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Sunil Kumar
MA NET in Yoga, Head
Constable Delhi Police India

Understanding integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo

Sunil Kumar

Abstract

The goal of yoga is to become free of the cycle of birth and death and attain union with God. The soul that is afflicted with birth, death, sorrow, falsehood, disease and ignorance wants to escape from them. Sri Aurobindo who was an Indian Yogi, Philosopher, Guru, gave the concept of a new form of yogic philosophy being not satisfied with the approaches of traditional yogic philosophies. He called his yoga 'Purna Yoga' or 'Integral Yoga'. This yoga aims at the conscious union with the Divine in the supermind and the transformation of the nature. It is a collective yoga that transforms life universally. This paper is an attempt to study and understand the philosophy and approach of the Integral Yoga and try to understand the differences of Integral yoga with the traditional yoga approaches.

Keywords: Integral yoga, Indian yogi, Purna yoga, yoga approaches

Introduction

Sri Aurobindo developed a new method of yoga which subsequently became known as Integral Yoga because he felt that all other branches of yoga were not adequate for the realisation of the totality of the truth. Sri Aurobindo's concept of the integral yoga is very comprehensive. He had a clear system of practice that he called integral yoga, as it was based on a synthesis of different paths of yoga. He said that the practice does not proceed through any set mental teaching or prescribed forms of meditation, but by aspiration, by self-concentration inwards or upwards, by self-opening to the Divine Power above us and its workings. Aspiration is not desire, but the need of an inner soul, of one quiet settled will, to turn towards the Divine and seek the Divine.

The Divine is already in ourselves, and we have to learn to direct our attention to it, and to let it work in our practice and lives. According to Aurobindo there are two ways to do practice: one by knowledge and by one's own efforts; the other by reliance on the Mother (Divine Consciousness, also called as *Aditi or Adya Shakti*) when one starts to develop trust and surrender to the Divine.

Defining yoga

According to Sri Aurobindo yoga is not something religious or mystic. It is a scientific process which is based on rational principles and which is supported by logic for the realisation of the higher potentialities of man. Sri Aurobindo writes, "All methods grouped under the common name of yoga are special Psychological processes rounded on a fixed truth of nature and developing out of normal functions, powers and results which were always latent but which her ordinary movements do not easily or do not often manifest"

Sri Aurobindo accepts the physical, vital and the psychical aspect of human being and that is why the mind, life and body have been given due importance in the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo. He writes, "Mind, life and body are the three powers of our lower nature. But they cannot be taken quite separately, because the life acts as a link and gives its character to body and to a great extent to our mentality. Our body is a living body; the life force mingle in and determines all its functioning. Our mind too is largely a mind of life, a mind of physical sensations; only in its higher functions is it normally capable of something more than the workings of a physical mentality subjected to life".

Sri Aurobindo stresses on the transformation of the consciousness in the process of Integral yoga. For him consciousness is the fundamental fact of existence. It operates in three ways:

Correspondence
Sunil Kumar
MA NET in Yoga, Head
Constable Delhi Police India

1. Firstly, there is the supreme divine self-knowledge, which embraces the unity as well as multiplicity.
2. The second operating factor of consciousness is quite in contrast to the first one, because it is complete Nescience of the consciousness, which is an effective, dynamic and creative principle.
3. In between knowledge and Nescience is ignorance. This ignorance has its own characteristic way of soul's self-withholding of complete self - knowledge. In this ignorance there is concealed power of transformation, by whose help it is preparing to transform itself by the process of progressive illumination of its darkness to knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo suggested integral method of yoga by which we could realise the knowledge and truth.

The Integral Way

Just as for experiencing and realising the truths of physical Sciences, like physics and chemistry etc. there are proper methods in physics and chemistry, likewise for experiencing the integral truth and knowledge there must be an integral method. The integral experience is the experience of our whole being, and not a part of it. Thus for realising the entire reality, the philosopher needs the integral method.

Sri Aurobindo suggested that for the integral truth the method of knowing should also be according to it. In his words, "Our ways of knowing must be appropriate to that which is to be known."

The method must change according to the nature of knowledge. Here we need the entire knowledge of the truth and therefore in the words of Sri Aurobindo, "A direct intuitive method alone can give a direct view of reality." In knowledge reason and intuition include and affirm each other. Bergson also affirms this view. He writes, "Dialectic is necessary to put intuition to the proof, necessary also in order that intuition should break itself up into concepts and so be propagated to the other men."

According to Aurobindo there are two ways to do practice: one by knowledge and by one's own efforts; the other by reliance on the Mother when one starts to develop trust and surrender to the Divine. If one relies solely on one's effort it can be a difficult and long process. It can be a good beginning, and then it is best to focus on the Mother. The Mother is not some mythological goddess entity. The Mother is the consciousness and force of the Divine. While the Supreme Self is inactive, a silent witness, its dynamic aspect, which takes on the form of the Mother, can bring down the Force of the Divine, and help the practitioner to clear out any confusion, and lead him to the higher consciousness.

With Aurobindo's system one not only ascends through the body, vital and mind into the Divine or Supramental consciousness, but then brings this Supramental Consciousness down into the mind, vital and finally into the body, and thus into our ever day life. Body, vital and mind are not something to get rid of. Man would not then have a divine life here on Earth. The purpose of Aurobindo's system is to reach the higher consciousness while being fully in the body, on Earth, and not to try to get away from Earth for some higher dimension. As most yogis were only interested in an ascent, a going up into the Supramental realm, Aurobindo also promotes bringing down the supramental power into matter and body, and thus let it fulfill itself here on earth by removing the limitations that Nature has up to now. Then the world will slowly change and establish a harmony that will resonate throughout the world.

"This yoga accepts the value of cosmic existence and holds it to be a reality; its object is to enter into a higher Truth-Consciousness or Divine supramental Consciousness in which action and creation are the expression not of ignorance and imperfection, but of the Truth, the Light, the Divine Ananda. But for that, surrender of the mortal mind, life and body to that Higher Consciousness is indispensable, since it is too difficult for the mortal human being to pass by its own effort beyond mind to a supramental Consciousness in which the dynamism is no longer mental but of quite another power. Only those who can accept the call to such a change should enter into this yoga".

Sri Aurobindo makes an essential distinction between the goal of the traditional yogas and the goal of Integral Yoga. The goal of the traditional yogas is to escape to the unmanifest, the Non-Being. The traditional yogas say we should liberate our soul from bondage to mind, life and matter. Sri Aurobindo says the real goal of yoga is to transform mind, life and matter, to divinize them.

This yoga aims at the conscious union with the Divine in the supermind and the transformation of the nature. The ordinary yogas go straight from Mind into some featureless condition of the cosmic silence and through it try to disappear upward into the Highest. The object of this yoga is to transcend Mind and enter into the Divine Truth of Sachchidananda which is not only static but dynamic and raise the whole being into that truth.

In our yoga the Nirvana is the beginning of the higher Truth, as it is the passage from the Ignorance to the higher Truth. The Ignorance has to be extinguished in order that the Truth may manifest. The realisation of this yoga is not lower but higher than Nirvana or Nirvikalpa Samadhi.

The sadhak of integral yoga who stops short at the Impersonal is no longer a sadhak of integral yoga. Impersonal realisation is the realisation of the silent Self, of the pure Existence, Consciousness and Bliss in itself without any perception of an Existent, Conscientious, Blissful. It leads therefore to Nirvana. In the integral knowledge the realisation of the Self and of the impersonal Sachchidananda is only a step, though a very important step, or part of the integral knowledge. It is a beginning, not an end of the highest realisation.

Basic Characteristic of Integral yoga

The Integral Yoga is a form of yoga that no one can do for himself. It is a collective yoga that transforms life universally. It is like praying for rain. You cannot pray for rain just for yourself. The rain falls for everyone. When you call Mother (divine force), she does not just come for you alone, She comes for everyone. And that is the yoga they were doing, bringing down the Supramental Force for everybody. When we make a progress, that progress is not just for us individually. We are representatives of humanity. Everyone who shares a similar trait or attitude or difficulty, also receives a benefit. When you seek a privilege or protection because of your friendship with a minister, you obtain an individual boon. When you obtain the same boon by a change in the law, you achieve something for everyone in similar circumstances. The law applies to all. Progress in Integral Yoga is like changing the laws for humanity. Our progress is a progress for everyone.

Sri Aurobindo speaks of the stages of ascent from human consciousness.

1. The first stage is moving from the mind to the higher mind. The higher mind is the mind of silence. In the mind we know by thought, in the higher mind we know

without thought, in silence.

2. Above the higher mind is the illumined mind. In the illumined mind, we know by light, by vision, we SEE the reality.
3. Above the illumined mind is the intuitive mind. This is where we know by intuition, an intuition coming from outside and giving us the knowledge.
4. And finally, in Supermind we know by intuition that comes from inside ourselves, because the whole world is within us. We know by identity. So we bring the psychic forward, and then we rise through the higher mind to the illumined mind to the intuitive mind to the Supermind.

Sri Aurobindo says that the result of this yoga is a triple transformation.

1. First is the psychic transformation in which the parts of our being open up and allow the psychic to come forward. The mind, vital and body open to the psychic consciousness.
2. The second transformation is the spiritual transformation.

The parts of our being directly receive from the Supramental consciousness. We no longer have to receive through the intermediacy of the psychic. Mother's consciousness-force comes down from the Supramental plane into our parts of being and directs them. But we are still not supramentalized. Our parts are only under Her influence.

3. Finally the Supramental transformation completely changes the nature of mind and makes it other than it is. It loses the sense of division and acquires the Supramental knowledge. The vital becomes universalized and the physical is transformed into the Supramental consciousness. The body becomes Sat, self-conscious being.

That is the reason why the triple way of knowledge, works and love becomes the keynote of the whole Yoga, for that is the direct means for the soul in mind to rise to its highest intensities where it passes upward into the divine oneness. That too is the reason why the Yoga must be integral. For if immergence in the Infinite or some close union with the Divine were all our aim, an integral Yoga would be superfluous, except for such greater satisfaction of the being of man as we may get by a self-lifting of the whole of it towards its Source. But it would not be needed for the essential aim, since by any single power of the soul-nature we can meet with the Divine; each at its height rises up into the infinite and absolute, each therefore offers a sufficient way of arrival, for all the hundred separate paths meet in the Eternal. But the gnostic being is a complete enjoyment and possession of the whole divine and spiritual nature; and it is a complete lifting of the whole nature of man into its power of a divine and spiritual existence. Integrality becomes then an essential condition of this Yoga.

At the same time we have seen that each of the three ways at its height, if it is pursued with a certain largeness, can take into itself the powers of the others and lead to their fulfilment. It is therefore sufficient to start by one of them and find the point at which it meets the other at first parallel lines of advance and melts into them by its own widenings. At the same time a more difficult, complex, wholly powerful process would be to start, as it were, on three lines together, on a triple wheel of soul-power.

Conclusion

The common initial purpose of all Yoga is the liberation of the soul of man from its present natural ignorance and

limitation, its release into spiritual being, its union with the highest self and Divinity. But ordinarily this is made not only the initial but the whole and final object: enjoyment of spiritual being there is, but either in a dissolution of the human and individual into the silence of self-being or on a higher plane in another existence. The human soul's individual liberation and enjoyment of union with the Divine in spiritual being, consciousness and delight must always be the first object of the Yoga; its free enjoyment of the cosmic unity of the Divine becomes a second object; but out of that a third appears, the effectuation of the meaning of the divine unity with all beings by a sympathy and participation in the spiritual purpose of the Divine in humanity. A perfection has to be aimed at which amounts to the elevation of the mental into the full spiritual and supramental nature.

Integral yoga which is an integration of the yogas of love (*bhakti* yoga), knowledge (*jnana* yoga), and action (*karma* yoga)—is not only understood as an individual spiritual practice, it is also accomplished by Nature in a collective manner. Therefore the integral Yoga of knowledge, love and works has to be extended into a Yoga of spiritual and gnostic self-perfection. As gnostic knowledge, will and Ananda are a direct instrumentation of spirit and can only be won by growing into the spirit, into divine being, this growth has to be the first aim of our Yoga. The ultimate aim of integral yoga is to eradicate the unconscious dimension of the human psyche and thus achieve a fully integrated conscious psyche.

To summarize, the goal of yoga is to accelerate the rate of conscious evolution. Whereas Integral yoga aims at total transformation of the unconscious as well as ordinary consciousness. Culmination of conscious evolution, therefore, requires a total transformation of human personality and consciousness. The high level of integration of personality required in this process supersedes the establishment of basic wholeness of personality which is possible by balancing the egocentric and psychocentric spheres of consciousness. This level of integration known as Psychic Transformation in integral yoga.

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