

Sri Aurobindo's Lila

The Nature of Divine Play According to Integral Advaita

Matthew W. Morey¹

Abstract: This essay addresses the concept of Lila, or Divine Play, in the context of Integral Advaita as described by Sri Aurobindo and Haridas Chaudhuri. In order to convey the characteristics of Integral Lila, the first part of the essay examines Integral Advaita. The second part of the essay directly addresses Sri Aurobindo's description of Lila, a play that is at once a dalliance of the Divine and a teleological drama unfolding toward a denouement that may be at hand. In the context of Lila, the essay examines evolution, the individual poise of Brahman and the participatory nature of Integral Yoga.

Keywords: Haridas Chaudhuri; Integral Non-dualism; Integral Philosophy; Integral Yoga; Integral Advaita; Sri Aurobindo; Lila; *Purnadvaita*.

The slow self-manifesting birth of God in Matter is the purpose of the terrestrial Lila.

(Ghose, 1997, Vol. 12, p. 247)

Lila, as a concept denoting play, is applied to much of Indian thought, both spiritual and secular. According to Apte's *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, the noun *lila* means anything from "Sport, dalliance, play" to "any languid or amorous gesture in a woman" (Apte, 1965, p.813). Clearly not reserved strictly for the spiritual, *lila* is nevertheless employed as a justification for the mystery of existence in various Indian religions. Depending on the spiritual system claiming the term, *lila* denotes a specific Divine play whose nature corresponds to the fundamental epistemological and spiritual beliefs of the tradition in question. Thus the tenor of the definition of *lila* provides a unique vantage point for any spiritual tradition that utilizes the term.

In this essay I will examine the concept of *Lila*² in the context of Sri Aurobindo's Integral yoga. The essay is divided into two sections: The first examines the distinguishing characteristics

¹ **Matthew W. Morey** is a doctoral candidate in the East-West Psychology Program at California Institute of Integral Studies. As a psychotherapist intern, his focus is on integrating Integral and Buddhist wisdom with Western psychological practices. He is a former Peace Corps Volunteer and school teacher, who now teaches mindfulness to teens at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and other venues in the San Francisco Bay Area. He also works in the service sector to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds. His personal practice is geared toward contributing to the collective well-being and furtherance of consciousness on the planet.

mwmorey@hotmail.com

² The terms that originate from Sri Aurobindo's writings will be expressed in this paper capitalized or lower case according to his usage. The secular use of the words out of Sri Aurobindo's and Chaudhuri's context, for example the dictionary and general use of the term *lila* used above, will be expressed in lower case.



of *purṇadvaita* (integral nondualism) in the context of Integral yoga. In this section I use primarily the material from Haridas Chaudhuri who has produced numerous studies examining and comparing Sri Aurobindo's Integral advaita, a complex and nuanced distinct interpretation of nonduality, with other religious schools. His studies have distilled out the major characteristics of Integral advaita that will be used in the remainder of the paper. These characteristics, which will be examined thoroughly in the section on *purṇadvaita*, include the following: validity of three quasi-independent poises of being within the larger framework of Brahman³; the evolution of consciousness from the nescient world of matter toward superconscious beings who will evolve past a sense of separation from, and ignorance of Brahman; and the participatory role of human beings in this unfolding evolution.

The distinguishing properties of Sri Aurobindo's Integral advaita provide the philosophical and spiritual framework in which Lila is embedded. The second section examines the concept of *Lila* as referenced in the works of Sri Aurobindo, focusing primarily on passages from *The Life Divine*, and the implications of this interpretation of Lila.

Lila in Integral yoga is indeed the idle play of the Absolute, but the play involves a uniquely teleological and participatory agenda—an agenda that the Absolute has somehow put forward—that leads toward the evolution of consciousness. The three poises of being provide a context for this evolutionary agenda. The participatory nature of the individual poise of being creates a quasi-independent dynamo for the evolution of consciousness. But this evolution is conceived “in sport” (Ghose, 2009, Vol.2, p.611) in that its denouement, the recognition of Brahman in all things, has never been absent; or as Chaudhuri describes it, liberation or “*mukti* [is the] realization of eternal identity with the Divine” (Chaudhuri, 1950, p.221). Thus the Lila of Integral advaita is a specific play at once teleological and idle, and one in which humans are definite distinct players with unique agency to further Brahman's game.

Advaita in the Context of Integral Philosophy

Haridas Chaudhuri explores Integral Advaita from several perspectives. In *Being, Evolution & Immortality* (Chaudhuri, 1974) and in the essay, *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (Chaudhuri, 1960), he compares eastern nondual practices with western dualistic ones, examines the various ways in which nondual Advaita Vedanta traditions have manifested in Asia and distinguishes Integral advaita from the other nondual traditions. Chaudhuri takes on a perennialist perspective with regard to advaita, suggesting that the traditions that emphasize the nondual realization include, among others, “Vedanta, Tantra, Vaisnavism, Taoism, and Zen,” and he suggests Christian mysticism and Sufism also have qualities of nondual traditions (Chaudhuri, 1960, p.26). He speaks to the wisdom of these philosophies, discussing their strengths and shortcomings. Though each has its own wisdom and practices that emphasize the

³ In this paper the use of the word Brahman is synonymous with the Absolute, the Infinite, God and Being. Though at certain points Ishwara, Purusha and other terms might be more specifically appropriate, this level of parsing the nature of existence is beyond the scope of this essay. The chapter “Brahman, Purusha, Ishwara—Maya, Prakriti, Shakti” in *The Life Divine* (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, pp. 336-379) distinguishes the nuances of these different expressions of Being. Brahman contains them all: “Brahman the Reality is Atman, Purusha, Ishwara....The Supreme Brahman is that which in Western metaphysics is called the Absolute: but Brahman is at the same time the omnipresent Reality in which all that is relative exists as its forms or its movements...” (p. 338).

ever-available access to the lived experience of the Absolute, Chaudhuri contends that none of these schools embraces the whole of human experience.

According to Chaudhuri, only Sri Aurobindo integrated the strengths and wisdom of these various religious traditions to create a *purṇadvaitavada*, or Integral Advaita. Chaudhuri (1950) clarifies the inclusiveness of Integral advaita in *Sri Aurobindo: Prophet of the Life Divine*⁴, identifying the distinctions between Integral nondualism and *kevaladvaitavada* (unqualified nondualism), *visistadvaitavada* (qualified nondualism) and *dvaitavada* (dualism). He discusses how each of these three spiritual schools have a legitimate contribution to make, but none of them alone can be said to honor the full range of the existence: the co-existence of the individual along with the cosmic contexts and the transcendent Sachchidananda. Any of these three schools of Eastern thought touch on an abiding truth of existence, but only Integral advaita finds an integral poise including the three into a larger whole.

The key to Chaudhuri's analysis is the observation that the absolute can have paradoxical manifold simultaneous expressions without diminishment. Brahman can divide itself into individual beings with agency and self determination, while expressing the unfolding cosmic designs as well as the inescapable ultimate transcendent Sachchidananda.

[I]ntegral nondualism affirms being as the undivided unity of the formless and multiple forms. According to ancient nondualism, ultimate reality is the formless, the indeterminable. Forms and determinations are unreal from the ultimate standpoint. In the view of Integral nondualism, forms and determinations also are very real from the ultimate standpoint. They are the glory of the creative urge inherent in Being. They provide meaning and reality to the self-expressive impulse of Being. (Chaudhuri, 1974, p. 31)

This affirmation of formlessness and form sets the stage for an exploration of distinct poises of being that exist inseparably within the cognitively incomprehensible seamlessness of Brahman. "As supra cosmic transcendence, Brahman is not a blank featureless unity, but an infinitely opulent unity embracing an unlimited wealth of content and measureless possibility" (Chaudhuri, 1950, p.218). Chaudhuri suggests that no previous religious tradition has effectively integrated the truths in the various nondual and dual wisdom traditions in Asia. Exploring *kevaladvaitavada*, *visistadvaitavada* and *dvaitavada*, he details both the accuracy and the limitations of these schools of thought, and sets up an interpretation of Integral advaita that includes the wisdom of each.

With regard to unqualified nondualism, whether that of Shankaracharya's advaita, Buddhism, Samkhya yoga, or other traditions, Chaudhuri has a mixed review. These wisdom traditions have brought to consciousness the capacity to experience the ineffable unity of being at the very heart of the mystery of existence, which has of course been a gift to humanity. But two shortcomings exist about their interpretations of the range of existence. First, the emphasis on the transcendent has uniformly minimized the immanent expression in this world. Involvement in this world is, according to these advaita schools, a potential "entanglement either in the meshes of Prakriti

⁴ Much of the material Chaudhuri uses can be found in *The Life Divine* in the chapter "The Triple Status of the Supermind" (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, pp. 152-160). Chaudhuri's work is both an exegesis of this chapter and a comparative analysis with other religious traditions in India.

(*Samkhya*) or in the cobwebs of Maya (*Shankara Vedanta*), or in the fetters of Karma (*Buddhism*)” (Chaudhuri, 1950, pp. 44-45). The shortcoming in this perception of the manifest world is the conviction that involvement in this world of nature and people is entangling illusion fraught with dangerous spiritual setbacks.

Integral advaita emphasizes that depths of sustained liberation should include the embodiment of the individual in the realm of this cosmic expression of Brahman; the world is nothing other than Brahman's creative expression and the liberated individual is the fruition of Brahman rising to consciousness in Jivatman. As Chaudhuri (1950) describes,

The empirical individual is without a doubt a product of Ignorance, but the same cannot be said of the spiritual *individual* (*jivatman*) which is essentially a particular poise of being or mode of manifestation of the supreme Spirit. Identical with Brahman in essence and existence, the spiritual individual has also a unique function and form of manifestation of its own, in consequence of which it differs from other poises of being of Brahman, the supreme Reality. (p. 216)

From this point of view the world itself—again provided that the individual has been liberated from “all taint of ignorance” that keeps the ego in a state of illusion of separation and self importance—is an inseparable expression of Brahman, valid in its own right and, as a creative manifestation of Brahman, worthy of creative interface and participation by the individual.

Qualified nondualism or *visistadvaita*, according to Chaudhuri, makes the contribution to the dialogue of religious wisdom that *jivatman*, the spiritual self of each individual, is in fact an inseparable aspect of Brahman. *Jivatman* “is not ontologically separate from the supreme Lord, but is rather eternally dependent upon Him as His standing self-differentiation” (Chaudhuri, 1950, p.213). However, the insufficiency of the qualified schools of Advaita, according to Chaudhuri, is that their understanding of the nature of existence fails to capture the nature of relationship of the Jivatman and Brahman.

No analogy or conceptual framework can do justice to the mysterious nature of Being. The term *self-differentiation* from the passage above speaks to the wisdom of both unqualified advaita and qualified advaita: This is all Brahman, all without the possibility of otherness. But paradoxically—and as the qualified advaitans emphasize—the human aspect of Brahman does in fact have a quality of independence within the larger frame of being Brahman.

Chaudhuri (1950) suggests that humanity is an aspect of Brahman, but with a standing independent agency. This paradox is of course at the heart of liberating insight. “The Individual Self is not a mere power or form or quality or function of the Absolute; it is the Absolute itself in a particular poise of being” (p.213). The shortcoming of the Qualified Nondualism is summed up as a sort of inverse to the Unqualified Nondualism:

In other words, *visistadvaita* is mistaken in emphasizing the Saguna aspect of Brahman at the cost of the Nirguna aspect. Brahman is at once Nirguna and Saguna. And the liberated soul is at liberty to choose either the state of blissful absorption in Nirguna Brahman or the state of rapturous communion with the Saguna Brahman (p. 214).

Here the Nirguna aspect of Brahman is the transcendent state of the movement beyond form. The Saguna aspect is the world of form that is a poise subsumed in the formless unfolding. Both poises, Chaudhuri suggests, are valid.

Dualism, or *dvaitavada*, validates the abiding quality of the spiritual individual before, during and after spiritual awakening. What liberation eradicates is the ego, the “empirical self which is an organization of Nature (*prakriti*) for the centralization of man’s manifold experience” (Chaudhuri, 1950, p.212). The spiritual self is in fact “an eternally real component of ultimate reality”(p.212). However, Dualism overshoots the mark when it perceives each Jivatman is ontologically independent from one another and the larger scope of Ultimate existence. Dualism as a system of thought acknowledges the individualization of Brahman into component parts “*as if* it were entirely separate from other individual soul forms and also form the universal Divine” (pp.210-211). This “poise of being in the Spirit” is critical to Integral nondualism, but it must be taken within the larger truth of Being: “The basic and essential unity of Spirit is in no way abrogated by this free play of differentiation” (p. 211).

Integral advaita reconciles the validity of all three of these spiritual schools.

When the Spirit is realized in its full Integrality, it is found that advaita, visistadvaita, and dvaita are all true, although none of them represents the whole truth. They are all true in so far as they endeavor to translate in terms of logical thinking three equally real poises of being—three supramental forms of self-manifestation—of the same indivisible ineffable Spirit. (Chaudhuri, 1950, p. 211-212)

Thus each is valid, but not sufficient to embrace the range of being that is described by Integral advaita. Below is an extended passage from *The Life Divine* (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22) in which Sri Aurobindo describes the coexistence of three poises of being, all of which, he proposes, can be grasped by the Supermind:

We, human beings, are phenomenally a particular form of consciousness, subject to Time and Space, and can only be, in our surface consciousness which is all we know of ourselves, one thing at a time, one formation, one poise of being, one aggregate of experience; and that one thing is for us the truth of ourselves which we acknowledge; all the rest is either not true or no longer true.... But the Divine Consciousness is not so particularized, nor so limited; it can be many things at a time and take more than one enduring poise even for all time. We find that in the principle of Supermind itself it has three such general poises or sessions of its world-founding consciousness. The first founds the inalienable unity of things, the second modifies that unity so as to support the manifestation of the Many in One and One in Many; the third further modifies it so as to support the evolution of a diversified individuality which, by the action of Ignorance, becomes in us at a lower level the illusion of the separate ego. (pp. 155-156)

This passage speaks to the limitations of the human mind such that we embrace a single poise of being that is true and limit that observation as the exclusive truth. Thus *advaita*, *visistadvaita* and *dvaita* all have truths to offer humanity, but none are sufficient to describe the paradoxical inclusive expression of Brahman. The three poises described in the above passage correspond to

the wisdom of the three spiritual schools that Chaudhuri analyzes above. The Unqualified Nondualists describe the “inalienable unity of things”; the Qualified Nondualists adhere to the “manifestation of the many in the one”; and the Dualists affirm “the evolution of a diversified individuality.” The coexistence of the three poises of Being is beyond the scope of our conceptual analysis of the regular human mind, but the profound expression of the three can be simultaneously experienced by the Supermind, toward which Sri Aurobindo suggests consciousness, in the guise of humanity for the time being, is evolving. Chaudhuri (1950) captures the inclusive and indefinable nature of the coexistence of the three poises of being within Integral Nondualism:

The spiritual individual is, in point of truth, a center of universal consciousness, a focus and medium of the transcendent Divine. Eternally free in itself, the spiritual Individual is essentially identical with the All of existence and also identical with the all-transcending One. That is why *purṇadvaitavada* maintains that supra-cosmic transcendence, cosmic universality and unique individuality are three equally real, non-temporal poises of being of the same supreme Spirit. (p. 220)

Lila

All exists here, no doubt, for the delight of existence, all is a game or Lila; but a game too carries within itself an object to be accomplished and without the fulfillment of that object would have no completeness of significance.

(Ghose, 2009, Vol.2, p.867)

Sri Aurobindo's Commentary on Other Spiritual Views of Lila

To understand the unique manner in which Sri Aurobindo applies *Lila* to Integral Yoga requires that we first explore what he asserts Integral Lila is not. In his chapter, “The Divine and the UnDivine” (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, pp. 403-427), Sri Aurobindo describes possible variations on a doctrine of Lila that other religions and advaitin points of view might advocate. First with regard to dualistic thinking, whether some schools of Sankhya and Vaishnavism or certain Christian interpretations, Sri Aurobindo distinguishes his interpretation of Divine play from theirs. According to the dualistic schools, this worldly life is often seen as unDivine.

The soul by taking on manhood, perhaps by the very fact of birth itself, has fallen from the Divine, has committed an original sin or error which it must be man's spiritual aim, as soon as he is enlightened, thoroughly to cancel, unflinchingly to eliminate. In that case, the only reasonable explanation of such a paradoxical manifestation or creation is that it is a cosmic game, a Lila, a play, an amusement of the Divine Being. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 424)

Birth as an original sin or error clearly does not fit into the Aurobindonian understanding of Integral advaita. This understanding might be seen as teleological, but with these dualistic schools the teleology is promoted in the sense of eradicating a mistake. Sri Aurobindo's teleological play, which will be further examined below, does not start with a separation from or

mistake of the Divine. Clearly, *Lila* of the dualistic schools could be employed to their explanations of the mystery of existence, only the play involves a very different paradigm.

Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22) goes on:

Or, perhaps, as some religions curiously suppose, He has done this so that there may be inferior creatures who will praise and glorify Him for his eternal goodness, wisdom, bliss and omnipotence and try feebly to come an inch nearer to the goodness in order to share the bliss, on pain of punishment—by some supposed eternal—if, as the vast majority must by their very imperfection, they fail in their endeavor. But to the doctrine of such a Lila so crudely stated there is always possible the retort that a God, himself all-blissful, who delights in the suffering of creatures or imposes such suffering on them for the faults of his own imperfect creation, would be no Divinity and against Him the moral being and intelligence of humanity must revolt or deny His existence. (p. 424)

This dualistic rendering of a narcissistic God not only misses the mark of Lila in the Integral sense, but would demand a sort of spiritual call to arms by Sri Aurobindo, were it to be the case.

The applications of the term *Lila* to various other nondual schools of thoughts are dealt with subtly. With traditional Advaita in the Shankaracharya tradition in question, the obvious question of what is the motivation for this mask of imperfection on the ultimate transcendent Brahman that underlies all of our experience of existence?

It may be He pretends to be unDivine, wears that appearance like the mask or make-up of an actor for the sole pleasure of the pretence or the drama. Or else He has created the unDivine, created ignorance, sin and suffering just for the joy of a manifold creation. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p.424)

Perhaps for the advaitin sages that have experienced the Absolute, an explanation of any kind seems unnecessary. To transcend this realm of earthly experience and to see the vaster beautiful truth that embraces all possible manifestations is enough. Many advaitins may feel that the realm of seeking a logical explanation of any kind is to reenter into the small provincial world of our human drama. Since many nondual teachers do describe the typical human experience as an illusion, far removed from the liberating insight of true revelatory experience, engaging the mind to begin to fathom the mystery of Brahman's purposes may seem not just idle, but counter to the experience of insight into the absolute, often described as sheer wisdom, love or bliss.

Sri Aurobindo offers—and then refutes—two possible traditional nondual explanations of the mysterious puzzle of our existence within Brahman.

He suggests that the human drama with its shrouded comprehension of the Absolute is, a) an aspect of Brahman that He created of Himself as an idle pleasure of enactment or; b) simply the experience of the joy of being variously manifested. These two explanations affirm the status quo. One might argue that if bliss simply exists as the backdrop to all this creation, there is no need to meddle with complex thoughts of Brahman's intention. The fundamental knowledge that Atman is Brahman is enough to trust in the Divine and let the unfolding creation take care of

itself. The direct experience of Brahman, beyond the grasp of most of humanity, is sufficient. To fathom the intention of Brahman is unnecessary and quite possibly counterproductive to that direct experience.

Sri Aurobindo, however, does not adhere to this relationship between Atman and Brahman. He sees submission to an arbitrary universe with odd-ball beings, a few of whom can glimpse the Divine, as unbecoming to an all-blissful Brahman. Why should the vast majority of beings be destined to live in an ill-suited illusion while in actuality embraced by an abiding Love? With God of creation in all things, would this perspective not be a dim view of his purposes?

[E]xistence of the individual is not an error in some self of the Absolute which that self afterwards discovers... Neither is the individual existence a subordinate circumstance in a Divine play or Lila, a play which consists of a continual revolution through unending cycles of pleasure and suffering without any higher hope in the Lila itself or any issue from it except the occasional escape of few from time to time out of their bondage to this ignorance. We might be compelled to hold that ruthless and disastrous view of God's workings if man had no power of self transcendence or no power of transforming by self-knowledge the conditions of the play nearer and nearer to the truth of the Divine Delight. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 402)

Sri Aurobindo clearly does not adhere to a view of Lila that would affirm the idle cycle of things. The view of a God that would provide for such a turn of affairs in which the mass of beings suffer in a small realm of being while only a very few beings perceive the delight that is Brahman, Sri Aurobindo offers as "ruthless and disastrous." Further, in emphasizing humanity's agency in bringing about self transcendence, Sri Aurobindo suggests that submitting to a worldview that holds with things as they are would indicate that we are missing the value of the very gift we have been given in this human form. He suggests here that we can and should engage in our own transformation.

Lila in the Integral Yoga Perspective

[E]ternal and immutable delight of being moving out into infinite and variable delight of becoming is the root of the whole matter... (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 111)

As described in the section above, Integral advaita distinguishes three poises of being: transcendental, universal and individual. These three poises exist distinctly within Brahman because Brahman can be paradoxically manifold and beyond manifold without ever losing its Absolute nature as Being. Transcendent Sachchidananda, the laws and expression of the material cosmos and the dawning consciousness of individual beings coexist. Each is a realm valid in and of itself, and each is an aspect of the play of the Absolute Brahman.

As with the being of Brahman, so with its consciousness, Maya: it is not bound to a finite restriction of itself or to one or law of its action; it can be many things simultaneously, have many co-ordinated movements which to the finite reason may seem contradictory; it is one but innumerably manifold, infinitely plastic, inexhaustibly adaptable. Maya is the supreme and universal consciousness and force of the Eternal and Infinite and, being by its

very nature unbound and illimitable, it can put forth many states of consciousness at a time, many dispositions of its Force, without ceasing to be the same consciousness-force for ever. It is at once transcendental, universal and individual; it is the supreme supracosmic Being that is aware of itself as All-Being, as the Cosmic Self, as the Consciousness-force of cosmic Nature, and at the same time experiences itself as the individual being and consciousness in all existences. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 356)

In order to comprehend *Lila* in the context of Sri Aurobindo's Integral yoga, this point, clearly identified by Sri Aurobindo above, must be understood. A nondual expression can manifest variously, obviously. That is the significance of nonduality: no individual being or object exists outside the creative expression of Brahman. All is Brahman unfolding. But the distinction that Sri Aurobindo makes above is that multifarious poises of being are expressing independently within the larger frame of Brahman. The transcendent, the cosmic and the individual exist on relatively independent levels of existence. Granted a rough conceptual sketch would put the individual consciousness within the cosmic, which in turn exists within the transcendent. But each has an independent expression simultaneously. This distinction of being, examined thoroughly by Chaudhuri (1950), as described above, begins to elucidate the nature of Being within which the Divine Lila of Integral yoga unfolds.

Evolution

The question of why such a complex system of Being exists as the expression of perfect Brahman is addressed repeatedly by Sri Aurobindo. Why, if cosmic material of all nature and life forms of all manner are perfection unfolding, is this delight of Being so hidden from consciousness in this worldly poise? Why do the vast majority of life forms on earth, including humans, in spite of their Divine status, fail to identify themselves as such? Our vision of our divinity is imperfect. If Sri Aurobindo's observations are correct, in spite of our Divine essence, most humans do not perceive this true nature. Is this some sort of deluding ruse that Brahman is playing on aspects of Itself?

Sri Aurobindo's response to these questions is simple: the Lila of Brahman involves the evolution of consciousness toward Sachchidananda.

In that power [of human capacity of self transcendence] lies the justification of individual existence; the individual and the universal unfolding in themselves the Divine light, power, joy of transcendent Sachchidananda always manifest above them, always secret behind their surface appearances, this is the secret intention, the ultimate significance of the Divine play, the Lila. But it is in themselves, in their transformation but also their persistence and perfect relations, not in their self-annihilation that that must be unfolded. Otherwise there would be no reason for their ever having existed; the possibility of the Divine's unfolding in the individual is the secret of the enigma, his presence there and this intention of the self-unfolding the key to the world of the Knowledge-Ignorance. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 402)

Thus the "secret intention" of the Lila is the "transformation" from unconscious matter to conscious beings to individuals in the cosmos who recognize their place in the Divine and the

Sachchidananda that permeates life and existence with that level of awakening. The “self-annihilation” of the schools of Advaita that promote transcendence from this realm of matter and individual consciousness does not agree with the transformation that Sri Aurobindo proposes. The material world and the beings whose consciousness has arisen thereof, are valid expressions per se of this creative unfolding mystery. To emphasize the primacy of transcendence from this world of form and individual life denigrates the miracle of our existence as evolving expressions of Brahman in this realm of cosmic and individual existence. Lila, from the Integral perspective, validates the Maya of this realm, its expression and development, as fundamentally valid expressions of Brahman in the context of the mystery of the play.

However, for Sri Aurobindo the creative and teleological play of Lila is superior to the concept of Maya. In comparing the Integral perspective, which embraces both the transcendent and the material poises, to the advaita of Shakaracharya, which gives primacy to the transcendent poise Being, Sri Aurobindo remarks:

The world, as God has made it, is not a rigid exercise in logic but, like a strain of music, an infinite harmony of many diversities, and his own existence, being free and absolute, cannot be logically defined....Maya is one realisation, an important one which Shankara overstressed because it was most vivid to his own experience. For yourself leave the word for subordinate use and fix rather on the idea of Lila, a deeper and more penetrating word than Maya. Lila includes the idea of Maya and exceeds it. (Ghose, 2009, Vol. 13, p. 89)

Maya, often translated to English as illusion, indicating the illusion of manifest existence, is understood by Sri Aurobindo differently. He describes Maya as the “consciousness” of Brahman (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p.356). This definition of Maya gives it substantially more credibility than regarding it as illusion. If this elevation of Maya is taken as a premise, “then certain consequences inevitably impose themselves” (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p.112). These include, first, that we are unknowingly supported by Brahman in this Lila in all moments and realms of being, and, second, that we are only partially evolved toward the desired ends of this Lila.

Lila, the play of affairs of the Divine, involves the transformation of Maya toward the realization of its true nature. In Moksha, the liberated mystics have achieved a level of consciousness that is essentially the Maya of manifest existence perceiving its place as Brahman. The possibility for humanity to rise above the station that it currently holds, that of illusion of separation and suffering, even as it is already one with Brahman, offers a glimpse of evolution and the manifold nature of Being.

In the first place...since in the reality of our being we are the indivisible All-Consciousness and therefore the inalienable All-Bliss, the disposition of our sensational experience in the three vibrations of pain, pleasure and indifference can only be a superficial arrangement created by that limited part of ourselves which is uppermost in our waking consciousness. Behind there must be something in us—much vaster, profounder, truer than the superficial consciousness—which takes delight impartially in all experiences; it is that delight which secretly supports the superficial mental being and enables it to persevere through all labours, sufferings and ordeals in the agitated movement of the Becoming.... Oneness finds itself infinitely in what seems to us to be a falling away

from its oneness, but is really an inexhaustible diverse display of unity. This is the miracle, the Maya of the universe, yet perfectly logical, natural and a matter of course to the self-vision and self-experience of the Infinite. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 112)

There is no way for us to be anything other than perfect transcendent Being unfolding, yet there is this illusion of separateness. In the larger frame of Being, regardless of our pains, some part of us “takes delight impartially in all experiences.” The illusion of separateness and the pains that result are indications of our imperfect evolution toward Sachchidananda. Our divided consciousness is:

... an imperfect response, a tangled and discordant rhythm preparing and preludeing the full and unified play of the conscious Being in us; it is not the true and perfect symphony that may be ours if we can once enter into sympathy with the One in all variations and attune ourselves to the absolute and universal diapason. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 112)

This imperfection of human experience is logical from the point of view of the graduated development from nescient matter toward individuals whose consciousness can realize the Sachchidananda that permeates all things. Imperfection is necessary in the movement from inert matter to life to embodied aspects of Brahman experiencing Itself—all of which is part of Brahman's Lila.

The strangeness of the play diminishes, the paradox loses its edge of sharpness if we discover that, although fixed grades exist each with its appropriate order of nature, they are only firm steps for a progressive ascent of the souls embodied in forms of matter, a progressive Divine manifestation which rises from the inconscient to the superconscient or all-conscient status with the human consciousness as its decisive point of transition. Imperfection becomes then a necessary term of the manifestation: for, since all the Divine nature is concealed but present in the Inconscient, it must be gradually delivered out of it; this graduation necessitates a partial unfolding, and this partial character or incompleteness of the unfolding necessitates imperfection. An evolutionary manifestation demands a mid-stage with gradations above and under it,—precisely such a stage as the mental consciousness of man, part knowledge, part ignorance, a middle power of being still leaning on the Inconscient but slowly rising towards the all-conscious Divine Nature. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 425)

This passage describes both evolution, the firm steps for a progressive ascent of the souls embodied in forms of matter, and the position of humanity in this ascent, a “mid-stage” of evolution, part insight, part ignorance. The description of evolution as ‘progressive Divine manifestation which rises from the inconscient to the superconscient or all-conscient status with the human consciousness as its decisive point of transition’ is both indicative of the evolutionary movement of Maya and the important position that humanity holds in this game of the Divine. Humanity is on the verge of achieving the critical evolutionary step of consciousness toward individual Beings who can achieve and sustain their relation as Brahman in this individual poise in the world of the cosmos: matter, soul, and even community. Sri Aurobindo's Integral yoga proposes that humanity can rise out of its stupor and ignorance, and that each individual should employ the agency to rise up toward the Divine. Lastly, this passage reminds us that the Divine

is always in the background, holding and sustaining human beings even when enveloped in the fog of their illusions of separateness: 'since all the Divine nature is concealed but present in the Inconscient, it must be gradually delivered out of it'. The nature of evolution is paradoxical: Humans are unconscious players in a game they have already won. The key to the game is that they must discover this for themselves.

This evolution from a limited largely unpleasant perception of ourselves to the Being-Consciousness-Bliss of Sachchidananda raises the question of cruelty: Why is humanity seemingly unwittingly involved in a game, much of which involves suffering. This game—whose dénouement, which exists just beyond the grasp of the ego for most of us, is incomparable joy—may seem rather tragic to the observer on the sideline: so much suffering to the multitudes of individuals. Why would the Absolute create players ignorant of their role in the game? Sri Aurobindo holds that an aspect of Atman must have consented to this play of the Divine:

A manifestation of this kind, self-creation or Lila, would not seem justifiable if it were imposed on the unwilling creature; but it will be evident that the assent of the embodied spirit must be there already, for Prakriti cannot act without the assent of the Purusha. There must have been not only the will of the Divine Purusha to make the cosmic creation possible, but the assent of the individual Purusha to make the individual manifestation possible. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 426)

Prakriti, in broad terms, refers to the earthly realm of material world and egoic beings that seem, phenomenologically, separate from Brahman. Purusha is the transcendent aspect of Brahman and Atman. That 'Prakriti cannot act without the assent of the Purusha', whether cosmic or individual suggests that the Divine cannot make players completely ignorant of their status as Divine. There is consent of some sort in this realm of Purusha that renders the illusion of suffering separate individuals moot. There is never complete severance from the Divine; our individual Atman is always there just behind the curtain of ignorance.

But if the human soul is a portion of the Divinity, if it is a Divine Spirit in man that puts on this imperfection and in the form of humanity consents to bear this suffering, or if the soul in humanity is meant to be drawn to the Divine Spirit and is His associate in the play of imperfection here, in the delight of perfect being elsewhere, the Lila may still remain a paradox, but it ceases to be a cruel or revolting paradox; it can at most be regarded as a strange mystery and to the reason inexplicable. (Ghose, 2009, Vol. 21-22, pp. 424-425)

We are each, then, the Divine Spirit's "associate." A part of us colludes with the Divine to play this game of imperfection. This image of individual Purusha admitting us into this game of evolution seems to render the game an odd curiosity, 'a strange mystery and to the reason inexplicable'.

Sri Aurobindo, however, proposes several nuanced justifications for the initiation of this Lila. First and foremost, Sri Aurobindo affirms the mystery of this game. He addresses the question of why we have this game to re-evolve into Brahman, when one has from the start never been separate: "The only question is the reason why this kind of progressive manifestation was itself necessary; that is the sole point left obscure to the intelligence" (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p.

426). He offers that the movement is itself a mystery beyond our ken: But it may be said that the Divine Will and delight in such an arduous manifestation and the reason for the soul's assent to it is still a mystery. But he goes on to say that a play of self-concealing and self-revealing is one of the most strenuous joys that a conscious being can experience. More than a mere game of transcendental hide and seek, this play involves the most poignant aspects of being alive. This then, the expression of Brahman in myriad individual forms whose accomplishment is discovering their innate divinity from the shroud of ignorance, might be one reason for this Divine game, the delight of self discovery.

Another sort of proposed justification for the play of the Divine that Sri Aurobindo suggests "is a new affirmation of Sachchidananda in its apparent opposite. If the Infinite's right of various self-manifestation is granted, this too as a possibility of its manifestation is intelligible and has its profound significance" (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 427). What sort of seamless bliss existed before the poise of cosmos began is, of course, unknowable. But the choice to take this "plunge into Inconscience," (p. 427) to take form in matter and cosmic energy, perhaps was preceded by simple uncomplicated bliss of Brahman. This plunge into the material world followed by a gradual evolutionary uncovering of the divinity innate in all things, then, could be for a freshness of perspective and affirmation of itself from the depths of the inert conditions of cosmic existence.

Whatever the motivation for the source of this teleological Lila may be, Sri Aurobindo is clear that there exists an abiding Sachchidananda at every level of the game. The game's sought resolution, that of abiding creative Being-Consciousness-Bliss, has never been absent, even as evolution of consciousness brings humanity closer to Sachchidananda. Perhaps the motivation for initiating the play is too vast for our psyches to grasp. Sri Aurobindo realized levels of communion with Brahman that unveiled the Being-Consciousness-Bliss, steadily present and gracious, unflinchingly behind and within the movement of all things.

The world of which we are a part is in its most obvious view a movement of Force; but that Force, when we penetrate its appearances, proves to be a constant and yet always mutable rhythm of creative consciousness casting up, projecting in itself phenomenal truths of its own infinite and eternal being; and this rhythm is in its essence, cause and purpose a play of the infinite delight of being ever busy with its own innumerable self-representations. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 111)

Thus Lila, idle Divine play, is the most fundamental motivation for existence as it stands.

The Participatory Nature of Evolution

The individual poise of Integral advaita describes beings within the cosmic design of Brahman, mainly ignorant of their Divine status for the time-being, that have agency to further their own evolution. That Brahman should willingly divide itself into micro-beings, fragments of Itself, who don't know what they are, may seem rather arbitrary. This arrangement certainly seems capricious.

However, the cosmic design has given us autonomy to move and develop as we will; hence, we participate in the Lila of immanent consciousness evolving toward Divinity. The aspect of evolution that is participatory for humanity involves choice: to submit to complacency or to live in such a way that moves us toward experiencing the Divine in any given moment. Our position as humans allows us the opportunity to consciously move our souls toward the union with Divine, even as we stay in and engage with the manifest material world. Alternatively, we also can choose to live in the 'sensational experience in the three vibrations of pain, pleasure and indifference'. This latter choice is, of course, compelling to most of us.

This complex evolution is at the heart of Integral advaita and Integral Lila. Brahman has moved into the inconscience of the cosmos for some reason beyond comprehension. But the movement is clearly toward reawakening to our true nature, otherwise why stars? Why planets? Why water? Why life? Why liberation (Moksha)? Humans can choose to fully engage in this game of rediscovery of our Divine nature. Though the opportunity is at hand, we have shown our capacity to decimate our own existence, thus setting back the chance for imminent evolution. Myopic 'greed, hatred and delusion' as the Buddhists put it, may cause humanity to miss this opportunity, not just for the possibility of abiding indescribable Bliss, but toward the achievement of sustained 'God in Matter' and the next step in Brahman's Lila.

The following extended passage from *The Life Divine* eloquently describes the steps of evolution and ends with our participation in the unfolding process.

But if it is once admitted that the Spirit has involved itself in the Inconscience and is manifesting itself in the individual being by an evolutionary gradation, then the whole process assumes meaning and consistence; the progressive ascent of the individual becomes a key-note of this cosmic significance, and the rebirth of the soul in the body becomes a natural and unavoidable consequence of the truth of the Becoming and its inherent law....Our explanation of the evolution in Matter is that the universe is a self-creative process of a supreme Reality whose presence makes spirit the substance of things—all things are there as the spirit's powers and means and forms of manifestation. An infinite existence, an infinite consciousness, an infinite force and will, an infinite delight of being is the Reality secret behind the appearances of the universe; its Divine Supermind or Gnosis has arranged the cosmic order....The material universe is the lowest stage of a downward plunge of the manifestation, an involution of the manifested being of this triune Reality into an apparent nescience of itself, that which we now call the Inconscient; but out of this nescience the evolution of that manifested being into a recovered self-awareness was from the very first inevitable. It was inevitable because that which is involved, must evolve; for it is not only there as an existence, a force hidden in its apparent opposite, and every such force must in its inmost nature be moved to find itself, to realise itself, to release itself into play, but it is the reality of that which conceals it, it is the self which the Nescience has lost and which therefore it must be the whole secret meaning, the constant drift of its action to seek for and recover. It is through the conscious individual being that this recovery is possible; it is in him that the evolving consciousness becomes organised and capable of awaking to its own Reality. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, pp. 784-785)

Evolution, as described here, is the “secret meaning” of the Lila. Out of the nescience of the material universe, we are recovering our wholeness through self-awareness. Fulfilling that awareness of our Divine nature in this realm of being in time and space is the Reality secret behind the appearances of the universe. The evolution will take place through each of our life choices, through the conscious individual being.

Thus as bits of Brahman ignorant of our identity, we are given the capacity to evolve, but with no guarantee of success. The paradox is as brilliant as it is bizarre. The general movement of consciousness in the cosmos is toward awakening: to find itself, to realize itself, and to release itself into play. The force of this energetic awakening is at work in us and in everything. Yet the animal nature out of which we have emerged has consolidated an egoic center that must be transcended to achieve Sachchidananda. We are at once moved by the zeitgeist of this existence which moves us toward self-knowledge and we are left to our own devices to sort out if and how humans will collectively achieve this final step from ignorance to self-knowledge.

The Dénouement: Superhumanity

Evolution's end, then, is a being in this realm of the material universe and individuality that knows the Sachchidananda of Brahman even as we exist on this cosmic and individual level of being. Sri Aurobindo describes our current status as a penultimate state of consciousness, near to this final stage. Our task as individuals and as a race is to grow from what we are into a more luminous existence—from pleasure and pain into a purer and vaster and deeper bliss, knowledge, and power.

There is an evolution and we have to complete it: a human animality or an animal humanity is not enough. We must pass from the inadequate figure of humanity into a figure of the Godhead, from mind to supermind, from the consciousness of the finite to the consciousness of the Infinite, from Nature into Supernature. (Ghose, 2009, Vol.12, pp. 227-228)

This notion of Supernature and Supermind are the final stages of this Lila, the achievement of the game's resolution. *Super-* of course suggests that which is above or beyond. Beyond mind lies the harmonious integration of Sachchidananda with our current practical worldly faculties. The accomplishment of Superhumanity is the fulfillment of the Divine play.

Superhumanity, then is beyond humanity in that it achieves the Supermind or Truth-Consciousness, that which experiences Sachchidananda, the Divinity behind and within all things, and lives in the individual poise ensconced in that level of awakened consciousness. Super-humanity is the next step in evolution and the fulfillments of this Lila.

A life of gnostic beings carrying the evolution to a higher supramental status might fitly be characterised as a Divine life; for it would be a life in the Divine, a life of the beginnings of a spiritual Divine light and power and joy manifested in material Nature. That might be described, since it surpasses the mental human level, as a life of spiritual and supramental supermanhood. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p.1104)

Our next phase, should we come to achieve it, would involve a disarmingly simple task: To surrender our egos and discover the divinity that has always been there sustaining and delighting in our lives. Then the place humanity would hold is aptly described as a “Divine light” manifested in the cosmos. Humanity has access to this way of being in the world. Sri Aurobindo describes “a new consciousness in which humanity itself shall find its own self-exceeding and self-fulfillment by the revelation of the divinity that is striving for birth within it. This is the sole true supermanhood and the one real possibility of a step forward in evolutionary Nature”(Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, pp. 1105-1106). Yet—to reiterate—there is ample room for failure.

The Lila may or may not be fulfilled by this species of being. Sri Aurobindo, who lived through two world wars and the inception of nuclear violence, perceived our possible failure to achieve our evolutionary potential. He saw humanity's will as central to the possibility for our potential unfolding:

Not individuals only, but in time the race also...can have the hope, if it develops a sufficient will, to rise beyond the imperfections of our present very unDivine nature and to ascend at least to a superior humanity, to rise nearer, even if it cannot absolutely reach, to a Divine manhood or supermanhood. At any rate, it is the compulsion of evolutionary Nature in him to strive to develop upward, to erect the ideal, to make the endeavor. (Ghose, 2009, Vols. 21-22, p. 745)

The will of Brahman is toward evolutionary development. If the will of humanity is lacking, Sri Aurobindo is clear: “If, then, man is incapable of exceeding mentality, he must be surpassed...” (p. 879).

The movement of Lila, then, involves humanity in this evolutionary drama. The participatory opportunity for humanity includes all the variables in human nature that move us toward insight and wisdom. Primary among these is *will*. Dedication to awaken from our somnambulistic lifestyle will determine the fulfillment or failure of Brahman's Lila through humanity. Understanding the movement of Brahman in this larger frame of Divine Lila gives purpose to nondual insights. Sri Aurobindo's mapping of the evolution of consciousness serves as a source of inspiration to seekers of all sorts, from the committed to the lackadaisical. The movement toward a spiritual Divine light manifested in material Nature, and the knowledge that we ourselves can be that light, ought to be enough to turn our attention toward helping to resolve this Lila.

Lila

*In us is the thousandfold Spirit who is one,
An eternal thinker calm and great and wise,
A seer whose eye is an all-regarding sun,
A poet of the cosmic mysteries.
A critic Witness pieces everything
And binds the fragments in his brilliant sheaf;
A World-adventurer borne on Destiny's wing
Gambles with death and triumph, joy and grief.*

*A king of greatness and a slave of love,
Host of the stars and guest in Nature's inn,
A high spectator spirit throned above,
A pawn of passion in the game Divine,
One who has made in sport the suns and seas
Mirrors in our being his immense caprice.*

(Ghose, 2009, Vol.2, p. 611)

References

- Apte, V. S. (1965). The practical Sanskrit-English dictionary. Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Chaudhuri, H. (1950). Sri Aurobindo: The prophet of life Divine. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press.
- Chaudhuri, H. (1960). The integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. In H. Chaudhuri and F. Spiegelberg (Eds.), The Integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo: A commemorative symposium. London, U.K.: Unwin Brothers.
- Chaudhuri, H. (1974). Being, Evolution and Immortality: An outline of integral philosophy. London, U.K.: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Ghose, A. (2009). The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (Vol. 2), Collected Poems. Retrieved from <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>.
- Ghose, A. (2009). The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (Vol.12), Essays Divine and Human. Retrieved from <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>.
- Ghose, A. (2009). The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (Vol. 13), Essays in philosophy and yoga. Retrieved from <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>.
- Ghose, A. (2009). The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (Vols. 21-22), The Life Divine. Retrieved from <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>.