

Individual Self: As Envisioned by Sri Aurobindo

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Abstract: *The concept of Self is really very interesting topic to be discussed. In the Vedas we discover the uses of the words as 'knowledge', 'consciousness', 'will', 'thought', 'understanding' etc whose inherent meaning stands for the meanings like Dhi, Manas, Buddhi, Chetana, Ritam, Satyam, Vipra, Chitti, Mati, Achitti etc. Rig Veda speaks of 'Dyawa Prithivi' i.e. Heaven and Earth, symbolizing the mental and physical planes of consciousness. In this context let us try to comprehend Sri Aurobindo's explanation of the Self.*

Keywords: *Self, Manas, Consciousness, Sri Aurobindo, Chetna, Mental and Physical plane.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Self is a very relevant concept that we want to discuss here. It is prevalent everywhere either in Indian or in Western psycho logical thoughts. However there exists a popular misconception that India had no cultivation of psychology. It was wrongly thought that India was reluctant to use psychology as a separate study. But this presumption is certainly not true. It is certainly true that psychology in India as elsewhere was not a separate science, but was centred on religion and philosophy; and, so, psychology was intimately connected with all of the above. Perhaps the intimate relation of psychology with that of religion and philosophy in India is the main cause of this misconception. Hence we are falsely guided to think that there was no such practice of psychology in India. On the contrary, in India, the culture of psychology could be discovered even in the ancient eras. It has a rich tradition of psychological studies from the time of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

2. THEORY OF SELF: VEDAS

The *Vedas* speak of 'knowledge', 'consciousness', 'will', 'thought', 'understanding' etc by using several words like *Dhi, Manas, Buddhi, Chetana, Ritam, Satyam, Vipra, Chitti, Mati, Achitti* etc. *Rig Veda* speaks of '*Dyawa Prithivi*' i.e. Heaven and Earth, symbolizing the mental and physical planes of consciousness. It also mentions of '*Antariksha*' i.e. the immediate vital plane between Earth and Heaven – the physical and mental. Here we could also discover the three summits of the mind – '*Trini Rochana*'. In I, 50.10 *sukta* of the *Vedas* we got to know about the ascent of the human soul from plane to plane; from Darkness to Light.¹ In IV, 2-12, again the Vedic seer or *Rishi* says 'The knower must distinguish between consciousness and unconsciousness' –

3. THEORY OF SELF: UPANISHADS:

The *Upanishads* differentiate between various mental states of human beings and it was quite similar with that of Western psychology.

¹ "Beholding on high the Light beyond the Darkness, higher still we saw the God among the Gods, we reached the Sun, the highest Light." [I, 50.10 *sukta* of *Vedas*]. However in this context we can discover its similarity with that of Sri Aurobindo. In his opinion, Sachchidananda is the supreme spirit of all. Hence we can say that Sun of the *Vedas* = Sachchidananda of Sri Aurobindo.

1. *Jagrat* – Waking State;
2. *Swapna* – Dream State;
3. *Sushupti* – Deep-sleep State;
4. *Turiya* – Hallucinated State.

Again, in the *Upanishads*, various levels of human consciousness are also briefly mentioned.

1. *Annamaya* – the Physical;
2. *Pranamaya* – the Vital;
3. *Manomaya* – the Mental;
4. *Vijnanamaya* – the Supramental
5. *Anandamaya* – the Level of Bliss.²

4. THEORY OF SELF: SRI AUROBINDO:

From this high note let us try to formulate Sri Aurobindo's notion of individual self. In this regard we have to deal with several significant questions regarding the true nature of human soul or self

1. Does self stand for Body?
2. Does self stand for Mind?
3. Does self stand for Ego?
4. Or, is it something else?

4.1. First Objection: Self = Body:

3.1.1 Indian Aspect: Charvaka Metaphysics:

To formulate the first objection 'Is it (self) Body?' we should look towards the Indian tradition at first. In the *Charvaka* philosophy, soul and body were not differentiated. To them, there is no separate existence of self other than body. Self-consciousness is an emergent property of the body itself. Body is perceptible, not soul. The existence of self after the decay of body is also not permissible. When I say "I am sleeping" then this 'I' is nothing else but body, as 'sleep' is used for symbolizing the rest of the body, not of the soul. Self is, in their tradition, is just body and nothing else. Conscious human body is regarded by the *Charvaka* as self. Hence all kinds of soul-consciousness are the sheer manifestations of the bodily consciousness. Consciousness thus seems to be the epiphenomenon of the body and has to be made up of four physical atoms, namely *kshiti* or earth, *apa* or water, *tejas* or fire, and *marut* or air. This physicalist theory is popularly known to be *Dehatma-vada* or *Bhutachaitanya-vada*. In this respect we can discover their strong similarity with that of the epiphenomenalism of the West where mind and mental parts are considered to be the epiphenomena of the physical components. Only physical parts are apprehended to be the phenomena and the mental components, as the inherent objects within the physical realm, has been known as epiphenomena.

3.1.2 Western Aspect: William James:

When we look back to West, we can discover the similar theory regarding self and body in that of William James. According to him, 'No Psychology....can question the existence of personal selves.'³ He admitted the possibility of various kinds of self, e.g. the material self, social self and

² Here also we could discover the similarity of Upanishadic views with that of Sri Aurobindo. According to him, the levels of consciousness is as follows –

- a) Matter or Physical;
- b) Life or Vital;
- c) Mind or Mental;
- d) Supermind or Supramental;
- e) Sachchidananda or Divine Existence – Consciousness-force – Bliss i.e. *Sat-Chit-Ananda*.

³ William James, *Psychology: Briefer course*, Henry Holt & co., New York, 1926, p. 153.

the spiritual self. If we concentrate only towards his theory of material self, then we can certainly deduce that self = body. The body is the innermost part of *the material* self in each of us; and the body as a whole seems more intimately ours than the rest. Without body no one can exist. Self has to be manifested within the bodily realm of an individual. Hence at least in the case of material self, William James too accepted the doctrine of equality between self and body. [Here we take the help of the Principle of Exclusion]

4.2. Sri Aurobindo's Answer:

In our common sense point of view, we can immediately remove this dichotomy by calling that self is conscious and body is unconscious, hence body should never stand for self. However Sri Aurobindo's position is certainly much different from that. It is true that soul is supremely conscious, but body even is not at all unconscious in its inherent nature. He explained his position in two ways as following – first, by showing the presence of bodily consciousness and secondly, by rejecting the idea that matter must be unconscious in nature. Let us start with the first stand-point. When our fingers are cut, then the mind can also feel the pain. The reason of it, as conceived by him, is that body has its own consciousness though in the dormant level. For that reason, body can influence the mind (as shown in the above example) and also body can do many things according to its own will, e.g. picking up a spoon or knife even when we are not conscious of it. By these two examples we can prove the existence of bodily consciousness. From the second stand-point we have to prove the existence of consciousness in matter.

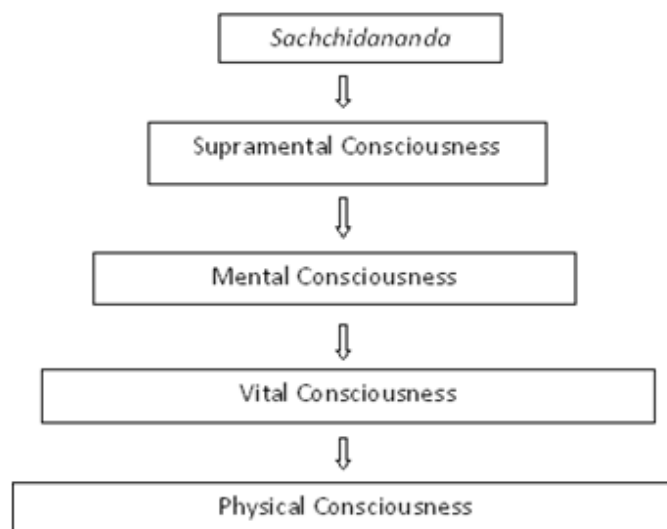


Fig1. *The Apex System of Consciousness Structure*

According to Sri Aurobindo, consciousness is a fundamental thing which in the process of involution for fulfilling the Divine purpose of God (this Divine purpose is due to Sachchidananda's cosmic manifestation) takes the form of apparently unconscious matter. So matter, in his theory, is nothing but a dormant form of Divine consciousness. From his *Life Divine* we ultimately derive this truth. Actually due to our ignorance we misunderstand the true nature of matter as inconscient. For describing matter, Sri Aurobindo uses the term 'sleep of consciousness' unless 'suspension of consciousness' which is sufficient enough to prove the existence of consciousness even in the material level. Thus even if we admit body as material in nature, we cannot call it unconsciousness at all.

But the question remains the same – is soul = body or not? Sri Aurobindo never accepted that soul is synonymous with body. Let us try to find its answer from his writings –

‘...we have to begin with a dualism of the thing and its shadow, Purusha and Prakriti, commonly called spirit and matter [Underlines are done by me]...He (Purusha) is the origin of the birth of things and He is the receptacle of the birth and it is to the Male aspect of Himself that the word Purusha predominantly applies. The image often applied to these relations is that of the man casting his seed into the Woman; his duty is merely to originate the seed and deposit it, but it is

the woman's duty to cherish the seed, develop it, bring it forth and start it on its career of manifested life. The seed, says the Upanishad, is the self of the Male, it is spirit, and being cast into the Female, Prakriti, it becomes one with her and therefore does her no

hurt; spirit takes the shaping appearance of matter and does not break up the appearances of matter, but develops under their law'.⁴ Here both soul and matter have some amount of consciousness lying inherent. But the consciousness of soul as *Purusha* is active; while consciousness remaining in matter or *Prakriti* is passive in nature. They are nothing but the manifestations of the same *Brahman*. The active manifestation is *Purusha* or soul and the passive manifestation is *Prakriti* or matter. This concept of Purusha and Prakriti has very much in common with that of the *Samkhya* philosophy. Hence, in Sri Aurobindo's view, soul cannot be synonymous with body.

4.3. Second Objection: Self = Mind:

4.3.1. Western Aspect

Rene Descartes: Now to formulate the second objection we have to concentrate on the Modern Western psychological point of view. According to Rene Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am' this *Cogito Ergo Sum thesis* indicates towards drawing a conclusion such that self = mind. Here the word 'I' stands for 'Self'. But this self can never be able to think without the help of mind. Thinking is a capacity of the mind, not of soul. Soul cannot think, but mind. Thinking thus indicates towards the mind. Hence 'I think' this utterance could be true if and only if we accept that self is mind.

Kant: In Kantian doctrine, we cannot understand soul without understanding the mind. Consciousness is a unique feature of mind. Hence, without mental consciousness there is no such thing as self-consciousness. We cannot experience self-consciousness, but mental consciousness. For him, self-consciousness simply implies having experience and recognizing that as one's own (mental consciousness). So no difference between self and mind could be drawn in Kant's thesis.

David Hume: However in the opinion of David Hume, we find out that soul is nothing but just the bundle of mental thoughts. We cannot experience any such thing like soul, but only our mental states. We can identify the experiences of our childhood due to the existence of such mental states remaining intact till now. In his book *Treatise Concerning Human Nature* he clearly argued that there is no such thing as self even if we have strong belief in its favor. What we can experience is the continuous flow of perception that replaces one another in rapid succession. His thesis is known as the Bundle theory of Mind. This can also be claimed as the No-self Theory of Hume.

4.4. Indian Aspect:

When we consult the Indian tradition, then we can discover a somewhat similar theory with that of the Bundle theory of Hume is the Buddhist theory of *Anatma-vada*. According to them, there is no such thing as the eternal soul. The soul we see is just a mental flux and comprises of every little bit of mental experiences. Self is nothing but a succession of several mental states. We cannot experience soul, but only that of these mental states. Hence soul stands to them nothing but a mental phenomenon. *Yogachara* Buddhists or *Vijnanavadins* made this much more explicable by refuting the existence of everything except the mental phenomena.

4.5. Sri Aurobindo's Answer:

4.5.1. First Interpretation:

To remove this second objection from the point of view of Sri Aurobindo, we have to prove that – first, all consciousness is not mental, soul-consciousness remains in the highest position; and secondly, soul is not similar to mind. In the first interpretation, he shows us that consciousness is not at all mental. In the hierarchy of consciousness-level, mental consciousness is actually that type of consciousness which exists within the range of human knowledge. Where human

⁴ A.S. Dalal, *A Grater Psychology: an Introduction to the Psychological Thought of Sri Aurobindo*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 2001, p. 96-97

knowledge exhausts is not the ultimate end. There exist different levels of consciousness above & below the human range. Actually in the supramental level, consciousness exists beyond our reach. This consciousness is, in reality, depicting the consciousness level of the *Brahman* or *Sachchidananda*. The supramental consciousness is luminous or *Svayamprakasa* in nature. Just like the *Vedanta* school of Indian philosophy, Sri Aurobindo is also sure about the indescribability of this level of consciousness. Hence when *Yajnavalkya* describes that there is in reality no consciousness in the Brahman state, Sri Aurobindo conceives it not as the non-existence, rather for the supramental existence. In the same way, he does not admit the Buddhist theory of *Sunyavada*. The supramental stage of consciousness is certainly existent, i.e. not *Sunya*. In his opinion, superconscient, subconscient as well as inconscient all are relative terms. Superconscient means consciousness existing beyond the reach of mental consciousness. So soul-consciousness or supramental consciousness has to remain in the highest position. So it follows from the above discussion that consciousness is in no way mental in nature.

4.5.2. *Second Interpretation:*

In the second interpretation Sri Aurobindo showed that soul and mind are basically two separate entities. Thus they should not be confused together. The mind is actually the instrumental entity or consciousness whose function is just to think & perceive; whereas the spirit is that entity or consciousness whose objects are objects of direct knowledge (*Svayamprakasa*). Thus the spirit must not be indulged in the simple work of thinking & perceiving. This is the first interpretation where both of them are considered to be two separate entities. We can also give its answer from another perspective. In Sri Aurobindo's book *On Education* we can find out that mind stands for *Antahkarana* which has four layers - the passive mind or *Chitta* i.e. the preserving mind; the proper mind or *Manas* i.e. the mind that receives thought; the intellect or *Buddhi* i.e. the real instrument of thought & last, but not the least, *Bodhi* i.e. the stage of intuiting truth & having direct vision of knowledge. Now we can consider spirit as *Bodhi*, the highest layer of mind, because in both of them we get direct knowledge & intuition of everything. But even if spirit really stands for *Bodhi*, then also we can think mind to be different from spirit as the whole (i.e. the mind) must be different from the part (i.e. the spirit). In this context we can discover the similarity of Sri Aurobindo's thought with that of Gestalism. The Gestalt theory also accepts the whole as a separate entity from the part because the whole has the unique quality named Gestalt-quality not found in its parts. So it follows that soul and mind are not at all synonymous to Sri Aurobindo.

4.6. Third Objection: Self = Ego:

4.6.1. *Indian Aspect: Advaita Vedantism:*

To formulate the third objection, let us start with the Indian philosophical tradition. The word 'I' naturally depicts the 'ego' or 'aham'. However there is no strict boundary left between self and ego. In the *Advaita* Vedantism, individual being i.e. *jivatman* and the Supreme Being i.e. the *Paramatman* are not different from each other. Then ego can be synonymous with that of self. This is the *Parmarthika* point of view. But due to the existence of *Avidya* or Nescience we can distinguish ourselves from the *Brahman*. Actually the *Jiva* or Ego is nothing else than the ultimate manifestation of the *Brahman*. [Self = Ego]

4.6.2. *Western Aspect: Sartre:*

We can discover a somewhat related theory in that of Sartre. According to him, the consciousness can conceive of other objects but it cannot conceive of other consciousnesses. Sartre in his book *Transcendence of the Ego* mentioned that the consciousness can conceive of other egos, be it my ego, or be it the ego of another person. It cannot conceive of another consciousness insofar as it is an enclosed, self-contained consciousness for which the very amalgam "other" and "consciousness" is simply unthinkable. We cannot, thus, at all transcend beyond the ego. Hence it can be assumed that whenever we try to catch the self, we can discover it as none but ego. Hence it could be presumed that in his thesis self and ego remain synonymous in nature. This is another example of using the Principle of Exclusion.

4.7. Sri Aurobindo's Answer:

But in Sri Aurobindo's notion self is not at all replaceable by ego. Ego is the cause of generating *ahamkara* in every living creature. It is mainly responsible for every kind of authoritative feelings that gave birth of the false notion that only I am that person on the earth that can do it. This *ahamkara*, created by *Maya*, deprives the human being from realizing his true identity such that he is nothing else but a mere manifestation of *Brahman*. While going through this concept of ego or *ahamkara* we can find out his enormous similarity with that of the *Samkhya* notion of *ahamkara*. However the search for our own self can prolong even if we become acquainted with ego. In the writings of Sri Aurobindo we can get the clear picture of our self-inquiry '...it (consciousness) is to observe oneself and watch oneself living, and then see whether it is really the body which is the consciousness of the being, what one calls "myself"; ...and at the end of a very short time one becomes aware: "No, I am thinking, therefore 'myself' is different from my thoughts". And so, by progressive eliminations one succeeds in entering into contact with something, something which gives you the impression of being – "Yes, that's myself". And this something I can move around, I can move it from my body to my vital, to my mind, I can even, if I am very ...very practised in moving it, I can move it into other people, and it's in this way that I can identify myself with things and people. I can with the help of my aspiration make it come out of my human form, rise above towards regions which are no longer this little body at all and what it contains." And so one begins to understand what one's consciousness is; and it's after that that one can say, "Good, I shall unite with my psychic being and shall leave it there, so that it may be in harmony with the Divine and be able to surrender entirely to the Divine". Or else, "If by this exercise of rising above my faculties of thinking and my intellect I can enter a region of pure light, pure knowledge..." then one can put his consciousness there and live like that, in a luminous splendour which is above the physical form.'⁵ With the use of the word 'luminous' Sri Aurobindo clearly mentions that 'I' is actually denoting the 'self', rather than 'ego'. In this above way, very beautifully in his doctrine, self is proved not to be ego.

4.8. Fourth Objection: Self = ?:

Thus the problem becomes much more complicated now. If self is not body, not mind, even not ego, then what is it? Does self at all exist? Will Sri Aurobindo ever accept any such notion as self? This is our fourth and final objection. But surprisingly it leads us towards the end our search as it is not only a question but also is an answer hidden within.

4.9. Sri Aurobindo's Answer:

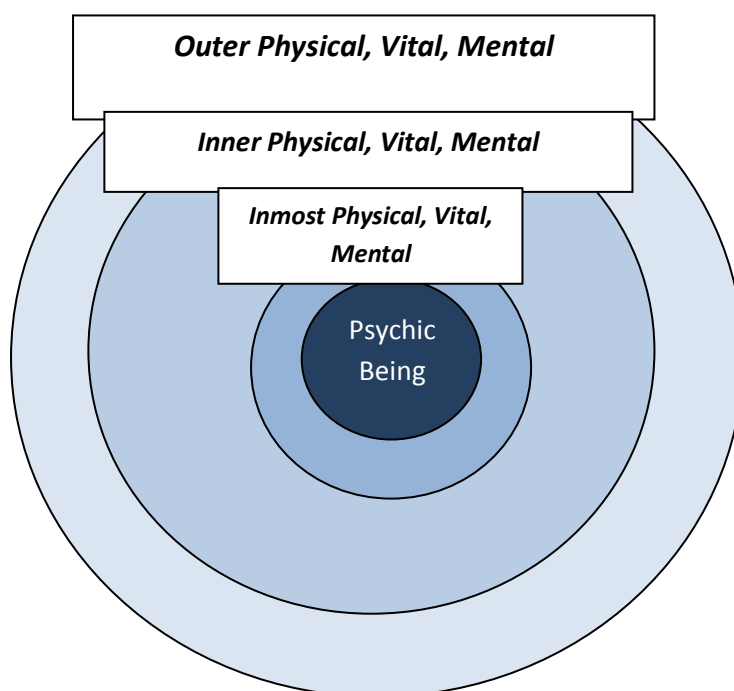


Fig 2. The Concentric System of Individual Being

⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Our Many Selves*, compiled by A.S. Dalal, p. 163-64

In its answer Sri Aurobindo develops the concentric system of the individual being and our soul remains as its core or basis. The concentric system looks like the series of rings, consisting of the outer being, the inner being and the inmost being. The outer being and the inner being constitute our phenomenal or instrumental being and have three corresponding components – physical, vital, mental. The inmost being has two parts – the divisible and the indivisible. The divisible part of the inmost being is divided into the inmost mental, inmost vital as well as an inmost physical. However at the very centre of the rings remains the Psychic Being or the *Chaitya Purusha*. This remains as the indivisible part of the inmost being. And this Psychic Being, according to Sri Aurobindo, is nothing else but self or *Jivatman*.

4.10. Self = Psychic Being: Sri Aurobindo:

Now here arises a confusion regarding the nature of this psychic being. The term ‘psyche’ etymologically stands for ‘mind’. But, according to Sri Aurobindo, it is not at all a mental being, rather the inmost being of our existence. This inmost being is something that is far beyond the realms of mind. And actually there is no other thing except soul that can stand beyond the reach of the mind in such a way. Sri Aurobindo truly realized that the word ‘psyche’ is used in many senses. One of them is psyche = mind. But he never uses the word ‘psyche’ in this sense. Mind, on the contrary, in his tradition, could stand for *Chitta*. *Chitta* belongs to the category of *Buddhi*, *manas*, *Chitta*, *prana* etc, one among the ordinary classification made by the Indian psychology. *Chitta* covers only the psychology of the external being. It is one of the main functions of the external consciousness, and, hence, to know it we should not go beyond the limits of our external nature. Perhaps the main reason behind the calling up of the mental consciousness as an external kind of consciousness is that its manifestations are external and become prominent with the help of behavior of oneself and others. But the psychic, on the contrary, belongs to another class of Supermind, mind, life, psychic and physical. And it covers both the inner and outer nature of man. Thus for knowing it, we have to go beyond our external nature, and to reach to our internal one. So psychic being or self seems to be the inmost being to Sri Aurobindo.

4.11. Nature of Psychic Being: Sri Aurobindo:

But we need to know the proper location of this psychic being as the innermost part of an individual should remain within the realm of his body. This *Chaitya Purusha* has to reside in the heart of a body. However this heart has to be the inner heart or the secret heart (*hrdaye guhāyaām*), rather than the centre of our vital-emotional feelings and emotions. We usually call heart as the seat of emotion and human emotions are nothing else other than the mental-vital impulses. The heart which deals with emotions and feelings are our external heart, not the inner one. But we have to concentrate our attention only towards the inner heart. Self has to deal with the psychic feelings. Hence heart, in the sense of self, is not the residing-place of any mental-vital emotion at all.

5. Conclusion:

Now we can draw our conclusion on the basis of our above discussion. The uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo’s concept of self is truly amazing. None before him and perhaps even after him, either of the Indian tradition or of the Western one, even dare to think of self as an inner being of the individual. No one other than him conceives self as the ‘inmost being’ and gives such a vivid description of its workings. This inmost being or Psychic being, according to him, is the mere manifestation of the *Brahman*. In this way he beautifully draws a correlation of *jivatman* or Psychic being with that of *Paramatman* or God. Standing far beyond the reach of the ordinary mental consciousness of man, the Psychic being or self is actually the individual expression of divinity hidden within each human being. And this is the true essence of his theory concerning individual being.

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