

APPLIED SPIRITUALITY AND OUR WORK AT BHĀRATSHAKTI

Beloo Mehra

Sri Aurobindo Society seeks to bring a dynamic spirituality into material life and all its activities, so that the global problems can find a true solution, and the dreams of humanity, through the ages, can be realized.

~ From Sri Aurobindo Society's website

Sri Aurobindo Society's mission and vision is to disseminate the light and force of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in all domains of human activity. Accordingly, all our works including our research projects have always been on topics and issues that impact diverse aspects of our collective lives.

But collective life is not entirely separate from how each one of us understands and lives our own individual life. Sri Aurobindo once said that what is true of the individual is also true of the nation. In a way, this implies that the Light which helps us work out a sustainable resolution to a challenge or problem in individual life will also guide us to right solutions and approaches when dealing with collective problems.

Today humanity faces serious challenges such as global poverty, mindless consumerism, ecological destruction versus the need for economic development, global terrorism, inter-religious conflicts, widespread corruption, and many more. Political leaders, subject experts, intellectuals, journalists, activists, pretty much everyone has an opinion on these matters. In their own ways, peoples, societies and nations have been trying to address these conflicts and challenges using different approaches – by enacting reasonable laws, formulating appropriate policies, strengthening relevant institutions, and promoting all the 'right' secular values such as equality, liberty, human rights, universal education. At the same time, there is a greater sensitivity now to promoting nobler ideals such as compassion for all life and nature, peace, non-violence, etc.

But still the challenges continue and even get worse over time. Maybe some key aspect is still missing.

This is where we must bring in the idea of applied spirituality. It has been said by many spiritual masters including Sri Aurobindo that the consciousness which created a problem cannot help us solve it. Only when we rise in consciousness, we can truly understand the problem and address it.

This means that if the challenges we face today – whether in individual life or collective life – are the outcome of mind-based modernisation, which is the result of a rational, materialistic scientific model of progress, we need to go beyond the rational-scientific-materialistic paradigm to something that is suprarational and spiritual. It does not mean giving up science or giving up our concerns with material progress. It means seeing that in the larger and wider picture of subjective and spiritual progress of individuals and societies.

In one of his writings, Sri Aurobindo uses a phrase “spiritual practicality.” Now this term can be confusing to those who are used to thinking that spirituality and practicality cannot go hand in hand. Many of us have been conditioned to a faulty notion which sees “spiritual” people as “impractical, other-worldly” or those who are “out-of-touch-with-the-real-big-bad-world.”

But the truth is something else. True Indian spirituality is not a world-denying spirituality – this is another important truth Sri Aurobindo reminds us through his vast writings on India and Indian culture. His famous line – All Life is Yoga – summarises this life-affirming nature of spirituality.

An unbiased and honest look at the thousands of years of India’s history will tell us about the immense contributions of rishis, munis, yogis, sadhaks, gurus in practically all aspects of human life and activity. Philosophy, psychology, ethics, sociology, mathematics, astronomy, science, medicine, literature, arts, politics, warfare — every field of what we consider as “practical” human activity has been the field of work of our rishis and yogis.

Once again, we need to bring the wisdom of “spiritual practicality” or applied spirituality to find deeper ways to address some of the most serious issues of our times.

From the Vedic times till Sri Aurobindo, all sages and seers have spoken of the true self deep within and beyond our outer self which is the triple nexus of body, heart and mind. This inmost self is not the ethical-moral conscience, which is still part of our mental being, but something much deeper. And it is this which always points us towards Truth and Right and Beauty, towards Love and Harmony and all that is a divine possibility in us.

An awakening to this inmost self is the first step on the path of true spirituality – right from Vedic Yoga to Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. In more applied terms, this means that we first must become more and more conscious of all our inner and outer movements, our intentions, impulses, choices, decisions, and actions. Because only then we can slowly prepare ourselves to hear the faint whispers of that inmost self, that highest divine presence.

What is needed is an inward turn and seeking of the higher truth of our true self. This means quietening down the noises that come from our mind’s ideas and heart’s likes and dislikes. This requires that we become keenly aware of the subtle ways in which our egoistic preferences work.

This inner work must be combined with the outer action, but not just action in the usual egoistic spirit when we work with some sort of a personal motivation. The work must be in

the spirit of true *nishkāma karma*, a completely disinterested action which is not impelled by any desire or craving of the ego and has no preference for any particular outcome. This synthesis of inner and outer work must be the basis for a true applied spirituality.

Applied spirituality also means that until we are truly guided in all our actions by that true inmost self, that divine presence within, we must constantly enlarge, purify, and open out faculty of Reason. This way it can arrive at an intelligent sense of that inmost truth and reality which is hidden from it and grow in the reflection of the Light of the Spirit which surpasses it.

How to do that, one may ask? One simple practical teaching given by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is -- ‘Remember and Offer.’ When sincerely practiced, this can help us arrive at the dharmic thing to do when we are faced with a dilemma, which is often a choice between right and right. Here is one way we can practice it.

First, we must remember that the true self hidden inside whispers to us very softly through the light it shines upon its outer instruments -- the intellect and Reason. We must also remember to become more aware and conscious of these very subtle hints we receive. We must stay open and receptive to the light we receive in our intellect and reasoning capacity. Placing our trust in that Light which is guiding us, we must, without any bias or preconceived notion, accept the voice of this Intelligence.

With a calm confidence and complete trust in the Supreme Power, we make a sincere offering to the Divine of the decision we have arrived at using our *viveka-buddhi*, the sense of discernment. We offer all the consequent actions, all the difficulties that arise in the path, the choices we make as we pursue the action, the results of our efforts, any successes and failures we face. And we leave the consequence of our decisions and actions on the Divine alone.

If we can remember to do this, and if we can do this with as much sincerity and humility as we can find within, we can go through all conflicts or dilemmas with a sense of calm equanimity.

But this is not how we normally work. Why not? What prevents us from practicing this advice of “remember and offer”?

The answer: our mixed-up, egoistic outer nature.

A lot of stuff occupies our daily lives and keeps us away from remembering. How often have we said — oh, let me finish this work and then I will sit down and meditate for half an hour; now I have this one more thing to do, so where is the time for my prayers; after I am done with this I need to go and do this other thing, so there is no way I will be able to sit quietly for ten minutes and remember the Divine. We keep postponing the act of remembering. We get so occupied by forgetfulness, that it becomes super-convenient to forget and stay forgetful.

Here again we find great wisdom in applied spirituality that is taught by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. From attending the meetings at office or reading through detailed arguments in a policy document, from teaching at a kindergarten to working on a complex mission at ISRO,

from cleaning our bathrooms to preparing the dinner, from folding the laundry to entertaining house guests, whether it is working outside the home, or driving back home in the evening — each and every task in front of us can be a means to grow in our consciousness. Because every work is truly the Divine's Work.

If we can do the work in front of us with the right inner attitude, we grow spiritually. This right attitude is not easy to acquire, it takes a life-long practice and an utmost sincere effort. But every journey begins with the first step.

The right attitude also means that we must spontaneously remember that it is not the separate 'I' that is doing all this work, but that all this is part of the Larger Work of the Divine, and that I am only a mere instrument through which it is being done.

This is how we will progressively heighten, deepen and widen our consciousness. This is how we as individuals, societies and nations will be guided more and more by the uniting and harmonizing tendencies of our inmost self instead of the separative, divisive, and egoistic turnings of mind.

This is how applied spirituality works. Apply spiritual approach to life in every movement, every work, because as Sri Aurobindo says – all life is consciously or subconsciously yoga. All Life can become conscious yoga if we know how to cultivate that yogic approach to life and living.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother emphasise that the light of the spirit must descend in all areas of life. Only then life and living will find their true meaning. Another fundamental idea of Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga is that of the ascent of life and mind into spiritual consciousness.

In simpler terms, this means practicing an applied spirituality, or turning every aspect of life into a means for spiritual growth. As per this understanding, all experience in the ordinary life can become a stepping stone to elevate oneself in consciousness. This is why in the written works and conversations of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother we find their concern with all areas of life.

Whether it is conscious conception and conscious parenting of children, or making teaching-learning experience in educational contexts as means to grow in spirit, we find great wisdom in their works. Similarly, when it comes to human relationships, how the light of spirit can transform their inner meaning and nature – for this too, we find valuable life-changing guidance in Sri Aurobindo's letters and the Mother's conversations.

How does religion in its true sense can be a stepping stone for an individual to experience a deeper spiritual seeking – this aspect is also beautifully explained in their vast writings.

But this applied spirituality also goes beyond individual life. It is also concerned about how societies gradually evolve as individuals rise in consciousness. We find how rationality, science, religion, art, beauty, culture, literature, politics are shaped by the level of consciousness at which groups and collectivities operate. And at the same time how these

areas of collective life impact the evolutionary journey of a society. In other words, every aspect of societal life is of concern in the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

This kind of applied spirituality has been hitherto unknown in the spiritual teachings of most sages and seers. But in this day and time, we are blessed to have a rishi who has reminded us of the true meaning of spirituality. This is how ordinary life can one day become a divine life.

Such applied spirituality requires a constant inner practice of aspiring for a higher light, rejecting the movements of our lower egoistic nature, and surrendering to the Divine so that we can gradually grow in our divine nature. We find many practices in the Integral Yoga writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

But one that comes to mind is perhaps that sounds the simplest – though not so simple when it comes to practice it constantly. This is called the Golden Rule.

It basically comes down to this - “Do not do what you will hesitate to do or be ashamed of doing in the Divine’s presence. Do not say anything which you will hesitate to say or be ashamed of saying in the Divine’s presence. Do not think even what you will find it awkward to think in the Divine presence.”

This necessitates developing an intimate relation with the Divine – whosoever is our *ishta deva*, guru, or our conception of the Divine. Because only the Divine Light can correct all the false movements that arise in us. By offering those at the Divine’s feet, we can ask for the Light which will transform the falsehood into truth. Slowly, over time, as we become more and more conscious, we find it easy to practice the Golden Rule.

This constant referring of all our inner movements and tendencies to the highest presence within can be a great way to practice applied spirituality. This is how I have come to understand applied spirituality, and I constantly aspire to bring into my life and work.