

# Traditional Roots of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga

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**Abstract:** Sri Aurobindo's teachings on Integral Yoga are couched in a universal and impersonal language, and could be considered an early input to contemporary transpersonal psychology. Yet, while he was writing his principal works in English, he was also keeping a diary of his experiences and understandings in a personal patois that hybridized English and Sanskrit. A hermeneutic perusal of this text, *The Record of Yoga*, published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, uncovers the semiotics of Indian yoga traditions, showing how Sri Aurobindo utilizes and furthers their discourse, and where he introduces new elements which may be considered "modern." This essay takes a psychobiographical approach to the life of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), tracing his encounters with texts and situated traditions of Indian yoga from the period of his return to India from England (1893) till his settlement in Pondicherry (1910), to excavate the traditional roots and modern ruptures of his own yoga practice, which goes to inform his non-sectarian yoga teachings.

**Key Words:** integral psychology, Pancharatra, Sri Aurobindo, tantra, transpersonal psychology, Vedanta, yoga, yoga psychology.

Sri Aurobindo wrote almost all his major works between 1914 and 1920 in the journal *Arya*. These works include tracts on the practice of his yoga, on the metaphysical basis of his yoga and on the social and political history of the world in an evolutionary context. He also published interpretations of the Vedas, selected Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. In his works on yoga, there are sometimes references to the Upanishads, Gita or Vedas and the use of certain terms belonging to an Indian yoga psychology and metaphysics; but these are always translated into a western lexicon and made part of a narrative which may be considered "modern," belonging to a philosophical and psychological discourse of "world knowledge." This has allowed him to be seen as one of the founders of contemporary integral philosophy and psychology, a modern scholar of universal significance, rather than a purely sectarian teacher.

But at the same time that Sri Aurobindo was writing these major works, he was practicing his own yoga sadhana in a very intense way; and writing his diaries of yoga practice, experiences and analyses. These diaries have been published under the title *Record of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo, 2001), a name he himself wrote as a title to some of the diaries. If one reads the *Record of Yoga*

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alongside the major works, one sees very different language practices in use and what might even seem to be different formulations of his yoga teaching. Later, some of these major works were revised, so that one may detect at least four formulations of his yoga: (1) the version we get from his diaries, which follows a terminology taken from the Hindu traditions of Vedanta, Gita, Tantra and Pancharatra Vaishnavism; (2) the version in the first three sections of *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo, 1999), which adapt the Bhagavad Gita's "triple path" of Works, Knowledge and Love; (3) the version elaborated in the chapter on "The Triple Transformation" of *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo, 2005) and in a number of the letters to his disciples, where he utilizes an invented terminology of the "psychic being," "overmind" and "supermind" to develop his yoga; and (4) the version found in the compilation known as *The Mother* (Sri Aurobindo, 2012), and in many letters to ashram inhabitants after the final arrival in Pondicherry of Mirra Alfassa, his spiritual collaborator, enjoining surrender to her as the embodiment of the Divine Mother.

Through these formulations, one can see changes in terminology and emphasis. I hold that this is more due to the different kinds of audience for which his different texts were meant, the traditional terminology and emphases becoming translated into terms which were more approachable by these audiences. Of course, this is not to say that there were no changes in his understanding of the goals and processes of the yoga, but such changes are at an advanced stage beyond the division between *Vidya* (knowledge) and *Avidya* (ignorance). In this essay, I will explore the traditional roots of Sri Aurobindo's yoga which form the basis of his own diary notes. I posit that there is continuity in Sri Aurobindo's formulations, the core of which is to be found in his traditional roots.

## A Psycho-biographical Consideration

To excavate these roots, I will take a psycho-biographical view of the yoga journey of Sri Aurobindo, relating this to the situated history of religious sectarian practice or influence. Sri Aurobindo's spiritual journey can be said to have begun when he returned to India. He grew up in England, and studied at Cambridge University, where he enrolled for a Tripos in the classics (Heehs, 2008, P. 27). He was also well versed in the European romance languages (p. 43). This education prepared him as a modern subject, who had internalized the post-Enlightenment values of social critique and creative freedom. Such a preparation must be considered significant in his eclectic and creative approach to the yoga traditions of India.

Sri Aurobindo returned to India in 1893, and joined the service of the Maharaja of Baroda. At this time, he took up serious study of two texts that were to last with him through the rest of his life, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita (Heehs, 2008, p. 57). He also began reading the books of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The Upanishads introduced to him the proto-philosophical complexity of the Vedanta, particularly its concern for an embodied freedom and delight (*jivanmukti*); while the Gita gave him the active doctrine of spiritual works and its revolutionary nature; as also a theistic and more integral spirituality, involving surrender to, and identity with, the Personal Divine. In Baroda, he also encountered situated traditions of Indian spiritual practice and participated in them. He had a few sporadic spiritual experiences; came across examples of paranormal power; visited the legendary yogi Brahmananda, who lived by the Narmada River and went to a Kali temple in the same area (Chandod) where he had an

experience of the “World Mother” (Heehs, 2008, pp. 85-86). He later gave poetic form to this experience:

***The Stone Goddess***

*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.  
(Sri Aurobindo, 2009, p. 68)*

This is the first mention of the “World Mother” in Sri Aurobindo's writings and attests to his introduction to the goddess traditions of India, that were to play a very important part in his personal and public life from 1906 onwards. The poem records a moment of *darshan*, which indeed, is also a moment of identity with Kali, perhaps his first (“one in the worshipper and the worshipped stone”). Here, he also started the practice of *pranayama*, taught by a friend who was a disciple of Brahmananda and close to the circle of hatha yogis surrounding Brahmananda (Heehs, 2008, p. 87).

## **Political Activism and Yoga**

Sri Aurobindo began his political activism in Baroda in the company of Maharashtrian revolutionaries like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and his associates (Heehs, 2008, pp. 67-69), with a call for *poorna swaraj*, or unconditional independence based on the right of a people with its own cultural history to have independent expression and self-determination.

In 1905, the *swadeshi* movement, calling for a boycott of British goods and their replacement with indigenous manufacture began in Bengal as a consequence of the administrative partition of Bengal. Along with this, there rose a call for national education and Sri Aurobindo was offered the post of principal of the proposed national college by its primary patron. This was a chance Sri Aurobindo was waiting for, and in 1906, he left Baroda and moved to Calcutta to join this college and to pioneer and engage himself fully in the anticolonial resistance movement (Heehs, 2008, pp. 91-93, 97). A proto-nationalistic culture had been brewing in Calcutta for close to a century before Sri Aurobindo's arrival there. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had already written his novel *Ananda Math* in which the lyrics of the revolutionary song *Bande Mataram* are contained; and Rabindranath Tagore was very active in cultural politics. There were many others, less known today, but all engaged in their own ways in the transvaluation of Bengali culture through

hermeneutic engagement with the west. Behind this surface activity we find strong regional traditions of yoga. This is an aspect of the Indian struggle for freedom which is glossed over by secular historians of modern India.

These practices and teachings took their inspiration mainly from two regional traditions, Tantra and Vaishnavism. Shakta Tantra practices around the worship of Mother Goddess Kali and Bhakti traditions based on love for Krishna and amplified by Sri Chaitanya in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, were very alive in Bengal and available for mobilization in the freedom movement. We see, for example, how Bankim's writings drew heavily on both the Shakta as well as Vaishnav regional traditions of Bengal. The Shakta tradition contained mythic elements which fed the nationalistic eidos. Shakta traditions include the idea of sacralization of the Indian sub-continent through the myth of the dismemberment of the corpse of Sati (Eck, 2012, p. 27). This mythos was undoubtedly a fertile influence on the idea of the nation as Mother (*Bharata Mata*) that arose at this point in Bengal, though it had a more regional significance at this time.

These regional traditions were trans-religious and trans-cultural, forming the legacy of both subaltern and *bhadralok* classes in Bengal. Here, though it is true that the nation has been identified as a Mother by many emerging nationalities, the Indian image of nation as mother has not only a cultural history, but traditions of yoga—or in other words, spiritual experience and transformative practice—behind it. These ideas had already powerfully impacted Aurobindo in his last years in Baroda, since he was in close contact with a fledgling revolutionary movement in Bengal, which he was guiding. If one is to believe K. M. Munshi, Sri Aurobindo had already developed the idea of Bharat Mata and taught a method of practice aimed at making the nation alive in the consciousness as the Divine Mother (Heehs, 2008, p. 95). Around the same time, he concretized this perception in a letter to his wife, where he said that the land of India was not just a physical territory but the body of the Mother to him (pp. 88-90).

One may see this as a mythic politicization of Indian yoga traditions. The use of myth to territorialize a nation racially, ethnically or ideologically, has been seen as a rhetorical trope in the formation of fascist subjects in modern times. However, the shared regional cultural traditions transcending religions and opening new forms of collective numinous experience need to be acknowledged here, as a prelude to Sri Aurobindo's later invocation of the Divine Mother as a spiritual power (*Shakti*) uniting diverse human beings. The formation of a national archetype should also be seen as a critical stage in a process of popular identity formation, important as a form of what Gayatri Spivak has called "strategic essentialism" (Chakravorty-Spivak, 1988, pp. 1-32), though this needs to cede to processes of universalization once its purpose is served. Indeed, this is what we find in Sri Aurobindo, for whom this phase led to a more species-wide consideration of human consciousness and its possibilities.

The Tantric traditions, with their archaic roots in human and animal sacrifice, could also be utilized to inspire the sacrifice of one's life to the cause of national emancipation, something Sri Aurobindo drew on to some extent. Already in Baroda, he wrote up an impassioned program celebrating Shakti as the spirit of modernity needing a temple home in the mountains and men ready to sacrifice themselves to her (Heehs, 2008, pp. 81-82); and later in Calcutta, he stimulated the conversion of the regional Durga Puja festival into a political ritual. Sri Aurobindo and his fellow revolutionaries also drew heavily on the idea of sacrifice and desireless works contained

in the Bhagavad Gita. As part of the initiation rites of the revolutionary Anushilan Samiti, members had to take an oath on the Gita to sacrifice their lives to the nation as a divine work, a sworn loyalty sealed by blood. Such practices show the braiding of the spiritual traditions of the Gita and the Tantra, a precursor to his worship of the dual forms of Krishna and Kali.

## Beginnings of Personal Yoga

As mentioned above, along with these mental and symbolic attitudes drawn from yoga traditions, Sri Aurobindo, towards the end of his stay in Baroda, turned towards the practice of *pranayama* (breathing method) and some *asanas* (hatha yoga postures), and had a number of encounters of a spiritual and occult kind (including that with a *naga sannyasin* who demonstrated occult healing powers) (Heehs, 2008 pp. 84-87). This aspect of developing sources of inner power, the field of what have been called *siddhis* (yogic powers), through yoga, no doubt had an impact on Sri Aurobindo as a political activist. One may read this as a consequence of dispossession. Those lacking material or political power, often look to personal sources such as enhanced mental, vital, subliminal, psychic, physical or spiritual power, to wage their battles for rights. Sri Aurobindo's serious turn towards the practice of yoga, did not arise, then, from a seeking for freedom from the bondage of existence (*moksha*) but from a seeking for spiritual power (*shakti*) that could help to free the nation (Heehs, 2008, p. 87). We may see this as a more properly Tantric goal.

The teachings of the Vedanta, particularly as they have been interpreted later by the *bhashyakars* or commentators, emphasize *moksha* or liberation. Undoubtedly, there are world affirming teachings to the Upanishads (*jivanmukti*) and these are what interested Sri Aurobindo more than a world-negating transcendentalism. These life-positive teachings of Vedanta are reiterated in the Bhagavad Gita, which shows the way to desireless enjoyment of dedicated action from a vantage of freedom. But the Vedanta and Gita concerned themselves, even when world affirming, with *dharma* (right action), *karma* (right attitude in works), *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion) and *moksha* (liberation). The schools of Tantra, on the other hand, made a maximization of worldly power and enjoyment their purpose. The project of the Tantras became a development of the latent and paranormal powers of experience and activity with the body and the earth as their field of fulfillment. Thus, it is to develop inner power and explore its possibilities that Sri Aurobindo turned to hathayogic and pranayama practices meant to open up the occult doors separating us from cosmic and divine sources of Power (*Shakti*).

Sri Aurobindo claims that his practice of pranayama did not result in much except for an enhanced flow of poetic inspiration and some physical changes including the development of a faculty of subtle vision, the ability to see forms and movements in astral space, eyes closed or open (Heehs, 2008, P. 87). Later in 1906, he stopped the pranayama and fell very sick. Recovering from this illness, he sought spiritual help from a master. A number of yogis and sannyasins, who concerned themselves with India's freedom, were in contact with the circles of the Indian struggle for independence, and several of the leaders of this struggle had become disciples of yogis. Sri Aurobindo's brother, Barindra Ghosh, knew a Maharashtran yogi, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele who lived in Baroda, and he put Sri Aurobindo in contact with this teacher. Sri Aurobindo met Lele in 1907 when he traveled to Gujarat and Maharashtra to participate in the fateful Surat Congress and in political rallies in Bombay and Pune (Heehs, 2008, P. 142).

## The Nirvana

In Baroda, Sri Aurobindo sat with Lele in the house of a friend and sought instruction in yoga. Lele was a Vaishnav, though it isn't clear what denomination (*sampradaya*) of Vaishnavism he belonged to. He was also a follower of the Dattareya cult, popular in Maharashtra, and was versed in Theosophy. From the Pancharatra underpinnings of Sri Aurobindo's diary of yoga, *The Record of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo, 2001), it seems to me that Lele may have been a follower of the ancient form of Tantric Vaishnavism known as Pancharatra. What Lele wished to convey to Sri Aurobindo was an opening to divine guidance. This could be thought of as a form of intuition. To arrive at this contact with the Divine Will, Lele sought to help Sri Aurobindo to quiet the activity of his mind (Heehs, 2008, pp. 143-144). Lele instructed Sri Aurobindo in a form of *rajayoga* meditation meant to rid the mind of thoughts. Unexpectedly, within three hours Sri Aurobindo experienced a silent mind and with three days of practice, this complete silence established itself in his being, as a result of which he saw the world as illusory and as having no sense of self. Sri Aurobindo has referred to this experience as nirvana (Heehs, 2008, pp. 144-146).

As with the experience at the Kali temple at Chandod, Sri Aurobindo has poetized this experience, titling it Nirvana:

*All is abolished but the mute Alone  
The mind from thought released, the heart from grief,  
Grow inexistent now beyond belief;  
There is no I, no Nature, known-unknown.  
The city, a shadow picture without tone,  
Floats, quivers unreal; forms without relief  
Flow, a cinema's vacant shapes; like a reef  
Foundering in shoreless gulfs the world is done.*

*Only the illimitable Permanent  
Is here. A Peace stupendous, featureless, still.  
Replaces all, - what once was I, in It  
A silent unnamed emptiness content  
Either to fade in the Unknowable  
Or thrill with the luminous seas of the Infinite.  
(Sri Aurobindo, 2009, p. 561)*

Neither Sri Aurobindo nor Lele were expecting such an experience. It was of some inconvenience, since Sri Aurobindo was expected to deliver political speeches in Pune and Bombay, but couldn't find the motivation to do so. Lele, on his part, told Sri Aurobindo that "the devil had got hold of him," since the schools of Vaishnavism are theistic and not world-negating. However, he was impelled by a voice within him to ask Sri Aurobindo to trust his own inner guidance from now (Heehs, 2008, p. 148).

In essence, Sri Aurobindo did achieve what Lele had hoped for him, access to a divine guidance of his own, but this came via an unexpected experience. In using the term nirvana to

describe this experience, Sri Aurobindo clearly relates the experience to Buddhism, though the term "brahmanirvana" (The Bhagavad Gita V:26) also occurs in the Gita. From his descriptions of the event (as in the above poem), it is clear that the experience included a radical unreality and an extinction of the ego and any sense of self (including the Vedantic Atman), which separate it from an Advaitic moksha. However, he was later to refer to the ontology of this experience as the passive Brahman, which relates it to the lexicon of Vedanta and the Gita. Considering the Tantric tradition, this experience could be equated with *laya*, the dissolution of the self in Superconscience.

## Vaishnava, Tantra, Pancharatra

In Bombay, Lele, who accompanied Sri Aurobindo on his journey, asked him to fold his hands to Narayana (Supreme Being) and open himself to the Divine to speak through him. The reference to Narayana reinforces our understanding of Lele as a Vaishnav, most possibly of the Vishishtadvaita school of Vedanta, for which Narayana takes the highest place. This is also related to the Pancharatra sect, supported by Vishishtadvaita, which believes in a cosmology of emanationism from Narayana and/or Vasudeva, both names and forms of Vishnu that played a central part in Sri Aurobindo's sadhana. This, indeed, would have been an instance of listening to the "inner voice" of the Divine, but Sri Aurobindo had lost the will to works, due to the radical unreality experienced by him. Eventually, Lele folded his hands to Narayana and Sri Aurobindo witnessed a political speech being delivered, using his vocal instrumentation as a medium (Heehs, 2008, pp. 146-147). This, on its part, would hardly be a typical Buddhist experience, but could be more closely related to the Gita, where Arjuna is asked by Krishna to lose the sense of doership and, seated in brahmanirvana, enjoy the activity of prakriti in and through him, under the guidance of the Divine.

Following this experience, Sri Aurobindo continued in this state of unreality, obeying the directives of a divine voice (*adesh*) or other forms of communication and action through his instrumentation. At some time, during this period, the identification of this Divine Source with Krishna occurred in Sri Aurobindo's consciousness, though one of the first times we hear mention of this is during the famous Uttarpara Speech, delivered after his acquittal from the Alipore Jail in 1909.

This incarceration took place in May 1908, for allegedly directing terrorist activity in the case of the attempted bombing of a magistrate and the killing of two British ladies. Sri Aurobindo was in the jail for one year, facing a most likely death sentence. During this time, his yoga flourished. He has written about this: "I have spoken of a year's imprisonment. It would have been more appropriate to speak of a year's living in an ashram or a hermitage. The only result of the wrath of the British Government was that I found God" (Sri Aurobindo, 1991, pp. 261-262)

In the jail, Sri Aurobindo, who was settled in "the passive Brahman," now discovered "the active Brahman" (Heehs, 2008, pp. 177-178). This again is a combination of Tantric and Vaishnav regional traditions hearkening back either to an even earlier Pancharatra or to an evolution of Pancharatra. Krishna and Kali are Ishwara and Shakti. Kali is the universal Energy whose becomings are all things and Krishna is the Person at the heart of each becoming.

But Sri Aurobindo was a pure witness at one level, the level of the modern scientist. From the Uttarpara Speech and other records of that time, we know that it was an intense period of trials, of the overcoming of fear and aversion, of the practice of the mantra, *sarvam khaluvidam brahma, vasudevah sarvam iti* (Heehs, 2008, p. 165). This mantra demonstrated the link between Pancharatra Vishnavism (Vasudeva) and the Upanishads (Brahman), and in Sri Aurobindo's description, we see how the constant meditation on the idea moved from an impersonal Presence pervading and in all things in the cosmos, to an impersonal Person, wearing all the names and faces of the cosmos, and from that, to the Person than whom there is no other as Lover in all things. This, the *Record of Yoga* shows us, is the Krishna-Kali (Sri Aurobindo, 2001, pp. 77, 230, 571, 711, 734, 735, 760, 830, 831, 833, 845, 851, 869, 876, 922) and Krishnakali (2001, pp. 96-97, 247, 275, 277, 750, 767, 770, 780-783, 810, 813, 851, 854, 859, 863, 875, 883, 912, 923, 931) realizations; where Kali is the universal Energy whose becomings are all things, and Krishna is the Mysterious Being at love play (*lila*) with his own active mirror which is also himself, infinite, but Other— since radical Infinity means always an infinite Remainder. This is the Other of the Same, a dialectical polarity, positive and negative, *linga* and *yonī*<sup>2</sup>, that is necessary to the birthing of infinite becomings.

Of course, “nothing too, is himself unguessed” as Sri Aurobindo (2009, p. 216) writes in his poem “Parabrahman”. This poem, dated as being between 1900 and 1909, is a precise philosophical statement, using poetry just like the ancient Indian philosopher-poets of the Upanishads. It seems to me to be written after the Parabrahman experience, which is most likely to have visited him in the Alipore Jail. The entire poem is worth quoting, but I will restrict myself to the last verses:

*He is, we cannot say; for Nothing too  
Is His conception of Himself unguessed.  
He dawns upon us and we would pursue,  
But who has found Him or what arms possessed?*

*He is not anything, yet all is He;  
He is not all but far exceeds that scope.  
Both Time and Timelessness sink in that sea:  
Time is a wave and Space a wandering drop.*

*Within Himself He shadowed Being forth,  
Which is a younger birth, a veil He chose  
To half-conceal Him, Knowledge, nothing worth  
Save to have glimpses of its mighty cause,*

*And high Delight, a spirit infinite,  
That is the fountain of this glorious world,  
Delight that labours in its opposite,  
Faints in the rose and on the rack is curled.*

<sup>2</sup> Literally phallus and vagina, anthropomorphic signifiers in Indic and specially Shaiva and Tantric discourse, standing for a cosmic polarity.



*This was the triune playground that He made  
And One there sports awhile. He plucks His flowers  
And by His bees is stung; He is dismayed,  
Flees from Himself or has His sullen hours.*

*The Almighty One knew labour, failure, strife;  
Knowledge forgot divined itself again:  
He made an eager death and called it life,  
He stung himself with bliss and called it pain.*

The Alipore Jail descriptions are famous, of course, for Sri Aurobindo's experiences of Krishna—the Lover embracing him in all things (Sri Aurobindo, 1997a, p. 6), and finally revealing Himself in all beings at a court hearing (Sri Aurobindo, 1997a, p. 7). We don't get many mentions of Kali. There are a few interesting ones from his *Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Sri Aurobindo, 1997b). These, for example: "519. Kali is Krishna revealed as dreadful Power & wrathful Love. She slays with her furious blows the self in body, life & mind in order to liberate it as spirit eternal" (p. 496). But in one he spells out his relation to both of these:

427. I did not know for some time whether I loved Krishna best or Kali; when I loved Kali, it was loving myself, but when I loved Krishna, I loved another, and still it was my Self with whom I was in love. Therefore I came to love Krishna better even than Kali. (p. 483)

This "thought" shows Sri Aurobindo's identity with Kali, a condition he later described also in his book *The Mother* (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 13). Here Kali is seen not just as the cosmic Nature Force, but as the transcendental Shakti, one of whose appearances is the cosmos. The laws of the cosmos therefore do not bind either Kali or the sadhak who has surrendered him/herself to Kali. But bearing this transcendental Mother Force, he experiences it as himself ("when I loved Kali it was loving myself"). It is out of this identity with Kali that he experiences Her play with Krishna, the Other, the Mysterious, the Infinite Continent. According to the editor's note at the end of the volume, *The Thoughts and Aphorisms* were written in or around 1913, at a time when the diary entries of the *Record of Yoga* were also being written.

## The Four Realizations

Sri Aurobindo has described his yoga as resting on four "realizations." By the time he departed from the jail, he had realized two of these four realizations and was on the way to the other two realizations. In his words:

The first [realization] he had gained while meditating with the Maharashtrian Yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele at Baroda in January 1908; it was the realization of the silent, spaceless and timeless Brahman .....[;] his second realization ... was that of the cosmic consciousness and of the Divine as all beings and all that is, which happened in the Alipore jail .... To the other two realizations, that of the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects and that of the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind, he was already on his way in his meditations at the Alipore jail. (Sri Aurobindo, 2006, p. 94)

In the above account, we have seen three of the four realizations he speaks about here – the realization of the passive Brahman, the realization of the active Brahman and the realization of the Two-in-One in the guise of Krishna-Kali. However, in this description of four realizations, some key steps are missed out: (1) the realization of the active (and *saguna*) Brahman includes a containing and forming aspect and an aspect of immanence. These impersonal functions can be seen personally as Kali and Krishna respectively. Evidently, this is a transition that occurred in Sri Aurobindo's consciousness—the move from the *nirguna* (formless/static) to the *saguna* (immanent/dynamic) Brahman, with its qualities of dynamic manifestation and evolution and of individual creativity, and then to the Krishna-Kali, Krishnakali and ultimately Krishna personalism; (2) the realization of “the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects” also reflects the above transition and is ultimately dramatized in the reduction from plural to dual (Krishna-Kali) to two-in-one (Krishnakali) and finally to the sole existence of Krishna.

We can see in these four realizations again, the weaving of the Vedantic, Tantric and Vaishnav traditions. The first realization, as we have discussed, is Buddhistic and close to Advaitic (i.e. non-dualistic); the second realization includes the Tantric and Vishishtadvaitic at first, then the Gaudiya Vaishnav. The Tantric traditions aim for the experience of an impersonal all pervading and shaping Consciousness but this is seen and experienced as the Player in all forms, Kali. The Vishishtadvaitic realization of Ramanuja is an ontology of the One Person as the Many at play. Here if we combine Tantra and Vishishtadvaita, the Presence in the Substance and Energy of nature is seen as Kali, while its purpose can be seen as the relational delight of Vishnu-Narayana (Person form of Parabrahman) (according to the Gita and Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Krishna) with his prakriti (what the Tantrics would call Shakti). “The Parabrahman with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects” could be seen again as related to a synthesis of Tantric and Vishishtadvaitic ideas, particularly if we consider all three Parabrahman, passive Brahman and active Brahman to have Personal forms. Parabrahman would then be the transcendental form of Vishnu-Narayana, while the passive Brahman would be more like Shiva of the Tantric traditions and the active Brahman would be Kali with Krishna immanent within all her becomings.

Among the yoga traditions of India, the one tradition that is known to pair Krishna and Kali is the Tantric Ten Mahavidya tradition, where Kali's consort is Krishna. There may be other esoteric traditions that have the same coupling, but if so, this is not commonly known. The ontology of the third realization also derives from the Gita, where the Parabrahman would be Purushottama (Supreme Being) and the passive and active Brahman, akshara and kshara Purusha respectively. Translating the Vishishtadvaitic and Tantric schemes into Pancharatra (five manifestations) , each of the entities involved would be an Ishwara-Shakti pair, Parabrahman as Purushottama-Paraprakriti of the Gita or Narayana-Sri Lakshmi of Pancharatra which could have morphed in Sri Aurobindo's case to Krishna-Kali. The passive Brahman would retain the neutrality of the Nameless, while the active Brahman would assume the emanationism of Pancharatra, based on the quartering of the Vedic Purusha in the Purusha Sukta.<sup>3</sup> These

<sup>3</sup> The Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda describes the self-sacrifice of Purusha by “quartering” Himself into the four varnas – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. The Pancharatra emanationism follows this in seeing a Supreme Narayana emanate Himself into four descendants, the Vrishni heroes who can be identified as lords of the the four varnas – Vasudeva or Mahavira for the Brahmin, Sankarshana or

emanations would also exist in Ishwara-Shakti pairs. This, indeed, is what we find in *The Record of Yoga*; and in a modified form, in *The Mother*.

## Topography of Evolution

Moreover, though the first three realizations could be spoken of in terms of existing regional schools of traditional practice, the fourth realization—that of “the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind,”—is not as easy to find in traditional discourse of the modern period. This may be because the cartographer's interest required for this had been largely lost in the Indian spiritual traditions, perhaps because the Vedantic division between Vidya (knowledge) and Avidya (ignorance) was considered permanent. If, however, this division is probed, it yields a topography that provides a pathway for conscious human evolution towards a being of Knowledge. This entire aspect may be thought of as modern, not only in terms of its historicity but in terms of its ideology and telos. It is interesting that Sri Aurobindo claims initiation into this line of consideration from Vivekananda, ten years his senior, who went to sow the seeds of a Vedantic ideology and telos in America at the time when Sri Aurobindo returned to India from England.<sup>4</sup>

Brought up in English ways, Sri Aurobindo integrated British (and with it, French) modernity into his situated regional practices of traditional yoga. One may question his adherence to any existing sect or cult, but leeway and originality have always been encouraged in the most of the regional traditions of India, resulting in a rich evolving discourse. But to think a global and more, species-wide telos, defining in its own way thereby, the human, is quintessentially modern.

Heidegger's “Europeanization of the world” is the globalization and planetarization of the telos of technicity, humanity as *techne*. Against this, Heidegger had proposed humanity as *poiesis* instead, and even *techne* as *poiesis*. But once the dye has been cast, the modern born with the humanization of the cosmos as its goal, the definition of the human as a universal species-being goes up for grabs and there is no escape from the struggle for human self-definition. The Vedantic alternative proposed by Vivekananda was a science of Consciousness. Pushing these borders further, Sri Aurobindo (acknowledging Vivekananda as his occult teacher), began probing the phenomenology of mystic and cosmic experiences, and came up with a topography of consciousness ranges intervening between the human and the Knowledge consciousness (Vidya). Defining the human in these terms provides a telos of embodied and active self-exceeding renewing Nietzsche's dream of the Overman: “Man is a rope stretched between the beast and the overman” (Nietzsche 1982, p. 126). Hence, one may say that this traditionally novel line of yoga subsumed the traditional lineages of practice in Sri Aurobindo, giving a modern meaning to them—the *lila* as the evolutionary play of Krishna and Kali, leading to an unveiling of cosmic Maya and the Knowledge of Creative Agency as Oneness and Love. Such an unveiling would mean a materialization of the Symbolic Truth (taking the Symbol to be the archetypal Real), made plural through an embodied gift of tongues, the slippage and splintering

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Balarama for the Kshatriya, Pradyumna for the Vaishya and Aniruddha for the Sudra. For further details on Pancharatra, see Matsubara (Matsubara, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> 1893, the year of the Columbian Exposition and the Parliament of World Religions, held in Chicago, for which Vivekananda set sail for the US, was also the year of Sri Aurobindo's return to India from England.

of the Word into its infinity, making possible a Love relationship of Wonder between all beings, stemming from the experienced simultaneity of (radical) oneness (i.e. identity) and (radical) difference (i.e. singularity).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Sri Aurobindo came into contact with a number of situated Indian traditions of yoga and seems to have absorbed symbologies, goals, practices and lexicons from all of these. The Vedanta and the Gita seem to have remained, as per the tradition, Sri Aurobindo's textual touchstone, the *Sruti* (sacred texts), from which all else must seek validation. Of course, cosmic and transcendental experience exceeded these, but the Vedanta and Gita, were accepted by the tradition and by the early Sri Aurobindo, evidently following his own faith, to be in consonance with the highest experiences. Later, Sri Aurobindo was to discover unexplained obscurities in the Vedanta and the Veda Samhita was to become the original source of the goal of a divine life that he had arrived at. In Bengal, he entered an immersive environment saturated with Krishna and Kali, and had already received his mystic introduction to both of these at Baroda, Kali in her temple at Chandod and Krishna through the Gita. But neither of these seems to have become very spiritually important to him until after the nirvana experience of Baroda in 1907. By the time (1908) he was in the Alipore Jail, Krishna had become the personal form of the Divine with whom he was principally in relation. Sri Aurobindo does not mention the name of Kali with respect to the Alipore Jail, but after his departure to Pondicherry in 1910, we begin seeing references to his identity with Her, particularly in his *Thoughts and Aphorisms* (Sri Aurobindo, 1997b) and *The Record of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo, 2001). He also signed his letters of advice to his revolutionary friends, Kali. Yet, the Alipore Jail was also an initiation to a new and non-traditional line of yoga practice, one which gradually subsumed all the others and which he termed the formation of an intuitive mentality, seen not as an individual occult power (siddhi) but as a necessary step towards an alternate telos of modernity—the evolution of human consciousness out of its ignorance into the Knowledge or Integral Consciousness, which, in his opinion, could result in a divine life on earth.

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