

**Educational Philosophy
of
Sri Aurobindo**

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Academy for New Education

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An Integral Education which could, with some variations, be adapted to all the nations of the world, must bring back the legitimate authority of the Spirit over a matter fully developed and utilised.

THE MOTHER

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Educational Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo wrote a series of articles on education in the *Karma Yogin* during 1909-10 under the title *A System of National Education* and *The National Value of Art*. He also wrote *A Preface to National Education* which appeared in the *Arya* in 1920 in two parts. His book, *The Synthesis of Yoga* in which we find extraordinary insights in regard to education, appeared serially in the *Arya* from August 1914 to January 1921 in four parts.

I

In "*A National System of Education*", Sri Aurobindo points out that the question is not between modernism and antiquity, but between an imported civilisation and the greater possibilities of the Indian mind and nature, not between the present and the past, but between the present and the future. He pointed out that "the living spirit of the

demand for national education no more requires a return to the astronomy and mathematics of Bhaskara or the forms of the system of Nalanda than the living spirit of Swadheshi, a return from railway and motor traction to the ancient chariot and the bullock-cart." He, therefore, spoke not of a return to the 5th century but an initiation of the centuries to come, not a reversion but a break forward away from a present artificial falsity to India's own greater innate potentialities, which are demanded by the soul of India.

The major question, he pointed out, is not merely what science we learn, but what we shall do with our science and how too, acquiring the scientific mind and recovering the habit of scientific discovery, we shall relate it to other powers of the human mind and scientific knowledge to other knowledge more intimate to other and not less light-giving and power-giving parts of our intelligence and nature. Again, he pointed out the question is not what language, Sanskrit or another, should be acquired by whatever method is most natural, efficient and stimulating to the mind, but the vital question is how we are to learn and make use of Sanskrit and the indigenous

languages so as to get the heart and intimate sense of our own culture and establish a vivid continuity between the still living power of our past and the yet uncreated power of our future, and how we are to learn and use English or any other foreign tongue so as to know helpfully the life, ideas and culture of other countries and establish our right relations with the world around us. He argued that the aim and principle of a true national education is not to ignore modern truth and knowledge, but to take our foundation on India's own being, own mind, and own spirit.

As against the idea that the modern European civilisation is a thing that we have to acquire and fit ourselves for, and so only can we live and prosper, and it is this that our education must do for us, he argued that the idea of national education challenges the sufficiency of that assumption. He pointed out that India would do better, taking over whatever new knowledge or just ideas Europe has to offer, to assimilate them to its own knowledge and culture, its own native temperament and spirit, mind and social genius and create therefrom the civilisation of the future.

According to Sri Aurobindo, there is within the universal mind and soul of humanity the mind and soul of the individual with its infinite variation, its commonness and its uniqueness and between them there stands an intermediate power, the mind of a nation, the soul of the people. In his concept of a national system of education, Sri Aurobindo aimed at taking account of all these three elements so that national education would not be a machine-made fabric, but a true building or a living evocation of the powers of the mind and spirit of the human being.

Considering that India has seen always in the human being a soul, a portion of the divinity enwrapped in the mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit, he concluded that the one central object of the national system of education should be the growth of the soul and its powers and possibilities as also the preservation, strengthening and enrichment of the nation-soul and the normative needs of its ascending movements. Not limited to these two, Sri Aurobindo put forth in its aim also the raising of both the individual soul and the national soul into the powers of the life and the ascending

mind and the soul of humanity. He added "at no time will it lose sight of man's highest object, the awakening and development of his spiritual being."

II

Sri Aurobindo speaks of three principles of teaching, and when implemented, they provide a sound basis of a system of natural organisation of the highest processes and the movements of which the human nature is capable. They also form the basis of the theory and practice of integral education, which has been propounded in detail in Sri Aurobindo's book, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and the Mother's book, *On Education*.

In brief, the three principles of teaching are as follows in Sri Aurobindo's own words:

"The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster, he is a helper and a guide. His business is to suggest and not to impose. ... The second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth. The idea of hammering the child into the shape desired by the parent or teacher is a barbarous and

ignorant superstition. It is he himself who must be induced to expand in accordance with his own nature. ... The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use. ... The third principle of education is to work from the near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be. ... A free and natural growth is the condition of genuine development. ...”

There are, according to Sri Aurobindo, three instruments of the teacher: instruction, example, and influence. The good teacher will seek to awaken much more than to instruct; he will aim at the growth of the faculties and the experiences by a natural process and free expansion. He will not impose his opinions on the passive acceptance of the receptive mind; he will throw in only what is productive and sure as a seed, which will grow under the benign fostering within. He will know that the example is more powerful than instruction. Actually, the example is not that of the outward acts but of the inner motivation of life and the inner states and inner activities. Finally, he will also acknowledge that influence is more important than example. For influence proceeds

from the power or contact of the teacher with his pupil, from the nearness of his soul to the soul of another, infusing into the pupil, even though in silence, all that which the teacher himself is or possesses. The good teacher is himself a constant student. He is a child leading children, and a light kindling other lights, a vessel and a channel.

Sri Aurobindo's concept of integral education finds its full relevance in the context of what Sri Aurobindo has called the Evolutionary Crisis, a crisis that occurs in a species at a time when some kind of mutation is imminent.

According to Sri Aurobindo, one favourable factor, which is likely to help contemporary humanity, is the contemporary dissatisfaction that has arisen with materialism, on the one hand, and on the other hand, with asceticism, which has been negating the meaning and purposefulness of the material world. After centuries of experiments, materialism is gradually giving way to the pressures of new discoveries, which require exploration of the psychical and spiritual domains. Similarly, centuries of experiments in the spiritual fields have shown that the neglect of material life and

neglect of collective welfare result in poverty or bankruptcy and even in economic and political slavery. As Sri Aurobindo pointed out:

“It is therefore of good augury that after many experiments and verbal solutions we should now find ourselves standing today in the presence of the two that have alone borne for long the most rigorous tests of experience, the two extremes. ... In Europe and in India, respectively, the negation of the materialist and the refusal of the ascetic have sought to assert themselves as the sole truth and to dominate the conception of Life. In India, if the result has been a great heaping up of the treasures of the Spirit, – or of some of them, – it has also been a great bankruptcy of Life; in Europe, the fullness of riches and the triumphant mastery of this world’s powers and possessions have progressed towards an equal bankruptcy in the things of the Spirit. ... Therefore the time grows ripe and the tendency of the world moves towards a new and comprehensive affirmation in thought and in inner and outer experience and to its corollary, a new and rich self-fulfilment in an integral human existence for the individual and for the race.”

The knowledge of the secrets of the process of integral education is largely contained in the Veda and Upanishads, and what we find missing there has been the special subject of study and experimentation in Sri Aurobindo. It is in the light of all this that we can speak today with great assurance of the concept and practice of integral education and of the synthesis of the ancient secrets of the reign of Spirit over mind, life and the body and the modern secrets of utilisation of the life in perfecting the instrumentality of the body, life and mind.

Integral education would not only aim at the integral development of personality, but it would also embrace all knowledge in its scope. It would pursue physical and psychical sciences, not merely to know the world and Nature in her processes and to use them for material human needs, but to know through them the Spirit in the world and the ways of the Spirit in its appearances. It would study ethics in order, not only to search for the good as the mind sees it, but also to perceive the supra-ethical Good. Similarly, it would pursue Art not merely to present images of the subjective and the objective world, but to see them with significant and creative vision that

goes behind their appearances and to reveal the supra-rational Truth and Beauty. It would encourage the study of humanities, not in order to foster a society as a background for a few luminous spiritual figures so that the many necessarily remain forever on the lower ranges of life, but to inspire the regeneration of the total life of the earth and to encourage voluntary optimism for that regeneration in spite of all previous failures. Finally, it would encourage unity of knowledge and harmony of knowledge, and it would strive to foster the spirit of universality and oneness.

An important characteristic of integral education is its insistence on simultaneous development of Knowledge, Will, Harmony, and Skill as also various parts of the being to the extent possible from the earliest stages of education. And since each individual child is unique in the composition of its qualities and characteristics, its capacities and propensities, integral education in its practice tends to become increasingly individualised. Again, for this very reason, the methods of education become increasingly dynamic, involving active participation of the child in its own growth.

III

An unprecedented kind of experiment in education was launched by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, when in 1943, a school came to be established at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry in South India. It was expanded into Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in due course, and the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on education have influenced greatly the innovative processes of education in the country, and they have also received wide attention from the world at large. Mention may be made of the Mother's small but great book on education as also to a series of '*Conversations*' and '*Questions and Answers*' which have been published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

In 1968, she founded Auroville a few miles from Pondicherry, as a '*Laboratory of the New Evolution*'. Auroville has conducted various experiments in education, inspired and initiated by the Mother and published two important volumes of Educational research under the titles *The Aim of Life* and *The Good Teacher and The Good Pupil* which have received countrywide attention in India.

IV

Principles and methods of education advocated by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have a profound bearing on psychic and spiritual education. These two domains bring into the picture all that is central to value-oriented education, and to higher and profounder elements of human psychology. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have advocated new methods that are free from those of dogmas, rituals, ceremonies, prescribed acts. Spirituality, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, is a vast domain of the inmost soul, of the immobile silence, of the higher objects of the higher psychological exploration. The justification for psychic and spiritual education rests upon three important considerations:

- (a) Education should provide to the individual a steady exploration of something that is inmost in the psychological complexity of human consciousness;
- (b) The most important human question of human life is to consider the aim of human life and the aim of one's own life and one's own position and role in the society; and

this question can best be answered only when the psychic and spiritual domains are explored and when one is enabled to develop psychic and spiritual faculties of knowledge;

- (c) The contemporary crisis of humanity has arisen because of the disbalancement between the material advancement on the one hand and inadequate spiritual progression, on the other. If, therefore, this crisis has to be met, development of psychic and spiritual consciousness should be fostered. Unfortunately, spiritual consciousness is often conceived as a denial of material life and concerns of collective life. In Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's view, however, there is no fundamental opposition between Matter and Spirit. True integrality, according to them, implies rejection of no element in human personality and no denial of anything that can contribute to the full flowering of faculties of personality.

Again, according to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, psychic and spiritual development cannot be effected without effecting high level development of the body, life and mind, and

that the perfection of the body, life and mind can be attained only when the powers of psychic and spiritual consciousness are bestowed upon the instruments of the body, life and mind.

At an important stage of experimentation, the Mother gave the message that while India has or rather had spiritual knowledge but neglected Matter, the West has knowledge of Matter but has neglected the Spirit, – as a consequence of which both India and the West are suffering, and the solution would be to develop integral education, which would restore the development of matter under the guidance and authority of the Spirit.

V

There is a distinction between psychic consciousness and spiritual consciousness, as there is a distinction between spiritual consciousness and supramental consciousness. As the Mother pointed out:

“...the psychic life is immortal life, endless time, limitless space, ever-progressive change, unbroken continuity in the universe of forms.

The spiritual consciousness, on the other hand, means to live the infinite and the eternal; to be projected beyond all creation, beyond time and space. To become conscious of your psychic being and to live a psychic life you must abolish all egoism; but to live a spiritual life, you must no longer have an ego."

As far as the supramental education is concerned, the Mother pointed out that:

"...the supramental education will result no longer in a progressive formation of human nature and an increasing development of its latent faculties, but in a transformation of the nature itself, a transfiguration of the being in its entirety, a new ascent of the species above and beyond man towards superman, leading in the end to the appearance of a divine race upon earth."

If these three aspects of higher education are to be conducted properly, one must take great care to ensure that methods of religion are not introduced. Religion implies normally the methods of belief or dogma, performance of rituals and ceremonies, and prescriptions of certain specific acts, which are considered to be religious as distinguished from profane.

VI

A constant insistence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother has been on detailed perfection of the human mind, life and body. We may, therefore, turn to the three domains of mental education, vital education, and physical education as expounded and experimented upon at Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry and subsequently at the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research at Auroville.

Mental Education

In regard to mental education, the processes and methods can best be determined by understanding the mind. Mind is concerned largely with the activities of understanding, and all understanding is a discovery of a centre around which the ideas or things in question are held together.

Mental education is a process of training the mind of students to arrive at such central conceptions around which the widest and most complex and subtle ideas can be assimilated and integrated.

It is again found that even these central conceptions point still to a beyond, to their own essential meaning, which can be glimpsed and conceived by the mind, but which cannot be held and possessed fully in experience by the mind. This point marks the climax of the mental development as also a clear sign of the limitations of the mind. Having reached there its office is to fall into contemplation of silence and to open to the higher realms of experience, to receive clearly and precisely the intuitions and inspirations from those higher realms, and to give creative expression to them.

To train the mind on these lines, there are five phases of the programme:

- Development of the power of concentration and attention;
- Development of the capacities of expansion, wideness, complexity and richness;
- Organisation of ideas round a central or a higher ideal or a supremely luminous idea that will serve as a guide in life;
- Thought control, rejection of undesirable thoughts so that one may, in the end, think only what one wants and when one wants;

- Development of mental silence, perfect calm and a more and more total receptivity to inspirations coming from the higher regions of the being.

Multiplicity of ideas, richness of ideas, totality of points of view – these should be made to grow by a developed power of observation and concentration and by a wideness of interest. Care should be taken to see that the central ideas are not imposed upon the growing mind – that would be the dogmatic method, which tends to atrophy the mind. The mind should grow towards central ideas which should come as a discovery of the mind made through rigorous exercise of the rational faculty.

Stress should fall not only on understanding but also on criticism and control of ideas; not only of comprehension, synthesis, creativity, judgement, imagination, memory and observation, but also on critical functions of comparison, reasoning, inference and conclusion. Both these aspects of human reason are essential to the completeness of the mental training.

One of the best methods is to create an atmosphere in which massive and powerful ideas are constantly thrown as a stimulation and

challenge impelling the students to arrive at them or strive to grasp and assimilate them.

Thinkers alone can produce thinkers; and unless teachers are constantly in the process of building up great thoughts and ideas, it is futile to expect a sound or vigorous mental education.

An atmosphere vibrant at once with ideation and silence, an atmosphere surcharged with synthetic thoughts and most integral aspirations and an atmosphere filled with the widest realisation and a harmonious unity – such an atmosphere is indispensable for perfect mental education.

A constant attempt should be made to present each topic to the student in a challenging way so as to stimulate him and create his interest in the topic. To find new and imaginative methods, to compile materials from various sources, to introduce new concepts and new interpretations in various subjects, to develop new subjects, and above all, to attend in detail to all the psychological faculties and their development in such a way that the mental education does not veil the soul – this, in brief, should be the endeavour and its spirit.

Vital Education

Vital education aims at training the life-force (that normally vibrates in emotions, desires and impulses) in three directions: to discover its real function and to replace its egoistic and ignorant tendency so as to become the master by willingness and capacity to serve higher principles of the psychological constitution; to subtilise and sublimate its sensitivity which expresses itself through sensuous and aesthetic activities; and to resolve and transcend the dualities and contradictions in the character constituted by the vital seekings, and to achieve the transformation of the character.

The usual methods of dealing with the vital have been in the past those of coercion, suppression, abstinence and asceticism. But these methods do not give lasting results. Besides, they only help in drying up the drive and dynamism of the life-force; and thus the collaboration of the life-force in self-fulfilment is eliminated.

The right training of the vital then is much more subtle and much more difficult, needing

endurance, endless persistence and an inflexible will. For what is to be aimed at is not the negation of life but the fulfilment of life by its transformation.

First, the powers of the senses have to be developed, subtilised and enriched. Next, there are inner and latent senses which are to be discovered and similarly developed. Third, the seekings of these senses have to be trained to reject grossness and coarseness and to enjoy the finer tastes and higher aesthetic experiences. Finally, there has to be a deeper and piercing observation of the desires, passions, ambitions, lusts, etc., their risings, revolts and contradictions, and an attempt by various methods to separate out in each movement the elements that contribute to the concord and harmony from those tending in the opposite direction, and to eliminate the latter from the very nature and fibre of our psychological constitution.

The effective methods of this last aspect are:

- To instil in the child, as soon as possible, the will towards progress and perfection;
- Rational arguments, sentiment and goodwill, or appeal to the sense of dignity and self-

respect according to the nature of the child in question;

- To insist on the idea that the will can be developed, and that no defeat should be taken as final;
- To demand from the will the maximum effort, for the will is strengthened by effort;
- Above all, the example of the educator shown constantly and sincerely.

But still the direction in which the effort has to be made can be known only by the training of the mind and by the opening of the secret knowledge that is within our psychic being. To develop therefore in the vital the habit to open to this light and to act in that light would be to place the vital in its proper place as a will-force executing the inner and higher knowledge.

Vital education is greatly aided by stress on different kinds of fine arts and crafts. Sri Aurobindo has written at length on the contribution that Art can make to the integral education in his important book, *The National Value of Art*. He has pointed out that the first and the lowest use of Art is purely aesthetic, the second is the intellectual and the third and the

highest is the spiritual. He has even stated that music, art and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make and keep its movements purified, deep and harmonious. He has added:

“These, therefore, are agents which cannot profitably be neglected by humanity on its onward march or degraded to the mere satisfaction of sensuous pleasure which will disintegrate rather than build the character. They are, when properly used, great educating, edifying and civilising forces.”

A great lesson in vital education is to develop the will of the individual and to encourage the exercise of the will in which what is valued most is not the result but application and doing one’s best.

Physical Education

On the subject of physical education, it must be mentioned that the physical is our base, and even the highest spiritual values are to be expressed through the life that is embodied here. *s'ariram ādyam khalu dharma-sādhanam*, says the old Sanskrit adage, – the body is the means of fulfilment of dharma, while dharma means

every ideal which we can propose to ourselves and the law of its working out and its action.

Of all the domains of education, physical is the one most completely governed by method, order, discipline and procedure. All education of the body must be rigorous, detailed and methodical.

The education of the body has three principal aspects: control and discipline of functions of the body; a total methodical and harmonious development of all the parts and movements of the body; rectification of defects and deformities, if there are any.

Physical education must be based upon knowledge of the human body, its structure and its functions. And the formation of the habits of the body must be in consonance with that knowledge.

The child should be taught right from the early stage the right positions, postures and movements.

A similar training should be with regard to the choice of food. The child should develop the taste that is simple and healthy, substantial and

appetising. He must avoid all that merely stuffs and causes heaviness; particularly, he must be taught to eat according to his hunger and not make food a means to satisfy his greed and gluttony.

The child should also be taught the taste for cleanliness and hygienic habits. It is important to impress upon the child that he is not more interesting by being ill, rather the contrary. Children should be taught that to be ill is a sign of failing and inferiority, not of virtue and sacrifice.

VII

A very important problem in respect of integral education arises from its insistence on proper synthesis between freedom and discipline. Since education is a creative process, and since compulsion and creativity cannot go together, freedom has to be a very important instrument of education. The ideal condition is obtained when discipline becomes the child of freedom and discipline is transformed into self-discipline.

We have to recognise that different children react to various activities of education

differently. There are children who feel a powerful attraction towards creative activities such as arts, music, dance, composition of poetry, drama, etc. They should, of course, be given freedom to pursue these valuable activities. But there are instances where children who do not have this natural inclination towards creative activities are also compelled to be engaged in these activities. This is entirely unacceptable.

We may also need to note that there are children who do not easily respond either to the activities of creativity or activities of production, but who are deeply reflective and to whom abstraction of thought and clarity and beauty of ideation constitute a fascinating project. We must recognise that a deep exercise in ideation and organisation of ideas is a very active engagement. It is a great activity of concentration.

At the same time, an exclusive pursuit of ideation without devoting any attention whatever to creative or productive activity may lead to a lopsided development of personality. The remedy is not to make things compulsory, but to counsel children, to motivate and suggest to

them how gradually various kinds of activities can be blended together for a harmonious development. But while counselling, the teacher must realise and appreciate that there are periods where psychologically even an exclusive development of ideative activity or productive activity or creative activity has its legitimate claims. To what degree this claim has to be satisfied and in what way this claim has to be subordinated to the other claims of development will demand from the teacher a very deep insight into the inner psychological workings of the formation of the personality and his sympathetic understanding of the psychological differences among various children.

It may also be noted that there are children who are deeply interested in activities of self-sacrifice or of purifying their base emotions, or of the worship of the noblest ideals of life. Sometimes they may show no interest in studies or in arts or in crafts and often teachers complain of their dullness or their lack of concentration in studies. But a good teacher should ask himself if the child in question is not inwardly engaged in what may be called activities of '*purification*'.

There could also be children like Yuddhishtira who would not claim that they have learnt a lesson unless they have succeeded in practising it in their daily life. These are indeed noble children and the teacher should be able to appreciate their nobility and encourage it so as to lead it to its perfection.

During the course of educational process, students often come up with some very fundamental questions but they often remain unanswered. Why, for example, should one learn mathematics? What does really history teach us? What is the relationship between language and mathematics? What is the aim of life? There should be freedom to raise these questions and also enough time and readiness to answer them, even though they may not be a part of any prescribed syllabus.

Another important point that should be noted is that a great care should be taken to get the development of the child in such a way that in spite of the growth of knowledge, the student does not lose freshness and sense of wonder and mystery. This indeed is the most difficult part of the work of the teacher.

VIII

If we make a deep study of the experiments in education guided and conducted under the inspiration of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, it may be said that there are three important features that come to the forefront and which may help us to define what may be called '*New Education*':

- Learning by practice;
- Search for meaning and unity of knowledge;
- Unending education and perpetual youth.

New education insists on the development of the mind, life and body, it aims at development of these instruments for the discovery of the inner psychic being; it proposes to utilise mental, vital, physical perfection as instruments of the perfect manifestation of the inner and higher realities. The effort is to make the body supple, strong, agile and beautiful; the vital is to be trained to become dynamic, disciplined, obedient and effective; the mind has to be cultivated to be intelligent, observant, concentrated, free, rich and complex. But at every stage the paramount importance is to be

given to the needs of the psychic and spiritual growth. As the Mother writes: "The will for the great discovery should be always there above you, above what you do and what you are, like a huge bird of light dominating all the movements of your being."

Kireet Joshi

Kireet Joshi (b.1931) studied philosophy and law at the Bombay University. He was selected for I.A.S. in 1955 but in 1956 he resigned in order to devote himself to the study and practice of the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother at Pondicherry. He taught Philosophy and Psychology at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry and participated in numerous educational experiments under the direct guidance of the Mother.

In 1976, Government of India invited him to be Educational Advisor in the Ministry of Education. In 1983, he was appointed Special Secretary to the Government of India, and held this post until 1988. He was Member-Secretary of Indian Council of Philosophical Research from 1981 to 1990. He was also Member-Secretary of Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan from 1987 to 1993. He was the Vice-Chairman of the UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg, from 1987 to 1989.

From 1999 to 2004, he was the Chairman of Auroville Foundation. From 2000 to 2006, he was Chairman of Indian Council of Philosophical Research. From 2006 to 2008, he was Editorial

Fellow of the Project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture (PHISPC).

He was also formally Educational Advisor to the Chief Minister of Gujarat (2008-2010). Currently he is at Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, engaged in the tasks of research and guidance in themes related to 'Science and Spirituality' and 'Spiritual Education'.

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