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**UNIT 1**

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**BASIC UNITY OF REALITY**

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**1.0 OBJECTIVES**

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The problem of the one and the many is a major point of discussion in Indian philosophy. In fact the whole of classical Indian philosophy revolves on this point. Therefore, the major objective of this section is to initiate a serious discussion of this crucial issue in philosophical discourse.

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**1.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The problem of the One and the Many is a fundamental question in Indian philosophy as it is in the West. One of the fundamental presuppositions of Indian philosophy is its explicit adherence to the idea that the Reality is one in essence. But the moment one asserts that reality is 'One' he is perplexed by the riddle of the 'Many' that encompasses him with its enigmatic flux. How are we to reconcile the Vedantic formula that Reality is one with the apparent many which are constantly changing? This problem itself stems from another presupposition and avowed acceptance of Brahman as the single substratum of the universe.

It has to be made clear at the outset that the realisation or the acceptance of Brahman as the fundamental and sole reality by the Indian thinkers was not the result of a moment. It was the outcome of the age-old search of the Indian Sages to find the ultimate substratum of the universe from the beginning of the history of human thought. It has also undergone various stages of development. Classical Indian philosophy has its culmination in the Vedantic thought. It was Vedanta that identified Brahman as the ultimate substratum of the universe.

Once the Transcendent, Infinite, and Immutable Brahman is accepted as the Absolute it naturally raises the question of the reality of the phenomenal world. A number of questions are possible here: what does one mean by saying that the Brahman is the Absolute? What relation has it to the phenomenal world? If Brahman is the only Reality, what is the nature and status of the universe? These questions themselves take one directly to the problem of the one and the many. Therefore, we come back to the above statement: how can one substantiate the claim that the whole problem of Indian philosophy is the problem of the one and the many? To put it differently, the question

of the one and the many has a dual dimension, i.e., the whole development of Indian philosophy originates from this centrifugal question and at the end of all our search and analysis we come back to this centripetal point. Thus, the one and the many become the pivot for our discussion of Aurobindo's metaphysics of integral advaita as well. Aurobindo maintains a synthetic approach to reality. How has he come to such a conclusion?

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## 1.2 REALITY IS ONE

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The originality of Aurobindo's thought is most clearly exemplified in his finding a way out to the age-old problem of one and many in which he establishes the basic unity of reality. Aurobindo maintains the unity of Reality giving adequate space for the multiplicities of the universe. Aurobindo develops his theory of the Oneness of Reality (i) through a re-interpretation of the theory of Maya, for in Sankara's absolute non-dualism, the theory of Maya played a key role in maintaining the unity of Reality, through its negation of the external world; (ii) through developing the co-existence of Matter and Spirit; (iii) through a re-construction of the question of the one and the many; (iv) through his theory of Cosmic Consciousness; and finally (v) through his theory of Involution and Evolution or by presenting reality in its dual dimensions: being and becoming. Thus, some of these points constitute the subject matter of the present discussion.

### The Integral Advaitic View of Existence

After evaluating the extant theories of existence, namely the Supracosmic, the Cosmic-terrestrial, and the Supraterrestrial, Aurobindo developed his own system in the light of the Vedantic tradition. This approach tries to reconcile the elements of the above approaches, which themselves "tend to isolate." The fundamental tenet of this perspective is that it perceives human existence as a "Becoming with the Divine Being for its origin and its object, a progressive manifestation, a spiritual evolution with the supracosmic for its source and support, the other-worldly for a condition and connecting link and the cosmic and terrestrial for its field, and with human mind and life for its *nodus* and turning-point of release towards a higher and a highest perfection." (LD 667)

This citation of Aurobindo very well manifests how he has incorporated and integrated elements of the above theories. He admits them as a means and part of the self-manifestation of the Spirit in human life, but considers them as partial. Nevertheless, the integration of the first two theories, to a great extent, was already effected in the third by his predecessors. For Aurobindo, the fundamental flaw of the third approach, which attempted integration of the previous two was that in it, he maintained, the temporal as having no permanent value. What the realism of Aurobindo aims at is a richer unity and integrity of all the elements of existence.

For Aurobindo existence basically manifests two aspects: (i) Existence is integral: one and many, transcendence and immanence, spirit and matter, etc are different facets of it; and (ii) the nature of this Existence is dynamic or becoming: Being includes becoming as well. In other words, it is a progressive ascent.

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## 1.3 AUROBINDO'S INTERPRETATION OF THE CONCEPT OF MAYA

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A general and the often expressed impression of a Westerner about Indian philosophy is that it is a world negating philosophy or that it teaches that the world is mere illusion or Maya. However,

the truth is that no teacher of *Advaita* holds the view that the phenomenal world is absolutely unreal or illusory. It is real as far as it is a manifestation of being but unreal as a self-subsisting entity. Therefore, it can be rightly observed that the over emphasis that the Advaitins gave to one aspect of the reality was only a means to substantiate the Absoluteness of Brahman and was not a denial of the reality of the world.

The question emerges is how has such a negative impression come about? It maybe the result of two mistakes or two factors that occurred in the history of Indian philosophy: (i) the Western world knew about Indian philosophy, at first, through the interpretation of the Western scholars themselves for whom Indian philosophy meant nothing but the Advaita philosophy of Sankara; and (ii) in Sankara's philosophy, which advocated an absolute non-dualism (monism), the notion of Maya was wrongly interpreted as pure illusion, which was taken to be the truth in subsequent ages. Therefore, in the Western world, and even in India, what prevailed was this wrong interpretation of the theory of Maya. Thus, it may not be wrong to say that history has done much damage to the philosophy of Sankara by interpreting the notion of Maya as mere illusion and that he advocated and perceived that the world has only an illusory existence.

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#### 1.4 MAYA: THE POWER OF BECOMING

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Indian philosophy understands the notion of Maya in a number of ways. The introduction of the concept of Maya by the Indian sages has to do with the explanation of Brahman's relation to the world. For the Vedic sages, the "directing power" was known as Maya. For them, Maya was the "power of the infinite consciousness to comprehend, contain in itself and measure out" and also the power to form, name, and shape entities out of the vast illimitable Truth of infinite existence. It is by the power of Maya that the static being of infinite existence becomes the ordered being of active existence (LD 115). In the Vedic understanding Maya is also a mysterious, deceptive power of the gods (RV III 53. 8). Its deception lies in its ability to hide the Truth about reality. For the Advaitin, metaphysically conceived, Maya is the power of Brahman by which the world of multiplicity comes into existence. Therefore, it is right to say that metaphysically Maya is the mysterious power of Brahman that deludes one to take the empirical world as real, and epistemologically Maya is ignorance (*avidya*) with the power to conceal reality (*avarana Sakti*) and with the capacity of misrepresenting reality (*viksepa sakti*). Ontologically Maya considered as the creative power of Brahman that accounts for the variety and multiplicity of the phenomenal world. From an epistemological point of view, Maya is our ignorance about the difference between reality and appearance. And from a psychological point of view, Maya is the expression of human tendency to regard the real as the apparent, and vice versa. Thus, Maya is not only a negative designation, that is, a privation of vision, it is also a positive designation as far as it is capable of producing an illusion.

In the Advaitic interpretation in the state of Maya limitations (*upadhis*) are imposed upon reality. Thus, all attachments, aversions, fears, dreams are touched by Maya and one fails to recognise the oneness of the Real. Here it is appropriate to add that the Sanskrit word "*upadhi*" has another meaning as well, namely, "condition." In this sense Maya is a necessary condition for the manifestation of the world. Moreover, in this sense the Vedic understanding of Maya as the creative power seems more reasonable. In the light of this interpretation of Maya, the Advaitic explanation of Brahman-world relation makes more sense. As the world is the manifestation of Brahman, Maya, the creative power, becomes the power of becoming.

The world's reality is unreal only in the light of an ontological Reality. In contrast with the pure existence of the Absolute, Maya has existence as the power of limitation. In this respect, the description of Maya as *anadi* (beginningless), *acintya* (unthinkable) and *anirvacaniya* (indescribable) are reasonable. Indian philosophy understands Maya in its dual meaning: in its positive and in its negative meanings. In the positive sense it is the creative power, which also accounts for becoming and in the negative sense it is power of limitation. The world, being understood as the manifestation of the Absolute, would imply that there emerges the need for a mediator, for infinite action of the infinite Being would produce only an infinite world. Therefore, a world with order and unity demands "a selective faculty of knowledge commissioned to shape finite appearances out of the infinite Reality" (LD 115). It is in this sense, Aurobindo observes, that the Vedic seers understood the concept of Maya as the power of limitation (LD 115).

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### 1.5 MAYA: THE SELF'S EXPERIENCE OF ITS BEING

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Aurobindo undertakes a re-search into the meaning of "Maya" with a twofold purpose: (i) To establish the reality of the world, in contrast to the illusionism advocated by Advaita and (ii) thereby to establish the reality and relevance of matter in the cosmic process. Aurobindo speaks of two kinds of Maya: first, a lower Maya or mental Maya, which is the cause of illusion and, second, that which symbolises God's play of the infinities of existence, the splendors of knowledge and the glories of force. The remarkable point Aurobindo brings to light is that the pessimistic and the illusionist philosophies either failed to identify or ignored this distinction between the higher Maya and the lower Maya. The problem is that those who recognise the mental Maya as truth consider it as the creatrix of the world. The fact is only an instrument in the descending creative process but not the secret creatrix, and it is a transitional stage in the ascent but not the supreme goal of cosmic existence.

For Aurobindo, Maya is said to be real only in the sense that it is the self's experience of the Self. What does it mean to say that Maya is the self's experience of the Self? This has to be seen in the context of the Vedic implication of Maya. At one point Aurobindo interprets Maya as integrally united with the Absolute. He writes that in its transcendent nature Brahman, the Reality, is the self-existent Absolute, and Maya is the Consciousness and Force of this self-existence. What is evident here is that it is an avowed acceptance by Aurobindo of the Vedic notion of Maya as the creative power of Brahman. In relation to the world or in its immanent dimension this Brahman is the Self of all existence, Atman, the cosmic self. Moreover, due to its Infinite powers it is the supreme self-transcendent of its own cosmicity as well as it is the individual-universal in each being. In its cosmic dimension Maya is the self-power, *Atma-Shakti*, of the Atman.

Aurobindo holds that in a higher status of consciousness all illusions will vanish and one becomes aware of the relation between the temporal and the eternal. What is temporal is not absolute illusion or no-thing. It was already established at the outset that Aurobindo embarked on a re-search into the meaning of the notion of Maya with double purposes, which themselves are interrelated. Thus, the positive outcome of Aurobindo's interpretation of Maya is the vindication of the reality of the world. Aurobindo proves the reality of the world or the finite existence in contrast to Advaitins by emphasizing the following two points: (i) the finite is the self-manifestation of the Absolute. What is from the real cannot be unreal and (ii) Aurobindo attests

to the reality of the external world by pointing to the human capacity to enter into union with the Absolute. The point is that the finite must be real since what is unreal cannot enter into a relation with the Real. For Aurobindo, the only reality that can be described as unreal is the independent objective human existence. Thus, unlike his predecessors, Aurobindo maintains the Reality of both Brahman and the World without endangering the Absoluteness of Brahman.

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## **1.6 THE ONE AND THE MANY: THE WAY OF BEING IN BECOMING**

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We have started with the presupposition that the whole problem of Indian philosophy is inter-related to the question of the one and the many. Now it is time to take up this question as the focal point of our discussion. Aurobindo's Integral Advaitism invariably points to the doctrine of Sankara which establishes the oneness of the Supreme Reality or Brahman by denying the true reality of the world. Aurobindo challenges this contention and seems to suggest that Advaitism is true even when accepting the reality of the world. Therefore, Aurobindo is a Vedantin who has attempted to explain the unity of the one and the many in a unique way. He has insisted on the absoluteness of the Absolute, who is limited neither by unity nor by multiplicity. In fact, one and the many are at the service of each other. Aurobindo affirms the unity as a basis for the manifestation of the multiplicity and the multiplicity as the basis for the return to oneness and the enjoyment of unity in the divine manifestation. Our remaining task is to vindicate the veracity of Aurobindo's presumption that Advaitism is true even when accepting the reality of the world.

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## **1.7 THE ABSOLUTE: UNITY MANIFESTING MULTIPLICITY**

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According to Aurobindo, the apparent contradictions that exist between Brahman and the world seem to be irreconcilable only to a finite or abstract reason. It can be solved by a higher reason, which he names as the Logic of the Infinite, that reconciles the opposites, including the one and the many, being and becoming, infinite and finite, and knowledge and ignorance. The true Advaita is that which admits all things as the one Brahman and does not seek to bisect its existence into two incompatible entities.

For Aurobindo, it was a later impatience of human heart and mind and a vehement attraction to high masterfulness that sought a univocal approach to reality and denied the many. *Sat* and *Asat* (Being and Non-Being) are not opposites, destructive of each other, but are the "last antinomy through which we look up to the Unknowable." To know God truly is to "know him everywhere equally and without distinction". What is necessary is to put aside the trenchant distinctions. The many appear as absurd because of our inability to perceive one in the many. It is because of the partial logic that one employs that one declares many an illusion or the Absolute is *Sat* and the relative is *Asat*, etc. If one is able to pursue insistently the One, it is to return with the benediction and the revelation of the One confirming itself in the Many. Therefore, the core of integral Advaita is identity in difference as opposed to Absolute identity advocated by Advaita of Sankara. The Infinite would not be the infinite Oneness if it was not capable of an infinite multiplicity. This does not mean that the Infinite One is plural or that it can be described as the sum of the Many. On the contrary, it can be the infinite many in the sense that it exceeds all the limitations or descriptions by multiplicity as well as all the limitations by finite conceptual oneness.

Here we have Aurobindo's central argument for the claim that Advaitism is true even when accepting the reality of the world. It is not mere infinite multiplicity, rather all multiplicity finds

its place in the One, where the singularity of the many is kept and recognised. Therefore, the “One” is not the Hegelian “Whole” where the singularity is muffled up in the whole. Substantiating the co-existence of One and the Many Aurobindo argues that there would be no place for reason and logic if there is only a “rigid monotone of limited oneness and sameness”. The essence of logic is nothing but the right perception of the relations, and the highest work of reason is to find the one substance, the one law, the cementing latent reality connecting and unifying the many, the different, the discordant and disparate. Moreover, he writes the Being is one, but this oneness is infinite and contains in itself an infinite plurality or multiplicity of itself: the One is the All; it is not only an essential Existence, but an All-Existence. The infinite multiplicity of the One and the eternal unity of the Many are the two realities or aspects of one reality on which the manifestation is founded.

The core of the problem of One and the Many consists in identifying the right relation between the individual and the Divine Being, between Soul and *Isvara*. Aurobindo has his own distinctive way of understanding this relation. In the normal theistic understanding the many are the creations of the Divine as a potter makes the vessel. There is a total dependence of the creatures on the creator. In Aurobindonian understanding, the many are themselves divine in their inmost reality. They are the individual selves of the Self-existence, eternal but eternal in his being. Here the material existence is the creation of Nature, but the soul is an immortal portion of the Divine being. In other words, Divine is responsible for the individual self of the natural creatures. However, the fundamental Truth of existence is one and the many for their existence depends on the One. Thus the dependence of the entire created world on *Isvara* is all the more kept intact. It is human ego that conceals this dependent nature, for it strives to stand on its own right. Thus, for Aurobindo, multiplicity is not something that broaches the unity of the One, but rather the existential diversity enriches the Being of the One. Therefore, the one and the many become the way of being the Absolute. And what makes it possible is the nature of becoming.

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## 1.8 THE INFINITE: THE LOCUS OF UNITY

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The statement that ‘the one and the many is the way of being the Absolute’ takes us to a more fundamental truth of Being, namely that the Infinite is the locus of unity. Here, the question regarding the identity of the individual self is natural: if it is a total surrender that is demanded how does one account for the identity of the creatures? For Aurobindo, this dependence is not contradictory to the identity but is “itself the door to the realisation of the Identity.” Once again we meet with the phenomenon of duality expressing unity, “proceeding from unity and opening back into unity” which is the fundamental principle of the operation of the universe. The core of the relation between the One and the Many is the consciousness of the fundamental unity with the Infinite. The duality is a position taken up, a double status accepted for the operation of the self-manifestation of being; but there is no eternal and fundamental separateness and dualism of Being and its Consciousness-Force, of the Soul and Nature. Manifestation of the one Absolute in many forms can also be understood as an expression of the immense possibilities of the Infinite Consciousness. The Infinite existence can at once be individual, universal, and transcendent. It is the supracosmic being which is conscious of itself as All-Being. It is possible in the sense that the single underlying principle in all these states or positions is the same triune Consciousness in a triple status. The *conditio sine qua non* for our human intellect to understand this contradictory existence is to accept that there can be different real statuses of consciousness of One Being, and it is completely logical and intelligible for the Existence which is free and infinite. One corollary

of accepting the manifold statuses of one consciousness is that no limit can be put to the variation of status on the condition that the One existence is conscious of its simultaneous presence in all of them. There is nothing irrational in this understanding because the very nature of the pure Existence is to be universally conscious. One has to admit and promote both the unity and multiplicity of the One. For Aurobindo *unity is not unanimity, rather unity is a unity in multiplicity*. This is the core of his theory of the One and the Many. This is the way of being in becoming.

The cosmic consciousness is the source of reconciliation between matter and spirit, and so too of the One and the Many. A question emerges here as to, what is the relation that this reconciliatory principle has to the transcendent consciousness, the final assertion of all its negations? The “Unknowable” becomes the source of all affirmations and all negations and freedom becomes the ultimate source of both. Brahman is not an omnipresent cause of persistent illusions rather it is the omnipresent Reality. Thus, Brahman as the positive basis is the principle of harmony. If one admits that self alone exists, it must be also true that all is the self. If all is one self there must be some reason and inherent principle in it as the source of manifestation. To find that, Aurobindo observes, we must proceed with the hypothesis of potency. “There is one Lord and Self and the many are only His representations and becomings.” Therefore, in Aurobindonian perspective, there is only one Omnipresent Reality as the source of the World and the many are its manifestations. Human beings arrive at a perfect liberation and an infinite equality. It is this consummation of which the Upanishad speaks when it says: ‘He in whom the self has become all existences, how shall he have delusion, whence shall he have grief who knows entirely and sees in all things oneness.’ In fact, it is in and through a metaphysics of becoming that Aurobindo establishes both the fundamental unity of Reality amidst the multiplicity in the universe. Moreover, his metaphysics of becoming positively establishes the Absolute as its Alpha and Omega.

The matrix for the whole development of Indian philosophy was the Brahma-world relation. If the Absolute is One how do we account for the multiplicity of the universe? What status has it? What is the truth of our phenomenal experience? It indeed is the question of the Reality itself.

### Check Your Progress I

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

1) How does Aurobindo view unit of existence?

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2) Explain the unity in multiplicity.

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## 1.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we discussed the basic unity of existence as advocated by Aurobindo. The condition of possibility for such an understanding is the realization that the ultimate source of the world is a single reality, namely Brahman. We have also seen that this Absolute manifests itself in multiplicity, in matter and form. Therefore one can say the basic substratum of existence is matter and spirit which is the subject matter of our discussion in the next unit.

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## 1.10 KEY WORDS

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**Maya in Advaita:** In contrast with the pure existence of the Absolute, Maya has existence as the power of limitation. In this respect, the description of Maya as *anadi* (beginningless), *acintya* (unthinkable) and *anirvacaniya* (indescribable) are reasonable.

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## 1.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## UNIT 2      SYNTHESIS OF SPIRIT AND MATTER

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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### 2.2 DIPOLAR NATURE OF THE REALITY

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

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

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

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

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

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### **2.3 MATTER AS THE FOUNDATIONAL SUBSTRATUM OF EXISTENCE**

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

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

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## **2.4 THE RELATION BETWEEN MATTER AND SPIRIT**

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

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

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

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

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

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## **2.5 DIPOLARITY: NOT DICHOTOMY**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **2.6 COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS: THE SOURCE OF RECONCILIATION**

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

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

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

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

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## 2.7 A SYNTHETIC APPROACH TO MATTER AND SPIRIT

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

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

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

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

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

### Check Your Progress I

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

1) Is dipolarity dicotomy? Explain?

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

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

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

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## 2.9 KEY WORDS

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

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## 2.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## UNIT 3      EVOLUTION AND INVOLUTION

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- 3.0 Objectives
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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to clarify two important concept in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindon, namely Evolution and Involution. We have made some reference to the fact that the distinctiveness of Aurobindo from other vedantic thinkers is that Aurobindo follows a synthetic approach to life and reality, taking into account the complementarity of Matter and Spirit. In fact it is his evolutionary view of the nature of existence, including the Absolute, is that made it possible. In and through these two concepts Aurobindo makes clear that the world is real (not mere illusion), and the nature of this world is becoming and this becoming is also true in the case of the Absolute.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Aurobindo maintains, that the reception of both spirit and matter and the thesis that matter is also Brahman can be unacceptable to a rational mind unless we admit a series of ascending terms (Life, Mind, Supermind, and the grades that link mind to Supermind) between Spirit and Matter. Without the reception of the intermediary grades in the identification of Spirit and Matter, representing each in terms of the other, will be an artificial creation of the thought.

As we have already discussed, the second presupposition, wherein one observes the originality of Aurobindo and how he transcends the theories of his predecessors, of the Integral (*purna*) Advaita is faith in the "involution" (descent) of the Absolute Reality in the material world. The Vedanta accepts that life is already involved in matter and Mind in life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled life, life a veiled form of Consciousness. Here we also have Aurobindo's novel response to the problem of the one and the many. The condition of possibility for the evolution in reality is the "involution." Aurobindo writes in the *Life Divine* that a first involutionary foundation in which originates all that has to evolve, an emergence and action of the involved powers in or upon that foundation in an ascending series, and a culminating emergence of the highest power of all as the agent of a supreme manifestation are the necessary stages of the journey of evolutionary Nature.

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### 3.2 THE CONCEPT OF EVOLUTION: A PROCESS TOWARD INTEGRAL UNITY

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It was already established previously that in Aurobindo's integral vision Reality is characterised by two poles: Spirit and Matter. For, in his vision it is the involution of the Absolute that is responsible for the whole world process. However, our common experience delineates that matter and Spirit belong to two different realms: finite and infinite, immanent and transcendental. How can we reconcile the two? Furthermore, we are still to explain the how of the involution of the Absolute. It is his theory of evolution or becoming that answers these questions. Moreover, discussion of the concept of evolution would further clarify the questions of the One and the Many and the co-existence of matter and spirit. It would still clarify how the whole problem of Indian philosophy is inter-related to the problem of the One and the Many, a claim that we made at the outset. First we have to see the role of evolution in Indian philosophy.

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### 3.3 THE IDEA OF EVOLUTION IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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The idea of evolution is not something new or recent to the Indian tradition, though generally it is not well treated by many today. It was already in the Vedas and Upanishads, especially in *Rig Veda*. We have a clear reference to the concept of evolution in *Rig Veda*, in the tenth mandala. Here, evolution is presented in connection with involution. One can identify a number of other passages in the classics of Indian philosophy which speak of this evolutionary ascension (the Evolutionary Process—Ascent and Integration) in nature. A clear vision of evolution can be seen in Upanishadic literature. In the Upanishadic teaching, the world is the creative manifestation of Brahman which takes place in and through an involutionary and evolutionary process (TU 3.1). Realisation of this Brahman in individual existence also passes through various stages. Thus, *Taittiriya* Upanishad maintains that the true seeker of Truth comes gradually to the knowledge of Brahman in successive revelations (TU 3). The Absolute, Sachchidananda is the beginning and end of evolution. The finite is one with the Infinite. "This is full, that is full from the Full, the Full is taken out and yet the Full remains" (IU Santimantram).

Furthermore, the idea of evolution was already in the teaching of *Gita* as well. From *Gita* one gets the idea of Brahman as Purushottama, who is transcendent, motionless, and calm existence, and is yet dynamic and creative. It is nothing but Purushottama who evolves into both material and spiritual world, by his own power and determination. Srivastava maintains that it is the same power that Aurobindo names as "Cit-sakti or the Consciousness-Force, or Purushottama which reveals His Supreme nature: the transcendent and originating Sakti of the Purushottama is his para-prakriti". Evolution is the transformation of the lower nature (*apara prakriti*) into the higher nature (*para prakriti*). From this general background of the concept of evolution in Indian philosophy we could enter into the discussion of the same in Aurobindo.

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### 3.4 AUROBINDO'S VISION OF EVOLUTION

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The keynote of Aurobindo's thought is evolution. It is believed that he entertained the idea of evolution from his earliest writings in 1890-1892 when he was an undergraduate in King's College, Cambridge. His unfinished work of this period entitled, *The Harmony of Virtue*, gives ample evidence for this supposition. In this work which is written in the model of Socratic dialogue - a dialogue between Keshav Ganesh Desai - who clearly stands for Aurobindo himself - and his English friends - a new theory of virtue is proposed. The key to the virtue is evolution. He also speaks of a descent into the nether regions of consciousness, of which he later spoke in *Savitri*. Thus, one could say that both the ideas of evolution and involution, which is the

condition of possibility for evolution, were already present, at least in a germ form, in his thought from the very beginning. He states, “an involution of Spirit in Matter is the beginning”. The involution is the necessary condition of evolution.

Here a question emerges as to why Aurobindo conceives existence as a process or evolution? For him, the ultimate purpose of human existence is the realisation of Sachchidananda. The attainment of this goal depends on the gradual development that the person achieves. Therefore, evolutionary process is a must for two reasons: (i) the initial stages of evolution, namely matter, life and mind, are already a matter of our own experience. What is inevitable is the experience of the center of undivided power, Sachchidananda. However, because of the separation the first three stages (matter, life and mind) have from the spiritual source, there results a lapse which culminates in a total Inconscience out of which come an involved Being and Consciousness which have to emerge by a gradual evolution. Therefore, (ii) the evolution becomes an inevitable reality in human existence. Aurobindo maintains that evolution first develops, as it is bound to develop. In Matter, Life appears and living physical beings; in Life, Mind manifests as embodied thinking and living beings; in Mind, ever increasing powers and activities in forms of Matter, the Supermind or Truth-Consciousness must appear, inevitably, by the very force of what is contained in the Inconscience and the necessity in Nature to bring it into manifestation. Supermind appearing manifests the Spirit’s self-knowledge and whole-knowledge in a supramental living being and must bring about by the same law, by an inherent necessity and inevitability, the dynamic manifestation here of the divine Existence, Consciousness and Delight of existence. Thus, Aurobindo states that “Life has begun from an involution of the spiritual truth of things in what seems to be its opposite.” Once there is involution there cannot be but evolution; the evolution is not only possible, but inevitable, in the sense that involution is in view of evolution. Only then the very purpose of involution is actualised, namely divinization of the material world.

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### **3.5 DISTINCTIVENESS OF AUROBINDO’S CONCEPT OF EVOLUTION**

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It is observed that Aurobindo has combined the Eastern and the Western perspectives of evolution in his view. To facilitate a proper understanding of Aurobindonian theory, one has to see it also in contrast with that of the West. In light of the Eastern perspective, the Western perspective of evolution is not sufficiently spiritual. While the West speaks of an evolution of matter, the East concentrates on the evolution of the Spirit; while the West speaks more of a natural evolution, the East, especially Aurobindo, speaks of spiritual evolution, which is the evolution of Sachchidananda. It is basically an internal growth of Consciousness and an external development is only instrumentally applicable to it. The Spirit is “involved” in all the material realities. It is the involution of Spirit in matter and in all the evolutes of matter that spiritualises the Eastern theory of evolution in the Aurobindonian perspective. A spiritual evolution, an evolution of consciousness *in* Matter is then the keynote, the central significant motive of the terrestrial existence. Moreover, Aurobindo states that a complete involution of all that the Spirit is and its evolutionary self-unfolding are the double term of our material existence.

Thus, for Aurobindo the whole history is a movement of evolution, of a progressive self-manifestation of the Spirit in a material universe. In this context it can be observed that the fundamental flaw of Sankara when he rejected the reality of the world is that he “ignored the greatest truth that a divinised man can only emerge in a divinised cosmos.” Therefore, what is necessary is an integral evolution, rather than a partial one. “Evolution must be a cosmic Yoga”.

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### 3.6 TELEOLOGY CENTRAL TO AUROBINDO'S CONCEPT OF EVOLUTION

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Aurobindo's evolution is fundamentally teleological. For Aurobindo, a merely mobile nature would give us only the cyclic rhythm of becoming which is so common a feature of various ancient theories of the world. Such a view would be devoid of both hierarchical structure and teleology. Neither can it account for the persistent aspiration of the human consciousness to exceed itself to arrive at the integral conscious knowledge of all Being. Even the *Lila* (cosmic play) is not without its goal and object. For, it carries within itself an object to be accomplished and without the fulfilment of that object it would have no completeness of significance. As different from the Western thinkers of evolution, Aurobindo holds that if Brahman, the supreme Consciousness, is really involved in all evolution, it is but logical that the process of all evolution should finally culminate in the evolutionary manifestation of this super consciousness.

This teleological dimension is what distinguishes Aurobindo's evolution from that of Bergson (1859-1941), a western contemporary of Aurobindo. This demands further justification. Aurobindo maintains that Bergson's theory suffers from two weaknesses: firstly, Bergson maintains the *élan vital* as a pure flow, a spontaneous movement which goes on rushing. Thus, there can be no integration, no cohesion between what goes before or comes after. He feels the necessity of giving some stability to intuition, thus that purpose maybe served by the intellect. Though Bergson wanted to place intuition superior to reason, he had to resort to reason to give it stability; secondly, Bergson excluded teleology from the evolutionary process. He has taken together all the higher forms of consciousness under the title intuition. On the contrary, Aurobindo has pointed out lower and higher levels of intuition. Only in this way can one refer to any sort of teleology in the movement. It may be right to say that in Aurobindo one can see the why and how of evolution while Bergson is satisfied with the latter question alone. In Bergson's perspective, evolution should be seen as the endurance of '*élan vital*' the vital impetus that is continuously developing and generating new forms. Evolution has to be understood as creative and it is not mechanistic. His basic understanding of reality was that in life, in whatever form it might appear, there is an observable '*élan vital*', a drive of life, purpose, creativity and meaning.

In Aurobindo's vision evolution is emergent, free, and purposive. The apparent mechanical progression of evolution has a spiritual nexus inherent in it. Aurobindo, like Plato, observes that thing that is made is attracted towards the thing that is, becoming towards being, the natural to the supernatural, the symbol towards the thing itself, nature towards God. Each stage of evolution is subtler and more complex than the previous one as the purpose of evolution is the delight of self-manifestation of Sachchidananda. This teleological vision of evolution serves also as the foundation of his philosophy of history and his speculation about the future of mankind. The unique features of the Aurobindonian theory of evolution is commendably summarised as follows: "Evolution is not simply an increasingly complex configuration of matter and motion, presided over by chance. Nor is it the rattling-off of a chain forged innumerable years ago, presided over by an extra-cosmic divine mind. Nor is it the gradual emergence, in accidental fashion, of new qualities and superior values; all out of the void .... The process of evolution is the infinitely diversified self-determination of the essentially indeterminable reality. ... Evolution is the creative adventure of the world spirit in the uncharted ocean of Inconscience, so that the infinite possibilities inherent in Reality maybe infinitely expressed in material conditions." (Chaudhuri 1960, 31).

Aurobindo's philosophy leaves no doubt concerning the fact that cosmic history has a definite direction and purpose. Through it and in it, the eternal spirit seeks its self-realization, beginning, as it were, from the inconscience of matter, and passing through many stages it flowers into the full consciousness of its being when it completes the cycle of evolution and involution.

To clarify this cyclic process one has to recollect what has been seen about the basic forms of existence. It has already been stated above that existence in its activity expresses itself as a Conscious-Force. The working of this force is presented to the consciousness as its own form of being. Since the force is the action of the Conscious-Being the result also is nothing but the forms of that Conscious-Being. The natural consequence of the above affirmation has its bearing on the whole of Aurobindonian philosophy. If the result of the action of the Conscious-force is Conscious-being itself the substance or matter of every existence is only a form of Spirit, the pure Existence. It is also true that life is an action of the Conscious-Force and material forms are its result. However, life is involved in these material forms appearing in them first as inconscient force and as a result of the inner dynamics of evolution brings back into it the consciousness as it is done by Mind. In fact being conscious is the form of the being of Pure Existence either in its manifested form or unmanifested form. However, involution becomes the condition of possibility for the evolution.

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### 3.7 SACHCHIDANANDA AND THE INVOLUTION

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In the previous sections we pointed out that the world is the manifestation of the Sachchidananda, the Absolute in Indian philosophy. However, this may seem an arbitrary statement unless one clarifies the how of this manifestation. Our immediate task is to analyse this dimension of the Sachchidananda-World relation. It has to be analysed in the light of two paradoxes: (i) why did Sachchidananda, the infinite and all-perfect create or manifest the universe; and (ii) the nature of Sachchidananda, which is immutable, static, eternal, self-existent, featureless, etc. is contradictory to the nature of the created world which is transient, finite, imperfect, mutable, etc. In this respect the dilemma concerns as to how are we to concur with the reality of the world and the Absoluteness of Sachchidananda? For the first paradox one can find no answer other than the following that the cosmic manifestation is for the pure Delight (*Lila*) of Sachchidananda.

With respect to the second paradox Sankara solved it by identifying the material cause of the universe in the principle of Maya, while Madhva found *Prakriti* as the material cause of the universe. In these ways, they avoided applying *parinamavada* (theory of modification) in the case of God. In other words, they advocated a sort of absolute identity and identity in difference respectively to account for God-world relation. However, Aurobindo repudiated such a perspective.

Aurobindo solves the problem of the second paradox by recognizing in Sachchidananda a double nature; *Sachchidananda in its power of manifestation and Sachchidananda in its pure unmanifested nature*. Here we see also how Aurobindo surpasses Sankara and Madhva. He writes, "All that is in the kinesis, the movement, the action, the creation, is the Brahman; the becoming is a movement of the being; Time is a manifestation of the Eternal. All is one Being, one Consciousness, one even in infinite multiplicity, and there is no need to bisect it into an opposition of transcendent Reality and unreal cosmic Maya." (LD 461).

This takes us to Aurobindo's concept of involution, the first condition to understand the above relation. In other words, the involution of the Absolute is the condition of possibility for the evolution of the world or the manifestation of the world. And in explaining this we enter here into the hardcore of Aurobindo's metaphysics of becoming.

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### 3.8 THE INVOLUTION OF THE ABSOLUTE

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In dealing with the question of "involution" our objective is to clarify what is meant by Involution or in the Western categories "Becoming" and the why of it. It would clarify as well Aurobindo's conception of the Absolute as Being and Becoming. First, we take up the question what is meant by involution? In Aurobindo's own words, Involution "is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below; it is the descent of God into that divine birth of the human being into which we mortal creatures must climb ..." (EG 157). The "Involution consists in the descent of the Infinite ... into the cosmic world or reality through the medium of the Supermind. Evolution, on the other hand, is the reverse process of Involution, and it consists in the ascent of the Spirit from matter through the medium of the Supermind back to its original nature" (Susai 49). These citations explain the core of the becoming of Sachchidananda and the evolution of the universe. Moreover, it points to the great role of the Supermind as well. The law of involution is characterised as a law of unity in multiplicity" where "the different beings that emerge from Brahman's Self-manifestation have their being and origin in the Divine.

Involution can be understood as the "self-imposed veiling" of Sachchidananda. One of the differences between involution and evolution is that the descent by its very nature is self-concealing which makes the presence of the Spirit more and more obscure, and on the contrary the ascent is more and more revealing which makes the presence of the Spirit explicit. However, both involution and evolution are self-revelation of the Absolute. In no way one sees involution as self-concealing making the Absolute more obscure, rather it only makes possible the Transcendent more an Immanent one. It is a self-concealing only in the sense that it manifests itself in another mode of existence, that is, Matter.

The more the descent proceeds, the thicker, the denser, becomes the veil and as a result the apparently non-conscious and inert matter emerges. It can be said that Involution is a progressive self-limitation, or self-absorption of Sachchidananda outwards or downwards by increasingly veiling and consequently diminishing the glory of His pure Existence, Consciousness-Force, Bliss and the creative medium of Supermind. The coinage "self-imposed veiling" in fact clarifies how do the spirit and matter have one and the same source of origin. It is from the Spirit itself matter emerges. From the opposite pole what we have in matter is Sachchidananda itself subject to a self-imposed veiling. Here a relevant question emerges: why the involution at all? The temporal world demands a rational explanation. And it was to answer this demand as well that Aurobindo speaks of the involution of the Absolute. From another perspective it can be observed that Aurobindo's theory of Involution is his answer for the question of creation in Christian understanding. The world evolves on its several levels because at each level Sachchidananda has already involved itself in each of these levels. Logically prior to evolution, involution is the process whereby Brahman or Sachchidananda, seeks its own manifestation through the multileveled universe (McDermott 171). There is all probability that by his theory of involution of Sachchidananda Aurobindo wanted to repudiate the theory of the world as illusion. It is notable that rather than using the word 'creation', Aurobindo prefers to use the Indian concept

*sristi*, which means “the manifestation of something which is hidden and unmanifest”. For Aurobindo, creation has to be understood in the sense that the Sachchidananda “manifests what is in itself, in its own essence.” One can speak of creation only in the sense of “Being becoming in form and movement what is already is in substance and status” (LD 333). Through his concept of involution Aurobindo states that being is with becoming.

### 3.9 THE EFFECTS OF INVOLUTION

Aurobindo’s concept of involution has great impact on his whole metaphysics. It is one of the demarcating points of his integral advaita from that of the classical advaita. By this Aurobindo was able to incorporate the modern evolutionary theory to the understanding of world process, and precisely to the understanding of the Absolute itself. Aurobindo establishes his theory of the world in and through various ways and means. The first effect of the theory of involution is the understanding that the World is the Manifestation. The self-manifestation of Sachchidananda takes place in a threefold movement of ‘descent’, ‘emergence’, and ‘release’. In the first movement of the Spirit, it descends itself to the Inconscient. The self-absorption of the Spirit in the Inconscient is to enjoy the self-delight in the finite variation. In the second move, the Spirit assumes the form or emerges into the triple world of Matter, Life, and Mind and this process culminates in the rational animal, human being. In the third and the final move, the Spirit releases itself from the limitations of spatio-temporal dimensions and realises itself as the One and Infinite (Roy 1995, 39). It is nothing but the ‘getting home’ of the Sachchidananda. The thesis that the world is the manifestation of the Absolute points also to the fact that it is real. “What issues from the Absolute, what the Eternal supports and informs and manifests in itself must have a reality” (LD 477). Aurobindo himself states that “the philosophy of *The Life Divine* is a realistic Advaita. The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real” (LY 44). The idea of involution also clarifies the point that Sachchidananda is the Substratum and the Cause of the Universe.

#### Check Your Progress I

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

1) How does evolution operate in human beings?

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2) Explain the evolution and involution.

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### 3.10 LET US SUM UP

The concept of Involution and evolution are not new to Indian philosophy. However the merit of Aurobindo is that he has rediscovered these concepts and presented it also in the light of contemporary understanding of evolution. Moreover, by doing so he has succeeded in finding a viable solution for the problem of matter and spirit and established his realism on a strong rational foundation.

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### 3.11 KEY WORDS

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**Evolution:** Evolution becomes an inevitable reality in human existence.

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### 3.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## UNIT 4      INTEGRAL VEDANTA

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- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Fundamental Presuppositions of Aurobindo's Metaphysics
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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The primary goal of this unit is to introduce the student to the integral vision of life and reality by Aurobindo. All the schools of Indian thought are related to Vedanta in two ways: (i) they all stem from the Vedanta in the sense that they have either accepted or denied its doctrines and (ii) they are articulated as a response to the question of the one and the many. Aurobindo's integral Advaita or Vedanta is no exception to it. Therefore, our primary objective in this unit is to explicate how Aurobindo's predecessors have responded to this question and how Aurobindo is related to them. This is certainly a Herculean task, for it inevitably takes us to the discussion of Vedanta philosophy. We will also discuss in this section the fundamental presuppositions of Aurobindo's Philosophy and how the name Integral Advaita is applied to it.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Aurobindo's philosophy is known as integral advaita or integral Yoga. One cannot discuss the question of the one and the many in Indian philosophy in isolation of Vedanta; it calls us to delve into the genius of the masters of Vedanta philosophy. In fact, Aurobindo himself develops his metaphysics in dialogue with it. Therefore, as the *Sitz im Leben* of the Aurobindonian metaphysics we will also discuss three major schools of thought, though very briefly, in this unit. Nevertheless, first we look into the central presuppositions of Aurobindonian metaphysics.

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### 4.2 FUNDAMENTAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF AUROBINDO'S METAPHYSICS

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The whole edifice of Aurobindo's philosophy is pillared on certain presuppositions. For Aurobindo, the central problem of philosophy is the problem of harmony. We should give proper attention to the great Vedantic formulas: "One without a second" and "All this is Brahman" (MU 2,7). What went wrong in the past is that we stressed the first at the expense of the second. Therefore, the goal of Aurobindo was to find out a way for the affirmation of both matter and Spirit. The central problem, therefore, is the problem of harmony. The second presupposition, wherein one observes the originality of Aurobindo and how he transcends the theories of his predecessors, of the Integral (*purna*) Advaita is faith in the "involution" (descent) of the Absolute Reality in the material world which we discuss in detail in this unit. In his theory of the

involution of the Absolute into the material world we also have Aurobindo's novel response to the problem of the one and the many. The condition of possibility for the third presupposition, namely evolution of reality, is the "involution." A fourth presupposition of Aurobindo is his faith in "cosmic consciousness." By entering into that consciousness we become aware of the fact that Matter, Mind, and Life are one existence. One can summarize the major conclusions of Aurobindo's integral view of Reality as follows: (i) The realization of the Absolute Reality as utterly transcendent with respect to all forms; (ii) Realization of the Absolute as a personal God, creative and all-pervasive Lord of the universe; (iii) Realization of the Absolute as moving and unmoving, finite and infinite, determinate and indeterminate, immanent and transcendent, etc.; and (iv) Realisation of the various planes of being, linked in graded continuity from the lowest matter to the highest spirit – identification of the evolutionary ascent.

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#### 4.3 AUROBINDO AND THE VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY

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Aurobindo does not stand isolated in the history of Indian thought. Aurobindo places himself in the Vedanta tradition. He rather built his own system of Integral Advaita, that transcends the *Advaita* (Absolute monism) of Sankara, which stressed the non-dualistic character of reality; the *Vishishtadvaita* of Ramanuja, which proposed a qualified non-dualism; and the *Dvaitavada* of Madhva, which proposed a dualistic conception of Reality. Therefore, we develop Aurobindo's philosophy in dialogue with his great predecessors. In order to understand a philosophy one has to study its formative *Sitz im Leben*. Therefore, our first task is to understand the heritage of Indian philosophy that Aurobindo inherited from tradition. The questions of the ultimate Reality, the one and the many and God-World relation have captured the attention of Indian philosophers from the dawn of history, as it also happened in the West. There have been various attempts by the Indian thinkers to find a reasonable solution to these age-old philosophical problems.

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#### 4.4 AUROBINDO'S RESPONSE TO ABSOLUTE NON-DUALISM

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Advaitism is associated with the celebrated Indian thinker Sankara (788-820). "The term 'Advaita' literally means "non-two-ness" and it connotes a theory which maintains that the ultimate Reality is not characterized by duality. Sankara is generally considered the greatest of the Indian philosophers. Furthermore, the Advaita of Sankara is qualified as the "temple of metaphysics" (U 333). Sankara is qualified as the great "synthesizer and conciliator" of Indian philosophy. His contribution to Indian philosophy includes a powerful, universal understanding of the Upanishads, which were interpreted diversely by various thinkers, who preceded him. He established his own philosophy in contradistinction, on one hand, to the heretic nihilism of the Sunyavadins (Buddhists) and, on the other, to the efficacy of Karma as an ultimate means to salvation. Sankara upholds Brahman as the highest transcendental Truth. Brahman is *Nirguna Brahma*. Brahman is the ground (*adhithana*) of all creation, the consciousness presupposed by all knowing, and the object which is eternally desirable in and for itself. For the Indian thinkers the dilemma consisted, on one hand, in maintaining the oneness of the Absolute (Brahman) and, on the other, in accounting for the many in the phenomenal world. However, our primary concern here is how does Sankara account for the multiplicity of the world once he has established Brahman as the sole Reality. For him, Brahman is both the material and efficient cause of the world. Sankara explains it by his theory of *Satkaryavada* that the material effect preexists in the cause. Sankara maintains that it is a logical conclusion. The point is, if the effect somehow preexists in the material cause, anything could come out of anything. However, Sankara observes that cause and effect cannot be identified in the sense that the effect is only a

manifestation of the cause. Therefore, Brahman, the cause, is the only reality, and the effect, the world, is only an apparent manifestation of the cause. Brahman is both the efficient and material cause of the universe. Thus, Sankara advocates an absolute non-dualism.

Sankara and Shankarites in their preoccupation to maintain the Absolute oneness of the Reality, denied the reality of the world. The heart of Sankara's teaching is often expressed by: *Brahma Satyam, Jagat Mithya, Jivo Brahmaiva naparah* (Brahman is real, the world is false, and the self is not different from Brahman). This text has been often quoted and interpreted to support and substantiate the view that Sankara expounded an illusory existence of the universe. However, this concept is very much disputed today.

The Shankarites had to deny the reality of the world to keep the Absolute oneness of Brahman. It was the only possibility open to them. However, Sankara admits the reality of the world from an empirical standpoint and not from a metaphysical or transcendental standpoint. By using his method of sublation (contradiction) which is the mental process of correcting and rectifying errors of judgement, Sankara develops an ontological hierarchy. This is the core of Sankara's absolute non-dualism.

### **Aurobindo on Advaita of Sankara**

Aurobindo clearly repudiates Sankara's absolute monistic view of the world and maintains that 'All this is Brahman' (*Sarvam idam Brahma eva*) does not mean an identity between the phenomenal (*vyavaharika*) world of appearance and the ultimate (*paramarthika*) reality of Brahman. The reality of the Absolute does not nullify the reality of the temporal world. On the contrary, it points to the absolute dependence of the universe on the Absolute. Therefore, Aurobindo designates the philosophy of Sankara as "a qualified illusionism" in the sense that it does not give the external world a real existence. Here the ontological status of the world is "real and yet not really real". The criticism of Aurobindo against Sankara has to be seen in the light of the illusionism alleged against Sankara and which was so prevalent ever since the formulation of his theory. It is this (alleged) contention of the Sankarites that is challenged by Aurobindo. Aurobindo writes in repudiation of Sankara that "Cosmos is not the Divine in all his utter reality, but a single self-expression, a true but minor motion of his being". This citation highlights Aurobindo's realism very clearly. And his realism itself follows from the fact that the world is a manifestation of the Absolute, which in fact refers to the further truth that the involution of the Absolute is the essence of creation.

Sankara contended that the world is not truly real and the only true reality is Brahman. The inevitable consequence of such a view was that even the self of man was an illusion. In this respect the highest and the noblest ideal possible for human beings was to merge the individual soul into the essence of the Absolute reality. Such a perspective had a very negative consequence on human life; in fact, it promoted inaction and the renunciation of the world and everything in it as unworthy. The one-sidedness of spirituality was always a point of critique for Aurobindo. The ideal of human life is self-fulfillment rather than self-negation. In order to realise the Absolute an individual does not have to deny himself nor the cosmos but "need only deny his own separate ego-existence." Aurobindo is a strong critic of the ideal of self-absorption in the featureless Absolute.

Aurobindo claims that Advaitism can be maintained while accepting the reality of the World. In contrast to Sankara's interpretation of the Upanishads that they establish the oneness of reality as Brahman, at the cost of the reality of the world, Aurobindo points to the "coexistence of the divine and its multiple manifestations". The difference between Sankara and Aurobindo can be summarised in the following way: For Sankara as long as the individual is subject to Maya, he regards the cosmos as real, but once the individual withdraws from the cosmic Maya and attains liberation, he realizes that the cosmos is illusory. However, Aurobindo, maintains that the individual, due to ignorance, is unable to realise the identity of the cosmos with Brahman. Once his limited consciousness transcends into higher consciousness and the ignorance is replaced by true knowledge, he realizes the reality of both Brahman and the cosmos.

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#### 4.5 AUROBINDO'S RESPONSE TO QUALIFIED NON-DUALISM

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##### **Visistadvaita of Ramanuja**

Ramanuja (1017-1137) is the chief exponent of the *Visistadvaita* or the qualified non-dualism. His was a "creative and constructive effort to systematize" the philosophy contained in the classics of Indian philosophy. In the theistic tradition of Advaita he is considered only second to the great Sankara. The chief philosophical problem confronted by Ramanuja, like Sankara, is that of the one and the many. How are we to reconcile the Upanishadic teaching regarding Brahman as the only true reality and the flux of the many of the empirical world? In other words, how can we account for the empirical world without endangering the Absoluteness of Brahman? It is true that Ramanuja concurs with Sankara that Brahman is real. However, unlike Sankara, for whom Brahman is identity without difference (*Nirguna*), for Ramanuja, Brahman is identity-in-difference (*Saguna*). In this respect, Ramanuja is one with Aurobindo who maintains identity-in-difference. Ramanuja maintains that the Upanishadic denial of any negative qualities to Brahman does not mean that he is devoid of any qualities (contrasting with Sankara but concurring with Aurobindo); on the contrary, Brahman possesses a number of positive qualities such as existence, consciousness, bliss, knowledge, truth, etc. It is these attributes which are responsible for the determinate nature of Brahman.

##### **Ramanuja's Theory of Reality**

Ramanuja's theory of reality is an ineluctable corollary of his theory of identity-in-difference. Therefore, unlike Sankara, he postulates three ontological realities: God or *Isvara*, Souls or *Jivas*, and the world or matter. Ramanuja's conception of reality is distinct in two ways: (i) he personalized the nature of Brahman, and (ii) he restores more personal attributes to the world and individual souls. Brahman is an organic unity, and thus maintains a real relation between God, soul, and the world (matter). It is a point of convergence between Ramanuja and Aurobindo. They are three factors (*tattva-traya*) of the same Reality.

Though soul and matter (*cit* and *acit*) are equally real, they are nevertheless absolutely dependent on God (*Isvara*). One of the unique contributions of Ramanuja is the understanding that to be real does not mean to be independent. Since, for Ramanuja inorganic matter is also ensouled, the nature of dependence is perceived as that of body upon soul. Matter and individual souls are conceived to be the body of the Absolute and they are directed and sustained by the Absolute. In other words, though matter and soul are substances, in relation to the Absolute they are attributes. The Absolute is the supreme Reality with soul and matter as his integral parts. Brahman is the Absolute reality in the sense that independent of it or outside of it, there is no

other reality. In fact, what Ramanuja proposes is an ontology of participation like that of Aquinas.

In this respect also Aurobindo is one with Ramanuja. Ramanuja maintains that the substance can be known only through the attributes. Therefore, it follows from this premise that God can be known only through the world (Branningan 64). In his Vishishtadvaita, Ramanuja clarifies both the immanence and transcendence of the Absolute. Thus, for him, the unity of Brahman is a unity of plurality, containing both conscious and unconscious elements. One has to place Ramanuja's response to the problem of the One and the Many in the context of his theory of reality. How does the one contain the many? Ramanuja explains it through his principle of *Samanadhikarnya* or the principle of coordination. The argument is that different words in the same sentence can point to the same reality. His interpretation of the classical text "This is that Devadatta" explains the theory further. The core of the argument is that Devadatta of the past and Devadatta of the present are not entirely identical, yet both refer to the same person. Ramanuja holds that just as different descriptive modes can denote one and the same person, so also unity and diversity, one and many, can coexist; they cannot be contradictories, rather they can be reconciled in a synthetic unity. The many are real and they characterize the one.

Ramanuja's philosophy clearly emphasizes the immanence of the supreme Reality in all existence. In it one has both the strength and weakness of Ramanuja's ontology. He succeeded in bringing down the Absolute, however, he finds it difficult to explain the precise relationship that exists between Brahman and the world. His theory of 'part and whole' would further question the integrity of the Brahman, since the part is subject to change and decay. It would also question how the temporal changes and the miseries in the universe affect Brahman, a concept which he has not considered adequately. It is also notable that in order to keep the unity of the universe and the Absolute, Ramanuja has focused on the immanence of God even at the cost of his transcendental dimension. In this respect, both from the religious as well as from the philosophical perspective, Advaita of Sankara is more appealing to the intellect, while Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita appeals to the heart. Ramanuja in his attempt to safeguard the reality of the world, has altogether denied "the experience of a pure consciousness in an unqualified oneness". Ramanuja advocates a real relation between the Absolute and the world.

Nevertheless, in spite of Ramanuja's sincere efforts, he has failed to account for the subsistence of both *cit* (consciousness) and *acit* (matter) in a single whole – the Brahman. Ramanuja's Brahman is not a synthetic whole which might assimilate all its parts into itself. His concept of Brahman can be compared to a person whose body is composed of two opposing principles: *cit* – the individual consciousness (soul) and *acit* – the primordial matter. It seems that for Ramanuja, spirit and matter include both identity and difference in itself (*bhedabheda*). Such a position maybe applicable in a practical sense, but may not withstand an intellectual, logical scrutiny. Thus, one may have to admit that we are faced with a disjunctive proposition where the individual souls and primordial matter are either identical with or different from Brahman. However, the problem we face here is still acute, i.e., the former conclusion would take us to the Advaita philosophy of Sankara and the latter would demolish Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita in favour of Dvaita of Madhva where Brahman, individual soul, and matter are really different. This was also the point of criticism by Madhva against Ramanuja.

A comparison of Sankara and Ramanuja in the light of Aurobindo would claim that the latter is more sympathetic to Ramanuja in his approach to Reality. However, Ramanuja's theory of dependence, which claims the absolute dependence of the universe on Brahman, even to the extent of negating the real existence of the universe is hardly acceptable to Aurobindo. Ramanuja, to a certain extent, succeeded in maintaining the reality of the world, but failed to work out the relationship between the two in a reasonable way. Ramanuja influenced Aurobindo with his theory of identity-in-difference and the theory of real relation. However, the merit of Aurobindo is that he succeeded in maintaining the Absoluteness of Brahman amidst his avowal of the temporal universe, where Ramanuja failed.

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#### 4.6 AUROBINDO AND ABSOLUTE DUALISM

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Madhva (1199-1278) has a unique position in Indian philosophy with his dualistic conception of reality. His is a dualistic realism. The Sanskrit word *Dvaita* comes from the root *dvi* – meaning two. The term *dvaita* etymologically means duality or dualism. Dualism implies difference, which is said to constitute the essence of things. The theory of difference or dualism implies that each substance is unique with its own specific characteristics and nature. The difference is not only qualitative but also quantitative. Even the two objects that look alike are different in the sense that each possesses a self-differentiating characteristic. Madhva advocates, therefore, a pluralistic ontology. Madhva developed a vision of the universe where God, the individual soul and matter are considered really different, and are eternal and absolutely real. The latter two are dependent on God, in the sense that Brahman is the cause and the world is the effect.

##### Theory of Difference and Dependence

Madhva advocates, on the one hand, purely a theistic philosophy based on the dualism of God and the Jiva, and, on the other, the plurality of the universe. The foundation of his ontology is his theory of perception and his theory of knowledge. Human perception brings before the perceiving subject a world of objects. They are independent objects, independent of the perceiver and the knowledge of the perceiver. It is independent of the knowledge in the sense that knowledge does not create objects, but only reveals them. Perception also brings out the difference between the perceiver and the perceived or the cognizer and the cognized. For example, the perception of a table makes clear that the table is real and it is different from other objects. They are two independent entities which have their own reality in the outside world. These distinctions are real and objective. Thus, Madhva rejects the relation of inseparability, and for him this means that the understanding of the material universe as the body of God is no more acceptable. Matter and souls are rather real and different from Brahman.

Madhva, even though he advocates a pluralistic ontology, does admit the dependence of the world and soul on the Absolute. The core of Madhva's philosophy is the distinction he makes between twofold categories: the independent reals (*svatantra*) and the dependent reals (*paratantra*). For him, the only independent real is the Absolute, Brahman. Madhva is considered as an absolute dualist. The distinctive perception of the Brahman-world relation by Ramanuja and Madhva can be summarised in the following way: for Ramanuja, the impersonal God of Sankara was only an "inadequate and partial realization of 'the Supreme Person' (*Purushottama*)" who is Absolute and eternal. The Absolute is ultimately real, and therefore, whatever comes from it is real, both the universe and the individual souls, but dependent on God.

For Madhva, the individual soul was created by God, but never was and would never become one with him or part of him.

### **Aurobindo's Response**

Aurobindo criticizes Madhva for creating an unbridgeable duality between Brahman and the world. Furthermore, while Ramanuja maintained a qualitative monism and a quantitative pluralism with regard to the reality of souls, Madhva advocates both a quantitative and qualitative pluralism. Here Aurobindo concurs with Ramanuja in his repudiation of Madhva. On the other hand, one of the distinctive features distinguishing Aurobindo as well as Madhva from Sankara is that in the former two material realities are not neglected, on the contrary, the individual souls and the material realities of the world are accorded ontological reality.

In the above sections our attempt was to see how the great predecessors of Aurobindo conceived reality and its relation to the phenomenal world. Our discussion also eventually clarified how these thinkers have responded to the question of the one and the many. We have undertaken this analysis with a clear purpose in mind: (i) to clarify what is the relation of Aurobindo to the classical philosophy of India; (ii) to clarify the points of difference as well as points of convergence that Aurobindo has with his predecessors; and (iii) to delineate in a nutshell the constitutive factors of Aurobindo's integral Advaitism. We see that neither the Advaita of Sankara nor the Vishishtadvaita of Ramanuja, nor even the Dvaitavada of Madhva, are devoid of imperfections. Each theory has its own merits and demerits. Our primary concern is to see how Aurobindo views these respective issues and how he solves the imperfections involved in these systems by his integral Advaita and how adequate and truthful his responses are.

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## **4.7 INTEGRAL ADVAITA**

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It has already been made clear that Aurobindo places himself in the Advaita tradition. He acknowledges that his philosophy is a realistic Advaita. The question is about why Aurobindo's system is known as integral Advaita or *purna* Advaita? It is integral for the following reasons: (i) Aurobindo presents his philosophy as an advancement of the major Advaitic traditions, and (ii) the designation *Purna* (integral) connotes a stronger intrinsic value vested in the universe than advocated by his great predecessors. For Aurobindo, the Real is one, but this oneness does not point to an exclusion but rather to a totality. It is an identity in difference. It is devoid of any duality, but has a deeper unity of wholeness. Moreover, it is integral in two other senses: firstly, it takes into account the knowledge attained, not through any particular mental process in man, but through his whole being. Thus, it can be said that it is based on an integral epistemology; secondly, Aurobindo's conception of reality is based on neither man, nor God nor the world, nor any of the two alone, but on the integral consciousness underlying these three manifestations of Reality. For Aurobindo, Reality is an integral whole of which the individual, the universal and the transcendental are three facets.

Aurobindo's system is also designated as integral Yoga. By Yoga Aurobindo means a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent Existence we see partially expressed in man and in the Cosmos. 'Yoga' is essentially a 'spiritual integration'. It basically implies two factors: (i) Immediate contact with the inmost nature of existence in its manifold richness of content; and (ii) an integration of such different provinces of experience as science, art, morality, religion, etc., in the light of one's immediate insight into the heart of reality. Aurobindo defines

Integral Yoga as the turning of one or of all powers of our human existence into a means of reaching the Divine Being. Moreover, it is stated that the goal of integral Yoga is a divine perfection of the human being.

In contrast with the ancient systems of Yoga, which maintain a negative attitude towards life and nature, Aurobindo's system includes not only Being but also Becoming, not only the static or silent Spirit but also the dynamic Brahman. His system aims not only at the realization of God but also involves an entire consecration and change of the inner and outer life till it is fit to manifest a divine consciousness and become part of a divine work. Therefore, it is known as integral Yoga. Integral Yoga points to its comprehensive and all inclusive transformation of the state of mind and the life of the individual. Aurobindo's system is integral above all for the reason that it maintains a monistic pluralism.

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#### **4.8                      DISTINCTIVENESS OF INTEGRAL YOGA**

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The previous explication of the name "integral" brought out a number of features that are specific to Aurobindo's metaphysics. Therefore, our task in this section is to elucidate further a few more points that pertain to the distinctive nature of the Aurobindonian metaphysics. Integral Yoga is distinct from and goes beyond other Yoga systems by aiming at two higher goals: (1) It aims to assemble, concentrate and discipline all the qualities, capacities, and motive forces in man and to elevate them to a "diviner spiritual level," and (2) It moves beyond the liberation of the soul into a wholly transcendent realm of isolated unity, to a "cosmic enjoyment [*bhukti*] of the power of the Spirit" which has never been the motive or object of other systems. In fact it is a bolder and larger system. Again, while the traditional Yoga aims at individual liberation, Aurobindo's system is concerned with making Earthly life Divine or bringing God down to Earth.

The question, however, concerns how practical are these ideals? The nature and final object of Integral Yoga can be clarified by the following facts: i) The liberation of the individual soul and the achievement of the perfect union with the Divine; ii) It is a corollary of the first, namely, the enjoyment of the perfect union of the individual and the eternal; iii) The fruits of the divine union are expressed and manifested in the works for promoting spirituality in the world.

Aurobindo's integral vision, in contrast to Sankara's advaitism, does not abandon life and world, but renounces "man's blind attachment to them." Aurobindo states clearly that for the integral advaitism renunciation is merely an instrument and not an object. A unique feature of integral Advaita is that it attempted for the first time in the history of Indian thought a synthesis of the evolutionary perspective of the modern West with the spiritual heritage of India. Aurobindo's philosophy is an Integral Spiritualistic Non-dualism for two reasons: (i) in Aurobindo's perspective all realities emerge from the fundamental spiritual substance, the Brahman; and (ii) the central purpose of Aurobindo's yoga is an inner self-development by which each one who follows it can in time discover the One Self in all and evolve a higher consciousness than the mental, a spiritual and a supramental consciousness which will transform and divinise human nature.

Aurobindo's system is distinctive for the reason that the object of his philosophy is integral reality. For him, reality is integral in that it means not only Being but also Becoming, not only the quiescent, eternal or non-temporal Brahman but also the dynamic Brahman or Brahman

manifesting itself through flux and in time. The core of integralism is the acceptance of the Supra-cosmic Transcendence and freedom (*Nirguna Brahma*), cosmic creativity and universality (*Saguna Brahma*), and unique individuality (*Jivatman*) as the three inseparable and equally real modes of existence of the supreme spiritual reality Sachchidananda. Among the three, primacy remains with the transcendent. Thus, it is safe to say that in Aurobindo we have a synthetic reconciliation of the Indian schools of thought.

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#### 4.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit our attempt was to understand the thought pattern of Aurobindo and how his philosophy is different from other Vedantic thinkers. His system is known as integral Vedanta as different from Absolute monism of Sankara, Absolute dualism of Madhva and Qualified monism of Ramanuja. Though he is rooted in Vedantic tradition he presented his thought applying Western categories and thus making it intelligible for people from other philosophical tradition. With this background we are able to move to the next unit where we will discuss the basic unity of reality as suggested by Aurobindo.

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#### 4.10 KEY WORDS

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**Tat-tvam asi:** *Tat Tvam Asi*, a Sanskrit sentence, translating variously to "Thou art that," "That thou art," "You are that," or "That you are," is one of the Mahavakyas (Grand Pronouncements)

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#### 4.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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