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VEDANTIC BASIS AND PRAXIS OF THE INTEGRAL ADVAITA OF SRI AUROBINDO

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Abstract:

The integral nondualism of Sri Aurobindo can be traced to the great pronouncements (mahāvākya) of the Upanishads and later commentaries. This study examines teachings on the Supermind (vijñāna) and the other four kinds of consciousness that define human reality: Matter (annam), Life (prāṇaḥ), Mind (manah), and Bliss (ānanda). Through Yoga and Tantra, one learns and embodies the pathway to the divine.

Key Words: integral Yoga, Sri Aurobindo, consciousness, nondualism, Tantra, Divine Mother

Vedānta Darśana

Integral Advaita and Integral Nondualism are designations for Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy given by the philosopher, Prof. Haridas Chaudhuri, founder of the California Institute of Integral Studies (Chaudhuri 1960: p. 19). He translated by these designations the Sanskrit term 'Pūrṇādvaita Vedānta' (Ibid.), which is also his own coinage for the Vedantic basis of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy or yoga darśana. Sri Aurobindo has himself affirmed the Vedantic basis of his spiritual system but has not given it a name or developed its Vedantic basis explicitly. In this article, I will attempt to justify Chaudhuri's designations and work out a Vedantic praxis for this system. I will also highlight the life-affirming aspects of this Vedānta darśana and praxis, related to ethics and sustainability with their contemporary relevance.

Darśana is the Sanskrit term normally translated as philosophy. But this translation excises some essential connotations of the term inhering in its cultural context. The term darśana is inextricably tied to the term yoga. Darśana and Yoga have been likened to the two wings of a bird in Indian spiritual thought. Darśana literally refers to sight. Coupled with yoga, it means a sight or perception that arises from the experience of yoga. Sri Aurobindo in *The Life Divine* has distinguished concepts of darśana from concepts of metaphysical speculation by calling them "experience-concepts" (2005, p. 661). An experience-concept is a concept that gives voice to or brings to sight an experience. It is in this sense that darśana is yoga philosophy, it sees and brings to sight or makes us see the relations implicit to yogic experience. Thus darśana provides a retrospective conceptual map for Yoga. It is a conceptual map that brings to sight a cosmic experience orienting the mind towards it as a retrospective goal. In experiencing it, we validate it. In other words, a darśana is not a statement of universal truth like a religious dogma meant to convince followers, but a conceptual map meant for experience, with this experience being the validation of the darśana in the life of the experienter. A body of collective validation results from

repeated experience of the darśana. Vivekānanda pointed to this collective validation as the subjective equivalent of a central pillar of the scientific method, its universality through collective validation by experiment and experience.¹ Experience concepts of darśana are validated collectively in subjective terms. Darśanas as conceptual maps may carry reasoning based on past canonical texts that help to convince prospective adherents or strengthen the mind in its resolve, but their primary purpose is a goal of experience. These goals are experienced through yoga. Yoga is the praxis part of the darśana-yoga pair.

To return to Pūrṇādvaita Vedānta, as the name declares, this darśana is based on Vedānta. As most know, the term Vedānta literally mean “end of the Veda.” It is sometimes used to describe the Upaniṣads, but more often the term is used for later (post-8th c.) interpretations of the Upaniṣads. The term ‘Advaita Vedānta’ is familiar to many as the darśana of Shankaracharya (c. 700-750 C.E.). Due to its hegemonic spread over the field of Vedantic darśanas in modern times, many people use the word Vedānta to mean Shankara’s philosophy. Some use the term Advaita, but its proper designation is Kevalādvaita Vedānta. Advaita literally means non-dualism. ‘Dvaita’ means duality, hence advaita is the opposite of duality, i.e., non-duality. Kevala stands for exclusivity, hence Kevalādvaita Vedānta refers to exclusive nondualism as an interpretation of the Upaniṣads. In fact, one may say that nondualism characterizes the Upaniṣads, so that the term Advaita occurs in most interpretations of the Upaniṣads. Even dualistic interpretations of the Upaniṣads may be paradoxically non-dualist. Thus, for example, there is the Vaishnav school of Dvaitādvaita or dualistic non-dualism. Thus, what is common to most Vedantic darśanas is their non-dualism based on the Upaniṣads; where they differ is in the kind of nondualism they propose for the goal of yoga through their interpretation of the Upaniṣads. It is in this sense that Haridas Chaudhuri’s designation of the yoga philosophy of Sri Aurobindo as Pūrṇādvaita Vedānta, must be taken as a nondualistic experience-concept of integrality based on the Upaniṣads.

Mahāvākya

Vedānta darśanas draw on a form of concise statement in the Upaniṣads that have been called *mahāvākya*. A *mahāvākya* sums up the experience-concept of the darśana. It is there to bring to sight the foundation of the darśana not merely as a rational proposition, but as a praxis, an object of meditation. Kevalādvaita Vedānta has selected four such *mahāvākyas* from the Upaniṣads for praxis towards transcendence. They are:

- *Prajñānam Brahma*—“Brahman is Knowledge” (Aitareya Upaniṣad 3.3)

¹ For Vivekananda’s reasoning on yoga seen as a “science of experience,” see *Raja Yoga* (2003, 608).

- *Ayam Ātmā Brahma*—"This Self is Brahman" (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 1.2)
- *Tat Tvam Asi*—"Thou are That" (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7)
- *Aham Brahmāsmi*—"I am Brahman" (Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10)

I have tried to keep the translations generic and literal, but translations are never literal. They are polemical, as are all interpretations, even repeated statements, depending on context. Other Vedantic darśanas have emphasized these same statements to different ends. They have also privileged other such statements as *mahāvākyas*, such as:

- *Ekam evādvitīyam brahma*—Brahman is one, without a second (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.2.1)
- *So'ham*—He or That is I (Īśa Upaniṣad 16)
- *Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*—All of this is brahman (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1)
- *Etad vai tat*—This, verily, is That (Kaṭha Upaniṣad 2. 5.1)
- *Nityo 'nityānām cetanascetanānām eko bahunām*—The one permanent among transient things, the single consciousness in conscious beings, the one in the many (Kaṭha Upaniṣad 2.2.13)

Apart from Upanishadic *mahāvākyas*, Vedantic darśanas also often encapsulate their realization in terms of pithy propositions for meditation, so as to function like *mahāvākyas* for that darśana. In this sense, Kevalādvaita's *mahāvākya*, carried in Shankara's seminal text *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* is *brahma satyam jagan-mithyā* (verse 20). This statement, attributed to Shankara, translates as "Brahman is true, the world is false." This is a seemingly reductive statement; *mithyā* can be translated variously with different nuances, but however we parse it, in its contextual use, it highlights Shankara's praxical focus on the phenomenal world so that we distinguish it in our contemplation as unreal or illusory (*mithyā*), leading to the realization of an exclusive transcendental reality or truth (*satya*).² The statement also occurs in another text attributed to Shankara, *Brahmajñānavālimālā*, which is a collection of statements for meditation on one's identity with Brahman. In this text, the proposition takes a form which extends the terms of the statement to include the individual: *brahma satyam jagan-mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ* (verse 20), translatable as, "Brahman is true, the world is false, the individual is Brahman itself, no other."

² Verse 20 of *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* reads *brahma satyam jaganmithyetyevaṃrūpo viniścayaḥ* [so'yaṃ nityānityavastuvivekaḥ samudāhṛtaḥ || 20 ||]. In translation: "20. A firm conviction of the mind to the effect that Brahman is real and the universe unreal, is designated as discrimination (*Viveka*) between the Real and the unreal." Here it is clear that the statement *brahma satyam jaganmithyā* is meant as a praxis towards discrimination between the Real and the unreal."

Pūrṇādvaita Vedānta

Following a similar convention relating Brahman, the world and the individual, the *mahāvākya* of Sri Aurobindo's Pūrṇādvaita Vedānta may be given as *Brahma satya, jagat brahma, jivo brahmaiva nāparaḥ* or "Brahman is true, world is Brahman, individuals are Brahman indeed, none other". To elaborate in terms of the Upaniṣads, Brahman is the term used universally for Reality seen as infinite conscious Being (Sri Aurobindo 2001, p.151-152). It is the only thing there is, the Absolute. Thus it is One with radically Infinite potentiality. Whatever differences we see are appearances or forms of Brahman. In Sri Aurobindo's view, these appearances are not illusions but intentional self-presentations (2005, p. 87, 379). Brahman's power of self-presentation is Māyā.³ Using Māyā, Brahman can present itself to itself through infinite entities or beings, organized in the form of worlds, each of which is an order of infinity (2005, pp 342-243, 394-395). 'An order of infinity' means that Brahman as the Infinite One can view itself through a selective process as an ordering or disposition of infinity. For example, mathematically we may say that the set of all natural numbers is an infinity; the set of odd numbers is also an infinity. The set of natural numbers contains the set of odd numbers, but that does not make it a larger infinity. Both are infinite, but one is a greater order of infinity. Brahman itself is radical infinity, while any arrangement or disposition of infinity is a selective order of infinity. Such an arrangement or order of infinity is a self-presentation of Brahman to itself as a world. The entities that constitute the selection of each world are beings. Each being is thus a self-presentation of Brahman and hence infinite with the infinity of Brahman. However, following the selective criteria of the world, entities or beings are selective appearances of radical infinity. Neither worlds nor beings are other than Brahman. Orders of infinity are self-presentations of the absolute infinity of Brahman. Every being in it is a self-presentation of the absolute infinity of Brahman.

Our cosmos and its entities is one such order of infinity with its beings, each of which is an order of infinity and a self-appearance of Brahman. In this order, Māyā operates using three principles in presenting Brahman to itself. These are the principles of variation, limitation and absorption or prospection (2005, 356-359). Brahman can present itself as an infinite gradation of consciousness with discrete ranges expressing distinctive properties, in each of which Brahman can locate itself as an experiencer. The principle of variation acts in a systematic self-presentation as an infinite gradation of consciousness from the most dense to the most rarefied. "Most" here, as implied literally, is not a reference to a comparative degree but to a superlative degree, as expressed by a term used frequently in Sanskrit spiritual literature, *tama*. This is obvious given the necessary translation of

³ See the Chapter The Divine Maya in Aurobindo (2005, 120-128).

Brahman's infinity in its self-appearances: there is no end in either direction, an infinite density of consciousness in one direction and an infinite rarefaction in the other. Thus the principle of variation expresses itself in a self-presentation of Brahman as an infinite continuum of degrees of consciousness in our cosmos.

Further, by the principle of self-limitation, this continuous order can be discretized, so that various ranges of this continuity have bounded thresholds with emergent properties in terms of which Brahman experiences itself. These can form universal ranges of self-experience. Sri Aurobindo draws here on the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, which in its second and third chapters (*vallī*), describes five kinds of consciousness, Matter (*annaṃ*), Life (*prāṇaḥ*), Mind (*manaḥ*), Supermind (*vijñāna*) and Bliss (*ānanda*), each of which may be considered a discrete self-limitation of Brahman occupying a range in the continuity of consciousness.⁴ The Veda as well as other Upaniṣads name seven such ranges of consciousness, adding two, Consciousness (*cit*) and Being (*sat*) beyond Bliss (*ānanda*) of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad. One may consider Bliss (*ānanda*) of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad as a category including these other two. As experiencer of cosmos from each such range of consciousness, Brahman is Puruṣa, Person or Being of that range of consciousness. Its experience is draped in the qualia that characterize each such range of consciousness as its Prakṛti or field of manifestation. The instances, entities or beings manifesting such a field are composed of combinations of its qualities forming a qualitative body.

The third property of self-presentation of Brahman characterizing our cosmos is absorption, which Sri Aurobindo sometimes calls prospection (2005, p. 143). This applies to the entities or beings in each self-limited range of consciousness. Thus these entities are not merely qualitative bodies of experience for a generic Puruṣa of that range of consciousness, for example a mental (*manomaya*) or vital (*prāṇamaya*) Puruṣa, but an individualized form of Brahman, an individual Puruṣa. In each such combination of qualities Brahman can individualize its infinity and become immanent as a self-absorbed point of prospection as an experiencer.

Sri Aurobindo also introduces a temporal and evolutionary insight to this classification of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad. In our cosmos we see a progressive emergence of each of these principles or degrees of consciousness in time, starting from Matter and proceeding to Life and Mind, and he postulates the further evolution of the higher ranges or degrees of consciousness.⁵ He maps the three principles of Matter, Life and Mind to Avidyā of the Upaniṣads (prominently the Īśa Upaniṣad) while Vijñāna, Ānanda and the other principles such as Sat and Cit

⁴ See Chapter The Ascending Series of Substance in Sri Aurobindo (2005, p. 266-275). The "series" referred to here is taken from the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, Brahmānanda Vallī and Bhrigu Vallī (Aurobindo 2001, pp. 216-231).

⁵ See the chapter The Three Steps of Nature in *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Aurobindo 1999, pp. 9-19).

belong to Vidyā (2005, pp. 276-278). Here, Vidyā and Avidyā are translatable as Knowledge and Ignorance respectively. In Sri Aurobindo's interpretation, Vidyā (Knowledge) is a Knowledge by identity, which means that the conscious unity of Brahman is active in all the ranges of the Vidyā so that an entity can know any other entity by identity of consciousness as another form of its infinite Self. In Avidyā (Ignorance) the principle of Separation is active in all the ranges so that any entity knows only itself by identity while all others are knowable only indirectly by inference from external contact. From Matter to Mind we see the struggle of entities to emerge and individuate from a state of universal Unconsciousness. This gives rise to beings who experience themselves as the centre of their own universe. Brahman's principle of self-absorption seems to operate exclusively in the entities of these ranges of consciousness.

It is important to recognize that many of these terms, such as Vidyā, Avidyā or Vijñāna have variant meanings in different darśanas. In Shankara's interpretation of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (Kevalādvaita Vedānta) for example, *Manah*, which Sri Aurobindo sees as the mental principle, is understood as *manas* or sense mind while *vijñāna* is understood as *buddhi* or intellect. To Advaita Vedānta, Avidyā extends from Annam (Matter) through Vijñānam to Ānanda (Bliss),⁶ while Sri Aurobindo sees Vijñāna as Divine Mind or Supermind and classes it in Vidyā (Ibid). In this interpretation of the term Vijñāna, Sri Aurobindo agrees with another well-known modern yogi who preceded him, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886).⁷

Vijñāna

Vijñāna, translated as Supermind by Sri Aurobindo, forms the fulcrum of his yoga darśana. It is beyond the scope of this essay to delineate the details of Sri Aurobindo's reasoning for his interpretation, but Vijñāna for him is the ordering principle of Brahman's self-presentation. It is the source of the human intuition of order in the universe. Rationality, which forms the foundation of Science and one may say, of modern ontology, finds its origin here, prior to its operation in Mind. Mind is a subsidiary function of Vijñāna or Supermind appropriate to the exclusionary and separative ontology of Avidyā or Ignorance. Mind is marked by calculative finitude; it cannot grasp the free creative and infinite ordering principle of Supermind.⁸ Mind tries to tame radical infinity by subjecting it to finite schemas of order. But even a boundless finite cannot encompass radical infinity, while Supermind is the ordering principle of Brahman's self-presentation, a principle by which radical infinity assumes creative forms or appearances of finitude based on truths of Being, as we saw earlier,

⁶ See Sitarama Shastri trans. (1923, p. 130-135).

⁷ See Maharaj (2018).

⁸ See the chapter Mind and Supermind in *The Life Divine* (2005, pp. 170-184).

without losing its infinity in the finite form. This is the difference between the logocentrism of Mind and Logos of Supermind (1999, p. 794, 796).

The principles by which Brahman manifests and enjoys itself in a self-presentation are mobilized through Vijñāna or Supermind. Thus, in our cosmos it is Vijñāna which is Brahman's faculty of organization using the three principles of variation, self-limitation and absorption. Subjecting Consciousness (*cit*) to variation, Vijñāna presents Brahman to itself as an ordered gradation of degrees of Consciousness from an appearance of densest to most rarefied consciousness. Subjecting gradation to self-limitation, Vijñāna sets up fields of bounded properties for the self-manifestation of Brahman; and subjecting the qualitative combinations of these bounded fields to self-absorption it makes possible discrete centers of self-experience for Brahman. Manifesting these from bottom-up, as emergences in time, Vijñāna initiates an evolution of consciousness in the cosmos with particulate appearances of material Unconsciousness which combine due to their habitual properties to form a material universe of entities (objects) and experiencers (subjects). Each entity/experiencer is a self-absorbed appearance of Brahman that has lost its knowledge of oneness due to its establishment in a founding ontology of exclusive self-absorption. The heterogeneous plurality of these centers of qualitative self-experience seek to reconstitute their lost unity and hidden infinity through self-expression and combination. This sets up the field of individuation. In this manner, Vijñāna or Supermind manifests Vidyā's possibilities of self-experience through the properties of time, space, discreteness and the will to individuation in Avidyā.

Because of this latent ordering principle, these emergences take place in a coherent fashion; from Matter to Life, from Life to Mind, we see the emergence of degrees of consciousness in succession. Telescoped into one another in their emergence, all these principles remain within the projective ontology of Mind, and unable to experience themselves as the self-becomings of the creative Subject, Supermind (Vijñāna). This is what keeps the manifestation of Matter, Life and Mind in the Ignorance (Avidyā). We see beings or entities in each of these planes bound within the limitations of its properties in a gradation of types manifesting more complex adaptations of its possibilities and crossing the threshold of its boundaries into a higher plane of consciousness at a certain point. It is Brahman who experiences itself in a graded and phased manner through these individual experiencers in a creative field for its self-manifestation and self-experience. Thus these experiences are marked by positionality, temporality, relationality and evolutionary emergence, constituting the specificity of our cosmos. For Brahman self-absorbed in entities or individuals, this implies a will to individuation pushing towards an adequacy with the forces of the cosmos, originating from the latent intuition of its identity with Brahman. Since it is Brahman that is self-

absorbed in each individual operation of this will is free in its origin, following its own creative development in consonance with its self-vision in Vijñāna or Supermind. Thus, the immanent will-to-individuation in each individual is in consonance with the cosmic ordering evolutionary process of Vijñāna or Supermind. This hidden free will of Supermind acting through the density of Ignorance in the cosmos and its individuations is called *ājñāna* by Sri Aurobindo, following the Aitareya Upaniṣad.⁹

Vijñāna Śakti

Vijñāna, then, for Sri Aurobindo, is a Being (Puruṣa) and Power (Śakti) of Brahman orchestrating its self-experience in and as this cosmos and its individuals. It is this Śakti or ordering creative Power that is known as Māyā (2005, pp. 120-128). Hence, in Sri Aurobindo's darśana, Māyā is no illusion producing mystery but the Śakti of Vijñāna responsible for the graded and phased evolutionary order of the cosmos, effecting itself through the action of the will-to-individuation. Thus, Vijñāna Śakti, according to Sri Aurobindo, expresses both the mythos and the logos, the mythologic reality of cosmos; it is not an illusion or *mithyā* but the significant image or Mythos of the Divine Mother birthing the Logos (1999, p. 786) of an evolutionary cosmos, ordering its phases and parts within itself through transcendental vision and immanent cosmic and individual will. The cosmos and its entities are both itself and its self-becomings. This is what makes Sri Aurobindo call the Śakti of Vijñāna or supramental Śakti the Divine Mother (2012, p. 15). Just as there is an intelligence instinct in the birthing of the child, there is an intelligence involved in the birthing of the cosmos and all its ranges of consciousness, its entities and their evolution towards their self-knowledge as Brahman. Mobilizing in/as Time the gradations of Consciousness, Vijñāna Śakti precipitates the Annamaya Kośa or material substrate as the greatest density of consciousness, in which the entirety of Brahman with all the other grades or degrees of Consciousness becomes involved. Thus, Matter acts as a screen or medium which receives the involution of all the other ranges of Consciousness and evolves them progressively through individualized forms in material bodies (2005, p. 137).

This double process of involution-evolution is orchestrated transcendently through world circumstance and immanently through will-to-individuation in all individuals by Vijñāna. Thus Vijñāna is the panentheistic origin of 'Dharma'. 'Dharma' is that which holds everything together. It is the Logos that gives complex oneness to the Whole and its parts; the planes of consciousness, the beings that individualize the planes, the ordering sequence, the movement in time and the distribution in space. Vijñāna is the glue constituting this

⁹ Aitareya Upaniṣad V.2. See Aurobindo (2001, p. 204). A discussion of *ājñāna* along with other forms of Supramental knowledge can be found in Aurobindo (2001, p. 51).

complex unity of the cosmos and the conscious and individualized dynamic in its time-changes. From the viewpoint of the individual, it is the radically infinite transcendent power of self-conception of Brahman, that accepts to present itself through variation and self-limitation of Consciousness as cosmos and through absorption or prospection and will as individual. This is what Sri Aurobindo means by the term 'Integral' and the basis of Haridas Chaudhuri's coinage integral non-dualism and its Sanskrit version, Pūrṇādvaita Vedānta.

The grades of consciousness emerge in Matter through individualized forms of Life-in-Matter and Mind-in-living Matter. These degrees of consciousness are latent in Matter. Life is latent in material forms. This is the basis of archaic animism. Similarly, Mind is latent in all Life-forms, at first as an unorganized diffused subconscious mentality known in Indian psychology as *citta*. The organization of *citta* leads, in animals, to the formation of a sense mind (*manas*) that is responsible for the synthesis of sense experiences. A further emergence of the rational principle in mammals leads to the full establishment of intelligence (*buddhi*) in humans. Thus, the human, individuating the planes of Matter, Life and Mind and centered in intelligence, is in a position to intuit the integral. According to Sri Aurobindo, the Mind has not fully emerged in the human (1999, p. 13). The human intelligence, which becomes the seat of the rational ego (*cogito*) is characterized by the intuition of order in an ontology of separateness. This results in an exaggerated sense of separate individuality, of personal self as subject and its others as objects, an exclusivity of the property of absorption and prospection of Brahman, making the phenomenology of each individual an experience of itself as the center of truth in the universe. At the same time, a principle of universality is immanent within this individualized ontology of separation in the intellect as an intuition of order. However, the finite self-enclosure of individuals can agree about an universal order only with respect to the most unconscious ranges of consciousness. The intuition of order pluralizes itself in the more conscious ranges, leading to a bewildering multiplicity of interpretations. In Sri Aurobindo's view, the universality of the cosmos is not bound in a single ordered schema but manifests an infinite field of order. In the continuous gradation of consciousness, a range of cosmic Mind planes intervene between human intellect and the Supermind or *Vijñāna*, which manifest the degrees of conscious universality. These planes have yet to fully emerge in human mentality and constitute part of the future evolution of the human (or post-human) according to Sri Aurobindo.¹⁰ However, the emergence of rationality and consequent degree of individuality in the human also signifies a critical point where the will-to-individuation can consciously embody and choose the trajectory of the future evolution of nature (1999, p. 30, 47). Sri Aurobindo sees this as the yoga of evolution extending the

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo discusses these ranges of Mind in the chapter Supermind, Mind and the Overmind Maya in *The Life Divine*. See Aurobindo (2005, pp. 291-294).

emergence of Mind to include these cosmic ranges leading up to Supermind. This involves transitioning to the borders of the Avidyā and crossing over to the Vidyā to emerge into the consciousness of Vijñāna and integrate its realization.¹¹ This is how the Darśana of Sri Aurobindo relates to his yoga. It gives us the goals and conceptual map or cosmology preparing the praxis of yoga.

Yoga Praxis

The conceptual map includes the transformational goal of the integral yoga. This is implicit in the understanding of Vijñāna vis-à-vis the individual. As mentioned above, Vijñāna in its origin is transcendent to the human and the cosmos as Real-Idea of both; it is the Presence and Power of becoming of/in the cosmos and it is entirely immanent in each entity and individual of the cosmos as the integral truth of the individual and the will-to-individuation.¹² This triple aspect of Vijñāna vis-à-vis the individual is what might be described in the *mahāvākya*, *Brahma satya jagat brahma jivo brahmaiva nāparah*. Hence the goal of the integral yoga would consist in realizing each of these three aspects in themselves and as one, the integral realization of Vijñāna.¹³ The first term *Brahma Satya* can be seen to be a transcendentalism, partially shared with Kevalādvaita Vedānta, but it is not an exclusive transcendentalism, it is an inclusive and integral transcendentalism. This means that the transcendental Being must be realized as the cosmic Becoming and each individual self-becoming, all together as one. We may consider this against the *mahāvākya* of Kevalādvaita Vedānta (*brahma satya jagan-mithyā jiva brahma*), and its goal, whether *jīvanmukti* (liberation in life) or *videhamukti* (disembodied liberation) through *nirvikalpa samādhi* (absorption in radically transcendent Brahman). Here, by the erasure of the middle term of the *mahāvākya* (*jagan-mithyā*), the world is treated as unreal leading to a realization of transcendence and affirmation of permanent self (*ātman*) as an appearance of the transcendental Brahman. Since the world has no meaning, the self has no meaning in the world and can continue to exist as a Brahman-realized being in an illusory world (*jīvanmukti*) or to dissolve the appearance of self (*ātman*) in transcendental Brahman (*nirvikalpa samādhi, videhamukti*).

In Tantrik schools, this exclusive transcendentalism is related to a subtle anatomy (*sūkṣma śarīra*) and located outside the body above the head in a center known as *sahasradala* or thousand-petalled lotus. Raising one's consciousness to this center, one enters into trance of identity, from which one may return with some impress of liberation in life or may withdraw consciousness into this center. In Sri Aurobindo's

¹¹ See the chapters Vijñāna or Gnosis (1999, p. 475-487) and The Conditions for the Attainment of Gnosis (1999, pp. 488-497) in *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

¹² See The Triple Status of the Supermind in *The Life Divine* (2005, pp. 152-160).

¹³ See Oneness in *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1999, pp. 419-425).

Darśana, by the affirmation of the middle term (*jagat brahma*) there is a demand to discover a link and an identity between the transcendence, a cosmic immanence and the individual. Jīvanmukti in such a case is not just a liberation-in-life but an integral liberated life or in other words, a realization of transcendental Brahman expressing as and in life. This would not imply, as in Kevalādvaita Vedānta or in a Tantrik transcendence (trance in the thousand-petalled lotus), a return to life carrying the impress of a trance condition but the realization of transcendental Brahman and its creative Power (Śakti) in a waking condition. In terms of the esoteric anatomy of Tantra, this means a waking residence in the thousand petalled lotus, as one's center of ideation and action (1999, p. 805).

From the viewpoint of Vedānta, this is clarified in Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad in the chapter Samadhi in *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1999, pp. 519-527). The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad introduces four states of existence (*avasthā*) – waking (*jāgrat*), dreaming (*swapna*), dreamless sleep (*susupti*) and radical transcendence, literally called “the fourth” or nameless state (*turīya*). In Kevalādvaita Vedānta this is a succession with the highest transcendental Brahman reached in the trance of the fourth state (*turīya*), called *nirvikalpa samādhi*. According to Sri Aurobindo, the aim in integral yoga is to extend the waking condition into the dreaming and dreamless states, open to the radical transcendence of the unmanifest Brahman. This extension is prepared by a progressive receptivity to the intermediate cosmic planes of Mind that lead in successive grades to the Supermind and constitute the future evolution of Mind.¹⁴ In other words, this is Sri Aurobindo's process for a conscious evolution of the human. There is always a point of passing beyond one's capacity into trance, but with repetition and persistence, this point is to be extended until one comes into the consciousness of Vijñāna or Supermind (1999, P. 526). Sri Aurobindo equates this to rising to the thousand petal lotus in the waking condition and stabilizing the consciousness in that center. This is a primary way in which Sri Aurobindo's yoga differs from other yogas.

The question of yoga can be pursued further in asking whether Sri Aurobindo is prescribing extended states of meditation to achieve this waking transcendence. If we think of the states of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad and the way these have been approached traditionally, as for example by Kevalādvaita Vedānta, that would seem to be the case. But in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo indicates that the *darśana* of the Integral Yoga may lend itself to multiple formulations of yoga. In fact, adapting a statement from Vivekānanda he asserts that the integral yoga will come to fulfilment when there are as many ways of practising it as there are practitioners (1999, p. 57). Since it affirms the reality of life, it should be possible to approach the yoga through a life practice.

¹⁴ See fn. 1 in Aurobindo (1999, p. 491).

This is not exceptional, since all yogas, whatever their specific prescriptions, also include a life practice which relates to the concept of Dharma. How are we to orient ourselves to the law that holds together all of reality in terms of the goal of the darśana? Put in terms of yoga, how are we to “yoke ourselves” to the law (dharma) characterizing the *darśana*? The Gītā’s teaching is just such an orientation of consciousness. An orientation of consciousness implying a lifestyle praxis is also what the Buddha taught as the eightfold path. Sri Aurobindo’s teaching in *The Synthesis of Yoga* proceeds along the same lines with its initiating epigram, “All life is Yoga.” This epigram can be understood in two ways – first, that the Vijñāna Śakti immanent in cosmic Nature is active in evolving the ranges of consciousness through individuation, leading to its self-exploration, self-discovery and self-manifestation through the struggle of consciousness to emerge in a multiplicity. This process is the yoga of Nature to realize its origin (1999, p. 6). Second, as this process reaches a threshold of individualization, it turns into a conscious process reaching for alignment or “yoking” with the immanent knowledge-will of the Vijñāna Śakti (1999, pp. 6-7). This is the integral yoga of the human individual seeking conscious union itself with the yoga of Nature in all the activities of life. In this case, if yoga is understood as a life-praxis, it must be understood as a process for life as much as a process in life.

Mahāvākya Praxis

In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo approaches this life-praxis through an adaptation of the *trimārga* (triple path) of the Bhagavad Gītā.¹⁵ But since we are interested here in the Vedantic basis of the integral yoga, while keeping in mind its significance for life, we can attempt to formulate its darśana, as encapsulated in its *mahāvākya* (*brahma satyam jagat brahma jivo brahmaiva nāparaḥ*) in terms of meditations based on Vedantic *mahāvākya* praxis. I propose four Upanishadic *mahāvākyas* that together empower such a praxis: (1) *Om tat sat* (2) *Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma* (3) *Tat tvam asi* (4) *Aham brahmāsmi*.

The first may be translated, *Om*, That is Truth. By the word *tat* (That), the Upaniṣads refer to the Transcendental Real. It is left nameless, since it is always infinitely more than any description. This statement and corresponding praxis of meditation represents an orientation to the transcendence. Considering it in terms of the states of the Māndūkya Upaniṣad, it is an orientation towards the nameless condition (*avasthā*) of *turīya* or thinking of it in terms of the esoteric anatomy discussed above, it corresponds to the thousand petalled lotus above the embodied mind. In practice it involves a constant mental remembrance that the Infinite One is above us, beyond our power of

¹⁵ The first three parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga* – the Yoga of Divine Works, the Yoga of Integral Knowledge and the Yoga of Divine Love.

mental knowledge and apprehension but it is what gives meaning to our existence.

The second *mahāvākya*, *Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma* may be translated, “All this is only the Brahman.” In praxis it means holding the thought that whatever exists and is seen or known in the cosmos is Brahman. Brahman has become everything that we see around us. Holding to this meditation as a life practice is an orientation to the cosmic manifestation of Brahman. This second meditation affirms life and is the confirmation of the second term of Sri Aurobindo’s *darśan – jagat brahma*. It is this term and praxis that makes Sri Aurobindo’s *darśan* and yoga of contemporary relevance, since it responds to the close interdependence of the contemporary world in terms of an affirmation of its unity at all levels. This is the root of sustainability. Orientating oneself to a realization of the unity of the cosmos as a self-appearance of Brahman affirms a spirituality that embraces sustainability not merely as a mental ideal but as an experience of identity in consciousness. It points to the reality of a cosmic consciousness manifest as the world, which it is possible to experience. Responsibility for the cosmos is then a matter of intimacy and deep identity because the cosmos lives in us and is experienceable as such. Sustainability is the natural and inevitable consequence of the opening to such an experience through meditative praxis. As a life-praxis in one’s waking existence, it is an invitation to consider all beings, forms, principles and energies in the cosmos as appearances of Brahman as a cosmic consciousness in a temporal play (*līlā*) leading towards a realization of cosmic unity.

The third proposition, *Tat tvam asi* is translated as “Thou art That.” If the second *mahāvākya* extends a general condition of cosmic consciousness the third specifies it in terms of individuation. It implies a meditation in which every entity in the universe is seen as a particularized or individualized form of Brahman. The *tvam* or “thou” here must be taken to be the individual “other,” transcendent to ourselves in its radical otherness yet identically one in its essence (*ātman*). It is the radical infinity of Brahman and its absolute oneness that confronts us in every “other.” This is the basis of individualized relationality and the root of a spiritual ethics. Contemporary philosophers such as the Hasidic existentialist Martin Buber¹⁶ or the French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (2005) or the philosopher of deconstruction and messianism, Jacques Derrida (2020), come to mind in comparative analogy and contemporary relevance to this praxis. If we can see the One Being in other beings along with their uniqueness, we can be free from the demands of the ego and assume responsibility for the other as a form of alterity of oneself. Interestingly, this proposition also constitutes the third *mahāvākya* of Kevalādvaīta Vedānta. But there the aim of the meditation is to penetrate to the transcendental substrate of all individuals while negating their

¹⁶ See *I and Thou* (Buber 2000).

individuality or uniqueness as expressions of the Infinite One presenting themselves for relationality.

The fourth and final *mahāvākya*, *aham brahmāsmi* can be translated “I am the Brahman.” In essence and in manifestation, in body, in the energies and capacities of life and in mental makeup and expression, the Brahman has assumed the identity I call myself. This leads to the realization of ātman as Brahman. This realization, in itself, is also part of the goal of Kevalādvaita Vedānta, as we saw, corresponding to the last term of its extended *mahāvākya*, *jīva brahma*. The proposition, like the one before it, also coincides with the fourth *mahāvākya* of Kevalādvaita. But whereas in Kevalādvaita, this realization, combined with the negation of world (*jagat*) is a recipe for the equation of ātman as Brahman and of the illusoriness of any world-significance for the individual, in the integral yoga, it includes the individual’s unique individuation and relational expression in the world. Meditating on this yields the fulfilment of Yoga as individuation, reaching towards oneness in relationality, in cosmic consciousness and in the integrality of Supermind.

Integration and The Divine Mother

Each of these meditations is difficult to carry out as a life-practice; dividing one’s attention to focus on all of them together is a complex work of integration that is hardly achievable by the individual given our present constitution.¹⁷ The difficulty arises because of the ontology of mind to which human consciousness is subject. Mind is logically constrained to taking exclusive positions of truth, with any other position seen as relative, subordinate or untrue. This extends beyond attention to experience. Any of the four forms of *mahāvākya* meditation can yield a spiritual experience but each of these may assume centrality as the exclusive truth. Practice of these *mahāvākyas* proceeds in phases, with one or another form of attention predominating at any time. However, even with such a division of attention, it is possible to arrive at a simultaneity of these meditations as processes with one in front and the others continuing to varying degrees in the background. Spiritual experiences related to these meditations may similarly assume positions of predominance at different times with the others in the background. To arrive at an integration of all these positions, one needs to stabilize the consciousness beyond Mind, in Vijñāna or Supermind. In a letter to his brother, Barin, in 1920, Sri Aurobindo, explained the problem in this fashion:

[My yoga’s] fundamental principle is to make a synthesis and unity of integral knowledge, integral works and integral devotion, and, raising this above the mental level to the supramental level of the Vijnana, to give it a complete

¹⁷ See Aurobindo (1999, p. 399).

perfection. The defect of the old yoga was that, knowing the mind and reason and knowing the Spirit, it remained satisfied with spiritual experience in the mind. But the mind can grasp only the fragmentary; it cannot completely seize the infinite, the undivided. The mind's way to seize it is through the trance of samadhi, the liberation of moksha, the extinction of nirvana, and so forth. It has no other way.... First one must have all sorts of partial experience on the mental level, flooding the mind with spiritual delight and illuminating it with spiritual light; afterwards one climbs upwards. Unless one makes this upward climb, this climb to the supramental level, it is not possible to know the ultimate secret of world-existence; the riddle of the world is not solved. (1991: pp. 360-361)

The “climb upward... to the supramental level” involves the opening to and normalization of the intermediate planes of cosmic Mind. A detailed discussion of these planes and the way to achieve their normalization in us goes beyond the scope of this essay but a simplified approach to the problem would be to acknowledge Vijñāna as a Being (Puruṣa) and Power (Śakti) and invoke it relationally for the integration.

As discussed above, if we consider Dharma as the Real-Idea that holds the relations corresponding to the *mahāvākyas* together as one, its immanent power of evolution is the Vijñāna Śakti, or conscious power of Supermind. Vijñāna Śakti or supramental Śakti is what Sri Aurobindo has designated as the Divine Mother. We have introduced this earlier in discussing the becoming-cosmos and individual of the Supermind. The Divine Mother is at once transcendent, cosmic and immanent as innermost being and will of the individual. It is that which is orchestrating the evolution of all these together towards the integral consciousness. In the book titled *The Mother*, Sri Aurobindo describes the Divine Mother in her transcendent, cosmic and individual aspects and her relations with the aspirant for the integral yoga:

There are three ways of being of the Mother of which you can become aware when you enter into touch of oneness with the Conscious Force that upholds us and the universe. Transcendent, the original supreme Shakti, she stands above the worlds and links the creation to the ever unmanifest mystery of the Supreme. Universal, the cosmic Mahashakti, she creates all these beings and contains and enters, supports and conducts all these million processes and forces. Individual, she embodies the power of these two vaster ways of her existence, makes them living and near to us and mediates between the human personality and the divine Nature. (2012, p. 14).

Thus the integration of these meditations and their experiences is to be sought through the development of a primary relationship with Vijñāna Śakti related to as the Divine Mother. This implies the development of faith, surrender and opening to the transcendental Vijñāna Śakti seated beyond the thousand petalled lotus and preparing

the consciousness through the four meditations to a waking dynamic oneness with Her Presence and Power. Sri Aurobindo has an audacious image in a poem titled “Rose of God.” The line describes the Divine Śakti as “Sun on the head of the Timeless” (2009, p. 564). This can be considered an image of the cosmic Sahasrāra or center of consciousness above the Mind. It is the Mythos, Logos and Noos at once. One may invoke this transcendental dimension of Vijñāna Śakti in the first meditation on That - *Om tat sat*. Similarly, the second meditation *Sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma* can be practised with faith and receptivity to the Vijñāna Śakti as the Divine Mother who has become the cosmos and brings the aspirant the experiences needed in the process of cosmic evolution, leading us to oneness with Her as cosmic consciousness. Thirdly, the meditation *Tat tvam asi* can be practised with faith and receptivity to the Vijñāna Śakti in the aspirant’s relations with beings in the world, bringing us the experiences of oneness with each being as forms of Her in the evolution. Fourth, the meditation on Self (ātman) as an individuation of Brahman (*aham brahmāsmi*) may be practised with faith and receptivity in the Vijñāna Śakti seated as Knowledge and Will within us and relating dynamically to all beings as her evolving cosmos and selves. The progressive development of a concrete relationship with the Vijñāna Śakti experienced as the Divine Mother can integrate the separate meditations leading to states of consciousness that are more cosmic and integral. It can prepare the aspirant by bringing the different spiritual realizations corresponding to the *mahāvākya* meditation, by normalizing the consciousness of the cosmic planes of Mind in him/her and finally by raising the consciousness beyond Mind into waking possession of the integral consciousness of Supermind:

If you desire this transformation, put yourself in the hands of the Mother and her Powers without cavil or resistance and let her do unhindered her work within you..... The Mother’s power and not any human endeavour and tapasya can alone rend the lid and tear the covering and shape the vessel and bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering Truth and Light and Life divine and the immortal’s Ananda. (2012, p. 26).

I realize that this process takes us beyond Vedānta into an adaptation of and integration with Tantra, but the integral nondualism of Sri Aurobindo could hardly be considered integral if it refused this integration.

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