



Integral Yoga And The Ascent Of Consciousness: Bridging Eastern And Western Perspectives On Human Evolution In Sri Aurobindo's Texts

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo as a philosopher blends Western ideas and Indian metaphysical traditions. This further synthesises the material and the spiritual. His ideas associated with spiritual evolution and the emergence of a higher consciousness in humanity are relevant in the contemporary world; especially in the fields of psychology, philosophy and spirituality. The current study aims at evaluating the comprehensive metaphysical framework of Aurobindo in select texts, focusing primarily on the notion of integral yoga alongside its role in the teleological progression of human consciousness. It further addresses how Aurobindo's integral approach unifies the bodily, cognitive, vital consciousness and superphysical levels of being in order to direct humanity towards a higher consciousness. This will be achieved by employing an explorative and qualitative approach. The paper delves into answering key questions raised associated with the transformative approach that integral yoga offers and its relevance in the modern materialistic world. The paper promotes the significance of Aurobindo's integral yoga by exploring the integration of the tripartite structure of body, mind, and spirit. This area is less researched as integral yoga and its application in practical life remain unexplored. However, the paper limits itself to two texts by Aurobindo- *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Further qualitative, comparative and quantitative research can be conducted on the historical political or the influence of Aurobindo's works specifically on mental health.

Keywords: higher consciousness, holistic, integral yoga, modernity, philosophy, self-development, spirituality

Introduction

An Indian poet, yogi, philosopher and nationalist, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) integrates spiritual philosophy- perception of the east and the vigour of the west. His ideas promote the evolution of the human consciousness, which happens to be the base of human existence. This awareness of one's consciousness, leads an individual to adopt the path towards a celestial realm. He further distinguishes between the concept of spirit and matter in his text *The Life Divine*, by drawing references from the *Vedanta*, *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. However; he explores beyond conventional beliefs, by advocating that the human soul has the potential to experience spirituality while being alive and not just

in transcendence. By following the path of spirituality, a human's life can be equivalent to a divine existence. Peter Heehs aptly puts forth Aurobindo's ideology.

"...rejected both the ascetic renunciation of the world found in much Indian yoga and the scientific materialism of the modern West... a spiritual evolution in the world." (Heehs 212)

The Life Divine was originally written in the Arya journal between 1914 and 1919. It promotes Aurobindo's vision of spiritual evolution which suggests that experiencing divinity on earth is a possibility. The text also suggests that humans have the potential to evolve both physically, and spiritually. The emergence of the 'Supermind' is associated with the realization of the presence of the divine on earth. Spirit and matter are therefore representative of the two aspects of the same reality. This is evident when Aurobindo quotes that "The world is not an illusion, but a play of the Divine Consciousness." (Aurobindo 49)

In other words, the 'Supermind' has a triple status and can be described using three terms- identity, creative principle and the multiplicity of existence. *The Life Divine* can be perceived as a metaphysical yet practical representation of reality.; emphasising that the spirit and life can possibly become one and the same.

The Synthesis of Yoga puts forth Aurobindo's spiritual practices as a channel to unify and assimilate the varied traditional paths of yoga into a comprehensive approach known as 'Purna Yoga'. Aurobindo's ideas on yoga are in stark contrast to the universal aspect on the same. Instead of portraying yoga as an escape from reality, he justifies it as a path towards spiritual evolution and transformation.

The key objective of the book is to classify yoga into four categories- Karma Yoga (the path of action), Raja Yoga (the path of mental discipline), Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion) and Jnana Yoga (the path of knowledge). This classification leads us to the transformative power of yoga associated with the body, life and the mind. This reflects in Aurobindo's observation about yoga being a part of one's daily life.

"In the right view both of life and of Yoga, all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga." (Aurobindo 6)

Aurobindo's in-depth philosophy on yoga can be considered as both futuristic and progressive, as it integrates idea from the east and the west; thereby establishing universality. His unique mindset is reflected in his writings, further bridging the eastern and western philosophy on spiritual consciousness and human evolution.

The Concept of Integral Yoga

The concept of Integral Yoga, also known as 'Purna Yoga', was formulated by Aurobindo. This represented the path towards spirituality. He defines yoga in the following way, in his book *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

"Yoga is the journey of the soul towards the Divine, the passage from ignorance to knowledge, from fragmentation to unity, from the separative ego to vast infinite consciousness of the Divine." (Aurobindo 45)

Aurobindo reinstates the idea of yoga being a dynamic process; impacting directly from societal beliefs at any given point of time. His idea aims at convincing individuals of the divine existence that they can experience in the earthly life. One need not attain ‘moksha’ in order to experience the divine. This has been highlighted in *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

“... the union of the human individual with the universal and the transcendent existence through the elevation of the whole nature to a spiritual status.” (Aurobindo 14)

Traditional yoga and Internal yoga are two different concepts that are poles apart. The former expects one to live by the policy of renunciation, whereas the latter expects humans to embrace life in order to experience the Divine on the earth. Through this, Aurobindo is expressing how traditional ideas can be blended with modern standards of living; representing his futuristic view. Aurobindo suggests that “The Divine is everywhere and in everything, and all life can be turned into yoga if one takes the attitude of consecration.” (Aurobindo 173)

Instead of ‘moksha’ (liberation) being our ultimate goal, one must focus on ‘supramentalization’, which deals with the transformation of humans, facilitating the divine life on earth. This way, the concept of ‘Purna Yoga’ is traditional, progressive, revolutionary and evolutionary; providing a holistic approach.

“An integral yoga must harmonize knowledge, love, and works in the integral experience of the Divine.” (Aurobindo 60)

Aurobindo explores the layers in which humans operate- physical, mental, vital and the spiritual. If one adopts the ideas of internal yoga, he/she can purify/ liberate and as a result divinize the four layers of life. His idea coincides with Sant Kabir’s doha.

“कस्तूरी कुण्डल बिनी, बग मंते फिराय |

गरब गवावत भया, जतन सुघर खाय ||” (Kabir)

It translates to:

“The musk is in the deer’s nasal, yet it runs around the forest,
Searching for the fragrance outside, but it is already within.”

The musk deer is not aware of the musk pods that lie within it; and roams around the forest in search of it. Similarly, we humans are ignorant of the integral power we possess that unites us with the Divine on earth. It also serves as a reminder that the real fulfilment is through the inner realization. Internal yoga therefore qualifies to be classified as a transformative discipline.

The concept of ‘supermind’ integrates truth and knowledge with action and will, thereby extending it beyond one’s intellect. It also links the gap between the materialistic world and the Divine consciousness; making them coexist. This further enables what Aurobindo calls “divine life”. It is a realm where humans live in coexistence with nature, following the principle of unity. The same is discussed by Tagore in his essay *The Religion of the Forest* where he comments on the eastern and western perspective towards nature.

“According to the true Indian view... it is perfect when our consciousness realizes all things as spiritually one with it, therefore capable of giving us joy...not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.” (Tagore 49)

The term “Sachchidananda” used by both Tagore and Aurobindo reinstates the possibility of living in unity, and expressing the presence of the divine in our daily activities of earthly existence.

Tradition and the Evolution of Consciousness: Reconciling the Eastern and Western Worldviews

Aurobindo's texts, *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* present the idea of evolution not just as a physiological process but a transcendent one; as spirituality stands as a symbol of one's consciousness. He explains this by defining terms like 'matter', 'life', 'mind', 'over mind', and 'super mind'; each directly deriving its existence from the other.

"Matter itself is a form of veiled consciousness... the progressive manifestation of the Divine out of the apparent inconscience of matter." (Aurobindo 266)

Life springs from matter, the mind springs from life and so on. The above idea also reinstates the evolutionary continuum leading to the idea of 'super mind'. Humans are therefore at the centre of the universe, bridging the gap between the animals and the Divine. "The Divine is in all things, even in the apparent inconscience of matter." (Aurobindo 130)

Unlike other writers who created a binary between the Eastern and the Western ideologies, Aurobindo is one such writer who attempted to connect the two and was quite successful in doing so. His views can be considered quite futuristic as it is practically impossible to lead the life of hermitage in the post-modern world. His definition of evolution aligns with today's modern perspective.

"Evolution is not accidental or blind working of a chance force; it is the slow and deliberate progression of the Divine manifestation itself in Time and Space." (Aurobindo 102)

Not only does Aurobindo reinstate Vedantic truths; but also perceives it and merges it with modern scientific, philosophical and psychological ideas. Aurobindo was explicit about the limitations that came with both the eastern and Western perspectives associated with spirituality and life. The east and west represent the extremes. The former represents the idea of hermitage and renunciation; whereas the latter represents the idea of materialism and scientific advancements. Aurobindo's efforts are to combine the two extremes and recreate a perfect balance of the two polarized perspectives towards life.

Aurobindo reinstates the idea of matter and spirit being one and the same. He challenges the traditional ideas of the *Advaita Vedanta* that perceives the world as *Maya* (an illusion). Instead, he puts forth the idea that the world is real and exhibits the presence of the Divine. "The world is not an illusion... but a play of the Divine Consciousness." (Aurobindo 49) This reinterpretation of the text by Aurobindo facilitates a balanced consolidation of the Eastern and Western perspective. This balance is portrayed by Aurobindo through the following statement from his book, *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

"In the right view both of life and of Yoga, all life is either consciously or subconsciously Yoga." (Aurobindo 6)

Despite having a far-fetched vision, Aurobindo's idea of 'Purna Yoga' is confronted with multiple backlashes and challenges, especially from the material-driven outlooks. The idea of Aurobindo's 'supermind' is devoid of scientific authentication. As a result, it is not a theory applicable to mainstream academics and policy making. Aurobindo defines 'supermind' in the following manner.

"The Supermind is the divine force of creation, the power that creates and governs the evolution of the universe...it is the source of all higher spiritual powers and faculties." (Aurobindo 157)

However, the long and gradual process of the 'supermind' raises several questions on the feasibility of this approach associated with patience and perseverance. Such qualities are possible to possess only in a Utopian world. One can also say that Aurobindo's idea is a much-needed perspective that will offer a purpose and vision to humans.

Conclusion

Aurobindo's texts, especially *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* serve as mediums that unite the mystical revelations of the East along with the intellectual discipline and reformative zeal of the West. A futuristic worldview has been formulated by Aurobindo which reinstates and justifies that the Divine is an integral part of the world we live in. Ken Wilber aptly points out that "Integral philosophy is not a philosophy of synthesis, but a philosophy of holism, where everything fits together in a harmonious whole."

In *The Life Divine*, the idea of 'moksha' (the notion of liberation) is seen as a fulfilment of life, quite contrary to the notion of it being an escape. The following assertion challenges the tradition perception of the Eastern thoughts; dismissing Advaita Vedanta's statement on the world as an illusion.

"It is not by rejecting the world but by divinizing it that we shall best live in the Divine."
(Aurobindo 712)

Aurobindo's idea of the yogic process is not primarily about mental stillness. Instead, it is associated more with one's lifestyle and daily routine. He blends the east and the west by bringing together practices like longing and renunciation from the former and the idea of psychic evolution from the latter. He believes and reinstates that "Man is a transitional being" and "is not final." (Aurobindo 6) This aligns with the western idea of evolution. In simple terms, Aurobindo's idea of yoga is a balance of Eastern spiritualism and Western evolution. This paves a path to transform the future of mankind, and can be considered as a living synthesis. Heehs addresses the same ideology Aurobindo preached.

"Sri Aurobindo's synthesis was neither eclectic nor syncretic, but integrative in the deepest sense"
(Heehs 217)

We are headed towards a fragmented world, and compromising is not the solution. Instead, one must consciously choose evolution over desires, utilizing yoga as a medium to do so. Thus, Aurobindo's texts are of contemporary and universal relevance, though it was written more than a century before.

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