

The concept of integral yoga in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo in his various writings has put forward the basic concept of his integral Yoga. Though he has constantly mentioned that the integral Yoga is not anything brand new, it was inherent in our ancient culture. He has repeatedly mentioned Yoga as a means of self-fulfilment. In his several writings he has represented the different aspects integral Yoga. Also, he has explained how different aspects of Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Gnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Tantric Yoga can be integrated into integral Yoga. According to Sri Aurobindo all the integral aspects of these systems of Yoga is necessary for human perfection. In addition to this he has also elaborated on the qualities of the spiritual practitioner or Sadhak that is required to be on the path of Integral yoga. In this paper an attempt has been made to provide a comprehensive description of the methods, goals and outcomes of integral Yoga as Sri Aurobindo has put forward.

Key words: Integral, Yoga, Supermind, Overmind, The Absolute, Super-Conscious

Introduction:

Sri Aurobindo penned many outstanding writings about Yoga, some of the significant of them being *Letters on Yoga*, *Lights on Yoga*, *The synthesis of Yoga*, *Bases of Yoga* and *The riddle of this world*. The basic thought that he had put forward in his writings, from that we can easily conceptualize that and even Sri Aurobindo had himself admitted that the concept of integral Yoga is not a new one, this form of Yoga is embedded in our ancient Indian philosophy and spirituality. Incorporating the overall knowledge and procedure of ancient Indian yogic thoughts he had built on the model of integral Yoga. In his writing *Letters on Yoga*, he had

clearly stated that “I have never said that my Yoga was something brand new in all its elements. I have called it integral Yoga, and that means it takes up the essence and many processes of the old Yogas – its newness is in its aim, standpoint and the totality of its method”¹. Integral Yoga, though shaped out of ancient yogic procedures, has a novelty in terms of its goal, perspective and approach. Sri Aurobindo had clearly mentioned that his yogic procedure be referred as integral Yoga, because it bore the essence of the ancient yogic traditions and integrated the procedures into one.

But in his writing *Lights on Yoga*, he stated a different reason as to why his Yoga be termed as 'integral Yoga'. He detailed that the key word in integral Yoga is 'integral' or completeness, which can be explained as perfection of soul or divine completeness. Human beings come to this state of perfection when their minds ascend to super-conscious states.

Generally, people by and large think themselves as incomplete, but in actual incompleteness is not their destination. Their destination is completeness and Yoga is the appropriate means which takes a person to this most deserved completeness or perfect state of being. So, the means by which the soul reaches its perfection. Sri Aurobindo said in his own words, "This Yoga implies not only the realization of God, but an entire consecration and change of the inner and outer life till it fit to manifest a divine consciousness and become a part of divine work."ⁱⁱ Most rightly integral Yoga implies the transformation of inner and outer life, the sole intention of which is the realization of divine and in this vast cosmos to become a part of the divine consciousness. From this view it can be said that Sri Aurobindo referred integral Yoga as a way to realize the Absolute or God-consciousness. Human through performing the stages of integral Yoga can reach the super-conscious state and can directly realize the Absolute.

Sri Aurobindo in his well-known publication, *The Riddle of this World*, provided details about integral Yoga saying – "Our Yoga is a double movement of ascent and descent; one rises to higher and higher level of consciousness, but at the same time one brings down their power not only into mind and life, but in the end even into body. And highest of these levels, the one at which it aims is the Supermind."ⁱⁱⁱ It is evident that Sri Aurobindo said that integral Yoga is a two-way procedure, it indicates both the ascend and the descent. At the same time, it makes the person's exalted

consciousness to get reflected through his soul, mind and body and create in it. Ardently Sri Aurobindo have stated this clearly that it is through Yoga that one can ascend to the super-conscious state, and ascending to this state is the much-desired subject of integral Yoga. Although using the energy or power that is received from the super-conscious state to alter a person's spiritual capacity is the primary motive of integral Yoga.

Sri Aurobindo had conceptualized integral Yoga as both ascending and descending procedure, this creates a distinction of integral Yoga from ancient yogic procedure. In ancient yogic traditions, Yoga was only seen as a means for a person to attain nirvana or Mukti in which a person ascends to exalted states of consciousness. But in case of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy the first step towards fulfilment is that of ascend but the means is to descend. He stated, "Here the ascent is the first step, but it is a means for the descent."

Another aspect of Sri Aurobindo's integral Yoga is that it not only does fulfil individual goals, but it finally enriches the worldly consciousness also. An individual when ascending to the super conscious state reaches the divine life, he then fulfils the much-desired plan of the divine. From this perspective it can be said integral Yoga is independent from ancient yogic traditions. Besides this Sri Aurobindo said, "because a method has been preconized for achieving this purpose which is as total and integral as the aim set before it, viz., the total and integral change of the consciousness and nature, taking up old methods but only as part action and present aid to other that are distinctive. I have not found this method (as a whole) or anything like it professed or realised in the old Yogas."^{iv} Apparently, Sri Aurobindo had claimed that by pursuing integral Yoga, it brings about an overall change in a person's nature and consciousness. But in case of ancient yogic traditions, they couldn't indicate a procedure for a

person's overall change. Sri Aurobindo had noticed that the yogic procedures which are continuing from the ages of Vedas and Upanishad era can only take a person to over-mind state, but cannot take them to the super-conscious state where the person can get a continuous taste of the spiritual treasure, and so they get deprived from experiencing the divine. According to him many yogic procedures failed to strive a balance between a person's spiritual life and his daily life. The ancient yogic traditions had considered the truth about the spiritual aspect as the only means of livelihood, leaving the truth of the worldly feelings and sensation. So, he thinks even though the ancient yogic procedures are a necessity but it is not adequate to reach to divine life. The ancient yogic traditions/procedures need integration as well as addition of certain things.

We have seen that Sri Aurobindo, in this book *The synthesis of Yoga*, had tried to integrate the ancient yogic procedures. From this the name of this integration or synthesis is integral Yoga. According to Sri Aurobindo the synthesis of Hatha Yoga, Raja Yoga, Gnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Tantric Yoga is required in the path of integral Yoga, but by means of synthesis he did not indicate the accumulation of all the Yogas. Also, he did not direct that in the path of realization or sadhana the practice of all these Yogas must be a simultaneous or successive one. By 'synthesis', he wanted to mean that ignoring all the extramural aspects of Yogas and incorporating or accepting the internal inherent basic principles of all Yogas. The central principle is the general inherent truth that is present in all the different Yogas. The general truth embedded in each of these yogic procedures is the inherent basic or core principle, and with the help of this core principle it is possible to build contact with all other yogic procedures. Sri Aurobindo in his book *The Synthesis of Yoga* said, "the synthesis we propose cannot, then, be

arrived at either by combination in mass or by successive practice. It must, therefore, be affected by neglecting the forms and outsides of the yogic disciplines and seizing rather on some central principle common to all which will include and utilize in the right place and proportion in their particular principles."^v If the core principles of the ancient Yoga can be used at prescribed place and ratio then success will come in this path. Like a person practicing integral Yoga will receive the benefits related to Hatha Yoga and if continues to practice both there will be a purification of body. In this way practitioner practicing integral Hatha Yoga will lead to purification of body. But as in Bhakti Yoga and Gnana Yoga we ignore the body, Sri Aurobindo did not do it. Again, in Raja Yoga, he didn't accept the approach of annihilation of *chittvabritti*, instead the approach in Raja Yoga where one activates the kundalini to invoke the divine has found a place in Sri Aurobindo's integral Yoga. Again, he had synthesized the principles of Gnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga into integral Yoga. Even the theory of self-surrender in Tantric Yoga have found it's place in integral Yoga. In this context, Professor Sunil Ray said that in integral Yoga there is a reflection of tantric sadhana. Invoking the divine power in integral Yoga and shakti sadhana in tantric procedure is the same. For an integral yogi existence and shakti is one. Through existence, shakti takes an effective role. Again, through energy, existence manifests itself in a limitless way. In this way we can see that in Sri Aurobindo's integral Yoga there is surprisingly a synthesis of the ancient yogic procedures which means the core of these yogic procedures have been accepted. Pashupati Bhattacharya in his famous book, *Divyajibaner Sandhane* (Search for a Divine Life) has told that Sri Aurobindo's integral Yoga is a comprehensive system which includes physical exercise in Hatha Yoga, self-control in Raja Yoga, attitudes and ideas in

Gnana Yoga, surrender in Bhakti Yoga, working dispassionately as service in Karma Yoga, shakti-sadhana in tantric Yoga, and all of these are necessarily associated with it. Among these anyone cannot be neglected.

The Method of integral Yoga:

Sri Aurobindo had accepted that, for integral Yoga the entire being of the yogi needs transformation. The yogi or *sadhak* should orient his consciousness towards the divine or ultimate in such a way so that he can get fulfilment. The pressure of the latent conscious force within a yogi will itself bring fulfilment to him. The divine super-conscious force will then gradually descend upon the *sadhak*'s consciousness. So, in integral Yoga there is no need for external kriya or sadhana. In integral Yoga, the *Sadhak*, by independently amplifying his latent conscious force can manifest the divine form in reality. In integral Yoga *sadhak* uses his life energy which is an integration of the inherent divine power and the super-conscious force, and the divine grace also supports him. The path of integral Yoga is formed by two forces –

The conscious force which is inherent in the individual's body and associated with it is the aspiration to attain the divine life, and

Through this irrepressible aspiration the divine grace or super-conscious force that is gained.

Sri Aurobindo have said that, at an individual level *sadhak*'s effort can be divided into three kinds. The first one being aspiration. This aspiration is absolutely not about getting addicted to the worldly pleasures. The intense desire to reach or realize the divine is itself called as aspiration or spiritual desire. Nalinikanta Gupta is trying to explain Sri Aurobindo's thoughts has said that, aspiration should be sudden, incessant, continuous, needs single pointed desire of the mind, exploration of heart or emotions, willingness of the mind and consciousness of body and being able to see the world in an open, unbiased and

flexible way. So, for this reason a *sadhak* in the path of integral Yoga should have to keep incessantly the desire to reach the ultimate otherwise it will result in failure. In this context, Sri Aurobindo have said that a person in whom the spiritual desire has come alive, he has to be calm and still. He has to orient his mind away from worldly things and focus inward.

At an individual level the second effort of the yogi is rejection. By rejection he meant removing all the negative tamasic bad qualities and kriya of the body, mind and emotion and that of the *chittva*. Like in the body there are *tamashik*, laziness, suspiciousness, doubt, stupidity, pettiness etc, related and to emotion are desire, greed, selfishness, jealousy, hatred, pride etc. According to Sri Aurobindo all these negative qualities acts as hindrance in the path of spiritual seeking. He further added that rejecting these negative qualities from the mind is the relatively tough job. If we have to dispose off these negative qualities of the mind then we should eliminate the "I". He suggested that in the same way this "I" could be banished is by making this thought the centre of one's life 'mother loves me and I belong to mother.'

According to Sri Aurobindo within the individual's boundary the third effort is complete surrender. Complete surrender means to completely surrender oneself to the divine or ultimate. We have to offer our everything to the divine. To become absolutely God oriented. An individual's being or soul, life, heart, body, desire his energies and his eagerness must be completely directed to realize the ultimate so that he can be in the truest sense a vehicle for the divine. So, we have to completely surrender ourselves to the divine without cheating or creating gaps. This belief has to be firmly established in mind that I belong to the divine mother – all what I have is Her's. In this way if self-surrender can be done totally then only the "I" will be removed and this ego will get removed from the entire being.

Sri Aurobindo had also discussed about the qualities of spiritual seeking in context to the path of integral Yoga. Among them faith is one. Holding something as true, despite not having certain evidence is termed as faith. In case of integral Yoga, he said divine existence, divine grace, the correctness of spiritual practice, the path of spiritual practice and having full faith on guru, these are of utmost importance. With this type of faith in a yogi, his spiritual practice will reach its destination.

In addition to faith, Sri Aurobindo had added few more qualities that can make the path of integral Yoga smooth for a seeker, they are 'calmness', 'silence', 'peace' and 'equality'. According to Sri Aurobindo for a complete state of Yoga, a calm and undistracted mind is necessary. He stated that by calm and still mind he meant by having such a consciousness who can perceive that all the thoughts come to him, they can go here and there but he cannot feel them that he is thinking all those or being disturbed by them. A fickle or unstable mind can never be the basis of integral Yoga. For, Yoga the stability of mind is of utmost importance. Keeping the mind stable means keeping it thoughtless. When the mind becomes stable, then only complete tranquillity descends.

In Sri Aurobindo's concept of integral Yoga one of the important foundations is to bring balance and peace in all situations or conditions and in every aspect of the being. When the mind becomes still and motionless then only happiness generates. When this happiness becomes deeper and deeper, then a pleasantness spreads through the body, mind and being. That is called as peace or tranquillity. In this context Sri Aurobindo said that the first step is to experience a sense of peace around and top of your head. We have to establish a connection with this peace, and should have the ability to make this peace descend on us and it should encompass our mind, body and being. You are residing in the living presence of God – and the only

sign of his presence is this peace – if we can find this peace then everything will follow.

By equality Sri Aurobindo meant a *sadhak* will be indifferent of happiness or unhappiness. A *sadhak* will do everything, but he will not relate anything to himself personally and get attached to it. Using the sense of equality, he should view everything as an expression of the divine. According to him, apart from this, steadiness and meditation is a necessary part of integral Yoga. Steadiness means to focus one's consciousness at one place on one thing. Sri Aurobindo stated that in this Yoga, 'steadiness' is a necessity. You have to focus your consciousness in your heart and meditate about God-Mother, to pray for Her presence, to invite Her energies, and say Her to engulf everything – and plead so that Her energies transform your thoughts.

In the same way in integral Yoga importance is given to meditation. If Yoga has to get internalized within the individual's being then meditation is needed. Sri Aurobindo has said that for every individual there is a specific path of meditation. But if someone wants to transform their meditation into an active process then for that the individual must keep his desire on and through their meditation also, they must try to fulfil their desire. He also added that when meditation becomes deeper, then there is a pressure on the consciousness to go much deeper. Consequently, the outside awareness will fade away and a much deeper inner awareness will be activated. In meditation gradually this inner awareness will create divine experience.

Sri Aurobindo thought that like all other paths of Yoga the spiritual path of integral Yoga is also full of obstacles. This path is not only difficult but also there is a possibility to get misguided in the path. Because of this one needs a Guru in the path of Yoga. A Guru only can understand his disciple's thoughts and impart the necessary yogic knowledge. Only in the

path indicated by the guru can a seeker fulfil his longing. So, Sri Aurobindo very non-hesitantly said “The Guru is the Guide in the Yoga.”

The goal of Integral Yoga:

From the discussion up to now it can be understood that the goal of integral Yoga is to transform an individual into a super-conscious state. In his publication *Letters of Yoga*, he clearly specified the goals of integral Yoga saying “The supermind is the vast Truth– consciousness of which the ancient seers spoke; there have been glimpses of it till now, sometimes an indirect influence or pressure, but it has not been brought down into the consciousness of the earth and fixed there. To so bring down is the aim of our Yoga.”^{vi} It is needless to say that by saying “our Yoga”, Sri Aurobindo meant integral Yoga. Indian spiritual leaders or sages have spoken about this supermind or super-conscious state but that till now not has been established as a distinct worldly consciousness. Bringing and establishing the super-conscious state into the worldly consciousness is the goal of integral Yoga. Regarding the goal of integral Yoga, Sri Aurobindo had said in *Letters of Yoga* that “...the object of our Yoga is to establish direct contact with the divine Consciousness from above into all the centres.” Again, he also mentioned that, “this Yoga aims at the conscious union with the Divine in the Supermind and the transformation of nature.”^{vii} It is very clear from his statements that the goal of integral Yoga is to directly connect an individual to the divine consciousness and this connection is made possible through the super-conscious state. When an individual reaches the super-conscious state then there is a spiritual transformation within him and by this, gradually the whole personality undergoes a radical change. So, individual’s personality transformation and spiritual growth is another goal of integral Yoga.

From the above discussion, it is clear that Sri Aurobindo’s integral Yoga has three

basic goals – first, the ascent to or fulfilment of the Supermind or superconscious state. For this reason, integral Yoga is also called the Yoga of super-consciousness. Second, to bridge the gap between human and divine consciousness, and third, to bring about a spiritual transformation in the human personality. But he repeatedly asserted that an individual can best achieve the state of Supermind with the help of integral Yoga. However, in order to reach the state of Supermind, it is absolutely necessary to have the demise of the superconscious power or the divine blessing from the Absolute. Without this divine blessing or super-cosmic power, no sadhak can remain in the state of Supermind with his own attempt.

Conclusion:

Although the practise of Yoga has a long and dignified history in the Indian subcontinent, Sri Aurobindo’s observance of Yoga also occupies a significant place. Sri Aurobindo called his Yoga system Integral Yoga, incorporating the essences of all the Yogas already present in the Indian tradition. Integral Yoga is by no means a newer version of Yoga, separate from all the established Yoga systems; rather, he sought to combine all the basic principles of Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Tantrik Yoga, and so on. All these basic principles of Yoga are necessary for a sadhak for his spiritual transformation. Through the practice of Integral Yoga, a sadhak performing various traditional Yoga practices at different levels can rise to the superconscious state. Integral Yoga helps to manifest a divine consciousness in the abode of the human body. When a person practices Integral Yoga, he can easily reach the superconscious state of mind or Supermind. But Sri Aurobindo has clearly pointed out here that access to Supermind is not possible without divine blessings. Through the practice of Integral Yoga, a sadhak can at best reach the Overmind with his own effort. But to get

from the Overmind to the Supermind, the descent of the cosmic force or the divine blessing is urgently required. So, although Integral Yoga is usually seen to take us to the realm of the Overmind of Superconsciousness according to Aurobindo, in reality it only helps us to reach the state of Overmind. Nevertheless, integral yoga has a definite function for spiritual transformation, because the Overmind is the doorstep to the

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Supermind. Thus, the practice of integral Yoga, together with the divine blessing, can bring the supermental state into the abode of the human body, and man can become a gnostic being in whose mind a thought of universal oneness persists forever. Man then begins to live in and for the Divine itself, in and for the Divine in the collective, in and for the Divine in all beings.