

A Complete Integral Education: Five Principal Aspects

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Abstract: This article reviews the five principal aspects of a “complete integral education” envisioned by Sri Aurobindo and Mother Mirra Alfassa and elucidated in their writings. This innovative, learner-centered pedagogy encourages holistic development through acknowledgment and cultivation of the five dimensions of a human being—the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic, and the spiritual. The article suggests that a complete integral education contributes a potentially corrective alternative to outmoded orthodox methods that privilege intellectual proficiency over the holistic knowledge potentially present, given authentic engagement of learning communities.

Keywords: Higher education, holistic education, integral education, Mother Mirra Alfassa, Sri Aurobindo.

Introduction

Beginning in the early decades of the twentieth-century, the primary founders of the *integral yoga* tradition, Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950) and his spiritual co-partner The Mother (Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973) offered a visionary and holistic approach to the lived experience. This approach focuses on a progressive advancement of self-realization, recognizing the individual nature, multi-dimensionality, and interrelatedness of human beings. In corresponding these ideals with teaching and learning, they proposed innovative guidelines toward the formulation of a unique branch of whole-person centered progressive education, placing great emphasis on individual, global, and spiritual worldviews that had been and remain largely absent in Western education.

The whole-person perspective at integral education’s core reflects an evolving and expanding awareness toward the complexities and fullness of our own human composition and experience. Integral education contributes a methodical yet adaptive pedagogical framework and competently holds the potential for the development of other subsequent alternative models—such as experiential and transformative learning as well as critical, engaged, liberatory and radical perspectives—and inherently applies embodied, contemplative, and creative modalities throughout praxis. I will be maintaining use of the term “Integralists” (Ryan, 2005) as it pertains to these founders, whose development of an integral or “complete” yoga laid the foundation for

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their theories on whole-person education. Transferring an integrative worldview into a pragmatic discipline such as education and determining how to implement these perspectives into classroom environments will benefit from an overview of some key tenets of the Integralists' writings specific to their theories on pedagogy. The purpose of this paper is to introduce and discuss the five principal aspects of the whole-person learner identified by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. These aspects are interrelated and are intended to be simultaneously honed throughout learner development.

This paper will illustrate that integral education is comprehensive and innovative, establishing guidelines that warrant consideration as a distinct, progressive, and potentially corrective pedagogical model. This is relevant given that over the last few decades, substantive concern has been raised about the overall efficacy, value, and purpose of higher education in the United States. In examining the need for reform, a growing body of educators have begun to concede that on the whole institutions "have stressed the highly instrumental form of learning to the exclusion of personal reflection and integration" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 4). Beginning early in classroom environments, concentration on achieving "successful" outcomes often comes at the expense of "holistic engagement" whereby learners would begin to engage in creative processes, intuitive inquiry, and self-reflectivity. These deficiencies likely contribute to the accruing evidence that illustrates many students enter college "with attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors that are often at odds with academic commitment" (Arum & Roksa, 2011, p. 3). In higher education, value is placed on critical, analytical, and logical thinking, without guiding students in the use of subjective and experiential measures for determining the meaningfulness and relatedness of content. These systematic conditions contribute to poor preparation, lack of commitment, and inadequate knowledge of chosen areas of occupational interest on behalf of students. Additionally, campus cultures are frequently focused on peer development within extracurricular and social activities instead of academic endeavors. Not surprisingly, the industry has been brought under scrutiny from legislators, parents, and policy makers along with classroom educators (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Barbezat & Bush, 2014). The integral model may prove beneficial during what appears a necessary revisioning of a Western educational system that principally utilizes increasingly outmoded practices.

Given the focus of this article, I will not be addressing key contributions by Haridas Chaudhuri (1913-1975), who in significant ways expanded, updated, and implemented integral education with an emphasis on higher education in the West. Readers interested in an introduction to Chaudhuri's developments in this area should refer to his writings on education (Chaudhuri, 1974) and integral consciousness (Chaudhuri, 1977 & 1979) as listed in the references section. Additionally, other prominent perspectives embracing the term "integral" will not be addressed herein. While acknowledging sizable contributions to an integral worldview through models of human consciousness as well as syntheses of major disciplines of human knowledge from Jean Gebser (1905-1973) and Ken Wilber (1949-), in my view it should not be overlooked that the methodology and definitions unfolding from integral yoga and its expanded perspective on whole-personhood precedes these other perspectives by decades. Kaslev (2007) goes so far as to posit that later perspectives and formulations employing the term integral "came about as the result of the former (and not just through superficial and intellectual influence)" (para. 22). Lastly, the integral yoga and subsequent developments in education of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have no direct

connection to Sri Swami Satchidananda, the spiritual teacher who registered the name “Integral Yoga” in the late 1960's before launching the first “Integral Yoga Institute” in 1970.

Potential audiences of interest may include current and future students, teachers, curriculum and policy designers, and other administrators in the discipline as well as those interested in human development and potential. Sources primarily consulted in this paper are three booklets of compiled writings from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother entitled, *Education: General Principles*, *Education: Teaching* and *Education: Learning*, which were all published in 1972.

Integral Education and the Unique Purpose of the Whole Person

The model of integral education offered by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother emerges from a spiritual worldview and proposes a comprehensive whole-person approach, defining the value and purpose of learning as being central to self-fulfillment. An educational process is essential for accompanying learners toward identifying and coming into relation with their *Psychic Being*. The Psychic Being is the embodied divine principle, “the earthly half of the eternal, evolving part of the human soul, manifest as light in the heart of each person” (Julich, 2013. p. 83), serving to guide one toward their highest personal ideals and evolution as a human being. It is this evolutionary aspect of the soul that influences one in realizing one’s *svabhāva*, or the unique and intrinsic state of being, and actualizing the *svadharma*, that individual's own path of purpose, individual life-calling, and true self-unfoldment. These two concepts are key components within the integral vision of pedagogy, providing an expansive scope for orientation, interpretation, and adaptation by educators while valuing personal as well as communal enrichment and fulfillment.

Five Principal Aspects

In *Education: General Principles* (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972 a), the Mother informs us that in order to be “complete”, an integral education must possess “five principal aspects relating to the five principal activities of the human being: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic, and the spiritual” (p. 8). These innate human attributes are acknowledged as being fundamentally holistic, humanistic, and divine and must all be addressed to achieve a *complete integral education*. Being interrelated, they require cultivation individually and collectively. The remainder of this section elaborates on and briefly discusses each of these principles in the order cited above.

Education of the physical. In traditional education, a near exclusive prominence has been attributed to the cognitive and intellectual models of acquiring knowledge; “essentially, an exclusively or eminently intellectual approach perpetuates the ‘cognicentrism’ of mainstream Western education in its assumption that the mind’s cognitive capabilities are or should be the paramount masters and players of learning and inquiry” (Ferrer, Albareda, & Romero, 2005, p. 311). As such, recognition and inclusion of the physical body in the learning process, in higher education in particular, has been considered at best recreational and ancillary; playground recess and competitive sports are familiar activities disconnected from learning outcomes present in the classroom. There is a miscomprehension of the essential co-relationship between the mind and body as mutually important vehicles in both acquiring and generating valid knowledge. Thus, the cultivation of a mind-body interrelationship within a whole-person framework is often neglected.

Integral education honors and engages the learner's unique human body and its higher potentials. The Mother dismisses an embodied education as a secondary or recreational consideration for learning in her admission that the physical aspect of learning needs to be rigorous and methodical in its undertaking. She elaborates that an education of one's physical body is comprised of three principal aspects, "(1) control and discipline of functions, (2) a total, methodical and harmonious development of all parts and movements of the body and (3) rectification of defects and deformities..." (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972 a, p. 10). Implementing a consistent and individualized pedagogical approach in response to the recognition that the body is habit-forming in its nature is advocated. According to the Mother, these habits "should be controlled and disciplined yet...supple enough to adapt themselves to the circumstances and the needs of the growth and development of the being" (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972 a, p. 9). Sensitivity to circumstance and creative adaptation is thereby advised for proper development of the physical aspect.

The physical aspect is a necessary and foundational component of the integral model. Somatic, kinesthetic, expressive arts, martial arts, athletics, dance, and other embodied practices can aid in developing realms of knowledge informed by our unique physical intelligences. These intelligences play an essential role in student health, well-being, and creativity which ultimately influence self-efficacy.

Education of the vital. The following aspect is that of the vital, which seems to share some common characteristics with the emotional, instinctual, or libidinal operative processes. The Mother defines one's "vital being" as the "set of impulses and desires, of enthusiasm and violence, of dynamic energy and desperate depression, of passions and revolts" (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 10). It is divided into two distinctive yet equally important categories, varying in both goal and process. The first categorical distinction invites one "to develop and utilize the sense organs", while the second requests the learner "to become conscious and gradually become master of one's character and in the end to achieve its transformation" (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 11). These two categories—sense organs, through which one receives information from the environment, and reflective self-examination, whereby one considers one's reactions, thoughts, and experiences from an internal perspective—provide learners with a spectrum of sensorial, perceptual, and contemplative information. This allows for a more comprehensive, holistic ontology from which to engage in the lived experience. These categories will be revisited and further elaborated on when we discuss the education of the mind.

A vital education is intended to encourage consideration, self-reflection and an honest evaluation of one's internal, energetic, and emotional processes. To provide one example, Mother advises entering "into the heart of your grief: you will find there the light, the truth, the force and the joy which the pain hides" (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 4). Prescriptions for how to engage with the vital aspect are meaningful, since she interprets that "with the collaboration of the vital, no realization seems impossible, no transformation impracticable" (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 10). This aspect is considered as that dimension most challenging to entrain, necessitating sincerity, patience, discipline, endurance, and volition. The requisite perseverance and intention are necessary to enter into one's personal vulnerabilities and encounter the transformative authenticity to which they are connected; this is the all-important practice of coming to truly know oneself.

Vital impulses in the form of desires are energies that greatly contribute to shaping and establishing behavior patterns which in turn may eventually solidify into bodily habits. Being so, the Mother advocates for beginning the training of this aspect in the learning process as soon as developmentally possible to best avoid the generation of lesser habits. She elaborates that one is to then “acquire control over one’s movements so that one may achieve perfect mastery and transformation of all the elements that have to be transformed. Now, all will depend upon the ideal which the effort for mastery and transformation seeks to achieve” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972 a, p. 11). Thus, in developing sufficient knowledge of the relationship between vital processes, bodily responses and behaviors, and mental reflectivity, one achieves a fuller capacity for alleviating deficiencies. This capacity is aided and enhanced by the observance or formulation of ideal ways of being.

As mentioned in the introduction, a concern with the development of the Psychic Being as the inner guide on one’s path to realizing their personal ideal is a central component of an integral approach to educating, to drawing out learners’ highest ideals. Having addressed that the vital dimension interrelates with and reinforces one’s physical aspect, I will now consider how these two aspects become necessary for the training of the mind.

Education of the mind. A range of cognitive faculties are detailed in regard to an education of the mind in integral education. These include our instruments for attaining knowledge (here being interpreted more broadly than mental, cognitive, or intellectual attainments), memory, progression from object-based to abstract-concept relations, gestalt, contemplation, inspiration, intuition, and imagination. Sri Aurobindo contributes a considerable and ordered series of insights on these faculties. He declares that the first consideration for the teacher should be to interest the learner in “life, work and knowledge”, instructing in such a way that will be simple and organic, while effectively examining our “instruments of knowledge” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 7). This study of instrumentation is undertaken to assist the student in his or her mental development, “to give him mastery of the medium” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 4). As a component of this medium, Aurobindo advises that exceptional training be afforded to memory and that early developmental sharpening of the mental faculties should begin with the observation, comparison and classification of objects, before gradually transitioning to more abstract words, concepts and ideas. This transition toward abstraction naturally entails advancement of the imagination.

Sri Aurobindo is explicit in classifying the imagination as that aspect which is—in addition to self-generating mental imagery and thought-forms—able to acknowledge and admire those emotive and spiritual resonances of existence. He imparts that “Imagination...may be divided into three functions, the forming of mental images, the power of creating thoughts, images and imitations or new combinations of existing thoughts and images, [and] the appreciation of the soul in things...the emotion and spiritual life that pervades the world” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 16). He affirms that honing imagination is as crucially important for mental development as guiding the physical senses and comparative analytical faculties. Overall, Sri Aurobindo provides a thorough introduction to how the student may skillfully perceive, classify, and recall the world around him or her, how this pertains to his or her personal understanding, how this comes to inform his or her internal mental generative processes, and finally, what it may reveal about his or her individual purpose, communal responsibility, and spiritual orientation.

Equally as thorough in her written comments on the mental aspect, the Mother lays out five principal phases detailing a comprehensive approach to refinement of the mind that impart a willful, yogic approach to its education. The five phases she identifies include:

1. Development of the power of concentration, the capacity of attention.
2. Development of the capacities of expansion, wideness, complexity and richness.
3. Organisation of ideas around a central idea or a higher ideal or a supremely luminous idea that will serve as a guide in life.
4. Thought control, rejection of undesirable thoughts so that one may, in the end, think only what one wants and when one wants.
5. Development of mental silence, perfect calm and a more and more total receptivity to inspirations coming from the higher regions of the being. (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 12)

Despite the above division of phases, the Mother advocates that the goal is a more fully realized overall comprehension. She states that students should endeavor to “understand instead of learning” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 7) and discloses that “reason is not the supreme capacity of men, one has to go beyond it” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 18) before offering some insights as to how to transcend our reasoning capacities. She submits that through ample development of concentration, the compulsion to think actively is not appropriate in all instances since mental “vibration” can be made to cease and an “almost total silence [is] secured. In this silence one can open gradually to the higher mental regions and learn to record the inspirations that come from there” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 11). She further advises that gaining time for effectively completing tasks through developing concentration correlates to one’s will or volition; when this force is added to one’s concentration or focused attention, they possess the recipe for genius, which she determines is an irresistible agency.

In addition to gaining time via concentration and recording inspirations originating in mental stillness, the Mother advocated students learn about history—consequential events in time that have already occurred—as a way to frame the present and begin cultivating the intuitive faculty in preparation “to live for the future” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 2); it is in and for the future that learners will make their greatest contributions. The following aspect begins to deal even more directly, deeply, and personally with that future, and by what means the Integralists’ educational model informs it.

Education of the psychic. Albeit more concise than the other aspects outlined prior, the Mother’s written comments on the psychic education provide novel and profound considerations for educators. Revealed in these comments are some insights into the Psychic Being and those related areas of Self and path. She presents a refreshing and progressive view in postulating that “with psychic education we come to the problem of the true motive of life, the reason of our existence on earth...the consecration of the individual to his eternal principle” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 13). Integral education emphasizes comprehension of and concern with a personal and unique contribution that is inherent in each individual. This is an individual’s *svadharma*, introduced earlier.

Accordingly, the Mother also refers to the *svabhāva* by clarifying that “it is through the psychic presence that the truth of an individual being comes into contact with him and the circumstances of his life” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 13). She determines that to presence the psychic in one’s life, it is contingent upon him or her to eradicate selfishness and beyond this, in progressing toward a spiritual way of life, one must become truly selfless. This focus on a spiritual way of being comprises the final principle of a complete integral education.

Education of the spirit. The spiritual aspect in integral education is designated as being of the utmost importance. Sri Aurobindo states that one’s “highest object, [is] the awakening and development of his spiritual being” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 3). One way in which this awakening is nurtured is through the educational process, which aims to allow one’s spirit eventual full facilitation of his or her mature and multi-faceted self. In the literature, the Mother distinguishes the principal of spiritual education as “an education which gives more importance to the growth of the spirit than to any religious or moral teaching or to the material so-called knowledge” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 3). Furthermore, she determines the highest aim of education is “the manifestation of Truth...[to] make matter ready to manifest the Spirit” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 5).

The development and advancement of the learner’s material embodiment is a necessary component for inviting the spirit into full participation, which is the intended result and encouraged outcome for student learners as they proceed to enter into society-at-large. According to the Mother, a fully realized integral education should endeavor to position the “legitimate authority of the Spirit over a matter fully developed and utilized” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 4). This level of participation and realization is deeply interrelated with each individual student’s conscience—that inner orientation that provides guidance and morally positions one in their life.

As an educator, assisting students with identifying and coming into relation with their true self-guidance is not a matter of conveying concepts to the mind alone. The Mother states that “there is only one true guide, the inner guide, who does not pass through the mental consciousness” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 22). Aurobindo clarifies that at the outset, the approach to offering moral guidance should be to “suggest and invite, not command or impose. The best method of suggestion is by personal example, daily converse and the books read from day to day” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 20). The few instances provided begin to illuminate behaviors that are appropriate to influence and shape the character of the student so that they may find their own path in alignment with a personal inner truth arrived at in the course of their learning and development.

From Aurobindo’s perspective, each person is ultimately imbued with his or her own individual and unique path and purpose. For integral educators, placing impositions or mandates on the individual student is ineffective and potentially harmful. According to Sri Aurobindo, “to force the [individual] nature to abandon its own dharma is to do permanent harm...” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 18). The role of a complete integral education is bringing this purpose to light; as per Aurobindo, “the task is to find it, develop it and use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 18). To be in alignment with an education complete in the five principles then, Mother states that teachers should assist students in coming to greater self-understanding by guiding them to “know themselves and choose their own destiny, the way

they want to follow” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 1). To know oneself essentially means, according to the Mother, “to know the motives of one's actions and reactions...To master oneself means to do what one has decided to do, to do nothing but that, not to listen to or follow impulses, desires or fancies” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 1). She advises on the appropriate approach to taking steps toward this self-mastery and states in regard to this determination that “if you decide to do something...in life, you must do it honestly, with discipline, regularity and method” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 21).

The personal destiny which is to be undertaken by each student can be informed and inspired by a divine agency. This agency is acknowledged as one of the primary five principles of a complete integral education, correlating to the spiritual dimension of human life.

Supramental Education

In the integral yogic tradition, the Supreme evolutionary consciousness of creation is known as the *Supermind*, which Aurobindo has also referred to as *supramental consciousness* or *truth consciousness*. It may be conceived of as an integrated truth-consciousness (or gnosis) and possessing an unlimited transformative power that humanity and all of life has the potential to access. According to Sri Aurobindo: “The supramental consciousness is not a fixed quantity but a power which passes to higher and higher levels of possibility until it reaches supreme consummations of spiritual existence” (Ghose, 1989, p. 539).

This pure plane of consciousness is identified as a concept that will manifest in the field of education, aiding in the advancement of all living beings. The Mother states that the Supramental agency is “the true solution of the problem of suffering” and applies through it reconsiders ignorance, suffering and even death as components of “a transformation, a total transfiguration of matter brought about by the logical continuation of Nature’s ascending march in her progress toward perfection” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 16). This evolutionary thrust of the Supermind emanates as a transcendent phenomenon, progressively infusing both consciousness and material substance with divine creative potential, and it is determined to thereby usher forth “a new species...a new force, a new consciousness and a new power. Then will begin also a new education which can be called the supramental education...” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972a, p. 16).

Considering that all life is undergoing transition in the evolutionary continuum, an integral worldview provides learners with an awareness that informs that search for individual destiny; a complete integral education is in congruence with this search. The Mother clarifies, “If you want to understand the true reason why you are here, you must remember that our aim is to become as perfect an instrument as possible expressing the Divine will in the world” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 1). In this way, one allows oneself to receive new evolutionary creative energies so as to participate in their manifestation on all levels of existence, through one’s whole being. The perfection of this individual being is the true purpose of engaging in a meaningful and comprehensive integral education, since according to Mother, “when you want your physical being to be a perfect instrument for manifesting the supramental consciousness, you must then cultivate it, shape it, refine it, add to it what it lacks, perfect what it already possesses” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972b, p. 1). Sri Aurobindo and the Mother affirm that since we are always in the presence of

and derived from the Supreme, all of our actions should be conducted as a reflection and offering to this principle. Aurobindo imparts that “one must keep constantly in mind...that you are a representative of the Supreme Knowledge, the Supreme Truth, the Supreme Law and you must apply it in the most honest way you are capable of...” (Ghose, A. & Alfassa, M., 1972c, p. 10).

That each and every person is an instrumental representative of the Supreme generative force with potential to undergo total self-transformation and contribute to and participate in the transfiguration of all life and matter is a penetrating affirmation. The gravity of this perspective places a sobering responsibility on those educators choosing to be aligned with or informed by this worldview and by the pedagogical approach effected from it.

Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo and Mother Mirra Alfassa recognized the breadth and depth of whole-personhood as a fundamental expression in alliance with tenets from a venerable metaphysical philosophy. Out of their modern formulation arose a comprehensive educational model placing priority on each learner’s unique make-up and purpose as it unfolds during self-fulfillment. The alignment and interrelationship between the five principal aspects conceptualized in both frameworks honors personal reflection and integration, as well as adherence to methodology, process, and self-awareness.

Educational communities are rightly questioning the efficacy of reductionist and cognicentric approaches exemplified in traditional pedagogies. These conventional biases begin in early education and remain prevalent on college and university campuses, ultimately inhibiting student engagement. The “complete integral education” as outlined by the “Integralists” precedes other correlative contributions and provides a thorough foundation for advancing alternative methods in education.

Integral education places holistic learner development at the forefront while assisting in self-definitions of personal purpose in accordance with values and ethics enveloped in a sacred, yet inclusive, worldview. This worldview acknowledges both an individually unique and collectively interrelated wholeness, offering a much-needed alternative to antiquated educational paradigms that privilege intellectual proficiency over whole-person wisdom. Even if educators reject a sacred perspective and do not wish to consider learners’ uniqueness as being divine or ensouled, it should hardly discount the need to examine how to adequately engage, enrich, and guide those learners toward their fullest potential. The potentials in holistic wisdom, drawn from a wider wealth of competencies, will prove essential in cultivating students’ responses to dynamic and evolving global crises.

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