

VMSI

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS AS A SCHOOLING IN KARMA

In the summer of 1969, just a few months after defending my dissertation on "Radhakrishnan's Comparative Philosophy," I encountered the life of Sri Aurobindo as a believable historical example of karma and rebirth. Although I had been studying Indian religious thought for about five years, it was not until I studied the remarkable metamorphosis of Aurobindo Ghose to Sri Aurobindo, that I seriously confronted how these concepts of karma and rebirth might apply to a contemporary life. I also began to understand Sri Aurobindo's insistence to his biographers that his life was "not on the surface for man to see."

Within two to three years after first encountering Sri Aurobindo's spectacular life and work, and his spiritual collaboration with Mira Richard, the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, I was beginning to recognize that Sri Aurobindo's life (like the Mother's), should be understood on the level of soul history and destiny. Such recognition, however, was not yet a knowing; rather, it was a pragmatically helpful, or heuristic, thesis providing the means to see behind a historical life to the divine reality of which it is a manifestation.

I began to read the life of Sri Aurobindo, including particularly the way his life was spiritually, or karmically, joined to that of the Mother. This is best understood as a powerfully revelatory spiritual reality. Even during my stay in the spiritually charged atmosphere of the Ashram, and in the presence of the Mother, I was not able to see behind the surface of these two spiritually joined lives. Yet I knew this was to be known.

Although I had the elephant only by the ear, I sensed that it was part of something larger, something mysterious and closer to the truth than is available on the empirical, historical surface. I knew that yoga, or the yogas of knowledge, action, devotion (or love), and the integral yoga of historical transformation--were the way to progress but I was not at all confident that I was any closer to seeing/knowing behind the surface.

I had met disciples of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother between my first reading of Sri Aurobindo in 1969 and my departure for India in 1970, but it was not until I met Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri on my return from India that I was able to discuss with a scholar/philosopher the relationship of the spiritual and the intellectual with respect to Sri aurobindo's teaching and influence.

Important conclusions do not ordinarily come without preparation. I would not have made much sense (or super-

sense) of the life and teaching of Sri Aurobindo had I not struggled with Krishna's claim in the Bhagavadgita that he remembered all of his previous lives. By the early 1970's I had decided that the Gita revealed a powerful spiritual method for the transformation of human consciousness. Krishna of the Gita exercised real effects not only on his devotees--as I knew from my two summers in India in 1966 and 1970--but to some extent on pragmatic comparative philosophers such as myself.

If my pragmatic approach to spiritual efficacy turned up productive questions and, eventually, a positive reading on Krishna of the Gita, how much more challenging were the complexities and impact of Gotama the Buddha, with and about whom I entered on a long-term discussion soon after my confrontation with the meaning of Krishna.

From my first semester of full-time teaching as an instructor in philosophy, I taught courses in comparative, or Asian-Western philosophy and religion. In these courses I occasionally used Huston Smith's Religions of Man with its handy summary of the Theravada and Mahayana conceptions of the Buddha. In the same book, in the chapter on Christianity, Huston Smith asks the reader to consider not only what Jesus said and who he was, but significantly, what He was. I began to ask--are there religious figures about whom we should ask not only what they said and who they were, but what they were --i.e., what was their nature, their level of mission, their dimension of transformative power, their ability to endure and function efficaciously after death.

My confrontations with the meanings of Krishna, Buddha and Christ and my reluctant, if perhaps inevitable, willingness to grant them privileged spiritual status represents my transition from pragmatic naturalism with an interest in the varieties of religious experience to an affirmation of the spiritual in history and individual lives.

During these same years of teaching and brooding on the meaning of Krishna, Buddha, and then, beginning in 1969, on the meaning of Sri Aurobindo, I moved closer to answering the "what" of these figures with various positive designations, cutting a middle path through the thicket of comparative religion. I came increasingly to admit that Krishna, Buddha and Sri Aurobindo had their being on a spiritual plane.

If, as I decided retrospectively, my confrontation with Krishna and Buddha enabled me to experience the spiritual dimension of Sri Aurobindo's life and mission, and particularly his remarkable collaboration with the Mother, my seven year experience of Sri Aurobindo prepared me for an experience of Rudolf Steiner. In spring 1975 I went to the

Anthroposophic bookstore and library in order to find a copy of Theodore Schwenck's Sensitive Chaos as a gift for my wife, Ellen, who was then a teacher of pottery. As I had been avoiding this upstairs bookstore with its unpronounceable name and aura of occultism, I was astonished to find more than a hundred books by a spiritual philosopher with whom I had been totally unfamiliar. I purchased and read Steiner's two books on the Bhagavadgita. Karma, it would seem, was working overtime.

I then embarked on a serious study of Steiner and one year later was already thinking in terms of a spiritual teaching and discipline which is western, esoteric Christian, and highly articulated. Rudolf Steiner's writings enabled me not only to understand the theory of karma more precisely, but to begin to use it, and to attempt to penetrate its subtle mysteries. At the invitation of Bina Chaudhuri and Dionne Marx, I delivered a series of lectures on Sri Aurobindo and Rudolf Steiner at the Cultural Integration Fellowship here in San Francisco.

To the extent that I am prepared to serve as president of the California Institute of Integral Studies, it would be due at least as much to my work in institutions serving Anthroposophy as to my years of administration at Manhattanville and Baruch Colleges. In contrast to administration at traditional colleges, in which the nearly exclusive modus operandi is the politics of "turf," my work with Anthroposophical institutions has shown me the value of schooled imagination in order to incarnate spiritual ideas in the most stubbornly material spheres of activity-- budgets, personnel and salaries, fund-raising and advertising. ^

One of the most important foci of spiritual scientific research which can be learned from the writings of Rudolf Steiner is schooling in biography, or individual karma in the context of one's historical situation, institutions and human relationships. In his basic works and in specialized studies, Steiner explicated a detailed account of the workings of karma. As is increasingly well known through the attention justifiably paid to the correlation between curriculum and child development in Waldorf Schools, Steiner also bequeathed an exquisitely detailed account of human development in seven-year periods.

This delineation of a life in seven-year stages, combined with his research concerning life before and after death, offer what seem to be the most complete and careful account of individual karmic destiny in relation to higher beings (including Krishna, Buddha and Christ) the planets and stars, the earth as a spiritual being, evolution of language and cultural forms, modes of thought, affect and will, and

the varied patterns and possibilities of one's own soul history.

On a more personal level, I believe that his time around my primary karmic choice has been my relationship with my wife, Ellen Dineen McDermott. Our shared primary karmic facts are the quality of our marriage, the growth of our children into freedom, and life-defining relationships with an immodest number of relatives and friends. I was unable to take seriously the possibility of our move from New York (where we were born and have lived an intensely rewarding life for more than fifty years) until we were equally convinced that our shared karma indicated a commitment to the California Institute of Integral Studies and all that will come with it.

The circumstances of my selection as president, my acceptance of the appointment, and the startling receipt of massive funding by Mr. Laurance S. Rockefeller, provide rich opportunities for observing karma-in-action. During the hours that this extraordinary gift was coming into being in Mr. Rockefeller's office, it seemed to my (karmic) eye that something else was happening. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that fortune was unfolding on more than one level.

This sense of what William James referred to as "something more" fills me with profound gratitude and deep seriousness. In just a few months we have seen enough multi-layered drama to suggest that as I join my karma to that of the Institute, and as Ellen and I join our destinies to a new community, there would seem to be spiritual forces at work. There is at least a sufficiently strong hint of other powers and ideals in the works that it could lead some of us talkative types to lower the volume, to look beneath the surface, and to listen to the silence. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "it is the hour of the unexpected."

Robert McDermott  
December 1, 1990