Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is the great light that shone over India for fifty years during the first half of the twentieth century. Sri Aurobindo may truly be called the Sage for the New Age. He worked all his life to bring down from above a New Consciousness that will take hold of the affairs of mankind. He foresaw coming together of the people of the globe. He predicted that Indian spirituality will enter the West in ever larger measure. His predictions and mystic visions are coming true. What the Great Rishi willed is being fulfilled. Sri Aurobindo's predictions were not based on intellectual analysis but on spiritual vision. He could see into the future with his mystic eye.

From age seven onward, Sri Aurobindo was educated in England at St Paul's School in London and at Kings College, Cambridge. He was a brilliant student of the Classics. He won all the prizes in Latin and Greek. He also wrote poetry at an young age.

After fourteen years stay in England and upon his return to India in 1893, Sri Aurobindo taught English and French literature at Baroda College. He rose to become the vice-Principal of the College. During this period, he taught himself Sanskrit and Indian languages. He translated portions of the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into English. Sri Aurobindo came to represent the best integration of the scholarship of the East and the West.

Soon Sri Aurobindo was drawn to the nationalist anti-British fervor sweeping India at the turn of the century. He was influenced by the writings of Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda, Gokhale and Tilak. He joined the radical wing of the nationalist movement. He edited the revolutionary weekly, Bande Matrim. Sri Aurobindo maintained that the true aim of the nationalist movement was to restore the spiritual greatness of India.

In 1907, he was jailed for a year for his anti-British writings and speeches. This was a period of great transformation for him. In the Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo studied intensively the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. He engaged in deep practices of yoga and meditation. The Divine graced him with a vision of the Supreme Reality. He had a vision of Vasudeva (Krishna) as the author and creator of all that surrounded him.

His life was radically changed. Upon release from the Alipore jail, he gave up all political activity. He moved to Pondicherry in South India which was under French administration. There he did intensive Tapasya for many years. An Ashram grew up around him, which now draws devotees from around the globe.

Sri Aurobindo was a prolific writer and a poet. His works appear in thirty volumes. He was steeped in Western scholarship. He commented on the works of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Racine, among others. Sri Aurobindo also wrote commentaries on the Veda, the
Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. His Essays on the Gita are about the very best commentary on the Hindu scripture.

INDIA AS A HELPER AND A LEADER OF THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE

August 15th is the birthday of free India. It is also Sri Aurobindo’s birthday. On this day in 1947 Sri Aurobindo gave a message to the nation on the All India Radio. Sri Aurobindo outlined there his prophetic vision for India, for the globe and for the human race. He wrote,

August 15th is the birthday of free India. It marks for her the end of an old era, the beginning of a new age. But it has significance not only for us, but for Asia and the whole world, for it signifies the entry into the comity of nations of a new power with untold potentialities which has a great part to play in determining the political, social, cultural and spiritual future of humanity.

I have always held and said that India was rising, not to serve her own material interest only, to achieve expansion, greatness, power and prosperity, -- though these too she must not neglect--, and certainly not like others to acquire domination of other peoples, but to live also for God and the world as a helper and a leader of the whole human race.

Sri Aurobindo foresaw that India will play a great role in waking humanity to a New Spirituality.

The spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India’s spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever increasing measure. That movement will grow; amid the disasters of the time more and more eyes are turning towards her with hope and there is even an increasing resort not only to her teachings, but to her psychic and spiritual practice.

Sri Aurobindo’s vision that India will come to play an enhanced spiritual role in the world is largely proving right. A number of the so-called New Age or New Thought churches have been founded in the United States and the West. These churches incorporate into their teachings many of the precepts of Hindu religion. Many Americans now practice Yoga and meditation. Some chant Vedic hymns in congregational meetings.

The roots of American interest in Indian spirituality can be traced back to the Transcendental Movement of the middle of the 19th century. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were two of the generally recognized leaders of this Movement. Others included Margaret Fuller, Palmer Peabody, James Freeman Clark, and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. Thoreau is better known in India. This is because Mahatma Gandhi was influenced by Thoreau’s short book, Civil Disobedience (1849).

In a lecture delivered at the Harvard Divinity School in 1844, titled ‘The Oversoul,’ Emerson clearly shows the influence on him of Vedic philosophy. He talked of ‘A Divine Presence’ that permeates the whole creation and all living things. Behind the appearances in the universe, there is a Reality of a Being and Consciousness, which is One and Eternal. In Sanskrit this is called ‘S ad E kam.’ This One Reality is the Self of all things. God could best be found by looking inward into the core of one’s being, one’s Soul. By living according to the dictates of an Inner Will, one could
transcend the materialist world of sense perception, the world of cause and effect. The purpose of human life was to seek unity with the Oversoul (Paramatma in Sanskrit).

Like the Vedic Rishis (seers), the transcendentalists believed that intuition rather than reason was the highest human faculty. The notion of a mystical union with the Divine was emphasized. The process of seeking unity with the Divine was inherently individualistic rather than congregational. The role of religious institutions were therefore de-emphasized. Contemplative solitude was extolled. Henry David Thoreau lived in a 10 x 15 cabin on the banks of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. He lived deliberately, on the tradition of ancient Rishis. His observations are recorded in a short book, Walden (1854).

Even though Emerson and other transcendentalists met opposition in their time, their ideas have sprung forth a number of non-traditional Christian churches in America. These are called the New Thought or New Age churches. Examples include: the Unity Church of Christianity, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Science of Mind, Divine Science Church, Temple of the Universe, Self Realization Fellowship, and the Center for Spiritual Awareness.

Occasionally, I attend meetings of the Unity Church in Pensacola, Florida. I will describe here several of the Unity articles of faith. Unity Church was founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in 1889.

1. Unity members affirm the following statement of Truth at their Sunday service meetings: A There is One Power and One Presence in the universe, God the Good, Omnipotent.A Compare this statement with the opening line of Isa Upanishad: A Asa Vasyam I dam Sarvam@ In the heart of everything, of whatever there is in the universe, dwells the Lord.

   Traditional Christianity posits a dual power: God and Satan. An Important Unity principle is that duality itself springs from God. Compare this statement of truth with another statement from the Upanishad: Brahma is AE kam Advityam, A One without a Second.

2. The founder of the Unity Church, Charles Fillmore and many of his followers believe in the theory of reincarnation. This is the belief that the Soul returns to express itself in another life until it finally gains divine perfection. Traditional Christianity posits a single life span for man and woman.

3. Unity is non-sectarian. One does not have to give up one's religion in order to join Unity Church.

4. Unity does not preach that Jesus was A the only Begotten Son of God. Jesus is regarded as a way-shower. He showed how men ought to live.

5. Prayer and meditation are an important part of Unity service meetings. For example, every Sunday service includes a 20-minute period of meditation.

Unity is one of the fastest growing churches in America. The story is told in The Unity Way by Marcus Bach (1982).
ARE INDIANS MORE SPIRITUAL THAN OTHER PEOPLE?

A disciple once asked Sri Aurobindo if Indians were more spiritual than other people. Sri Aurobindo replied,

No, it is not so. No nation is entirely spiritual. Indians are no more spiritual than other people. But behind the Indian race there lives the past spiritual influence.

India has the greatest chance because of her past and because the spiritual force is accumulated here. But if India remains indifferent and sticks to old worn-out forms and refuses to move forward or listen to the call of her soul, then the Truth may recede and try somewhere else. India’s Rebirth, pp 175, 184.

Indian spirituality is not exclusive or divisive. It accepts all, it belongs to all and it encompasses all. Sanatana Dharma is the common heritage not only of the people of India but of whole mankind. Those from India have a special responsibility. They must rise to the opportunity that the changed globe offers. The Truth must be made available to all. But they must first awaken to the Truth themselves.

Sri Aurobindo’s vision of the Truth is unparalleled. Unfortunately, his works are not well known except among the few. Sri Aurobindo’s style is terse and compacted for the uninitiated. A beginning student will do better to first read one of the secondary works on the life and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. Recommended are Satprem’s (a French devotee) The Adventure of Consciousness, and M. P. Pandit’s Sri Aurobindo and his Yoga. Books by Peter Hees, K. D. Sethna and Nirodbaran are also recommended.

Useful web sites for information on Sri Aurobindo include: www.miraura.org www.auroville.org www.Sriaurobindosociety.org www.iksc.org

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The quotations in this article are from Sri Aurobindo’s Collected Works known as Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (SABCL), published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, India, 1972. The text of his message on All India Radio is available in Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram, Sri Aurobindo Trust, Pondicherry, 1964.

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