Evening Talks
with
Sri Aurobindo
INTRODUCTION

I

The question which Arjuna asks Sri Krishna in the Gita (2nd Chap.) occurs pertinently to many about all spiritual personalities: "What is the language of one whose understanding is poised? How does he speak, how sit, how walk?" Men want to know the outer signs of the inner attainment,—the way in which a spiritual person differs outwardly from other men. But all the tests which the Gita enumerates are inner and therefore invisible to the outer view. It is true also that the inner or the spiritual is the essential and the outer derives its value and form from the inner. But the transformation about which Sri Aurobindo writes in his books has to take place in nature, because according to him the divine Reality has to manifest itself in nature. So, all the parts of nature—including the physical and the external—are to be transformed. In his own case the very physical became the transparent mould of the Spirit as a result of his intense Sadhana. This is borne out by the impression created on the minds of sensitive outsiders like Sj. K. M. Munshi who was deeply impressed by his radiating presence when he met him after nearly forty years.

The Evening-Talks collected here may afford to the outside world a glimpse of his external personality and give the seeker some idea of its richness, its many-sidedness, its uniqueness. One can also form some notion of Sri Aurobindo's personality from
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the books in which the height, the universal sweep and clear vision of his integral ideal and thought can be seen. His writings are, in a sense, the best representative of his mental personality. The versatile nature of his genius, the penetrating power of his intellect, his extraordinary power of expression, his intense sincerity, his utter singleness of purpose—all these can be easily felt by any earnest student of his works. He may discover even in the realm of mind that Sri Aurobindo brings the unlimited into the limited. Another side of his dynamic personality is represented by the Ashram as an institution. But the outer, if one may use the phrase, the human side of his personality, is unknown to the outside world because from 1910 to 1950—a span of forty years—he led a life of outer retirement. No doubt, many knew about his staying at Pondicherry and practising some kind of very special yoga to the mystery of which they had no access. To some, perhaps, he was living a life of enviable solitude enjoying the luxury of a spiritual endeavour. Many regretted his retirement as a great loss to the world because they could not see any external activity on his part which could be regarded as “public”, “altruistic” or “beneficial.” Even some of his admirers thought that he was after some kind of personal salvation which would have very little significance for mankind in general. His outward non-participation in public life was construed by many as lack of love for humanity.

But those who knew him during the days of the national awakening—from 1900 to 1910—could not have these doubts. And even these initial misunderstandings and false notions of others began to evaporate with the growth of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram from 1927 onwards. The large number of books published by the Ashram also tended to remove the idea of the other-worldiness of his yoga and the absence of any good by it to mankind.

This period of outer retirement was one of intense Sadhana and of intellectual activity—it was also one during which he acted on external events, though he was not dedicated outwardly to a public cause. About his own retirement he writes, “But this did not mean, as most people supposed, that he (Sri Aurobindo) had
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... retired into some height of spiritual experience devoid of any further interest in the world or in life. It could not mean that, for the very principle of his yoga is not only to realise the Divine and attain to a complete spiritual consciousness, but also to take all life and all world-activity into the scope of this Spiritual Consciousness and action and to base life on the Spirit and give it a spiritual meaning. In his retirement Sri Aurobindo kept a close watch on all that was happening in the world and in India and actively intervened, whenever necessary, but solely with a spiritual Force and silent spiritual action; for it is part of the experience of those who have advanced in yoga that, besides the ordinary forces and activities of the mind and life and body in Matter, there are other forces and powers that can and do act from behind and from above; there is also a spiritual dynamic Power which can be possessed by those who are advanced in spiritual consciousness, though all do not care to possess, or possessing, to use it, and this Power is greater than any other and more effective. It was this force which Sri Aurobindo used at first only in a limited field of personal work, but afterwards, in a constant action upon the world forces.1

Twice he found it necessary to go out of his way to make public pronouncements on important world-issues, which shows distinctly that renunciation of life is not a part of his yoga. “The first was in relation to the second world-war. At the beginning he did not actively concern himself with it, but when it appeared as if Hitler would crush all the forces opposed to him and Nazism dominate the world, he began to intervene.”2

The second was with regard to Sir Stafford Cripps’ proposal for the transfer of power to India.

Over and above Sadhana, writing—work and rendering spiritual help to the world during his apparent retirement there

1. Sri Aurobindo and his Ashram
2. Sri Aurobindo and his Ashram
were plenty of other activities of which the outside world has no knowledge. Many prominent as well as less known persons sought and obtained interviews with him during these years. Thus, among well-known persons may be mentioned C. R. Das, Lala Lajpat Rai, Sarala Devi, Dr. Munje, Khasirao Jadhava, Tagore, Sylvain Levy. The great national poet of Tamilnad, S. Subramanya Bharati, was in contact with Sri Aurobindo for some years during his stay at Pondicherry; so was V. V. S. Aiyar. The famous V. Ramaswamy Aiyangar—Va. Ra. of Tamil literature—stayed with Sri Aurobindo for nearly three years and was influenced by him. Some of these facts have been already mentioned in "A Life of Sri Aurobindo."

Jung has admitted that there is an element of mystery, something that baffles the reason, in human personality. One finds that the greater the personality the greater is the complexity. And this is especially so with regard to spiritual personalities—what the Gita calls "Vibhutis" and "Avatars."

Sri Aurobindo has explained the mystery of personality in some of his writings. Ordinarily by a personality we mean something which can be described as "a pattern of being marked out by a settled combination of fixed qualities, a determined character." In one view personality is regarded as a fixed structure of recognisable qualities expressing a power of being; another idea regards "personality as a flux of self-expressive or sensitive and responsive being." "But flux of nature and fixity of nature—which some call character—are two aspects of being, neither of which, nor indeed both together, can be a definition of personality." Besides this flux and this fixity there is also a third and occult element, the Person behind of whom the personality is a self-expression; the Person puts forward the personality as his role, character, persona, in the present act of his long drama of manifested existence. But the Person is larger than his personality, and it may happen that this inner largeness overflows into the surface formation; the result is a self-expression of being which.
can no longer be described by fixed qualities, normalities of mood, exact lineaments, or marked out structural limits.”

The gospel of the Supermind which Sri Aurobindo brought to man envisages a new level of consciousness beyond Mind. When this level is attained it imposes a complete and radical reintegration of the human personality. Sri Aurobindo was not merely the exponent but the embodiment of the new, dynamic truth of the Supermind. While exploring and sounding the tremendous possibilities of human personality in his intense spiritual sadhana, he has shown us that practically there are no limits to its expansion and ascent. It can reach in its growth what appears to man at present as a “divine” status. It goes without saying that this attainment is not an easy task; there are conditions to be fulfilled for the transformation from the human to the divine.

The Gita in its chapters on the Vibhuti and the Avatar takes in general the same position. It shows that the present formula of our nature, and therefore the mental personality of man, is not final. A Vibhuti embodies in a human manifestation a certain divine quality and thus demonstrates the possibility of overcoming the limits of ordinary human personality. The Vibhuti—the embodiment of a divine quality or power,—and the Avatar—the divine incarnation—are not to be looked upon as supra-physical miracles thrown at humanity without regard to the process of evolution; they are, in fact, indications of human possibility, a sign that points to the goal of evolution.

In his Essays on the Gita, Sri Aurobindo says about the Avatar: “He may on the other hand descend as an incarnation of divine life, the divine personality and power in its characteristic action, for a mission ostensibly social, ethical and political, as is represented in the story of Rama and Krishna; but always then his descent becomes in the soul of the race a permanent power for the inner and Spiritual rebirth.”

1. The Life Divine, P. 833
2. Essays on the Gita, P. 258
"He comes as the divine power and love which calls men to itself, so that they may take refuge in that and no longer in the insufficiency of their human wills and the strife of their human fear, wrath and passion, and liberated from all the unquiet and suffering may live in the calm and bliss of the Divine".1

"The Avatar comes to reveal the divine nature in men above their lower nature and to show what are the divine works, free, unegoistic, disinterested, impersonal, universal, full of the divine light, the divine power and the divine loves. He comes as a divine personality, which shall fill the consciousness of the human being, to replace the limited egoistic personality, so that it shall be liberated out of ego into infinity and universality, out of birth into immortality," 2

It is clear that Sri Aurobindo interpreted the traditional idea of the Vibhuti and the Avatar in term of the evolutionary possibilities of man. But more directly he has worked out the idea of the "gnostic individual" in his masterpiece The Life Divine. He says: "A Supramental gnostic individual will be a Spiritual Person, but not a personality, in the sense of a pattern of being marked out by a settled combination of fixed qualities, a determined character; he cannot be that since he is a conscious expression of the Universal and the Transcendent." Describing the gnostic individual he says: "we feel ourselves in the presence of a light of consciousness, a potency, a sea of energy, can distinguish and describe its free waves of action and quality, but not fix itself; and yet there is an impression of Personality the presence of a powerful being, a strong, high or beautiful recognizable Someone, a Person, not a limited creature of Nature but a Self or Soul a Purusha." 3

One feels that he was describing the feeling of some of us - his disciples - with regard to him in his inimitable way.

1. Essays on the Gita, p. 258
2. Ibid, p. 258
3. The Life Divine, p. 883
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This transformation of the human personality into the Divine—perhaps even the mere connection of the human with the Divine—is probably regarded as a chimera by the modern mind. To the modern mind it would appear as the apotheosis of a human personality which is against its idea of equality of men. Its difficulty is partly due to the notion that the Divine is unlimited and illimitable while a “personality”, however high and grand, seems to demand imposition, or assumption, of limitation. In this connection Sri Aurobindo said during an Evening Talk: “No human manifestation can be illimitable and unlimited but the manifestation in the limited should reflect the unlimited, the Transcendent Beyond.” (28-4-1923)

This possibility of the human touching and manifesting the Divine has been realised during the course of human history whenever a great spiritual Light has appeared on earth. One of the purposes of this book is to show how Sri Aurobindo himself reflected the unlimited Beyond in his own self.

Greatness is magnetic and in a sense contagious. Wherever manifested, greatness is claimed by humanity as something that reveals the possibility of the race. The highest utility of greatness is not merely to attract us but to inspire us to follow it and rise to our own highest spiritual stature. To the majority of men Truth remains abstract, impersonal and far unless it is seen and felt concretely in a human personality. A man never knows a truth actively except through a person and by embodying it in his personality. Some glimpse of the Truth-Consciousness which Sri Aurobindo embodied may be caught in these Evening Talks.

II

Guru griha vasa—“staying in the home of the Guru”—is a very old Indian ideal maintained by seekers through the ages. The Aranyakas—“the ancient teachings in the forest—groves”—are perhaps the oldest records of the institution. It was
not for "education" in the modern sense of the term that men went to live with the Guru; for the Guru is not a "teacher". The Guru is one who is "enlightened," who is a seer, a Rishi, one who has the vision of and has lived the Truth. He has, thus, the knowledge of the goal of human life and has learnt true values in life by living the truth. He can impart both these to the willing seeker. In ancient times seekers went to the Guru with many questions, difficulties and doubts but also with earnestness. Their questions were preliminary to the quest.

The Master the Guru, set at rest the puzzled human mind by his illuminating answers, perhaps even more by his silent consciousness, so that it might be able to pursue unhampered the path of realisation of the Truth. Those ancient discourses answer the mind of man to-day even across the ages. They have rightly acquired — as everything of the past does — a certain sanctity. But sometimes that very reverence prevents men from properly evaluating, and living in, the present. This happens when the mind instead of seeking the Spirit looks at the form. For instance, it is not necessary for such discourses that they take place in forest groves in order to be highly spiritual. Wherever the Master is, there is Light And Guru griha — the house of the Master—can be his private dwelling place. So much was this feeling a part of Sri Aurobindo’s nature and so particular was he to maintain the personal character of his work that during the first few years — after 1923 — he did not like his house to be called an "Ashram", as the word had acquired the sense of a public institution to the modern mind. But there was no doubt that the flower of Divinity had blossomed in him; and disciples, like bees seeking honey, came to him. It is no exaggeration to say that these Evening-Talks were to the small company of disciples what the Aranyakas were to the ancient seekers. Seeking the Light, they came to the dwelling place of their Guru, the greatest seer of the age, and found it their spiritual home—the home of their parents, for, the Mother, his companion in the great mission, had come. And these spiritual parents bestowed upon the disciples freely of their Light, their consciousness, their—
power and their grace. The modern reader may find that the
form of these discourses differs from those of the past but it was
bound to be so for the simple reason that the times have changed
and the problems that puzzle the modern mind are so different.
Even though the disciples may be very imperfect representations
of what he aimed at in them, still they are his creations. It is
in order to repay, in however infinitesimal a degree, the debt
which we owe to him that the effort is made to partake of the-
joy of his company—the Evening Talks—with a larger public.

III

EVENING SITTINGS

Sri Aurobindo was never a social man in the current sense
of the term and definitely he was not a man of the crowd. This
was due to his grave temperament, not to any feeling of superiority
or to repulsion for men. At Baroda there was an Officer's Club
which was patronised by the Maharajah and though Sri Aurobindo
enrolled himself as a member he hardly went to the Club even
on special occasions. He rather liked a small congenial circle
of friends and spent most of his evenings with them whenever he
was free and not occupied with his studies or other works. After
Baroda when he went to Calcutta there was hardly any time in
the storm and stress of revolutionary politics to permit him to
lead a “social life.” What little time he could spare from his
incessant activities was spent in the house of Raja Subodh Malick
or at the Grey Street house. In the Karma yogin office he used
to sit after the office hours till late chatting with a few persons
or trying automatic writing. Strange dictations used to be received
sometimes: one of them was the following: “Moni (Suresh
Chakarvarty) will bomb Sir Edward Grey when he will come
as the Viceroy of India.” In later years at Pondicherry there used
to be a joke that Sir Edward took such a fright at the prospect
of Moni’s bombing him that he never came to India!
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After Sri Aurobindo had come to Pondicherry from Chandranagore he entered upon an intense period of spiritual sadhana and for a few months he refused to receive anyone. After a time he used to sit down to talk in the evening and on some days tried automatic writing. Yogic Sadhana - a small book - was the result. In 1913 Sri Aurobindo removed to Rue Francois Martin No. 41 where he used to receive persons at fixed times. This was generally in the morning between 9 and 10. 30.

But, over and above newcomers, some local people and the few inmates of the house used to have informal talk with Sri Aurobindo in the evening. In the beginning the inmates used to go out for playing football, and during their absence known local individuals would come in and wait for Sri Aurobindo. Afterwards regular meditation began at about 4 p.m. in which practically all the inmates participated. After the meditation all of the members and those who were permitted shared in the evening sitting. This was a very informal gathering depending entirely upon Sri Aurobindo’s leisure.

When Sri Aurobindo and the Mother removed to No. 9 Rue de la Marine in 1922 the same routine of informal evening sittings after meditation continued. I came to Pondicherry for Sadhana in the beginning of 1923. I kept notes of the important talks I had with the four or five disciples who were already there. Besides, I used to take detailed notes of the evening talks which we all had with the Master. They were not intended by him to be noted down. I took them down because of the importance I felt about everything connected with him, no matter how insignificant to the outer view. I also felt that everything he did would acquire for those who would come to know his mission a very great significance.

As years passed the evening sittings went on changing their time and often those disciples who came from outside for a temporary stay for Sadhana were allowed to join them. And, as the number of Sadhaks practising the yoga increased, the
evening sittings also became more full, the small verandah upstairs in the main building was found insufficient. Members of the household would gather every day at the fixed time with some sense of expectancy and start chatting in low tones. Sri Aurobindo used to come last and it was after his coming that the session would really commence.

He came dressed as usual in Dhoti, part of which was used by him to cover the upper part of his body. Very rarely he came out with Chaddar or Shawl and then it was "in deference to the climate" as he sometimes put it. At times for minutes he would be gazing at the sky from a small opening at the top or the grass-­curtains that covered the verandah of the upstairs in No. 9 Rue de la Marine. How much were these sittings dependent on him may be gathered from the fact that there were days when more than three-fourths of the time passed in complete silence without any outer suggestion from him, or there was only an abrupt "Yes" or "No" to all attempts at drawing him out in conversation. And even when he participated in the talk one always felt that his voice was that of one who does not let his whole being flow into his words; there was a reserve and what was left unsaid was perhaps more than what was spoken. What was spoken was what he felt necessary to speak.

Very often some news-item in the daily newspaper, town­gossip, or some interesting letter received either by him or by a disciple, or a question from one of the gathering, occasionally some remark or query from himself would set the ball rolling for the talk. The whole thing was so informal that one could never predict the turn the conversation would take. The whole house therefore was in a mood to enjoy the freshness and the delight of meeting the unexpected. There were peals of laughter and light talk, jokes and criticism which might be called personal,—there was seriousness and earnestness in abundance.

These sittings, in fact, furnished Sri Aurobindo with an occasion to admit and feel the outer atmosphere and that of the
group living with him. It brought to him the much-needed direct contact of the mental and vital make-up of the disciples, enabling him to act on the atmosphere in general and to the individual in particular. He could thus help to remould their mental make-up by removing the limitations of their minds and opinions, and correct temperamental tendencies and formations. Thus, these sittings contributed at least partly to the creation of an atmosphere amenable to the working of the Higher Consciousness. Far more important than the actual talk and its content was the personal contact, the influence of the Master, and the divine atmosphere he emanated; for through his outer personality it was the Divine Consciousness that he allowed to act. All along behind the outer manifestation that appeared human, there was the influence and presence of the Divine.

What was talked in the small group informally was not intended by Sri Aurobindo to be the independent expression of his views on the subjects, events or the persons discussed. Very often what he said was in answer to the spiritual need of the individual or of the collective atmosphere. It was like a spiritual remedy meant to produce certain spiritual results, not a philosophical or metaphysical pronouncement on questions, events or movements. The net result of some talks very often was to point out to the disciple the inherent incapacity of the human intellect and its secondary place in the search for the ultimate Reality.

But there were occasions when he did give his independently personal views on some problems, on events and other subjects. Even then it was never an authoritarian pronouncement. Most often it appeared to be a logically worked out and almost inevitable conclusion expressed quite impersonally though with firm and sincere conviction. This impersonality was such a prominent trait of his personality! Even in such matters as dispatching a letter or a telegram it would not be a command from him to a disciple to carry out the task. Most often during his usual passage to the dining room he would stop on the way, drop in on the company of four or five disciples and, holding out
the letter or the telegram, would say in the most amiable and yet the most impersonal way: “I suppose this has to be sent.” And it would be for some one in the group instantly to volunteer and take it. The expression very often he used was “It was done”, “It happened” not “I did.”

There were two places where these sittings took place. At the third place there was no sitting but informal talk to a small number of disciples who were attending him after the accident in November 1938.

From 1918 to 1922 we gathered at No: 41 Rue Francois Martin, called the Guest House, upstairs, on a broad verandah into which four rooms opened and whose main piece of furniture was a small table 3'/x 1'4", covered with a blue cotton cloth. That is where Sri Aurobindo used to sit in a hard wooden chair behind the table with a few chairs in front for the visitors or for the disciples.

From 1922 to 1926 No. 9 Rue de la Marine, where he and the Mother had shifted, was the place where the sittings were held. There, also upstairs, was a less broad verandah than at the Guest House, a little bigger table in front of the central door out of three, and a broad Japanese chair—the table covered with a better cloth than the one in the Guest House, a small flower vase, an ash-tray, a block calendar indicating the date and an ordinary time-piece, a number of chairs in front in a line; The evening sittings used to be after meditation at 4 or 4–30 p.m. After November 24, 1926, the sitting began to get later and later, till the limit of 1 o’clock at night was reached. Then the curtain fell. Sri Aurobindo retired completely after December 1926 and the evening sittings came to a close.

Then, on November 23, 1938 I got up at 2 o’clock to prepare hot water for the Mother’s early bath because the 24th
was Darshan day. Between 2.20 and 2.30 the *Mother* rang the bell. I ran up the staircase to be told about an accident that had happened to *Sri Aurobindo*’s foot and to be asked to fetch the doctor. This accident brought about a change in his complete retirement, and rendered him available to those who had to attend on him. This opened out a long period of 12 years during which his retirement was modified owing to circumstances, inner and outer, that made it possible for him to have direct physical contacts with the world outside.

The long period of the second world war with all its vicissitudes passed through these years. It was a priceless experience to see how he devoted his energies to the task of saving humanity from the threatened reign of Nazism. It was a practical lesson of solid work done for humanity without any thought of return or reward, without even letting humanity know what he was doing for it! Thus he lived the Divine and showed us how the Divine cares for the world, how he comes down and works for man. I shall never forget how he who was at one time—in his own words—“not merely a non-co-operator but an enemy of British Imperialism” bestowed such anxious care on the health of Churchill, listening carefully to the health bulletins! It was the work of the Divine, it was the Divine’s work for the world.

There were no formal evening sittings during these years but what appeared to me important in the talks was recorded and has been incorporated in this book.