

Sri Aurobindo's Integral Philosophy of Body, Mind and Consciousness: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

In Indian philosophy the concepts of mind, body and consciousness occupy a very important place. In most classical systems, the body is viewed as transient and subject to suffering. The mind is regarded either as an instrument that must be purified or transcended, while consciousness is understood as the ultimate, eternal, self-luminous reality and the true essence of the individual. However, Sri Aurobindo proposes an integral philosophy in which the body, mind, and consciousness are transformed into instruments of divine manifestation. The objective of the present paper is to explain Sri Aurobindo's understanding of body, mind, and consciousness and identify the distinctive contribution of his thoughts.

The significance of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy lies in his attempt to reconcile materialism and spiritualism. In his magnum opus *The Life Divine*, following the Advaita Vedantins SriAurobindo admits the *SAT-CIT-ANANDAMAY Brahman* as the only reality. But he points out that if everything is *Brahman* (*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*), then matter also is *Brahman* and hence matter and the material world also is real. While for the Advaita vadins cons. is pure, unchangeable, eternal, self-luminous, non-dual and the witness of all experiences, for Sri Aurobindo cons. is not only the witness but it is actually a force that is inherently dynamic, creative, and evolutionary. The Advaitins hold that the body and the mind are not the ultimate reality; hence liberation means the realization of the individual self as pure consciousness and overcoming the ignorant identification of the Self with body and mind. However, for Sri Aurobindo body, life and mind are evolutionary manifestations of consciousness. They are not merely to be transcended; rather they are to be transformed and divinized.

Finally the paper would try to show the relevance of Sri Aurobindo's integral philosophy in the present society.

Keywords: Integral, Consciousness, Evolution, Involution, Mind, Body, Triple Transformation.

1. Introduction

Since the Vedic period, the concepts of body, mind, and consciousness have occupied a central place in Indian philosophical thought. It is in relation to concept of liberation that the concepts of body, mind and consciousness become relevant. In most classical systems, the body is viewed as transient and

subject to suffering. The mind is regarded either as an instrument that must be purified or transcended, while consciousness is understood as the ultimate, eternal, self-luminous reality and the true essence of the individual. Liberation is therefore achieved by transcending bodily attachment and mental limitations. However, Sri Aurobindo proposes an integral philosophy in which the body, mind, and consciousness are transformed into instruments of divine manifestation. His philosophy synthesizes the insights of the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā, and modern evolutionary thought, presenting an affirmative vision of human life and spiritual development. This paper aims to explain Sri Aurobindo's understanding of body, mind, and consciousness and identify the distinctive contribution of his thoughts.

The objective of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy:

Sri Aurobindo, one of the greatest spiritual seekers of India, a *yogi*, a *rishi*, aimed to bring about the resurgence of the entire mankind through the awakening of spirituality within it. The significance of his thoughts lies here that Sri Aurobindo attempted at a reconciliation of spiritualism with that of materialism. The great seer was deeply influenced by the philosophy of the Advaita Vedānta and conceived reality as the one eternal all pervading *Brahman* or the *Sacchidānanda*, the realization of which is the highest aim of human life. But unlike the Advaita Vedānta of Saṃkara, Sri Aurobindo regarded the material world also as real. For him matter as well as spirit is real. The question is: why did Sri Aurobindo attempt at such reconciliation?

In *Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo explains that from the very dawn of human civilization on earth mankind has an intense aspiration to realize a perfect life on earth. He has been in a constant search for pure truth, unmixed bliss, a secret immortality in this mortal existence. God, light, freedom and immortality have been the primary ideals of his life. Although these ideals appear to be in contradiction with our normal experience, even the skeptics have raised doubts regarding the actuality of such ideals, yet human beings' intense urge to realize these ideals from time immemorial is undeniable. And hence, despite the significant progress of his external life based on modern science, humanity is not satisfied; an intense feeling of dissatisfaction persists throughout man's existence. Hence, the aim of SA philosophy is to enable mankind realize such a perfect life of unity, truth, freedom and immortality, in this material world only. Sri Aurobindo is convinced that mankind is destined to realize the ultimate spiritual truth in this phenomenal world. The question is how would this become possible? According to him this would be possible through a gradual process of evolution of consciousness in the material world.

Sri Aurobindo's Metaphysics:

The significance of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy lies in his attempt to reconcile materialism and spiritualism. Sri Aurobindo points out that generally the spiritualists consider the Supreme Self or the spirit as the only reality and matter as merely an object of illusion. The materialists on the other hand deny the reality of the spirit which is for them nothing but a product of imagination. While the spiritualists regard only a spiritual truth as the basic principle of life on earth, the materialists consider material energy as the fundamental substance of the universe. Sri Aurobindo says that neither materialism nor spiritualism can give us a satisfactory explanation regarding the nature of world and reality. If matter is completely unconscious, it is difficult to explain how life, our conscious experience,

thought and self- awareness emerged out of matter. Again, if spirit alone is real and the world is merely an illusion, then the significance of the world which is the basis of human life and action is denied. Then what is the solution?

Sri Aurobindo sees the essence of reality in a supreme omnipresent being which transcends the manifested universe and our world, yet involves itself in the universe and all multiplicity. In his magnum opus *The Life Divine*, following the Advaita Vedantins SriAurobindo admits the *SAT-CIT-ANANDAMAY Brahman* as the only reality. But he points out that if everything is *Brahman (Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma)*, then matter also is *Brahman* and hence matter and the material world also is real. Matter may not be as real as Brahman, but matter cannot be unreal. On the one hand the Brahman is one, infinite, unchangeable that transcends the manifested universe and the world. On the other hand it is changeable, dynamic, moving manifesting itself in the form of the cosmic world and its beings. It is therefore both transcendent and immanent.

Now, Sri Aurobindo explains that since the Supreme Spirit or the Divine Reality which is of the nature of pure consciousness is all-pervading, it is already present within us as well as in the external material world. The aim of human life is to discover the divine and then to work for its manifestation in the entire material world. As a result of this there will be a radical transformation of our entire phenomenal life and a Divine Life characterized by truth, unity, peace and harmony would emerge upon earth. This would become possible through a gradual process of spiritual evolution of consciousness. What is evolution? Sri Aurobindo points out that the Supreme Spirit (*Saccidānanda*), which is essentially one, descended straight into the grossest and the densest matter, in order to realize its manyness. This descending process is called involution. The Spirit that remains involved in the inconscient matter again begins its slow but sure movement upwards, i.e. back to its source of origin in order to realize its original unity. This ascending process is called evolution. The first principle that evolves in this process is matter. From matter, evolves life, and from life, there is evolution of mind, i.e. at present there is appearance of the mental man. But Sri Aurobindo says that man who is capable of possessing higher consciousness would definitely take its leap into the next higher spiritual realm that is into the realm of Supermind. Since the process of evolution presupposes involution, evolution or the ascent of mental man into the level of Supermind would be possible only if Supermind or the Divine Reality itself involves or descends into the lower realm of mind, life and body. And for this the individual needs to attain perfection of his mind, life, body (the physical, the vital and the mental) and of his entire being. To attain such perfection of mind, life and body Sri Aurobindo proposes the practice of integral yoga. The practice of integral yoga would bring about triple transformation of the entire human nature and prepare the individual to act as the medium of the divine manifestation. The individual being would thus act as the key to the evolutionary process of the world. With the involution or descent of the Supermind into the entire being of man as well as into the phenomenal world, there would be a Supramental divine transformation of the earthly existence and a divine life of unity, peace and harmony would dawn upon earth. Nature would thus be transformed into Supernature and mental beings to Gnostic beings or men of knowledge. Thus Sri Aurobindo's philosophy represents a life affirming spiritual vision that interprets liberation not as renunciation of worldly existence, but as transformation of worldly life through the manifestation of divine consciousness.

Consciousness:

Sri Aurobindo regards the divine consciousness as a force or *cit śakti* which is inherent in Sat. At times Sri Aurobindo refers to it as *tapas*. According to him it has an active aspect and passive aspect. The active aspect is expressed in the creation of the world of multiplicity. The passive aspect is the great reservoir of Sakti which remains behind and is not affected by the activities on the surface.

Sri Aurobindo admits grades of consciousness. The consciousness that remains involved in matter is inconscience, consciousness that gradually evolves from matter is physical consciousness, vital consciousness, (related with our desires and impulses, emotions and feelings), mental consciousness, (is associated with thought, reasoning and imagination), psychic consciousness. The physical, vital and mental consciousness represents the lower level of consciousness where evolution has been able to reach. Beyond mind or mental consciousness there lie the higher levels of consciousness where evolution is going to take its next leap— which include higher mind, illumined mind, intuitive mind, overmind and supermind, existence, consciousness-force and bliss. Thus there is evolution of consciousness through various stages. And this is possible because consciousness was already involved in matter. Involution actually provides the conscious power that is required in order to actuate the movement into the higher states of consciousness. Moreover, when the principle of life evolves, life descends into matter, transforms it partially and thereby uplifts it. Again, when mind evolves, there is transformation in matter and life. Thus, each of the higher state in the process of evolution is involved in the lower and thus the lower can ascend to the higher. Unless life is potentially involved in matter, it cannot evolve out of matter. Similarly mind is involved in life and in mind lies Supermind and *Sacchidānanda*. This is called the process of ascent through descent or integration which distinguishes Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution from other mechanical theories of evolution which regards it as a process of ascent from the lower state to the higher state without maintaining any relation with the lower ones as they are crossed.

Since there are two realms of reality - on one hand there is the one, infinite, absolute reality and on the other hand there is the world of multiplicity, Sri Aurobindo says that there must be a link between these two realms. This link is the Supermind or the Supreme Truth Consciousness. The Supermind in itself is one having the consciousness of *Saccidānanda*, but at the same time it has multiplicity potentially contained in it. Thus it can link the two realms of reality by acting as the creative principle that forms the world of multiplicity, yet maintain the unity of the absolute reality. The Supermind thus acts as the creator.

Comparison of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy with Advaita Vedānta:

We find that like the Advaita Vedāntins, Sri Aurobindo also regards consciousness as the ultimate reality, but he differs fundamentally from the Advaita Vedāntins in his understanding of the nature of cons., the status of the world, the purpose of human life, and the goal of spiritual realization. While for the Advaita vadins cons. is pure, unchangeable, eternal, self-luminous, non-dual and the witness of all experiences, for Sri Aurobindo cons. is not only the witness but it is actually a force that is inherently dynamic, creative, and evolutionary. SA calls this force, a mother force inherent in *sat*/existence. It is purposive; it progressively unfolds itself through cosmic evolution, culminating in the manifestation of

the Supermind. It is a creative force that manifests as well as transforms the universe. Moreover, while the Advaitins regard liberation as the dissolution of ignorance and the realization of the unity of the individual soul with the Brahman, Sri Aurobindo considers liberation only an intermediate stage. His ultimate goal is the supramental transformation of human nature and the establishment of a divine life on earth. Thus, whereas Advaita is primarily **world-transcending**, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is **world-transforming**. Moreover, Sri Aurobindo does not emphasize merely upon individual liberation, but his ultimate aim is liberation of the entire mankind. After realizing one's unity with the Divine being, the individual's aim would be to help others too to realize the divine consciousness in their entire being and then bring down the divine light upon earth.

Mind, Body, Life:

Mind, life and body constitute the physical being of man. And in his philosophy Sri Aurobindo assigns significant importance to them. He admits that due to their limited consciousness, mind, life and body suffers from various limitations. But since the divine consciousness is involved in them, the mind, life and body can overcome their limitations. According to Sri Aurobindo it is through the individual's body, mind and life that the supreme truth consciousness would manifest itself in the entire being of the individual as well as in the phenomenal world. For this the individual needs to attain perfection of body, mind and life and undergo a divine transformation of his entire being. This transformation would be possible through the practice of integral yoga as proposed by Sri Aurobindo. Integral yoga would bring about a triple transformation of psychicisation, spiritualization and supramentalisation of the entire being of man.

In this regard we may note that Sri Aurobindo also admits two aspects of human nature. On the one hand in the external or the surface level there are mind, life and body which constitute our surface consciousness or the outer being. But behind this surface being lies the subtle or the subliminal mind, life and body that form the inner being. Similarly we have the surface soul or the 'desire soul' and as hidden from the surface soul lies the psychic being or the *caitya puruṣa* which represents the true soul in man. However above it lies the *jivātman* which is actually a spark or a portion of the Divine Being, and as such it transcends the individual life and presides over it.

According to Sri Aurobindo it is by virtue of the psychic entity that we exist as individuals. Unlike the other parts of our being which change and perish, this part of our being is immutable and imperishable. Unlike *jivātman*, this immanent principle supports the mind, life and body, and uses them as its instruments for realizing the Divine. While, *Jivātman* is beyond the process of evolution, the psychic being is within the evolutionary process. It helps to rekindle the Divine Spark present within and thus enlighten the whole of our being. And according to Sri Aurobindo the awakening of the psychic being or the true soul is the first step towards the attainment of a spiritual life which he refers to as psychicization.

As a result of the awakening of the psychic being one no longer identifies himself with his individual ego. The surface being becomes aware of the existence of the true self lying within us and of the transcendent self or the Supreme Reality that pervades the external world is also present within us. But that the individual self is actually identical with the Supreme Reality remains yet unrealized. Hence to

complete psychic transformation, it must be followed by spiritual transformation. In spiritual transformation the psychic being realizes itself to be the *jīvātman* or the spark of the divine being, the individual becomes aware of an infinite existence, consciousness and bliss within one's being. As a result there is ascent of mental man to the higher reaches of consciousness where he can have a vision of unity with the Divine. However to change this vision into realization of this unity, there must be the permanent ascent of the lower to the higher consciousness. And for this there must be the descent of the Supreme Truth Consciousness or the Supermind into the lower nature. As a result of this there would be supramental transformation of the entire being and existence of the individual. The presence of the supramental consciousness in matter, life and mind will entirely change the nature of our physical, vital and mental being as well as transform the entire terrestrial existence. Man would evolve into Gnostic beings and Nature into Supernature. Thus, the highest spiritual destiny of man, according to Sri Aurobindo, is to cooperate consciously with the creative force of evolution or with the Divine purpose that is immanently operative in the Universe. This triple transformation of the entire being of man would be possible through integral yoga. The significance of integral yoga lies here that it does not merely aim at the development of either the body or the mind; rather it aims at the total transformation of the mental, the vital and the physical.

Significance of Sri Aurobindo's concept of Body, Life and Mind:

We then find that Sri Aurobindo's philosophy presents a profoundly interconnected conception of mind, life and body. The significance of his philosophy lies precisely in his integral vision that the aim of spiritual evolution is not merely to escape from life, but to transform life; not merely to transcend the body but to transform the body; and not merely to develop the mind but to lead the mind beyond itself towards a higher consciousness.

The Advaitins hold that the body and the mind are not the ultimate reality; hence liberation means the realization of the individual self as pure consciousness and overcoming the ignorant identification of the Self with body and mind. However, for Sri Aurobindo body, life and mind are evolutionary manifestations of consciousness. They are not merely to be transcended; rather they are to be transformed and divinized.

Relevance:

Sri Aurobindo's integral philosophy is relevant to contemporary discussions of human nature, cons., education, psychology, spirituality and holistic development. While modern philosophy and psychology continue to debate regarding the relationship between mind and body, Sri Aurobindo offers a perspective that avoids both strict dualism and reductionist materialism. He does not regard the body and mind as completely separate substances, nor does he reduce consciousness to physical processes. Instead, body and mind are understood as different levels of the manifestation of consciousness.

Since Sri Aurobindo's philosophy emphasizes upon the integral development of body life and mind, it becomes very much relevant in the contemporary education system.

Sri Aurobindo's psychology offers a broader conception of human personality which is not merely limited to ordinary mental processes. Human beings are more than physical organisms. Mind and body should be understood integrally rather than as absolute opposites.

Finally, Sri Aurobindo offers a life affirming philosophy where the ultimate aim of human life is not to escape from the world but to transform human life and existence and establish a life pervaded by unity, peace and harmony on earth.