Imagining the Spiritual Mission of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

The epigraph following the dedication of this book to Sri Aurobindo reads: “Such a great soul is very difficult to find” (Bhagavad Gita, 7:19). But what is it to “find”—or to look for—a great soul? Assuming “great soul” to be an intelligible concept, and further, that great souls do, or perhaps did, exist, how could we judge the relative greatness of Sri Aurobindo, or Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, by reading this anthology of his writings? Of the approximately ten thousand individuals who purchased this book since it was published in 1973, and the many others who presumably read the three thousand copies sold to libraries, how many of these readers were able or inclined to judge whether Sri Aurobindo (and the Mother) is “such a great soul?” Or for how many Western readers did Aurobindo remain an Indian author of Victorian English, a spiritual visionary in a time characterized by materialism and utilitarian practicality? Perhaps the extraordinary claims in this book, and the manner in which Sri Aurobindo describes and defends them, provide all the reason necessary as to why relatively few Westerners have “found” Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Or perhaps relatively few Westerners know how to look for or know whether they have found a great soul.

Using the pragmatic habit of mind he helped to establish as characteristically American, William James went in search of great souls and tested the worth of each by the fruits of their experience. In his The Varieties of Religious Experience, James argued that the only way to study religion is to call in the experts, those individuals whose lives exhibit an uncommon awareness of a presence taken to be divine. He concluded his survey by affirming that the fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show.

What are the characteristics of the experiences which Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother disclose in these pages, and what are the fruits of these experiences? If we were to evaluate the quality of their writings or disciples, or the quality and extent of their influence on individuals and the larger culture, we would almost certainly judge the fruits of their influence to be positive. Unfortunately, however, it would be difficult to gain a clear perspective on such a disparate phenomenon, and as a result, those drawn to Sri Aurobindo’s yoga and vision would find more evidence for their positive influence than would those unattracted to such teachings. If Sri Aurobindo and the Mother themselves were asked to submit their work to the pragmatic test of the quality of their influence, they might answer by pointing to a particularly subtle line from Sri Aurobindo’s poem Savitri. One could imagine, for example, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother appreciating an attempt to fathom their life and work by meditating on a line such as the following:

The whole wide world is only he and she (Savitri, 63).

Obviously, no single line of poetry, no matter how suggestive, can stand for thirty volumes by Sri Aurobindo, twenty volumes by the Mother, and two spectacularly rich lives. But as a thimble full of water can reveal the consistency of a huge body of water, a single line, when made the subject of right meditation, and informed by extensive writings and a lifework, can be extremely revealing for anyone in search of a great soul. Ruud Lohman, for example, a Dutch Catholic priest who worked at Auroville for fifteen years before his sudden death in 1986, was a searcher who meditated on the above line—“The whole world is only he and she”—and enabled it to disclose important meanings not merely in the line, or in Savitri, but in the entire vision and force which Sri Aurobindo and the Mother represent in his life.

In his little book of essays, written between 1972 and 1986, A House for the Third Millennium: Essays on Matrimandir, Lohman provides an excellent example of the way in which Sri Aurobindo’s writings can bear fruit in our thinking, in our
receptivity to a spiritual insight, to a revelation. Sri Aurobindo and Mother teach a higher, wider harmony. In fusing their consciousness, Sri Aurobindo and Mother, He and She, represent the overcoming of opposites which is the task of all evolution. The spirit is not only in the Matrimandir, the Mother temple, but outside as well—not only in the flame at the center and the stillness of the meditation space, but equally in the material and the muscle used in construction. Lohman finds words for his meditation on the Matrimandir:

It is only the He in me that is capable of loving Her, of pursuing Her through the centuries:
   All here where each thing seems its lonely self
   Are figures of the sole transcendent One:
   Only by him they are, his breath is their life;
   An unseen Presence moulds the oblivious clay.
   A playmate in the mighty Mother's game,
   One came upon the dubious whirling globe
   To hide from her pursuit in force and form (Savitri, 60)

He gives up his eternity to be with Her, He hides in forms and forces for Her to rediscover and love Him. He hides in me, in you, in us, masks of His divinity. The secret is so obvious that it is hard to see it. The secret is that it is not behind, or beyond, or above all this, no, it is all this. It is I and my brain cells, my hands and the steel I touch, and it is you and things you eat and the thoughts you think and the people you communicate with. There are no two different realities. It is the same reality, His and Hers, and yours, and mine. It is not when the evolution is complete and full-grown that He and She will move into their palace; it is much more dramatic and more loving and more beautiful: the evolution with all its ups and downs, its steps back and little steps forward, history with all its wars and cultures and art and heroes and soldiers, is their place, their chamber of love in which they embrace. It is not when Matrimandir is ready that She will move in in some subtle or supranatural form and inhabit it as a queen adored by her subjects. It rather is all the perspiration, all the aspiration, all the physical work, all the designs, all the money, all the steel, all
the concrete, all the shapes and spirals and curves of the building that is He and She. There is nothing else. All is either He or She or, when fulfilled by love, both.

They are married secretly in our thought and life. The universe is an endless masquerade:
For nothing here is utterly what it seems,
It is a dream-fact vision of a truth
Which but for the dream would not be wholly true,
A phenomenon stands out significant
Against dim backgrounds of eternity;
We accept its face and pass by all it means;
A part is seen, we take it for the whole.
Thus have they made their play with us for roles:
Author and act with himself as scene,
He moves there as the Soul, as Nature she (Savitri, 61)

To unite with their love-play, to be in it, to be of it, to feel it, to know it, must then be the sense of all this phenomenal show, and the sheer joy of it. For every why? there is only one ultimate answer: love. And not even that fuzzy kind of ethereal love the preachers preach about of “love thy neighbor...” etc., but some robust, straightforward “real” love down to your flesh and bones and glands and organs. Sri Aurobindo as usual doesn’t beat around the bush: “To commit adultery with God is the perfect experience for which the world was created” (The Hour of God, 129).¹

Ruud Lohman’s essays on the Matrimandir obviously suggest that he considered Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to be “a great soul.” His “finding” Sri Aurobindo, and his meditation on the line from Savitri—“This whole wide world is only he and she”—is another example of a “he and she”: Sri Aurobindo and the Mother provide a library full of words, images, and ideas, and Ruud, priest and worker, theologian and Aurovillian, brings his spiritual hunger and receptivity to Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s soul force. The lila, the play, goes on, for the ananda, the delight of it.

For others in search of a great soul, Savitri might not be

the best place to look, but no matter: the fruits of Aurobindo’s experience range over his life story, his philosophy of spiritual evolution, his yoga teaching, karma and rebirth, and his vision of a transformed world—the further manifestation of which is the Mother’s vision of Auroville, the most perfect expression of which is the Matrimandir. All of these profound and profoundly important topics invite the kind of meditative reflection which Ruud Lohman brought to, and from, Savitri and his work on the Matrimandir.

Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s spiritual biographies—or, we perhaps should say, their two observable biographies (plural) and their spiritual biography (singular)—provide an excellent starting place for thinking about, with, through, the great soul of Aurobindo-Mother. When he was not yet Sri Aurobindo, but Aurobindo Ghose, a prisoner in the Alipur Jail in Calcutta, awaiting trial for seditious activity against the British rule of India, he was blessed by a transformative “He and She” experience: Krishna entered him, so that he realized, not only intellectually but spiritually, a union with Krishna’s divine will which enabled him “to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do his work negligently” (Ky, 3, and above, p. 8). Krishna gave to Aurobindo a power of harmonious vision similar to that which he gave to Arjuna: the other prisoners and the jailers now seemed to Aurobindo to be part of an underlying harmony, part of the spiritual reality of Krishna. Although frustrated and deserted, Aurobindo was able to overcome hatred, alienation, and misunderstanding by the healing power of Krishna consciousness. Not that Aurobindo, prisoners, or jailers lost their identities: they all stayed in character, but Aurobindo could now see the extent to which these characters were (and are) on the surface. The inner, true, essential self in all cases is not the surface character, personality, or role, but the divine core, the Krishna standing behind and within each one.

When Aurobindo met Mira Richard, they immediately knew that the other was the full complement—the He and She needed for the divine drama. She brought to this divinely sponsored coalition Western esotericism supplemented by sev-
eral years of Zen Buddhist training in Japan and a deep affinity with Indian yoga, especially with Tantra (the discipline of realizing the spiritual transformation of matter, including the increasing spiritualization of the human body). Aurobindo brought English language and education as well as a profoundly Indian spirituality.

The idea of a spiritual collaboration, of the unifying of two souls, requires the kind of meditative reflection which Ruud Lohman brought to Savitri and to the Matrimandir. How are we to understand the consciousness of the Indian-male-mystic-poet-yogi becoming identical with the consciousness of the French-female-artist-occultist? One way to start is to establish that they are not united on the level of Aurobindo Ghose and Mira Richards: the souls of these personalities are presumably no more capable of such a union of consciousness than are our souls at our level of spiritual attainment. Rather, their union is at the level of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, as coavatars. Is this not the signature of the avatar status—that they are capable of taking on the consciousness and the destiny of another? When we join with another, such a union might include the physical, emotional, and mental, but will be imperfect at each of these levels and will not reach to a spiritual level. To the extent that we are not avatars (or initiates, or buddhas), our souls remain imperfectly related to other souls, as well as to our mental, vital, and physical lives. When Sri Aurobindo says that his consciousness and the Mother’s are one and the same, he must mean something like the “He and She” of the line in Savitri, which in turn echoes Krishna’s claim to include within himself legions of higher beings and civilizations. If we are to picture and articulate the union of the Sri Aurobindo consciousness and the Mother consciousness, we will have to follow Sri Aurobindo into supramental poetry—a poetry which issues from spiritual experience, as did his Savitri, and as did a host of other creations and revelations which issued from the individual yet unified Sri Aurobindo-Mother consciousness.

As the disciple who was preparing to write a biography of Sri Aurobindo was not dissuaded from doing so by his master’s insistence that his life was not on the surface for man to see, so
will we fail to understand Sri Aurobindo on the surface of external events, or in terms of his accessible personality, the historical person, Mira Richard. Sri Aurobindo’s announcement concerning the identity of his and the Mother’s consciousness came as a result of his experience of the Overmind, a realization preparatory to the descent of the Supermind through the Mother thirty years later. Until the overmental descent, Sri Aurobindo presumably did not know—at least not sufficiently to announce or to act upon—that his consciousness and the Mother’s expressed the divine will for themselves and for their disciples. Furthermore, the death of Sri Aurobindo on December 5, 1950, did not signify the death of the spiritual reality, psychic entity avatar, which lived through the personality Aurobindo Ghose; the death of the Mother, at age 95, on November 17, 1973, did not terminate the active spiritual force, shakti or Mother, behind the double task of spiritualizing matter and creating a new world for which Auroville is intended as a living laboratory. The possibility of Sri Aurobindo cooperating with the Mother for the descent of Supermind in 1956, six years after his death, or the Mother’s cooperation with Aurovillians on behalf of the work underway at Auroville (e.g. the creation and subsequent force of the Matrimandir, the Mother-temple), are subjects on which not only disciples but all spiritual seekers are invited to meditate.

For some readers of the New Testament, Jesus is a moral and religious teacher but is not the Christ, a divine being with a unique relation to the Father. A similar dispute has raged concerning Buddha. Sri Aurobindo reminds anyone who would study a spiritual life that “it is the inner life that gives to the outer any power it may have and the inner life of a spiritual man is something vast and full, and at least in the great figures, so crowded and teeming with significant things that no biographer or historian could even hope to seize it all or tell it.” He continues:

The outward facts as related of Christ or Buddha are not much more than what has happened in many other lives—what is it that gives Buddha or Christ their enormous place in the spiritual world? It was because something manifested through
them that was more than any outward event or any teaching
(Letters on Yoga, 428).

To understand what manifested through Buddha or Christ requires a lifetime (or more) of meditative study; to understand Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in their avatar roles requires a similar effort—with no guarantee of success, though the effort itself is its own reward. The essence of yoga, after all, is to do what is required—in this case, to penetrate to the inner meaning of the life and mission of Sri Aurobindo-Mother, without regard to the fruits of such effort.

In addition to struggling with the spiritual significance of Sri Aurobindo-Mother in one’s life, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother also insist that one attempt to understand and join forces with their mission in relation to the entire sweep of evolution from matter to Supermind, and the transformation of each level of evolution, from the mental down to the vital and the physical. This enormous vision and challenge is complemented by an equally important—and to Western minds, altogether un-usual—double concept of karma and rebirth. To understand fully Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is to confront their conviction that their incarnation in this lifetime was made possible or followed spiritually from previous lifetimes, in which they each attained important spiritual powers necessary for the task given them in this century—and, further, that they will continue to be active in the spiritual world until they return at a future time to aid in the evolution of consciousness, not as Aurobindo Ghose and Mira Richard, but as the spiritual realities known imperfectly in this incarnation as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Karma and Rebirth in the Evolution of Consciousness

If, following William James, we call in the experts in order to determine the nature and significance of religious experience, we can do the same on behalf of religious thought: what are we to make of Aurobindo’s spiritually based theory of evolution, and the complex phenomenon of karma and rebirth
by which it proceeds? For Aurobindo, a proper understanding 
of evolution—i.e., that space and time, the universe, is possi-
ble because of a prior involution (involvement) of Spirit—is 
the foundation stone of his entire teaching. He also emphasis-
izes, however, that it is the question of human destiny—and the 
solution provided by karma and rebirth—around which all of 
our questions revolve. The significance for his teaching of 
involution and evolution is succinctly stated in his three-page 
summary, "The Teaching of Sri Aurobindo":

Sri Aurobindo's teaching states that this one being [the 
eternal divine Self] and consciousness is involved here in mat-
ter. Evolution is the process by which it liberates itself; con-
sciousness appears in what seems to be inconscient [uncon-
scious], and once having appeared is self-impelled to grow 
higher and higher and at the same time to enlarge and develop 
toward a greater and greater perfection. Life is the first step in 
this release of consciousness; mind is the second. But the 
evolution does not finish with mind; it awaits a release into 
something greater, a consciousness which is spiritual and sup-
ramental. The next step of the evolution must be toward the 
development of Supermind and spirit as the dominant power in 
the conscious being. For only then will the involved divinity in 
things release itself entirely and it become possible for life to 
manifest perfection (p. 39, above).

This conception of evolution as a manifestation of a previously 
involved divinity is the essential theoretical context within 
which all other theoretical questions must be answered, begin-
ning with the questions with which humanity is primarily 
concerned—questions of its own destiny.

In his highly readable and well-argued little volume on 
rebirth and karma, The Problem of Rebirth, Aurobindo 
asserts that the one basic question around which all philosophy 
revolves is the meaning of human life—its source, direction 
and destiny. He argues that we will not satisfactorily answer 
this question (or cluster of questions) unless we take into 
account the clues provided by karma and rebirth:

The one question which through all its complexities is the 
sum of philosophy and to which all human inquiry comes
round in the end, is the problem of ourselves—why we are here and what we are, and what is behind and before and around us, and what we are to do with ourselves, our inner significance, and our outer environment. In the idea of evolutionary rebirth, if we can once find it to be a truth and recognize its antecedents and consequences, we have a very sufficient clue for an answer to all these connected sides of the one perpetual question. A spiritual evolution of which our universe is the scene and earth its ground and stage, though its plan is still kept back above from our yet limited knowledge—this way of seeing existence is a luminous key which we can fit into many doors of obscurity. But we have to look at it in the right focus, to get its true proportions and, especially, to see it in its spiritual significance more than in its mechanical process (The Supramental Manifestation, 113).

The same approach is needed for an understanding of karma and rebirth as is needed to grasp other spiritual phenomena such as the mission of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, or the triple process of involution, evolution, and transformation: “Finding” Sri Aurobindo-Mother, or “finding” karma and rebirth means seeing these phenomena in their spiritual rather than in their external manifestations.

To understand cosmic and human evolution is to see or know (in spiritual experience, these are identical) that the entire evolutionary process, in its most particular as well as in its general terms, issues from and aims to express the fullest possible meanings inherent in the divine source of all. Again, it is the inner that is regarded as more real, more valuable, than the outer: the inner life of Sri Aurobindo (“not on the surface for man to see”), the inner meaning of the collaboration between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and the inner process of rebirth and karma which in each case provide the solution to the mystery of human destiny. Every rebirth represents a unique expression of the divine, and simultaneously, an advance of evolution toward a divine life on earth:

The spiritual process of which our human birth is a step and our life is a portion, appears as the bringing out of a greatness, asya mahaminan, which is secret, inherent, and self-imprisoned, absorbed in the form and working of things. Our
world-action figures an evolution, an outrolling of a manifold power gathered and coiled up in the crude intricacy of matter. The upward progress of the successive births of things is a rise into waking and larger and larger light of a consciousness shut into the first hermetic cell of sleep of the eternal energy (The Supramental Manifestation, 238).

Successive births and rebirths struggle upward toward a greater freedom from matter, toward a fuller manifestation of divinity, in order to experience the inherent ananda (joy, delight) of the creative process itself. In this respect, all creativity joins with the motive of the divine—to experience and express maximum ananda:

If, then, being free to move or remain eternally still, to throw itself into forms or retain the potentiality of forms in itself, it indulges its powers of movement and formation, it can be only for one reason, for delight (The Life Divine, 91).

As the poet, artist, or musician when he creates does really nothing but develop some potentiality in his unmanifested self into a form of manifestation, and as the thinker, statesman, mechanist only bring out into a shape of things that which lay hidden in themselves, was themselves, is still themselves when it is cast into form, so is it with the world and the Eternal. All creation or becoming is nothing but this self-manifestation (The Life Divine, 112).

This definition of creativity, including birth and rebirth, as self-manifestation of potentiality, all of which is of and from the divine, can either be passed over as an intellectual theory or can be made the object of meditative reflection. Aurobindo presents this theory, as he presents all of his theories, as an aid to spiritual insight and practice. While it is easier not to bother with such a metaphysical, if not mysterious and unanswerable, question as “why the world at all?”—Aurobindo would have us brood on this question for its spiritual content and challenge. It is an exercise in jñana—or knowledge-yoga to grapple with a thought such as: “the Absolute can have no purpose in manifestation except of manifestation itself” (The Life Divine, 834).
Afterword

This statement follows from Aurobindo's own spiritual experience and invites the reader of his writings on evolution (Part One, above) to accept as one's own the motive and will of the divine—to "seek for delight...to find and possess and fulfill it" (The Life Divine, 219).

Seeking the delight of existence must become the motive not only of life in general, but of every life, through each birth and rebirth. Each individual is expected to join with shakti, the divine will and energy, in helping to realize the spiritual potential of matter, life, and mind. The great struggle initiated by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is for the realization of the divine energy at the levels above mind—levels of consciousness referred to as intuition, illumined mind, overmind, and Supermind. This gradual self-manifestation of the divine might be referred to in Indian terms as the Brahmanization of the world and in Christian terms as the Kingdom of God on earth. Sri Aurobindo refers to it as founding the Life Divine.

Aurobindo's account of this hoped for triumph gives full measure to the significance and ultimate transformation of matter. With an eye to both philosophy (specifically metaphysics—the philosophical study of being or existence in its most general terms) and to the practical requirements of spiritual discipline, Aurobindo argues against both those who deny the significance of matter and those who are caught in its snare. According to the intergralist perspective which characterizes both his philosophy and his yoga, Aurobindo criticizes the materialist's denial of spirit and the spiritualist's denial of matter. Philosophy and yoga are joined in his vision and in his practical spiritual advice concerning the delight of creation, just as they were joined in the Upanishads. Three thousand years ago, the Taithiriya Upanishad expressed this idea of ananda, delight of creation, which Sri Aurobindo has amplified in modern terms: From Delight all these beings are born, by Delight they exist and grow, to Delight they return (II.7).

In opposition to the world-negating spirituality (which Sri Aurobindo identified with much of Indian thought, including Buddhism and the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara), he insists on the value of matter as well as spirit:
The affirmation of a divine life upon earth and an immortal sense in mortal existence can have no base unless we recognize not only eternal spirit as the inhabitant of this bodily mansion, the wearer of this mutable robe, but accept matter of which it is made, as a fit and noble material out of which he weaves constantly his garbs, builds recurrently the unending series of his mansions (*The Life Divine*, 6).

Sri Aurobindo's most dramatic affirmation of the interplay between spirit and matter, and the resulting spiritualization of matter, is to be found in his experience and concept of the Supermind. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother understood their spiritual mission—their work as co-avatars—to consist primarily in cooperating with the Supermind in the eventual spiritualization or supramentalization of matter, including the human body.

The supramental level of consciousness, or mode of transformation, involves divine involution and evolution: it is an involution in that it is a descent from the divine, and of the divine, into mind, life, and matter. It is also a phase of evolution, the fourth and highest phase to date, in that it is the level above mind toward which humanity appears to be doing anything but searching for the Supermind, or any similar spiritual transformative power. Sri Aurobindo acknowledges that throughout the entire course of evolution, the physical, vital, and mental have exercised near-total dominance over the spiritual, and consequently, the difficulty which contemporary humanity will experience in affirming the existence of Supermind or the possibility of a spiritually transformed body. The descent and manifestation of Supermind could dispel such doubt, but only if it were to enter human consciousness and actually begin the process of liberating our mental, vital, and physical lives from their present limitations. Aurobindo's two conditions for the coming spiritual age—a few inviduals who experience the transformative power of spirit, and a mass of humanity able to assimilate such advanced experience—is particularly apt here (above p. 193).

Sri Aurobindo argues that we are blinded to the possibil-
ity of a principle such as Supermind because of our inadequate vision and discipline, both of which fail at integration of matter and spirit. Whereas we should experience and understand the whole of the universe as a complex but organic manifestation of the one divine reality, we tend to divide the world, or our world, into separate compartments wherein the spiritual, if it is acknowledged at all, remains removed from the physical, vital, and mental. In response to this view, Aurobindo offers a vision of the world as an evolving and integral expression of the divine which will soon manifest more dramatically and unmistakably than at any previous time.

The spirit has been thought of not as something all-pervading and the secret essence of our being, but as something only looking down on us from the heights and drawing us only toward the heights and away from the rest of existence. So we get the idea of our cosmic and individual being as a great illusion, and departure from it and extinction in our consciousness of both individual and cosmos as the only hope, the sole release. Or we build up the idea of the earth as a world of ignorance, suffering, and trial and our only future an escape into heavens beyond; there is no divine prospect for us here, no fulfillment possible even with the utmost evolution on earth in the body, no victorious tansformation, no supreme object to be worked out in terrestrial existence. But if Supermind exists, if it descends, if it becomes the ruling principle, all that seems impossible to mind becomes not only possible but inevitable (The Supramental Manifestation, 63).

The Supermind would enable a humanity cooperating with its transformative power to gather into a higher harmony the polarities which limit the mind, emotions, and physical body in their respective spheres; the mind would overcome its natural inclination to divide reality into mutually exclusive parts, the vital or emotional would overcome the desire to possess objects and experiences as mine, and at the physical level, all physical impulses and appetites such as eating and sex would be "accepted as part of the divine life and pass under this law" (The Supramental Manifestation, 28). The average person is presumably not interested in such a transformation, but
slowly, according to Aurobindo, consciousness continues to evolve from an imperfect mental life to a more perfect supra-mental life. Although imperceptible to most, the powerful effects of "the great soul," the one who is very difficult to find—and to accept, which means the same—continue to be felt by some portions of humanity. Religions exist for this reason: to transmit to the larger community the advances of the great souls to those who spiritually live off the achievements. Through this transmission, the great souls and religious communities cooperate in making possible a fuller, more perfect manifestation of the divine.

The great souls, furthermore, continue contributing to the evolution of consciousness immediately after death, from the spiritual world, and when they subsequently return to earth bearing the capacities attained in their preceding lifetime. The Mother explained that Sri Aurobindo had helped to bring down the descent of the Supermind even though—or rather because—he was on the other side. According to their disciples, the force of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother continues in the communities which grew up around them during their lifetimes. The disciples also carry their spiritual achievements, their work toward the transformation of the mental, vital, and physical, into the spiritual world and put it at the service of the total evolutionary process. Unlike the great souls, however, disciples generally remain ignorant of their previous lives. Early in the text of the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna rather pityingly reveals to his disciple, Arjuna, the truth of rebirth: "Many of My births that are past and gone, thine also, O Arjuna; all of them I know, but thou knowest not..."(4:5). It is not through the dialogue, or intellectual argumentation, but rather by his progress in yoga practice that Krishna enables Arjuna (or humanity) to grasp the fact of karma and rebirth. Sri Aurobindo similarly argues that spiritual experience alone can lead to the acceptance of this subtle spiritual law:

The soul needs no proof of its rebirth any more than it needs proof of its immortality. For there comes a time when it is consciously immortal, aware of itself in its eternal and immu-
table essence. Once that realization is accomplished, all intellectual questionings for and against the immortality of the soul fall away like a vain clamour of ignorance around the self-evident and ever-present truth (*The Supramental Manifestation*, 88).

The self that is aware of previous earth lives is, of course, the eternal, spiritual self, not the personality which was fashioned by the spirit for this lifetime. Had Aurobindo Ghose not evolved into Sri Aurobindo, or had Mira Richard not attained the realization of herself as the Mother, they would not have gained a knowledge of their previous lives, any more than Arujuana would have had such knowledge had he not replaced his ordinary consciousness by a genuine Kirshna consciousness. Arjuna, Aurobindo, and Mira Richard died to the old self and were born to the new—which self is in fact the old or original spirit self which succeeded in overcoming, or transforming, the ordinary self by which it was previously limited.

Ironically, it is precisely the ordinary self which is typically desperate for knowledge of karma and rebirth. Aurobindo affirms the value of the ordinary self—the physical, vital, and mental parts of the human being, or levels of consciousness—but he sees it as an instrument of the soul, not as an end in itself. Neither the human body, nor the emotions nor the individual mind—the three components which I regard as “me”—are reborn. Their effects are written on the soul, but in themselves their existence is limited to one earthly life. It is the soul, or what Aurobindo refers to in the following passage as the psychic being, which is of lasting value:

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 mental buildings, not the capacities or characters, but something essential that is 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 realization or for the work that has to be done for the divine (Letters on Yoga, 452).

The self to which most of us are committed most of the time did not exist in the past and will not be reborn in the future. The effects of the past selves have fashioned my present self according to the law, or laws, of karma, and the effects of my present life will karmically influence the self that I will be in the future, but “I” in this statement refers to my soul or psychic being, not the physical, vital, or mental self which I live for and love. I contribute to my own soul evolution and the evolution of humanity by aiding the manifestation of the divine through more advanced soul qualities.

Evolution proceeds by—or is impeded by—the constant influx of the soul capacities built up in previous lives. As the evolving being develops still more and becomes more rich and complex, it accumulates its personalities, as it were. Sometimes they stand behind the active elements throwing in some color, some trait, some capacity here and there—or they stand in front and there is a multiple personality, a many-sided character or a many-sided, sometimes what looks like a universal capacity [sic]. But if a former personality, a former capacity, is brought forward, it will not be to repeat what was already done, but to cast the same capacity into new forms and new shapes and fuse it into a new harmony of the being which will not be a reproduction of what was before (Letters on Yoga, 451-52).

In effect, Sri Aurobindo is here positing a double evolution: as the world evolves through successive states of earthly
and human history, so does each soul successively accumulate new personalities, each appropriate for its own history and for the historical period in which it must realize its destiny. This combination of soul history and world-historical environment, both karmically guided, presupposes that the world in general and the individual soul in particular are striving, however unconsciously, to attain a divine perfection in and through earthly life. In order for this double realization to take place, the individual must contact the spiritual capacity of matter, life, and mind: "The soul comes into birth for experience, for growth, for evolution till it can bring the divine into matter" (Letters on Yoga, 451).

Although the spiritual quality of the self and the universe is ordinarily veiled, it can be penetrated, and when it is, both the self and the universe are thereby spiritually advanced. It is largely on the basis of this conception of the soul working in concert with the evolutionary process that Aurobindo criticizes traditional conceptions of rebirth. According to Aurobindo, the position of Advaita Vedanta (an absolute monist philosophy based on the Upanishads) affirms the reality of the self as one with Brahman, but fails to take seriously the reality of soul or its relationship to the world of change. Whereas he criticizes the Vedantist position for not emphasizing the reality of the self in the world, he criticizes the traditional Buddhist view for its denial of a permanent self:

It views the recurrence of birth as a prolonged mechanical chain; it sees, with a sense of suffering and distaste, the eternal revolving of an immense cosmic wheel of energy with no divine sense in its revelations, its beginning an affirmation of ignorant desire, its end a nullifying bliss of escape. The whole wheel turns uselessly, forever disturbing the peace of Nonbeing and creating souls whose one difficult chance and whole business is to cease (The Supramental Manifestation, 116).

Aurobindo's response to the Buddhist position shows the extent of his commitment to the reality of both the self and the world, and to their creative collaboration as they evolve in cooperation with the divine purpose:
But what if rebirth were in truth no long dragging chain, but rather at first a ladder of the soul’s ascension and at last a succession of mighty spiritual opportunities? It will be so if the infinite existence is not what it seems to the logical intellect, an abstract entity, but what it is to intuition and in deeper soul experience, a conscious spiritual reality, and that reality as real here as in any far-off absolute superconscience. For then universal nature would be no longer a mechanism with no secret but its own inconscient mechanics and no intention but the mere recurrent working; it would be the conscient energy of the universal spirit hidden in the greatness of its process, mahimamnam asya. And the soul ascending from the sleep of matter through plant and animal life to the human degree of the power of life and there battling with ignorance and limited to take possession of its royal and infinite kingdom would be the mediator appointed to unfold in nature the spirit who is hidden in her subtleties and her vastness. That is the significance of life and the world which the idea of evolutionary rebirth opens to us; life becomes at once a progressive ascending series for the unfolding of the spirit. It acquires a supreme significance: the way of the spirit in its power is justified, no longer a foolish and empty dream, an eternal delirium, great mechanical toil, or termless futility, but the sum of works or a large spiritual will and wisdom: the human soul and the cosmic spirit look into each other’s eyes with a noble and divine meaning (The Supramental Manifestation, 12-21).

Integral Yoga
and the Task of the Present Age

Aurobindo’s yoga teaching is based on the yogas of the Bhagavad Gita—knowledge, action, devotion, and meditation—but goes beyond the Gita in requiring the yoga practitioner to be as concerned with the evolution of humanity as with one’s own spiritual liberation. Each of the yogas of the Gita is affirmed and extended in Aurobindo’s integral approach: in the Gita, Arjuna is invited to know—or see—Brahman through the appearance of the incarnate god Krishna, and in Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga, the seeker is expected to know the fullest possible manifestation of the divine from its initial involution in time and space, through the physical, vital, men-
tal, and supramental stages of evolution. To the karma-yoga of the Gita, Aurobindo adds that the karma-yogi must serve without attachments to the fruits of one's action all of the tasks and all of the participants in the lila (drama) of the human community in its evolutionary struggle. The Gita teaches a pure devotion to, or love of, Krishna, and Integral Yoga adds that the devotee must also extend this commitment to include a self-sacrificial love of all manifestations of the divine.

To the Gita's affirmation of the traditional meditative discipline summarized in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, Aurobindo adds an emphasis on the experience of the divine energy, so that meditation should focus on and lead to a transformation of the will. Furthermore, in Aurobindo's synthesis of yoga, the yogas of the Gita are shown to be mutually dependent, and truly integrated:

By way of this integral knowledge we arrive at the unity of the aims set before themselves by the three paths of knowledge, works, and devotion. Knowledge aims at the realization of true self-existence, works at the realization of the divine conscious-will which secretly governs all works, devotion at the realization of the bliss which enjoys as the lover all beings and all existences—Sat, Chit-Tapas, and Ananda. Each therefore aims at possessing Sachchidananda through one or other aspect of his triune divine nature (The Synthesis of Yoga, 406).

In addition to the yogas traditionally associated with the Gita—knowledge, action, and devotion, and the fourth, meditation, which is not always listed with the other three—Aurobindo emphasizes tantric yoga, or the discipline of spiritualizing nature. He describes this tantric discipline as follows: "To raise nature in man into manifest power and spirit is its method and it is the whole nature that it gathers up for the spiritual conversion" (The Synthesis of Yoga, 585).

In Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, tantra refers to the union of the yoga practitioner with shakti, the energy of the divine Mother, in order to effect a transformation of material life. Tantric yoga, or simply tantra, serves an important function in Aurobindo's total spiritual teaching because it focuses on the
contemporary opportunity and need to serve and to help manifest the divine will, particularly in union with the supramental force now functioning through individuals of high spiritual attainment such as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Aurobindo's yoga teaching, however, is not based exclusively on either tantra or on the Gita, but on both, as well as on his, or their, contemporary Indian and Western spiritual experience.

It is noteworthy that Aurobindo's spiritual experience received a Western coloration from two sources, his education in England from elementary school through graduation from King's College, Cambridge University, and the influence of the Mother, but he shows little or no trace of the influence of Christian spirituality, or of a connection to the Christ. In a letter in 1936 to a disciple (concerning the opinion of a third person) Aurobindo confessed his nonattraction to Christ as well as his profound reverence for Krishna:

I feel it difficult to say anything about [X's] Christ and Krishna. The attraction which she says people feel for Christ has never touched me, partly because I got disgusted with the dryness and deadness of Christianity in England and partly because the Christ of the gospels (apart from a few pregnant episodes) is luminous no doubt, but somewhat shadowy and imperfectly constructed in his luminosity: there is more of the ethical put forward than of the spiritual or divine man. The Christ that has strongly lived in the Western saints and mystics is the Christ of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Theresa, and others. But apart from that, is it a fact that Christ has been strongly and vividly loved by Christians? Only by a very few, it seems to me. As for Krishna, to judge him and his revealing tradition by the Christ figure and Christ tradition is not possible. The two stand in two different worlds. There is nothing in Christ of the great and boundless and sovereign spiritual knowledge and power of realization we find in the Gita, nothing of the emotional force, passion, beauty of the Gopi-symbol and all that lies behind it, nothing of the many-sided manifestation of the Krishna figure. Christ has other qualities: there is no gain in putting them side by side and trying to weigh them against each other (On Himself, 137-38).

One wonders, on reading this passage, whether Sri Aurobindo is not partly influenced here by the Aurobindo Ghose
who experienced Christianity both in England and through the British governors of India during his days as an Indian nationalist. He wisely criticizes the Western habit of comparing—never completely free of sectarian narrowness—Christ with Krishna, Buddha, and other great souls. Aurobindo has definite relationships and corresponding ideas concerning these figures, but avoids pitting them, or the religious traditions built around them, against each other.

Aurobindo nevertheless acknowledges that for him neither Buddha nor Christ have brought the degree of spiritual transformation brought by Krishna. He did not see it as his task to develop comparisons between his conception of the supramental transformation and Christian incarnational theology. His thought neither affirms nor discourages a third party from studying—or, better, trying to experience spiritually—the inner similarity and spiritual complementarity between his vision of spiritual evolution and Christian evolutionism articulated by contemporary thinkers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Rudolf Steiner. There is need for a fuller understanding of comparisons and complementarities—without sectarian narrowness—concerning the respective spiritual powers represented by these three dominant spiritual figures, Krishna, Buddha, and Christ, and for their continuing role in contemporary spiritual and cultural life.

In the case of Integral Yoga, Aurobindo combines a profound affirmation of the positive features found in traditional spiritual teachings with a radically new insight concerning recent developments in human evolution. With respect to the Gita, for example, he considers Krishna an avatar, a divine being incarnated on behalf of the human struggle toward a higher and truer consciousness of the divine, but he considers Krishna's message as articulated in the Gita and in traditional Hinduism to be inadequate in relation to his understanding of the next evolutionary state—the supramental transformation of matter. He considers Buddha, Krishna, and Christ as avatars who each brought a distinctive contribution to humanity, and he affirms that these contributions are still significant for the bulk of spiritual seekers. He adds, however, that beginning with the supramental descent in the second half of the present
century, it will be increasingly possible and important to adherents of religious traditions—followers of Krishna, Buddha, and Christ—to experience their respective missions and forces in more spiritual ways. Aurobindo regrets that Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians alike have generally reduced the spiritual mission of Krishna, Buddha, and Christ to an ethical and social level (Essays on the Gita, 161-62), but far from seeing no value in these traditions, he recognizes that they are the seedbed for the spiritual age and the spiritually evolved incarnations soon to come.

Aurobindo warned against comparisons ripped from their evolutionary context, but he surely would have seen the merit in exploring possible points of corroboration between his spiritual vision and contemporary spiritual insights in other traditions. In view of his emphasis on the manifestation of the divine in matter, life, and mind, and his corresponding attempt to replace the traditional Indian view of the created world as maya (illusion) with an emphasis on the reality of earthly evolution, it would be worth developing the implications of Aurobindo's position in relation to the dominant Christian view of creation and earthly evolution. The first obvious difference between Aurobindo's teaching and standard Christianity would focus on the absence in Christianity of the double concept of karma and rebirth—specifically on the possibility of the soul's progress in concert with the entire sweep of earthly evolution. Aurobindo's thought largely ignores claims for and against the transformative effect of the incarnation of Christ, and focuses appropriately instead on the spiritual phenomenon and transformative power which he himself experienced—the descent of the Supermind in the second half of this century as the decisive intervention of the divine in human history.

Aurobindo's emphasis on the spiritual source and goal of evolution, as well as the transformative effect of divine intervention, would provide a broad base of agreement for an Aurobindo-Christian synthesis. Although it has often failed to do so, the Christian tradition (e.g., by building on the
Bonaventurean-Franciscan tradition) can provide a positive spiritual source and goal of evolution, as well as the transformative effect of divine intervention. Although it has often failed to do so, the Christian tradition can prove a positive interpretation of the role of matter. More specifically, the incarnation of the Christ in a human body that suffered and bled into the earth would seem to be at least analogous to the role of shakti, divine energy, which Aurobindo puts at the center of his vision and yoga teaching. Further, Aurobindo's account of the characteristics and possible effects of the supramental descent seem to suggest spiritual experiences and transformations which Christians attribute to the continuing influence, called grace, of the Christ in human history and earth evolution.

Nowhere is the battle between matter and spirit, coupled with an unconscious commitment to evolution, more obviously in the balance than in the youthful, materialistic yet religious culture of the United States. Aurobindo was not alone in seeing the great spiritual significance of the American experiment, the American errand into the wilderness.

In his response to a request for a message on the occasion of his birthday celebrated by his disciples in New York in 1949, Sri Aurobindo sent a three-page statement which outlines the complementary strengths of the East (by which he means India and Buddhist Asia) and the West (by which he means Europe and North America). He offers three observations, each of which is useful for an understanding of Sri Aurobindo's significance for the West (and particularly for America) at the present time. First he observes that contrary to the usual perception of East and West, their histories are not entirely opposed or mutually exclusive: the East, which is typically perceived as characteristically spiritual and mystical, nevertheless "has had its materialistic tendencies, its material splendors, its similar or identical dealings with life and matter and the world in which we live," and "the West has had no less than the East its spiritual seekings and, though not in such profusion, its saints and sages and mystics" (On Himself, 414). Aurobindo's second point focuses on the contrast which has become increasingly
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definitive during the last several centuries. With the commitment to science, the modern West has increasingly neglected, and finally denied, the spiritual realm:

The West has concentrated more and more on the world, on the dealings of mind and life with our material existence, on our mastery over it, on the perfection of mind and life and some fulfillment of the human being here: latterly this has gone so far as the denial of the Spirit and even the enthronement of matter as the sole reality (On Himself, 414-15).

Aurobindo's third point, in conclusion, is simply that the deep experience and knowledge of Spirit which is still alive in the East could, and should, be seen as the true goal of the commitment to evolution characteristic of the West. The intelligence and energy with which the West struggles on behalf of evolution must be made to acknowledge and to serve the evolution of consciousness, not merely its expression in the material world. If the West could see behind its commitment to matter and nature, to the spiritual source and goal of the evolutionary process, the combination would be the richest possible. He concludes his message with this hope:

The ascent of the human soul to the supreme Spirit is that soul's highest aim and necessity, for that is the supreme reality; but there can be too the descent of the Spirit and its powers into the world and that would justify the existence of the material world also, give a meaning, a divine purpose to the creation and solve its riddle. East and West could be reconciled in the pursuit of the highest and largest ideal, Spirit embrace matter and matter find its own true reality and the hidden reality in all things in the Spirit (On Himself, 416).

Sri Aurobindo's legacy represents a uniquely promising attempt to provide a spiritual base and goal for America's commitment to the material, as well as a discipline whereby all material life may be made into an instrument of progress for the individual and the human community.