
UNIT 2 SYNTHESIS OF SPIRIT AND MATTER

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous section we have seen that Aurobindo maintains a synthetic approach to life and reality. There is a basic unity between the finite and the Infinite, Matter and Spirit. Here in this unit our objective is a detailed analysis of the unity of Matter and Spirit. How the two constitute a synthetic whole.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Aurobindo synthesizes both matter and spirit by transcending the partial views of both the materialist and the idealist in his integral Advaita. A pre-requisite for appreciating the reality of both Spirit and Matter is a correct understanding of the relation between the two. This takes us to the understanding of Aurobindo's integral approach to reality. Aurobindo, in the light of his basic presuppositions, which we have seen in unit one of this block, as well as in the light of the three great Vedantic schools of thought, develops his metaphysics. For Aurobindo, the "revolt of Spirit against Matter" has dominated human thought for two thousand years. Problems stem from "an unsolved discord," from "an undiscovered agreement or unity". Therefore, he attempted to formulate a "larger and complete affirmation" of both Matter and Spirit. This acceptance is demanded by the Upanishadic teaching that "Matter is also Brahman." The central problem, therefore, is the problem of harmony. In fact it is his synthetic conception of Matter and Spirit as the two poles of the single Reality that made possible his integral vision. Our immediate task is to develop this synthetic vision of Matter and Spirit.

2.2 DIPOLAR NATURE OF THE REALITY

Aurobindo's realism with regard to the nature of reality would further mean the acceptance of Reality having two poles: Matter and Spirit. In the classical Western (eg. Aristotelian) philosophy the basic substratum of every existence is named substance. According to Aurobindo, in Vedantic thought this substance has two poles. This calls to mind Whitehead's description of actual entity having two poles. In his *Life Divine* Aurobindo writes: "[...] if Matter is one end, Spirit is the other. The two are one: Spirit is the soul and reality of that which we sense as Matter; Matter is a form and body of that which we realise as Spirit ... Therefore it is a purely conceptive – a spiritually, not a mentally conceptive difference ending in a practical distinction,

which creates the series descending from Spirit through Mind to Matter and ascending again from Matter through Mind to Spirit.” (LD 241).

We have seen above that the fundamental problem for Aurobindo was the problem of unity. Thus, having realized its importance, Aurobindo built the whole edifice of his metaphysics on the sublime truth that both Matter and Spirit are real and are essential part of Reality. He established the oneness of Reality through a holistic vision of Matter and Spirit. Any sort of reductionism is shortsighted. In his search, however, the guiding light is the ancient scriptures, especially the Upanishads. In *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad it is stated: “As all spokes are contained in the axle and in the felly of a wheel, thus also all beings and gods, all worlds and organs are contained in that Self” (2.5.15). Moreover, *Chandogya* Upanishad states, “it is that is below and is above, that is to the West and to the East, that is to the South and to the North. Brahman, indeed, is this whole universe” (7.25.2). A monistic idealism is very clear in it.

How does Aurobindo clarify that Matter and Spirit are two poles of the same Reality? For Aurobindo, Matter expresses itself as the formulation of some unknown Force. Moreover, a second move in the same direction would clarify that life itself is “an obscure energy of sensibility imprisoned in its material formulation.” In the light of this integral knowledge, however, Matter itself is found to be a result of something other than itself, of an Energy, which cannot be something self-existent and acting in the Void. Matter can turn out and, when deeply scrutinised, it is likely to turn out to be the action of a secret Consciousness and Being. The Energy that creates the world can be nothing else than a Will, and the Will is only consciousness applying itself to a work and a result. “Work and result” mean here nothing but a self-involution of Consciousness in form and a self-evolution out of form in order to actualize a tremendous possibility in the universe. One is able to transcend all the contradictions of the world existence once it is viewed in the light of the triune principle of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. “The world of which we are a part is in its most obvious view, a movement of Force; but that Force, when we penetrate its appearances, proves to be a constant and yet always mutable rhythm of creative consciousness casting up, projecting in itself phenomenal truths of its own infinite and eternal being; and this rhythm is in its essence, cause and purpose, a play of the infinite delight of being ever busy with its own innumerable self-representations.” (LD 103).

Thus, as one transcends the dividing ignorance, that gives us a sense of the apparent gulf between matter and life, Mind, Life, and Matter will reveal itself as one energy triply formulated, the triple world of the Vedic seers. Therefore, for Aurobindo, both matter and spirit are nothing but the result of the self-involution of the Absolute. It is the ground for the reality of the world. It is the manifestation of the Consciousness-Force and not mere illusion.

2.3 MATTER AS THE FOUNDATIONAL SUBSTRATUM OF EXISTENCE

Aurobindo maintains that the whole structure of Life is founded on the principle of Matter and upon it life stands as upon a pedestal or out of it evolves like the form of a many-branching tree out of its encasing seed. This material principle is the basis on which the mind, life and body of human beings depend. In spite of the development of life from consciousness emerging into Mind, the foundational substratum is the material principle. In other words, Life and its functioning are conditioned by matter which constitutes its external body. Both mind and body are important for human existence. Actually it is only because man possesses a body capable of receiving and serving a progressive mental illumination that human beings are able to transcend above the level of animals.

Matter is the foundation and the apparent beginning; to use the language of the Upanishads, “*Prithivi*, the Earth-principle is our foundation”. Aurobindo views that Matter is the substance of the one Conscious-Being phenomenally divided within itself by the action of a universal mind, a division which the universal mind repeats and dwells in, but which not at all abrogates or diminishes the unity of spirit or the unity of Energy or the real unity of Matter. It is also noted that without the creation of matter, the spirit is only potent, but actionless and hence a deep sleep. Its Energy is only implicit and as good as nil. But the potent must be actual, the implicit cannot but be explicit, else its mission is not fulfilled. These facts recall again Aurobindo’s holistic vision of both matter and Spirit. Matter and Spirit are complementary to each other. The “Spirit is the soul of matter and matter is the body of the spirit.” However each has their own specific features and characteristics. Matter, in contrast with Spirit, is the culmination of the principle of ignorance. It is also the principle which held us to the mechanical law. Moreover, matter is the culmination of the principle of division and struggle. Nonetheless, the relationship between matter and spirit needs further clarification.

2.4 THE RELATION BETWEEN MATTER AND SPIRIT

It is true that Spirit and Matter are not the same, but they are not contradictory, rather contrary. In fact, they work together as two sides of the same coin. The philosophical credo of Aurobindo was that matter and consciousness (spirit) are inseparably connected as two aspects of a single whole. For Aurobindo if one asserts only pure Spirit and a mechanical unintelligent substance or energy, calling one God or Soul and the other Nature, the inevitable end will be that we shall either deny God or else turn from Nature.

The question here is, how has the general trend of opposition between the two come to be? Answering this question demands a clear understanding of the opposition between the two. What causes this division is the individual ego consciousness. In the Indian perspective the first fundamental opposition that matter presents to Spirit is that it constitutes the culmination of the principle of Ignorance. Human beings, in their finitude, misconstrue things and realities. They are often misled by the illusion of quality and quantity so that often they perceive reality in comparison with something else. However, when we transcend beyond the differences of quality and quantity and look only for the intensity of the movement one will realise that Brahman dwells equally in all forms of existence. Nevertheless, the question remains, how are we to transcend these differences? The consciousness of this infinite energy is different from our mental consciousness and only by the knowledge informed by intuition and culminated in knowledge by identity can we realize the full truth of it. Each thing may differ in quality and quantity but the self is equal.

The second fundamental opposition that matter brings forth to Spirit is that it is the culmination of bondage to mechanical Law, and matter is in opposition to all that tries to liberate itself from the colossal inertia. A third fundamental opposition of matter to spirit is that matter is the culmination of the principle of division and struggle. Again, by the principle of matter Mind’s wings are clipped, its feet are tied to a narrow perch and are held back from the vastness and freedom above of which it is conscious. Fourthly, perhaps the most fatal division that Matter imposes on the vital and mental existence is the law of pain and suffering and the unrest of dissatisfaction with its status of division, inertia and ignorance. In this sense, for Aurobindo, the crux of all that is problematic lies in Matter.

Aurobindo clarifies further how the consciousness of the dichotomy between matter and mind has occurred. For Aurobindo, the practical divisions and differences that one experiences in the phenomenal world is due to the dividing action of Mind. Indeed there is difference and a series of ever ascending degrees in the world of existence. Substance is nothing but the conscious existence presenting itself to the senses as an object. Depending on the relation that the senses establish with the substance there can be various fundamental principles of relation. Thus, it is true that the substance with which the pure mind works and the substance with which human physical senses work have different foundations. In the same way, one can speak of the substance of pure dynamic life-energy as different from the subtlest forms of material substance. From the same principle it is also true to say that spirit itself is a pure substance which presents itself as an object to the light of a pure spiritual perspective knowledge where the subject becomes its own object. In other words, that which is beyond spatio-temporality becomes conscious of itself in a pure spiritually self-conceptive self-extension as the foundation or the primal material of all existence. Here the spirit objectifies itself neither to the physical senses nor to the vital or mental senses but to what is purely spiritual. Once one possesses this experience of the pure substance of being, all sorts of differences disappear and reach the absolute unity of subject and object, and the very existence of various substances has no more meaning now. Aurobindo's statement that the difference between matter and spirit is purely a conceptual one is better understood in this light. All through the descending of Spirit -through mind to matter- and ascending matter -through mind to spirit- the oneness of the pure Existence is never abrogated. "Brahman is not only the cause and supporting power and indwelling principle of the universe, he is also its material and its sole material. Matter is also Brahman and it is nothing other than or different from Brahman". It is only by having a body that is attuned to the functioning of the spirit and higher illumination that man can attain the divine manhood. Otherwise either the promise of life is cancelled, its meaning annulled or earthly being can only realise Sachchidananda by abolishing itself, by shedding from it mind, life and body and returning to the pure infinite.

As a final point to this section what we can say is that in the integral Advaitism what is aimed at is not a compromise but a true reconciliation between matter and spirit because compromise is always characterised by bargains or transactions of interests between two opposing powers, while reconciliation "proceeds always by a mutual comprehension leading to some sort of intimate oneness" which would assign each its "due portion in life and their due justification in thought" that never overlooks their rights or truth claims. "Matter itself cannot be the original and ultimate reality. At the same time, the view that divorces Matter and Spirit and puts them as opposites is unacceptable; Matter is a form of Spirit, a habitation of Spirit, and here in Matter itself there can be a realisation of Spirit". The suggestive ideal is the acceptance of both matter and spirit as two aspects of the same Reality. This calls for a further discussion on how the two actually make an integral unity.

2.5 DIPOLARITY: NOT DICHOTOMY

The dual existence, namely, of matter and spirit, does not mean any dichotomy between the two. What went wrong, Aurobindo states, is our perception of the material world or what one names as the undivine element in the world. There is nothing undivine in existence. What one conceives as undivine is nothing but created in the divine existence; namely, pure-existence, consciousness-force and bliss. Therefore, to conceive them as pure contradictories is a mistake of human mental consciousness. Truth is that mind, life, and body are found in their true forms in the Divine itself.

They function as they do, as conveyed to human consciousness, because they are by some means separated in consciousness from the divine Truth. Once it is possible to abrogate this separation by the expansion of divine energy in humanity, it would be possible that the working of these lower forms be converted to a supreme evolution and progression. Thus it is possible to manifest divine being in the lower forms of existence, namely mind, life and body. *Taittiriya* Upanishad amply substantiates this claim with its statement that matter is Brahman (III. 2).

The primordial characteristic of the world is a differentiated unity, a manifold oneness rather than the constant attempt to reach unity in uniformity. The world is not characterised by the everlasting struggle between the irreconcilable opposites.

Therefore, emphasizing categorically his integral perspective, Aurobindo states that “the real Advaita does not make the least scission in the one eternal Existence. On the contrary, the “undividing Monism sees the one as the one even in the multiplicities of Nature,” in all aspects of life, such as in the reality of self and of cosmos, “as in that greatest reality of the supracosmic which is the source of self and the truth of the cosmos and is not bound either by any affirmation of universal becoming or by any universal or absolute negation”.

The remaining questions are: How are we to reach the unity of the two, even though the division is apparent? How can it be reasonably substantiated? Aurobindo calls up different possibilities. One among them would be to abandon the phenomenal world as having no real reality, the way the Advaitins and all other world negating philosophies followed. However, that would lead to further problems, and would entail that one abandons this earthly existence in its entirety for something beyond. Also it would mean that perfection of humanity is not in humanity itself but in something else abiding in another world. If that is the case, the whole project we have been trying to develop collapses, for it would lead to a supracosmic view, which we already repudiated to be a partial view of existence. Then the question is, how are we to achieve the unity of Spirit and Matter? How does Aurobindo escape the dilemma?

The solution offered by Aurobindo to overcome the apparent dichotomy between Matter and Spirit is that there must be a universal Mind which is subconscious to us in the form of the universe or superconscious to its spirit. It is this superconscient Mind which through the instrumentality of universal sense establishes in itself the relation between different forms and that which establishes the rhythm of the material universe. However, this does not explain the whole truth about the material world. In other words, it only explains that the material world is a creation of consciousness, but we are yet to clarify the how of this creation. One has to reasonably clarify how matter can be Brahman and how the Absolute can assume the material form. Apparently it is a contradiction. Here we recognise the importance of Aurobindo’s presupposition that the whole of Reality is based on the involution of the Spirit into the lower principles of matter, and a corresponding evolution of this material principle to the higher state of the Spirit, passing through various stages, in both processes. It is the greatness of Aurobindo that he clearly stated that unless we identify a series of ascending terms (Life, Mind, Supermind, and the grades that link mind to Supermind) between Spirit and Matter or without the reception of the intermediary grades in the identification of Spirit and Matter, representing each in terms of the other, it will not be intelligible, rather will be an artificial creation of the thought. Only this thought pattern would enable one to overcome the apparent dichotomy. This inevitably takes us to the discussion of Aurobindo’s concept of evolution, a means to overcome the dichotomy between matter and spirit. We referred previously to the involution of the Spirit and the different

stages it passes through. Their explication would constitute the heart of Aurobindonian metaphysics of becoming. However, we will keep their discussion for the next unit. For the moment we turn to his understanding of Cosmic Consciousness.

2.6 COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS: THE SOURCE OF RECONCILIATION

Here our primary objective is to articulate our arguments for conceiving Cosmic Consciousness as a principle of reconciliation. The contradictory nature of matter and spirit can be reconciled in two ways. On the one hand, one has to understand matter as the lowest level of existence which ought to be transcended to the spiritual; on the other hand, matter and spirit are to be taken as equally real and valuable because they are essential components of the one divine reality, Sachchidananda. The material and the spiritual realities are phases of the earthly processes. It is only from within the limitations of matter or spirit, supported by the diverse functions of the intellect, that one or another of these phases is affirmed or denied. In this regard, what Aurobindo suggests both to the “materialist” as well as to the “ascetic” to escape one sided perspective of Reality is to make resort to “an extension of the field of our consciousness” which is “an inner enlargement from the individual into the cosmic existence”. However, the question of ‘how’ remains. Here again what comes to our aid is the cosmic consciousness by which we become aware of our fundamental unity with the whole of cosmic existence. As one grows in this Consciousness, he or she becomes aware of the “Supermind, whose universal operation is the key to all lesser activities.” With the help of this new awareness one is able to transcend his past ego-sense, that is responsible for the sense of division, and live in the Universal Consciousness. However, this realisation is possible only when one accepts an ascending process in life. In cosmic consciousness, mind and matter are considered intermediaries and not agents of separation or “fomenters of artificial quarrel” between the two aspects of the same Reality.

From another perspective cosmic consciousness is a logical necessity for Aurobindo in the sense that if we reject the existence of consciousness in the matter it becomes difficult to explain the process of evolution. For Aurobindo, everything in the world is conscious; “consciousness remains concealed, unmanifest and veiled in the material, vital and mental realities.” This is an ineluctable corollary of Aurobindo’s claim that the divine involution or manifestation is the condition of possibility for the beingness of the universe and everything in it. The Vedic sages identified five degrees of being: the material, the vital, the mental, the ideal, the spiritual or beatific and to each of these grades of our soul there corresponds a grade of our substance, a sheath as it was called in the ancient figurative language. Taking into account the wisdom of the Vedic sages as well as the findings of the modern scientific developments, Aurobindo points out that there exists a sort of “obscure beginning of life and perhaps a sort of inert or suppressed consciousness in the metal and in the earth and in other “inanimate forms”, or at least the first stuff of what becomes consciousness in us maybe there”.

Finally, cosmic consciousness leads one to cosmic love, which is the “non-attached love of the world as the visible manifestation of the Divine”. Only a cosmic love can enable one to accept both matter and spirit as dual dimensions of the single Reality. Cosmic love does not demand a self-annihilation in the Absolute, but rather a joyful co-operation with the dynamic world spirit at the integral existential experience of the indefinable unity of God and the world. Cosmic love originates from the “vision of the spiritual unity of all existence”. It is a participation in the divine *lila* itself, the latter understood in the sense of God’s creative love for the cosmos. It is both the sense of “oneness” of matter and spirit, that helps to overcome the “artificial quarrel”

aforementioned. It is the place (*locus*) wherein the individual being becomes aware of its own inherent nature of becoming or the progressive ascent.

2.7 A SYNTHETIC APPROACH TO MATTER AND SPIRIT

A major point of divergence between the East and the West is in the understanding of fundamental truth of existence. To be precise, the emphasis the West and the East give to Matter and Spirit respectively can be seen only as an ineluctable corollary of their approach towards the Reality. In general what we have in the West is a dualistic approach to nature and reality. For, the West has generally laid its emphasis on the truth of matter, in contrast to the East, either by denying the existence of spirit or by relegating it to the domain of the unknowable or what is secondary. What Indian culture and philosophy aims at, as Aurobindo rightly observes is the harmony of matter and spirit; “Spiritual and temporal have indeed to be perfectly harmonised, for the spirit works through mind and body. But the purely intellectual or heavily material culture of the kind that Europe now favours, bears in its heart the seed of death; for the living aim of culture is the realisation on earth of the kingdom of heaven. India, though its urge is towards the Eternal, since that is always the highest, the entirely real, still contains in her own culture and her own philosophy a supreme reconciliation of the eternal and the temporal and she need not seek it from outside” (RI 60).

The East generally maintains a synthetic approach. Nevertheless, it is not free of the taint of dualism. Aurobindo recalls: The idea by which the East “has been governed is the firm knowledge that truth of the Spirit is the sole real truth” and Asia tried to mould her external life in view of this sublime goal (SM 289). Aurobindo in his own distinctive way brings out his critique of the dualism of matter and spirit in his response to the *refusal of the ascetic* (over emphasis of Spirit) and the *denial of the materialist* (over emphasis of Matter at the cost of Spirit). In contrast with the Western trend, the East has laid its whole emphasis on Spirit and at least for a period it neglected the possibilities and relevance of life and focused on the narrow development of a fixed status. Aurobindo recognizes the danger involved in this exaggerated position of the East. As he warned the West for her over emphasis on the material dimension vis-à-vis he warns the East for her over emphasis of the Spiritual. For him, what characterised the history of last 2000 years is the revolt between matter and spirit.

For Aurobindo, the antinomy between the two is unreal for the fundamental is the Spirit and life is only its manifestation. His argument is that the East “has deviated into a divorce between the Spirit and its instruments and a disparagement and narrowing of the mental and external life of the race.” The core of the Aurobindonian argument is that the “fullest and most absolute attainment of the spiritual can be securely based” only on the basis of the material or the instrumental life (SM 289). In this respect Aurobindo appreciates the West and commendably suggests to the East: “The message the West brings to the East is a true message. ... Life also is the Divine, its progressive expansion is the self-expression of the Brahman, and to deny Life is to diminish the Godhead within us” (SM 289).

In the dualism of matter and spirit what we have is the separation of fact and value. Organic nature of the universe is countered by a mechanistic approach to it, whereby the nature becomes devoid of any intrinsic value.

A second move in the direction of the dualism of matter and spirit resulted in the separation of man and nature. When the nature is conceived intrinsically valueless, it naturally demanded that man put value in it, which finally resulted in the objectification of nature. The natural corollary of the separation of man and nature was the alienation of man from nature, which finally ended up in nihilism. Taking a distance from the then existing predominant view of nature and life Aurobindo considered it to be intrinsically valuable.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Is dipolarity dicotomy? Explain?

2) Describe Aurobindo's scheme of thinking on Synthesis of Spirit and Matter.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

Our discussion in this unit focused on Aurobindo's synthetic approach to life and reality. Aurobindo arguing against then existing prevalent trend stood for a holistic view where both matter and spirit are equally important. It is this synthetic approach of Aurobindo what helped him to upheld the descent of the Absolute into the material world and evolutionary ascent of the matter into the spiritual sphere. And this will be our point of discussion in the next unit.

2.9 KEY WORDS

Dualism: of matter and spirit, is the separation of fact and value. Organic nature of the universe is countered by a mechanistic approach to it, whereby the nature becomes devoid of any intrinsic value.

2.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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