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Yoga for the Change of Consciousness: An Integral Vision of Sri Aurobindo

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Abstract

The process and the principle of his Yoga, Sri Aurobindo elaborately explained in some of his major works such as The Synthesis of Yoga, Letters on Yoga and Records of Yoga. Although it is not possible to analyze the intuitive realization and the spiritual vision of Sri Aurobindo on the rational ground of the mind as it is a vast ocean of eternal Knowledge, an attempt has been made in this paper to recapitulate and to analyze Sri Aurobindo's Purna Yoga which is a synthesis of essentials of all the traditional systems of yoga and which is at the same time unique in its totality.

Key Words: Consciousness, Integral Yoga, Transformation and Surrender.

1. Introduction: The concept of Yoga in Indian philosophical tradition is as old as the Veda. Yoga is essentially a way or process of systematic study of observation and experiment of human psychology. The word 'yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'yuj' which means to join i.e., to join the *jivatman* with the *Paramatman*. Swami Pavitrananda says, "Technically, the word Yoga has been used to refer to the system of philosophy propounded by the Sage Patanjali, about the second century B.C. But, in general, Yoga may be called a method by which one can remove 'ignorance', the cause of manifoldness, and thus, attain union with the Supreme Self."¹ So, Yoga primarily means union or communion of the human consciousness or self with the Absolute, something transcendent, eternal and divine. It also means ways of unification with the supreme Self. The term yoga, therefore, connotes the goal, the union and the means of identity with the Eternal.

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was a revolutionary yogi of the unknown eternal heights, a great scientist of occultism, poet and philosopher. The philosophy of Sri Aurobindo emerges from his direct experience of reality lying beyond the mind which descends from above into his being through the *sadhana* of the Integral Yoga. It transcends all the mental rationale, it transcends all the knowledge of the finite mind, it transcends all the logic of the mental construction, it transcends all the ethico-religious limitations. His philosophy which is integral affirms the reality of the world as well as the Absolute.

Sri Aurobindo perceives the whole universe from the standpoint of the highest Consciousness which he calls *Saccidananda*. From his spiritual experiences of *sadhana* in life, Sri Aurobindo, realizes that yoga proceeds by a change of consciousness, a change from the ordinary mental, vital and physical consciousness, to a greater consciousness in which one finds one's true being and comes first into direct and living contact and then into an identity or union with that something that lies beyond mind, life and body. So for Sri Aurobindo, yoga is an exploration of consciousness through consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo's yoga is the integration of essentials of all the traditional yogas. He enumerates the main principles of Hatha, Raja, Karma, Jnana and Bhakti Yoga and then proceeds to develop his own Yoga of Self-Perfection. The Hatha Yoga is the most commonly known and practiced form of yoga. Hatha Yoga utilizes body and life-force as its instruments. It aims at conquest of the body and life-energies that sustain. Raja Yoga aims at the perfection and mastery of the mental being. The mind is the chief instrument in Raja Yoga. It aims at the liberation and perfection not of the body, but of the mental being. Jnana yoga or aims at the realization of the unique and the Supreme Self. This is the yoga which the Bhagavad Gita describes as Sāmkhya Yoga, yoga by Knowledge. In this yoga, the

instrument is the intellect. It proceeds by the method of intellectual reflection, *vicara*, to right discrimination, *viveka*. It is the process of rejecting the phenomenal world by regarding it as *māyā* or illusion to arrive at the Absolute. *Bhakti Yoga* is the path by which God may be realized through love and devotion. It is the method of devotion by which true communion of the soul with the Supreme is accomplished. So, the chosen instruments of the *Bhakti Yoga* are the emotional and aesthetic power of the being. *Karma-Yoga* is the principle of renunciation of desire for the fruits or the effects of actions. It is basically the process or the principle in which the full concentration is given to the selfless service. It selects the will of the worker as its instruments. It aims at the dedication of every human activity to the supreme Will. So, the surrender of one's own will to the Divine Will is the aim and the process of *Karma Yoga*. Swami Vivekananda observes, "Karma-Yoga is the attaining through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature. Every selfish action, therefore, retards our reaching the goal, and every unselfish action takes us towards the goal..."²

2. The synthesis of the Systems in Sri Aurobindo's Yoga: Sri Aurobindo is not opposed to traditional system of yoga, but he is concerned with their incompleteness. In his yogic *sadhana*, Sri Aurobindo attempts to complete that which has remained incomplete either at the level of theory or in the sphere of practice. He takes in his wide sweep all the systems of yoga and brings them into a creative synthesis by introducing those factors that go to make complete that which has remained incomplete. So, Sri Aurobindo's Yoga does not recognize Knowledge, Devotion and Action as three different paths – they are the expressions of one spiritual whole. He deals also with the implications and potentialities of *Raja Yoga* comprehensively in his synthesis of Yoga. He accepts the stages of *Samadhi* and *Nirvāṇa* or freedom of Patanjali, but he points out that it cannot be the final goal of yoga. According to Sri Aurobindo, *Samadhi* is the beginning of the higher evolutionary journey, a stepping stone in the long march to the realization of the Supreme Truth – the *Saccidanada*. In fact, the state of *Samadhi* of the Patanjali is only the level of over-mind consciousness of Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo does reconcile the essentials of all the traditional yoga in his *sadhana* for the integral perfection of man and that is why his Yoga is known as *Purna Yoga* or Integral Yoga. Rishabhachand rightly remarks on this uncompromised synthesis that, "Nowhere, at no period of the spiritual history of mankind, has there ever been such a vast and powerful attempt at a synthesis, at a mighty gathering up of the distinct and divergent elements of human nature into a living and fruitful unity."³

According to Sri Aurobindo's Yoga psychology, a man is not the physical alone, nor the vital, nor the mental but he is a psychic being or soul covered by all the different parts i.e., physical, vital and mental, constitute an integral whole. So, a synthesis of all the yogas implies an integration of all the parts of the human being including the physical. Sri Aurobindo stands for such a complete synthesis and the integral fulfillment of man. "Synthesis on the expressive planes of our being, synthesis on its creative summits and synthesis at its nether base"⁴ – this is the triple formula and aim of the synthesis envisaged by the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

Thus, Sri Aurobindo in his yoga lays emphasize on a synthesis of the systems for the transformation and the integral perfection of man. He says, "If indeed our aim be only an escape from the world to God, synthesis is unnecessary and a waste of time; for then our sole practical aim must be to find out one path out of the thousand that lead to God, one shortest possible of short cuts, and not to linger exploring different paths that end in the same goal. But if our aim be a transformation of our integral being into the terms of God-existence, it is then that a synthesis becomes necessary"⁵

3. Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo: Sri Aurobindo holds in his *The Synthesis of Yoga*, "All life is yoga". All life is consciously or subconsciously a yoga. What does it mean? And specifically what is the significance of "all life" in the science of yoga?

In Sri Aurobindo's Yoga philosophy, there is a great stress laid on conscious evolution and on Nature's own yoga. Nature by her innermost law of being has yoga which she follows unfailingly. Sri Aurobindo says, "all life... is a vast Yoga of Nature who attempts in the conscious and the subconscious to realise her perfection in an ever-increasing expression of her yet unrealised potentialities and to unite herself with her own divine reality."⁶ But in man, Nature becomes able to evolve by a conscious will in the instrument. Perhaps, this is the reason when Protagoras made a revolutionary change in the outlook of Greek philosophy with his doctrine *Man is the measure of all things*. This is conscious evolution, the core of Yoga discipline

3.1. Aim of Integral Yoga:

- This Yoga aims at realization of the Divine Being in its triple existence, viz., realization of the individual Divine (the psychic realization), realization of the universal Divine and realization of the transcendent Divine.
- Consequently, this Yoga aims at three radical transformations, viz., psychicisation, spiritualization and supramentalisation, i.e., transformation by realizing one's inner most being, transformation by realizing the cosmic Self, and supramentalise the consciousness in all the parts of the being and nature, and full and perfect manifestation of the Divine on the earth-nature respectively.
- Thus the main and the inevitable aim of this Yoga is to bring down the Supramental Consciousness on earth, to fix it there, to create a new race with the principle of Supramental Consciousness governing the inner and outer individual and collective life.

3.2. Discipline of Integral Yoga: Sri Aurobindo discovers four factors constituting the preparatory discipline of Integral Yoga. These are the foundations of his yoga. They are –

3.2.1. Sastra: *The Knowledge of Truth:* According to Sri Aurobindo, *Sastra* is the knowledge of truths, principles, powers and process that governs one's realization. For him, it is the eternal *Veda*, the lotus of the eternal knowledge, which is the supreme *Sastra* of the integral yoga embedded in the heart of every thinking and living being. As man develops, as his consciousness grows, this knowledge within swiftly and gradually begins to unfold. But *Sastra* is not the ultimate and only source of *sadhana*. The *Sadhaka* must make use of the scripture but not be bound by it. Sri Aurobindo thinks, all *Sastra* is the outcome of past experience and a help to future experience. It is an aid and a partial guide to the integral knowledge.

3.2.2. Utsaha: *The Force of Personal Effort:* But the *Sastra* alone is not enough to make oneself prepared for the *sadhana*. M.P. Pandit aptly remarks, “scholars who have at their finger tips all the formulas of logic, *tarka* and *nyaya* who can quote passage after passage from the Upanisads, from *sarvadarsana sangraha*, from Russell, from Hegel – but do the books on which they propound, on which they even write expositions make any difference in their lives?”⁷

So, *Utsaha* is that personal effort or energy which is expressed as the power of aspiration of the heart and the force of will within. This is not mere enthusiasm, a condition of emotional excitement. It is the zeal which is necessary for the attainment of the Divine. Sri Aurobindo says, “The Ideal *Sadhaka* should be able to say in the Biblical phrase, ‘My zeal for the Lord has eaten me up’. It is this zeal for the Lord, - *utsaha*, zeal of the whole nature for its divine results, *vyakulta*, the heart's eagerness for the attainment of the Divine...”⁸

3.2.3. Guru: *The Influence of the Guide:* The *Guru* is one who guides, suggests, gives directions to the right path and helps to make realization. So Sri Aurobindo describes the *Guru* as the third of his four aids of Integral Yoga. Writing about true *Guru*, Sri Aurobindo says in his *Synthesis of Yoga*, “As the supreme *Shastra* of the integral yoga is the eternal *Veda* secret in the heart of every man, so its supreme Guide and Teacher is the inner Guide, the World-Teacher, *jagad-guru*, secret within us. It is he who destroys our darkness by the resplendent light of his knowledge...”⁹

However, Sri Aurobindo describes the role of a human guru in *The Synthesis of Yoga* as, “The Teacher of the integral Yoga will follow as far as he may the method of the Teacher within us. He will lead the discipline through the nature of the discipline. Teaching, example, influence, – these are the three instrument of the Guru...He will give a method as an aid, as a utilizable device, not as an imperative formula or a fixed routine. And he will be on his guard against any turning of the means into a limitation, against the mechanisation of process. His whole business is to awaken the divine light and set working the divine force of which he himself is only a means and an aid, a body or a channel.”¹⁰

3.2.4. Kāla: *The Instrumentality of Time:* Now, what is the significance of *Kala* or Time in the journey of the Integral Yoga? Time seems to be the greatest hurdle for man in the journey of his life. Sri Aurobindo says that time appears as a resistance. As long as time is a resistance and an obstruction so long time is an enemy. According to Sri Aurobindo, time is relative and the construction of the mind in the sense that when mind passes through some unpleasant events the movement of the time becomes slow, and becomes faster in occasions in mind's pleasure. So, if Time could be made an ally

of man then the frustration of the journey could be eliminated. In Sri Aurobindo's own word, "Time is the remaining aid needed for the effectivity of the process. Time presents itself to human effort as an enemy or a friend, as a resistance, a medium or an instrument....When the two becomes one, it appears as a servant and instrument."¹¹

3.3. Receptive Silence: Sri Aurobindo observes that it is not enough that the mind is silent in yoga, it must be Receptive Silence. This silence constitutes an interval between the awareness of mind's possibilities and the awareness of mind's limitations. Sri Aurobindo gives us the three following steps for treading the path of Integral Yoga which leads to the Receptive Silence.

3.3.1. Aspiration: A call to the Divine: Aspiration is the fundamental psychological process of the Integral Yoga. It is a process of becoming. In aspiration the mind of man makes an effort to reach to the highest. It is indeed an inquiry aimed at finding a new way of living. Sri Aurobindo says, "an aspiration vigilant, constant, unceasing – the mind's will, the hearts seeking, the assent of the vital being, the will to open and make plastic the physical consciousness and nature...."¹² Aspiration should be constant and complete for the realization of the Divine It must be pointed out that aspiration is not identical with ambition.

3.3.2. Rejection: A higher movement to the Divine: Rejection symbolizes an act of withdrawing. Sri Aurobindo observes that the personal effort for entering into the higher *sadhana* requires "rejection of the movements of lower nature - rejection of the mind's ideas, opinions, preferences, habits, constructions, so that the true knowledge may find free room in a silent mind, - rejection of the vital nature's desires, demands, cravings, sensations, passions, selfishness, pride, arrogance, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, hostility to the Truth, so that the true power and joy may pour from above into a calm, large, strong and consecrated vital being – rejection of the physical nature's stupidity, doubt, disbelief, obscurity, obstinacy, pettiness, laziness, unwillingness to change, Tamas, so that the true stability of Light, Power, Ananda may establish itself in a body growing always more divine"¹³

Thus, aspiration and rejection together lead to the *sadhaka* to the elimination of the mental ego. This brings in what Sri Aurobindo calls a Receptive Silence. The state of Receptive Silence signifies both width and depth of consciousness and this is the state of surrender.

3.3.3. Surrender: A true Self- Giving to the Divine: Surrender is the main power of yoga. "The first word of the supramental Yoga" for Sri Aurobindo, "is surrender; its last word also is surrender."¹⁴ But what is surrender in Sri Aurobindo's yoga? The Mother, the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, says, "By surrender we mean... a spontaneous self- giving, a giving of all yourself to the Divine, to a greater Consciousness of which you are a part....Surrender means a free total giving with all the delight of the giving; there is no sense of sacrifice in it. If you have the slightest feeling that you are making a sacrifice, then it is no longer surrender."¹⁵ This surrender is not of the weak but of the passionate yogi. So it takes time. Sri Aurobindo prays to the Divine, "O Mother, come down in me. So many times I have promised to offer myself to you, and every time the promise has been broken, leaving me suspended in the air. But if I am reminded of my unfitness, what shall I do? I can't do anything."¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo holds the view that transformation of the whole being can be possible only when one will be in the state of integral and total surrender of his being and the rejection of the falsehood.

Sri Aurobindo observes that the surrender is done neither by the physical nor the vital nor the mental, it is only by the Psychic. It is the Psychic being that knows how to surrender. Now, what is Psychic being? The psychic being is the soul involved in the movement of evolution. It is the divine element in the individual evolving birth to birth. When the Psychic being awakes, it can bring a sudden and true surrender of the whole being. The psychic being is progressive and it grows from life to life, using mind, vital and body as its instrument. It stands behind the heart supporting the mind, life and body.

4. Triple Transformation: 'Transformation' is the key concept in the Integral Yoga. Sri Aurobindo uses the term transformation in a very special sense. "By transformation", he says, "I do not mean some change of the nature– I do not mean, for instance, sainthood or ethical perfection or yogic siddhis (like the Tantrik's) or a transcendental (*cinmaya*) body. I use transformation in a special sense, a change of consciousness radical and complete and of a certain specific kind which is so conceived

as to bring about a strong and assured step forward in the spiritual evolution of the being of a greater and higher kind and of a larger sweep and completeness than what took place when a mentalised being first appeared in a vital and material animal world.”¹⁷

Thus, the spiritual evolution of the individual consciousness, for Sri Aurobindo, takes place by triple transformation viz., the Psychicisation, Spiritualisation and Supramentalisation. Now, what do these terms stand for?

4.1. Psychicisation: In this transformation, the consciousness is transformed by the opening of the psychic being within the heart. *Psychicisation* is a key-movement in his yoga. But, what does it mean? *Psychicisation* means “ the change of the lower nature bringing right vision into the mind, right impulse and feeling into the vital, right movement and habit into the physical- all turned towards the Divine...”¹⁸ So, it is the conversion of whole present nature of a man into a soul-instrumentation. Thus Psychicisation is the first step towards greater consciousness. But Psychicisation is not enough for the transformation of the whole being of man in this journey of consciousness.

4.2. Spiritualisation: The spiritual transformation leads to the realization of the Cosmic Self. The *Sahasradala Cakra* within is activated and one rises above the ordinary rational mind and begins to live in the Overmind. This is the realisation of oneness of the soul with the Spirit or Brahman. This is the state of Turiya, the fourth state of consciousness, described in the *Mandukya Upanisads*. It is the higher ascent of the mind i.e. , Higher Mind followed by Illumined Mind, Intuitive Mind up to the Overmind that brings a Spiritual transformation of the being. Thus, there is a difference between psychicisation and spiritualisation- the spiritual is the change that descends from above and the psychic is the change that comes from within by the psychic dominating the mind, vital and physical. So, though psycho-physical parts of man’s personality, namely, mind, life and body undergo a deceive change during the process of the emergence of the soul, yet they are not radically changed. The realization of the soul of its original status is according to Sri Aurobindo not enough. What is also necessary is that the body, life and mind that constitute the external aspects of man’s personality must realise their original and fundamental status and must be radically transformed and transmuted by the power and consciousness of Supermind and *Saccidananda*.

4.3. Supramentalisation: The supramental transformation is the final stage in the integral yoga. The Supramental Transformation consists of ascent of the spiritual being to the Supermind or Truth-Consciousness and descent of the Supramental power into the mental, vital and physical parts of the being. It is the state where a total oneness and identity with the environment and with others is realised. Psychicisation and spiritualization can spiritualize the individual being, but they cannot radically transform the human nature. It is only by the ‘Supramentalisation’ that the radical transformation of the human nature to its Divine counterpart will be possible.

As a result of the Supramental transformation of human personality, there will be radical change in the working of mind, life and body, and a Gnostic being will emerge. In the Gnostic being or the Gnostic personality, the process of knowledge undergoes a fundamental change. In the ordinary human personality, the senses and the mind are the chief sources of knowledge. But in the Gnostic personality, mind is replaced by a fundamental consciousness of unity and identity.

The method of Integral Yoga, for Sri Aurobindo, starts with the method of Vedanta in order to reach the aim of Tantra. In Tantra, they try to arrive at the divine Soul in its fullness through a manipulation and utilization of the Shakti or the centre of consciousness. In the Vedanta, they start with the soul, the inner *Purusa*. In Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga, one starts with the Self, and makes that the centre (*cakras*) of the movement to arrive at a higher Consciousness that enables one to realize the aim of the Tantra which is to take up all nature and raise it to a divine level. In the traditional line of Yoga including the Yoga of Tantra, the whole effort is directed towards the liberation of the individual. But, the liberation that Integral Yoga envisages is liberation for all and all the parts of man.

5. Conclusion: Thus, Integral Yoga has a dynamic approach to life and is intensely practical. Its newness is in its scope, aim, standpoint and the totality of its method. This Yoga, Yoga of Self-Perfection is called the *Purna* Yoga because it covers the whole of life. Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga indicates the way to man’s growth in the sensitivity of consciousness. It brings a change in the view of man. Man is not merely an individual being seeking after with the Transcendental Divine. He

is also a Universal being who is capable of oneness with the Supreme God in all souls and in all Nature. Thus to realize union of the individual consciousness in its fullest reality with the environment and with the Supreme is the aim of this yoga. The aim of this yoga is to bring down the Supreme force in the earth consciousness to make the earth divine.

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