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## UNIT 3      SPIRITUAL THOUGHT IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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- To study the spiritual journey of Aurobindo.
- To see how Aurobindo's spiritual thought coexists with the needs of the country.
- To see how Aurobindo drew strength from the rich Indian tradition, while remaining open to other philosophies.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In order to focus on the spiritual thought in Indian philosophy, we study the spiritual adventure of Sri Aurobindo. Basing on Indian traditions, he has perfected the art of blending mysticism with practical needs of the nation.

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### 3.2 SRI AUROBINDO, THE SPIRITUAL ADVENTURER

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It was when India lay prostrate at the feet of the British that Sri Aurobindo was born. India had almost lost its ancient glory and attained the peace of the desert. The shadow of British rule in India was so thick and dark that people had almost been blinded of its past glory. A certain systematic impoverishment in various fields pervaded the country. Macaulay's efforts in establishing English in India could create a new class of intellectuals who lost their faith in India's traditional background and cultural heritage. It was to this class of people that Dr Krishna Dhan Ghose, the father of Sri Aurobindo, belonged. This class of people, no doubt, had a new activity which was crudely and confusedly imitative of the foreign culture. It was a crucial moment and an ordeal of perilous severity. What India then required was a strong political awakening, a cultural consciousness and a spiritual rebirth. In fact it required a common stream of creative inspiration, progressive contemplation and a peaceful and powerful reaction. Of this dire need for India Sri Aurobindo was one of the leading spirits (Venkataratnam1978).

Born to a highly anglicised and denationalised father, Sri Aurobindo had become one among the great patriots of India. He got the seeds of this feeling from the very letters of his father when he stayed and was educated in England. At the same time he sucked the Western culture to its core. Though Sri Aurobindo was essentially a seer, he was a great mystic poet. He shed light and warmth on his age, revitalised the spiritual soil of his land, revealed unknown horizons of Yoga and created new hope in bridging the gulf between the East and the West. When he defined India's decline as the ebb-movement of a creative spirit which can only be understood by seeing it in the full tide of its greatness he had a unique type of patriotism. He further explained India's decline as a momentary helplessness which can be overcome by an original dealing with modern problems in the light of Indian spirit and the endeavour to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritual society. To know him fully well it is not enough to read his works or to study the system of his Yoga; one has to dig deep into India's ancient lore-Upanishads and Gita—to practise the system of his Yoga and to drown deep in his inexhaustible mystic layers of thought and poetry. The whole aroma of Upanishads and Gita, is infused into what Sri Aurobindo said and did (Venkataratnam1978). The sharp razor-edged road to spirituality appeared widened and smoothed in his Yogic-Sadhana and man had become elated in admiring him. He who is unsurpassed as a mystic poet, as a scholar of ancient languages, both Indian and European, "as the propounder of Integral Yoga, as a prophet of Life Divine, and as an exponent of a new progress for humanity on the basis of Indian tradition, is really a superman!" (Venkataratnam1978).

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### **3.3 POWER OVER POETRY**

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According to Sri Aurobindo, poetry comes by inspiration but not by reading. Everything he wrote came from his Yogic experience, knowledge and inspiration. His greater power over poetry and perfect expression was from the heightening of his consciousness. It was Yoga that had developed his poetic style by the development of consciousness, fineness and accuracy of thought and vision, increasing inspiration and an increasing intuitive discrimination of right thought, word-form, just image and figure. The poetic word is a vehicle of the spirit and the chosen medium of the soul's self-expression. The deeper layers of intense personal experience can never be explained unless there is the mere suggestiveness of words and hence 'some kind of figure or symbol more than a direct language.' "Poetry should be half as a prayer from below, half as a whisper from above."

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### **3.4 PERMEATED BY THE SPIRITUAL**

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If Sri Aurobindo had been nothing more than a mere Indian mystic poet in English, a great patriot and prophet he would still be remembered as one of the world's immortals. But he was something more. Whatever he touched—politics, literature, education—was permeated with his highly spiritual outlook. To omit spirituality from Sri Aurobindo's life and thought would be to miss the very essence of his being. He knew that spirituality was not something to be attained by mere intellect. He saw that the world is almost at the end of the material swing. It is getting exhausted and fatigued with its own material exertions and with tears in eyes, despair writ large on her face! It is now looking up to the East for solace and peace. Tagore saw that Sri Aurobindo had been seeking for the soul and had gained it and through this long process of realisation had accumulated within him a silent power of inspiration. Early in life, significantly enough, he had a

dream in which a mass of darkness came rapidly towards him, encircled him, entered into him and repeated the same experience while in England. But it was dispelled only when he returned to India.

This notable spiritual experience of infinite calm descending upon him had the climax when he stayed in Alipore Jail and this historic experience leads him to Pondicherry, a centre and sanctuary from which radiated the new gospel of Integral Yoga and evolved a new life and light. He lived here mostly in the inner world, probing into its innumerable mysteries, taking measure of the depths and heights of consciousness. The inner promptings and the decisive urges of his heart were always there as revealed in his early mystic experiences and ultimately they drove him to the exclusive domain of the spirit (Venkataratnam1978). His life in Pondicherry represented one continuous, great and epic struggle against all the retrograde forces of life. It was the result of that strenuous struggle, that Sri Aurobindo evolved his philosophy of the Life Divine, discovered the unique path of Integral Yoga. This laid the foundation for human life on a higher plane – the supramental plane – which is at once subtler, purer, nobler and intrinsically harmonious and evolutionary.

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### **3.5 THE LILA OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

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It is said that life is a mighty stream of intangible force pushing forward and upward, ever evolving, ever organising matter for its own purpose, and ever making its way through the encircling inert mass in which it lies involved. Sri Aurobindo felt that a stage in the evolutionary movement had been reached when man himself has to launch on the adventure of contributing to the process by his own efforts. Hence he has an irrepressible aspiration to be master of himself, a deepening of his self-consciousness, an ability to meditate on himself and an understanding of the laws of his own evolution. Consequently his intense search for Life Divine led him to the discovery—the aspiration of man to ascend to Life Divine and the downward descent of the Supermind to lift the spirit of man to the divine level. “He sees the cosmic drama of involution and evolution, the Lila of God descending into clay and clay aspiring to godhead; and the mystery of world-existence is a mystery no more”. The supramental consciousness will enable the evolved man to live simultaneously in the transcendent and immanent dimensions of existence (Ghose 1949).

What then is this cult of the new world he promised? Is man to continue to be a prey to the limitations of unavoidable death, unrealizable desire and inflicting incapacity even in this new world? We can aspire an optimistic approach of this great seer to answer the questions. For the heavy task he had undertaken the never ending sources of energy for him are the immortal expressions of the Upanishads and the Gita. He promised a new world surely inhabited by a new race of man. This new man will have ‘a golden body’ or the body beautiful, strong and healthy (Venkataratnam1978). His emotions will well up, not from the muddy unconscious or subconscious, but from the depths of the pure spirit. His arts and crafts, his music and song will be an expression of spiritual realities. His sensual and intellectual faculties will be in an integral subservience to the spiritual, the home of Truth, Beauty, Power and Bliss.

From such an experience, Aurobindo was able to support and nourish himself from the rich spiritual resources of India's religious experience and philosophy. Let us see how history has been preparing him for such an adventure.

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### **3.6 SPIRITUAL THOUGHT AND INDIAN HISTORY**

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From 1910 onwards the emphasis of Sri Aurobindo's life changed from an outer political quest to the inner spiritual quest which is a significantly more difficult undertaking, because whereas politics is on the surface and can be easily described, the inner spiritual quest does not lend itself as readily to verbalization (Singh 2008).

Right from 1893 when Sri Aurobindo returned from England, along with his political interests he began having a series of spiritual experiences. On his first contact with Indian soil at Apollo Bunder in Bombay after 14 years abroad he had an experience of what he described as a vast calm which descended on him and remained with him for a long time. Then, after he had joined service in Baroda, in 1894 there was a near accident to the carriage in which he was travelling, and on that occasion also he seemed to feel that there was some sort of benign intervention beyond intellectual explanation; he felt he was under some kind of higher protection. In 1901 when he visited Kashmir along with Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad and went to the ancient Sankaracharya Temple in the city of Srinagar, he had another experience of what he called the vacant infinite, and he also wrote a poem about this. From 1906 onwards, he was initiated into into several meditational techniques including Pranayama.

This resulted in a series of tremendously powerful experiences which surprised not only Sri Aurobindo but also his yoga master (Singh 2008). It is clear from reading the description of what happened that Sri Aurobindo had very strong sanskaras, as it were, a very strong background and predilection for spiritual experience, and it required only a touch for the flame to burst forth into tangible experience.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 led to a tremendous upsurge of political aspirations in India, and in 1907 at Surat the Congress party split. The Moderates continued the meeting, while the Extremists had a separate meeting under the Chairmanship of Sri Aurobindo. Next year there was the famous Alipore Bomb Conspiracy Case, and on the 2nd May 1908, Sri Aurobindo was arrested and sent to the Alipore jail. The case itself is fascinating. This is a most enthralling story - high drama with 42 accused, 4,000 documents, 422 witnesses, the approver murdered in jail - all sorts of peculiar things happened. But the point of importance for our present purpose is that this one year in jail had a very significant impact upon Sri Aurobindo's inner spiritual development.

He had been interested in religion, he had been interested in yoga, but so far his predominant interest was the political freedom of the country, the awakening of the masses to a realization of the glory that could be India, the evocation of Bhawani Bharati, the description of India as the Mother and of nationalism as a yajna. When he was sent into jail it was a sort of enforced rest. During the year he remained in the cell in the Alipore Jail he had a number of decisive experiences. Even in the middle of such pain he looked around seeing Krishna in everything.

He shares his experience: "I looked at the jail that secluded me from men, and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned - no it was Vasudeva who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell, but it was not the tree, I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door, and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given to me for a couch I felt the arm of Sri Krishna around me the arms of my Friend and Lover" (cited in Singh 2008).

In addition, he has recorded that for fifteen days continuously when he was in jail he heard the voice of Swami Vivekananda speaking to him on certain aspects of Yoga and the supramental. The result of all this was that in the year that he was in jail Sri Aurobindo was transformed. He was finally released after being acquitted, and it was again a dramatic thing how his lawyer C.R. Das gave up every other work in order to defend him and how ultimately in the final peroration, he said: "My appeal to you is this, that long after the controversy will be hushed in silence, long after this turmoil and agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will have echoed and re-echoed, not only in India but across distant seas and lands. Therefore I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this court, but before the bar of the High Court of history" (Singh 2008).

After his release, although for another year or two Aurobindo did continue to take an active part in politics, he started the Karmayogin and began writing regularly in it but the emphasis changed. I think he realised that his political role was over and in 'An open letter to my countrymen', published in 1909 he wrote, "All great movements wait for their God-sent leader, the willing channel of His force, and only when he comes move forward triumphantly to their fulfilment. Therefore the nationalist party, custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come." He wrote this a full decade before Gandhiji emerged on the scene, but I think he realised that he had done his bit for the awakening of the nation and could now turn to the deeper things which really interested him. Soon after that, in 1910 he abruptly left for Chandernagore in response to what he called an Adesh, an over-riding divine command, and after a short while there he moved on to Pondicherry (Singh 2008).

For forty years he was in Pondicherry. His interest in Indian politics continued right up to the end, and you will recall his historic message on the day of Independence which, by a very strange coincidence, was his birthday also - the 15th of August - in which he pointed out how the great movements that he had envisaged, including the movement for India's freedom, had succeeded. In these forty years he wrote on a large variety of subjects, particularly philosophy. His work were published in thirty volumes in the centenary edition, and they are unique as a corpus of thinking and writing on almost every subject which concerns human development. The facility with which he wielded his pen, the tremendous depth and range of his thought, is really quite staggering. According to Karan Singh (Singh 2008) his best work is his Essays on the Gita, where you find the full luminosity of his spirit. The Gita itself is a tremendous document, but when you look at it through the vision of Sri Aurobindo the whole thing comes alive and vibrant as if it is being explained by Sri Krishna himself.

Thus in Aurobindo we see someone who has the highest mystical experience by involving himself in the politics of his day. This has enabled him to have a renewed understanding of Indian thought and philosophy.

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### 3.7 'WHO?' - HIS POEM

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So from his forty years of intense spiritual experience and engagement with Indian thought (philosophy) we can trace Aurobindo's own spiritual journey. In a fine poem called "Who", Aurobindo has expressed more dramatically, with more immediacy than in his longer and more complex words, his vision of the Divine which is very important for an understanding of his philosophy and spiritual thought.

In the blue of the sky, in the green of the forest;  
Whose is the hand that has painted the glow?  
When the winds were asleep in the womb of the ether,  
Who was it roused them and bade them to blow?

He is lost in the heart, in the cavern of Nature,  
He is found in the brain where He builds up the thought:  
In the pattern and bloom of the flowers He is woven,  
In the luminous net of the stars He is caught.

In the strength of a man, in the beauty of woman,  
In the laugh of a boy, in the blush of a girl;  
The hand that sent Jupiter spinning through heaven,  
Spends all its cunning to fashion a curl.

These are His works and His veils and His shadows;  
But where is He then? by what name is He known?  
Is He Brahma or Vishnu? a man or a woman?  
Bodied or bodiless? twin or alone?

We have love for a boy who is dark and resplendent,  
A woman is lord of us, naked and fierce.  
We have seen Him a-muse on the snow of the mountains,  
We have watched Him at work in the heart of the spheres.

We will tell the whole world of His ways and His cunning  
He has rapture of torture and passion and pain:  
He delights in our sorrow and drives us to weeping,  
Then lures with His joy and His beauty again.

All music is only the sound of His laughter,  
All beauty the smile of His passionate bliss;  
Our lives are His heart-beats, our rapture the bridal  
Of Radha and Krishna, our love is their kiss.

He is strength that is loud in the blare of the trumpets,  
And He rides in the car and He strikes in the spears;  
He slays without stint and is full of compassion;  
He wars for the world and its ultimate years.

In the sweep of the worlds, in the surge of the ages,  
Ineffable, mighty, majestic and pure,  
Beyond the List pinnacle seized by the thinker  
He is throned in His seats that for ever endure.

The Master of man and his infinite Lover,  
He is close to our hearts, had we vision to see,  
We are blind with our pride and the pomp of our passions,  
We are bound in our thoughts where we hold ourselves free.

It is He in the sun who is ageless and deathless,  
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown;  
When darkness was blind and engulfed within darkness,  
He was seated within it immense and alone.

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### **3.8 THE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS**

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This poem beautifully expresses the basic feature of Sri Aurobindo's thought that he has derived from Indian philosophy. The first point is that he accepted the primacy of the supreme, all-pervading reality-Vedantic concept of the spirit pervading not only the manifested cosmos but also the unmanifested cosmos and that of the Gita, even transcending both in the concept of the Purushottama who is both the manifested cosmos and the unmanifested cosmos and something beyond. This basic reality Sri Aurobindo accepted.

From there we go to the second point and that is cosmogenesis - the creation (Singh 2008). How does all this come into being at all? Of course, this is essentially something impossible to conceive in verbal terms. Today when we study the cosmos and realize the way in which billions of galaxies spring into being and disappear the mind finds it impossible to comprehend. But the basic point that Sri Aurobindo makes is that this all-pervasive reality plunges into the opposite pole that is the very densest and darkest matter.

There is a process of involution whereby this supreme reality by descending stages - the Brahmanda, the supermind, the over-mind, mind with life and matter - ultimately plunges into the opposite pole, the most inconscient, the deepest and the densest matter. That is the process of creation. Why that happens is a question which I do not think can be answered. Some people say it is *lila*, some people say it is in the very nature of the cosmos. But whatever it is the creation must be in some manner a reality otherwise we will not be there at all.

After the involution, after the downward spiral, the upward spiral begins, and here Sri Aurobindo has in very great detail developed the whole concept of spiritual evolution. If his political thought can be defined as spiritual nationalism, his philosophical thought can be defined as

spiritual evolution. He points out how from the densest matter, from mineral life, life gradually begins to develop. This is now a well-known scientific fact. From the densest matter the early forms of life - mineral, then vegetable, then animal - and after billions of years finally the stage comes when man appears on the scene - anthropogenesis. In Sri Aurobindo's view man is not a being who suddenly descends upon the earth; man is a being who has evolved out of this very matter, and with the coming of man a new dimension is added to the history of evolution. For the first time a being has come into existence who is conscious of being - in other words, who can look inwards and understand himself (Singh 2008).

The next step in evolution is going to be a quantum leap in consciousness. Before man there was the animal - the ape, let us say. Now the ape developed into man - this is something we accept. But Sri Aurobindo puts forward a further point that now man is going to develop into superman, and he holds that the difference between the conscious level of the animal and man is much less than the level of man and superman. Take for example, a dog. Dogs are very intelligent creatures. Let us say you have a dog, howsoever intelligent the dog may be it would not be able to understand what you are saying because while it is intelligent at its own level; it has limitations, it cannot understand abstract concepts, it cannot understand the sort of things that we are talking about. Similarly Sri Aurobindo says that with the advent of superman, instead of the imperfect human reasoning that we now have - we do not know what is happening on the other side of that wall, we have got to reason, we have got to consider, all sorts of conflicting thoughts vie with each other in our mind, we are in an area of indeterminates - at the supramental level there would be direct cognition.

Hints of this are already found in intuition, for example. It has happened to many people that suddenly you get a feeling that something is going to happen somewhere, and you find that it is in fact happening. Now that is just a small spark of the intuitive faculty, and Sri Aurobindo says that the supramental level is a level of direct cognition, of the direct wording of the intuitive faculty rather than the imperfect, complicated and confused consciousness of present man (Singh 2008).

So from the mental you move to the supramental, from man you move to superman, and this whole process, according to him, is the true destiny of mankind. The destiny of mankind is to evolve but of course not everybody will evolve at the same time. All the rocks did not become fish, and all the fish did not become animals, and all the animals did not become men. Some people will evolve, they will be the pathfinders, as it were, into the new consciousness. Thus the theory of spiritual evolution, according to Sri Aurobindo, does not end with man. Above us there are other spheres, and he has analyzed them in great detail - the overmind and the supermind and perhaps spheres beyond. That being so, the question arises as to how this supramental sphere is to be achieved, how does man rise to it? Now in politics, Sri Aurobindo did not only put forward an ideal but also a method for its attainment. Similarly in his philosophical thought he did not only rest at describing the supramental possibility, he also developed an extremely interesting process whereby this supramental can be achieved, which he called the Integral Yoga.

There are three main points which need to be made, there are three great movements in this yoga. The first is a surrender to the divine power that is within us and around us - a surrender not only mental, not only psychological but a total surrender of all parts of our being. It has not been well

established that the conscious mind is only a very small part of human consciousness, there are vast depths below and above the waking mind. Therefore the surrender to be effective has got to be an integral surrender, in all parts of one's mind, one's being, one's emotions (Singh 2008).

Then follows the ascent to the supramental sphere. Through the divine grace, aided by certain yogic practices, there is the ascent of consciousness to the supramental sphere. There the power and the light and the glory of the supramental is absorbed. Then comes the third movement, and this is a very important part of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy which must be clearly understood. The third movement is the return to terrestrial consciousness along with the light and power of the supramental. We have had in our culture many different expressions of people rising into higher spheres of consciousness. The difference with Sri Aurobindo is there is no question of going out in a wave of bliss leaving behind a world as wretched as it was before. That power has got to be brought to bear upon this terrestrial consciousness through this triple movement - the movement of surrender, the movement of rising to the supramental sphere and absorbing its light and power and the third movement of returning to the terrestrial consciousness.

These are the three movements of the integral yoga. It is also integral because it integrates the four major strands of yoga; *Bhaktiyoga*, the devotional input; *Karmayoga*, constant and ceaseless action divine-inspired and divine-dedicated; *Jnanayoga*, the aspect of discrimination, and certain aspects of the *Rajyoga*, the psychophysical dimension. It is integral in yet another way because it does not compartmentalize life. There is no rule to practise integral yoga for a few minutes or for an hour or so a day and then for the remaining 23 hours forget about the path. It is supposed to comprehend and inform the total activity of the human being whether it is work or art or literature or music or whatever it is something which must integrate one's entire being. Sri Aurobindo writes a great deal of the difficulties in the way of the yoga, the forces which help and the hostile forces (Singh 2008).

The important point to remember in all this is that his goal is not individual salvation, his goal is not even racial salvation, his goal is nothing less than a terrestrial transformation itself. This very world is to be transformed into a supramentalized world.

As Karan Singh says Sri Aurobindo was a "born revolutionary" (Singh 2008). Not only did he revolt against the Moderate Congress leadership, not only did he revolt against the British rule, he ultimately revolted against the very texture of human consciousness itself, he revolted against the fact that man should be stuck at an intermediate level and should not be able to go ahead on the evolutionary path.

Our author finally came to the conclusion that it was only when consciousness itself was transmuted that it would be possible to solve the problems of the world. He writes about this: "It is impossible for a man to understand the ultimate secret of this creation unless one enters the Supermind. Nor can the problem of the world be solved unless and until this is done. It is only there on the supramental level that ignorance about the duality of matter and spirit can be dispelled." Ultimately, according to Sri Aurobindo, the final reconciliation between matter and spirit, between thinking and feeling, between being and doing, between two halves of the human psyche the kinetic and the quietistic, can only be attained at the supramental level, and it is only then that the destiny of the human race will be fulfilled and man will grow to his full stature.

### Check Your Progress I

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Indian tradition view Reality?

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2) Explain influences of Indian Scriptures on Aurobindo.

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### 3.9 LET US SUM UP

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We have broadly outlined Aurobindo's approach to the spiritual quest, and it is quite astounding the masterly manner in which he evolved spiritually, basing on Indian tradition. In the course of forty years he left for the world a corpus of literature and experience which are unique and unparalleled in modern times.

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### 3.10 KEY WORDS

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**Lila:** *Lila* or *Leela* is a concept within Hinduism literally meaning "pastime", "sport" or "play". It is common to both non-dualistic and dualistic philosophical schools, but has a markedly different significance in each. Within non-dualism, Lila is a way of describing all reality, including the cosmos, as the outcome of creative play by the divine absolute (Brahman). In the dualistic schools of Vaishnavism, Lila more simply refers to the activities of God and his devotees, as distinct from the common activities of karma.

**Sanskaras:** In Hinduism *sanskaras* (singular: *sanskara*) (Sanskrit for impression; under the impulse of previous impressions) are the imprints left on the subconscious mind by experience in this or previous lives, which then color all of life, one's nature, responses, states of mind, etc.

**Supermind:** Supermind in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy refers to the infinite unitary truth-consciousness or truth-idea simultaneously transcendent and immanent to planes of matter, life, and mind.

**Yajna:** Hindu sacrifice with particular purpose: a sacrifice, often a substantial one, offered to a Hindu deity or deities.

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