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The Self and the Structure of the Personality: An Overview of Sri Aurobindo's Topography of Consciousness

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Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga aimed not only at what he called the *realization of the Divine*, but also at an *integral transformation of human nature under Divine influence*. For this exceptionally wide aim, he developed an exceptionally deep and comprehensive frame for understanding human nature. His concepts, as discussed in this paper, must be understood on their own terms, which are often different from meanings attributed in the conventional language of Western psychology. This paper provides a detailed account of Sri Aurobindo's conceptualization of the various centers of identity and of the vertical and concentric dimensions he used to describe the structure of the personality. It explains the importance Sri Aurobindo gave to the location where one places one's consciousness, and indicates why he argued that consciousness is not only awareness, but also force. Finally, this paper describes how Sri Aurobindo visualized the still ongoing evolution of consciousness and humanity's role in it.

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo, personality structure, planes of consciousness, evolution of consciousness

The beginning of last century saw two well known efforts toward the development of a systematic understanding of human nature: Freud's push toward framing human behavior as the product of unconscious drives, and Watson's turn toward psychology as a science of human behavior. Contemporaneously in India Sri Aurobindo started his less known work synthesising the massive storehouse of knowledge that Indian civilization had developed regarding consciousness and the higher ranges of human potential.

Sri Aurobindo's work¹ may well offer a promising avenue for the future of psychology. I hold that his synthesis not only dealt with traditional spirituality and objective science with an equally deep insight, but that it transcended and integrated both in a detailed and well-worked out vision for the future (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 1–37, 730–753, 1051–1107).

In this paper I will focus on one specific aspect of Sri Aurobindo's synthesis: the structural and functional model he created of the self and its relations to the different parts and planes of

human nature. To be more specific, this paper is an attempt at explaining the terms Sri Aurobindo used to describe the structure and functioning of human nature in a language that is closer to the language of mainstream American psychology. This is not as simple as it may seem because the ontology and epistemology on which Sri Aurobindo based his thinking are significantly different from those on which modern science is built. In line with the Vedic tradition, Sri Aurobindo (2012) saw, for example, the world primarily as a manifestation of consciousness rather than of matter (p. 22), and related to this, he saw consciousness as one in essence but variable in its outer manifestations, comparable to the different frequencies of light and physical energy (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 16). In terms of epistemological assumptions, Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) held, again in line with the Vedic tradition, that there are a number of essentially different types of knowledge (p. 543), and that all of these can be made more reliable by the purification of one's inner instrument of knowledge (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999, pp. 312–316, 646). Throughout the paper I will come back

to these ontological and epistemological issues wherever required. The full discourse can be found in *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005) and *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999).²

Before getting into the details of Sri Aurobindo's terminology, I will indicate why he needed a more complex model of the personality than most other authors in the Indian tradition and at the end of the paper I will give a short overview of how the different elements of human nature can work together towards Sri Aurobindo's ideal of an integral transformation. In order to avoid unjustifiable simplifications of Sri Aurobindo's often subtle observations and arguments, I have taken the liberty to make extensive use of relatively long quotations.

The Starting Point: A Roughly Constituted Chaos

If one's aim in yoga is liberation, one does not need a comprehensive understanding of human nature. One can focus one's efforts on only those aspects of psychology that one really needs for the particular path one has chosen. For the integral transformation Sri Aurobindo envisaged, on the other hand, one needs a deep, detailed, and integral understanding of human nature in all its astounding complexity—and human nature is definitely complex. In fact, in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo (1955/1999) described human nature in its normal state as a "roughly constituted chaos" (p. 75). He prefaced this observation with: "The practice of Yoga brings us face to face with the extraordinary complexity of our own being, the stimulating but also embarrassing multiplicity of our personality, the rich endless confusion of Nature" (p. 74). Sri Aurobindo then proceeded with a rather abysmal depiction of the prevailing human condition. He wrote:

To the ordinary man who lives upon his own waking surface, ignorant of the self's depths and vastnesses behind the veil, his psychological existence is fairly simple. A small but clamorous company of desires, some imperative intellectual and aesthetic cravings, some tastes, a few ruling or prominent ideas amid a great current of unconnected or ill-

connected and mostly trivial thoughts, a number of more or less imperative vital needs, alternations of physical health and disease, a scattered and inconsequent succession of joys and griefs, frequent minor disturbances and vicissitudes and rarer strong searchings and upheavals of mind or body, and through it all Nature, partly with the aid of his thought and will, partly without or in spite of it, arranging these things in some rough practical fashion, some tolerable disorderly order, — this is the material of his existence. (pp. 74–75)

Sri Aurobindo's portrayal does not offer a particularly flattering picture, but it is one in which one can easily recognize oneself. Sri Aurobindo stressed subsequently that each part of one's nature has its own character and that these different parts are not always in harmony with each other:

The most disconcerting discovery is to find that every part of us — intellect, will, sense-mind, nervous or desire self, the heart, the body — has each, as it were, its own complex individuality and natural formation independent of the rest; it neither agrees with itself nor with the others nor with the representative ego which is the shadow cast by some central and centralising self on our superficial ignorance. We find that we are composed not of one but many personalities and each has its own demands and differing nature. Our being is a roughly constituted chaos into which we have to introduce the principle of a divine order. (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999, p. 75)

The complexity of human nature becomes perhaps most painfully clear when one tries to change or transform it, which is the goal of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. It is then that one really needs a good map. Over the years Sri Aurobindo developed a model of the personality that is relatively simple and eminently practical in order to guide the disciples who had gathered around him for their *sādhana*, or yogic practice. Most of the terms, and their basic structure, are derived from the *R̥g Veda* and the *Upaniṣads*. Most of the detailed descriptions are based on *The Life Divine*

(Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999), and his *Letters on Yoga*, especially *Letters on Yoga – I* (Sri Aurobindo, 2012), *Letters on Yoga – II* (Sri Aurobindo, 2013), and *Letters on Yoga – IV* (Sri Aurobindo, 2014). The terms Sri Aurobindo used in these writings can be grouped into three different sets:

- Terms that belong to a concentric system: *outer nature*, *inner nature*, and *true nature*;
- Terms that belong to a vertical system based on the Vedic *Sevenfold Chord of Being*: *Matter*, *Life*, *Mind*, *Supermind*, *Ānanda*, *Cit-Tapas*, and *Sat*; and
- Terms related to a person's center of identification: *ego*, *soul*, and *Self*.

These three sets are like perspectives that look at the same psychological reality from three different dimensions or perspectives. Each perspective has its own meaning and purpose; however, as will be shown, when they are brought together, something more is added. For instance, one can see not only how human nature is structured, but one can also gather new insights into the meaning and direction of life. One can see not only how all the different elements of human nature relate to each other, but one can also discover the meaning and functionality of the structure as a whole. What makes this possible is Sri Aurobindo's (1940/2005) vision of an ongoing evolution of consciousness (see also Cornelissen, 2008). It shows a certain inevitability of movement—something that seems to say, yes, this must be where humans came from, this is where they are struggling at present, and this must be the stunningly beautiful future towards which they are heading.

I now turn to the three sets of terms mentioned above, and then focus on the higher order functionality that becomes possible by their integration.

The Concentric System

The *concentric system* is the term Sri Aurobindo used to describe what one encounters when one ventures as if inward from the surface nature in the direction of one's *innermost self*. In the concentric

system, Sri Aurobindo distinguished three major realms: an *outer nature* and an *inner nature*—both part of *prakṛti* universal Nature—and an *inmost*, or *true nature*, which belongs to the *puruṣa*, the Self (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, pp. 84-85).

Outer nature is the term Sri Aurobindo used for that part of being that a person is conscious of, at least to some extent, in his or her normal everyday life. In this outer nature, physical, emotional, cognitive, and conative elements are mixed. When one gets angry, for instance, one's body and mind tend to be as much involved as one's feelings. On the surface, thoughts are rarely entirely free from emotional coloring. Bodily states—like tiredness and freshness, illness and health—affect the way an individual feels and thinks; the mind affects the way one feels both emotionally and physically.

The longer one studies oneself, the clearer it becomes that this outer nature is only a tiny part of one's existence as a whole. Freud (1900/2010) considered that:

The unconscious is the true psychological reality; in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs. (p. 607)

Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) said more or less the same when he remarked:

We are not only what we know of ourselves but an immense more which we do not know; our momentary personality is only a bubble on the ocean of our existence. (p. 576)

Inner nature is the term Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) used for that part of the being which is not fully accessible to an individual in his or her *ordinary waking consciousness*. The word *inner* might give the impression that one is dealing only with a small, dark, and purely private territory. According to Sri Aurobindo, the opposite is true: the inner nature (a) is vaster and more luminous than the outer nature; (b) has access to broader and higher ranges of experience and knowledge; and (c) is more, not less, connected to others and the rest of the world (pp. 442, 554–564).

It may be noted that people who have not developed this deeper awareness of their inner states and processes will tend to call only their behavior their *outer nature*—since it is visible on the outside—and whatever else they know of themselves their *inner being*. Yet, in Sri Aurobindo’s terminology, most of what they know of themselves is called outer nature (e.g., Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 79), as his reference point is much further inside. What in his terminology is called the inner being is a part of human nature that most people in their waking consciousness are not aware of at all. Figure 1 may make the situation more clear.

Though Sri Aurobindo sometimes used the word *subconscious* to describe this part of the human nature, he preferred the term *subliminal*, which indicates that it is that part of a person that is *below the threshold*³ of one’s ordinary outer awareness without implying that it is smaller or less conscious than the outer nature. Most people are not aware of what the subliminal contributes to their lives except indirectly through unexplained feelings and changes of mood, through dreams and

other special states, or through sudden thoughts and flashes of insight, which the subliminal throws up onto the surface. According to Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005), all these contributions from the subliminal are possible because the person, in the subliminal, is connected vertically to layers above and below his or her ordinary awareness and horizontally to other people and to the myriad of forces and beings that surround the person (pp. 580, 605, 681, 761–763).

In these same pages, Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) called the part of the subliminal that deals with an individual’s own deeper and higher being the *intraconscious*. It is through the intraconscious that a person can become aware of those aspects in his or her own nature which one has no access to in one’s ordinary waking state. As may be clear from the quotation at the beginning of this section, Sri Aurobindo’s intraconscious includes the area that Freud called the unconscious. But the intraconscious also includes ranges above the ordinary waking consciousness that Freud ignored but Jung explored to some extent (Coward, 1985).

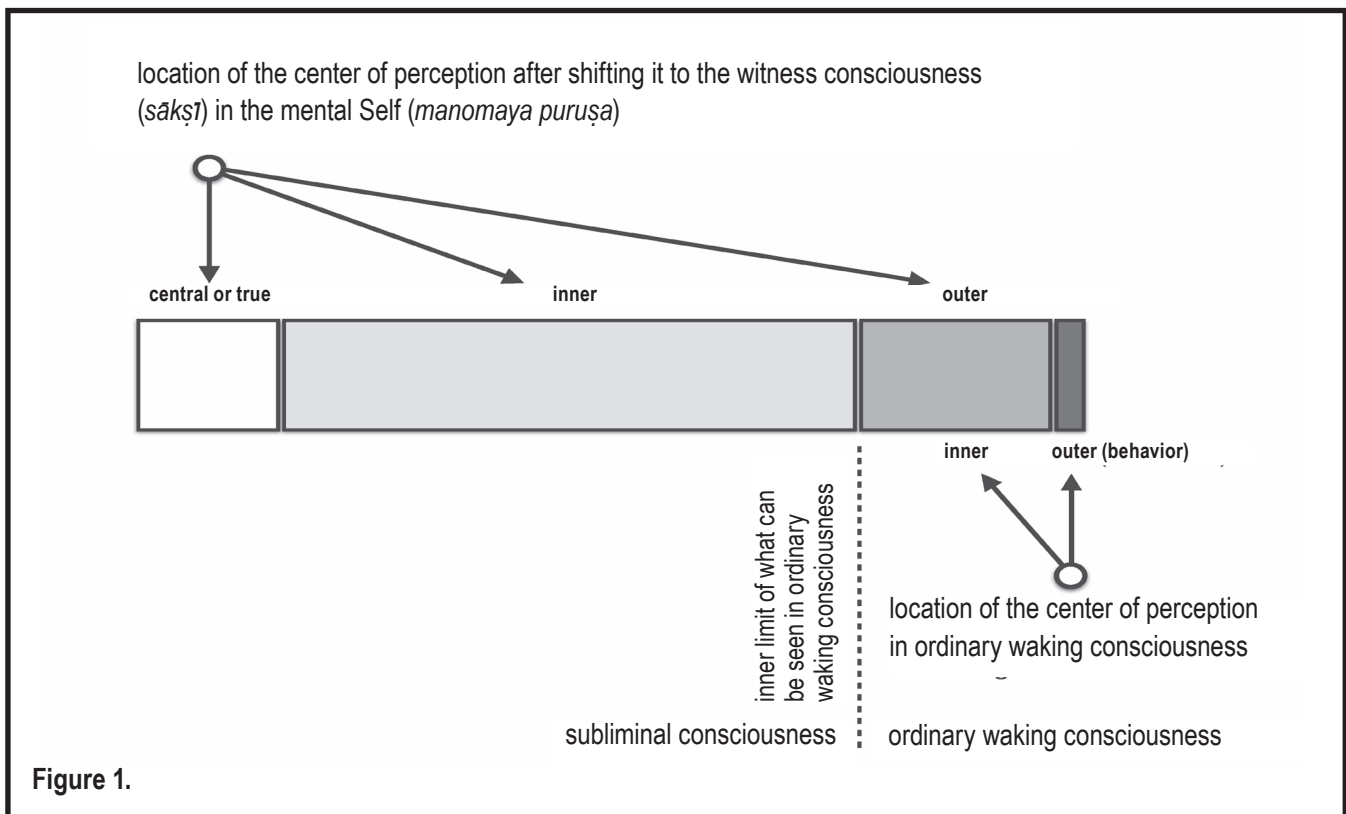


Figure 1.

Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) called the part that connects an individual to others and to the play of cosmic forces, the *circumconscient*. It is through the circumconscient part of the inner being that Sri Aurobindo saw most parapsychological perceptions taking place (e.g., pp. 556–557).

Partial glimpses of the inner nature can be experienced through dreams. Dreams are, however, not really the “royal road” that Freud (1900/2010) held them to be (p. 604). They are more like incidental cracks in the wall which separates the inner from the outer nature. To explore the inner nature systematically, an expert level of inner observation and training is needed that can be developed through the yoga of knowledge, *jnanayoga* (Cornelissen, 2013).

True being and *central being* are terms Sri Aurobindo (2012) used for what one can experience as a kind of vertical axis at the core of one’s individualized existence: “The true being may be realised in one or both of two aspects—the Self or Atman [above] and the soul or antaratman, psychic being or caitya puruṣa [within]” (p. 97). While the outer and inner natures belong to *prakṛti*, one’s true being is the *puruṣa*. Above all the planes and worlds, it is the *jivātman* who eternally and immutably presides over the manifest nature. The *jivātman* is one’s highest individualized essence.

Still further above it is the *ātman*, or *paramātman*, one’s true universal essence. Both can be experienced as the true Self—far above the ordinary earthly existence, transcendent, immutable, and eternal, if not beyond time. Deep within one’s embodied being, behind the heart is the soul, the *psychic entity*, which represents the *jivātman* in its incarnate existence (p. 56). I will return to these and other aspects of the Self and soul in a later section on the various centers of identity.

A simplified diagram of the concentric system could then look like Figure 2. In Figure 2 one can notice on the right the parts of the nature, and on the left the types of knowledge that give access to them. For more details on these types of knowledge one may consult Cornelissen (2013, 2015).

The Vertical System

The *vertical system* is built around an ancient Vedic division in seven layers, which Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) called *The Sevenfold Chord of Being* (pp. 276–284). From top-down, the layers are:

- Existence (*sat*),
- Consciousness-Force (*cit-tapas*),
- Bliss (*ānanda*),

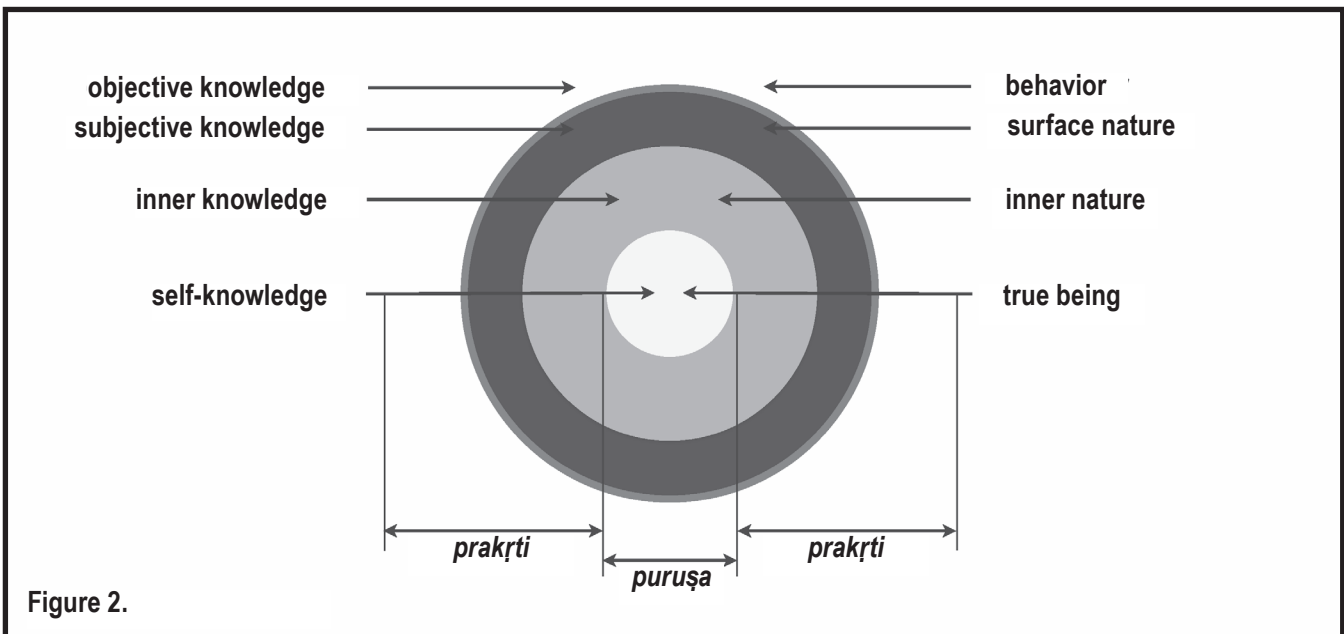


Figure 2.

- Supermind (*vijñāna, mahas*),
- Mind (*manas*),
- Life, or Vital (*prāṇa*),
- Matter (*annam*).⁴

There is a deep connection between psychology and cosmology in the Indian tradition, and Sri Aurobindo's work is no exception. The individual and the cosmos are seen as two expressions of the same basic principles, and so it is not surprising that many of these terms apply with only minor modifications to:

- Levels and types of consciousness,
- Independently existing planes or worlds, and
- Forces and beings in these worlds.

The lowest three, Mind, Life, and Matter, are part of the complex evolving manifestation and, as such, these terms also apply to:

- Parts and planes in one's own personal nature, and
- Stages of collective and individual evolution.

In other words, according to Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005), there exist, besides the hugely complex mixed mental, vital, physical manifestation of which we humans are partially aware in our ordinary waking state, also more or less independent typical worlds or planes of existence where the different types of consciousness are present in all their original strength and purity. I will describe later in more detail how in his view the mixed manifestation evolves in a direction that is determined by the way these different types of conscious existence influence, penetrate and limit each other (pp. 276–284). I now turn to examining each type of conscious existence in some more detail—this time from the bottom upwards.

The Physical

Sri Aurobindo (2012) described the physical plane as follows:

Each plane of our being — mental, vital, physical — has its own consciousness, separate though interconnected and interacting; but to our outer mind and sense, in our waking experience, they are all confused together. The

body, for instance, has its own consciousness and acts from it, even without any conscious mental will of our own or even against that will, and our surface mind knows very little about this body consciousness, feels it only in an imperfect way, sees only its results and has the greatest difficulty in finding out their causes. It is part of the Yoga to become aware of this separate consciousness of the body, to see and feel its movements and the forces that act upon it from inside or outside and to learn how to control and direct it even in its most hidden and (to us) subconscious processes. But the body consciousness itself is only part of the individualised physical consciousness in us which we gather and build out of the secretly conscious forces of universal physical Nature.

There is the universal physical consciousness of Nature and there is our own which is a part of it, moved by it, and used by the central being for the support of its expression in the physical world and for a direct dealing with all these external objects and movements and forces. This physical consciousness-plane receives from the other planes their powers and influences and makes formations of them in its own province. Therefore we have a physical mind as well as a vital mind and the mind proper; we have a vital physical part in us — the nervous being — as well as the vital proper; and both are largely conditioned by the gross material bodily part which is almost entirely subconscious to our experience. (pp. 201–202)

The Vital

Embodied life, in the details of its physical operations, has to follow the laws of physics and inorganic chemistry. Yet, it achieves something new that, at least in some aspects, seems to go against the basic spirit of the inorganic, physical reality. Plants and animals, for example, manage to reconstitute their immensely complex structures out of the utterly simple molecules of air, water, and soil in total disregard of physical nature's basic principles of inertia and entropy, its consistent tendency towards the dissipation of energy. As Sri

Aurobindo remarked in several places, someone who knew only the purely physical world could never have predicted, or even imagined, the way life has developed on this planet (e.g., Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 881-883).

In terms of the Indian tradition, the origin of life on this planet is easier to understand. For example, in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (Part ii) the life force is seen as a manifestation of the *prāṇamaya kośa* and, as such, it has a fundamentally different character than the material world, which belongs to the *annamaya kośa* (e.g., see Sri Aurobindo, 2001, pp. 217-218). While the physical reality is dominated by *tamas* and its concomitant properties of inertia and entropy, the *vital* is characterized by *rajas*, energy, play, enjoyment, and self-assertion in ever more complex patterns of interchange. The way this is seen to operate in the process of evolution is beautifully explained in the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* (1.7-9; e.g., see Sri Aurobindo, 2001, p. 132). Life, as a type of consciousness, first involves itself in the near inconscience of matter, and then begins to evolve in there, while remaining part of that material world. Life does this by transforming the stuff of matter until it begins to manifest a mixture of its own physical characteristics with the characteristics that are typical of life. The details of the process are seen to be worked out under the influence of formative energies descending directly from the pre-existing life plane.

Philosophically, the process may remind one of the *ideas* that Plato (c. 380 BCE/1992) described in his *Republic*, but Sri Aurobindo worked out the subtleties of the integration of descending and ascending forces in considerably more detail (e.g., see Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, *The Life Divine*, Book II, Part 1, pp. 305–655). The end result could perhaps be seen as a form of realistic idealism (or idealistic realism) that bridges fashionable oversimplifications like the opposing views of evolutionism and intelligent design, or constructivism and essentialism.

For psychology, the most important point to note is that according to Sri Aurobindo (1955/1999), the self-existent joy and energy—which are typical of the life force in its own domain—undergo a specific degradation when

life begins to manifest within the physical world (p. 645). This degradation happens because of the way in which they are used: In order to overcome the *tamas* of the physical reality, joy turns into need and desire, because only these can force physical organisms to wake up and become individually active as living creatures. At the human stage of evolution, this degradation becomes conscious and is then the source of much of human suffering. Especially when the life-force enlists the half-individualized human mind, the energy and enthusiasm of life turn into egoistic self-assertion with all the pain and suffering this brings with it. It is part of yoga to recover the joy that is inherent in life in its original state. About the vital energy as it appears within the human personality, Sri Aurobindo (2012) wrote the following:

The vital has to be carefully distinguished from mind, even though it has a mind element transfused into it; the vital is the Life nature made up of desires, sensations, feelings, passions, energies of action, will of desire, reactions of the desire soul in man and of all that play of possessive and other related instincts, anger, fear, greed, lust etc. that belong to this field of the nature. Mind and vital are mixed up on the surface of the consciousness, but they are quite separate forces in themselves and as soon as one gets behind the ordinary surface consciousness one sees them as separate, discovers their distinct action and can with the aid of this knowledge analyse their surface mixtures. (p. 168)

The vital . . . is a thing of desires, impulses, force-pushes, emotions, sensations, seekings after life-fulfilment, possession and enjoyment; these are its function and its nature; — it is that part of us which seeks after life and its movements for their own sake and it does not want to leave hold of them even if they bring it suffering as well as or more than pleasure; it is even capable of luxuriating in tears and suffering as part of the drama of life. What then is there in common between the thinking

intelligence and the vital and why should the latter obey the mind and not follow its own nature? The disobedience is perfectly normal instead of being, as Augustine suggests, unintelligible.

Of course man can establish a mental control over his vital and in so far as he does it he is a man, — because the thinking mind is a nobler and more enlightened entity and consciousness than the vital and ought therefore, to rule and, if the mental will is strong, can rule. But this rule is precarious, incomplete and established and held only by much self-discipline. For if the mind is more enlightened, the vital is nearer to earth, more intense, vehement, more directly able to touch the body. There is too a vital mind which lives by imagination, thoughts of desire, will to act and enjoy from its own impulse and this is able to seize on the reason itself and make it its auxiliary and its justifying counsel and supplier of pleas and excuses. There is also the sheer force of Desire in man which is the vital's principal support and strong enough to sweep off the reason, as the Gita says, "like a boat in stormy waters", *nāvam ivāmbhasi*. (p. 175)

The vital plane is often divided into three sub-planes (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 86):

- The *lower vital*, which consists of the basic life instincts, fear, anger, small enjoyments, etc.;
- The *middle vital* (or *vital proper*), which contains the larger life energies of power, ambition, and self-assertion; and
- The *higher vital*, which deals with the more sophisticated emotions in the social realm, both positive like sympathy, compassion, sense of responsibility, or aesthetic sense, and negative ones like self-love, vanity, envy or guilt.

I will return to these three sub-planes in the context of the *cakras*.

The Mind

In the mind, one will find an entirely different type of consciousness than that of the vital. The mind, as such, is not interested in self-

assertion, though the vital life force may enlist it for that purpose. It is the mind's job to model reality, and then plan action on the basis of its model. The mind presents reality to itself, thinks about it, uses it to plan action, and expresses its mental constructions to itself and others. One can look at the nervous system—with which the mind tends to identify itself—as an incredibly complicated, multidimensional model-making machinery.

How completely different mind and vital are can be easily illustrated by the difference between the digestive system and the brain. For instance, when the stomach tackles an apple, the apple is destroyed. The apple, in the process of digestion, is taken apart into its constituting molecules, which are subsequently used to provide energy and the raw materials that the animal who eats it can use to build and maintain its body. At the end of the digestive process, there is no trace of the apple, but the apple-eating animal is strengthened. When, on the other hand, the eyes tackle an apple, the apple remains what it is. The mind creates an image: a complex, multidimensional mental model of the apple, which the thinking creature can subsequently use to guide further action.

Interestingly, the mind as it is found embodied in living creatures has undergone a disabling diminution that is quite similar to the degradation life underwent when it was first embodied in matter. Mind as it develops within living matter makes models of reality on the basis of the senses, memory, and whatever else it can press into service to this end. As constructed models, they can become better and better, but they will never reach absolute perfection. This, according to Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005), is a serious step down for mind, which at its best can function through intuitions it receives from planes of perfect, pre-existing knowledge (p. 803). Why true intuition, in the sense of ready-made, perfect knowledge, can be expected to exist, and how people can develop access to it, forms a major part of Sri Aurobindo's writing on philosophy, yoga, and psychology (e.g., Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999, 1940/2005, 2012), but goes beyond the scope of this paper. A short statement of the basic ideas can be found in Cornelissen (2013).

Just as the fully developed manifestations of embodied life are many orders of magnitude more complex than those of inorganic matter, the brain, as a physical substrate for the mind's activity in this evolving physical world, is many orders of magnitude more complex than any other biological structure. About the mind as it manifests in human beings, Sri Aurobindo (2012) wrote in *Letters on Yoga — I*:

The "Mind" in the ordinary use of the word covers indiscriminately the whole consciousness, for man is a mental being and mentalises everything; but in the language of this Yoga the words mind and mental are used to connote specially the part of the nature which has to do with cognition and intelligence, with ideas, with mental or thought perceptions, the reactions of thought to things, with the truly mental movements and formations, mental vision and will etc. that are part of his intelligence. (p. 168)

The Mother (2004) said the following about the dynamic, action-supporting aspect of the mind:

For the true role of the mind is the formation and organisation of action. The mind has a formative and organising power, and it is that which puts the different elements of inspiration in order, for action, for organising action. And if it would only confine itself to that role, receiving inspirations — whether from above or from the mystic centre of the soul — and simply formulating the plan of action — in broad outline or in minute detail, for the smallest things of life or the great terrestrial organisations — it would amply fulfil its function.

It is not an instrument of knowledge.

But it can use knowledge for action, to organise action. It is an instrument of organisation and formation, very powerful and very capable when it is well developed.

One can feel this very clearly when one wants to organise one's life, for instance — to put the different elements in their place in one's existence. There is a certain intellectual faculty which immediately puts each thing in its place and makes a plan and organises. And it is not a knowledge that comes from the mind, it is

a knowledge which comes, as I said, from the mystic depths of the soul or from a higher consciousness; and the mind concentrates it in the physical world and organises it to give a basis of action to the higher consciousness. . . .

Then, there is another use. When one is in contact with one's reason, with the rational centre of the intellect, the pure reason, it is a powerful control over all vital impulses. All that comes from the vital world can be very firmly controlled by it and used in a disciplined and organised action. But it must be at the service of something else — not work for its own satisfaction.

These are the two uses of the mind: it is a controlling force, an instrument of control, and it is a power of organisation. That is its true place. (p. 189)

Manas, the Sanskrit word that probably comes closest to the English word *mind*, is in the older Sanskrit texts used for an entire plane or world of mind, the fifth from the top in the Sevenfold Chord of Being (Sri Aurobindo, 1998b, p. 45). In the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* (Ch. 2, the *Ānanda valli*; Radhakrishnan, 2007), it is used for what it calls the sheath of mind, the *manomaya kośa*. Patanjali seems to have used *manas* in his *Yoga Sūtras*⁶ rather like we use *mind*, that is, for the individual mental faculty, but it is quite possible that it still had for him the connotation of something with a cosmic (rather than individual) existence (see verses i.35, ii.53, iii.48). In the later *Darśhanas* (schools of philosophy), *manas* tends to be used in a more restricted way for the sense-mind whose job it is to coordinate the ten *indriyas* (the five senses and the five instruments of action; see, e.g., Dasgupta, 1922/2006, Vol. I, p. 213).

The mind intersects with the vital and the physical planes. On that basis, Sri Aurobindo (1955/1999) distinguished between:

- The *sense-mind* (the intersection of the mind with the physical),
- The *emotional mind* (the intersection of the mind with the vital), and
- The *thought-mind* (the mind proper). (p. 351)

The *mind proper*, which corresponds more or less to the Sanskrit *buddhi*, was subdivided by Sri Aurobindo into five clearly distinct sub-planes that represent different types of mental consciousness. The first is:

- The *ordinary mind*.

Sri Aurobindo (2012) further subdivided the ordinary mind on different occasions in different ways using slightly different categories. For example:

- The *expressive externalizing mind* is the part of the mind that mainly deals with externalizing of mental stuff into the physical world. There is a considerable overlap with the physical mind as discussed earlier.
- The *dynamic mind* is the aspect of the mind discussed in the quote from the Mother given earlier. It deals with planning and the will.
- The *thinking mind* is, as has been seen, also called *the mind proper*. (p. 177)

Another division is based on one's degree of openness to intuition:

- The *habitual mind* (also called *mechanical mind*) repeats itself endlessly and obstinately resists change—in short, the mind under the reign of *tamas*.
- The *pragmatic mind* deals with action and practical things.
- The *pure ideative mind* (also called *intellectual truth-mind*) consists of thoughts and ideas more or less for their own sake. (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999, pp. 842-843)

Above this, but still within the mental plane (the *manomayakośa*), one finds the *Higher Mind*, *Illumined Mind*, *Intuition*, and *Overmind*. Together, Sri Aurobindo viewed them as belonging to what he called the *higher consciousness*. Individually, he described them as follows:

Higher Mind

I mean by the Higher Mind a first plane of spiritual [consciousness] where one becomes

constantly and closely aware of the Self, the One everywhere and knows and sees things habitually with that awareness; but it is still very much on the mind-level although highly spiritual in its essential substance; and its instrumentation is through an elevated thought-power and comprehensive mental sight — not illumined by any of the intenser upper lights but as if in a large strong and clear daylight. It acts as an intermediate state between the Truth-Light above and the human mind; communicating the higher knowledge in a form that the Mind intensified, broadened, made spiritually supple, can receive without being blinded or dazzled by a Truth beyond it. (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/2004, p. 20)

Illumined Mind

A Mind no longer of higher Thought, but of spiritual light. Here the clarity of the spiritual intelligence, its tranquil daylight, gives place or subordinates itself to an intense lustre, a splendour and illumination of the spirit: a play of lightnings of spiritual truth and power breaks from above into the consciousness and adds to the calm and wide enlightenment and the vast descent of peace which characterise or accompany the action of the larger conceptual-spiritual principle, a fiery ardour of realisation and a rapturous ecstasy of knowledge. (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 978–979)

Intuition

Intuition is a power of consciousness nearer and more intimate to the original knowledge by identity; for it is always something that leaps out direct from a concealed identity. It is when the consciousness of the subject meets with the consciousness in the object, penetrates it and sees, feels or vibrates with the truth of what it contacts, that the intuition leaps out like a spark or lightning-flash from the shock of the meeting; or when the consciousness, even without any such meeting, looks into itself and feels directly and intimately the truth or the truths that are there or so contacts the hidden forces behind appearances, then

also there is the outbreak of an intuitive light; or, again, when the consciousness meets the Supreme Reality or the spiritual reality of things and beings and has a contactual union with it, then the spark, the flash, or the blaze of intimate truth-perception is lit in its depths. . . . Intuition has a fourfold power. A power of revelatory truth-seeing, a power of inspiration or truth-hearing, a power of truth-touch or immediate seizing of significance, which is akin to the ordinary nature of its intervention in our mental intelligence, a power of true and automatic discrimination of the orderly and exact relation of truth to truth, — these are the fourfold potencies of Intuition. Intuition can therefore perform all the action of reason — including the function of logical intelligence, which is to work out the right relation of things and the right relation of idea with idea, — but by its own superior process and with steps that do not fail or falter. (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 981–984)

Intuition is the typical plane between the Illumined Mind and the Overmind. It is the highest typical plane that is still individualized. As such it is the source of the truth that can be found in the planes of the Illumined Mind and the Higher Mind. While in the ordinary mind, intuitions tend to come down like individual rays of lightning, in the typical plane that Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) called Intuition: “Its rays are not separated but connected or massed together in a play of waves of what might almost be called in the Sanskrit poetic figure a sea or mass of ‘stable lightnings’” (p. 983).

Sri Aurobindo (1955/1999) used the term *Intuitive Mind* in a few places for this same typical plane above the Illumined Mind, but more commonly he used it for the embodied thinking mind when its substance and functioning begins to be taken over by intuition (pp. 799–810).

The next higher plane, the Overmind,⁵ is fully and intrinsically cosmic in nature.

Overmind

The Overmind knows the One as the support, essence, fundamental power of all things, but in

the dynamic play proper to it it lays emphasis on its divisional power of multiplicity and seeks to give each Power or Aspect its full chance to manifest, relying on the underlying Oneness to prevent disharmony or conflict. Each Godhead, as it were, creates his own world, but without conflict with others; each Aspect, each Idea, each Force of things can be felt in its full separate energy or splendour and work out its values, but this does not create a disharmony, because the Overmind has the sense of the Infinite and in the true (not spatial) Infinite many concurring infinities are possible. (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 139)

In its nature and law the Overmind is a delegate of the [next higher plane, the] Supermind Consciousness, its delegate to the Ignorance. Or we might speak of it as a protective double, a screen of dissimilar similarity through which Supermind can act indirectly on an Ignorance whose darkness could not bear or receive the direct impact of a supreme Light. Even, it is by the projection of this luminous Overmind corona that the diffusion of a diminished light in the Ignorance and the throwing of that contrary shadow which swallows up in itself all light, the Inconscience, became at all possible. For Supermind transmits to Overmind all its realities, but leaves it to formulate them in a movement and according to an awareness of things which is still a vision of Truth and yet at the same time a first parent of the Ignorance. (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, p. 293)

Above the Overmind

The plane above the Overmind is the *Supermind*. It links the *upper hemisphere* to the *lower hemisphere*. Sri Aurobindo (1998a) described the Supermind as follows:

The Supermind is in its very essence a truth-consciousness, a consciousness always free from the Ignorance which is the foundation of our present natural or evolutionary existence and from which nature in us is trying to arrive at self-knowledge and world-knowledge and a right consciousness and the right use of our existence

in the universe. The Supermind, because it is a truth-consciousness, has this knowledge inherent in it and this power of true existence; its course is straight and can go direct to its aim, its field is wide and can even be made illimitable. This is because its very nature is knowledge: it has not to acquire knowledge but possesses it in its own right; its steps are not from nescience or ignorance into some imperfect light, but from truth to greater truth, from right perception to deeper perception, from intuition to intuition, from illumination to utter and boundless luminousness, from growing widenesses to the utter vasts and to very infinitude. On its summits it possesses the divine omniscience and omnipotence, but even in an evolutionary movement of its own graded self-manifestation by which it would eventually reveal its own highest heights, it must be in its very nature essentially free from ignorance and error: it starts from truth and light and moves always in truth and light. As its knowledge is always true, so too its will is always true; it does not fumble in its handling of things or stumble in its paces. In the Supermind feeling and emotion do not depart from their truth, make no slips or mistakes, do not swerve from the right and the real, cannot misuse beauty and delight or twist away from a Divine rectitude. In the Supermind sense cannot mislead or deviate into the grossnesses which are here its natural imperfections and the cause of reproach, distrust and misuse by our ignorance. Even an incomplete statement made by the Supermind is a truth leading to a further truth, its incomplete action a step towards completeness. All the life and action and leading of the Supermind is guarded in its very nature from the falsehoods and uncertainties that are our lot; it moves in safety towards its perfection. (pp. 558–559)

The importance of the distinction Sri Aurobindo makes between Overmind and Supermind can best be understood from the perspective of the evolution of consciousness which we have already spoken of. As has been discussed in the description of the vital, in Sri Aurobindo's view, major evolutionary changes take place under

influence of pre-existing typical planes. Thus, if an overmental type of consciousness is the highest type of consciousness in which multiplicity and differentiation are still possible, then the manifest reality can never be more than a come-down from the absolute perfection that is the hallmark of the Transcendent. And if this is so, classical yoga systems like Patanjali's are correct in holding a content-free (*nirbija*) type of *samādhi* higher than types of *samādhi* with content. However if there exists above the present manifestation a typical plane that is both differentiated and yet fully divine in the deep sense of the Vedic terms *satyam*, absolute truth, and *ṛtam*, dynamic truth of action, then a corresponding perfectly divine manifestation right here in the physical world should be possible or even, as Sri Aurobindo claimed, inevitable in some future step of our collective evolution. In that case, the ultimate aim of yoga should not only be *sunya* (emptiness) or *kaivalya* (purity), but following on those realisations, a supramental transformation of life in all its aspects. One could well argue, that it is this long-term perspective on the future of humanity, and the great practical detail in which he has worked it out, for example in the last four chapters of *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 922–1107), that make Sri Aurobindo's work so valuable.

Above the Supermind, there is finally the upper hemisphere of:

- *Ānanda*, pure, absolute Delight;
- *Cit-Tapas*, pure, absolute Consciousness-Force; and
- *Sat*, pure, absolute Existence.

The upper, or divine hemisphere, and the Supermind, together, are the home of the *Divine Consciousness*. Sri Aurobindo (2012) described this consciousness as follows: "By the Divine Consciousness we mean the spiritual consciousness to which the Divine alone exists . . . and by which one passes beyond the Ignorance and the lower nature into unity with the Divine and the Divine Nature" (p. 5). Sri Aurobindo stressed throughout his works that it is only through a descent of this Divine Consciousness that an entire perfection is possible. So, as he said in one of his letters: "The more you surrender to the Divine,

the more will there be the possibility of perfection in you” (Sri Aurobindo, 2013, p. 285).

About *Sat*, or absolute Existence, and *Ānanda*, absolute Bliss, I need not say much as these are solidly in the realm of metaphysics and Sri Aurobindo does not differ too much here from many others in the tradition. The situation is different for *cit*, absolute Consciousness, because Sri Aurobindo holds a position that differs from many others in the tradition in a manner that affects our day-to-day life. Sri Aurobindo stressed that *cit*, the original Consciousness of Brahman, implies *cit-tapas*, conscious energy. Seen from the perspective of Indian philosophy, this is the core condition needed to allow action to be lifted from the corrupting determinations of unconscious Nature, *prakṛti*, into the free and perfect agency on the side of the Self as Lord, *īśvara* (e.g., Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 262–263). In the perhaps more personal and practical language of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo (1955/1999) wrote,

This power of the soul over its nature is of the utmost importance in the Yoga of self-perfection; if it did not exist, we could never get by conscious endeavour and aspiration out of the fixed groove of our present imperfect human being. (p. 628)

The acceptance of power as part of *saccidānanda* and the power of the individual soul over its nature are necessary preconditions for the radical transformation Sri Aurobindo envisaged (e.g., Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 87–97).

This concludes the description of the Sevenfold Chord of Being. Before moving on to the next section, there are a few smaller issues remaining that have a vertical component and, as such, will be discussed here.

The Cakras

The *cakras* are centers of consciousness that seem to be stacked up one above the other in the inner, subtle physical body, the *sūkṣma śarīra*. As centers of consciousness, the *cakras* seem to belong to the *puruṣa*, but they preside over corresponding layers of the inner nature, which are part of *prakṛti*. As the *cakras* are as much centers of force and action as of awareness, they do not go well with the strict separation

of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* that can be found in Sāṃkhya, one of the six schools of Indian philosophy, and one sees them more often discussed in Tantric literature. Sri Aurobindo only rarely described them in the traditional (and perhaps rather romantic) manner of lotuses with distinct colors, sounds, and numbers of petals. He wrote, however, very often about the layers, or levels, of conscious existence over which they preside. Unless mentioned otherwise, the quoted phrases and most of the paraphrases in the following list are from *Letters on Yoga – I* (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, pp. 230-237):

- The highest *cakra*, the *sahasrāra* is located at the crown of the head. It “commands the higher thinking mind, houses the still higher illumined mind, and at its highest opens to the intuition through which . . . the overmind can have . . . an immediate contact.”

This center is not often mentioned in the English language, though there may be a vague reference to it in the fact that difficult or highly abstract ideas are said to “go over one’s head”. Anecdotally it is through here that inspirations are most often felt to enter.

- Just below it, the *ājñā cakra*, “governs the dynamic mind, will, vision, mental formation”. It is located behind the forehead.

According to an informal survey in one of the earlier issues of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* this is the location where philosophers and academics feel that their consciousness resides. Again, a child who needs to think more clearly is asked to use his head, not his heart, let alone his guts.

- Below the *ājñā cakra*, at the level of the throat, comes the *viśuddha* in the lowest mental layer, the expressive and externalizing mind. Its character depends on what it expresses. It can express vital feelings coming from below as well as thoughts and inspirations from above. It is not only concerned with verbal and vocal expressions, but it is also active in other forms of creative work.
- The *anāhata* at the level of the heart “governs the emotional being” and lodges the higher vital consciousness. It carries the more

sophisticated human emotions of love, compassion, etc.

If people are asked to be more generous or compassionate they are encouraged to “open their heart.” They are not asked to “open their head.”

- Below it, one can find the *maṇipūra* housing the middle vital with one’s larger ambitions for power and possession.

This middle vital is the *Hara* of Japanese martial arts (see Markert, 1998). It is also the location of what those in business call their gut feelings. Significantly, “having guts” means being courageous and daring—qualities that according to the Indian tradition occur when one’s consciousness is powerfully present at this level.

- Below it is the *svādhiṣṭhāna*, the *cakra* of the lower vital consciousness, where one finds sexuality and the search for minor, personal comforts.
- The last *cakra*, at the bottom of the spine, is the *mūlādhāra*, the seat of the *kuṇḍalīnī* energy and the physical consciousness down to the subconscious.

The *cakras* are supposed to be interconnected through vertical energy channels within the subtle body. Again anecdotally, some people report to feel them as streams of force while others perceive them as streams of light.

When subtle inner energies open a *cakra*, the inner powers, or *siddhis* that belong to that *cakra* are supposed to awaken and become available. This awakening can be achieved intentionally, for example, as part of focused *hatha* and *rajayoga* practices, but it can also happen spontaneously or as a consequence of other forms of yoga (Sri Aurobindo, 2013, pp. 460–464).

Levels of Awareness

Besides the Sevenfold Chord of Being and the *cakras*, there is still one more set of terms that describe states that tend to be experienced subjectively as a vertically arranged hierarchy. They describe levels, or degrees, of awareness. From the bottom up, they are the *inconscious*, the

subconscious, the ordinary waking consciousness, and the *superconscious*. The *inconscious* base of the creation Sri Aurobindo (1922/1997b) also calls *nescient* (p. 427).

The word *subconscious* Sri Aurobindo used with two somewhat different meanings. He used it sometimes simply to indicate all that is below the ordinary consciousness (in other words, as a synonym for the subliminal), but he used it more typically for a specific plane situated below the physical consciousness. In that last sense, the *subconscious* contains the first crude beginnings of conscious movement when creation just arises out of the sleep of the *inconscious*. Whatever has been rejected from the higher levels of consciousness sinks back into this nether region—and so come into being the murky waters that Freud described as the *unconscious*. It is also the place from which rise up the active remnants of the past, or *atavisms*, that mar the individual’s progress. Sri Aurobindo (2012) explained:

In our yoga we mean by the *subconscious* that quite submerged part of our being in which there is no wakeningly conscious and coherent thought, will or feeling or organised reaction, but which yet receives obscurely the impressions of all things and stores them up in itself and from it too all sorts of stimuli, of persistent habitual movements, crudely repeated or disguised in strange forms can surge up into dream or into the waking nature. For if these impressions rise up most in dream in an incoherent and disorganised manner, they can also and do rise up into our waking consciousness as a mechanical repetition of old thoughts, old mental, vital and physical habits or an obscure stimulus to sensations, actions, emotions which do not originate in or from our conscious thought or will and are even often opposed to its perceptions, choice or dictates. In the *subconscious* there is an obscure mind full of obstinate *sanskaras*, impressions, associations, fixed notions, habitual reactions formed by our past, an obscure vital full of the seeds of habitual desires, sensations and nervous reactions, a most obscure material

which governs much that has to do with the condition of the body. It is largely responsible for our illnesses; chronic or repeated illnesses are indeed mainly due to the subconscious and its obstinate memory and habit of repetition of whatever has impressed itself upon the body consciousness. But this subconscious must be clearly distinguished from the subliminal parts of our being such as the inner or subtle physical consciousness, the inner vital or inner mental; for these are not at all obscure or incoherent or ill-organised, but only veiled from our surface consciousness. Our surface constantly receives something, inner touches, communications or influences, from these sources but does not know for the most part whence they come. (pp. 216–217)

In *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) similarly wrote:

That part of us which we can strictly call subconscious because it is below the level of mind and conscious life, inferior and obscure, covers the purely physical and vital elements of our constitution of bodily being, unmentalised, unobserved by the mind, uncontrolled by it in their action. It can be held to include the dumb occult consciousness, dynamic but not sensed by us, which operates in the cells and nerves and all the corporeal stuff and adjusts their life process and automatic responses. It covers also those lowest functionings of submerged sense-mind which are more operative in the animal and in plant life; in our evolution we have overpassed the need of any large organised action of this element, but it remains submerged and obscurely at work below our conscious nature. This obscure activity extends to a hidden and hooded mental substratum into which past impressions and all that is rejected from the surface mind sink and remain there dormant and can surge up in sleep or in any absence of the mind, taking dream forms, forms of mechanical mind action or suggestion, forms of automatic vital reaction or impulse, forms of physical abnormality or nervous perturbation,

forms of morbidity, disease, unbalance. Out of the subconscious we bring ordinarily so much to the surface as our waking sense-mind and intelligence need for their purpose; in so bringing them up we are not aware of their nature, origin, operation and do not apprehend them in their own values but by a translation into the values of our waking human sense and intelligence. But the risings of the subconscious, its effects upon the mind and body, are mostly automatic, uncalled for and involuntary; for we have no knowledge and therefore no control of the subconscious. It is only by an experience abnormal to us, most commonly in illness or some disturbance of balance, that we can become directly aware of something in the dumb world, dumb but very active, of our bodily being and vitality or grow conscious of the secret movements of the mechanical subhuman physical and vital mind which underlies our surface, — a consciousness which is ours but seems not ours because it is not part of our known mentality. This and much more lives concealed in the subconscious.

A descent into the subconscious would not help us to explore this region, for it would plunge us into incoherence or into sleep or a dull trance or a comatose torpor. A mental scrutiny or insight can give us some indirect and constructive idea of these hidden activities; but it is only by drawing back into the subliminal or by ascending into the superconscious and from there looking down or extending ourselves into these obscure depths that we can become directly and totally aware and in control of the secrets of our subconscious physical, vital and mental nature. This awareness, this control are of the utmost importance. For the subconscious is the Inconscious in the process of becoming conscious; it is a support and even a root of our inferior parts of being and their movements. It sustains and reinforces all in us that clings most and refuses to change, our mechanical recurrences of unintelligent thought, our persistent obstinacies of feeling, sensation, impulse, persistency, our uncontrolled fixities of

character. The animal in us, — the infernal also, — has its lair of retreat in the dense jungle of the subconscious. To penetrate there, to bring in light and establish a control, is indispensable for the completeness of any higher life, for any integral transformation of the nature. (pp. 762–763)

Our ordinary waking consciousness is limited to a small portion of the physical, vital, and lower mental planes. Most of what happens even on these planes remains below its threshold of awareness. The higher ranges of the mental plane, the supramental, and *saccidānanda* are entirely superconscious to the ordinary waking consciousness. The words superconscious and superconscient were both used by Sri Aurobindo again with two different meanings. More broadly, they were used for any consciousness that is above the ordinary waking consciousness—in other words, including the higher consciousness or, more specifically, for that type of consciousness that is divine, entirely beyond dualities. Sri Aurobindo did not use the term “unconscious”. Freud’s unconscious covered, more or less, what Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) described above as “a hidden and hooded mental substratum into which past impressions and all that is rejected from the surface mind sink” (p. 762). Jung’s unconscious contained more positive formations, like, for example, his *archetypes*. In that sense it has some overlap with Sri Aurobindo’s subliminal.

It seems appropriate at this time to put the most important terms used for the vertical system together into a model, as in Table 1. Almost everything in this table belongs to the subliminal. The only exception might be the ordinary waking consciousness and its share of the ignorance. But one could argue that even the ordinary waking consciousness itself belongs to the subliminal. The reason is that most people, most of the time, are so fully identified with the *surface mind* that they are only aware of the content with which that part of their mind is busy. So even when they engage, for example, in introspection, they may become aware of the mental and vital processes that are happening inside their (surface) consciousness, but

they will still not be aware of the consciousness itself, let alone of its ignorance.

To end this section, a word of caution: The terms that occupy the cells of this table do not denote things. They point at concepts that have meanings and connotations whose borders tend to be far more vague than the neat lines that this diagram suggests. Though I hope this table is useful for those who enjoy such things, it has to be treated with utmost caution and humility. Even the simplest flower surpasses whatever our minds can possibly create.

The Center of Identity

As has been shown, Sri Aurobindo’s understanding of human nature was complex. He distinguished many different parts that all have their own history, character, and priorities for action. In order to present one face both to the outside world and to oneself, one needs something to coordinate all these different parts and tendencies, and as long as the person has not found his or her real Self, it is the ego that fulfills this role.

The Ego

At one place in *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) described the ego as follows:

But what is this strongly separative self-experience that we call ego? It is nothing fundamentally real in itself but only a practical construction of our consciousness devised to centralise the activities of Nature in us. We perceive a formation of mental, physical, vital experience which distinguishes itself from the rest of being, and that is what we think of as ourselves in nature—this individualisation of being in becoming. We then proceed to conceive of ourselves as something which has thus individualised itself and only exists so long as it is individualised, — a temporary or at least a temporal becoming; or else we conceive of ourselves as someone who supports or causes the individualisation, an immortal being perhaps but limited by its individuality. This perception and this conception constitute our ego-sense. Normally, we go no farther in our

Hemisphere	Sevenfold chord of being		Cakra	Consciousness	Knowledge/ Ignorance	
upper hemisphere	Existence (<i>sat</i>)			Superconscious, Divine Consciousness	True Knowledge	
	Consciousness-force (<i>cit-tapas</i>)					
	Bliss (<i>ānanda</i>)					
link plane	Supermind (<i>mahas</i> or <i>vijñāna</i>)					
lower hemisphere	Mind (<i>manas</i>)	Overmind		<i>sahasrāra</i>	Higher Consciousness	beginning of separation, no real Ignorance
		Intuition				
		Illumined mind				
		Higher mind				
	Ordinary mind	Thinking mind		<i>ājñā</i>	Ordinary Waking Consciousness	Knowledge-Ignorance mixture
		Planning mind				
		Expressive mind		<i>viśuddha</i>		Ignorance
	Vital (<i>prāṇa</i>)	Higher vital		<i>anāhata</i>		
		Middle vital		<i>maṇipūra</i>		
		Lower vital		<i>svādhiṣṭhāna</i>		
Physical (<i>annam</i>)		<i>mūlādhāra</i>				
Subconscious			Subconscience			
Inconscient				Nescience		

Table 1.

knowledge of our individual existence. (pp. 382–383)

In other words, Sri Aurobindo viewed the ego as a temporary, makeshift arrangement that nature makes to centralize the action and provide a focal point for one's sense of identity. Interestingly, neither the character, nor the center, nor the borders of the ego are fixed. When one speaks to a sibling, for instance, one becomes a sister or brother; when one is with one's parents one functions as their child; with one's children, as parent; and when one speaks with neighbors, one suddenly represents one's family as a whole. When one watches a football match, one identifies with one's city or

country; when an individual talks about feminism, he or she grows aware of his or her gender; in one's concern for the environment, one can identify with the planet; and when one hurts one's toe, one retires to the central command of one's little, individual, bodily existence. In other words, both the borders of the ego and the center of one's identity shift continuously from one second to the next. As its existence is far from intrinsic and in many ways precarious, the ego tends to be in constant need of support and it engages in various forms of defensive action, not all of which are appropriate or helpful. Common ways for the ego to defend itself are, for example, to stress the superior quality of its achievements, character, possessions, and

social contacts, or to do its opposite: get out of the way of others by dissimulating its own existence.

Modern society is ambivalent about the ego. In English, egoism, egotism, and ego-centricity have all negative connotations, if only because they clash with the same traits in others, but psychology professionals tend to stress that a lack of ego-strength leads to difficulties in keeping oneself together and to an inability to withstand the pressure of others. It is not surprising that a healthy ego is widely considered essential for psychological well-being amongst professional psychologists as they often meet people who do not have a sufficiently strong ego. Amongst those who do yoga, however, one does not often hear praise for the ego and its often-misplaced attempts at heroic action. Here, the ego is more often derided as the villain of the piece. As a young Buddhist monk once told the author, "All suffering is due to ego."

Shifting the Border

Between Self and World Inwards

As was mentioned earlier, the location of the border of the self is perpetually shifting and in a person's ordinary waking consciousness it can include not only the individual's body, mind, and personality, but even possessions, roles, group-memberships and whatever else one identifies with at a given moment. What is more, both the average and the ideal location for the border of the self differ, not only between individuals but also between (sub)cultures—think for example about the degree to which one's sense of self can include one's small family, extended family, caste, company, class or country. Some spiritual traditions in India recommend placing the borders of the self radically further inside. For example, in Sāṃkhya, the philosophy supporting *hatha* and *raja yoga*, the true Self or *puruṣa* contains only pure consciousness, while the personality and all mental processes are considered to belong to universal Nature, *prakṛti* (Hiriyanna, 1993, pp. 270-280). For Sri Aurobindo too, it is an essential element of the practice of yoga to shift one's center of identification from the temporary formation of the ego to the true Self in the central being. As Sri Aurobindo (2012) said,

The "I" or the little ego is constituted by Nature and is at once a mental, vital and physical

formation meant to aid in centralising and individualising the outer consciousness and action. When the true being is discovered, the utility of the ego is over and this formation has to disappear—the true being is felt in its place. (p. 97)

In the following two sections I will elaborate on what Sri Aurobindo meant with "the true being."

The Self: Ātman, Jivātman, and Plane-Specific Puruṣas

Sri Aurobindo used the word Self (with a capital S) mostly for the transcendent, immutable essence, both in its universal form (*ātman* or *paramātman*) and in its individual form (*jivātman*). While in his scheme of things, the *ātman* is truly universal and one for everybody, the *jivātman* is aware of that oneness but it also has the essence of a spiritual individuality: It is an eternal portion of the Divine (Sri Aurobindo, 1922/1997b, pp. 549–550; Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, p. 493; Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 57). One could say that the *jivātman* is not any longer *ananta-guṇa*, of infinite quality, but, as the carrier of one's spiritual individuality, it manifests only the particular subset of all possible qualities that determines one's individual *svabhāva* and *svadharma*, one's essential individual nature and truth of action.

According to Sri Aurobindo (2012), there is not only a Self above the manifest reality, but there is also a distinct Self, or *puruṣa*, on each plane or level of consciousness. These plane-specific Selves function as the true center of one's conscious existence on that level (p. 41). So, the central being contains an *annamaya puruṣa*, a *prāṇamaya puruṣa*, and a *manomaya puruṣa*. On each of the three manifest lower planes (physical, vital, and mental), one can find, besides this plane-specific Self, also plane-specific aspects of the inner and outer nature (p. 41). The combination of a self, in the most generic sense of a center of consciousness and identity, with a corresponding part of nature, is what Sri Aurobindo called a *being*. So, within the human individual, Sri Aurobindo spoke of an inner and an outer physical being, an inner and an outer vital being, as well as an inner and an outer mental being. In the outer nature, one is generally

not aware of the true Self, and as a result, there is a tendency to operate under command of some more superficial, ego-based center instead. The inner nature comes more easily under control of one's true Self. For example, the outer mental being is likely to be guided mainly by a *mental ego*, while the inner mental being is more likely to have the *mental Self* as its center. Sri Aurobindo spoke about a true being when on one of the planes, one's nature is fully under the conscious control of the true Self of that plane. The true mental being, for example, describes the (part of the) mental nature that is fully under conscious control of the *mental puruṣa*.

The Soul: Evolving from Psychic Entity to Psychic Being

In Sri Aurobindo's (2012) system, the *psychic center* stands behind all the complexities of one's outer and inner nature, and even behind the plane-specific Selves. It has descended as the delegate of the *jīvātman*, one's individual Self beyond space and time, into this "world of becomings"¹⁷ and supports one's whole nature through the plane-specific Selves (p. 59). Initially, this psychic center (*antarātman*, *caitya puruṣa*) is only a small, almost point-like *psychic entity*. It is the tiny kernel of truth that hides below the otherwise false sense that the ego has of its own reality and importance (pp. 56-57). Initially, it can be felt in the surface nature at best as a *psychic influence*. Gradually, however, as it grows, or to put it differently, as it brings (over many lifetimes) more and more of one's inner and outer nature under its influence, it becomes a full-fledged *psychic being*, which one can experience as a *psychic presence*. When this presence is strong and sensed even by other people, they may say of such a person that he or she is an "old soul". At a still later stage, there can be a complete reversal, through which the psychic being becomes one's one-and-only identity, and the ego is no longer needed.

The word *soul* Sri Aurobindo used quite often in the common English sense for anything with which one's "I" can identify. In this more common sense, he wrote, for example, about the *desire soul* (Sri Aurobindo, 1940/2005, pp. 234-240). More typically, however, he used it for this evolving psychic center:

The true being may be realised in one or both of two aspects — the Self or Atman and the soul or *antarātman*, psychic being or *caitya puruṣa*. The difference is that one is felt as universal, the other as individual supporting the mind, life and body. When one first realises the Atman one feels it separate from all things, existing in itself and detached. . . . When one realises the psychic being, it is not like that; for this brings the sense of union with the Divine and dependence upon it and sole consecration to the Divine alone and the power to change the nature and discover the true mental, the true vital, the true physical being in oneself. Both realisations are necessary for this Yoga. (Sri Aurobindo, 2012, p. 97)

While the outer layers of the being remain for a long time determined by the forces working in the surrounding outer nature, the inner layers generally come more easily under the influence of the *psychic element*. Sri Aurobindo (1955/1999) elucidated:

One must first acquire an inner Yogic consciousness and replace by it our ordinary view of things, natural movements, motives of life; one must revolutionise the whole present build of our being. Next, we have to go still deeper, discover our veiled psychic entity and in its light and under its government psychicise our inner and outer parts, turn mind-nature, life-nature, body-nature and all our mental, vital, physical action and states and movements into a conscious instrumentation of the soul. Afterwards or concurrently we have to spiritualise the being in its entirety by a descent of a divine Light, Force, Purity, Knowledge, freedom and wideness. It is necessary to break down the limits of the personal mind, life and physicality, dissolve the ego, enter into the cosmic consciousness, realise the self, acquire a spiritualised and universalised mind and heart, life-force, physical consciousness. Then only the passage into supramental consciousness begins to become possible, and even then there is a difficult ascent to make

each stage of which is a separate arduous achievement. (pp. 281–282)

It may be noted that the distinction Sri Aurobindo made between the eternal, immutable Self above and the evolving nature of the Soul deep within is not commonly made within the Indian tradition—at least not in the same manner. The *antarātman* is recognized as the self-within, but it is not seen as individualized or evolving. One reason for this is that the existence of an evolving soul-personality is only interesting in the context of an on-going evolution of consciousness where the ultimate aim is the manifestation of various aspects of the Divine in an ever-evolving material world. If the ultimate aim of life is liberation and merger with the transcendent Divine, *mokṣa*, then the personality, however well-developed it may become on the way, has no real meaning. The soul is then seen as a center of pure consciousness, found inside, but otherwise identical to the cosmic *ātman* above, unchanging and the same for everyone. Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), for example, spoke of the *antarātman* but acknowledged only its pure, immutable presence, neither its individuality, nor its evolving nature. For him, distinctions like those between *ātman*, *jīvātman* and *antarātman* were still part of *māyā*, and as such unreal and uninteresting (Sri Ramana Maharshi, 1923/2010, items 3–7). Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887-1963), another contemporary of Sri Aurobindo, like many traditional Vedantins, took the *jīvātman* to be in essence identical to the *paramātman*, and as such only seemingly different from person to person as long as they are lost in the Ignorance. He wrote:

Jivatman is the individual soul, a reflection of Brahman in Avidya or the mind. Paramatman is the Supreme Soul, Brahman or the Atman. From the empirical viewpoint, the Jivatman is a finite and conditioned being, while the Paramatman is the infinite, eternal, Sat-chitananda Brahman. In essence, the Jivatman is identical with Paramatman when Avidya is destroyed. (Swami Sivananda Saraswati, 1992/1997, p. 34)

Many in the tradition of Advaita Vedānta would agree, but for Sri Aurobindo this is just one of two possibilities. He wrote:

Some of us, it has been said by a great teacher,^[8] are *jivakotis*, human beings leaning so preeminently to the symbol-nature that, if they have lost it utterly for a while in the Reality, they lose themselves; once immersed, they cannot return; they are lost in God to humanity; others are *ishwarakotis*, human beings whose centre has already been shifted upwards or, elevated in the superior planes of our conscious-existence from the beginning, was established in God rather than in Nature. Such men are already leaning down from God to Nature; they, therefore, even in losing themselves in Him yet keep themselves since in reaching God they do not depart from their centre but rather go towards it; arrived they are able to lean down again to humanity. Those who can thus emerge from this bath of God are the final helpers of humanity & are chosen by God & Nature to prepare the type of supernatural man to which our humanity is rising. (Sri Aurobindo, 1997a, pp. 340–341)

Elsewhere, Sri Aurobindo (2012) seemed to wonder whether *jivakotis* actually exist, and whether it is not in the nature of things that in the end, all souls will turn out to be *ishwarakotis* (pp. 540-541).

The main point remains, however, that Sri Aurobindo held that the eternal, unchanging *jīvātman* above has a unique spiritual individuality and that it sends a representative of itself, the *psychic entity*, down into the incarnate life, where its role is to bring, gradually, over many lifetimes, more and more of the inner and outer life under its influence, slowly becoming the center of a unique “evolving soul” or “psychic being.” It is now time to see how the horizontal and vertical systems and the various centers of identity are related to each other.

Bringing It All Together

Before all the elements that have been discussed thus far can be brought together, one should keep in mind that the divisions made as part of the

concentric system, apply equally to each of the three lowest layers of the vertical system. There is an outer, inner, and true mental; an outer, inner, and true vital; and even an outer, inner, and true physical. Or, to list them the other way around, one can distinguish between mental, vital, and physical aspects in the outer nature, in the inner nature, and even in one's true Self. One reason why this is important is that people can have quite different characteristics and levels of development in the various areas that constitute their personality.

Within the outer nature, for example, a person can be strong in body but weak in mind; flexible in his ideas but unforgiving in his feelings; possessive about his ideas, but generous in physical things; and, of course, the opposites are equally possible. Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) stressed that within the inner realm people tend to be in direct contact with each other, but the capacity to bring that inner knowledge to the surface nature differs from person to person (pp. 549–567). Thus, someone may be very open to other people's thoughts and know what people think even at a distance when there is no outer contact, but the same person may be quite insensitive to their feelings. And again, the opposite may also exist: someone may sense directly, without any outer clue or contact what someone else feels, but may not have any idea about what the other thinks. In the inner physical, some people can feel concretely, as if in their own body, the physical sensations of other people, and yet they may not be particularly sensitive to their feelings or thoughts. In short, virtually all combinations are possible.

The situation is slightly different regarding the Selves on the different planes. The Self differs considerably from one plane to the other but tends to be similar in its basic characteristics from one person to the next. The mental Self, the *manomaya puruṣa*, for example, is most typically the witness, the *sākṣī* (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999, pp. 238, 345, 347). It watches with perfect equanimity what happens in oneself and in one's surroundings. There are no comments, no judgments. In the vital Self, the *prāṇamaya puruṣa*, there is also equanimity, but here it is an equanimity of feeling, energy and action: "tranquil, strong, luminous, many-energied,

obedient to the Divine Will, egoless, yet or rather therefore capable of all action, achievement, highest or largest enterprise" (Sri Aurobindo, 1955/1999, p. 178). There is a steady, self-existing joy and energy that streams freely, unencumbered. The physical Self, *annamaya puruṣa*, has most typically a strong, unperturbed peace and calm. All three tend to be impersonal, vast, blissful, and universal, but each has these qualities in a manner that depends on the plane of conscious existence they preside over.

Where One Places the Center of One's Consciousness

A major reason for making these various distinctions is that it is important where one places the center of consciousness. A typical example may make this clear. Imagine a meeting in which an academic hears that a colleague has a better idea than the one he himself has just presented to the group:

- If the academic lives at that moment predominantly in his surface mind, he will be happy, since the idea from the colleague will enable him to construct a better model of reality than the one he had managed on his own.
- If, on the other hand, he receives the news while residing in his surface vital, he may feel threatened, because the human vital is not at all bothered about truth: it is a life-force and as such its primary concern is the need to assert itself, and so he may fear that his colleague's prowess may endanger his own position in the power hierarchy of his office.
- If he has access to what is called the Higher Mind, he may immediately see how the new idea hangs together with a whole range of other ideas.
- If there is a psychic influence on the vital, his egoic need for self-assertion will be tempered by kindness or sympathy, and he may be happy for his colleague, especially if the latter needs a little boost in life.

If he lives deep within his true being, he will not have any automatic reactivity:

- In the *mental Self*, he will just continue watching events unfold on the physical, vital, and mental planes.
- In the *vital Self*, he will remain energetically, enthusiastically present in the midst of the play of forces.
- In the true *physical Self*, he will again be nonreactive, but peacefully, eternally, and impersonally present amidst the physical circumstances.

If one looks in more detail, one might realize, as has been seen in the earlier discussion of the *cakras*, that there are actually three clearly distinct vital selves.

- In the *anāhata*, he will be aware mainly of higher emotional feelings like sympathy and love at play during the discussion.
- In the *maṇipūra*, he will be aware primarily of the power play between the ambitions of the protagonists in the debate.
- In the *svādhiṣṭhāna*, he will be aware of the smaller, individual life-sensations.

And finally, there are notorious as well as beneficial combinations:

- If his center of identity is divided between the two outer, lower vital levels, he may not have much interest in the content of the debate, but he might try to use sex-appeal to gain the upper hand in the department's power-struggle, or, reversely, use a position of power to solicit sexual or social favors.
- On the positive side, a combination of well-tuned vital and mental powers might enable him to use the new ideas to implement some much-needed positive change, whether inside the office or in the world outside.

Some Diagrams

To make it easier to visualize the relationships between the various concepts discussed so far, I will now put some of them together into two diagrams. The reader may keep in mind that reality is always much more complex than the models that can be made of it, and these diagrams are intended only to depict in graphic form how the different

parts of the personality conceptually relate to each other. They are not intended to depict reality in any other way.

Figure 3 indicates how the concentric system intersects with the three planes of the lower hemisphere: the physical, vital, and mental. The grey sheet labeled "Section" on the right side of Figure 3 serves as the backdrop for the conceptual relationships indicated in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4 indicates the most prominent elements of human nature together in a simple, two-dimensional diagram. The ego and the outer nature are on the right. It may be noted that in the outer nature, the distinction between mental, vital, and physical is not as clear as the separate circles indicate. In the inner nature, they are clearly distinct, but in the outer nature, they are always mixed up together. An important issue that is visible, even in this highly simplified diagram, is that the inner nature, which in mainstream psychology would be counted under the self, is in Indian systems like Vedānta and Sāṃkhya unambiguously part of *prakṛti*, the non-self.

Figure 5 shows a somewhat more detailed rendering of the same model. Along the vertical axis, there are listed the various planes belonging to the Sevenfold Chord of Being. The subsequent discussion has added the *cakras* and the corresponding parts of the inner nature; below the diagram, a few additional terms have been added to indicate the concentric system. In Figure 5, on the left of line A is the Self, the *puruṣa*, the carrier of our individual consciousness. On the right of line B is the outer nature, which is all of which most people are aware. In between the two vertical lines are the inner worlds. The arrowhead lines under "inner being" indicate that the center of the inner being can be in the inner realm itself, in the corresponding *cakra*, or in the plane-specific Self. The lines under "psychic being" indicate that the psychic being evolves over time: It gradually brings first the true being, then the inner being, and, ultimately even the outer being under its control.

Epilogue

With this, I have completed my account of the way Sri Aurobindo described the structure of

existence, *sat*

consciousness-force, *cit-tapas*

bliss, *ānanda*

supermind, *vijñāna*

mind, *manas*

vital, *prāṇa*

body, *annam*

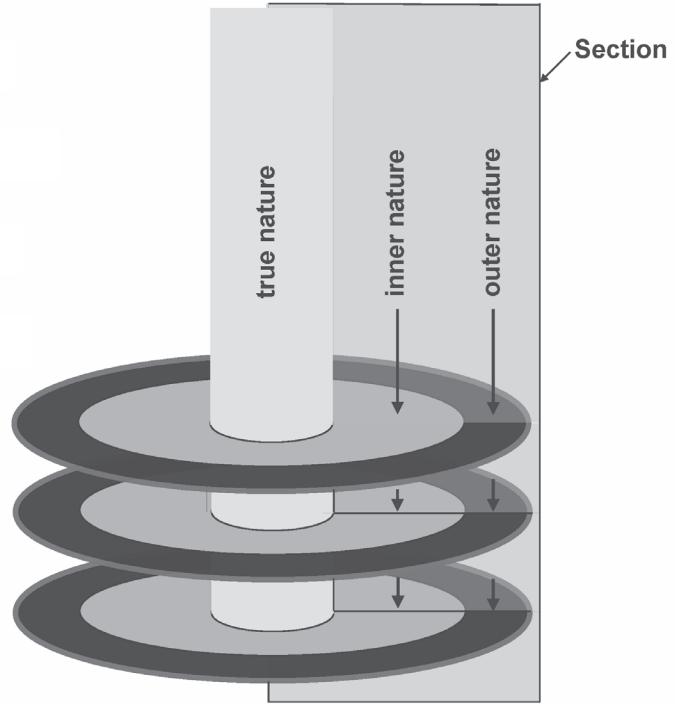


Figure 3.

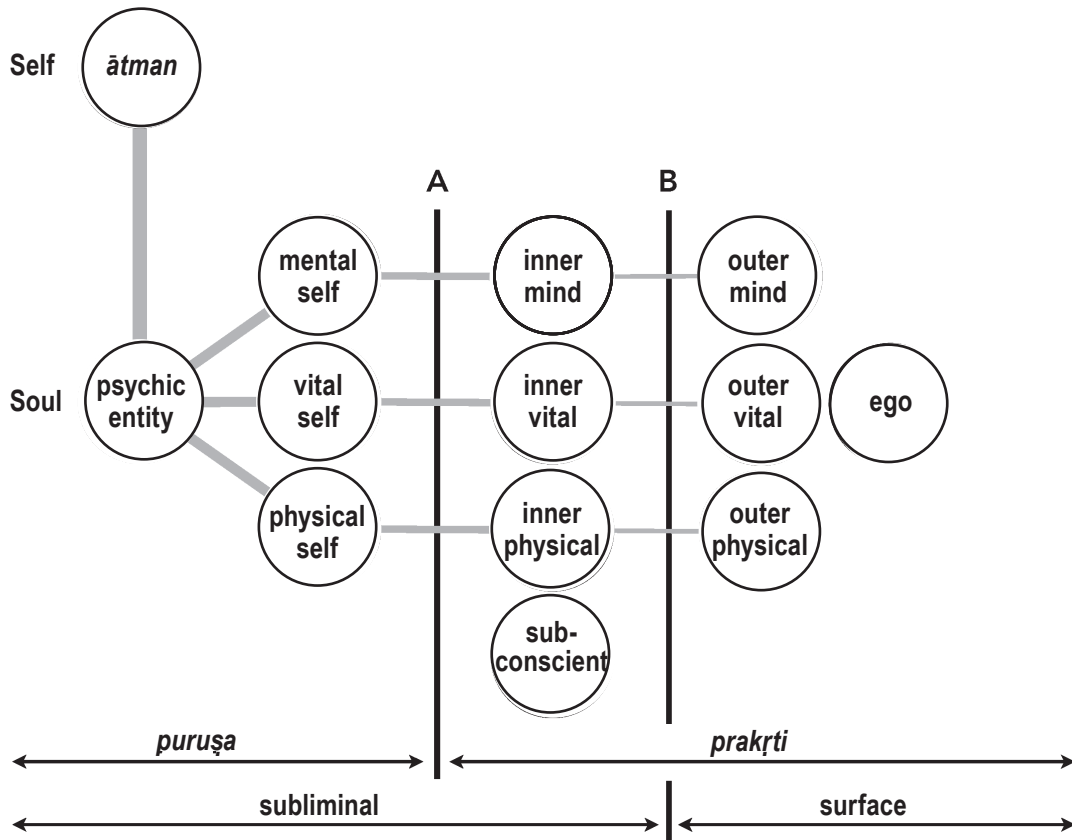


Figure 4.

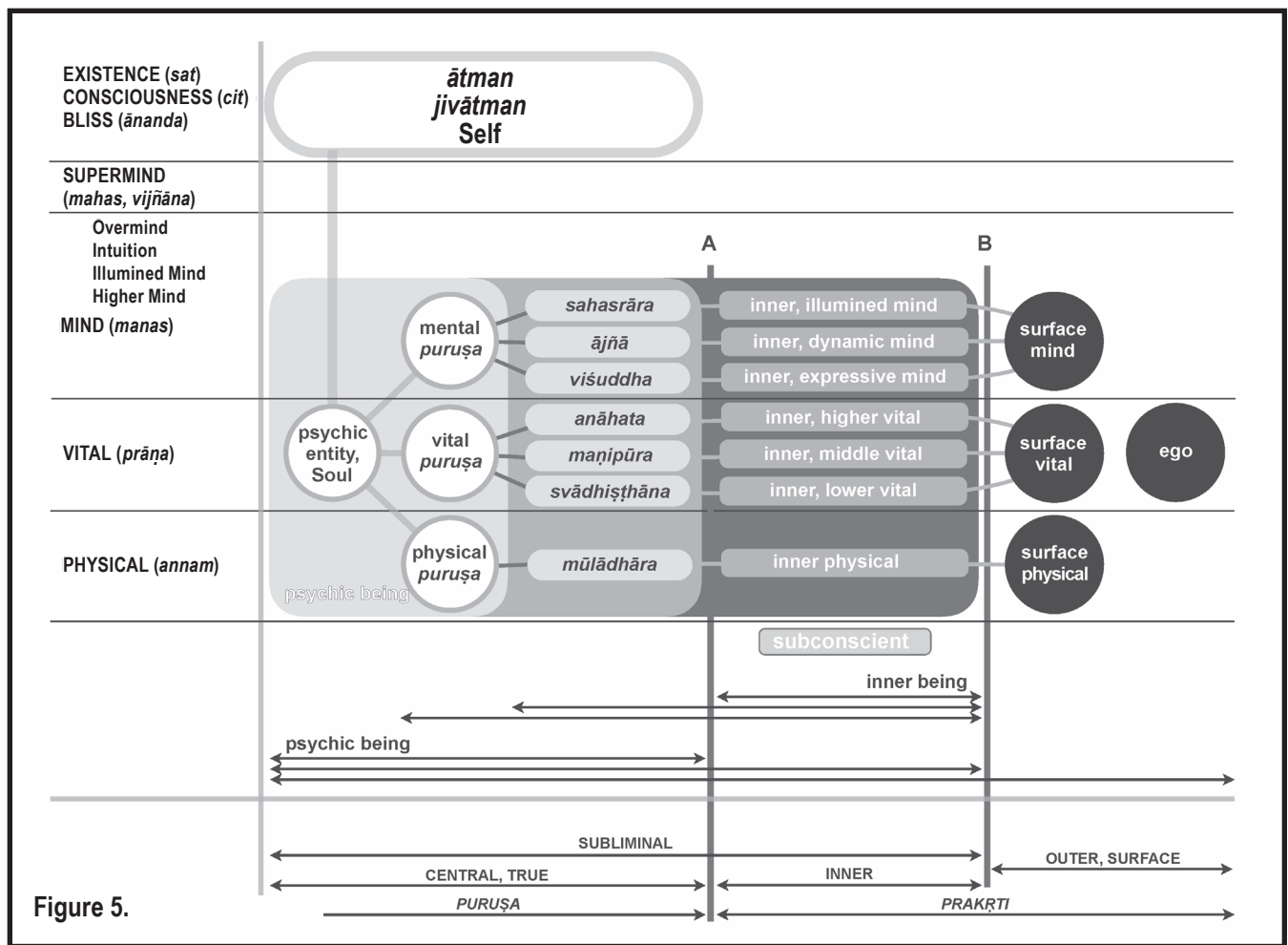


Figure 5.

the personality and the topography of consciousness in human nature. What remains is to provide some more context.

In the opening paragraph of this paper, I mentioned that Sri Aurobindo's integral understanding of human nature was needed for the integral transformation he envisaged. What was not explained is what Sri Aurobindo meant by integral transformation. This is what he wrote in one of his letters:

By transformation I do not mean some change of the nature—I do not mean for instance sainthood or ethical perfection or Yogic siddhis (like the Tantrik's). I use transformation in a special sense, a change of consciousness radical and complete and of a certain specific kind which is so conceived as to bring about a strong and assured step forward in the

spiritual evolution of the consciousness such as and greater than what took place when a mentalised being first appeared in a vital and material animal world. If anything short of that takes place or at least if a real beginning is not made on that basis, a fundamental progress towards it, then my object is not accomplished. A partial realisation does not meet the demand I make on life and Yoga. (Sri Aurobindo, 2011, p. 153)

As may be clear, the transformation Sri Aurobindo described here is radical. It involves a shift greater than the one from animal to man, and what is more, he asserted that humans can play a conscious role in bringing it about. The core of what humans can contribute, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a handing over the control of their lives from the ego to the higher principle; a process that is, as Sri

Aurobindo (1955/1999) said, “not too difficult to initiate, but very difficult to make absolutely sincere and all-pervasive” (p. 247). Yet even when that has been accomplished it is still only the first of three stages that Sri Aurobindo (1940/2005) described in one of the most psychologically interesting chapters of *The Life Divine* (pp. 922–952). For the remaining two, and especially for the third, which Sri Aurobindo called the *supramental transformation*, there has to be at least the beginning of a change in the outer, manifest reality of the collective human existence, about which he gave some indications in the last chapter of the same text (pp. 1051–1107).

Since the rise of the *śramaṇa* (renouncer) traditions in India (800–400 BCE), many Indian schools of spiritual endeavor have stressed *duḥkha* and *avidyā* (Flood, 1998, pp. 76, 81–82), and it is not unusual to see *vairāgya* encouraged not just in the sense of disillusionment, but in the sense of disgust.⁹ All this clearly was not Sri Aurobindo’s (1940/2005) attitude towards the world, and for him the manifestation, however it may appear at present, was not intrinsically doomed to *avidyā* and *duḥkha*, ignorance and pain. If Sri Aurobindo was right, then the Vedic, idealist-realist perspective of involution and evolution of consciousness can give the assurance that, sooner or later, humanity—or its evolutionary successor—will reach such a state. In Sri Aurobindo’s vision, this is the future that in a most profound and complete way will finally “justify the light on Nature’s face” (Sri Aurobindo, 1950/1997c, p. 344).

Notes

1. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* is published in 37 volumes, each of which are available for free download in pdf format at: <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>
2. For a discussion of how Sri Aurobindo’s conceptualization of consciousness relates to a few commonly held positions in the field of consciousness studies, one could consult Cornelissen (2008), and for a further discussion of his theory of knowledge, Cornelissen (2013).
3. Subliminal: sub + Latin *limen*, threshold.
4. In his writings for the general public, Sri Aurobindo tried to use English translations

rather than the original Sanskrit terms whenever possible, capitalizing them to indicate that he used them with a specialist, and often elevated, meaning. Mind stands here for *manas* in its oldest and widest Vedic sense, which includes all the mental powers, intellect, intelligence, understanding, perception, sense, conscience, etc. (Elsewhere, Sri Aurobindo used *manas* more often with the much narrower meaning of sense-mind.)

5. There is an extensive literature in English about Patanjali’s *Yogasutras*. A good place to start is B. K. Iyengar’s (1993) *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. For a more scholarly approach, inclusive of an excellent glossary cum index of all Sanskrit words used in the text, see Georg Feuerstein (1979/1989), *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A New Translation and Commentary*.
6. The term *Overmind* for the topmost layer of the lower hemisphere was introduced by Sri Aurobindo only after the period in which he first wrote his major works in serialized form in the journal *Arya* (1914–1920), some works of which were later revised and expanded. In the unrevised parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga* (part of “The Yoga of Divine Knowledge,” “The Yoga of Devotion,” and “The Yoga of Self-Perfection”) the words Supermind and supramental are not yet used in the specific sense he later gave to them. In these texts, they are often used to denote what he later called the Overmind, and sometimes even simply to denote anything above the ordinary mind. For a clear exposition of the difference, see Sri Aurobindo (2012, pp. 148-151).
7. *Ṛg Veda* V.81.5 as translated by Sri Aurobindo (1989b, p. 286).
8. In a few letters about this distinction, Sri Aurobindo (2013) identified this “great teacher” as Sri Ramakrishna (pp. 433, 441).
9. Swami Sivananda, for example, quoted in the opening section of a book on *vairāgya*, and clearly in agreement with it, a recommendation by Adi Shankara to look at everything, good and bad, as no better than “the excrement of a crow” (Adi Shankara, as cited by Swami Sivananda, 1983/1998, opening section).

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