

Collaboration

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Shyam Kumari on “an extraordinary girl” • V. Madusudan Reddy on death and immortality • Larry Seidlitz on Savitri’s encounter with death • Review of Alok Pandey’s book, *Death, dying and beyond* • Current affairs • AV almanac • Source material • Poetry • Apropos



About the cover

Life's end: From our failing plank, we must take the final plunge. (Photo courtesy bigfoto.com)

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From the office of Collaboration

The artists and photographers

Celal Teber took the photo on p. 21 and provided it for use on sxc.com. The photo was slightly altered by the editor.

Phil Wilkerson (vireo@thirdsun.net) took the abstract photo on p. 22 and provided it for use on morgue.file.com. The original color photo was changed to grayscale by the editor.

In this issue, we focus on the issue of death. I came to this theme unexpectedly. Perhaps it began subconsciously after a fellow disciple and friend who lived in Pondicherry suddenly passed away in the early morning of the Mother's birthday. I learned of his death after the 6 a.m. meditation in the Ashram, later spent some time at his house where he was laid out for friends with flowers, Sunil's music, and incense, and that evening went along to the cremation grounds for my first experience of that ritual. It was a moving experience, made somewhat lighter by the auspicious day and the feeling that the Mother was truly looking after his soul.

Perhaps it was this that reminded me that Alok Pandey had been writing a book on death and, knowing of his deep knowledge and clear expression from his talks and articles, I was eager to read and review the book for *Collaboration*. When it became available for purchase I quickly read it and wrote the review. It won't be surprising that I found the book fully up to my expectations. Then, looking for an essay to feature in the issue, I asked my colleague Ananda Reddy whether there was an article by his father, the late V. Madhusudan Reddy, that might be suitable. He searched and handed me an article that coincidentally was on death and immortality, and which I found to be a good complement to the review of Alok's book. In it, Dr. Reddy gives a whole different perspective of death than how it is normally viewed, and explains many of its mysteries. To help round out the theme, I found a talk that I had previously prepared on Savitri's encounter with death, and after some further work on it, turned it into a suitable article that dealt with still other aspects of the subject. I also found interesting source material by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on death, and received one poem by a disciple specifically on the subject, and two others which have some bearing on it.

For the Chronicles, I turned to my friend and colleague Shyam Kumari, who provided a compilation of stories about an Ashram disciple, Esha-di, which she had selected from Nirodbaren's book, *An Extraordinary Girl*. Although these stories do not focus on death, the subject does come up in several of the stories, and in any case they are extremely interesting. Esha-di is extraordinary in several respects. One was that she came to the Ashram when she was only five years old, and began her life-long relationship with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother at that time. Secondly, she is extraordinary in her intelligence and courage, which was why Sri Aurobindo himself applied this description to her, a story recounted in the article. Thirdly, Esha-di has the extraordinary gift of being able to see and hear Sri Aurobindo with her inner senses on a frequent basis, and many such fascinating experiences are related in her story. Shyam also concludes the article with an afterward in which she relates some more recent experiences of Esha-di that have a remarkable significance for us all.

As usual, I have also included Current Affairs, which feature articles on new developments in the Russian Sri Aurobindo community, and on the start of a new *Savitri* study group in Northern California. In Briefs, there is also information on this year's AUM conference, as well as on developments at The University of Tomorrow. In AV Almanac, there are three interesting articles, two focused on a new initiative for developing a more concrete and consensus-based plan for the development of the community, and another on an Auroville conference that was focused on business for the new millennium. I concluded the issue with a collection of thought-provoking quotes in *Apropos*.

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About SAA: The Sri Aurobindo Association distributes information about Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, and Auroville and supports various projects related to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville, and Integral Yoga activities in America. Current officers: Theresa Boschert, coordinator; Kalpana Patel, treasurer; Chandresh Patel, secretary.

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Current Affairs

The start of online courses on Sri Aurobindo's teachings in Russian

by Emilya Dunayets

The yogic community in the former Soviet Union is a scattered, poorly organized, almost sporadically functioning collection of small groups of people, which often live in different cities far from each other. Their few activities include more or less regular meetings, where they usually meditate, talk, and read books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which are often poorly translated into Russian. There is a publishing house called "Aditi" in Saint Petersburg, which publishes a few books a year, supported by the generous help of Michael Bonke, who lives in Germany. Free practice of yoga and official publishing of the books of Sri Aurobindo became possible only after the fall of the Soviet regime in 1992. That is why the Integral Yoga community in Russia is not as well-developed as in the United States or in India, and has yet to develop a good understanding of the main theoretical and practical issues of the Integral Yoga.

Although the Russian people continue to struggle to restore economical balance and bearable conditions of human existence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they have something deep inside of them which is alive and potent and aspires to the Mother's force and receives a strong response from above. This inner flame inspired me and my dear Ukrainian friend, Vladimir, to act on this opportunity to help in the manifestation of Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's light and force in the outer world. I am a professional artist and a poet who was born in the Ukraine; I have translated classic English poetry to Russian since I was 19 years old. I lived in New York for 17 years, and in February 2005 I returned to Kiev and found that much work was needed to bring Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's vision to the Russian people. We started to publish an Integral Yoga journal online, since it was the only way to reach practically everyone who was practicing the Yoga in Russia. Computers, though often outdated, are very popular in Russia. Vladimir was well experienced in computers, so he made a web site, which quickly grew and soon became a multifunctional unit with a library of well-translated texts of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's organized by topics such as the four powers of the Mother, faith and bhakti, the psychic being, and the Bhagavad Gita. We also published a bimonthly journal called "Aim," developed a news section, an Integral Yoga online discussion forum, and we regularly conducted seminars on the major topics of the Integral Yoga.

But a culmination of our activities became possible only after

a meeting with Dr. Ananda Reddy, the Director of the Sri Aurobindo Center for Advanced Research (SACAR), which is based in Pondicherry, India. We met Dr. Reddy in July 2005 in Saint Petersburg where he came to give three lectures as part of his European tour sponsored by the Indian government. The wonderful simplicity of Dr. Reddy's explanations of the most complex ideas of the Integral Yoga—as he himself put it, "to deliver undiluted the truth of Sri Aurobindo's ideas in simple words"—made me realize the importance of this approach to make accessible to everyone the enormous complexity and deep meaning of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and Yoga. I was delighted. I meditated during the lectures and saw inside a soft blue light that was coming from Ananda Reddy, and his gentle voice made my soul rejoice. It was a deep spiritual experience that showed to me my further destination. After the lecture, Vladimir and I talked with Dr. Reddy and it felt to us as if we had started the discussion a long time ago. Everything was decided in the next 15 minutes: we were to take and then to translate and offer to the Russian community The University of Tomorrow's online Orientation Programme, a semester-long course on the Integral Yoga.

On 15 August 2005, Vladimir and I had started taking our course (the Programme costs only 300 dollars for 16 weeks). We expected this programme to be something simple, for beginners in Yoga. To our surprise we discovered the most intense and wonderful programme of the Integral Yoga we have ever experienced. And yet it was remarkably simple compared to the scope of ideas that were discussed there. For example, *The Life Divine* was a formidable work for me. But with Dr. Reddy's assistance the universal ideas of Sri Aurobindo became so much clearer that it turned into a truly enjoyable experience. At the same time, we were translating this course in Russian, and were promoting the future online Russian course on the Integral Yoga in our journal, by publishing some printing materials like postcards and calendars, and by giving seminars and lectures.

On 21 February 2006 we had 12 students and the first Russian course of the University of Tomorrow began. The people who had enrolled in the programme were anticipating the beginning of the semester with the same enthusiasm and joy as we did ourselves. The atmosphere was most conducive to knowledge and enlightenment by Sri Aurobindo's words and Dr. Reddy's and the other course facilitators' comments. In the beginning, our students tried to express what *they* think about and how *they* perceive the matters of the Integral Yoga. We encouraged them to answer questions not from their own ignorance, but from the knowledge that they learned from the words of Sri Aurobindo. "You have to forget about yourselves and leave your limited perceptions behind," we told them, "try to understand the words of Sri Aurobindo, his point of view and make it your own. Then you may start to change your consciousness little by little, since 'contact with the spiritual reality changes the consciousness,' according to Sri Aurobindo, and reading Sri Aurobindo in a meditative manner enables you to have a contact with his conscious-



ness. If you hold on to your own ideas, nothing will change for you and you will lose this chance to make a step from ignorance to knowledge.”

After two and a half months we opened a new section of our online course focused on “practical yoga,” where we discuss different problems that arise in our students’ lives. We discuss such topics as techniques of meditation and pranayama, how to overcome physical weakness after illness, what to eat and how much, what type of physical exercises are most beneficial in yoga, how music helps us to go inside, and how to relax deeply. Yoga then becomes something very tangible and concrete, which can be planned and adjusted and learned as we substitute good habits for bad and new awareness for the old unconsciousness. This was a welcome addition to the theoretical issues of the Yoga that were being discussed in the course.

Meanwhile, Vladimir and I are taking the next course with Dr. Ananda Reddy at the University of Tomorrow online. It is a wonderful practical course called “Governed by the Soul,” which is distinctly growing a new awareness inside of me, the psychic awareness. This course contains various exercises and techniques that were worked out by the Mother as a means to purify one’s outer and inner consciousness in order for the soul to come in front. And it works wonders for us.

We will continue our work to bring this new type of accessible and simplified knowledge of Sri Aurobindo from Dr. Ananda Reddy to the Russian community of the Integral Yoga with Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s continuous help and inspiration.

For more information about The University of Tomorrow, visit the website, www.theuniversityoftomorrow.org, our Russian website, www.integral-centre.org.ua, and/or send an email to vladimir@integral-centre.org.ua.

Savitri group in Grass Valley, CA

by Gaia Lamb

Every Wednesday afternoon from two to three o’clock a group comes together with Maury and Gaia Lamb at Integral Life Institute in Grass Valley, which is located in the foothills of Northern California, to read, discuss and sit with *Savitri*. This group is a continuation of a group Maury and Gaia formed three years ago in Nevada City, sister city to Grass Valley. One of the intervening periods of time between that first group and the present one was the six months Maury and Gaia spent in Pondicherry at the Ashram. During that time they attended the *Savitri* group lead by Shradhdhavan at the Savitri Bhavan on Sunday mornings in Auroville, which deepened their love and appreciation for this remarkable work of Sri Aurobindo. Although they were well-aware of the transformative nature of the poem, during this time in Pondy they came to realize more fully how *Savitri* serves as a guide to Integral Yoga.

In their meetings, they now introduce the work by listening to Shradhdhavan’s reading of *Savitri*. They felt this would give the group a sense of reading slowly and with intention. Also, they feel the energy of the Mother that Shradhdhavan brings to the reading and wanted the group to experience this if they could. They have begun with Book III, The Book of the Divine Mother, and focus on the yoga of Savitri. Because the members of the group are reading this part for the first time—some having read the earlier sections when they had the group three years ago—they supplement the reading with the use M.P. Pandit’s *Summary of Savitri* and Dr. Madhusudan Reddy’s wonderful book, *Savitri: Epic of the Eternal*.

It was through attending Dr. Madhusudan Reddy’s classes in 1982 in which he gave the lectures that were published in his book that Gaia had an opening to the Divine Mother. Three months later she was in Pondicherry at the Ashram for nine months. Maury had a similar experience through Rod Hemsell’s reading of *Savitri* at Crestone in 2000. It took a little longer to get to the Ashram, but four years later he and Gaia spent six months at the Ashram in Pondicherry. At this time they had the opportunity to attend classes with Dr. Ananda Reddy, son of the late Dr. Madhusudan Reddy.

Several weeks ago a woman who had come to the group for the first time called the next day to say, “Something profound is happening from the group reading of *Savitri*!” Maury and Gaia definitely do not underestimate the power of *Savitri* in the activation of the soul. Additionally, Mother’s statement that “*Savitri* is a mantra for the transformation of the world” is a rationale Gaia feels strongly about and often expresses to interested people to let them know the value of *Savitri* and that it is much more than a grand poem.

For information on the *Savitri* group and other programs that support the transformation of the body, mind and soul, contact Maury and Gaia at Integral Life Institute, 530-477-1918; integrallife@sbcglobal.net

Briefs

The All-USA Meeting (AUM 2006) will be held July 1-5 at the Menla Mountain Retreat near Matagiri in upstate New York. It is being held in conjunction with the annual Integral Psychology Conference in collaboration with the California Institute of Integral Studies. For details see: www.collaboration.org/Aum.html or call 845-679-5358.

Sri Aurobindo Darshan: The University of Tomorrow and Hindu University of America have developed joint online programs of academic study leading to a Master or Doctor of Sri Aurobindo Studies. Individual courses are also available, and The University of Tomorrow has lowered its tuition to \$300 per course for U.S. and European learners. For more information, see www.theuniversityoftomorrow.org and www.hindu-university.edu.



AV almanac

Towards the dream: Auroville Vision 2012 – a new initiative

by the Auroville Vision 2012 coordinating team: Ann R., Alain B., Fabienne, Janet, Kathy, Luigi, Pashi, Serge

This article appeared in Auroville's News & Notes, Vol. 110, October, 2005; it has been edited for Collaboration.

In September 2005, the Center for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU) organized a seminar on New Business and Global Consciousness in Auroville. At the concluding session, an action plan was proposed by the participants which included another seminar on business and consciousness in February 2006 and the formulation of an Auroville Road Map for 2012. This proposal is one of a number of such calls over the last two years to evolve an identifiable direction for life in the township.

In response to this invitation, a group convened to begin to explore a possible route to develop a holistic road map to accelerate the manifestation of the Auroville vision with the year 2012 as our target. While our general effort should be aimed at realizing the city at the earliest, it is proposed that our objective for 2012 should be the completion of the first phase of the construction of the city. It is strongly felt that this should be a joint effort of all teams, working groups and people concerned with the realization of Auroville in all its dimensions. It should be an effort of Auroville as a whole, in a renewed aspiration to reconnect to each other and to work together as one team for a common objective.

An endeavour in this direction has been initiated. As a first step we have begun to identify people who could act as coordinators for facilitating a communication process, ideally with every Auroville resident, to understand and synthesise the collective 'pulse' of priorities and lines of development for each of the areas of collective life in Auroville. These people are being identified on the basis of their demonstrated sincerity and capacity to listen and integrate different perspectives in order to try and arrive at a higher synthesis of how we wish to move forward to manifest the ideals of Auroville in a practical way. This process will include an exploration of how to develop both the details of city centre development as well as the general areas of life in the city including:

- 1 Entry process/Human resources/Residential zone
2. Economy/finances/fund raising
3. Organisation/administration/municipal services
4. Businesses/services/farms
5. Education for all
6. International and cultural zones
7. Villages relations
8. Communication/networking/public relations

It is proposed that this process will include study groups, consultations with experts, general meetings, presentations to the Residents' Assembly, exhibitions, publications in the *News & Notes* and on *AVnet*, news and discussion on *AV Web radio*, etc. Our target would be to present a proposal of the road map for the development of Auroville for the period of February 2006 to 2012 for endorsement to the Residents' Assembly as well as to the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council in their meetings in February 2006. We would like to also have a general meeting to present a more detailed outline of this proposal in the near future.

Reflection on AV Vision 2012

by some members of the AV Vision 2012 team—Serge, Kathy, Olivier, Kathryn, Shivaya, Peter A., and Janet

A version of this article was published on Auroville's internal web site, AVnet (www.auroville.org.in), on 14 March, 2006.

The essential idea of the Auroville Vision 2012 "Road Map" initiative was to develop a strategy for the progressive acceleration of the manifestation of Auroville that had wide collective support so that we could move forward more coherently, using the year 2012 as a target. A group then took up the task of facilitating this collective process.

The central motive of the proposal is to facilitate a creative communication process that will be comprehensive, inclusive and participatory, to understand and synthesize the collective sense of priorities and lines of development of the city and the bioregion as well as the general areas of life in the city.

The initiative was launched on 4 December 2005 at the Tibetan Pavilion. Approximately 150 people attended, mostly Aurovilians but also a number of visitors. In the months that followed, the Vision 2012 facilitation group organized three public sessions, each with a different theme: communication and organization, city and development, economy. The session formats varied depending on the theme and generally combined presentations of various aspects of the topic, small group dialogue, and large group synthesis.

Recently, we met together to reflect on our experience with this initiative till now, to explore where we want to go now from here and how we may want to get there.

Introspection and assessment

Though these community gatherings served some purpose, attendance was not more than 50 people at each session and therefore did not fulfill our aim for a widely inclusive, participatory process. Constructive dialogue and active participation were there but we did not experience these gatherings as especially generative or enjoyable, and no clear way to move forward



emerged. A few ideas were incubated about some specific activities that could foster a more resonant field and provide a more fluid structure to allow more creativity and vision to flow through, however, overall, we felt a long way from a “road map!”

There was also the clear perception that to really develop Auroville in all its dimensions, help from those living outside and committed to Auroville is very much needed. As a global vision, Auroville must take counsel from others around the world who can act as peers and consultants so as to stay in touch with applicable emerging trends around the world.

Next phase

Not wanting to abandon the process, we looked at how we could move into the next phase of this visioning process, re-affirming our commitment to the participatory, inclusive and comprehensive parameters. We feel deeply the need to widen and refine the process, to center our functioning in a different place than we have been till now. An image of “dream weaving” emerged, implying both a receptivity and artistry rather than with imposing a fixed vision of town planning and development, which was an association that many people made to this initiative and felt excluded by. We begin to envision our role as working to identify the different “threads” that express lines of development in Auroville and through deep interviews with groups or individuals, attempt to understand what these threads represent: what is their vision and work that contributes to the vision and how does it articulate with the whole of Auroville. We feel working in this way will both unblock creativity and lead to a higher synthesis.

Evolving a creative dialogue and meeting culture

Although meetings are a core part of how work happens in Auroville, till now we have not paid very much attention to our meeting culture (i.e. how to create them as a field of practice—effective, inspiring, generative, and expressing a refined consciousness). We truly believe that manifestation that arises from a high synergy process will be vastly more in tune with Auroville’s true vision than one that is derived from the mind alone.

Practical steps

We also believe it is important to have concrete goals. Next we will:

1. review the recent results from past community surveys and gatherings on development priorities (10 point game, “Act the Dream” initiative of two years ago, as well as the results of the recent forums) and familiarize ourselves with the past and current circumstances pertaining to each priority area. Please let us know if you have any notes or summaries of past visioning processes, either AV-wide or from a particular activity interest group;

2. meet groups, both formal and informal concerned with various aspects of life in Auroville to explore with them in deep inter-

views where they feel they are now, where they want to go, how they are functioning as a collective, what helps or blocks their progress and what kind of help could they use to progress.

3. reflect on these existing “puzzle pieces,” identifying coherent patterns, gaps, etc.

4. set up focused group sessions open to the public as to invite everyone who is concerned with a specific issue, e.g., roads, organic food production, aesthetics of public buildings, etc. to share their perceptions and expertise.

Particular attention will be paid to the way these meetings are facilitated and we will experiment with creative ways of conducting these sessions to foster safe, creative and highly interactive spaces. Some groups that we are aware of and intend to conduct deep interviews with are: the “Dream Catchers,” elders, youth groups and other informal groups like the Planning Group, Tsunami Team, Mirra Women’s Group and Auro-Village Platform. International Advisory Council and Auroville International groups will also be invited to contribute their perspectives. Please let us know if you are part of a formal or informal group and would like to participate in this process—our wish would be to hear every voice that wants to be heard about the future of Auroville.

Creating resonant fields

We truly feel that building a momentum and bringing along a large, very diverse group of people is not a process that can be rushed. This work will require a sustained effort and we do not want to burn out, yet we also want perceptible progress. We also feel impelled to develop a refined way of working as a team that respects and cares for each member, nurtures the joy of working together and in fact catalyses the emergence of a collective consciousness. We intend to strengthen our facilitation capacities by experimenting deeply with various methods to create resonant fields, and in this way we hope both to become and to train facilitators that can truly assist the community in weaving synthesis and increasingly experiencing a unity field of aspirations, thoughts, feelings and actions.

Identifying concrete, agreed-upon priorities

So far, there are five of us who will participate part time in this work. We would like to establish a functioning secretariat with at least one full time person responsible for the vital tasks of communication and correspondence. Our goal is to identify concrete, agreed-upon priorities and steps to take us forward in concert, coherence and unity.

Each step of the way, we will also document and share this work through our communication channels within Auroville and with our friends around the world. In this way, we hope all those inspired, informed and concerned, wherever they might live, will see themselves as Auroville community development consultants working in partnership with us to emerge Auroville’s vision for the years ahead.



Second International Auroville Dialogue: Knowledge, Business and Consciousness

by Marc Luyckx Ghisi and Serge Brelin

The main aim of the international city of Auroville is to help *raise humanity's consciousness*. Auroville has been struggling with this "impossible task" for almost 40 years, since it was founded in 1968.

In a first seminar in September 2005, we explored the existence of "another consciousness" among a small minority of businesses worldwide. Our conclusion was rather positive. This minority does exist, and we have assisted in the very dynamic encounter between the Auroville business community and this new type of business community worldwide. This has brought the Auroville community to rethink itself, its relation to economics, to its future, and to the world business community. It has even set in motion the project to set up a new type of business school in Auroville.

In a second conference held 27 February--1 March, we have focused on the knowledge society because this is leading us to a new economy. In the European Union (EU) the knowledge society is an important policy objective, called the "Lisbon strategy." The goal is to make the EU the most competitive knowledge economy before 2010, while being sustainable and socially inclusive.

In India a "National Knowledge Commission" has been set up recently and has Dr. Phuspa Bhargava as one of its leaders. Dr. Phuspa Bhargava was present to explain the objectives and methods of this new Indian National Knowledge Commission.

Here are some of the questions that we face in the EU, in India, and worldwide:

1. If this knowledge economy is post-capitalist (Peter Drucker) and post-industrial, do we not need another level of consciousness to be able to manage it properly?
2. If knowledge is not traded but shared, because we never lose the knowledge we give to another person, are we ready to build a "free share" economy in the twenty-first century?
3. Are we ready to shift from a win-lose market strategy to a win-win network strategy for our businesses?
4. Are our leaders ready to shift from a command and control approach to an *enabling and connecting approach* to the knowledge business?
5. Are we aware that secrecy and patenting will disappear or be deeply modified in a society where transparency is increasing?
6. Are we aware that the value creation system will be different in this new knowledge society?
7. Are we aware that the tool of production is no longer the machine as in the industrial society? It is the human brain which produces knowledge; so every evening, workers go home with their tool of production.

February 28th was the 38th birth anniversary of Auroville founded by the Mother. The international city of Auroville is meant to be an accelerated centre of evolution where a new way of living is being worked out at all the levels of life. The aim of its economics would be to give to all members of society the joy of work according to their own nature and free leisure for inner growth, as well as a simply rich and beautiful life.

In August 1954, the Mother of Auroville dreamed of a place where: money would no longer be the sovereign lord; individual worth would have a far greater importance than that of material wealth and social standing. There, work would not be a way to earn one's living but a way to express oneself and to develop one's capacities and possibilities while being of service to the community as a whole, which, for its own part, would provide for each individual's subsistence and sphere of action. The Mother approved the following guidelines for Auroville industries:

1. One of the objectives of Auroville is that economic activities of all kinds, whether industrial, artisan, agricultural, etc., should be completely looked after by Aurovilians. Since the requirements of the Aurovilians are completely looked after by Auroville, the question of salary does not arise. This objective, which should not in any case be forgotten or delayed in its application, is the ideal to be attained.

2. Sections like industries which participate actively will contribute part of their income towards the development of the township. Or if they produce something (like foodstuff) useful for the citizens, they will contribute in kind to the township which is responsible for the feeding of its citizens.

The second day of the conference was aimed at assessing where we are today in regard to these ideals and at exploring how we could get closer to them taking into account the recent changes in the world of economy and business. To this end, we presented a SWOT analysis of Auroville businesses and an Auroville business group brand.

In this context, Mr. Tachi Kuichi, Chairman of the Future 500, Japan, explored with the participants how to design a road map to accelerate the manifestation of the City of Auroville in all its aspects with the year 2012 as a target.

The third day of the conference aimed at exploring the ways Auroville could develop a new structure of integral economy and a strong economic interaction with its bioregion. Time was set aside for work on developing criteria that could act as a baseline for establishing an incubator for integral entrepreneurship in Auroville and its bioregion, thus potentially catalyzing the growth of new income generating initiatives within Auroville.

A creative program was envisioned to include presentations and interactive dialogues between the visiting specialists and Aurovilians already engaged in business units or aspiring to develop new income generating units and a new economy in Auroville with an integral base. Youth were particularly encouraged to participate and space was given in the program for exploring their visions and perspectives.



Chronicles

Vignettes of “an extraordinary girl”

Edited by Shyam Kumari

Here are the precious and elevating reminiscences of Esha, whom Sri Aurobindo called “an extraordinary girl,” and who was loved deeply by the Avatars of Supermind. She came to the Ashram at the age of five and had a unique relationship with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. These vignettes have been selected from Nirodbaren’s book, An Extraordinary Girl, with his kind permission. They were narrated by Esha to Nirodbaren in Bengali, and Nirodbaren later put them down in English as faithfully as he could.

The lucky dog

In 1930, my parents wanted to visit the Ashram, probably to see my uncle rather than for any deeper reason . . .

We made the journey along with Manu, my girl-companion, and my little Pekinese dog. I was five years old. An old spacious house on the sea front was rented for us, possibly the house which is now the Beach Office of the Sri Aurobindo Society. The Mother paid us a visit on the afternoon of our arrival. As soon as she had taken her seat my dog went running to her and, jumping into her lap, began showering her with affection. The Mother embraced it and said lovingly, “How sweet!” (p. 17)

The Darshan of the Avatars

My father (due to a boat-accident) lost whatever faith he had in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and never visited the Ashram again. He did, nevertheless, allow



Esha-di, from the cover of Nirodbaren’s An Extraordinary Girl. (Courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

my mother and myself to come on a number of occasions, in 1932, 1934, 1936 and 1938.

In 1932, we stayed in my uncle’s house. I had brought Manu again, and once more we were considered too young for the Darshan. Instead, I was left to play in the open space behind the Service tree, and amused myself by throwing stones into a nearby tank while accompanied by the same elderly relative who had taken care of me in the boat-accident and was now an Ashram inmate.

All of a sudden one day, I looked up and I saw someone standing at the window observing me intently, his face all smiles. I stood there agape with wonder. My relative who was with me, looked too, but said nothing. “Is it Champaklal?” I asked myself, perplexed. Then the Mother came and stood at the window as well. Both of them enveloped me with their

smiles and the Mother waved to me with her hand. I folded my hands and did pranam to them both. Then the window closed. When I asked, my relative told me I had not seen Champaklal, but Sri Aurobindo himself with the Mother by his side. (p. 19)

The beloved child of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

During our visit in 1934, my mother and I stayed with my uncle. We had again brought my friend Manu, who had accompanied us the previous time; the two of us were about nine years old. This time we were given permission to appear for Darshan. My mother dressed me in a sari and put a tiara on my head. When Manu saw it she was taken with a fit of jealousy and insisted on having the tiara for herself. My mother gave it to her and I had to relinquish the precious ornament. Uncle did not help matters by coming and remarking that I looked most untidy in my sari, or perhaps he

meant that I suffered in comparison to my friend who was now wearing the tiara. Whatever it was, I burst into tears and went to Darshan with swollen eyes.

Sri Aurobindo noticed this and later wrote to my uncle asking him what had made me cry. After Uncle had explained, Sri Aurobindo wrote back that though I wore no tiara, he thought I still looked very pretty. This made me so happy that my heart melted towards Sri Aurobindo at once. I began to write letters to him in which I addressed him as “My Sri Aurobindo,” even though my uncle was extremely displeased with this familiarity. He would rebuke me, saying, “How do you dare address him as ‘My Sri Aurobindo?’”

My uncle’s attitude made me sad and unhappy. At last, the other uncle of mine in the Ashram told him, “Look here, Dilip, why do you come between her and Sri Aurobindo? If anything was amiss, he



would correct her himself.” At this, my uncle was compelled to stop interference. But he continued to read Sri Aurobindo’s answer to me. This prompted me to write to Sri Aurobindo, “Please write two letters to me, one private and the other the kind that my uncle could read.” And he did indeed do so.

The Mother used to see me every day after coming back at five in the evening from a drive in her car. She would wait for me at the foot of the staircase, opposite what is now the Samadhi, with Nolini-da and Pavitra-da. One day I came about fifteen minutes late because I had been chatting with some friends. I found the Mother standing there, and running up to her I knelt at her feet. Without further ado she caught hold of my hair and pulled me up. Then looking at me sternly in the eyes she said, “Come in time.”

The other occasion when I would be with the Mother regularly was when she was working in her room. Later, I would go up to the terrace with her and walk by her side. It was a wonderful and memorable time. (pp. 22-23)

Some letters from Sri Aurobindo

7-5-1935

Esha

Mother said she would try to make you see her because it is not always easy for people to see her even when she is near them. It is also easier to see with eyes shut than with eyes open—though this too is possible—because it is a sight within you that has to open in order to see her. It is not necessary to call her for any fixed number of hours. It is enough if you love her always, remember her often, sit everyday a little time before her photograph and call her.

You must never doubt that the Mother loves you and you need never weep for that, for her feelings towards you cannot and will not change.

Of course you can take the photographs given to you by the Mother and keep them with you there.

Sri Aurobindo (pp. 25-26)

8.5.1935

Esha

It is not that because the Mother loves you she can show herself to your physical eyes at a distance. The physical eyes of men are not made so as to see in that way. It becomes possible only after long sadhana. First one sees with the eyes closed, because that is easier. When one is accustomed to see with the eyes closed, then afterwards it becomes more possible to see with the eyes open. So you should not be too eager to see at once in the more difficult way. It will come in the end, if you want it, but it does not come at once. Don’t mind if it takes time. You must grow first more and more able to feel the Mother near you; that you can do by thinking of her and calling her often. Then seeing will become more easy.

Sri Aurobindo (p. 26)

9-5-1935

Esha

Do not mind about the time that it will take—one can’t fix the time of these things beforehand. When you feel the Mother’s presence more and more, when you began to see her with inner sight, then it can come.

It is better not to speak of the Mother to your friends. They do not know her, therefore they can take no interest in her. The more you live close to the Mother in yourself, the less you will need to speak of her to others.

P. S. You can of course take your temples with you.

We shall certainly write to you when you are over there.

Sri Aurobindo (p. 26)

28.5.1935

I have got three letters from you, but as I was busy with many things I could not answer them—today I am answering all the three together. It was known that it wouldn’t be possible for you to come for darshan this time, it can not be easy to come twice within this short time. Don’t be sorry, remain calm and remember the Mother, gather faith and strength within.

You are a child of the Divine Mother, be tranquil, calm and full of force. There is no special procedure. To take the name of the Mother, to remember her within, to pray to her, all this may be described as calling the Mother. As it comes from within you, you have to call her accordingly. You can do also this—shutting you eyes you can imagine that the Mother is in front of you or you can sketch a picture of her in your mind and offer her your pranam, that obeisance will reach her. When you have time, you can meditate on her with the thinking attitude that she is with you, she is sitting in front of you. Doing these things people at last get to see her. Accept my blessings, I send the Mother’s blessings also at the same time. From time to time Jyotirmoyee will take blessing flowers during pranam and send them to you. (pp. 26, 31)

16.6.1935

I have got your two letters. Remember what I wrote to you when you were here and remember the Mother with a calm mind, call her. At the beginning one sees the Mother by shutting one’s eyes, can hear her words within oneself, but even that does not happen easily. Man sees the external form, hears external words and sounds—only what he sees with his outer senses, that alone he sees and hears. To see or hear anything else is difficult for him, but the capacity for inner vision and hearing has to be opened, one has to try for, it takes time. If it doesn’t happen in the beginning, don’t be sad. The Mother will always love you and remember you, one day you will have her vision and hear her voice. Don’t be sorry, invoke the Mother’s peace and force within you, you will feel her nearness by that. (p. 31)

... Because I love Sri Aurobindo

My father died in 1938 at Calcutta when I was thirteen years old. Hearing the news, my uncle hurried there from Pondicherry. After a few weeks, my uncle, my mother and I left for Kashmir. I accompanied my uncle to Pondicherry for the November Darshan, while my mother was

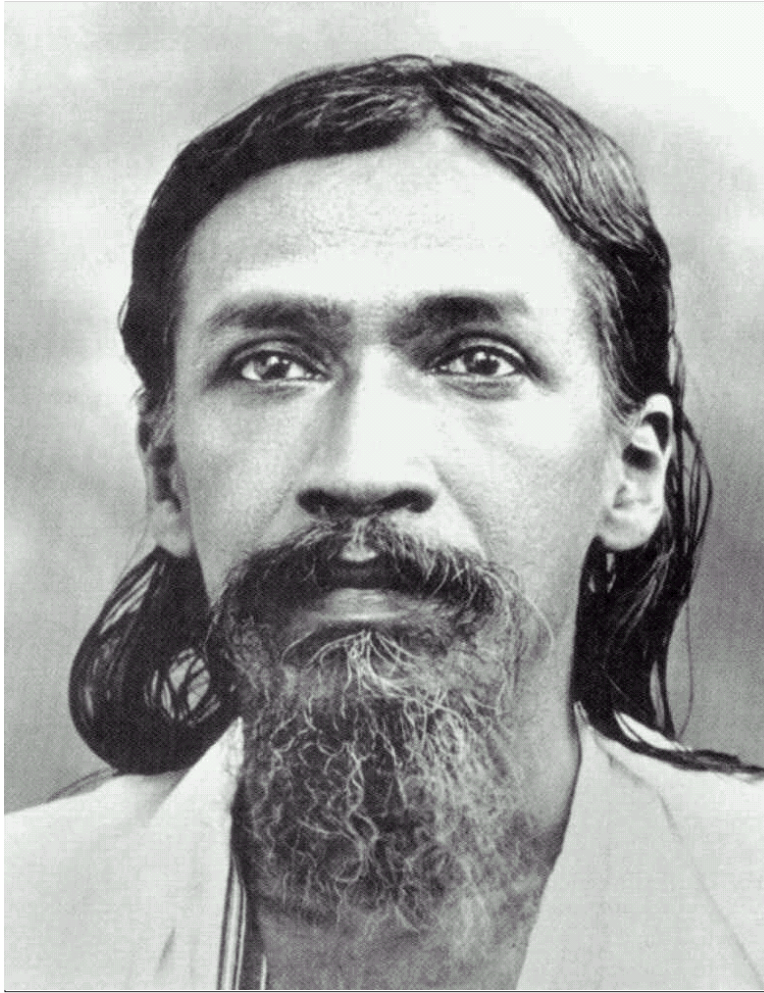


back to Calcutta.

It turned out, however, that there was no Darshan, for it was the month Sri Aurobindo met with an accident to his right leg. I quickly made up my mind not to return to Calcutta. I decided that if the Mother permitted, I would stay in the Ashram for good. I told my uncle of my decision, and it was perhaps he who had spoken to the Mother about it. One day during my usual visit to her, she broached the question of my desire to stay and said, "If you knew that as a result your mother might commit suicide, what would you do?" I answered that I was ready even for that. Then she said, "All right, but don't write about it to your mother just now. You can have Jyotirmoyee as your companion—she will look after you."

I was extremely happy not only for her permission to stay, but for having been given Jyotirmoyee as my guardian. I had already struck a deep friendship with her during my earlier visit. We had grown very fond of each other even though she was almost my mother's age. She called me "Ma Moni" (jewel of a daughter) and I called her "Jyoti masi" (Aunty). When she heard that I was to remain in the Ashram, and of the Mother's instruction not to inform my mother of it, she thought the matter over, and then told me I had better inform my mother all the same. Young as I was, I listened to her, forgetting the Mother's advice. This disastrous mistake brought about the greatest tragedy of my life.

As soon as my mother received my letter, she set out for Pondicherry with the intention of taking me back. She stayed with us for only one night and the next day



Sri Aurobindo, whose eyes seem to gaze into infinity. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

shifted to a hotel. She did her best to persuade me to leave, but I remained adamant. The situation was reported to the Mother. Meanwhile the dilemma intensified. My uncle did not know what to do, but seemed to favour my mother's point of view. In the midst of the commotion and turmoil, Nolini-da came to our house and in front of my uncle said that he had come at the instance of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo because they had wished to know why exactly I wanted to stay in the Ashram. At this my uncle asked me, "Do you know anything about yoga? Can you practice Sri Aurobindo's yoga?"

"No," I answered.

"Then why do you want to stay?"

"Because I love Sri Aurobindo."

My uncle seemed taken aback. Nolini-

da simply replied, "It is enough; I will tell Mother about it." The Mother finally said, "Let her stay."

What happened next was such a perfidy and sacrilege as to be almost unthinkable. My mother, after every persuasion of hers had failed, took the last drastic step: she filed a lawsuit in the French court against my uncle. She had been instigated to this course of action by a distant relative who happened to be an influential officer under the French Government in Chandernagar, and who had no love for the Ashram. The charge filed was that I was minor who was being held back by my uncle so that he might take possession of my property. My uncle was shocked beyond belief. Though I do not remember clearly, I think he had to appear in court, but in the end, inevitably, lost the case. So I had to go.

The only saving grace of the whole affair was that the Ashram had not been involved.

Now I tried in my childish way to avoid leaving. I cried and cried. I played hide-and-seek with the police, concealing myself here and there, first under Sahana Aunty's bed, then under a staircase of the Ashram building. But I was discovered there, and Sri Aurobindo sent word that I should go. The Mother added that otherwise the police would enter the Ashram main building, so at last I had to yield. My uncle showered affection on me and with many caresses bade farewell.

Thus I became the unwilling victim of a terrible sacrifice that cut me off from the Ashram for many, many years. Had it not been for the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's



loving guidance through many long and unhappy years, I believe I would have succumbed long ago.

What lay before me as a minor of thirteen was a vast unknown world, with none to guide me except my mother, who had understandably adopted a hostile attitude towards me and was, herself, quite inexperienced in worldly affairs.

I must, however, add that she and her ill-advised accomplice paid dearly for their act of perfidy.

I suffered complete banishment from the Ashram for about twelve years. Only Uncle's visits now and then brought a fresh breath of life. When I was able to renew my contact in 1949, I was already a married woman and the mother of a child. And it took me about another 35 years to get a permanent nook in Pondicherry. (pp. 41-43)

An extraordinary girl

At that time the Ashram and the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were anathema to Calcutta's high society, perhaps because Sahana Aunty and my uncle, two renowned and much loved figures in Calcutta's elite music-world, had abandoned Calcutta for the Ashram. As a young girl of thirteen or so in such a high-browed assembly, I was quietly listening to their scurrilous conversation.

A report of all this and what happened next was received in the Ashram. What follows is an account by Nirod-da:

I read out the report to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, while the other attendants were also present:

The topic of the Ashram came up. Comments and criticisms started flying. Even the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were not spared. The child was listening quietly, but when somebody seemed to overstep the limit of decency, she could stand it no longer. In a firm tone she said: "Look here, if you speak one word more against my Gurus, I'll give you such a slap that you will roll on the floor." A bolt from the blue!

Everybody was stunned. Her mother left the room in shame and anger. An uncle started looking at the ceiling.

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo looked pleased at this report. Then the Mother left.

Sri Aurobindo commented, "What she had done is remarkable for her age. She is an extraordinary girl. Along with strength of character she has developed an extraordinary intelligence. When she used to write to us, she would make reflections about people and the world in general which were beyond even a woman of fifty." (pp. 45-46)

Tagore's dilemma

[An interviewer recounts an incident concerning the Ashram that had baffled Tagore, and Esha responds.]

"You know it was about Sahana Devi's sister who had come away like you, for sadhana, leaving her husband and family, and has never gone back."

"Well?"

"When her husband, who was very fond of her, was on his death-bed, he wanted to see her for the last time. But it seems she was not given permission to leave the Ashram and the poor man died with her name on his lips, so to speak. That shocked and aggrieved Tagore very much. He was baffled and bewildered. How could the path to God be so cruel, he wondered."

"Yes, yes, I remember it all. You, however don't seem to know the sequel. Let me tell you. I heard about it and, I think, it came out in some newspaper. It was my uncle who had it published. You see, one day my mother received a call from Tagore to see him. She had often visited Shantiniketan, for Tagore enjoyed her company, so when she went to see him he unburdened his perplexity to her and asked for an explanation. She replied, 'I can not give you the answer. But I can write to my brother at Pondicherry and ask him to get a reply from Sri Aurobindo.' Her brother did get a reply. Sri Aurobindo wrote—I give you the

purport—'When people can leave their families and give their lives for a noble cause like, for example, the Swadeshi Movement—so many youths have done it—and their sacrifice is spoken of in golden terms, while here, when it is done for the sake of the Divine, why does one get a sullied name and have the path of God labelled as cruel? What better sacrifice can there be than for the Divine?' That was the answer." (p. 48)

Blessed by the Lord

My birthday falls on 10 October, and in 1991, I was very happy to be able to celebrate it in the Ashram. In the afternoon when Nirod-da came to greet me, he said, "You had the darshan of the Guru, I am sure. Tell me about it."

I smiled and replied, "Yes, I was blessed by him. I got up in the early morning as usual, finished all my chores, and had my bath. After I had dressed, I lit a few incense sticks. Then I stood before his picture and prayed, 'Won't you bless me?' He gave me a broad smile and, stretching out both his arms, put his hands on my head as he used to do during the darshans of my childhood. I was happy beyond description. The whole day his smile and the gentle, almost physical pressure of his hands on my head recalled to me those childhood memories..." (p. 60)

Birthdays in the Ashram

Two birthdays particularly stand out in my mind—those of 1932 and 1936.

On the first occasion, I was seven years old, and I had come to the Ashram with my mother especially for my birthday. In those days, the Mother used to come down to the Pranam Hall every morning except on Monday, which was her hair-washing day. As luck would have it, my birthday happened to fall on a Monday. Nonetheless, I was called to see the Mother at 10 a.m. Amazingly, she kept me with her for nearly two hours. In that time she played the piano for me while I sat at her feet, then she showed me pictures of ani-



mals, told me stories in English—which I could not understand—and gave me chocolates, flowers, and a variety of presents.

On the second occasion, in 1936, too, I had a similar birthday celebration.

My next visit in November 1938 was the year when Sri Aurobindo met with the accident to his right leg. There was therefore no Darshan. Soon after, I had to leave the Ashram for a different reason.

After that, the entire course of my life took an unhappy turn, putting an end to my visits to the Ashram until 1949 November. I stayed on up to February 21, 1950, when I had my last physical darshan of Sri Aurobindo.

A series of bitter experiences frustrated my married life and made me break off all contact with the Ashram. (p. 61)

A fatal utterance

On the 5th December, 1950, an hour or so after midnight, I had a most frightful dream. I dreamt that the entire world was shaken by a violent earthquake. My bed trembled, swayed, rose and fell. Darkness enveloped the earth and everything in it men, beasts, cities, nations. All were laid waste by a massive destruction. In the midst of the holocaust, I found myself totally alone. Desolately and with a great effort I somehow climbed a tower and heard a voice whispering in my ear, “On this earth you now have no one left to call your own. Beyond, you have.” The shock of this ominous utterance shattered me. My whole body trembled. I woke up dazed from the terrible dream, my head reeling. “What does it mean?” I wondered miserably.

The next day morning, I recounted my dream to one of my distant relatives. He was as puzzled by it as I was. Then, later, we heard the radio announcement that Sri Aurobindo had left his body. On hearing the news, I felt completely broken. My

mind became a blank unable to accept the brutal truth, and then it dawned on me that the huge convulsion that had overtaken the world in my dream had been due to his departure. “What a tremendous person he must be!” I marvelled. My relative too was stunned by the news, even more so when he later received a letter from my uncle, Dilip Kumar Roy, who was in Benaras at the time, describing a similar dream he had had the same night.

Five days later, while I was putting my child to sleep, I saw a figure standing at my door. At first I could not make out who it was. But when I looked closely, it became clear that it was Sri Aurobindo himself. He appeared exactly as he had been during

entire family, including my child, to the Ashram. Darshan by that time had been reduced to the sadhaks and devotees standing before the Mother and Sri Aurobindo for a brief minute—nothing more. But when my turn came, Sri Aurobindo fixed me with his penetrating gaze. I felt overwhelmed, almost suffocated, and inwardly cried out to him that I couldn’t bear it. At once he lowered his eyes, and I was left to marvel at the dynamic power in his look.

The next day, Sri Aurobindo sent Nirod-da to me to ask how my son had been born with such a fair complexion when my own was darkish. The question took all of us by surprise, particularly my uncle, for he could not accept that Sri Aurobindo could take notice of such trivial details during Darshan. I could only answer that I did not know. No one in his father’s family was so fair, and though my own

mother was fair enough, it could not explain my son’s complexion which was like a European’s.

The following day, Nirod-da returned with the same question, Sri Aurobindo insisting that I knew the reason. I began to reflect. Then all of a sudden I remembered that during the child’s gestation period, I had prayed fervently for a son and that he should have a fair complexion. Sri Aurobindo had granted that prayer. Now my uncle was more astonished than ever to hear that Sri Aurobindo had taken interest in such trifles. Further, Sri Aurobindo enquired through Nirod-da if the child could talk and hear properly. I answered that he could, but Sri Aurobindo said that I did not know. He said so because he knew somehow that my husband’s family was hard of hearing. Then he advised me to approach Sahana Aunty to teach the child how to speak. His legs were also somewhat knock-kneed.

We stayed in Pondicherry till the next

Sri Aurobindo fixed me with his penetrating gaze. I felt overwhelmed, almost suffocated, and inwardly cried out to him that I couldn’t bear it. At once he lowered his eyes and I was left to marvel at the dynamic power in his look.

that last Darshan I had attended. Then he said in a low voice, “I have come to bless you.” But when I stepped forward to do pranam at his feet, I suddenly found there was no one there. (p. 62)

First visit with my son

The Darshan of November 1949 was approaching when we sent a telegram to the Ashram for permission to come and, upon receiving a prompt reply in the affirmative, we set out for Pondicherry. When we arrived at the Pondy station, we discovered that, surprise of surprises, Nolini-da was waiting there for us with a car. He told us that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo had sent him with the vehicle and that we could indeed stay in Uncle’s house. This gesture served to confirm me in my belief that we were receiving special attention only because of my uncle.

Meanwhile, Uncle too returned for the Darshan, and on that day he escorted our



Darshan in February which turned out to be my last, for Sri Aurobindo passed away the following December. No wonder I had felt such a strong pull to come to the Ashram. (pp. 76-78)

[From here onwards the experiences narrated by Esha are based on her contact with Sri Aurobindo in her inner being.]

Difference between Sri Ramakrishna's and Sri Aurobindo's work

I told Sri Aurobindo, "Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) appears so often to us. Why are you so rare?" He answered. "His work is different from mine. He has created a few great souls. My work is not to appear in visions but to change man from within and to change humanity. Have you changed much as a result of these visions? It is not that you have not seen me, you saw me and the Mother for many consecutive days. Do you remember? Tell me then, have you made much progress?"

"No!"

"Not vision. What is important is to feel the Presence," he added.

Once I did see Mother and Sri Aurobindo for fifteen days. Whichever way I looked, I saw them sitting within my forehead, very luminous. At first I was thrilled, but as the vision continued, I became tired of it and it vanished. (p.87)

Long lease of life

Once, as I lay in bed, I fell into a pensive mood, and like the young disciple began to think, "I have been with Sri Aurobindo for so many years. He has, in fact, brought me to yoga against my will. And now even though I am getting old, I have gained nothing substantial so far." My mind was running on in this vein when I suddenly saw a light curtain hung between my bed and the wall sway gently. I became hushed and attentive, feeling that something was going to happen. And then I saw Sri Aurobindo appear from behind the curtain which had parted slightly. He looked exactly like the picture of him taken

in 1950 that we all have with us. Then he spoke: "I can give you a long lease of life so that you may realise the Divine. Will you accept it?"

Vehemently and spontaneously I cried out, "No, No! I don't want a long life. My son will die, my closest friends will go, and I will be left all alone. You know how much I have suffered, and I don't want to suffer any more. How often I have already prayed to you to take me away!"

"Think again," he replied. "I have given you my word."

"No, I don't want a long life," I insisted.

"All right," he replied sweetly. "I won't press you." Then raising his right hand in a gesture as in the statues of the Buddha, he disappeared. Oh, how beautiful his palm was as he raised it and held it before my eyes! It meant so much to me. (pp. 87-88)

Regarding India's present condition

The other day I was bemoaning the tragic fate that had overtaken Rajiv Gandhi, and was saying to myself, "He was such a fine person. What desperate condition India has been reduced to, these days! There has never been such chaos, confusion and violence since India gained independence. No one seems to be safe today." While I was lost in these gloomy thoughts, I heard Sri Aurobindo telling me, "There is nothing to be surprised about. Among the present leaders there is hardly a true lover of India. Almost all of them want power, position, fame, and money. Corruption is rampant everywhere, so what else can you expect? In our time, we truly loved India. People sacrificed their lives for the sake of the Motherland. We never forgot God. We felt his power working through us. All the leaders were the disciples of yogis. And the cry of 'Bande Mataram' acted like a mantra. It echoed from shore to shore, State to State. That was India then. And today? Nobody takes the name of God. Or raises the cry of 'Bande Matram!' So long as it is like that,

India will suffer. This trouble will continue for a long time. Then a change will come. You may not be alive to see that change. But I will raise up India." (pp. 88-89)

A vision of hell

I had this vision after the passing of Sri Aurobindo.

One day, as I was lying in bed, I felt I was going to die. All on a sudden my soul came out of my body and began to fly very high up. I used to have the experience of going out of my body in my early days, but what happened now was most memorable and significant. After I had reached a certain height I began to turn round and round at a tremendous speed. It produced such an unbearable pain that I began to cry out, "O Thakur, O Sri Aurobindo, save me, save me. I am dying. I can't bear this excruciating pain. Do free me from this agony!" My cry was of no avail. The soul was kept on whirling. Then I felt someone coming near and standing and watching. I felt it was Sri Aurobindo.

The spinning soon stopped and the relief came. Then he said to me in a grave voice: "This pain of yours, you have suffered only for a while and you call it unbearable. Well, just have a look below." I did. My God, what a sight! Thousands and thousands of souls crowded, huddled together and squirming like worms and crying, wailing, howling in extreme agony.

"Do you see these souls?" Sri Aurobindo said. "They have been in this condition for ages and will go on, one doesn't know for how long. Compared to their suffering, yours is a child's peevish discomfort."

I had no words to utter, so struck I was by what I saw. This was, I suppose, what goes by the name of suffering in hell. Then Sri Aurobindo said, "This is the seventh plane—*bhumi*—to which you have come. Now go!" He uttered these words with such power that I was moved downwards. Suddenly a door with only one panel opened up and, gliding through it, I fell into a world of light. Light and nothing but light was there and I was bathed in that



golden and blissful lustre. I remained plunged in it for a long time. Such indescribable joy, ananda, it was.

These two polar conditions so markedly contrasted are beyond belief. I said to Sri Aurobindo, "I don't want to go down into the world again. I shall live here for ever."

"No, you have to go down," he replied.

"When shall I be able to return?" I asked.

"You have to take one more birth."

Saying this, Sri Aurobindo vanished and I came back to my body. (pp. 90-91)

An unbelievable experience

Recently, something truly extraordinary happened to me for which there is no rational explanation. Even the many people I asked could give no answer to the enigma. It came about like this.

I and a close friend of mine were on our way from Pondicherry to Calcutta. During the taxi ride to Madras, we entertained each other with all kinds of stories and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Still in a jovial mood, we arrived at Madras station where we were to catch the Howrah Mail. Upon boarding the train, my friend, whom I will call Barun, found his seat without any difficulty, but though I had made my reservation from Pondicherry we could find no seat reserved for me. Asking me to wait, Barun took my ticket and went to check with the booking office. There he was given the number of a bogey. When he returned, we quickly located it, and Barun helped me to my seat with my luggage, then left for his own compartment.

After a while, a man arrived and told me, "You are occupying my seat. Please let me have it—this is my number." Disconcerted, I got down and searched out

Barun. Once again he made the trip to the Booking Office and came back with another seat number. But soon after I had settled myself in that, a lady appeared and claimed it for herself. My dismay grew. There were barely ten minutes left for the train to leave. Close to panic, I called on Barun again. He explained my problem to a passing ticket collector but the man could not even spare a moment to listen.

Finally Barun and I went to the booking office together, only to be told that they had never received any confirmation of my reservation from Pondicherry. I was at the end of my tether and almost broke down. I told Barun that there was no other way for me to go but to sit on the floor of the train. But the booking officer objected, "It is against the law," he declared.

I heard Sri Aurobindo telling me, "There is nothing to be surprised about. Among the present leaders there is hardly a true lover of India. Almost all of them want power, position, fame, and money. Corruption is rampant everywhere, so what else can you expect?"

Barun now expressed his own helplessness and advised me to go back to Pondicherry by myself as he had to return to Calcutta by this train. Then, as the first bell for the departure of the train had struck, he left me and boarded the train. I was terribly shaken. How was I to return to Pondicherry alone, late at night? Finding no other way, I did what I always do in such situations. With all my heart and soul I began to call on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo to come to my rescue. Outwardly I kept looking this way and that for some escape from my predicament, when suddenly two young men came up to me and one of them said, "Ah, elder's brother wife, how is it that you are here all alone? Don't you recognize us? We are your husband's younger cousins. We met you many years ago and still remember you—but perhaps

you don't remember us." It was true. Both were complete strangers to me but I had no choice except to trust them. I poured out my story.

"Oh, is that the trouble?" One of them replied. "Then you can travel with us in our compartment. We have two bunks—you can have the lower one and we two can share the upper."

Before I could reply they picked up my luggage, took me to their compartment and settled me there. Then they went off down the corridor. Soon after, the train started.

I arrived safely in Calcutta. During the trip I had been so relieved and so preoccupied with myself that I had completely forgotten about the two boys, who had never returned. We arrived about eight hours

late because on the way a woman had committed suicide by throwing herself in front of the train. So it was not surprising that when I got down at Howrah, I found no one from my family waiting for me. When my

friend Barun discovered me on the platform, he burst out in amazement: "How did you get on the train?"

It was only as I began to explain that I realised I had been alone throughout the journey, and that my traveling companions had never reappeared. It now began to dawn on me who exactly it was who had helped me to reach Calcutta, but the riddle of the two boys remained. Barun was as happy and relieved at my good fortune as I was. Then, seeing that no one had come to receive me, he hailed a taxi for me and sent me home.

At home I recounted the incident to my relatives and asked if there were any cousins of my husband such as the two who had met me at Madras station. Completely mystified, their immediate impulse was to deny it. Still, they asked, "But did



the boys touch your feet?"

"They must have," I replied, "though I don't have any recollection of it."

"And how did you pass two nights on the train without thinking of them even once?"

Here again was the unresolved question. "I don't know," I demurred, as confounded as they were. "It was only when we arrived at Howrah and Barun asked me how I got on the train that I came to my senses and remembered about them. All I could reply to Barun was that two of my cousins-in-law had miraculously appeared, put me on the train and then vanished."

"And not once . . .?"

"I know, I know," I said shaking my head. "I was in such a dazed condition, almost as though under the influence of drugs, that I completely lost my normal awareness."

Only afterwards when I began to reflect in earnest on the bizarre happening did I ask my Guru if he had sent me those escorts. Was he really the one who had saved me, and were his instruments divine powers or men?

His answer was clear: "Of course they were divine powers and I did send them. But what does it matter to you whether they were human beings or something else?"

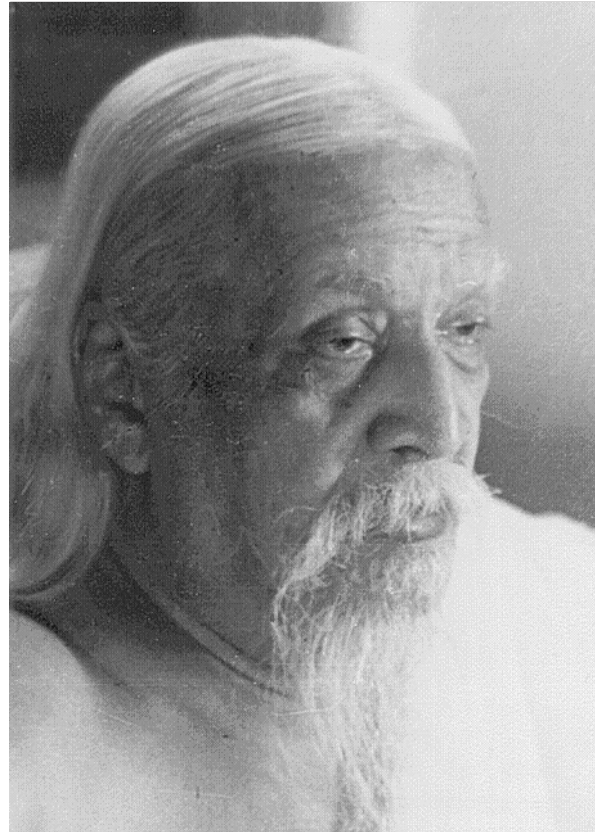
In this way, once again I realised my Guru's infinite grace that came in such a miraculous manner. (pp. 97-99)

Japa

Another day I said to him, "Do show me how to do meditation. As I can not settle my mind, I do japa."

He made a gesture of joining the thumb and index finger of both hands and doing japa.

O Krishna, O Keshava, save me;
O Mother and Sri Aurobindo, deliver me!



Sri Aurobindo. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobind Ashram)

I very distinctly heard him uttering the japa.

Whenever I do not see him, I complain and he says, "Be like a child, just as you were when you came first, because like that you will see me, I am in you."

"I do not understand."

"At that time, you were not concerned about other people's opinions. You would just jump into the Mother's lap. Give up your desire to be good in people's eyes." (pp. 116-117)

About my experiences

One day I was thinking of all that I had told Nirod-da. Sahana Auntie says that there is something like an Intermediate Zone and people going there hear lots of things and take them to be genuine. Since the Guru isn't now in his body, one can't verify their truth directly from him. Who knows if I am not hearing the same kind of thing?

Then I heard the Guru's voice: "Shame! Sitting before the Samadhi you are thinking like this? And you believe it?"

"Lord, if you were in your body, the question would not arise. Others too would believe it."

"It doesn't matter in the least. The effect would be just the same whether I were in the body or not."

"But people won't believe . . ."

"It's not with their belief, but with your own that I am concerned."

"I understand, Lord. But I am so insignificant—where is the power in me by which I can write or speak about you?"

"Oh, you are priding yourself on your humility? Beware! The consciousness in which you find yourself at present may not remain at all times. So do sadhana from now on." (p. 118)

Be like a child

I told the Lord, "You are doing so much for me. At every step I feel your protection, your love and care for me, Lord. I don't know why you are doing so much for me. I have done nothing for you so far. I have been self-centered, busy with my own thousand problems, major and minor, and complain to you all the while. You are never annoyed but are ever gracious and sweet. What have I done to deserve this bounty? I can only offer my gratitude."

"Don't talk of gratitude, forgiveness, etc.—all those human sentiments, high though they are. Be just like a child as you were when you came to the Ashram and used to fall into the Mother's lap—simple, innocent and beautiful. Questions of gratitude do not become you. Be that child again."

"My old bone-trouble has reappeared. Sometimes the pain is very acute. Homeopathy helps me; the pain subsides, but only for a few days and then comes back. My stomach also gives me trouble



now and then. I can not say that I ever enjoy good health.”

The Guru answered: “It is because you are not doing any work for the Mother. Those who do her work enjoy good health.”

“But I do a lot of work at home. I have no servant. I mop the floor every day, clean the furniture, wash my own clothes. All these chores take away the entire morning. I have to go to the bazaar, the bank and what not. I am all alone. I have never been used to this kind of life. You know it very well.”

“It is true indeed. That is why my constant help and protection are with you. Go on in your usual way. One day all these troubles will disappear. But at present you have to be ready to face such minor troubles. Eventually your love for me will conquer everything.” (p. 126)

Afterward by Shyam Kumari

Esha-di is the only person that I know who could contact Sri Aurobindo and talk with him when she wanted to. Sri Aurobindo always answered her doubts. He spoke to her in Bengali.

Although she lives now in one of the Ashram nursing homes, Esha-di lived for more than two decades alone in a small room in the rear of a building on a small by-lane in Pondicherry. There I had the good fortune to meet her several times. She faced all her problems with equanimity and remained ever joyful. By Sri Aurobindo’s Grace, Nirmal-bhai, a devotee, and his family began to look after her. Nirod-da was her close friend, who with a few other select friends, used to meet in her room from 5 to 6 p.m., once a week.

One thing that greatly troubled Esha-di was the deterioration of the Ashram atmosphere, the disappearance of its earlier vibration. Previously the sadhaks could feel a type of entrancing Divine vibration, and had extraordinary experiences. The sadhana had been taking place in the mental and higher vital levels, but when the sadhana came down into the lower vital, subconscious, and physical levels, that Divine afflatus withdrew and the exalting vi-

bration was no more. All the mud that was hidden in the lower vital, physical and the subconscious levels came to the surface. When Esha-di lamented to Sri Aurobindo about this change in the vibration he had assured her that it was a necessary phase for transformation and will not last long. The darkness will disappear and Light will come.

Another thing that greatly troubled her was the condition of the world, where darkness and chaotic conditions prevail. Here too, in an inner experience that took place in 1995, Sri Aurobindo assured her that the darkness will fade and disappear and that the reign of Light would be established in 40 years. Esha-di fretted and lamented to Nirmal-bhai that she will not live that long. She would rather see the reign of Light in this life and not in another life.

In 2001, Esha-di had a cataract operation. After the operation, she lived as the guest of Nirmal-bhai for three months. Probably on 21 September 2001, after dinner, the same topic came up for discussion, how the darkness will disappear and Light will come. Esha-di went to the room provided to her, still thinking about this problem. At about 10:30 p.m. she saw a wonderful vision. The 12 inch square yellow stool in her room became a round seat, on which Sri Aurobindo was seated looking majestic. His whole body was radiating diamond white light. The whole room became flooded by this light. Sri Aurobindo was smiling mysteriously. Then a hazy and foggy wind started blowing into the room from the western window. After some time the whole room became cloudy and dark. Sri Aurobindo was seen no more. Darkness prevailed. Then after some time a very sweet breeze started blowing from the same window. Esha-di saw Sri Aurobindo again sitting majestically on that seat radiating white Light. An intense white Light filled the air. Esha-di was exhilarated. Then Sri Aurobindo said to Esha-di pointing with his index finger, “Like this the darkness will disappear and Light will come.” Filled with joy and gratitude, the next morning Esha-di narrated to Nirmal-bhai and his family this experience.

Essays

Ego, death and integral immortality

by V. Madhusudan Reddy

This essay was previously published in the book, The Yoga of the Rishis: The Upanishad’s Approach to Death and Immortality, written by the late V. M. Reddy, published by the Institute of Human Study, Hyderabad, India, 1978, pp. 111–135. It is based on a talk given by Dr. Reddy at the Cultural Integration Fellowship in San Francisco in the Spring of 1978. The present version has been slightly shortened and edited with the permission of the publisher.

The subject of death is a little frightening, but I suppose some day we all will have to face it. Death is the constant denial by the deathless of the ego’s false self-imprisonment in the individual framework of mind-life-body. The ego, which is a limited formulation of universal mind, life, and body, tends to overemphasize its exclusiveness, its autonomy, which of course is an error, but then it persists in the error. Within the limited self-knowledge that it has, it feels self-sufficient and does not want to leave hold of the individual. But the Divine, in all his compassion, wants to make the individual as omniscient and all-powerful as he is. Nevertheless, the individual who does not understand the supreme mystery of the universe persists to be egotistic. He neither knows the Omniscient nor does he desire to know him. Nature has a way of helping the individual out of the grip of his ego. It is the way of death which repeatedly provides the individual with new bodies and new opportunities for realizing the secret truth of existence. Suffering and evil, limitation and death are linked up with man’s love of the ego. Their very existence by implication means that there is something beyond



which is infinite and eternal. Death implies the possibility of man's transcendence of death. Death is the secret and most effective teacher of immortality.

It is only by realizing the integral oneness of the Divine that it is possible to transcend suffering and death, fear and limitation. It is said in the Katha Upanishad that Yama, the Lord of Death, presides over this three-dimensional world of space and time. So long as we are content with this kind of a limited life, he will continue to bring us into this domain of death and give us again and again a new body. We do not realize that we are limited, and that there is a need to go beyond this limitation and to grow into the limitless, that the essence of our existence itself is the limitless. Overtly, human existence is limited and finite but essentially it is limitless and infinite. It is by the realization of his infinite potential-

ity that man becomes immortal. Nature, or Yama, the Lord of Death, would continue to give us body after body. We may be afraid of death, we may not want death, we may refuse it, we may decry it, and hate it, but nonetheless, death would come as a necessary end to this body—end not of life itself, but the end of this body, so that a new body may be given to us. So long as we do not realize this divine 'I' within us, body after body will continue to get dissolved in Prakriti.

In fact, many of us do not have even a very highly accomplished ego, a refined and polished ego; we have a very crude ego with the result that we are merely a lump of body-life-mind complex. Few of us can consciously step outside of the body, and not be dependent on it. We are so close to the body and involved in it that with the dissolution of the body, the ego also seems to disappear.

There are some great men who are not

spiritual and yet are not dependent upon their bodies. They have something to offer to the world because of their accomplishments. In their case the ego continues to remain after the death of the body in the subtle vital world. One such example is given by the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram: There was a great organ-player, an accomplished artist whose hands had almost embodied the art. After his death, his hands stayed back in the subtle vital without getting disintegrated or dissolved. And when once the Mother was attending a piano concert, she saw those hands entering the piano-player and playing the organ with exquisite mastery.

When a great devotee-disciple of Sri Aurobindo passed away in the Ashram, the Mother said of him: "His higher intellectual part has gone to Sri Aurobindo and united with him. His psychic is with me, and he is very happy and in peace. His vital is helping those who seek his help."

Yoga and immortality

Yoga helps man to make his ego pure and transparent which then reflects the psychic being within. It is possible too that one is made aware of his psychic by the grace of the Divine or the guru. That is rare, but normally the seeker will have to go through the process of refining and purifying his ego-nature through aspiration, surrender to the hidden Guide, and rejection of all that impedes his inner progress. The psychic being is the representative of the Divine within the evolutionary nature of the individual that guides him to his luminous destiny. The ego of the individual normally confines him to the limits of his bodily existence. It does not take him to the truth of his infinite existence. And when he awakens to the presence of the psychic, he takes a leap into the spiritual, or rather, he is reborn into the world of spirit, *dwija*. It is the psychic

birth. The psychic is the mirror in which are reflected the love and light and joy of the Divine. The psychic is the flame of love and light that ever burns in the heart of the yogi. When the seeker awakens to its presence, it is certain that he will be led progressively toward the final freedom. He finds himself securely on the royal road that leads to the kingdom of infinite existence, infinite consciousness and infinite bliss, Sachchidananda.

A stage comes on this journey when the seeker realizes not only his Self, but realizes that it is also the Self of everything and the Self of the universe. It is the Self that transcends the universe. *Avidya* pursued in the right

direction helps the individual to go beyond the conditions of death. It helps to replace the ego with the egoless. The path of wisdom and works, of contemplation and action,

leads to the greater liberation in which the individual soul transcends both *vidya* and *avidya* and attains immortality.

The knowledge of multiplicity creates conditions whereby the seeker is enabled to go beyond the barriers of death. Modern science at the level of the physical mind has shown us the way to deny the limitations of the body and to defy death. Although a hundred years ago it was not possible, today it is possible to live a long and healthy life almost without disease. It is making us more and more capable of going beyond the limits imposed on us by phenomenal existence. But this by itself does not help us to realize immortality; victory over the forces that govern the physical universe does not give us immortality. The realization of the Self within and its identity with the Supreme Self is the *sine qua non* of immortality.

Immortality does not mean the survival of the Self after the death of the body



and much less the survival of the ego. It is possible to achieve a certain amount of integration of our mental and vital capacities with the *manomaya purusha* and the *pranamaya purusha*, in which case these capacities can survive for some time after the dissolution of the body. We have in fact four personalities: the physical personality, *annamaya purusha*; the vital personality, *pranamaya purusha*; the mental personality, *manomaya purusha*, and the central personality, the *chaitya purusha*, which is the soul personality. If the body dies it is not necessary that the vital personality should also die immediately. A great artist or a musician or a poet—a very powerful person, who in his own times really shapes the thoughts and feelings of many, can survive his body dissolution and remain longer in the subtle vital and subtle mental planes. A vital or mental personality could be a powerful formation and refuse to get disintegrated along with the physical body at the time of death. The disembodied vital and mental personalities of great persons can remain for longer periods in their respective regions and help kindred souls on earth engaged in related work. A Beethoven and a Tansen must have from other worlds certainly inspired and guided their brother-souls in their efforts. Even as a St. Paul's Cathedral or a Taj Mahal can defy for long the ravages of time, because of their strong construction, so also the vital and mental personalities of men developed consciously and carefully would defy for decades the disintegrating forces of the subtle world and remain behind to inspire and help those who are open to them.

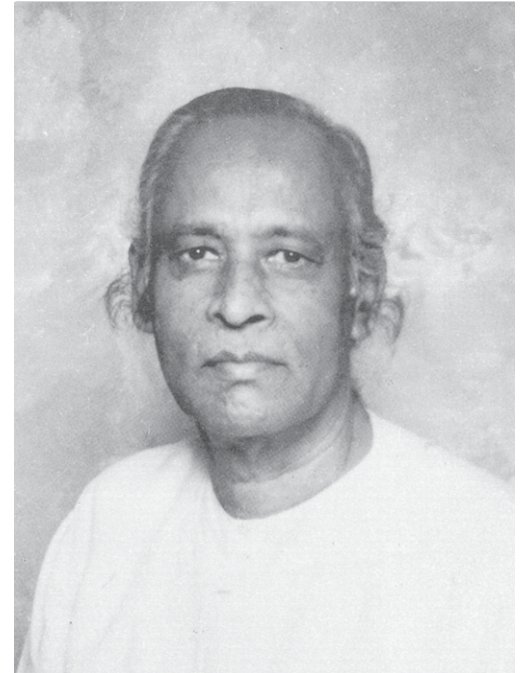
When a great devotee-disciple of Sri Aurobindo passed away in the Ashram, the Mother said of him: "His higher intellectual part has gone to Sri Aurobindo and united with him. His psychic is with me, and he is very happy and in peace. His vital is helping those who seek his help." (*A.B. Purani Commemoration Volume*) This should help make it clear to us how the process works. But immortality does not mean either liberation of the Self or the survival of the vital and mental personali-

ties. We cannot think of these personalities becoming immortal or remaining there eternally in the earth-atmosphere without the psychic touch or spiritual sanction or without their being spiritualized. In the case of great incarnations and Avatars, it is stated that they still remain at some level helping humanity in its evolutionary march. In the *Prayers and Meditations* of the Mother, it is mentioned that during one of her own journeys into the inner worlds, she encounters Sakyamuni, the Buddha. (The Mother, *Prayers and Meditations*, pp. 265–67) This proves that it is possible for the yogi to contact great personalities in the subtle physical or in other higher regions, as the case may be.

Liberation and transformation

Immortality could be defined as the consciousness which is beyond birth and death, beyond cause and effect,—a consciousness which is free, all-blissful, self-existent. This is the consciousness of the Supreme Being, the consciousness of Sachchidananda himself. But what has this immortality to do with birth? On attainment of the state of liberation, the soul can choose to stay beyond the universe of manifestation. However, individual salvation is not the end. The ideal is 'self-realization through the Lord in all.' The object of manifestation is to divinize life on earth. And this can be accomplished only through both the integral liberation of the soul, and integral perfection and integral transformation of man's nature. In the words of Sri Aurobindo: "Having realised his own immortality, the individual has yet to fulfill God's work in the universe. He has to help the life, the mind and the body in all beings to express progressively Immortality and not mortality." (Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads*, SABCL, Vol. 12, p. 113)

The one who seeks and enjoys personal salvation does not do the work of God in the universe of manifestation. It is not to seek eternal enjoyment in the non-



V. Madusudan Reddy (Photo courtesy Institute of Human Study)

phenomenal world that he came into this phenomenal world. He is here for the Lord's work. It is to help mind, life, and body to progressively manifest the Divine, and likewise prepare humanity for fulfilling the task. It is to collaborate with the Divine that he created man in the progressive manifestation of immortality on earth. He is our great friend and fellow-worker in this mission. The evolutionary purpose of nature is to become self-conscious on all its planes. The primary plane of existence is the material universe, the next is the universal life, and the one beyond it is that of the universal mind; the latter two are telescoped within the plane of the physical. The universe with all the three planes has to be made increasingly self-conscious. As a pioneering project, nature has created man. He is commissioned here to become self-conscious and to be integrally liberated to be able to make nature self-conscious at all levels.

He is here not to seek his individual liberation alone and leave this universe, but to seek his individual liberation and be of help to the liberation of nature itself. Today, because of ignorance, we are alien-



ated from nature and feel that we are conquerors of nature. But, when we get liberated, then also we get alienated from nature, though in a different way. To put it in current jargon, nature does not get any feedback from our personal liberation. For the fulfillment of nature's secret evolutionary purpose, the liberated individual who has had integral liberation should take birth. When such a person takes birth, he is not bound by his body, because he already has knowledge of multiplicity integrated with the knowledge of oneness. He is no longer a slave to his body, but its master, in as much as he has perfect knowledge of its planes and parts. He can utilize the body as a very effective instrument for the work of transformation of nature. Such a person could be called truly immortal, because he lives and works in a mortal world, and yet not bound by the laws of mortality. He can come into birth at his will as well as discard the body whenever it is not necessary.

Liberation is not the ideal; it is a means for divine perfection—perfection of universal life, universal mind and universal physical. Perfection of the physical, vital and mental is necessary for the work of total transformation of the earth-nature. The physical along with others has to be made conscious of the presence of the Divine within it. This can be accomplished only by a yogi who has attained integral liberation and achieved integral perfection. Individual salvation is therefore not the end. Having realized immortality, the individual has yet to fulfill God's work in the universe.

There are two or three ways of doing this: some liberated souls might choose to be beyond the world and may not want to come into human birth. While remaining at that level they might send their helpful vibrations and directly influence the workings of the world. We call them great Masters. But that is not as effective as taking birth and moving among human beings. In the case of those who try to help us from some other world or from the worlds beyond, the human phenomenon does not receive so much as is necessary.

Divine incarnations and Avatars greatly suffer by embodying on earth, and their suffering has a direct bearing on the integral liberation of humanity as well as the earth-nature. It is one of the greatest sacrifices that the Divine makes by taking upon himself a human body; it is the supreme sacrifice of the Purusha. In a human body the Avatar absorbs the falsehood and ignorance and suffering of all.

An anecdote from Sri Ramakrishna will illustrate the point. Girish was a well-known playwright, patriot, and stage actor who wrote many plays which depicted the rebellious spirit of his countrymen against the colonialists. He was a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna and yet morally a wreck. He was, from inside, simple, pure, innocent, and a devout child of Mother Kali. Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of him and his plays. Years later, when the Master was sitting on the banks of the Ganges, Girish brought in his folded palms water from the sacred river and sprinkled them on the Master's feet and fell prostrate on them. This is the Indian tradition symbolic of surrender to the guru. That very moment the Master felt that his feet had caught fire, for he had accepted the prayers of the devotee and absolved him of all his bad karma. After Girish had left the place the Master told his attendant-disciple of the great agony he had gone through for the sake of his devotee. Great yogis and saints are said to absorb in their bodies the suffering of humanity so that humanity is redeemed.

Birth and death—milestones on the road to immortality

Birth and death may seem to be physical conditions, but they are milestones on the road to immortality. To the poet Tagore, life and death are like the breasts of a mother; she feeds her children alternately on them. Only, the children do not know that each time they are removed from the earth-scene they are fed on the other breast of life. Death is as much a nourisher of life as birth is.

Attachment to birth is due to the ignorance of the true nature of the Self. But love of non-birth, release, and liberation is another form of ignorance. There are two Selves—one which transcends nature and does not participate in the world of manifestation, and the other which is in nature and becomes the creative process. Birth involves us in the latter, and non-birth merges us in the former. "Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Non-Birth, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Birth alone." (Sri Aurobindo (translator), *The Upanishads*, SABCL, Vol. 12, p. 66)

Exclusive and excessive attachment to non-birth leads to dissolution into the nihil or the void, and *sunya* is a state of non-existence and not a state of illimitable existence. It is the void of the impersonal consciousness and not of final freedom. But exclusive attachment to birth leads to constant self-limitation without release. Both have their gains also—attachment to non-birth leads to a withdrawal into the higher world, whereas attachment to birth may lead to great earthly accomplishments. The ideal way would be to go beyond both birth and non-birth and then return to earth with an integrally liberated consciousness for the benefit of humanity and the earth. This is integral immortality.

The Veda has two gods—Surya and Agni—that symbolize and figuratively suggest the two revelations of the Supreme Truth and immortality. Surya represents divine light or supreme illumination, and Agni represents divine force or the divine will. The Veda contains several hundreds of hymns in praise of Surya and Agni. The human soul in its long inward journey needs illumination and should therefore first aspire for infinite light. Next, it should seek to have the strength of Agni, the power of the fire; it should possess infinite will and infinite force. Infinite illumination and light lead the seeker into the eternal bosom of the Being; infinite will and force guide him to the truth of Becoming. The Vedic rishis did not seek immortality as an escape from the world; for them the Divine is not only light but also will



Death is but a passage to the Light. (Photo courtesy sxc.com)

and force; He is not only Being but also Becoming. Integral immortality implies the realization of the Divine as infinite light, force, will, knowledge, and delight.

The evolutionary journey

We are travelers of the Infinite, and in our long and great journey, nature has provided us initially with four aids; these are body, life, conscious will, and action. The physical universe, *annamaya kosha*, supplies us with the body; the universe of life, *pranamaya kosha*, helps us with the life-force; the vital and the mental universes, *prana-manomaya koshas*, between them equip us with consciousness-force or the conscious will, and they all inspire the individual to act. When his effective physical instrument, the body, through the passage of time grows ineffective, it is time for replacement. If the body becomes incapable of translating the conscious will of the Guide within, then visits death, the vigilant replenisher.

The material and life principles are eternal, only the form is perishable and is replaced by death. Under the luminous pressure of the conscious will the life-force itself becomes increasingly effective in terms of the evolution of both the individual and the universe of manifestation. The life-force, to begin with, is not conscious of the divine will. It feels the push of a blind will, and upon the crest of a con-

cealed cosmic will, it rides into greater heights, thus helping the traveler to cover the journey. An inexorable law stands revealed as the will of the Lord. Beyond Prakriti is Shakti, and Shakti is the consciousness-force of the Supreme Purusha. The one that presides over our journey through this as well as all

the other worlds is no other than the Mahashakti, the Supreme Mother.

Unchanging physical laws have their own utility in human evolution. They are a strong defense of the body-ego-formations against the swift current of universal flux. Once the formations are stabilized and begin to grow into conscious centers of God's multiple action and enjoyment, they transcend these laws. Physical laws in the initial stages of human development help us to become ourselves, for we do not want to be swept off or get lost in the flux that the universe is. In the struggle of wanting to be ourselves we fight nature tooth and nail, and in the process we 'conquer' nature, and establish ourselves firmly in the midst of instability and change.

Whatever we might be, we are steeped in ignorance and limitation and suffering, but nonetheless alive. It is from here that the great journey truly begins, the journey from the finite to the Infinite. The animal is not qualified to undertake this journey, for it does not possess self-consciousness. We are pilgrims of the stars, but stars themselves cannot accompany us on our pilgrimage, as they have manifested not even the life-principle. It is the conscious human will that initiates the adventure, it is the Guide within that guides us on the way, and it is the will of the Mahashakti that takes us to the destiny—the goal of integral immortality.

The meaning of death

One is prone to ask the question, in the words of the Mother, 'What is this monstrous farce called death in which one has to take part without wishing it or understanding it?' Why to be born at all if one has to die? Now that is the basic question which comes up again and again and seeks for a very satisfactory solution. Some, or I should say, many, submit to this inexorable fate; they accept it without questioning, because they know they will not find the answer. So they very peacefully submit to it. Whereas there are a few who would like to revolt against it. Although it is a brutal fact of life, still they would like to revolt against the very idea of death. Some others live in despair; but no one seems to know the secret of death or its purpose.

According to Sri Aurobindo, death is an indispensable means to awaken the need of perfection and progress in the consciousness of matter. Now this is a very difficult proposition to understand: to awaken in the heart of matter the divine consciousness or to make matter conscious of the Divine is the purpose of death. Then what is the role of the individual? It is to make his body increasingly conscious of the Godhead within it; he will thus be indirectly serving the universe of matter to become increasingly conscious of the Divine. It is the immortality of the physical that is the goal of evolutionary nature. From a religious standpoint the purpose of life is to attain immortality. It is liberation from this world of suffering and evil. But from the spiritual standpoint the purpose of life is to make the physical increasingly conscious of the divinity within it,—the ideal is physical immortality, which is not endless prolongation of life in the body.

When Sri Aurobindo speaks of physical immortality, it is the realization by matter of its perfect identity with the Divine immanent in it. Even as the soul can become perfectly conscious of the Divine, so too it is possible for matter to grow divine. In a very special way, matter too will have



to be made increasingly conscious of the Divine. It is only then that matter will grow 'immortal'. In the process of becoming increasingly conscious of its identity with the Divine, matter is bound to change. At present it is organic matter because not only is it informed of life, but it is charged with the force of life. When it becomes immortal, the body will be permeated by the spirit, charged by the infinite consciousness and force of the spirit, and will be soaked in the infinite self-delight of the Divine. Matter therefore is destined to be the luminous habitation of God.

A pragmatic approach to the understanding of death would be that it is a catalyzer of human progress and evolution. It evokes in the human breast the will to perfection. Without it, humanity could sink back into complacency, slothfulness, and animal contentment. The constant awareness of death perhaps makes man aspire for immortality. The rishis of yore equated fearlessness with perfect liberation. This approach, though seemingly practical, is a negative one. The positive one, and therefore more helpful approach, is that the Divine is within each one of us. He is the very source and inspiration for man's endless search for immortality, freedom, and joy.

Stability and rigidity of the body

Human aspiration and human effort through history have always been directed towards perfection, freedom, and immortality. Of the three aspects of human existence, the physical is the most recalcitrant and resistant to change. It is the very nature of matter to be stable, to retain the fixity of form. And this quality is profitably utilized by nature in creating shapes out of an otherwise formless energy. In the early stages of unconscious evolution, physical forms help nature to organize and crystallize individual centers of self-consciousness. The bodies are like reliable casts into which are poured life, mind, and psychic energies from planes above so as to help the formation of multiple centers of self-consciousness and self-delight of the Divine.

The Divine is not only the one but also the many. Matter and material moulds serve this great and secret purpose of individualization of the universal, formless energies. These energies, when organized around individual forms, *nama rupa*, grow into self-conscious centers which in turn progressively reveal the Divine. The merit of such bodies is that initially they help the individual formulation of universal forces, but being too rigid they also resist the increasing manifestation of the universal consciousness, force, light, and joy. Forms have a limited utility. Stability of forms is both the helper and the bar. Stability and rigidity impede the manifestation of a greater truth and the consequent transformation of matter.

The subtle physical, subtle vital, and subtle mental are pliable and change in the light of a higher consciousness-force, but the gross physical, vital, and mental which constitute the human body do not change easily and quickly. In a way, it is good that they do not change so quickly, because the human being has a hundred flimsy reasons for his body to change, which if changed, would spell disaster to his very existence. Nonetheless, by a conscious and constant effort, man is able to bring about a change in his consciousness, and a corresponding change in the subtle parts of his being. Beyond a point, the physical body may no longer cooperate with him in accomplishing the desired change. Moreover the body itself may cease to be a useful instrument for his further evolution. It is then that the embodied soul decides to discard the body, and takes a new one. It is for new experiences and newer realizations that the soul takes new bodies. With an



This abstract photo is suggestive of a rapid transit through inner dimensions towards the Light. (Photo courtesy morguefile.com)

increasing awareness and a rapid and radical change of consciousness, the body cannot keep pace, and therefore it is given up by the soul in its evolution. It is the incapacity of the outer form to follow and to help the progress of inner forces that makes death inevitable.

Yet, by some method, if it were possible for us to infuse into our physical an appreciable change corresponding to the change of our consciousness, then death could be postponed indefinitely. If the consciousness-force within and the outer body were to respond to each other's change, then there would no longer be the need for death.

Immortality implies not only a radical change of consciousness, but its influx into the mind, life, and body and their consequent transformation. A total transformation of the body is possible, as Sri Aurobindo observes, with the descent of the truth-consciousness into the physical. Truth-consciousness is the Divine's own consciousness-force which can divinize the body and make it immortal. But the body will then no longer be organic; it will be composed of divinized matter, divinized life, and divinized mind.

An organic body can manifest life, but it cannot manifest immortal life. If it expresses immortal life, infinite consciousness, infinite light, and infinite power, then



it can no more remain organic. It will have to be a transformed body. It is toward this end that we are moving, and it is on this journey that mortality is a necessary stage. It is only this physical body that dies, in fact. It is the form that disappears, whereas the energies are indestructible. It is the conditions of physical existence upon earth that make death indispensable. If we are capable of changing these conditions, then death will not be inevitable. When the truth-consciousness brings about the necessary radical transformation of matter, death will be abolished from the planet. Immortality is the essence of the spirit and if this essence could be smuggled into the cavern of matter, then matter too can share the immortal nature of the spirit. It is only with the realization of the spirit within itself that matter can live the essence of spirit. Also, matter must realize that it is involved spirit. Matter not only will have to discover within itself this imprisoned spirit but also realize that it is a form of spirit, that it is no other than the spirit.

Attitudes towards death

The soul incarnates in a body for a special experience and leaves the body after having it, accidents being exceptions to the rule. People with a mission or a deep sense of purpose leave their bodies only after completion of their allotted work. In this context, suicide may be evaluated as the worst act possible because it leaves the purpose of the embodied soul unfulfilled and also does not solve the difficulties which drive the person to commit it. It puts an end to the physical body but not to the consciousness that was there within the body. The karma remains unabsolved, and has to be taken care of any way, perhaps under conditions which may be much worse. Peaceful death requires conscious preparation which implies the fulfillment of the purpose of one's life in the body. So long as the body is there, one has to act, act consciously and act well. The decision to leave the body remains with the incarnating soul and not with the phenomenal nature.

If death is inevitable, at least in our present dispensation, it is always better to make of it a magnificent victory rather than take it as a disgusting defeat. In the context of the new consciousness, the Mother would never like us to accept death as inevitable at all. Man by nature is immortal, and is destined to remain immortal. Death is a habit perpetuated by human failing, custom, tradition, and faithlessness.

Until the supramental change takes us over, if death is to be taken as a necessary end, then it is the end of one span of life and the beginning of another. Death is the reminder of our immediate but temporary incapacity to manifest the Divine in our lives. The desire and acceptance of the inevitability of death is directly related to our unwillingness to manifest the Truth on earth. The darkest obstacle in the way of inner progress is fear, and fear of death is the worst enemy of light.

One has first to conquer the fear of death before he can conquer death itself. Three or four ways could be suggested for overcoming this fear: the intellectual approach, the emotional, and the psychic approach. The intellectual approach is one of ratiocination. Those who have a strong mental orientation and in all matters led by the mind may adapt it with profit. The mind is aware that life is eternal, only the forms change. We know that the world is mutable but indestructible; it is in this awareness that we should always live. This knowledge must be very securely established in one's mind and being and become a part of his life. Then he must identify himself in his consciousness with the everlasting life independent of all forms and knows no death, and with the infinite light that knows no shadow. The truth is that neither one can hesitate nor retard the hour of death. This attitude should not be mistaken either for fatalism or determinism. Death has an appointed time, but a numbered few can choose the time of their death, *istam mrtyu*; these are liberated souls commissioned on earth for a special purpose.

The emotional approach is one of introspection. Beyond all the emotions, in the silent depths of our being, there is the

soul—the psychic being. This psychic being which is the evolving soul, is the immortal element within us. The body dies, the life and the mental energies, all of them give way, but this psychic being which is the divine spark within us, does not die. Those who are emotionally oriented should withdraw into the psychic being. They should, sitting in meditation, practice to withdraw temporarily at least from the life, mind and body, and take refuge in the psychic. It is a very practical proposition. When we become aware of this eternal entity within us, then we realize that life is eternal and death is transitory.

The third approach is for those who have implicit faith in the Divine. It is for a person who is neither a purely mental being nor emotionally oriented to a degree that he can escape into his psychic being, but, is capable of great faith. Men of faith always cling to the feet of the Lord; they in some mystic way identify themselves with the Divine and feel strongly that it is the Lord who does everything for them. They might not have realized the Divine, yet their faith in the Divine is so intense and sincere and unshakable that they easily overcome all fear.

Finally, there are people who do not belong to any of these categories; they are born warriors. They do not want anything gratis or by grace; they want to have it by battling with forces that oppose them. They think that it is their birthright to enjoy life, and they do enjoy in their own right. They also feel that they have a right to immortality. They feel they have a right to live, and to live eternally. Such persons will have to fight battles on different fronts and at different levels, emotional and mental. They have to fight all attachments, and fight back the many suggestions coming from the collective unconscious. They have to cultivate emotional independence and mental resistance to suggestions coming from their social environment. Also, they have to fight the battle at the level of sensations in the material world. The way of the warrior is the most difficult and heart-rending. But that is the way close to him.



Reflections on Savitri's encounter with death

by Larry Seidlitz

We can gain useful insights into the meaning of death by considering Savitri's encounter with the god of Death in Part Three of Sri Aurobindo's epic, *Savitri*. To briefly recap the earlier parts of the story, the princess Savitri, whom Sri Aurobindo tells us is "the goddess of the supreme Truth," weds Satyavan, who represents "the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance." (*Savitri*, Author's Note) In one of his letters on *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo explains that Savitri is an incarnation of the Divine Mother. (*Savitri*, p. 729) Immediately after their marriage, Savitri learns from the great sage Narad that Satyavan is fated to die exactly one year hence. For one year, Savitri lives with Satyavan in a forest hermitage keeping her foreknowledge of his impending doom secret in her heart. On the fated day, she accompanies him into the forest where he suddenly dies. The god of Death appears and leads him away to his dark abode. Savitri, in her consciousness, follows in pursuit.

Savitri descends into the realm of death to bring Satyavan back to life. This appears to be a realm of the deep subconscious or inconscient. It is described thus:

A mystery of terror's boundlessness,
Gathering its hungry strength the huge pitiless void
Surrounded slowly with its soundless depths,
And monstrous, cavernous, a shapeless throat
Devoured her into its shadowy strangling mass,
The fierce spiritual agony of a dream. (*Savitri*, p. 583)

Savitri moves through this void and bears its torturing, destroying influence with her "faint beam of wandering Truth." (*Savitri*, p. 585) It is in these bottomless depths, not in the bright light of the mind or the strength and confidence of the vital, that Savitri confronts the god of Death and upholds her claim to Satyavan's life and soul.

Before examining some of the details of this descent into death and of Savitri's war of words with the god of Death, we may ask ourselves what is the general symbolic significance of this sojourn into death, into this void, to bring back Satyavan? First, we should dismiss the obvious interpretation that at the time of the death of the body, our souls descend into this void, since Satyavan represents the soul. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have explained that upon the death of the body, the psychic being briefly transits through the vital and mental worlds, discards its vital and mental sheaths, and then passes to the psychic world to assimilate its previous life's experiences and to rest prior to taking up a new birth (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 431-438).

They do not say that the psychic being passes into the inconscient.

If we reject this interpretation, then what is the significance of this sojourn in *Savitri*? I would suggest the following. The individual soul, the soul spark as Sri Aurobindo calls it, has descended into the inconscience of matter, into death. This divine nucleus exists in each atom, in the essence of each thing in the universe, as its soul spark, a divine vibration at its core. It is in this sense that the soul has descended into death, and is indeed held in its grip, and it is only through the descent of the Divine Mother into matter, into the inconscience, that this divine vibration can grow and finally overtake the inertia and darkness of matter and transform it.

But there is perhaps a further significance connected with the soul, or we should say, the psychic being of human beings. The soul spark mentioned above takes part in the evolution of consciousness from the inconscience of matter through successive life forms up to the human being. During this evolution, it gradually grows and by the time it reaches the human form it has developed a distinct soul personality called the psychic being. This psychic being 'ensouls' a new human form in successive human lives, and between human incarnations passes to the psychic world. When it takes birth in human form, that is, in a physical form, it ordinarily can only influence the outward life of the mind, life, and body indirectly. The grip of inconscience on the outward life, especially on the body, is strong, and the spiritual light and force of the psychic being is not easily visible or fully expressed. Thus, human life is fettered by the inconscience, by death, and so is the psychic being's free command and expression in the outward life of the human being. In this sense, the psychic being is subject to death, that is, to the mortal human existence, and it is through the descent of the Divine Consciousness into the inconscient that this subjection may be overcome.

Now the significance of this descent of Savitri, the Divine Mother, into death may be taken quite literally. Indeed the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram did literally and consciously descend into death, very much as does Savitri in the poem. In fact, the same thing may be said of Sri Aurobindo before her. When Sri Aurobindo left his body in 1950, he brought down into his body the supramental light and force, and for several days his body had a golden hue and aura that was visible to the many who saw it. Moreover, the Mother indicated in *Mother's Agenda* that at the time Sri Aurobindo left his body, the most material part of his subtle being passed into her (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 3, p. 27) Also, at that time she realized the Mind of Light, which means the reception of the supramental light in the physical mind. (*Collected Works of the Mother*, Vol. 13, p. 64) We can conclude that whatever the reasons for Sri Aurobindo's leaving the body, in his passing he brought down the supramental light and force into the physical in an important way. Probably it paved the way for the larger descent of the



supramental force and light into the earth consciousness six years later on 29 February 1956.

Later, on 2 April 1962, the Mother herself consciously left her body for a time, with a total cardiac arrest, but nevertheless her body survived and she regained a connection with it, though perhaps not quite in the same way as before. (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 3, p. 129) Moreover, at the end of this crisis, during the night of 12 April 1962, she had a decisive experience:

Suddenly in the night I woke up with the full awareness of what we could call the Yoga of the world. The Supreme Love was manifesting through big pulsations, and each pulsation was bringing the world further in its manifestation. It was the formidable pulsations of the eternal, stupendous Love, only Love: each pulsation of the Love was carrying the universe further in its manifestation. And the certitude that what is to be done is done and the Supramental Manifestation is realized. (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 3, p. 131)

During the last years of her life, the Mother seemed to be in a state which oscillated between death and the supramental. For example, on 2 November 1972, she said: "Do you understand my condition? One minute the body feels it is going to die; the next minute it feels immortal. So after that, one can't . . . one can't possibly say 'how it's going.'" (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 13, p. 307) A week later she said, "It's like an attempt to make you feel there isn't any difference between life and death. There. That it is something else than life or death—neither what we call death, nor what we call life—it is . . . something. And that . . . is Divine. Or rather it is our next step towards the Divine." (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 13, p. 323) When the Mother did leave her body a year later, we do not know what happened on the occult level, but we might guess that then too the supramental light and force were infused still deeper into the subconscious and inconscient.

Savitri provides an interesting insight into the deeper reality of death, or of the inconscient, already in the very first lines of the poem, where the reader is introduced to the conflict between the powers of Light and Darkness:

It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.
Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abyss of the unbodied Infinite;
A fathomless zero occupied the world. (*Savitri*, p. 1)

On a cosmic level, this primordial darkness represents a reverse symbol of the Infinite. I say reverse because it says "unbodied Infinite," in other words, a vacant Infinite. In a line that follows it

is referred to as "A mute featureless semblance of the Unknown." This also suggests the notion of a blank that is a symbol of the Infinite. Note that the word "Unknown" is capitalized; one might instead apply the terms "the Infinite," "the Absolute," or "God." Shortly afterwards, the words Nought and Nothingness are applied to it, also capitalized. And on page 2, as this Nothingness is beginning to awake, Sri Aurobindo calls it by the psychological term, "the Inconscient."

Richard Hartz, in his article "The Composition of *Savitri*" concludes that the "inconscience and the Void of non-being came about as a consequence of what Sri Aurobindo has called 'the great denial of Sachchidananda by Himself.' If nothing but Sachchidananda exists, then He alone can deny Himself. In that case, the Spirit of the Void who denies God and soul can be none other than God denying His own existence." (*Mother India*, December 2001, p. 926) This Spirit of the Void is none other than the god of Death. This connection between the god of Death and Sachchidananda helps us to understand the paradoxical twist in the last part of the epic in which Death, after being vanquished by Savitri, after being "eaten by light," (*Savitri*, p. 667) is transfigured into a beautiful and luminous god.

We next turn to examine the god of Death's arguments in *Savitri*, his view of reality, his reason for denying God and the ideal of a divine life on earth. Note that we can hear in the following arguments echoes of the prevailing scientific view:

A fragile miracle of thinking clay,
Armed with illusions walks the child of Time.
To fill the void around he feels and dreads,
The void he came from and to which he goes,
He magnifies his self and names it God.
He calls the heavens to help his suffering hopes.
He sees above him with a longing heart
Bare spaces more unconscious than himself
That have not even his privilege of mind,
And empty of all but their unreal blue,
And peoples them with bright and merciful powers.
For the sea roars around him and earth quakes
Beneath his steps, and fire is at his doors,
And death prowls baying through the woods of life.
Moved by the Presences with which he yearns,
He offers in implacable shrines his soul
And clothes all with the beauty of his dreams.
(*Savitri*, pp. 586-587)

We should recognize that this sense of the hard reality of the void and the illusoriness of the Divine is false and an instrument of the perpetuation of death. It is a view that denies our divine possibilities, our divine essence and reality. We may note also that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had to fight against such arguments, which are ingrained in our very substance. Sri Aurobindo has written that he himself for years had to battle doubts about the possibilities of his yoga (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 1662), and it was a pervasive difficulty in many of the sadhaks with whom he



frequently argued. Mother also, when working with her body's consciousness, found a persistent doubt and pessimism that was extremely difficult to eradicate. (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 6, p. 209)

Death argues that God is a product of our imagination. The grim reality of our brief precarious life is so frightening, our impending death is so overwhelming, that we have invented the idea that we continue to exist after the death. He continues:

The Gods to whom man prays can help not man;
They are my imaginations and my moods
Reflected in him by illusion's power.
That which thou seest as thy immortal self
Is a shadowy icon of my infinite,
Is Death in thee dreaming of eternity.
I am the Immobile in which all things move,
I am the nude Inane in which they cease:
I have no body and no tongue to speak,
I commune not with human eye and ear;
Only thy thought gave a figure to my void.
(*Savitri*, pp. 592-593)

Death tells us, look around you, what do you see? You see a world of brief lives spinning in the void. Look at the immensity of the timeless, empty space around you and compare it to your brief, precarious human life. You cannot house the eternal in your frail, ephemeral body. When you come face to face with this void, when it impresses its totality upon your consciousness, and you realize your life is slipping away, its stark reality is overwhelming, irrefutable. Death is the only god: all things come from the void, and to the void all things return. All life and all mind come from matter, and even matter when you look at it closely is only empty space and inconscient swirling force. Somehow, through an accident of nature, life has arisen, and in it thinking mind. Mind lends a form to inconscient force—material forms in themselves, without the aid of mind, are just the movements of inconscient forces in a void. Being human, you look around and see this eternal darkness, this infinite emptiness waiting to swallow you. This is too much to bear, so you fill it with gods and imagine they are going to save you. Face the facts, face reality, don't turn from it. You have your brief life, a little pleasure and a little pain, and then you will return to eternal peace in nothingness. Don't resist, it will only make your life more painful. And Death continues:

This is the stuff from which the ideal is formed:
Its builder is thought, its base the heart's desire,
But nothing real answers to their call.
The ideal dwells not in heaven, nor on the earth,
A bright delirium of man's ardour of hope
Drunk with the wine of its own fantasy.
It is a brilliant shadow's dreamy trail.
Thy vision's error builds the azure skies,
Thy vision's error drew the rainbow's arch;
Thy mortal longing made for thee a soul. (*Savitri*,
pp. 607-608)

Death tells us that the ideal of a divine life is product of the mind, and the mind has built what the heart desires—it will all end with your brief life. In the same way the rainbow is an illusion of your mind, in the same way the blue of the sky is colored by your mind's perception, your soul is a product of your imagination, it is simply a mental projection of the timeless void you see around you, the emptiness that soon will swallow you. He tells us not to listen to the rambling of the saints and sages, they too were self-deceived:

The Avatars have lived and died in vain,
Vain was the sage's thought, the prophet's voice;
In vain is seen the shining upward Way.
Earth lies unchanged beneath the circling sun;
She loves her fall and no omnipotence
Her mortal imperfections can erase,
Force on man's crooked ignorance Heaven's straight line
Or colonise a world of death with gods. (*Savitri*,
pp. 609-610)

Death says that Avatars come and go, but earth still spins in the inane as it always has, and mankind still suffers, still dies. Forget about uplifting humanity to some divine status. Humanity is mortal and imperfect and will always remain so. Humanity is not interested in Avatars or a divine life. Humanity is content with its simple, squalid life, its narrow limits.

Death mocks her claim of immortal love, the love that ties her to Satyavan. This too he says is a product of her imagination, and worse, of her physical need and vital craving. It is her lust dressed up in imagination's bright clothes, and she calls it divine. He says:

Love cannot live by heavenly food alone,
Only on sap of earth can it survive.
For thy passion was a sensual want refined,
A hunger of the body and heart;
Thy want can tire and cease or turn elsewhere. (*Savitri*,
p. 611)

In human love, there usually is either a small or large part of physical and vital desire mixed in with higher motives. Seldom is love a pure self-giving with no expectation of return. Often, people are more concerned with their own needs and desires than those of the other person. Death argues, even if love has learned to reign in its desires and look disinterested, physical desire is still its origin; it is neither eternal nor divine. After the first blossoming of love with its passion and joy subsides, it is soon replaced by the harsher colors of the vital with its demands and jealousy and treachery. Or else it fades, and is replaced by the habit of a daily routine, a working together for common ends, a common sacrifice for a stable life.

Savitri replies to all of death's arguments. Regarding her love for Satyavan, she says,



My love is not a hunger of the heart,
My love is not a craving of the flesh;
It came to me from God, to God returns.
Even in all that life and man have marred,
A whisper of divinity still is heard,
A breath is felt from the eternal spheres.
Allowed by Heaven and wonderful to man
A sweet fire-rhythm of passion chants to love.
There is a hope in its wild infinite cry;
It rings with callings from forgotten heights,
And when its strains are hushed to high-winged souls
In their empyrean, its burning breath
Survives beyond, the rapturous core of suns
That flame for ever pure in skies unseen,
A voice of the eternal Ecstasy.
One day I shall behold my great sweet world
Put off the dire disguises of the gods,
Unveil from terror and disrobe from sin.
Appeased we shall draw near our Mother's face,
We shall cast our candid souls upon her lap;
Then shall we clasp the ecstasy we chase,
Then shall we shudder with the long-sought god,
Then shall we find Heaven's unexpected strain.
(*Savitri*, pp. 612-613)

Savitri says that love ultimately has come from God and to God returns. It is the divine within each of us drawn to the divine perceived to be outside. It is the Oneness in the multiplicity seeking its unity. It is true that here in the ignorance humanity has deformed love. We have lost our unity with the Oneness behind all existence; we perceive ourselves cut off and isolated from the whole. Therefore, in our ignorance we strive for security, strive to enlarge our ego to withstand the pressures of the world. Instead of opening ourselves up to the Divine, we protect ourselves and seek others to help us in putting up a common defense against the forces of the world we cannot understand nor control. Nevertheless, there still is something beautiful and divine at the core of human love, and when we grow in knowledge and strength, when we begin to purify ourselves of our egoistic motives, more and more of the sweetness and ecstasy of the original Divine Love begins to reveal itself.

One who came, love and lover and beloved
Eternal, built himself a wondrous field
And wove the measures of a marvellous dance.
There in its circles and its magic turns
Attracted he arrives, repelled he flees.
In the wild devious promptings of his mind
He tastes the honey of tears and puts off joy
Repenting, and has laughter and has wrath,
And both are a broken music of the soul
Which seeks out reconciled its heavenly rhyme.
Ever he comes to us across the years
Bearing a new sweet face that is the old.
His bliss laughs to us or it calls concealed

Like a far-heard unseen entrancing flute
From moonlit branches in the throbbing woods,
Tempting our angry search and passionate pain.
Disguised the Lover seeks and draws our souls.
(*Savitri*, pp. 613-614)

All things here are the Divine. He is the pursuer and the pursued, the play of the pursuit is He. This world is his stage. Through the cycles of the evolution he pursues himself in endless forms, always changing. We are caught in the game, mistake the mask for the Person behind, but feel the attraction and the delight of the play. The Divine calls to us through our beloved, attracting us to his delight. We are tossed about in his passionate play, finding sweetness here, sorrow there, but always led to new adventure and new delight and new pain. As we grow through this experience, our human love gradually transforms into its divine counterpart. Then the Divine within us unveils itself, and the disguise of the Divine in our beloved thins and falls. Love transforms to the Love of the Divine for the Truth within the beloved. We feel our oneness with others, we feel the delight of their essential truth, and participate in the gradual unfolding of their outward perfection.

Savitri gives a long reply to Death's argument about the illusion of God and the vanity of the ideal of a divine life on earth. In her reply, she explains how God immersed his consciousness into matter, into the inconscient, and is slowly emerging through evolutionary steps. Look at the miracles he has already performed: the appearance of life in inert matter, of mind in life. Even now man can turn his consciousness to the Divine and open it to a divine light and power.

God wrapped his head from sight in Matter's cowl,
His consciousness dived into inconscient depths,
All-Knowledge seemed a huge dark Nescience;
Infinity wore a boundless zero's form.
His abysses of bliss became insensible deeps,
Eternity a blank spiritual Vast.
Annulling an original nullity
The Timeless took its ground in emptiness
And drew the figure of a universe,
That the spirit might adventure into Time
And wrestle with adamant Necessity
And the soul pursue a cosmic pilgrimage.
A spirit moved in black immensities
And built a Thought in ancient Nothingness;
A soul was lit in God's tremendous Void,
A secret labouring glow of nascent fire.
In Nihil's gulf his mighty Puissance wrought;
She swung her formless motion into shapes,
Made Matter the body of the Bodiless.
Infant and dim the eternal Might awoke.
In inert Matter breathed a slumbering Life,
In a subconscious Life Mind lay asleep;
In waking Life it stretched its giant limbs
To shake from it the torpor of its drowse;



A senseless substance quivered into sense,
The world's heart commenced to beat, its eyes to see,
In the crowded dumb vibrations of a brain
Thought fumbled in a ring to find itself,
Discovered speech and fed the new-born Word
That bridged with spans of light the world's ignorance.
In waking Mind, the Thinker built his house.
A reasoning animal willed and planned and sought;
He stood erect among his brute compeers,
He built life new, measured the universe,
Opposed his fate and wrestled with unseen Powers,
Conquered and used the laws that rule the world,
And hoped to ride the heavens and reach the stars,
A master of his huge environment. (*Savitri*, pp. 621-622)

This poetic summary of the evolution on earth effectively counters Death's denial of hope and love and God. The miracle of life that we see before us every day bears constant witness to our divine possibility. If our consciousness, limited though it is, has emerged out of dense matter, on what basis shall we deny the possibility of its further emergence? The whole history of earth has been an evolution of consciousness. On what basis can we assume it will cease? Already human consciousness has attained pinnacles that touch the Divine. It has already produced marvels of knowledge, wisdom, courage, strength, beauty, delight, skill, and perfect execution. As this development of consciousness continues, these qualities will surely move towards a perfection which can be called divine.

Beyond these levels of the human consciousness, Savitri speaks of the realms of the inner and higher spiritual consciousness which already have been scaled by the yogin:

Out of this tangle of intellect and sense,
Out of the narrow scope of finite thought
At last he wakes into spiritual mind;
A high liberty begins and luminous room:
He glimpses eternity, touches the infinite,
He meets the gods in great and sudden hours,
He feels the universe as his larger self,
Makes Space and Time his opportunity
To join the heights and depths of being in light,
In the heart's cave speaks secretly with God. (*Savitri*, p. 659)

Savitri's description of the progression of the evolution does not stop here, but she takes it all the way to the realization of the supramental consciousness, which is vividly described as no where else:

The Truth supreme, vast and impersonal
Fits faultlessly the hour and circumstance,
Its substance a pure gold ever the same
But shaped into vessels for the spirit's use,
Its gold becomes the wine jar and the vase.
All there is a supreme epiphany:

The All-Wonderful makes a marvel of each event,
The All-Beautiful is a miracle in each shape;
The All-Blissful smites with rapture the heart's throbs,
A pure celestial joy is the use of sense. (*Savitri*, pp. 662-663)

It is interesting that at the end of Savitri's debate with Death, when Death has recognized that he is looking into the immortal eyes of the Divine, he denies her truth. His last arguments challenge her to "reveal thy power, lay bare thy spirit's force." (p. 664) In effect, he says you must *conquer* death; immortality will not be given. Death's denial bears a resemblance to what Sri Aurobindo has called elsewhere the spirit of doubt, which doubts for its own sake and cannot be convinced otherwise (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 162). But more profoundly, this suggests that physical immortality can only be achieved by the *power* of the Spirit brought down into the consciousness and substance of the body.

It was to this end that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother worked and struggled and suffered for humanity. It was a terrible work, as is depicted in Savitri's journey into death. During the last year of Mother's life, she spoke of the difficulty this way: "Poetically, I could say: a few seconds in heaven and . . . hours in hell." (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 13, p. 311) Sri Aurobindo, in his poem, "A God's Labour," said of his ordeal:

My gaping wounds are a thousand and one
And the titan kings assail,
But I cannot rest till my task is done
And wrought the eternal will. (*Collected Poems*, p. 100)

Only the Divine can bear this pain of transformation. Even the Mother, to cope with it, had in her most material consciousness to be exclusively turned to the Divine. (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 13, p. 308)

It is in this sense that death is God's instrument: to overcome it requires a conscious, absolute surrender to the Divine, down to the very cells of one's body. Savitri says to Death:

I have given thee thy awful shape of dread
And thy sharp sword of terror and grief and pain
To force the soul of man to struggle for light
On the brevity of his half-conscious days.
Thou art his spur to greatness in his works,
The whip to his yearning for eternal bliss,
His poignant need of immortality. (*Savitri*, p. 666)

Death is the great bar across our path to immortality that we must one day cross. Until that day, it is our spirit's instrument. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, through their sacrifice of love for us, have brought down the supramental light and force deep into the subconscious and inconscient, and it is there working, gradually permeating the darkness with its rays, opening that path for us.



Source material

The soul's line of destiny

by Sri Aurobindo

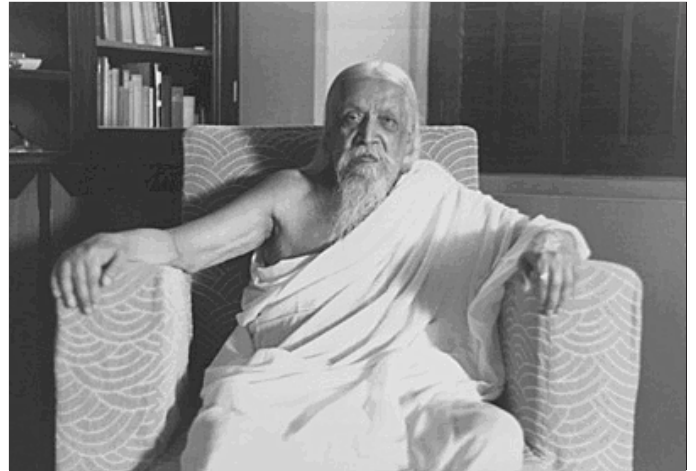
In a general way, a life is only one brief episode in a long history of spiritual evolution in which the soul follows the curve of the line set for the earth, passing through many lives to complete it. It is an evolution out of material inconscience to consciousness and towards the Divine Consciousness, from ignorance to Divine Knowledge, from darkness through half-light to Light, from death to Immortality, from suffering to the Divine Bliss. Suffering is due first to the Ignorance, secondly to the separation of the individual consciousness from the Divine Consciousness and Being, a separation created by the Ignorance—when that ceases, when one lives in the Divine and no more in one's separated smaller self, then only suffering can altogether cease. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 461)

* * * * *

Each person follows in the world his own line of destiny which is determined by his own nature and actions—the meaning and necessity of what happens in a particular life cannot be understood except in the light of the whole course of many lives. But this can be seen by those who can get beyond the ordinary mind and feelings and see things as a whole, that even errors, misfortunes, calamities are steps in the journey,—the soul gathering experience as it passes through and beyond them until it is ripe for the transition which will carry it beyond these things to a higher consciousness and higher life. When one comes to that line of crossing, one has to leave behind one the old mind and feelings. One looks then on those who are still fixed in the pleasures and sorrows of the ordinary world with sympathy and wherever it is possible with spiritual helpfulness, but no longer with attachment. One learns that they are being led through all their stumblings and trusts to the Universal Power that is watching and supporting their existence to do for them whatever for them is the best. But the one thing that is really important for us is to get into the greater Light and the Divine Union—to turn to the Divine alone, to put our trust there alone whether for ourselves or for others. (*Letters on Yoga*, pp. 460-461)

* * * * *

It is not the personality, the character that is of the first importance in rebirth—it is the psychic being who stands behind the evolution of the nature and evolves with it. The psychic when it departs from the body, shedding even the mental and vital on its way to its resting place, carries with it the heart of its experiences,—not the physical events, not the vital movements, not the



Sri Aurobindo. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

mental buildings, not the capacities or characters, but something essential that it gathered from them, what might be called the divine element for the sake of which the rest existed. That is the permanent addition, it is that that helps in the growth towards the Divine. That is why there is usually no memory of the outward events and circumstances of past lives—for this memory there must be a strong development towards unbroken continuance of the mind, the vital, even the subtle physical; for though it all remains in a kind of seed memory, it does not ordinarily emerge. What was the divine element in the magnanimity of the warrior, that which expressed itself in his loyalty, nobility, high courage, what was the divine element behind the harmonious mentality and generous vitality of the poet and expressed itself in them, that remains and in a new harmony of character may find a new expression or, if the life is turned towards the Divine, be taken up as powers for the realisation or for the work that has to be done for the Divine. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 452)

* * * * *

The being as it passes through the series of its lives takes on various kinds of personalities and passes through various types of experiences, but it does not carry these on to the next life, as a rule. It takes on a new mind, vital and body. The mental capacities, occupations, interests, idiosyncrasies of the past mind and vital are not taken over by the new mind and vital, except to the extent that is useful for the new life. One may have the power of poetic expression in one life, but in the next not have any such power or any interest in poetry. On the other hand, tendencies suppressed or missed or imperfectly developed in one life may come out in the next. There would be therefore nothing surprising in the contrast which you noted. The essence of past experiences is kept by the psychic being but the forms of experience or of personality are not, except such as are needed for the new stage in the soul's progress. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 453)



* * * * *

The psychic being's choice at the time of death does not work out the next formation of personality, it fixes it. When it enters the psychic world, it begins to assimilate the essence of its experience and by that assimilation is formed the future psychic personality in accordance with the fixation already made. When this assimilation is over, it is ready for a new birth; but the less developed beings do not work out the whole thing for themselves, there are beings and forces of the higher world who have that work. Also, when it comes to birth, it is not sure that the forces of the physical world will not come across the working out of what it wanted—its own new instrumentation may not be strong enough for that purpose; for, there is the interaction of its own energies and the cosmic forces here. There may be frustration, diversion, a partial working out—many things may happen. All that is not a rigid machinery, it is a working out of complex forces. It may be added, however, that a developed psychic being is much more conscious in this transition and works out much of it itself. The time depends also on the development and on a certain rhythm of the being—for some there is practically immediate rebirth, for others it takes longer, for some it may take centuries; but here, again, once the psychic being is sufficiently developed, it is free to choose its own rhythm and its own intervals. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 444)

* * * * *

I can understand the shock your wife's catastrophic death must have been to you. But you are now a seeker and sadhak of the Truth and must set your mind to rise above the normal reactions of the human being and see things in a larger greater light. Regard your lost wife as a soul that was progressing through the vicissitudes of the life of Ignorance—like all others here; in that progress things happen that seem unfortunate to the human mind and a sudden accidental or violent death cutting short prematurely this always brief spell of terrestrial experience we call life seems to it especially painful and unfortunate. But one who gets behind the outward view knows that all that happens in the progress of the soul has its meaning, its necessity, its place in the series of experiences which are leading it towards the turning-point where one can pass from the Ignorance to the Light. He knows that whatever happens in the Divine Providence is for the best, even though it may seem to the mind otherwise. Look on your wife as a soul that has passed the barrier between two states of existence. Help her journey towards her place of rest by calm thoughts and the call to the Divine Help to aid her upon it. Grief too long continued does not help but delays the journey of the departed soul. Do not brood on your loss, but think only of her spiritual welfare. (*Letters on Yoga*, p. 462)

The soul's activities between lives

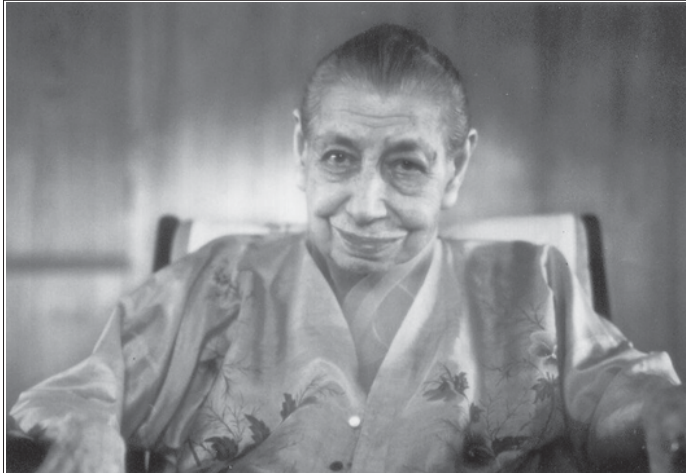
by The Mother

It is not the mind and vital which develop and progress from life to life—except in altogether exceptional cases and at a very advanced stage of evolution—it is the psychic. So, this is what happens: the psychic has alternate periods of activity and rest; it has a life of progress resulting from experiences of the physical life, of active life in a physical body, with all the experiences of the body, the vital and the mind; then, normally, the psychic goes into a kind of rest for assimilation where the result of the progress accomplished during its active existence is worked out, and when this assimilation is finished, when it has absorbed the progress it had prepared in its active life on earth, it comes down again in a new body bringing with it the result of all its progress and, at an advanced stage, it even chooses the environment and the kind of body and the kind of life in which it will live to complete its experience concerning one point or another. In some very advanced cases the psychic can, before leaving the body, decide what kind of life it will have in its next incarnation.

When it has become an almost completely formed and already very conscious being, it presides over the formation of the new body, and usually through an inner influence it chooses the elements and the substance which will form its body in such a way that the body is adapted to the needs of its new experience. But this is at a rather advanced stage. And later, when it is fully formed and returns to earth with the idea of service, of collective help and participation in the divine Work, then it is able to bring to the body in formation certain elements of the mind and vital from previous lives which, having been organised and impregnated with psychic forces in previous lives, could be preserved and, consequently, can participate in the general progress. But this is at a very, very advanced stage.

When the psychic is fully developed and very conscious, when it becomes a conscious instrument of the divine Will, it organises the vital and the mind in such a way that they too participate in the general harmony and can be preserved.

A high degree of development allows at least some part of the mental and vital beings to be preserved in spite of the dissolution of the body. If, for instance, some parts—mental or vital—of the human activity have been particularly developed, these elements of the mind and vital are maintained even “in their form”—in the form of the activity which has been fully organised—as, for example, in highly intellectual people who have particularly developed their brains, the mental part of their being keeps this structure and is preserved in the form of an organised brain which has its own life and can be kept unchanged until a future life so as to participate in it with all its gains . . .



The Mother. (Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram)

Otherwise, in ordinary people in whom the psychic form is not fully developed and organised, when the psychic leaves the body, the mental and vital forms may persist for a certain time if the death has been particularly peaceful and concentrated, but if a man dies suddenly and in a state of passion, with numerous attachments, well, the different parts of the being are dispersed and live for a shorter or longer time their own life in their own domain, then disappear.

The centre of organization and transformation is always the presence of the psychic in the body. Therefore, it is a very big mistake to believe that the progress continues or even, as some believe that it is more complete and rapid in the periods of transition between two physical lives; in general, there is no progress at all, for the psychic enters into a state of rest and the other parts, after a more or less ephemeral life in their own domain, are dissolved.

Earthly life is the place for progress. It is here, on earth, that progress is possible, during the period of earthly existence. And it is the psychic which carries the progress over from one life to another, by organising its own evolution and development itself. (*Collected Works of the Mother*, Vol. 9, pp. 268-270)

* * * * *

[The question about the departure of the soul at the time of death] depends on the degree of development, the conditions of death—and above all on the unification of the being and its attitude at the time of leaving the body. The question here was about fully developed beings, that is, fully developed psychic beings—and I don't know if it means a psychic being which has profited by its presence in a physical body to do yoga, for then the conditions are quite different. But in a more general way, I have often told you that, with regard to the external envelope of the being, everything depends on its attitude at the moment of death, and that attitude necessarily depends on its inner development and its unification.

If we take the best instance, of someone who has unified his being completely around the divine Presence within him, who is now only one will, one consciousness, this person will have grouped around his central psychic being a fully developed and organised mind, an absolutely surrendered and collaborating vital and an obedient, docile and supple physical being. This physical being, as it is fully developed, will have a subtle body—what Sri Aurobindo calls the “true physical”—which will infinitely surpass the limits of its body and have enough suppleness, plasticity, balance to be able to adhere to the inner parts of the being and follow the movement of the soul it its . . . I don't want to say in its ascent, but in its peregrinations outside the body. What the soul will do, where it will go—it all depends on what it has decided before leaving the body. And this capacity to keep around itself the being that has been fully organised and unified in its physical life, will allow it to really choose what it wants to do. And this also represents a very different field of possibilities, from passing consciously from one body into another, directly—there are instances in which one of these fully conscious and fully developed beings has slowly prepared another being capable of receiving and assimilating it, and in order not to stop its material work when it leaves one body, it goes and joins another physical body; that is an extreme case, extremely rare also, but one which forms part of an altogether traditional occult knowledge—to the instance at the other extreme, where the soul having finished its bodily experience, wants to assimilate it in repose and prepare for another physical existence later, sometimes much later. And so this is what happens, among many other possibilities: it leaves in each domain—in the subtle physical, in the vital, in the mental domain—the corresponding beings; it leaves them with a sort of link between them, but each one keeps its independent existence, and it itself goes into the zone, the reality, the world of the psychic proper, and enters into a blissful repose for assimilation, until it has assimilated [. . .] and is ready to begin a new experience. And then, if its work has been well done and the parts or sheaths of its being which it has left in their different domains have acted as they should there, when it descends again, it will put on one after another all these parts which lived with it in a former life, and with this wealth of knowledge and experience it will prepare to enter a new body . . . This may be after hundreds or thousands of years, for in these domains all that is organized is no longer necessarily subject to the decomposition which here we call “death.” As soon as a vital being is fully harmonised, it becomes immortal. What dissolves it and breaks it up are all the disorders within it and all the tendencies towards destruction and decomposition; but if it is fully harmonised and organised and, so to say, divinised, it becomes immortal. It is the same thing for the mind. And even in the subtle physical, beings who are fully developed and have been impregnated with spiritual forces do not necessarily dissolve after death. (*Collected Works of the Mother*, Vol. 8, pp. 336-338)



Book Review

Death, dying, and beyond by Alok Pandey

Reviewed by Larry Seidlitz

Death, dying and beyond is the first book by Alok Pandey, who is an outstanding and sought-after speaker on Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. Here he combines his personal experience of the spiritual life, his detailed knowledge of the writings of Sri Aurobindo, his story-telling charm, and his scientific background as a physician and psychiatrist in a comprehensive and penetrating look into the fascinating and disconcerting mystery of death. Under the author's pen, the subject is neither depressing nor frightening; he looks at it squarely, objectively, but with a warmth and wisdom that dispels its darkness and repugnance. Indeed, he takes us to the other side where there shines the light in which is revealed its process and purpose, its promise and opportunity.

The 327 page book (not including a substantive preface and introduction) is squarely based on Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's views and words on the subject, but goes well beyond them in several ways. The author brings his own experiences, scholarship, and scientific knowledge, as well as those of others, to the topic. Among the latter include reports of Raymond Moody, the famous investigator of near death experiences; Maria Parkes, a music thanatologist who helps the dying to make their passage with sacred music; Paul Brunton, the famous journalist and author of *In Search of Secret India*; extracts from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; and extensive references from the Bhagavad Gita. The author provides several case reports of his own patients, as well as a fascinating story about a personal encounter with a Tibetan child who demonstrated that he was the reincarnation of a certain departed Lama. The author liberally sprinkles the work with quotes from Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri* and other poems to help reveal subtle truths and lift the tone and level of the exposition.

The author's treatment of the topic "What is death?" is especially informed by his scientific background as well as his yogic scholarship. Here we find that the process is no simple matter, that indeed death is a process that occurs over time and does not begin and end with the stopping of the breath and heart. This latter notion is quickly dispelled by a number of case reports, including those of yogis who were able to bring these to a stop for extensive periods of time before objective witnesses. At the same time, we are invited to a deeper consideration of the implications of these facts, for example, for controlling and prolonging our lives. As expected, we are also given a detailed account of the withdrawal of the subtle physical, vital, mental, and psychic sheaths from the physical body and their sojourn in the subtle worlds, which have

also been discussed by Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine* and *Letters on Yoga*, but here we are also given some interesting information regarding the timing of these events, together with useful advice regarding how we can help our departed loved ones during their transit.

It is perhaps the book's coverage of "the why of death" that is the most comforting for those who have lost loved ones or may fear it. Here we find a kind of detached, objective analysis which, by removing the sense of meaninglessness and tragedy from death, takes most of the sting out of it. We find that death is no mere accident, no tragic end imposed upon a brief existence, but rather, a meaningful, helpful, and self-chosen transition in the evolution and growth of our soul through a succession of lives in different bodies, times, and circumstances. The author helps us to adopt a healthy view towards our life and death that is based on the soul and its development. We begin to see and feel how the fact of our limited time acts as a spur that moves us along the long road of our soul's evolution towards its earthly embodiment of freedom, bliss, and conscious immortality. We are shown the complexity and disparity of the interplay of the soul with its imperfect instruments of mind, life, and body, the latter subject to ignorance, limitation and rigidity. We begin to understand the complex relationship of the individual with the larger universe of which he is a part, and the inevitable and necessary interchange between the two.

In addition to these more philosophical reasons for the necessity of death, we gain some further insights from the scientific reasons. The author discusses some of the recent research on the in-built programming of cell death. Each cell generates various molecules, some of which signal the cell to continue, others of which signal it to die. The relative dominance of these signals determines the life or death of the cell. Of course, some cells in our bodies are continually dying, whereas others are multiplying. The death of cells is just as necessary for our survival as their reproduction. These facts in themselves suggest new perspectives on death, reveal the complex interplay of the part and whole, the constant and necessary interplay of life and death, the harmonious orchestra in which we all play our parts.

These central issues of the what and why of death are complemented with a whole range of issues related to death, leading to a comprehensive treatment of the subject. There is an extensive discussion of attitudes towards death, and especially of people's reactions to death, whether of our own or of others close to us. Here the author explains how the various parts of the being give rise to particular reactions. Through this analysis, we can better appreciate the reactions of our vital, sense-mind, mental reason, and our soul and spirit, which may be helpful in the cultivation of the latter responses. The author also discusses these reactions of the different parts of the being in the context of Kubler-Ross's famous analysis of the stages of human reactions to death in *On Death and Dying*, and, as such, represents an original and insightful extension of her work. In addition to this, we



are given much helpful advice on grief, on dealing with our own, on assisting children in dealing with theirs, and on the effects of grief on the one who is departing from earthly life and transiting to the other side. There is also a section on the fear of death, and various methods are given for overcoming this fear.

The author gives a detailed analysis of the whole subject of ghosts as well as of possession by vital beings and entities. Here we are shown Sri Aurobindo's analysis of seven different phenomena which come under the general category of ghosts, and the author's elaboration on these phenomena together with his advice. We learn, for example, that some ghost phenomena may in fact be the soul of a departed being, and others may be the mental formation of a departed being that persists in the atmosphere of a place. Other ghosts, however, may be vital beings (not human) from another dimension of existence that through various means manage to take a visible or audible form in the material world. Finally, some ghosts may simply be formations of one's own mind. The author also discusses the issue of possession by vital beings, as well as whether, or rather, the manner in which, heaven and hell exist.

There is an extensive discussion of the nature of karma and rebirth that includes an original analysis of how the consequences of our actions (karma) are transferred from one life to the next. We find that this takes place through the agency of the mental, vital, and physical purushas—the true mental, the true vital and the true physical. As part of this discussion, the author also clarifies the relation of the soul with the inner and outer nature, and how death serves as a means to shed an outer nature which can no longer adequately express the growing soul within. He dispels the notion that rebirth is a system of reward and punishment, but at the same shows why and how certain actions can have either helpful or deleterious effects in future lives. He also discusses certain forms of “bad karma” that are very difficult to overcome, and may persist in numerous successive lives. We also learn that the law of karma operates at the collective level, such that the actions of nations can have consequences in a later epoch.

There is also an interesting analysis of a range of ethical dilemmas associated with death and dying. These include euthanasia, artificial life support, resuscitation, post-mortem examination, abortion, suicide, capital punishment, organ transplantation, and animal experiments. He gives us some reassuring advice when he says that there are no hard and fast rules that can be applied in these situations, that decisions generally must be individually tailored to the specific persons and situations involved, that they must be made with the best lights that are available, and will be most effective if offered to God with an openness to a higher power. Nevertheless, he gives some insightful background information about these issues and provides much useful guidance for dealing with them.

Based on Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's vision, the book necessarily looks beyond death to physical immortality. On this topic, the author discusses not only the yogic view and ap-

proach, but also the scientific. We learn more about the various scientific causes of the death of the body, and current research and practices to remove or delay them. But the causes of death are not simply physical, and the deeper causes that are open only to a deeper vision are also examined. We learn more about prana, or the life energy, and how it can be manipulated to prolong life for very long periods. But we find that this approach too has its limitations, and while both physical and occult means are useful, what ultimately is necessary is a spiritual change of consciousness. We discover that the key is to find the spiritual part of us which is immortal, the soul: “The first genuine step towards immortality is taken when we touch and begin to dwell within our soul. We then begin to share the consciousness of immortality that is natural to the soul itself.” (p. 265) Whereas the traditional yogas stop with the realization of the soul, entering into it and either cutting the connection with body or allowing it to wither away, the Integral Yoga seeks a transformation of the body itself so that it may participate in the immortality of the soul. The author takes us through some of the steps necessary to reach this point of humanity's advance. We also learn that even physical immortality does not mean that one is necessarily bound forever to a single body. One could leave the body voluntarily, or one could change the body in a conscious way, rather than through the present unconscious process of death. We learn more about the advent of the supramental consciousness that has rendered a future immortality inevitable, and about the future supramental body envisioned by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

I found the book thoroughly interesting and enjoyable. It was not heavy, but rather uplifting and positive. It treated the subject objectively with a kind of detached, yet warm wisdom that one hopes for from a psychiatrist. The book seemed to be written especially for those well-acquainted with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, assuming a familiarity with the basic principles of death and rebirth and spiritual existence that they have discussed in their writings and talks. While it does not simply skip over these basics, it works with them in a facile way and builds upon them so as to fill them out and extend them in various directions and contribute something new to the subject. Therefore, for some who are unfamiliar with Indian thought on death, or even with the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the treatment of the subject may seem perhaps unbelievable, or at least highly mystical and unusual. But those readers who do have some developed background in these issues would be rather gratified to be treated as mature fellow-travelers on the road of life and death, and to be shown some of the interesting landmarks along the way that may not have been noticed before or appreciated in all their significance. And despite what we may intellectually know about the continuance of life after death, personal encounters with death inevitably challenge us to deal with the issue at the emotional level. It is here that this book, with its clear and warm daylight, can help dispel our fear and anxiety, and look into this mysterious doorway with greater courage and understanding.



The poetry room

Samadhi

At the Samadhi early every evening
a meditation took place

A shower had wet the roses on the Ashram wall
earlier in the day, which were now dry

Pilgrims were putting flowers and incense sticks
on the Samadhi tomb

I noticed the tall tree in the courtyard
where birds nestled and flew, squirrels scurrying up and down
on its branches

I thought of Sri Aurobindo and Mother

Sometimes I sat watching other pilgrims
and meditators

A total belief and devotion in placing flowers
on and around the pulsating tomb

Some had come from far away
I watched this and felt a subtle communion

It seemed fitting yet also
quite mystical . . .

I looked around for some stimulus
of my deeper feelings

Some of the older sadhaks sitting near
were talking and appeared unaware
of what was happening

Mother had stated years ago that feelings
she had during these gatherings

were very buoyant and uplifting
that only some got

I felt this to be a spiritual message
meaning *I am here*

beyond thought and physical vision
as a kind of pointing . . .

A supramental way of communicating
from there . . .

I glimpsed that it was perhaps Sri Aurobindo or Mother
at a higher stage of evolution

The startling experience reassured
and calmed

I thought of Mother and Sri Aurobindo released
from the Samadhi tomb

abiding in a very clear atmosphere,
peaceful and radiant . . .

—Joseph Kent

Passing

Whenever someone,
specially one
who's close to you,
leaves their body—
not in sleep at night
as everyone takes flight—
with no return
so it must die,
no matter how
prepared we are
it tears and twists,
drains . . . weighs
on us from seed to shore,
takes space once ours—no more;
at least for a time,
our time of grief.

So hedged down
and cast in,
it's not easy
to see beyond
where the smile comes
from the one gone
more tender, direct and free
than bodies or words we
always believed
were necessary.
And now it's wished that we, awaking, know:
our returning smile resumes the flow!

—Ronald Jorgensen



Travel against the night

On December 31st,
New Year's night,
I promised to visit
A place far away
From where I lived
In Pondicherry.

Suddenly rain appeared
And the sky filled with 'clouds black',
The sea roared with tides full
Rushing o'er the shore;
In thundering night,
A random breeze
Lightened the sky.

I was remembering
The banyan tree in Auroville
Where I had planned to gather
With friends to cheer
The New Year's night
Full with divine spirit.

I felt disappointed
I had only a bicycle
For the eight kilometer journey,
Alone, from the city to the forest.
She rang me up,
My maiden of love,
And said, "Hero!
Where are you?"

I got the spirit
And rejoiced within.
A flow of love moved
In my heart profound,
I thought to challenge
The night alone.

On the way to Auroville
I missed the track,
Being more engaged
In cheering the rain.
Suddenly my mind
Became free from the trap
Of nature's beauty
In the rainful night
I have ever enjoyed.

I was alone, and found
Wild dogs gathering
On the road cheering the night.
I crossed the time
To reach my mind's destiny.
I became faster than the rain
And hard before the deep
Forest of the night.

I reached the Tibetan Bhavan,
Where I found myself secure,
Attending a cultural show.
I heard a clarion call
From within, my spirit multiplied
In the strange darkness
Of the night full of rain.
The storm became smooth;
I became a traveler
Against nature's immortal law.

Stranger to me, an Italian lass
Called to me from far behind.
Night, rain and the thundering sky
Witnessed our meeting.
Both of us were destined
To reach the same spot,
At the time promised;
Crossing the road of sorrows;
We won the toss.

Neither of us was bothered
By the world around.
Slowly, smoothly, we moved
To reach our goal.
Night was the rain,
Lightning the torch,
As I met the maiden
Of my cherished search.

Author's note: The 'maiden of love' is the 'destined spiritual place.'

—Manas Ranjan Pati



Apropos

The Divine gives itself to those who give themselves without reserve and in all their parts to the Divine. For them the calm, the light, the power, the bliss, the freedom, the wideness, the heights of knowledge, the seas of Ananda. —Sri Aurobindo

My dear child, live in my love, feel it, be filled with it and be happy—nothing can please me more than that. —The Mother

None can achieve eternal life who has not first learned to live not in the past or in the future, but now—in the moment at the moment. —Aldous Huxley

Be like a child—clear, loving, spontaneous, infinitely flexible and ready each moment to wonder and accept miracles. —Mother Meera

God stood behind Himself one night and cast a brilliant shadow from which creation came. —St. Thomas Aquinas

O Great One! Install me firmly in that ever true Existence where I shall cease to see myself, seeing everything in Thee. —St. Tayumanavar

Grace is the golden lining to the dark cloud; it is the touch of love that rounds off all our faults. —Nolini Kanta Gupta

God cannot leave us. It is just that our soul is so vast, we do not always feel His lips upon the veil. —St. Catherine of Siena

A sort of absoluteness attends all perception of truth,—no smell of age, no hint of corruption. It is self-sufficing, sound, entire. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

One can make a day of any size and regulate the rising and setting of his own sun and the brightness of its shining. —John Muir

Love of the world, the mask, must change into the love of god, the Truth. —Sri Aurobindo

To live within, in constant aspiration towards the Divine—that renders us capable of regarding life with a smile and remaining in peace whatever the external circumstances. —The Mother

Beauty is my teacher helping me to know that He cares for me. —Rabia of Basra

They who can resign themselves to the will of the Almighty with simple faith and guileless love, realize God very quickly. —Sri Ramakrishna

If man is not a divinity, then man is a disease. Either he is the image of God or else he is the one animal which has gone mad. —G.K. Chesterton

The battleline between good and evil runs through the heart of every man. —Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Wisdom is so kind and wise that wherever you may look you can learn something about God. —St. Catherine of Siena

The flaming fire warns me off by its own glow. Save me from the dying embers hidden under ashes. —Rabindranath Tagore

Every one has been made for some particular work, and the desire for that work has been put into his heart. —Rumi

God waits to win back his own flowers as gifts from man's hands. —Rabindranath Tagore

Since no one really knows anything about God, those who think they do are just troublemakers. —Rabia of Basra

As soon as the center of all being is apprehended, there ariseth a joy in the heart that surpasseth all other. —Jacob Boehme

In the yoga as in life it is the man who persists unwearied to the last who conquers in the end and finds his faith justified. —Sri Aurobindo

When will they stop dancing like puppets on a string, pulled they know not by whom or what? When will they find time to sit quietly and go within? —The Mother

Words can enrich and be as wonderful spices mixed into the days we imbibe with all our senses. —Meister Eckhart

My soul has a purpose, it is to love; if I do not fulfill my heart's vocation, I suffer. —St. Thomas Aquinas

What sort of God would it be, who only pushed from without. —Goethe

There is a guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

All beings are words of God, His music, His art. —Meister Eckhart

It is easy to utter “do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do” by mouth, but not so easy to play them on an instrument. So it is easy to talk religion but difficult to practice it. —Sri Ramakrishna

Gaps are left in life through which comes the sad music of death. —Rabindranath Tagore

Wake up! It is time to wake up! You are young, strong—why do you waver, why are you lazy and irresolute? This is not the way to wisdom. —Dhammapada

This is a strange repose, to be asleep with eyes wide open; standing, speaking, moving, and yet so fast asleep. —William Shakespeare

Let us bring our minds to rest in the glory of the Divine Truth. May Truth inspire our reflection. —Rig Veda