of his influence and guidance in our lives can’t be understated. However, it is especially important to acknowledge and call attention to the fact that in Dakshina’s life, he was profoundly instrumental.

MONUMENTAL CHALLENGES

Running the Auromère import business of the old ashram in Pomona was a major challenge. When I first came in 1987, it was basically a small enterprise with a garage full of books and small storage sheds in the back yard containing massage oils, incense, soap, and toothpaste. Dakshina had to get credit cards under her own name and build up her personal credit so that she could charge containers of toothpaste that cost \$50,000. Often we didn’t know how to pay for the products imported from India, but somehow it always worked out.

For some time, the American branch of the old ashram had two bases in California, one in Pomona in the south and one in Lodi in the north. Maintaining them represented a significant undertaking. Dakshina, Vishnu, and I regularly drove hundreds of miles back and forth between the two cities to care for the Lodi property, all the while running the Auromère business

Dakshina at the ashram in Pomona in 1992. Image: SASP



There were the responsibilities of managing the ashram, dealing with the many visitors who came by, paying the bills, and keeping it all afloat. And of course, the practice of sadhana, which brings numerous challenges.

out of Pomona. Then there were the responsibilities of managing the ashram, dealing with the many visitors who came by, paying the bills, and keeping it all afloat. And of course, there was the practice of sadhana, which, as you may know, brings numerous challenges arising from the attempt to transform human nature.

Regarding this, I have to mention that Vishnu and I often broke the ashram rule of “no politics.” We would argue, often in heated passion, with him being a practical libertarian and me a progressive, resulting in Dakshina sweetly admonishing us many times to stop. To this day, however, though Vishnu and I disagree on much, we both regard each other as true spiritual brothers. The time we spent together with Dakshina in those years formed a bond among the three of us that I’m sure will last many lifetimes. And who knows, maybe next time he will be the liberal and I the conservative! What I mean to say is that when it comes to spiritual relations, we have to strive to take a higher view of things. And despite Dakshina’s having to intervene when we argued, she didn’t seem to hold it against us. Simply said, her patience was nothing short of remarkable.

A FATEFUL CHOICE

Dakshina’s first major choice was made in 1992, when she and others reaffirmed their long-standing devotion and commitment to Mother and the work here in the USA. At a time when many future possibilities were vying for manifestation, Dakshina took the lead in irrevocably securing for Mother’s work the properties and business owned by the Atmaniketan Ashram. The moment had come for the old to be dissolved and for something new to be born.

This was achieved with the help of the East-West Cultural Center (EWCC) in Los Angeles, which served as midwife to the birth of the Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham in Lodi, where Dakshina remained until the end of her life.

At that juncture Dakshina, Regina, Linda, and Vishnu legally dissolved the old ashram by entering into a merger agreement with the EWCC that lasted until the next year, when Dakshina, Vishnu, and I incorporated SASP. Initially, the new ashram was called Jyoti Ashram, in honor of Jyotipriya, founder of EWCC. Later Babaji instructed us to change the name to Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham, because he said that if there was to be an ashram in America dedicated to the work of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, it must have “Sri Aurobindo” in its name.

After the new ashram had secured its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status from the IRS, EWCC transferred the Pomona and Lodi properties and the Auromere business to it. In so doing, EWCC performed a great service in helping to close one door to the past and open up another door to the future. That set the stage for all that Dakshina subsequently achieved, with the help of many others including Vishnu, who worked with her for 19 years—and, most importantly, by the grace of the Divine Mother.

What followed was, indeed, truly inspiring! But first, Dakshina had to make a second choice.

ANOTHER FATEFUL CHOICE

Right up until 1995, there was a part of Dakshina that longed to be in India, join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, and live out her life there with the daily love and companionship of two of her longest and dearest spiritual sisters, Regina and Linda. The level of responsibility she had here in the U.S. was tremendous, almost unbearable, and sometimes seemingly impossible to fulfill. She had taken upon herself the caring for SASP members, its business and grounds, and so much more. But she steadfastly carried on, for decades! All told, she passed nearly 44 years dedicating her life to Mother’s work in ashram settings. We now know that a specific moment in 1995 was important to Dakshina because in 1999, shortly after Babaji passed away, she wrote about it and described how she had called Regina to ask Babaji if she could come to stay in India.

Now, in all his communications to us, Babaji dictated his replies in his native tongue, Oriya, using a translator who dictated his words to Regina in English. Babaji would always sign at the bottom, “Your well-wisher, Ramkrishna Das.”

However, on this occasion he signed differently, and he dictated the message to Dakshina in English. I think he wanted to make sure that what he said to her did not get diluted or enhanced in any way by translators (which happened a lot, actually).

Here is that message, which has never before been made public. English was not Babaji’s native language, so bear that in mind as you read this as it is, word for word, exactly as he dictated it to Regina on May 13, 1995.

You stay in ashram. Rely fully on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. If you rely on the Mother, Mother always remain with you and help you. Mother give all strength, you can do everything and business cannot stop. Afterwards your ashram going on nicely. Other persons will come, those who offer everything to Mother. But now you keep courage, rely on the Mother, be happy and remain in the ashram. All will be alright.

You can be sure, America [meaning your ashram] become very good center, you lead this center. You keep faith and remain happy. Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s ideal is not limited to India only, spread everywhere. Your America center sure become much developed. In America many centers will come, but this center will lead all the others, but it will take time. For all Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s special centers at first come many kinds of obstacles, but afterwards obstacles become help.

With love from Babaji, your true well-wisher, who knows the Truth!

Later, Regina added this comment: “Babaji did not usually sign his numerous letters in this way. Usually he signed, ‘Your well-wisher, Ramkrishna Das.’ When he dictated his signature in the above letter, I got goosebumps! After dictating the letter, Babaji named some of the special centers which have gone or are going through seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Foremost

among them, of course, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram [in Pondicherry, India].”

A PRESCIENT MESSAGE

The importance of Babaji’s message cannot be understated, because it represents a defining moment in which Dakshina chose the truth.

Babaji’s note to Dakshina was prescient, for he predicted what was to become of the ashram in Lodi and saw that sincere people would come there and offer their lives in service to the Divine. He essentially gave Dakshina an *adesh*, a spiritual command, for her to follow and fulfill.

And, finally, it is highly significant that he also affirmed that he knew the truth of the matter. According to Regina, this was the only time in all the many messages he conveyed through her that he had said that. And so the truth that Dakshina chose was the one personally conveyed to her directly by Babaji.

At the time, what he said seemed far, far away, and yet Dakshina steadfastly gave her life in service to make it so. And let’s be honest. Vishnu and I both had our own doubts; we even talked about it. As it turned out, Dakshina lived at SASP longer than all of us.

As time passed by, it turned out Babaji was correct. The life of SASP continues, and many new chapters in its story are yet to be written.

I daresay that had Babaji given Dakshina any other answer, the history of Integral Yoga in the USA would have been very different. Dakshina might have lived her life out in Pondicherry. We all might not be here together to celebrate her life. Many of you here might have never known her. No doubt she would have done other wonderful work in service to the Mother, but what she did here in Lodi over the following decades might not have happened at all.

So, what exactly did Dakshina do all those years? Let’s classify the proofs of her achievements into three categories: The practical, the creative, and the spiritual.

PRACTICAL ACHIEVEMENTS

As an entrepreneur, Dakshina built the Auromère import business into a leading brand in the natural products industry, creating an entire line of Auromère-branded products.

In her work with the wider Integral Yoga community, Dakshina served on the board of the Foundation for World Education; contributed writing to *Collaboration*

Dakshina had deep appreciation for beauty in the physical, and she manifested that beauty in so much that she did.

journal; and served on the Continuity Team for the All USA Meeting (AUM), an annual Integral Yoga conference. She also hosted activities for three large AUMs (in 1998, 2011, and 2016) at the ashram in Lodi, with many people attending, including many of you here today. Then there was the opening up of that ashram for monthly collective yoga retreats, weekend workshops, weekly study groups, personal retreats, and so much more.

The installation of Sri Aurobindo's relics here at SASP was highly significant for the American Integral Yoga community, and was attended by nearly 150 people. It was an especially defining moment and honor for Dakshina, who personally received the relics from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in India and brought them here to Lodi. Many of you have seen the picture of Dakshina

with the relics in Pondicherry. In it her sweet nature shines through.

The funding of the construction of Mother's House, a guest house in Pondicherry where Regina has been in charge all these years, was another important achievement. In fact, Mother's House can be seen as the Indian branch of SASP, even though it is governed by Auro-Seva, an Indian trust.

CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

Dakshina had deep appreciation for beauty in the physical, and she manifested that beauty in so much that she did. This is reflected in her chanting, her inspiring devotional paintings, her lifelong love of ballet, her design of the Sri Aurobindo symbol garden, the koi pond, the flower garden, the ashram grounds, and the house addition with the meditation room and reliquary. She personally composed all the beautiful, artistic packaging for the Auromère products.



In fact, the evidence of Dakshina's manifestation of beauty is found everywhere here at the Lodi ashram, in its business, and in her works within the wider community dedicated to Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

SPIRITUAL ACHIEVEMENTS: THE ESSENCE OF DAKSHINA'S LIFE STORY

Now we turn to Dakshina's spiritual achievements. These questions come to mind: What can be said about Dakshina's life that encompasses everything that she did? What are the one or two things she accomplished, spiritually speaking, that bring to light all her achievements? How can we understand and truly appreciate Dakshina's monumental, almost superhuman, devotion, faith, sincerity, and surrender?

I believe an answer is to be found in a passage from *Mother's Agenda* dated January 21, 1962.

The starting point for that conversation was aphorism number 70 from Sri Aurobindo: "Examine thyself without pity, then thou wilt be more charitable and pitiful to others,"³ and it is great advice, particularly in these times of strife and division in which we are now living. But let's focus on something Mother said that day that is so profound, so very significant, not only in relation to Dakshina's life achievements, but also for all of us on the path of the Integral Yoga. Here is the original text:

Do not try to be virtuous. See to what extent you are united, ONE with all that is antidivine. Take up your share of the burden: accept to be impure and false yourself, and in so doing you

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Dakshina working on the Ishwara/Shakti rebar symbol beneath the foundation of the new wing at SASP, 2006; chanting in the meditation room at SASP, 2018; and overseeing construction of the new wing at SASP, 2008. Images: SASP

Above right: Dakshina is given Sri Aurobindo's relics to carry from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry to SASP in California. Image: SASP



will be able to take up the Shadow and offer it. And insofar as you are able to take it and offer it, things will change.

Don't try to be among the pure. Accept to be with those who are in darkness and, in total love, offer it all. (*silence*)

From the moment this was seen and DONE, the full power came back—the great creative Power. (*silence*)

Most likely the experience could take place only because the time had come for all this to be offered up.

The point is not to perpetuate those things, but to offer them up.

Because the time has come to manifest this Power, which is a power of Love—of LOVE, not merely of identity—of Love, of perfect Love; for perfect Love alone can offer.⁴

A footnote on that page describes how Mother later changed the first paragraph:

When Satprem published extracts from this conversation in the *Ashram Bulletin* of April 1962, Mother had this passage modified (over his protests). Instead of "Do not try to be virtuous," she put "Do not try to seem to be virtuous," and

she added: "There is a drawback here. People never understand anything, or rather they understand everything in their own way. They would take this sentence as an encouragement to get into mischief, to misbehave, to entertain wrong feelings, and then proclaim, 'We are the Lord's favorites!'"⁵

MUD INTO GOLD

This reminds me of something I came to know about that happened here in the Lodi ashram many years ago. A man was here who experienced a dream-vision in which he found himself in a hole in the ground. He was using a small shovel to put thick, dark, sticky mud into a small pail. Then he climbed out of the hole and found Mother nearby in all her splendor and glory, sitting on a pure-white marble throne that was itself situated on a large, pure-white marble dais. When he placed the bucket of mud at her feet, Mother reached down and touched it, turning pail and mud, all of it, into gold! This happened two or three more times, and just before waking up, he heard a voice say to him while he was digging, "This is your pit. It is your responsibility. But never forget that beneath it lies the entire Earth."

This story illustrates an important aim of the Integral Yoga, which is that Mother wants everything from us. She wants us to offer our entire being and existence to the great transformation to which she and Sri Aurobindo call us. She wants the best of us as well as the worst of us. However, from a certain point of view, I believe this can also be said: It's not our gold that Mother wants from us; she wants our mud, which of course represents all the parts of our being and our entire lower human nature, down to the subconscious and even into the bedrock of existence in the inconscient.

The fact that that dream-vision was experienced here at the Lodi ashram seems significant. One can even imagine that if that man had been a little more conscious in his dream state, he might have looked up out of his pit and seen Dakshina doing her work in her own pit, but by the wheelbarrow load!

Again, from a certain point of view, Mother already has all the gold in the universe. How can we give to her that which is already hers? But this begs the question, what does the Mother want us to do with it? I believe she wants us to share her riches with one another. This is not at all to say that she wants us to preach, amass followers, or create a new religion—both Mother and Sri

Aurobindo were explicitly clear on that point: no new religions!

What they do want, however, is action. On the stairs leading up to Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's rooms in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, there is a frame with a large message written in Mother's hand. Some of you may have seen it. It says, "No words. Acts!" It was precisely action, not words, in which Dakshina was engaged through her own sadhana. What I mean to say is that Mother wants us to share the riches arising from our own progress with those of us who come to her and Sri Aurobindo, those of us who chose *them*, those of us who willingly and sincerely seek to fulfill their vision for the world and the spiritual evolution of consciousness.

The challenges and changes Dakshina went through were profound, and may well have facilitated her offering to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, as well as her sharing with all of us. There is one small hint of that sharing on the SASP website (<https://sasp.collaboration.org>). There you will find a statement summarizing the purpose of SASP that may indicate a profound change in Dakshina. When originally written, it said that the purpose of the ashram was "to maintain residence facilities for people who want to dedicate their lives to Mother and Sri Aurobindo by way of an exclusive, intensive practice of sadhana." That was all.

But at some point that sentence was revised and expanded. It now says this: "Although the primary purpose of the ashram is to maintain a residential community for intensive sadhana of the members, providing a place for the spiritual nourishment of fellow devotees, friends, and visitors has become equally important."

That was not there in the old ashram, which was very much a closed, cloistered environment—and it showed in the Dakshina I first met in 1987. But as I said, everyone who knew her in the early years saw her undergo over time a profound change. I have no spiritual authority to say so, but I do believe that for Dakshina, it was a psychic transformation.

So it seems to me that the essence of Dakshina's life is that she took up her share of the burden, and likely more than her fair share, and offered it all to Mother. In doing so, she not only lifted herself up; she also made possible an easier progress for others. That is, Dakshina, by and through her sadhana made it a little bit easier for others in the yoga to take up their own share of the burden. And she did so in as complete a love as is

humanly possible, not only for Mother, but also for Mother's children.

To conclude, let's turn to an important final proof of her spiritual achievements. And that proof is in everyone who is here today—and in many others who wanted to



Dakshina enjoys a restful moment on ashram grounds at SASP. Image: SASP

come today, but could not. That proof rests with those whose lives Dakshina touched in knowing and unknowing ways. Dakshina spread Mother's gold and riches arising out of her own spiritual progress to all of us. We each have some nuggets of Mother's gold given to us by Dakshina. Those gifts are worthy of her name, Dakshina, which means "Gift to God." For when Dakshina gave to us, it was her offering to the Divine.

THE GRACE OF THE DIVINE MOTHER

In closing, there is a passage from Sri Aurobindo about the grace of the Divine Mother, the conditions for its action, and its promise for all of us. It seems to me that Dakshina fulfilled those conditions, and that in her life the promise was fulfilled.

This is the third paragraph, of the third chapter in Sri Aurobindo's booklet, *The Mother*:

The more complete your faith, sincerity and surrender, the more will grace and protection be with you. And when the grace and protection of the Divine Mother are with you, what is there that can touch you or whom need you fear? A little of it even will carry you through all difficulties, obstacles and dangers; surrounded by its full presence you can go securely on your way because it is hers, careless of all menace, unaffected by any hostility however powerful, whether from this world or from worlds invisible. Its touch can turn difficulties into opportunities, failure into success, and weakness into unfaltering strength. For the grace of the Divine Mother is the sanction of the Supreme and now or tomorrow its effect is sure, a thing decreed, inevitable and irresistible.⁶

After the eulogy, a recording of Dakshina chanting the Sanskrit version of this prayer by the Mother was played:

Supreme Lord, eternal truth,
Let us obey Thee alone
And live according to truth.

Here is the link to listen to it: <https://sasp.collaboration.org/wp-content/uploads/Om-Paramo.mp3>

Notes

1. Ramkrishna Das, *Nama Japa in the Yoga of Transformation* (Pondicherry: AuroSeva Trust, 2007).
2. *The Mother, Questions and Answers, Collected Works of the Mother (CWM)*, vol. 3, p. 26.
3. *The Mother, Mother's Agenda*, vol. 3, January 21, 1962, p. 45.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother with Letters on the Mother, Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 32, pp. 12–13.

PRAPANNA SMITH lived and worked with Dakshina in ashram settings for five years.



Letters on the Mother

SRI AUROBINDO

INDIVIDUAL, UNIVERSAL, TRANSCENDENT

There is one divine Force which acts in the universe and in the individual and is also beyond the individual and the universe. The Mother stands for all three, but she is working here in the body to bring down something not yet expressed in this material world so as to transform life here—it is so that you should regard her as the Divine Shakti working here for that purpose. She is that in the body, but in her whole consciousness she is also identified with all the other aspects of the Divine Force.

June 16, 1933, p. 50

MAHESHWARI, MAHAKALI, MAHALAKSHMI, MAHASARASWATI

Yesterday night I saw Maheshwari above my head, Mahakali in my vital being and Mahalakshmi seated in my mind and heart. Each one radiated a different light from her body. Then I saw a few subtle powers descending into my being.

Maheshwari's natural place is in the higher consciousness above mind, for she is the wideness and largeness and wisdom of the Divine. Mahakali acts most naturally through the higher vital which is the instrument of force and power. Mahalakshmi acts through the heart — in your case at present she is acting through the mind also, though that is less usual — ordinarily it is Mahasaraswati.

August 31, 1933, p. 66

OPENING TO THE MOTHER AND THE INTEGRAL YOGA

I cannot understand whether I am doing Yoga. Can it be said that I am doing your Purna [Integral] Yoga?

Everyone who is turned to the Mother is doing my Yoga. It is a great mistake to suppose that one can “do” the Purna Yoga—i.e. carry out and fulfil all the sides of the Yoga by one's own effort. No human being can do that. What one has to do is to put oneself in the Mother's hands and open oneself to her by service, by bhakti, by aspiration; then the Mother by her light and force works in him so that the sadhana is done. It is a mistake also to have the ambition to be a big Purna Yogi or a supramental being and ask oneself how far have I got towards that. The right attitude is to be devoted and given to the Mother and to wish to be whatever she wants you to be. The rest is for the Mother to decide and do in you.

April 1929, pp. 151–152

DIFFICULTIES AND THE MOTHER'S HELP

Once one has entered the path of Yoga, there is only one thing to do, to fix oneself in the resolution to go to the end whatever happens, whatever difficulties arise. None really gets the fulfilment in Yoga by his own capacity—it is by the greater Force that stands over you that it will come—and it is the call, persistent through all vicissitudes, to that Force, by which the fulfilment will come. Even when you cannot aspire actively, keep yourself turned to the Mother for the help to come—that is the one thing to do always.

January 3, 1934, p. 294

All passages are from *The Mother with Letters on the Mother*,
The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, vol. 32



O Wild Cherry Tree

GARY MILLAR

Centered in the valley's forest crown
Upon a leaf-filled padded pregnant hill,
Sparkling as a gem above the ground
As a priestess calls a mystic thrill.

Upward send your flowers' fragrant prayer,
Your silent motion sent through nature's arms
Devotedly reveal what we can bear
Of holy nature's vast and psychic charms.

Take us to your offering to the sky,
Decorate our feelings as your sight,
Open in our heart your pink red sigh
That wraps around the mind in sky-blue light.

O wildest cherry tree of divine hue,
Bring Descent as in the sight of you.



Mother Ann Lee:

Manifestation of the Divine Feminine

Since the beginning of the earth, wherever and whenever there was the possibility of manifesting a ray of consciousness I was there.

—The Mother, *Agenda*, vol. 1, March 14, 1952

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.

—The Book of Revelations, Ch. 12, The Bible

SUSAN CURTISS

THROUGHOUT THE AGES the divine feminine has manifested in human form leading humankind toward the possibility of a fully realized connection with the Divine. The age-old longing of humanity to transform its nature and become one with God and thus find salvation found an astonishing expression in England's American colonies. Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, attempted to realize the Christ spirit and bring the spiritual knowledge of the early followers of Jesus into a living community wholly committed to this form of a perfected spiritual living. By doing so Mother Ann hoped to offer a secure, albeit demanding, path to God connection and salvation. The teachings of Jesus that she preached led to a form of close relationship with others that transcended the one based on marriage and family blood ties. This communal existence, based on brotherly love established in the society that grew

from the teachings, invited all aspects of earth-bound life into its vision. It was a physical, embodied, and spiritual life that was open to inner planes of consciousness and committed to an ongoing evolutionary revelation and transformation.

The story of Mother Ann's spiritual unfolding begins with a dynamic that governs much of her experience as she spreads her gospel. It's a cold December night in 1781 at a rural farmhouse in central Massachusetts. We find her preaching to local farmers and their families. Like other divinely inspired people through the ages, she is on a mission. Hers is to declare the reappearance of the Christ spirit in a woman. Mother Ann's calling is to bring this good news to the souls ready to hear it.

In addition to Mother Ann and her close followers, there are two groups gathered at the farmhouse: those sincerely interested in what she will preach and a group

of ruffians intent on seizing this middle-aged English-woman. The mob makes two attempts to capture her. Their first effort is thwarted by her followers. Mother Ann knows the ruffians will return, and she hides. They do come back, and search the house. When they find her they pull her out of hiding. They beat her male supporters severely, drag her down the stairs feet first, and throw her into a waiting sleigh. They take her three miles to a local tavern, where she is inspected to see if she is indeed a female. The drunken men subject her to all manner of abusive remarks and gestures, but eventually feel remorse. When assured they will not be prosecuted by the legal system for their behavior, they return her to the farmhouse. Mother Ann enters the farmhouse singing in joy at being returned to her followers and the ruffians ask her forgiveness. She forgives them and prays that they may be forgiven too by God.

The events of this evening are not unique in Mother Ann's life. She experienced persecution throughout her life both in Manchester, England, where she grew up, and in England's American colonies. Her preaching and charisma drew sincere seekers. However, her teaching

was radical for the times, and skeptics considered it threatening to the social fabric. Opponents routinely accused her of blasphemy, brought her before the courts, and imprisoned her.

Ann Lee came to the American colonies during the War for Independence in the 1770s. In those unsettled years, many people were eager to hear Christian preaching that promised a path to salvation and the return of Christ. Already people had flocked to religious revivals hoping to feel more spiritually secure despite the troubled times and the ongoing war. What historians call the Great Awakening in the 1740s and the New Light Stir in the 1770s were powerful gatherings of those who longed for God connection and a redeemed humanity.

Mother Ann's teaching was not only radically different from mainstream Christianity, but it was also being delivered by a woman. Colonial New England was no friend to the female gender. From the bedroom to the bank, women had no rights and were subjugated to the white male prerogative. If theologians of the time acknowledged the feminine at all, they tied it to the

The Great Awakening and the New Light Stir of the mid- and late 1700s were powerful gatherings of those who longed for God connection and a redeemed humanity. This engraving by M. Dubourg shows a religious camp meeting in 1819. Image: Library of Congress



myth of Eve the temptress, who brought about the fall of humankind. If Protestant Christians mentioned Jesus' mother Mary, they associated her with the papacy that the Protestant Reformation rejected. They did not see Mary as a comforting female divine source. The dominant Christian perspective saw God as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Mainstream American culture fully supported the white male claim and embraced slavery, gender inequality, and genocide in the human as well as in the animal kingdoms. Yet Mother Ann was opening a way for women's position to change on many levels: culturally, politically, and spiritually.

Let us now turn to the story of her life and her proselytizing mission, and see how the spiritual gift she possessed manifested.

THE LIFE OF MOTHER ANN

Ann Lee was born in Manchester, England, on February 29, 1736. (That February 29 reminds me of another February 29, in 1956, that marked the opening of a golden door in consciousness by the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram that initiated the supramental descent.)

Ann was the second oldest of eight children. Her father was a blacksmith and, though he was prosperous enough to maintain the household, the family had little

extra. When young, Ann had many inner experiences. She told her followers later that her child mind "was taken up with the things of God so that I saw heavenly visions, instead of trifling toys."¹ She could probably read and she knew the Bible, but she did not write.

As a girl she worked in the clothing trade, preparing cotton for spinning, and later cutting velvet. The work took place in households, not in a big mill. Children in Mother Ann's environment were seen as economic resources for the family. Eventually she worked as a cook in an infirmary. Ann was thus well acquainted with physical labor, and work became a cornerstone of the way of life she later espoused.

The house Ann lived in was likely small and lacked privacy for its members. Historians routinely use this fact as an explanation for her hatred of "fleshly cohabitation" and her later insistence on celibacy as a crucial aspect of her teaching and preaching. As a young woman, though, she did marry, perhaps more on the insistence of her father than on her own wishes. She had four children, all of whom died before the age of six.

In 1758 when she was 22, she was befriended by James and Jane Wardley, who were influenced by the preaching of the French Camisards. The Camisards prophesied that the second appearance of Christ was at hand. Ann joined the Wardley sect, which came to be



"The Ritual Dance of the Shakers." Image: Shaker Historical Society / Wikipedia

Mother Ann was opening a way for women's position to change on many levels: culturally, politically, and spiritually.

known for their physical manifestations of “spirit,” that is, non-ordinary energies, in their worship. These manifestations, including shaking, had biblical precedents, and aimed at the removal of all that could be released as a preparation for the second appearance of Christ in the form of a woman.

Ann’s reputation for humility, obedience, and sincerity grew and within 12 years, in 1770, she was declared the leader of the Wardley sect and given the title Mother Ann. Her spiritual evolution was agonizing and gave rise to a number of very physical manifestations. She described it to a convert later: “In my travail and tribulation, my sufferings were so great, that my flesh consumed upon my bones, and bloody sweat poured through the pores of my skin, and I became as helpless as an infant.”² She labored intensely for nine years until she experienced her full conversion. During this time she was hospitalized and given therapeutic care, presumably related to the death of her fourth child.

All during this difficult time prior to her full conversion, the sect she was in had such unusual forms of worship and doctrines that some of its members ran afoul of the law for disturbing the peace. Ann and her father were brought before the local magistrate and accused of blasphemy. At one point, Ann herself, accused of blasphemy, was placed in a confining cell and given no food or drink. James Whittaker, a young follower, is said to have helped her survive by feeding her milk and wine through a pipe stem which he inserted in the keyhole of her cell. Some believe that in the two week period of her incarceration her final conversion took place. As she put it: “My soul broke forth to God, which I felt sensibly as ever a woman did a child, when she was delivered of it. Then I felt unspeakable joy in God, And my flesh came upon me, like the flesh of an infant.”³

The manifestations of spirit in the worship of this Methodist sect (later to be known as Shakers) continued to get the group in trouble with the local authorities. The worship in these meetings was loud and replete with physical expressions, loud singing and shouting and stomping as well as preaching. This disturbed the

neighborhood and the local Anglican Church. Members were accused of blasphemy and disturbing the peace and were brought before various magistrates in Manchester. But Ann would not acquiesce to what she saw as mere religious etiquette. She followed the dictates of her conscience and inner revelations of God-given truth despite the persecutions that routinely followed. Mother Ann’s charisma enhanced her leadership and she retained a loyal following despite the arrests.

In addition to forms of worship, her advocacy of celibacy also deeply disturbed her detractors. This aspect of her preaching deserves greater clarification. In her conversion, Mother Ann had the revelation that the desire nature or “lust” was the cause of the failure to be ready for the second coming of Christ. Foregoing carnal relations was the purification that was necessary to evolve spiritually and become capable of salvation. In more modern terminology, she saw that our ego nature, motivated and run by its desires, needed to be purified and turned wholly to God. Sri Aurobindo was no less clear about the need to move beyond our lower ego nature and surrender it to be governed by Divine will.

Ann was motivated more by her inner visions than by outer events. It was these inner visions that led her to gather eight of her followers and sail in a condemned ship to New York harbor, where they arrived in August 1774. One of the visions prompting the trip to America came to James Whittaker, the follower who sustained her with the milk and wine. He saw a large tree whose leaves shone brightly and represented the Church of Christ that would be established in America. Ann herself had a vision of a house in Harvard, Massachusetts, which she later occupied and made her headquarters while preaching and gathering converts in the New England area. Mother Ann believed her mission was to gather the souls that were chosen to receive her teaching.

Arriving in New York, she worked as a domestic in a family home while some of her followers gathered resources to purchase undeveloped land in the Albany, New York, area. There the small band of Shakers built their own rustic settlement which they called *Niskeyuna*

(which means “extensive corn flats”). With the help of the local Mohawk Indians, a tribe that was part of the Iroquois Confederacy, they learned to survive and nourish themselves. The transition to America for the Shakers entailed constant hard work and the wise use of limited resources. Mother Ann was well acquainted with this manner of life.

MOTHER ANN’S MISSION

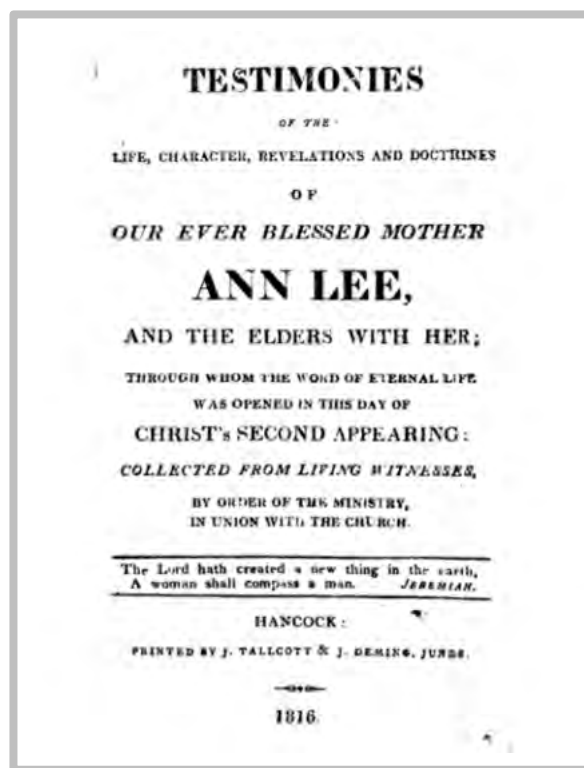
In 1779 the New Light Stir religious revival took place in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts, centered in a town called New Lebanon. Joseph Meacham was one of the leading preachers of that revival. The thrust of the preaching was to be aware of and ready for the reappearance of the Christ. News of Ann Lee’s presence and preaching had gradually filtered down the nearby Hudson River to the Berkshire Hills, and eventually Joseph Meacham decided to investigate. When he met Mother Ann and was convinced of her spiritual authority, he joined the Shakers. Soon after, the number of Shaker converts grew considerably. People began to see in Ann Lee’s presence the reappearance of the Christ spirit.

Although people were gradually finding their way to Niskeyuna, Mother Ann set out, as her vision had dictated, for Harvard and a particular dwelling, the so-called Square House, which had been the home of the followers of another unconventional preacher named Shadrack Ireland. He had passed away and his followers had given up on his claim to physical immortality. They had buried his body when it began to decompose. His doctrine was called Perfectionism, and those followers of his who remained were prime people for the Shakers to attract. The Shakers managed to commandeer the house and attract converts. But they also attracted those who tried to uproot them and drive them out of town.

For the next two years Mother Ann traveled to surrounding towns in Massachusetts and Connecticut visiting and supporting converts in their homes and seeking to attract more to her vision and teaching. She was uncompromising both in her forms of worship and in her view of the importance of celibacy as the way to overcome the desire nature. Many were afraid of her as well as deeply drawn to her. She was often threatened by mobs of townspeople and suffered much physical abuse, often barely escaping her opponents. Her followers endured severe public whippings and other

forms of physical abuse and indignities at the mobs’ hands. But there was no change in the forms that worship took among the Shakers. Their dancing, singing, shouting, stomping, speaking in tongues, whirling, and going into trance continued unabated whether Mother Ann was in a jail or among converts. In those two years she visited 36 towns and villages and established a spiritual community numbering around a thousand souls.

By 1783 Mother Ann decided to return to Niskeyuna because of hostility and mob violence directed against her presence and practices by the unconverted. She arrived back there on September 4, 1783, the day after the Peace of Paris was signed, ending the War of Independence. In her last year, Mother Ann received visitors at Niskeyuna. Worn down by the persecutions she had endured, she died on September 8, 1784.



Title of the first book about Ann Lee. Image: Wikimedia Commons

MOTHER ANN’S TEACHING

Essential to understanding Mother Ann’s teaching and preaching is the fact that it is deeply embodied. It is not only based on a set of beliefs. Although the Shakers referred to themselves as “believers” in the second appearance of Christ, in truth they were actually

The Shaker way was and is a mystical tradition; for the Shakers, the power of God transformed them and became a living reality.

“experiencers.” The Shaker way was and is a mystical tradition; each individual is to personally experience the unitive Christ presence. For the Shaker converts, Christ had “come again.” For them the inner experience of the Christ spirit, and thus the power of God, transformed them and became the living reality all around them. The Shakers were not hoping for some future happening. The second appearance of Christ had been realized. Their way of life in Christ was and is a progressive unfoldment of Christ’s presence that would never be withdrawn as they traveled from gift to gift. Their way was and is evolutionary and profoundly open to change.

Shakers are to turn from the narrowness of the individual self to the union of all people together in the One Christ. This spirit of God-in-Christ comes to everyone regardless of their individual gifts or capacities or backgrounds or races or gender or age. The task of the Shaker of the past and present, no matter what their spiritual stature, involves recognizing the gifts of the Spirit—all the various forms of spiritual energies in movement or song or dance or trance. The persons who have these experiences are united by spirit and thus the community itself becomes the living reality of the Christ presence. This explains Mother Ann’s uncompromising openness to the ecstatic form of spiritual experience.

There are a number of accounts of the unusual worship of the Shakers in Mother Ann’s time; the following is by Valentine Rathbun, the minister of the Baptist church at Pittsfield, Massachusetts. He had been drawn to the Shakers but subsequently apostatized and became a noted critic. These are some of his observations of their worship:

They begin by sitting down, and shaking their heads, in a violent manner, turning their heads half round, so that their face looks over each shoulder, their eyes being shut; while they are thus shaking, one will begin to sing some odd tune, without words or rule; after a while another will strike in; and then another; and after a while they all fall in, and make a strange charm ... some singing without words, and some with an unknown tongue or mutter, and some with a

mixture of English. The Mother, so called, minds to strike such notes as make a concord, and so form the charm.... When they leave off singing, they drop off, one by one, as oddly as they come on.... Every one acts for himself, and almost every one different from the other; one will stand with his arms extended, acting over odd postures, which they call signs; another will be dancing, and some times hopping on one leg about the floor; another will fall to turning around, so swift, that if it be a woman, her clothes will be so filled with the wind, as though they were kept by a hoop; another will be prostrate on the floor ... some groaning most dismally; some trembling extremely; others acting as though all their nerves were confused; others swinging their arms, with all vigor, as though they were turning a wheel, etc....⁴

This form of worship later became ritualized, toned down, and considerably more inwardly focused; but in this early period it was bizarre and ecstatic to the onlooker. There were precedents for worship inspired by forms of spiritual energies. Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples after the resurrection. At Pentecost when the apostles and Mary were gathered together, they experienced a strong driving wind of spiritual force, tongues of flames appeared on their heads, and they spoke in tongues. This occurrence laid the foundation for the ability to spread the gospel of Christ.

In the late 1600s and early 1700s the aforementioned Camisards, a sect of the French Huguenots who protested the rule of the Papacy, were known for their “inspirations.” They believed they spoke directly to God. Their members, like the early Shakers, were agrarian and merchant folk who were not often literate. They experienced bodily agitations, spoke in tongues, and had the gift of prophesy. Today we might dismiss these forms of worship as vital expressions. To the Shakers this form of worship was an expression of spiritual ecstasy.



"The Shakers Harvesting Their Famous Herbs." Image: Shaker Historical Society / Wikipedia

Although her later followers believed Mother Ann to be the second coming of Christ in female form—"the woman clothed in the sun" spoken of in the Book of Revelations in the Bible—she did not see herself that way. She considered herself the first one of many who together are the living Christ. Because Christ consciousness arose in her, she could pass that experience on to others. She saw herself more in the tradition of the apostle Paul, able to spread the gospel of Christ. According to testimonies collected from her followers, she was able to transmit the subtle energy associated with this spiritual realization.

The belief that Mother Ann was the female version of Christ also served to align Christian teaching once again to its original formulation. In it the female was seen as equal to the male. This God-given equal status could then be manifested in all aspects of the Shaker

communities, where gender equality was the norm, even for leadership and governance.

The core of this teaching is one of simplicity. The Shaker ideal was to live according to the way they believed the early Christians lived at the time of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount bore the directions for life in the physical world. For example, Mother Ann was quite humble and would say: "You must be kind to strangers, for that is the only way you can reward me."

Necessitated by the amount of persecution they attracted, Shakers withdrew into communities. They lived together free of the social arrangements of family and the individual possession of goods. The Shaker monastic villages gathered people together who worked for the good of all. Their precept was "from each according to their capacity, to each according to their ability to receive."

The Shakers were practical people. They were farmers and merchants who dealt fairly with people, including the neighboring Indigenous peoples. They saw God in all things. There was a great emphasis on cleanliness and order. Shakers were seed growers and herbalists; one has only to see their great stone barns to recognize the care and value they placed on their animals. They cared for the world of nature with respect. And all their labor was to be offered to God: "Hands to

The core of this teaching is one of simplicity. The Shaker ideal was to live according to the way they believed the early Christians lived at the time of Jesus.

work and hearts to God” is a well-known Shaker precept.

Mother Ann’s experiences as a worker made her a good and shrewd manager of the work of others. She is known for her saying: “Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live, and as you would if you had to die tomorrow.” She encouraged everyone to work for the good of all, respecting the whole natural order.

We do not have any portraits of Mother Ann. Contemporaries described her chestnut hair and blue eyes. She was a little below average height with a stocky build. Her followers found her beautiful. We can get a sense of her powerful, one-pointed intent in her description of her experience during the nine years leading to her full conversion:

When I set out to obey the gospel, I cried to God to bring my sins to remembrance, and I confessed them one by one as I committed them, and I denied myself every gratification of a carnal nature, of everything which my appetite craved, and ate and drank that which was mean and poor that my soul might hunger for nothing but God.⁵

The result of her full conversion was the possession of several special abilities, including clairvoyance. People who “opened their minds” to her in the process of confessing their sins attested to this power numerous times. The act of confession was essential if one wanted to become a Shaker. There are a good number of testimonies by those wanting to join the community that Mother Ann knew things about their lives that she could not have known by ordinary means. Confessions had to be complete and truthful. There are some testimonies that she also had the power to heal. A number of her close followers shared this gift. Most importantly Mother Ann was able to transmit the spiritual energies she experienced. The following account by a convert named Thankful Barce illustrates this:

Mother Ann founded a unique and successful experiment of living a spiritually perfected life on American soil; it was not world-fleeing but fully embedded in material life.

She sat down in a chair, and I sat down by her side. Her eyes were shut, and it appeared that her sense was withdrawn from the things of time. She sang very melodiously and appeared very beautiful.... The graceful motion of her hands, the beautiful appearance of her countenance, and the heavenly melody of her voice, made her seem like a glorious Inhabitant of the heavenly world, singing praises to God. As I sat by the side of her, one of her hands, while in motion, frequently touched my arm; and at every touch of her hand, I instantly felt the power of God run through my “whole body.”⁶

The power of the spiritual vibrations still lingers in the objects Mother Ann used, as described in the Fall/Winter 2022–2023 issue of *Collaboration* (vol. 47, no. 3).

“Life of the Diligent Shaker.” Image: Shaker Historical Society / Wikipedia



We do ourselves a favor by learning about Mother Ann's teaching and Shaker ways. She contributed deeply to the understanding of what it can be like to live a spiritually evolved and focused life on earth.

I have no doubt that Mother Ann was charismatic and received special gifts from the Divine. Her presence could be overpowering, as this testimony recognizes:

So great was the manifestation of the power of God in Mother at that time that many were unable to abide in her presence. Her words were like flames of fire and her voice like peals of thunder.... After this Mother was released from her sufferings and began to sing with love and great joy and gathered people around her, and her countenance was glorious and very beautiful.⁷

We already have said that Mother Ann had inner experiences and visions in childhood that preoccupied her. After her conversion she guided herself by them. She was open to other planes of consciousness. In response to one of her followers recounting that he had had visions of the apostles, she replied:

These are great gifts of God; they are ministering spirits. I have often seen St. Peter and St. Paul and conversed with them, and with all the apostles, and with Christ Jesus, my lord and head, for no man is my head, but Christ Jesus. I am married to the Lord Jesus Christ! He is my head and my husband, and I have no other ... I have walked hand in hand with him in Heaven....⁸

At another time she said:

I have been walking with Christ in heavenly union. Christ is ever with me, both in sitting down and rising up; in going out and coming in. If I walk in groves and valleys, there He is with me and I converse with Him as one friend converses with another, face to face.⁹

Mother Ann's revelation about celibacy may not have been universally applied. Celibacy was accepting

the "full cross"; it was for those who were truly committed to being in God-union in Christ. In a conversation with one Daniel Moseley, she is quoted as saying:

Do not go away and report that we forbid to marry; for unless you are able to take up a full cross, and part with every gratification of the flesh, for the Kingdom of God, I would counsel you, and all such, to take wives in a lawful manner, and cleave to them only; and raise up a lawful posterity, and be perpetual servants to your families: for of all lustful gratifications that is the least sin.¹⁰

This quotation illustrates the fact that Mother Ann recognized that people possessed varying spiritual gifts. And this brings us again to the emphasis on simplicity. Shakers are to be no more and no less than who they are; this is true fulfillment. Confession led to self-confrontation and was the gateway to the sacred oneness to be found in Christ.

The Shakers remained open to communication with Mother Ann and other deceased members after they departed. This led to an extraordinary period in the 1840s and 1850s known as the Era of Manifestations or Mother's Work. Divine gifts came to Shakers in the form of drawings and songs, messages, and rituals. During this period a deeper and wider form of the divine feminine, known as Holy Mother Wisdom, became available to the Shaker community. She too gave gifts during this time. The task of the Shaker was to recognize the gifts meant for them and to receive them.

CONCLUSION

Mother Ann fulfilled her mission. She founded a unique and successful experiment of living a spiritually perfected life on American soil; it was not world-fleeing but fully embedded in material life. Her spirituality brought gender equality, respect for all forms of life, pacifism, the doctrine of oneness, racial equality, and the communal sharing of goods into the society

developed from her teaching. Her followers remained unique individuals, but they were inwardly united by and in the Christ spirit. She practiced active and open communication with other planes of consciousness and fostered mediumship and spiritualism. She saw the Divine as perpetually bestowing gifts on those seeking alignment with Divine will and connection with the Christ spirit. All aspects of one's daily life were to be offered to God.

I see Mother Ann's teaching and how she lived her life related in significant ways to the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The creation of a divinely manifested life in the material consciousness is shared by the Shakers. The offering of all one's work and life in all its aspects is also there. Both recognize the oneness of all life and the progressive evolution of the spirit through God-given gifts or grace. The need to purify one's lower nature and take on the "full cross" is similar to Sri Aurobindo's teaching regarding the necessity of rising above the lower ego nature. Shakers valued obedience, which in our language today is called surrender. The Shakers, like contemporary Aurovilians, were interested in technological innovations and invented a number of work-saving devices, including the washing machine. They appreciated the arts, especially music, with more than 10,000 songs attributed to them. They had knowledge of the inner planes of consciousness and their spiritualism gave them access to the more subtle realms.

Of course knowledge of the supramental descent was not a part of Shaker theology. The Shakers used many outer methods to help individuals purify their nature to respond more fully to Divine will and grace. Confession was necessary to become a Shaker. Personal dress and style were simplified and mandated. There were rules for behavior between the sexes, and personal freedom of expression was curtailed. The Shakers were actively involved in missionary activities. Shakers could consecrate their lives, but they did this within the Christian context. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother used no set outer methods but supported individuals having the full freedom to discover and live their authentic inner selves connected to the Divine.

The values of the Shakers are widely appreciated today, as are many aspects of their provenance. One might argue that Mother Ann's evolutionary teaching, if applied, would be an antidote for many of the ills of modern American culture.

As the United States shifted its economy from agriculture-based to industrialized and wave after wave of immigration poured into its cities, the membership of fully consecrated Shakers has declined until only a few living members survive and live in an active community, the Sabbathday Lake Village in Maine. But Shakers and their supporters, often called Friends of the Shakers, continue to evolve and embrace new forms that their ways have created. The Shaker villages that have survived physically are being preserved as museums and are busily promoting Shaker ways of sharing communally and working together for the good of all. Although modern sources often present their technological ingenuity in a positive light, they usually leave out the main purpose of these technologies—to create more time for worship. The Shakers who came after Mother Ann lived a simple, devoted life deeply in touch with nature and its healing gifts; their agricultural practices and knowledge of herbalism are being showcased and receive governmental as well as philanthropic support.

We do ourselves a favor by learning about Mother Ann's teaching and Shaker ways. She contributed deeply to the understanding of what it can be like to live a spiritually evolved and focused life on earth. Her teaching could be seen as the foundation for an integral American yoga.

Notes

1. Richard Francis, *Ann the Word: The Story of Ann Lee, Female Messiah, Mother of the Shakers, the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 41.
3. Ibid., p. 44.
4. Edward Deming Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963), p. 28.
5. Ibid., Quoted from *The Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*, 1st ed. (Lebanon, Ohio, 1808), pp. 470–471.
6. Jean M. Humez, ed. *Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.30.
7. Andrews, p. 40.
8. Humez, p. 18.
9. Andrews, p. 11.
10. Ibid., p. 12.

SUSAN CURTISS is a transpersonal counseling psychologist and long-term devotee of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Fall/winter 2023 theme:

Language and Intuition for Integral Transformation

Submission Deadline:

July 1, 2023

We invite your reflections, art, poetry, essays, musings, and conversations about “Language and Intuition for Transformation” for the Fall/Winter 2023 issue of *Collaboration*.

TALKING AND THINKING run together in deeply *automatic* rounds. They hold our fractured world together in pieces. But what if the pressure of the TimeSpirit is breaking up these clinging automatisms? What if it is nudging some emergence beyond mental speech and thought? Sri Aurobindo mastered intuitive poetic language that expresses “a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity.” Mother, however, found descriptive words only flattened and diminished her experiences of the “flow” in her yoga of the body.

For this issue of *Collaboration*, we invite you to reflect with voice and art on the tango of thought and

language in our time. And on intuitive flashes of insight and speech, appearing around the edges or in the depths of this dance, that support an integral transformation.

Do you sense a breakdown or emergence? How does it begin for you? In silence, in deep listening, in love, in danger, in despair, in worship, in the forest or desert, in play, in inner depths, in attentiveness, in poetry, in the fields of the body? What do these events and experiences bode for language and its passion for higher mind or soul consciousness? How do they shape your life and that of your communities? How is all this in *your* practice? Have you found a new play of language and intuition in your yoga and for sharing your experiences?

MUSIC AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Spring 2024 issue

Submission deadline: **November 1, 2023**

This theme will explore music as an aid to spiritual practice. Can music facilitate entrance to inner states of consciousness, intuitional receptivity, and communion with the Divine? Can deep listening influence musical experience? Share with us your insights on music and the yogic journey.

WHOLE-PERSON PSYCHOLOGY

Summer 2024 issue

Submission deadline: **March 1, 2024**

Evolution’s quest for wholeness calls for a consciousness-centered psychology in our times that heals person, community, and nature; reveals hidden parts of being and planes of consciousness; and ultimately transforms mind, life, and body into instruments of a vast new dynamism for earthly unity.



Image: "New World Tree of Life," painting by Mira M. White

About *Collaboration*

MISSION: *Collaboration* is the journal of Integral Yoga published in the United States. Our mission is to share articles, conversations, poetry, and art that deeply engage our transitional times with the beauty, joy, and hope of the vast wisdom and practice of this evolutionary tradition and its founders, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. We explore and celebrate particularly the individual practice of yoga in this country as well as currents and expressions of the collective yoga of the American soul.

AUDIENCE: *Collaboration* is a means of reflection, encouragement, and inspiration for the Integral Yoga community. We also want to highlight friends and allies in related areas of personal and social transformation. Including these fellow travelers requires sensitivity from our contributors, whom we ask to refrain from using references and terms of Integral Yoga and the works of

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother without explaining or clarifying them.

CONTENT: We welcome many kinds of contributions, especially those that share, in ways both personal and universal, the surprises of grace, intuition, and delight in the widening—or frozen—moments of our lives. We also love to publish submissions that challenge the increasing polarization of our personal and social lives or embrace that fragmentation and find its deeper meaning and healing in the integrative and inclusive currents emerging today.

GUIDELINES

Contact our editorial team at editor@collaboration.org for the word count suitable for your contribution before submitting. This allows us to provide you with writer's guidelines that reflect our editorial criteria.

The Stone Goddess

SRI AUROBINDO

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,
From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me, —
A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harboured all infinity.

The great World-Mother and her mighty will
Inhabited the earth's abysmal sleep,
Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable,
Mute in the desert and the sky and deep.

Now veiled with mind she dwells and speaks no word,
Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,
Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard
The secret of her strange embodiment,

One in the worshipper and the immobile shape,
A beauty and mystery flesh or stone can drape.

—*Collected Poems, Complete Works of
Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 2, p. 608