

Rebirth in the Light of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Monism

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Sri Aurobindo was a Yogi who had formulated a unique path of Yoga which he had termed as the Integral Yoga. The aim of this Yoga was to attain the divine life. The practitioner of Integral Yoga does not merely crave his own salvation but strives to transform not only his own body, life and mind but also to bring about an integral transformation of the entire world.

In his book *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo has repeatedly spoken of the evolution of individual consciousness through rebirth. By evolution of consciousness, he has meant the transformation of consciousness. But why should the consciousness be evolved or transformed? What purpose would it serve? Where would it finally arrive following the course of evolution? One can answer following Sri Aurobindo's explanation that what lies concealed would be revealed or manifested through the evolution of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo has said that the Spirit keeps itself hidden through the various stages of mind, vital, etc. and thus involves itself in the material layer. This means that, according to Sri Aurobindo, it is the Spirit which lies hidden in matter through its different stages. The process of the descent of the Spirit into matter has been termed as 'involution' by Sri Aurobindo. Again, through the process of evolution, the Spirit gradually manifests itself through the various stages till it goes back to its real self. The purpose of evolution is to bring about an evolution of spiritual consciousness which lies beyond the sphere of mental consciousness. In this consciousness, we get to know, realize and unite with our inner self. For this progress of spiritual consciousness, Sri Aurobindo has spoken of both individual evolution and cosmic evolution. Evolution is not yet over, writes Sri Aurobindo. The next step of development would be to attain the supermanhood and this very attainment is the aim of evolution.

In Sri Aurobindo's theory of rebirth, one has to take into account — along with the concepts of involution and evolution — the theories of Ignorance and Maya in the light of Sri Aurobindo as these concepts are of immense relevance in his analysis of rebirth. This is so because the creation of this world has been explained by Sri Aurobindo through Maya and Ignorance. He points out that there is a deep link between rebirth and the world because this world is the only

sphere where a vast preparation for the progress of the individual being goes on through rebirth. So, the role played by these two forces in the creation of this world has to be analyzed first.

In the theory of involution we have seen how the Spirit gradually involves or descends down to the layers of the human mental and vital until it reaches the inconscient level of matter. Thus creation has been made possible. This means that the Spirit — which is complete in itself — in creation, has gradually become incomplete through the stages of consciousness (in man), subconscience (in animals and plants) and inconscience (in matter). This process of self-contraction of the Spirit has been called Avidya or ‘incomplete knowledge’ by Sri Aurobindo. Creation denotes the plunging down of the Spirit into ignorance; that is, through the process of self-limitation the Spirit gradually multiplies into the many from the One.

Sri Aurobindo has called ignorance a power as well. According to him, everywhere in this world, a play of the conscious-force is going on. But what is the source of this conscious-force? Sri Aurobindo says that it is the conscious-force of the Spirit itself through which the Spirit manifests in beings and in the world, or rather, through this force the Spirit has sunk in ignorance. Sri Aurobindo has called this conscious-force of the Spirit the ‘Maya-Shakti’. He has also divided Maya-Shakti into two categories: one is the Higher Maya or Divine Maya or *Para Prakriti* and the other is Lower Maya or Avidya, or *Apara Prakriti*, that is, ignorance.

The process of taking up a new physical body after death is known as ‘Rebirth’. Sri Aurobindo was a staunch believer in rebirth. It can be said that rebirth carries a special significance in Sri Aurobindo’s teachings as in the other schools of thought of Indian philosophy. Sri Aurobindo does accept the process of rebirth but there are certain original and independent insights to his theory of rebirth. “Who is it that takes birth?” While answering this question, Sri Aurobindo has presented before us a unique line of thinking. With the exception of Buddhism, all the schools of philosophical thought in India preach that it is only the eternal soul which takes birth again and again. Sri Aurobindo has accepted the classical Indian philosophical view about rebirth in general but has added more speciality to the concept. Such schools have used the term ‘Jivatman’ or individual soul while speaking of rebirth. But Sri Aurobindo has presented a somewhat different perspective. According to him, it is not the Jivatman which undergoes rebirth but its representative which he has called the ‘psychic being’. That is, instead of using the term ‘Jivatman’, Sri Aurobindo has used ‘psychic being’ in the case of rebirth. This psychic being, Sri Aurobindo reveals, is the evolving soul. Why has it been called ‘evolving’? This is because,

although the psychic being remains unnourished in its initial stage, it gradually gets enriched or nourished and evolves due to the manifold experiences it undergoes during the course of the several births it takes. Sri Aurobindo writes that at the time of taking a new birth, the psychic being selects all those experiences of its previous birth which it considers important and rejects all those which are of no use. By assimilating all the important experiences of its past life, it prepares itself to take up a new earthly life. But the psychic being requires a period of rest or intermission between two births for the aforementioned acceptance or rejection of experiences and their subsequent assimilation. And this period of rest is death.

Now a question arises: where does the psychic being go after death? Sri Aurobindo writes that the nature of man is constituted of various complex elements. Man is constituted of vital being and mental being and beyond these two beings there is the psychic being. He says that each and every being has a respective world of its own beyond this material world. For instance, vital beings have a vital world, mental beings have a mental world; similarly, the psychic being has a psychic world. But these are not the only worlds. After death the psychic being travels to such worlds and rests there during which period it acquires strength so that the process of transforming consciousness is brought about swiftly. During its lifetime on earth, the influence of the higher worlds fall on the individual beings as a result of which a relation is established between the individual being and the higher worlds, which, in turn leads to the ascertainment of the span of tenure that the individual being would have in each of these worlds.

Sri Aurobindo writes that rebirth is meaningless without karma. The theory of Karma and Rebirth is closely related to one another. However Sri Aurobindo has denied the claim that the individual being takes birth only to face the fruits of his actions. On the contrary, he points out that rebirth has a great purpose which is being fulfilled through the law of action. It means that the law of Karma is not merely a law of causation, where every cause (antecedent) has an effect (consequence). It is not limited to the law of causality. So, the law of Karma is not of prime importance here. What is of prime importance is the fact that through the law of Karma, the Spirit is fulfilling its grand purpose of bringing about a complete development of the individual being.

But when does the process of rebirth come to an end? From Sri Aurobindo's observation one can arrive at the conclusion that rebirth can be called the "unfoldment of consciousness", because in every birth the ascension of consciousness takes place and thus, through the gradual

progression of consciousness the individual being or Jiva goes back to its real self which means returning to that absolute consciousness that has been termed as the Supramental Consciousness by Sri Aurobindo. With the descent of this Supramental Consciousness upon earth, life would be transformed into a divine life. And man — through the process of rebirth — would eventually get transformed into a divine man which Sri Aurobindo has called the Gnostic Being. Once this divine life is attained, the cycle of rebirth would cease for good and man would be able to conquer death and achieve physical immortality and the eternal consciousness beyond life and death.

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