



Central Tenets of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy

In *The Life Divine*, a metaphysical treatise of more than 1000 pages, Sri Aurobindo set forth his spiritual philosophy in exquisite detail, culminating in a powerful, hopeful, and profound message for humanity's future. A central tenet of his philosophy is that the Truth of existence is an omnipresent Reality that both transcends the manifested universe and is inherent in it. This Reality, referred to as Brahman, is an Absolute: it is not limited by any mental conception or duality, whether personal or impersonal, existent or nonexistent, formless or manifested in form, timeless or extended in time, spaceless or extended in space. It is simultaneously all of these but is bound by none of them. It is at once the universe, each individual being and thing in the universe, and the Transcendent beyond the universe. In its highest manifested poise, its nature may be described as Sachchidananda—infinite existence, infinite consciousness, and infinite delight or bliss—a triune principle in which the three are united in a single Reality. In other words, it is a fully conscious and blissful infinite existence. The importance of this concept for humanity lies in its implication that Brahman is our deepest and secret Reality, it is our true Self, and it is possible to recover this Reality of our being by removing the veil of ignorance that hides it from us and imprisons us in a false identification with an apparently divided and limited egoistic movement on the surface of our being. This is the metaphysical basis for Sri Aurobindo's yoga, the discipline given to consciously unite our phenomenal existence and life with our essential Reality.

How has the absolute Brahman, Sachchidananda, become what we see here around us—this world of inconscient matter, struggling life, ignorance, limitation, conflict, suffering, death, and evil? To answer this question, first we should understand that the Absolute is not bound—not bound to its infinite existence, not bound to its infinite consciousness and the force inherent in that consciousness, not bound to its infinite bliss. Second, we should understand that by definition it is capable of manifesting within its absolute existence innumerable, limited, even distorted and contrary forms of its being. Third, we should understand that an infinitely extended, infinitely diverse manifestation, replete with objects and beings ranging from the most unconscious, the most vile, to the most conscious, the most beautiful, the most divine, would be perfectly consistent with an existence that was Absolute.



But how does it do this? Through what Sri Aurobindo describes as the principle of exclusive concentration. This principle is best explained through the example of our own ability to narrow our conscious awareness on a particular idea or perception, putting behind in the background of our focused awareness the rest of our conscious existence. When an author concentrates in writing her story—developing the characters, the scene, the action—her own personal identity becomes for the moment lost to her conscious awareness. Her consciousness enters into the story and identifies with it. She does not cease to be what she is or lose her knowledge of her identity, but practically her awareness is narrowed and identified at a point. This ability to focus awareness and put into the background all else is inherent in consciousness. It is through a similar process that the One and Infinite Being becomes the many, apparently separate, individual beings and things we see manifested in the universe. The separation is in appearance only, for in truth all individuals are constituted by the One, are That in their Reality, for there is nothing outside the Absolute. They are forms and appearances of its Being, expressions of its Consciousness, movements of its Delight.

According to Sri Aurobindo, for our world in particular—there are other worlds that follow a different process—there is taking place a gradual awakening of consciousness over time, an evolution of consciousness. Through its principle of exclusive concentration, the One became matter, losing all conscious awareness in the form of inanimate matter. From this base it is progressively awakening through the life of the plant, the beginnings of mind in the animal, the full emergence of mind in humanity, and is now stirring to awaken fully through the emergence of a greater consciousness than mind, the Supermind, in which the fullness of the undivided consciousness and infinite delight of the One will be manifest in individualities embodied here on earth. This evolution of consciousness, from the worm to the god, is the central process, aim, and significance of our existence.

There is the further question of why the Absolute would manifest in this way, and in particular, why pain, suffering, evil would be allowed to exist. For there is no shifting of responsibility possible here, there is nothing or no one outside the Absolute. It is a complex problem and there are various sides to the answer that Sri Aurobindo provides; here it is possible only to suggest the outlines of the solution. One point that Sri Aurobindo emphasizes is that it is the Brahman who thus suffers, it is not imposed on someone or something outside the Brahman. A second point he makes is that limitation and ignorance are inherent consequences of the plunge of the Absolute consciousness into the inconscience and its slow evolutionary awakening—pain, suffering, and evil developed as consequences or corollaries of limitation and ignorance. A third point is that while pain, suffering, and evil are abhorrent to our limited ethical sensibilities, they also may serve a purpose in the larger scheme of the evolutionary process. That is, they may be the spurs needed to drive a dense and ignorant emerging consciousness towards



its own fullness and ultimate release into the infinite and eternal, into the truth and delight of the divine existence. Furthermore, the end of the process, hidden from our narrow view, of a divine existence on earth, may carry within it the justification for the hard conditions of its gradual manifestation in time.