

Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo was an Indian nationalist, yogin, philosopher, scholar, and poet. Following his brief political career, during which he vehemently fought for India's outright independence, Sri Aurobindo began to explore the ancient Hindu practices of yoga (Heehs 88). Sri Aurobindo subsequently developed his own style of yoga which he called "Integral Yoga," because it "takes up the essence and many processes of the old yogas" with a new approach of "aim, standpoint and the totality of its method" (Minor 4). Sri Aurobindo believed that enlightenment came from the Divine, but that human beings possess a spiritual "supermind" that allows them to reach upward toward awareness. Spiritual perfection is achieved through Yoga practices that lead to "a change of life and existence" through the development of a new power of consciousness, which he called the "supramental" (Heehs 96).

Sri Aurobindo was born Aurobindo Ghose in Calcutta, India, on 15th August, 1872. At the age of seven, Sri Aurobindo and his two elder brothers went to England to pursue their studies. Initially, Aurobindo was tutored privately in Latin, French, history, geography and arithmetic. His proficiency in Latin allowed him to gain admission into St. Paul's School in London, where he was awarded a Foundation Scholarship (Heehs 11). At St. Paul's, Aurobindo began studying the Latin and Greek classics, writing poetry and prose in both languages, and reading English and French literature. At the age of fifteen, his studies ceased to interest him and his teachers began to lament that he was wasting his "remarkable gifts" because of laziness (Heehs 12). However, two years later, Aurobindo decided to try for one of the Open Scholarships offered by King's College, Cambridge. He took the examination and finished at the top of the

list. One of the examiners commented that Aurobindo's classical papers were "the best I have seen in thirteen years as an examiner" (Heehs 14). In 1893, after two years at King's College, during which he devoted much of his time to writing, Aurobindo returned to India.

Aurobindo became interested in political work amidst the anti-partition movement in the early 1900s. Between 1905 and 1910 Aurobindo acted as a political journalist for the revolutionary newspaper *Bande Mataram*, and as a leader of the advanced nationalist party known as the Extremists (Heehs 38). In 1908, Aurobindo was arrested on suspicion of his involvement in a bomb plot and was remanded in Alipore Central Jail (Heehs 56). Although he was later acquitted and released, his conversion from political action to spirituality occurred while he was incarcerated, where he was inspired by his meditation on the *Bhagavad Gita*. After reading it, he was able "not only to understand intellectually but to realize what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work...to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands" (Heehs 93-94). This realization would become one of the preliminary steps towards Aurobindo's ultimate awareness of the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo once wrote that there were "four great realizations on which his Yoga and his spiritual philosophy are founded" (Heehs 93). The first occurred in 1907 when Aurobindo encountered a yogin named Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who introduced him to "the awareness of some sole and supreme Reality" – an experience Aurobindo would later identify as the "passive Brahman" (Heehs 89). Lele instructed Aurobindo to "sit in meditation, but do not think, look only at your mind; you will see thoughts *coming into it*; before they can enter throw these away from your mind till your mind is capable of entire silence" (Heehs 89). Aurobindo wrote that, "I

flung them [thoughts] before they could enter and take hold of the brain and in three days I was free” (Heehs 89). However, Aurobindo also wrote that he was left with “a cleft of consciousness between the passive and active Brahman” (Heehs 99).

The second realization was achieved as Aurobindo regained his personal harmony by taking refuge with the Divine within him during his solitary confinement in Alipore jail. Aurobindo read the *Bhagavad Gita* and his initial realization regarding Sri Krishna soon blossomed into an all-encompassing awareness of the Divine, seen as Krishna in the form of Vasudeva, “as all beings and all that is” (Heehs 94). Aurobindo wrote that “I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned; no, it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there holding over me his shade” (Heehs 94). This universal vision of the Divine was followed by Sri Aurobindo’s awareness into what he called the “cosmic consciousness” (Heehs 94).

As mentioned above, Aurobindo’s first realization left him with “a cleft of consciousness” between the passive and active Brahman. This “cleft” was closed with Aurobindo’s third realization that the two aspects of the supreme Reality were the static and dynamic Brahman (Heehs 99).

Three years later, Sri Aurobindo reached his fourth realization through a “prolonged dwelling in Parabrahman” (the supreme Reality) (Heehs 99).

Armed with these four fundamental realizations, Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual development grew into his “yoga of self-perfection” or integral yoga. The aim of the yoga of self-perfection is to enable one to attain conscious identity with the Divine – the true Self – and to transform the

mind and body into an instrument for a divine life on earth (Minor 121). Sri Aurobindo emphasized surrender as the most important requisite of integral yoga. He wrote, “Surrender is giving oneself to the Divine – to give everything one is or has to the Divine and regard nothing as one’s own, to obey only the Divine will and no other, to live of the Divine and not for the ego” (Minor 122). Sri Aurobindo’s “yoga of self-perfection” had four constituent elements: *shuddhi* or purification, *mukti* or liberation, *bhukti* or beatitude, and *siddhi* or perfection (Synthesis of Yoga 38).

Sri Aurobindo believed that the essence of purification was the organization of the chaotic action of the various parts of man’s nature such as the mind to thought. Ultimately, perfect purification loosens the bonds of nature, specifically the bond of *ahankara* or ego, which allows actions to be performed without the incentive of personal satisfaction. This liberation, *mukti*, leads to perfection of the individual nature, *siddhi*, and enjoyment of the delight of being, *bhukti* (Synthesis of Yoga 61).

The culminating objective of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga is the remolding of the body, “even here upon earth” into a fit vehicle of the transformed consciousness. Sri Aurobindo believed that Nature must “evolve beyond Mind and manifest a consciousness and power of our existence free from the imperfection and limitation of our mental existence, a supramental or truth-consciousness...Into that [spiritual] truth we shall be free and it will transform mind and life and body” (Heehs 104-105). In his later years, Sri Aurobindo’s practice of yoga was directed towards achieving the effective transformation of the physical in pursuit of freedom of the truth-conscious spirit (Heehs 104-105).

Sri Aurobindo wrote prolifically in English on his spiritual philosophy and practice. Most notably, he introduced the concept of evolution into Vedantic thought (Minor 104). Although

Samkhya philosophy had suggested a similar idea centuries earlier, Sri Aurobindo rejected the materialistic tendencies of both Darwinism and Samkhya, and proposed an evolution of spirit which led to the evolution of matter.

In essence, Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary philosophy centers on the idea that humankind as an entity is not the last rung on the evolutionary ladder, but can evolve spiritually beyond its current limitations to a future state of supramental existence. This spiritually evolutionary step would lead to a divine life on Earth characterized by a realization of the supermind (Heehs 104).

Sri Aurobindo did not believe that the ultimate goal of his yoga – a divine life on earth – could be achieved so quickly. Nor did he foresee a day when a multitude of people would practice and study his philosophies and method of yoga (Heehs 151). Sri Aurobindo wished to bring the Divine into all aspects of life. Although his teachings may be seen as an attempt to reinstitute the “spiritual practicality” that he regarded as the great discovery of ancient India, Sri Aurobindo was arguably one of India's most fascinating and enigmatic leaders (Heehs 152).

References and Related Readings

- Chakravarty, Satyajyoti (1991) *The Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited.
- Chaturvedi, B.K. (2002) *Sri Aurobindo*. New Delhi: D.K. Publishers Distributors Pvt. Ltd.
- Heehs, Peter (1989) *Sri Aurobindo: A Brief Biography*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Heehs, Peter (1998) *The Essential Writings of Sri Aurobindo*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kaul, H. Kumar (1994) *Aspects of Yoga*. Calcutta: South Asia Books.
- Minor, Robert Neil (1978) *Sri Aurobindo: The Perfect and the Good*. Calcutta: South Asia Books.
- Nikhilananda (1992) *Hinduism Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit*. New York: Ramakrishna Vivekanada Center.
- Nikhilananda (1994) *Upanishads*. New York: Ramakrishna Vivekanada Center.
- Rama (2005) *Fearless Living: Yoga and Faith*. Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Himalayan Institute Press.
- Sri Aurobindo (1996) *Synthesis of Yoga*. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press.
- Yogananda, Paramahansa (2001) *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gita: An Introduction to India's Universal Science of God-Realization*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship Publishers.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

The Mother
Auroville
Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary philosophy
Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of involution
Sri Aurobindo's vision for the future
Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of social evolution
The Vedas
Bhagavad Gita
Sri Aurobindo's poetry
Nirvana
Renunciation

Pondicherry
Sadhana
Brahman
Supermind
Karma
Yoga
Bhakti
Meditation
Liberation
Krsna

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.sriaurobidosociety.org.in/>

<http://www.sriaurobidosociety.org.in/sriauro/sriauro.htm>

<http://www.miraura.org/>

<http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/>

<http://www.aurobindo.net/>

<http://www.kheper.net/topics/Aurobindo/SriAurobindo.htm>

<http://www.auroville.org/vision/sriauro.htm>

<http://www.savitribysriaurobindo.com/>

http://www.kheper.net/topics/Aurobindo/Aurobindo_cosmology.htm

<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1993/9/>

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9011289/Sri-Aurobindo>

Article written by Lewis Chong (Spring 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.