

Survival of Bodily Death
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Sri Aurobindo and the Survival Hypothesis

Michael Murphy

On Tuesday morning **Michael Murphy** gave a brief overview of Sri Aurobindo's life and thought as it applies to the survival hypothesis.

Brief Biography of Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta, India in 1872 to a professional-class family. His father, a doctor, wanted to educate some of his children in England, so Aurobindo spent much of his youth abroad. While at school the young Aurobindo showed an incredible aptitude for languages; he excelled in Latin and Greek. Later in his twenties, he continued to develop his mastery of languages, reading both Dante and Goethe in their native tongues. When he was in his late teens and early twenties, he spent two years in Cambridge when Frederic Myers was there. Although there is no record of contact between them, Aurobindo frequently used Myers's term "subliminal" in his masterwork *The Life Divine*.

In 1893, when he was 21, Aurobindo returned to India for the first time in fourteen years. Upon arrival, he did not know much about Indian yogic practices, and he might best be described as an agnostic. What is often called the Hindu or Bengal Renaissance had prepared the way for what would unfold next in Aurobindo's life. This cultural and spiritual movement was centered in Aurobindo's home province of Bengal, which is on the eastern side of India near modern day Bangladesh. It involved a diversity of thinkers and events, but overall it symbolized a potent re-birth of pride on the part of Indians in their indigenous "Hindu" religion and philosophy ("Hindu" is actually a term given to Indian religion by Western scholars). It involved such men as Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and Keshup Chandra Singh. Murphy pointed out that the globally influential Hindu mystic of the mid-19th century, Ramakrishna, like Aurobindo himself, was also from Bengal, which was rapidly becoming a hotbed of mystical and political ferment. As the Indian independence movement picked up steam at the dawn of the twentieth century, Aurobindo became one of its leaders. Due to his intelligence and stature, the Bengalese asked him to become head of the national college there. As the cries for independence grew stronger, it became all the more significant (and ironic) that an accomplished graduate of King's College was renouncing the British Raj both in voice and written word.

In light of Aurobindo's growing political activities, Murphy quipped that he could be described as a cross between Thomas Jefferson and St. John of the Cross. In January 1908 Aurobindo had his first major spiritual realization, in which he experienced the silent Brahman (which he later equated with the term *nigurna Brahman*). Three months after this initial experience, he was arrested by the British and spent a year in the Alipore jail in 1908-09 for his involvement in revolutionary activity. While in jail, he had his second major transformative experience, in which he saw Krishna in the face of the judge, in the bars of the jail, and every else he looked. After being released, he escaped further harassment by moving to the French enclave, Pondicherry, in southern India. Shortly after arriving there, he had his third formative experience, in which he realized a deeper unity to the first two. In this one, Aurobindo recognized the simultaneous embrace of the immanent and transcendent Divine. Still later in his life, Aurobindo had a fourth foundational experience that revealed to him the Divine nature of humanity's evolutionary advance. Murphy said that the past few years have been a fascinating time for his own scholarship into the life and practice of Aurobindo because he has been studying Aurobindo's recently released record of yoga, which was compiled as a diary of his daily practices from 1911 to 1920. In reading this record Murphy said he has been particularly impressed with Aurobindo's openly experimental approach toward his own practice. His notes reveal that he constantly revised his practices, metapsychology, and metaphysics, all in light of his developing experience.

Hinduism in an Evolutionary Context

Murphy turned next to some of the core features of Aurobindo's mystical-cosmological vision. Murphy said that Aurobindo's genius involved bringing together two great lineages of Hindu mystical practice, Vedanta and Tantra, and placing them within a larger evolutionary context. Aurobindo was one of the first deeply realized mystics (if not the first) to take the discovery of evolution quite seriously and incorporate it into his own cosmological vision. Murphy said that this is crucial, because once the centrality of evolution is acknowledged, it encourages us to re-conceptualize the significance of our own spiritual experiences. In particular, experiences that might otherwise be denigrated, such as the spontaneous emergence of siddhis, can be reconceived as budding forms of humanity's evolutionary advance. Contemporary scholars often classify Aurobindo in the Purna Advaita Vedanta school, but Murphy noted that these scholars often translate "purna" as "integral" where it may in fact be closer in meaning to "fullness."

The Nature of Supermind and the Soul in Evolution

Murphy said that Aurobindo considered all souls as an expression of the Supermind, which is the first emanation from Sachitananda. The Supermind acts to reconcile the unity of Sachitananda with the plurality of mind, life, and matter. It also facilitates the transformation of the manifest world into an ever more perfect manifestation of Sachitananda. In this manner, our own higher souls act upon us to embody our Divine self in the world. Murphy pointed out that far from having a static and dogmatic system of metaphysics, Aurobindo was constantly deconstructing and revising his own cosmology and vision of the Divine.

According to Aurobindo's mature teaching, the human soul has a double aspect or bi-partite structure:

First: The Jiva Atman, which is an eternal and ultimate subjectivity.

Second: The Chaitya Purusha, which is the individuating aspect involved in the cosmic adventure of Lila. This aspect of the soul can develop a progressive mastery of the cosmic game itself.

When distinguishing these first two aspects, Aurobindo would cite a well-known Vedic hymn:

There are two birds on the tree of existence, one eats the sweet fruit and the other regards him and eats not.

The bird that enters the evolutionary game is the one that has eaten the sweet fruit of existence, while the one that regards him is the Jiva Atman, the eternal and unchangeable aspect of the soul.

According to this view of the soul, reincarnation is the means by which to accelerate the soul's learning and evolution. In the course of time, all souls co-evolve with the evolving cosmos itself. In fact, when addressing the conundrum of rebirth and survival, Aurobindo suggested that an understanding of cosmic evolution was essential.

The Five Bodies (Koshas) The comic adventure of souls in reincarnation does not merely build the cosmos, it also builds the soul's subtle bodies, or koshas. Murphy noted that Aurobindo was strongly influenced by the Taittiriya Upanishad, in which these bodies are described in detail. Murphy mentioned five of them:

1. Anamaya kosha – the physical body
2. Pranamaya kosha – the body of ki or chi
3. Manamaya kosha – the mental body
4. Vijnanamaya kosha – the supramental body
5. Anandamaya kosha – the bliss body

This list of multiple bodies is important for contemporary theorizing about the nature of survival and the after life, because when we die physically, Aurobindo said we die step-by-step from each kosha, shedding one at a time. Thus, the evidence for survival that comes from records of mediumistic communication may very well be coming from souls who have not yet shed their lower (more earth-like) bodies. Yet once they have, it may no longer be possible to engage in mediumistic communications with those still alive on the physical plane.

Murphy added that a fully liberated and illumined soul can traverse and enter into the various realms that correspond to the outer koshas. As an expression of the Divine Lila, an illumined soul can assume any form it likes and eat any food it desires, all the while chanting "oh wonderful, oh wonderful, oh wonderful."

Preparing for the Afterlife in Other Dimensions

One of Murphy's main messages was that we can "take charge" of our next life now. We can start preparing our various subtle bodies while still in this life via transformative practice. The more conscious one is in preparation for the process of dying and crossing over, the more one will have already built an "annex" in the next world. But other dimensions of existence are available in addition to our own physical earth. These dimensions are not just dreamy realms but places in which embodied life is possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Murphy's presentation of Aurobindo emphasized that any discussion of human personality, soul, and survival will be incomplete if it does not incorporate an evolutionary cosmology. Without it, we will miss central insights into the deeper purpose and nature of who we are as participants in the evolutionary unfolding. As Aurobindo himself writes on the mystery of rebirth and the survival of bodily death, "the solution depends upon the nature, source and object of the cosmic movement, and as we determine these, so we shall have to conclude about birth, life, death, the before and the hereafter" (p. 743, *The Life Divine*).

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