
UNIT 2 TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY: EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To explore some basic insights of transpersonal psychology.
- To enable us to understand consciousness and its evolution.
- To open the students to the possibility of evolution of their own consciousness.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we attempt to understand the transpersonal psychology of Aurobindo and how he understands the evolution of consciousness in his integral vision. This unit is based primarily on the excellent article of Arabinda Basu, an acknowledged Aurobindo scholar (Basu 2001).

2.2 SRI AUROBINDO'S PSYCHOLOGY

Sri Aurobindo was a yogi and a mystic. He has said that the materials of his spiritual philosophy were provided by experiences obtained by practice of yoga. This is equally, if not more, true of the system of his metaphysical psychology. Some people who have no or little idea of yoga may wonder what yoga has to do with psychology or at the most they may think that breath control, sitting or lying in particular ways or trying to make the mind quiet by meditation or other means is yoga. In fact, these are specialised methods of yoga but not its essence (Basu 2001).

According to Sri Aurobindo, yoga has the same relation with the inner being and nature of man as science has with the forces of external nature like steam or electricity. Yoga, he says, is scientific in that its methods are observation of and experiment with the states, forces, functions of our subjective, that is, inner being and nature. Yoga is both science and art. It is a science because it knows by experience what man is inwardly and it is an art because it can apply that knowledge to change man's inner being and nature. Yoga is known as a means of attaining spiritual liberation, *mukti* or *moksha*. While that is true, it must be clearly understood that by the practice of yoga, it is possible to know the essential nature of our being, our true self. And yoga discovers the nature of our real self as consciousness. And this is where yoga and psychology meet. Indeed yoga is according to Sri Aurobindo practical psychology (Basu 2001). It is also transpersonal psychology, since it goes beyond individual and focuses on the collective, integral growth of consciousness of the whole reality.

2.3 AUROBINDO AND CONSCIOUSNESS

In expounding his experience-concept of Consciousness, Sri Aurobindo in a letter first states what it is not. On this fundamental point of his psychological system, we would like to quote his own words because they are precise and yet carry a wealth of suggestions and their nuances are difficult to convey in other terms. "Consciousness", he writes, "is not to my experience, a phenomenon dependent on the reactions of personality to the forces of Nature and amounting to no more than a seeing or interpretation of these reactions. If that were so, then when the personality becomes silent and immobile and gives no reactions, as there would be no seeing or interpretative action, there would therefore be no consciousness. That contradicts some of the fundamental experiences of yoga, e.g. a silent and immobile consciousness infinitely spread out, not dependent on the personality but impersonal and universal, not seeing and interpreting contacts but motionlessly self-aware, not dependent on the reactions, but persistent in itself even when no reactions take place. The subjective personality itself is only a formation of consciousness which is a power inherent, not in the activity of the temporary manifested personality, but in the being, the Self or Purusha" (Ghose, 1969).

Several things stand out in this passage which need to be understood clearly. We can only see a few salient points which it is essential to grasp for the understanding of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical psychology as is done by Arabinda Basu (2001). First, consciousness is not a phenomenon; it does not depend on the reactions of the personality to stimulus from outside or on mental activities. When the mind falls silent and ceases to function, consciousness abides. It is true that ordinary people cannot silence their minds. On the other hand, its experience is not very uncommon. Many people have the experience of a still mind though they do not fall into the state of unconsciousness.

Secondly, consciousness is immobile, i.e., not in its essence activity. In the same letter from which a paragraph has been quoted above, Sri Aurobindo says that consciousness is not only a power of knowledge of self and things, it is or has a dynamic and creative energy. It is free to act or not to act and free in action and inaction.

Thirdly, it is universal, spread throughout the cosmos. It is difficult for ordinary people to conceive or imagine the nature of consciousness because it is mistakenly identified with the individual, which is only a formation of consciousness.

Fourthly, consciousness is the Self, *Atman*, the *Purusha*, the cosmic Soul. Those who are familiar with Vedantic thought may wonder that the Self and the Soul are being mentioned in terms of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo has even said that God is a manifestation of Consciousness. Elaboration of this aspect of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual philosophy will take us into deep metaphysics. It is enough for us to say that consciousness, though indeterminable, has the power of self-determination, and its primary self-determinations are the Self, the Soul, God or the Lord. Thus consciousness is the ultimate Reality, it is inherent in existence, it is Existence or sat.

Finally, consciousness is self-luminous, *sva-prakasa*. It is not revealed by anything other than itself; indeed it is in the Light of Consciousness that everything is revealed and known. Consciousness is Conscious-Force. The Conscious Force hierarchically arranges itself on many levels, on each of which it appears progressively less conscious and less forceful. According to Sri Aurobindo, there are seven principal levels of which Matter is the lowest. He speaks of the Inconscient from which Matter is formed by the completely involved and hidden and to all intents and purposes lost conscious force in it. In Matter consciousness is physical which is the base of the vital and mental consciousness. Mind itself has more than one layer of which the subconscious is now recognised in psychology. The subliminal mind is another level of mind (of consciousness also). The difference between the subconscious and the subliminal is this that the former while conscious in essence is not actually so and hovers between the unconscious and the physical consciousness, the latter is conscious though not fully so. Though the subliminal has a good deal of knowledge in it, it is capable of errors and mistakes (Basu 2001).

2.4 SUBCONSCIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

Sri Aurobindo cites a remarkable example of the “subconscious consciousness”. He used this paradoxical phrase for the subconscious to show the formation of consciousness though below our surface mind. An uneducated maidservant was employed in the household of a professor of Hebrew, of which she knew not a word. But as she went on doing her daily chores, she used to hear willy-nilly the ringing tones of the professor's recitation of Hebrew poetry. Slowly the servant could repeat Hebrew verses verbatim. How could she do it? Her conscious mind did not understand or remember a word of what she used to hear, besides, she was using her conscious mind to do her job as best as she could.

The purpose of dealing with the subconscious and the subliminal is to show that they are levels of consciousness (Basu 2001). The fact that consciousness is not apparently present in the former and though the latter is conscious in itself, our mind does not know it is so, owing to one of the fundamental principles of the metaphysical psychology, viz., consciousness has the power to self-limit itself and appear as less conscious than it is in its essence.

2.5 METAPHYSICS AND PSYCHOLOGY

What is metaphysics and what is psychology? “Metaphysics”, writes Sri Aurobindo, “deals with the ultimate cause of things and all that is behind the world of phenomena. As regards mind and consciousness, it asks what they are and how they come into existence, what is their relation to Matter, Life etc. Psychology deals with mind and consciousness and tries to find out not so much their ultimate nature and relations as their actual workings and the rule and law of these workings”(Ghose 1969). Further he says, “Psychology is the science of consciousness and its status and operations in Nature and, if that can be glimpsed or experienced, its status and operations beyond what we know as Nature.”(Ghose 1994) This latter idea of psychology will push it to the borders of metaphysical or Vedantic or Yogic psychology.

Sri Aurobindo quite clearly reserves the term psychology to the levels of mind and vital in contrast with what pertains to the spiritual soul for which he employs the term psychic. In *The Human Cycle* he has written that there is the beginning of a perception that there are behind the economic motives and causes of social and historical development profound psychological, even perhaps soul factors, where also he distinguishes the psychological from the psychic (Ghose 1962).

But it will be a mistake to think that because Sri Aurobindo has such a metaphysical experience-concept of consciousness, he has neglected to deal with the phenomenal aspect of consciousness. He has dealt with human psychology in great detail. Not only that, the material theory of consciousness has engaged his close attention and he has given an objective, dispassionate critique of it. He has described that theory accurately, accepted what is true in it, but also shown where it falls short of accounting for the appearance of intelligence from non-intelligent matter. Needless to say, he rejects the identification of mind and brain which is the thesis of “physiological psychology”, a phrase he has employed in his writings on psychology. Incidentally, it is both interesting and instructive to note that he acknowledges that if the brain is damaged, the operations of consciousness are hampered which uses the brain as an instrument. He says consciousness is involved in the brain and that is why conscious activities are accompanied by activities of the brain cells.

The materialist hypothesis regarding consciousness, says Sri Aurobindo, is not enough. In fact, sense and reflex action become absurd if we try to explain by it thought and will, the imagination of the poet, the attention of the scientist, the reasoning of the philosopher. Call it mechanical cerebration, if you will, “but no mere mechanism of grey stuff of brain can explain these things; a gland cannot write Hamlet or pulp of brain work out a system of metaphysics.” There is a gulf here that cannot be bridged by any mechanical explanation of consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo further says that there may be connection of consciousness and an inconscient substance, there may be mutual interpretation, they may act on each other, “but they are and remain things opposite, incommensurate with each other, fundamentally diverse” (Basu 2001). To say that an observing and active consciousness emerges as a character of an eternal Inconscience is to indulge in a self-contradictory affirmation.

In fact, Sri Aurobindo himself has not described his system of psychology as “integral psychology”. He has employed the very suggestive phrase “complete psychology”, which he says “must be a complex of the science of mind, its operations and its relations to life and body

with intuitive and experimental knowledge of the nature of mind and its relations to supermind and spirit” (Ghose 1964). We hold that “consciousness is itself found to be not essentially a process,—although in mind it appears as a process.” By its very nature it is a self-existent being. Being or the Self of things can only be known by metaphysical—not necessarily intellectual—knowledge. This self-knowledge has two inseparable aspects, “a psychological knowledge of the process of Being, a metaphysical knowledge of its principles and essentiality” (Ghose 1964 and Basu 2001).

Sri Aurobindo is clear that “Vedantic psychology explores the idea and intuition of a higher reality than mind” (Ghose 1994). Therefore for him, “Yogic psychology is an examination of the nature and movements of consciousness as they are revealed to us by the processes and results of Yoga” (Basu 2001).

The metaphysical reality is not the subject matter of psychology. Let us be very clear that yoga is practised by something in our nature as human beings. It may discover in us unknown means of knowledge, action and enjoyment and instrument of the direct knowledge of the Self. Thus Vedantic psychology and yogic psychology are significant descriptions of Sri Aurobindo's psychological system in one aspect.

2.6 INTEGRAL YOGA AS APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

Sri Aurobindo has said, as pointed out above, that metaphysics deals with the fundamental principles of existence and life and in the final analysis it aims at knowing the ultimate Reality. Since yoga is applied psychology aiming at connecting psychological truths with metaphysical principles, its final goal is the Divine. Sri Aurobindo never tires of pointing out that the Divine is the object of the yoga. It is not to become a superman or a great yogi. These aims may be realised in the course of yoga's progress towards the Divine.

But what is to be noted especially is that Sri Aurobindo's view, shall we say vision, of the Divine is much more complex than is found in the earlier *yogas*. The reason is, these other visions are partial and the consequent realisations of God according to them are of one or more than one aspects of God but they do not have the integral experience of the Supreme. Sri Aurobindo is definitely of the view that the realisations of the Divine obtained by the partial *yogas* are not integral owing to the fact that they are achieved by levels of consciousness which do not harbour the integral knowledge. This is why he insists that the seeker must arise to the level of *vijnana*, (the Supermind) because it is that level of consciousness which has inherent in it the integral knowledge.

A brief review of the different *yogas* current in India for thousands of years can demonstrate the truth of Sri Aurobindo's contention regarding the partial character of those spiritual disciplines. Without trying to trace the history of yoga right from the time of the Veda, we refer to the five disciplines still current in India and widely practised. It is also noted that these *yogas* select one or the other of the principles of Nature instead of taking the whole of life which is the instrument of the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo (Basu 2001).

Hatha yoga for example takes the principle of life in the nervous system as its means. It may arrive at the knowledge of God but, in point of fact, its practices are so complicated and take such a long time and at the same time have to be disconnected with life in general, that it cannot be of any use directly to the goal of the yoga of Sri Aurobindo which is the radical transformation of all Nature down to the physical as a means of integral union with the Divine on all planes of existence.

Raja yoga takes mind as the instrument of its discipline. It is a very effective practice and is consummated by the separation of unconscious *Prakrti* which evolves as the world and all that is in it from *Purusa*, the pure conscious Soul. Raja yoga does not know of an overall reality like Brahman of the Vedanta.

Karma yoga takes the Will as its chief instrument of spiritual discipline. It starts with giving up the desire of fruits of action followed by the perception that the egoistic self is not the doer at all, combined with the perception that universal Nature is the real actor. It ends with surrender of fruits, actions, the ego, all of this to the Supreme Master of Will which brings about the closest possible union with the Divine, the Purushottama, *visatetadanantaram*.

Jnana yoga utilises the purified intelligence as the chief means for realisation of identity with Brahman which results in reducing the world into an utter unreality. This again is another great yoga the fruit of which, identity with Brahman, is one of the results that can be achieved by the integral yoga. Though Sri Aurobindo believes in the world as a self-manifestation of the dynamic Absolute, it is to be noted that he emphatically says that it is necessary for an integral yogin to have knowledge at a certain stage of the progress of yoga that the world is unreal. Otherwise, he says, there is great possibility that there would be some attachment to something in the world. Bhakti yoga's chief instrument is the heart, the emotional being, and it aims at turning all human emotions towards the Divine who is most prominently looked upon and experienced as the Beloved to whom complete adoration is due (Basu 2001).

The integral yoga is integral because it has seen the possibility of a new self-discovery of the Divine in and as completely spiritualised Matter by the supramental Knowledge-Will. And Sri Aurobindo is emphatic that the actualisation of this possibility is inevitable. It is the express purpose “to make Matter aware of God” and to enable it “to remember God.” (Basu 2001)

2.7 THE EVOLUTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

[In the following extract, written around 1930, we see what the Master himself writes on evolution of consciousness.]

“All life here is a stage or a circumstance in an unfolding progressive evolution of a Spirit that has involved itself in Matter and is labouring to manifest itself in that reluctant substance. This is the whole secret of earthly existence.”

“But the key of that secret is not to be found in life itself or in the body; its hieroglyph is not in embryo or organism,—for these are only a physical means or base: the one significant mystery of this universe is the appearance and growth of consciousness in the vast mute unintelligence of Matter. The escape of Consciousness out of an apparent initial Inconscience,—but it was there

all the time masked and latent, for the inconscience of Matter is itself only a hooded consciousness—its struggle to find itself, its reaching out to its own inherent completeness, perfection, joy, light, strength, mastery, harmony, freedom, this is the prolonged miracle and yet the natural and all-explaining phenomenon of which we are at once the observers and a part, instrument and vehicle.”

“A Consciousness, a Being, a Power, a Joy was here from the beginning darkly imprisoned in this apparent denial of itself, this original night, this obscurity and nescience of material Nature. That which is and was for ever, free, perfect, eternal and infinite, That which all is, That which we call God, Brahman, Spirit, has here shut itself up in its own self-created opposite. The Omniscient has plunged itself into Nescience, the All-Conscious into Inconscience, the All-Wise into perpetual Ignorance. The Omnipotent has formulated itself in a vast cosmic self-driven Inertia that by disintegration creates; the Infinite is self-expressed here in a boundless fragmentation; the All-Blissful has put on a huge insensibility out of which it struggles by pain and hunger and desire and sorrow. Elsewhere the Divine is; here in physical life, in this obscure material world, it would seem almost as if the Divine is not but is only becoming. This gradual becoming of the Divine out of its own phenomenal opposites is the meaning and purpose of the terrestrial evolution.”

“Evolution in its essence is not the development of a more and more organised body or a more and more efficient life—these are only its machinery and outward circumstance. Evolution is the strife of a Consciousness somnambulised in Matter to wake and be free and find and possess itself and all its possibilities to the very utmost and widest, to the very last and highest. Evolution is the emancipation of a self-revealing Soul secret in Form and Force, the slow becoming of a Godhead, the growth of a Spirit.”

“In this evolution mental man is not the goal and end, the completing value, the highest last significance; he is too small and imperfect to be the crown of all this travail of Nature. Man is not final, but a middle term only, a transitional being, an instrumental intermediate creature.”

“This character of evolution and this mediary position of man are not at first apparent; for to the outward eye it would seem as if evolution, the physical evolution at least were finished long ago leaving man behind as its poor best result and no new beings or superior creations were to be expected any longer. But this appears to us only so long as we look at forms and outsides only and not at the inner significances of the whole process. Matter, body, life even are the first terms necessary for the work that had to be done. New living forms may no longer be appearing freely, but this is because it is not, or at least it is not primarily, new living forms that the Force of evolution is now busied with evolving, but new powers of consciousness. When Nature, the Divine Power, had formed a body erect and empowered to think, to devise, to inquire into itself and things and work consciously both on things and self, she had what she wanted for her secret aim; relegating all else to the sphere of secondary movements, she turned toward that long-hidden aim her main highest forces. For all till then was a long strenuously slow preparation; but throughout it the development of consciousness in which the appearance of man was the crucial turning point had been kept wrapped within her as her ultimate business and true purpose.”

“This slow preparation of Nature covered immense aeons of time and infinities of space in which they appeared to be her only business; the real business strikes on our view at least when we look with the outward eye of reason as if it came only as a fortuitous accident, in or near the end, for a span of time and in a speck and hardly noticeable corner of one of the smallest provinces of a possibly minor universe among these many boundless finites, these countless universes. If it were so, we could still reply that time and space matter not to the Infinite and Eternal; it is not a waste of labour for That—as it would be for our brief death-driven existences—to work for trillions of years in order to flower only for a moment. But that paradox too is only an appearance—for the history of this single earth is not all the story of evolution—other earths there are even now elsewhere, and even here many earth-cycles came before us, and many are those that will come hereafter.”

“Nature laboured for innumerable millions of years to create a material universe of flaming suns and systems; for a lesser but still interminable series of millions she stooped to make this earth a habitable planet. For all that incalculable time she was or seemed busy only with the evolution of Matter; life and mind were kept secret in an apparent non-existence. But the time came when life could manifest, a vibration in the metal, a growing and seeking, a drawing in and a feeling outward in the plant, an instinctive force and sense, a nexus of joy and pain and hunger and emotion and fear and struggle in the animal,—a first organised consciousness, the beginning of the long-planned miracle.”

“Thence forward she was busy no more exclusively with matter for its own sake, but most with matter useful for the expression of life; the evolution of life was now her one intent purpose. And slowly too mind manifested in life, an intensely feeling, a crude thinking and planning vital mind in the animal, but in man the full organisation and apparatus, the developing if yet imperfect mental being, the Manu, the thinking, devising, aspiring, already self-conscious creature. And from that time onward the growth of mind rather than any radical change of life became her shining preoccupation, her wonderful wager. Body appeared to evolve no more; life itself evolved little or only so much in its cycles as would serve to express Mind heightening and widening itself in the living body; an unseen internal evolution was now Nature's great passion and purpose.”

“And if Mind were all that consciousness could achieve, if Mind were the secret Godhead, if there were nothing higher, larger, [no] more miraculous ranges, man could be left to fulfil mind and complete his own being and there would or need be nothing here beyond him, carrying consciousness to its summits, extending it to its unwallled vastnesses, plunging with it into depths unfathomable; he would by perfecting himself consummate Nature. Evolution would end in a Man-God, crown of the earthly cycles.”

“But Mind is not all; for beyond mind is a greater consciousness; there is a supermind and spirit. As Nature laboured in the animal, the vital being, till she could manifest out of him man, the Manu, the thinker, so she is labouring in man, the mental being till she can manifest out of him a spiritual and supramental godhead, the truth conscious Seer, the knower by identity, the embodied Transcendental and Universal in the individual nature.”

“From the clod and metal to the plant, from the plant to the animal, from the animal to man, so much has she completed of her journey; a huge stretch or a stupendous leap still remains before her. As from matter to life, from life to mind, so now she must pass from mind to supermind, from man to superman; this is the gulf that she has to bridge, the supreme miracle that she has to perform before she can rest from her struggle and discontent and stand in the radiance of that supreme consciousness, glorified, transmuted, satisfied with her labour.”

“The subhuman was once here supreme in her, the human replacing it walks now in the front of Time, but still, aim and goal of the future there waits the supramental, the superman, an unborn glory yet unachieved before her.”

[This is extracted with slight adaptation from an essay written in two pieces "Man and the Supermind" and "The Involved and Evolving Godhead", around 1930. It was first published in the Bulletin in November 1976 as the first of two separate pieces under the title "Evolution"]

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Aurobindo understand psychic being of Human person.?

2) Explain the higher levels of consciousness.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen the basic understanding of transpersonal psychology, as advocated by Sri Aurobindo. We also related it to our collective search for integral development and the evolution of consciousness.

2.9 KEY WORDS

Purusa: *Purusa* ("man") is the "self" which pervades the universe. It is one's true self, regarded as eternal and unaffected by external happenings.

Transpersonal psychology: It is a school of psychology that studies the transpersonal, self-transcendent or spiritual aspects of the human experience.

2.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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