

Invocation

Savitri

B H A V A N

Study notes No. 25

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*All Nature dumbly calls to her alone
To heal with her feet the aching throb of life
And break the seals on the dim soul of man
And kindle her fire in the closed heart of things.
All here shall be one day her sweetness' home,
All contraries prepare her harmony;
Towards her our knowledge climbs, our passion gropes;
In her miraculous rapture we shall dwell,
Her clasp shall turn to ecstasy our pain.
Our self shall be one self with all through her.
In her confirmed because transformed in her,
Our life shall find in its fulfilled response
Above, the boundless hushed beatitudes,
Below, the wonder of the embrace divine.*

(Savitri, p. 314-15)

‘A stone-still figure of high and godlike Pain’

A note by Nolini Kanta Gupta

*A guardian of the unconsolated abyss
Inheriting the long agony of the globe,
A stone-still figure of high and godlike Pain
Stared into space with fixed regardless eyes
That saw grief's timeless depths but not life's goal.
Afflicted by his harsh divinity,
Bound to his throne, he waited unappeased
The daily oblation of her unwept tears.* (Savitri, p.10)

The deepest and the most fundamental mystery of the human consciousness (and in fact of the earth consciousness) is not that there is an unregenerate aboriginal being there as its bed-rock, a being made of the very stuff of ignorance and inconstancy and inertia that is Matter: it is this, that the submerged being is not merely dead matter, but a concentrated, a solidified flame as it were, a suppressed aspiration that burns inwardly, all the more violent because it is not articulate and in the open. The aboriginal is that which harbours in its womb the original being. That is the Inconscient Godhead, the Divinity in pain – *Mater Dolorosa* – the Divine Being who lost himself totally when transmuted into Matter and yet is harassed always by the oestrus of a secret flame driving it to know itself, to find itself, to be itself again. It is Rudra, the Energy coiled up in Matter and forging ahead towards a progressive evolution in light and consciousness. That is what Savitri, the universal Divine Grace become material and human, finds at the core of her being, the field and center of concentrated struggle, a millennial aspiration petrified, a grief of ages congealed, a divinity lone and benumbed in a trance. This divinity has to awake and labour. The god has to be cruel to himself, for his divinity demands that he must surpass himself, he cannot abdicate, let Nature go her own way, the inferior path of ease and escape. The

godhead must exercise its full authority, exert all its pressure upon itself – *tapas taptva* – and by this heat of incubation release the energy that leads towards the light and the high fulfilment. In the meanwhile, the task is not easy. The divine sweetness and solicitude lights upon this hardened divinity: but the inertia of the Inconscient, the ‘Pani’, hides still the light within its rocky cave and would not deliver it. The Divine Grace, mellow with all the tears of love and sympathy and tenderness she has gathered for the labouring godhead, has pity for the hard lot of a humanity stone-bound to the material life, yet yearning and surging towards freedom. The godhead is not consoled or appeased until that freedom is achieved and light and immortality released. The Grace is working slowly, laboriously perhaps, but surely to that end: the stone will wear down and melt one day. Is that fateful day come?

That is the meaning of human life, the significance of even the very ordinary human life. It is the field of a “dire debate”, “a fierce question”, a constant struggle between the two opposing or rather polar forces, the will or aspiration “to be” and the will of inertia “not to be” – the friction, to use a Vedic image, of the two batons of the holy sacrificial wood, *arani*, out of which the flame is to leap forth. The pain and suffering men are subject to in this unhappy vale of tears – physical illness and incapacity, vital frustration or mental confusion – are symbols and expressions of a deeper fundamental Pain. That pain is the pain of labour, the travail for the birth and incarnation of a godhead asleep or dead. Indeed, the sufferings and ills of life are themselves powerful instruments. They inevitably lead to the Bliss, they are the fuel that kindles, quickens and increases the Fire of Ecstasy that is to blaze up on the day of victory in the full and integral spiritual consciousness. The round of ordinary life is not vain or meaningless: its petty innocent-looking moments and events are the steps of the marching Divinity. Even the commonest life is the holy sacrificial rite progressing through the oblations of our experiences, bitter or sweet, towards the revelation and establishment of the immortal godhead in man.

(Nolini Kanta Gupta, *On Savitri*, p. 22-23)

The Book of Fate: An Introduction

Talk by R.Y. Deshpande

January 7, 2006

R.Y. Deshpande is a teacher at Knowledge, the Higher Course of the Ashram school. He is also holding a regular Savitri class for adults in the Ashram. He was one of the small team under the leadership of Nirodbaran and Amal Kiran which undertook examination of all the discrepancies between the original Savitri texts and the printed versions, which resulted in the Revised Edition of 1993. As well as being a poet himself, he is the author of several studies of Savitri and the editor of the two-volume collection of Savitri studies and articles entitled Perspectives of Savitri. Most recently he has been engaged in a book-length study entitled Narad's Arrival at Madra which will be published soon by the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. We invited him to Savitri Bhavan to give an introductory talk about Book Six. This is an edited transcript of the recording.

Thank you very much for inviting me to say something about the Book of Fate. It is indeed a very rich Book, a very rewarding Book, very appealing also, particularly to the Western spirit. It is all that, and it is much more than that. Its dimensions are such that it is not possible for us to witness the full measure of what the poet is conveying through these pages of his marvellous epic, *Savitri*.

The Book of Fate appears right in the middle of *Savitri*, both symbolically and thematically. It is central to the theme of *Savitri*, central to the work for which Savitri has come to earth, central in the context of the spiritual path on which she has to begin her journey, central to the fulfilment of the mission for which she has incarnated herself here.

First I will give you a few general ideas about how the book was written, how it proceeded in its composition, its length, its breadth – in a geometrical sense, not in the spiritual sense because that is, for sure, beyond me, I suppose beyond us.

As far as the geometrical sense is concerned, I have a few statistics here. The Book of Fate consists of two cantos, and it covers 48 pages of the current edition, that is, roughly one fifteenth, or about 7% of the total epic. The first canto has 757 lines, and the second 909; so the total number of lines in Book Six is 1666, which again is about 7% of the 23,837 lines of *Savitri*.

As you know, *Savitri* went through several stages of drafting and transcription. It underwent many changes, encountered many situations, partly because of revision upon revision done by the poet himself, partly in the process of bringing it into printed form. There have been some alterations, inadvertent departures, some variations, some slips, changes, modifications between what may be considered to be the intended draft and what had been published. So the archival team of the Ashram, Richard in particular, have done a very extensive study of the changes which occurred between what they call 'the copy-text' and the printed versions. This has resulted in something like 2000 emendations on the whole. Most of them are of a minor nature, inconsequential, and perhaps they could be ignored; but there are a few which are very significant, and one has to really examine those more thoroughly, more perceptively, before they are finally accepted. There are a few ambiguities also, and in some cases subjective judgments have entered in while making the choices. Another look at these revisions is perhaps necessary. In the Book of Fate, while there are six new lines in the latest edition, five of the previous ones have been dropped. There are in all 231 emendations in it.

The central character of this Book of Fate is of course Narad. I can hardly tell you anything about this Narad, particularly about Sri Aurobindo's Narad; but we could make an attempt to understand the purpose of his visit to Aswapati, why he has come here, what he is sent to do, and all that. But again, by way of statistics, we see that the poet has given Narad 154 lines in Canto One, and 688 lines in Canto Two, which means that, together, these lines total a little more than 50% of the Book. So Narad dominates the Book of Fate very impressively, very prophetically also in some respects. More than 50% of the space is occupied by him.

There is a long speech by Narad in answer to some points raised by Savitri's mother. The traditional name given to Savitri's mother in the ancient tale, as we have it in the Mahabharata, is Malavi. Sri Aurobindo does not use that name, he refers to her simply as 'the Queen'. She had raised quite a few issues about the riddle of this world, a question running into 161 lines. This is not present at all in the Mahabharata narrative. But here in Sri Aurobindo's poem, in response to this query of the Queen, Narad gives a long answer running into 487 lines. It is a really substantial answer, covering about 13 pages out of the 48 of the whole Book. So one fourth of the Book is actually devoted to the issues raised by Savitri's mother. These are very fundamental issues, related to the problems of this world of ours, the mortal world. They explain occult metaphysical aspects of this creation, and what is expected to happen in this creation. Narad takes the opportunity to elaborate on those points. This speech of Narad is not just metaphysics for the sake of metaphysics. Narad is also, simultaneously, releasing through his revelations a power, his spiritual power, into the process of things, by which movements are set into operation. They start unrolling in their own manner. So, this is not just a metaphysical lecture, a long oration — though it is oratory too; it is, what's more, poetry — and what marvellous poetry!

The Book of Fate did not exist until 1945, apart from a small passage which was written by Sri Aurobindo in his very first draft of 1916-1918 — the very first available draft of *Savitri*, written in the *Arya* period. Except for those few lines, the Book of Fate did not exist until Sri Aurobindo took up the later Books of the poem in the mid-1940s. What he did was first to complete Part One of *Savitri*, roughly half of the epic. By 1942 it had taken a reasonable shape, he was reasonably happy about it, and he started moving forward from there to the other two Parts of the masterpiece. It seems that he took up the Book of Fate in 1945 and practically completed it in 1946. In fact, in a letter written to Amal in 1946, Sri Aurobindo says that the Book of Fate is "almost complete". By 1946, whatever he had to do on that Book, at that time, was done, and it was set aside. But during the period 1946-1950 a few extracts from *Savitri* started appearing in journals, and a fascicle containing the Book of Fate was brought

out in August 1950 — almost at the end of Sri Aurobindo’s time of being with us here in the physical.

There is a small fascinating story about this fascicle. Sri Aurobindo used to dictate the lines of *Savitri*, Nirodbaran used to take down the dictation in a scribbling-pad, then a fair copy was made, typed out, and then sent to the Press. At every stage, including the proofs, the matter was read out to Sri Aurobindo; it provided him an opportunity to look into it again. That was the general sequence. In this process, it so happened that when Nirodbaran was making the fair copy from the pad on which he had taken the dictation, he turned over two sheets together. So the matter in between remained untranscribed — it was not copied out. This resulted in the absence of about 30 lines in the 1950 fascicle. These lines belong to the opening part of the Book of Fate, a passage of 82 lines in the Centenary Edition, describing Narad’s arrival at Madra. But soon the slip was discovered, and when Parts Two and Three of *Savitri* came out as a single volume in May 1951 — five months after Sri Aurobindo’s withdrawal — the missed lines were restored. In the Revised Edition we have 83 lines of this opening passage of the Book.

This shows us how the human hand can bring its own problems into the text of divine *Savitri*, and one has to be multiply careful in sorting out, to ensure that in the process we do not introduce additional problems of our own. This is a very delicate job, a very difficult undertaking; but, all the same, it has got to be done.

But why am I giving these details – as to how the composition of *Savitri* proceeded through several stages? These are perhaps interesting, and instructive, in several respects.

In November 1950, when Sri Aurobindo had already decided to withdraw, he asked Nirod to take up the draft of the Book again. And at that point of time, he dictated in three places additional matter. In one place he added just three lines. In another place seven lines were inserted. And then he added a very long section, running into 72 lines. This means that 82 extra lines for Book Six were dictated by Sri Aurobindo in November 1950. And that was when his work on *Savitri* ended – that is, Sri Aurobindo put on *Savitri*, what Nirod calls “the seal of incomplete completion”.

The last lines which he dictated are prophetic in their character. They may not have such a direct relation with the main text of *Savitri* as it were, to its essential theme as a story but, at the same time, they do form a seamless connection with the whole text; for one who is not aware of this history, it may not be apparent that they were added later. I will just read one or two instances of these additions:

*He who has found his identity with God
Pays with the body's death his soul's vast light.
His knowledge immortal triumphs by his death.* (p. 445)

These three lines were added by Sri Aurobindo in November 1950. They come in the context of the sacrifice of the purusha performed for the benefit of this creation, how Christ sacrificed himself to bring down the higher light here. Sri Aurobindo elaborates, in great detail, the crucifixion scene, and in that context he adds these three lines.

In this case, it is very evident that when Sri Aurobindo is adding these three lines in 1950, in mid-November, he is referring to himself. The autobiographical touch is obvious here. He will withdraw, but his knowledge will triumph, this knowledge will do whatever has got to be done here. Knowledge is power. It is not just information — it is also power. So, knowledge in both these aspects — knowledge and power — will do whatever has got to be done in the entire process. Now, this is something significant. We should not really say that Sri Aurobindo has withdrawn. He hasn't — for his knowledge is here to triumph.

If you read the whole passage you can see how flawlessly, without a seam, this insertion flows into the whole description; but the fact that he added these three lines, at the last moment as it were, is also noteworthy.

Another example is on page 459. Narad is answering Savitri's mother. She is perturbed, she is in anguish, she cannot accept the widowhood of her young daughter, and she is challenging even the decision of the Spirit. She is questioning, "Why does this have to happen?" Sri Aurobindo says she is "*passionate like sorrow*". It is one of the most beautiful similes in *Savitri*, "*passionate like sorrow*".

That is Malawi, Savitri's mother. She is demanding of Narad, "Is this your God who has done this sort of mischief in this world?" She wants to know, "What kind of God is he who has created this misfortune, this anguish, this travail, this evil, this death, this falsehood in the world?" It seems Narad had come quite prepared to answer such questions. In his response, he is telling her, towards the end of his long explanation,

In vain thou mournst that Satyavan must die...

In November 1950, Sri Aurobindo added to this passage the next two lines:

*Death is the beginning of a greater life,
Death is the spirit's opportunity.*

These two lines, again, can be seen to refer directly to Sri Aurobindo's decision to withdraw. *Death is the beginning of a greater life*. Sri Aurobindo withdraws on 5th December 1950, at 1.25 am, in the midnight hour — and within six years, the supreme light comes down upon the earth: the Supramental Descent takes place. The Mother tells us that it occurred in the evening, when she was in the Playground, on 29th February 1956, after her Wednesday class, during the meditation. And not simultaneously, but about half an hour after the Supramental Descent in the subtle physical, the new creation was born. That marks the Supramental Manifestation. The two, the Descent and the Manifestation, didn't happen simultaneously. First, the light came into the subtle physical of the earth's atmosphere, and after half an hour the new creation was born. Later on the Mother says, "Born, born, born, the new creation is born". It is not that the old creation was revived, given a new birth. It is a totally new creation, marked by the event. There is a gap between the Descent and the birth of this New Creation — half an hour time gap. It is impossible for us to know why this is so, or how this is so, why this gap, what occult and spiritual factors came into play. We cannot have the least idea about them.

But let us get back to the *beginning of a greater life*. The point is, in the two lines

*Death is the beginning of a greater life,
Death is the spirit's opportunity,*

Sri Aurobindo, in a marvellous way, is revealing his own spiritual achievements to us. In the Mother's prayer, which is engraved on the Samadhi, she says he "*attempted all, achieved all...*", whatever had to be done, he has done. Whatever was to be established here, he has established it. That is the great siddhi, signifying a new beginning. His death is the beginning of a greater life. So these are the kind of profundities we come across in the Book of Fate.

I will give another example, the long insertion starting on page 460: 72 lines dictated by Sri Aurobindo at a single stretch, absolutely the last dictation, starting with the line:

Queen, strive no more to change the secret will.

What can human opposition really do, against the secret will, against the supreme Will? Savitri's human mother, Malawi, was told in a forceful manner: "Don't strive, be what you are, let things happen in their own way, don't intervene." She was trying to dissuade Savitri from accepting Satyavan as her life's partner and, in the given circumstances, now that his death at the end of the year has been made known, this action of Malawi is very understandable, her human nature responding instantaneously and violently. She was dissuading Savitri, not when Savitri disclosed Satyavan's name, but when the foreknowledge of his death was given by Narad. Narad tells the Queen:

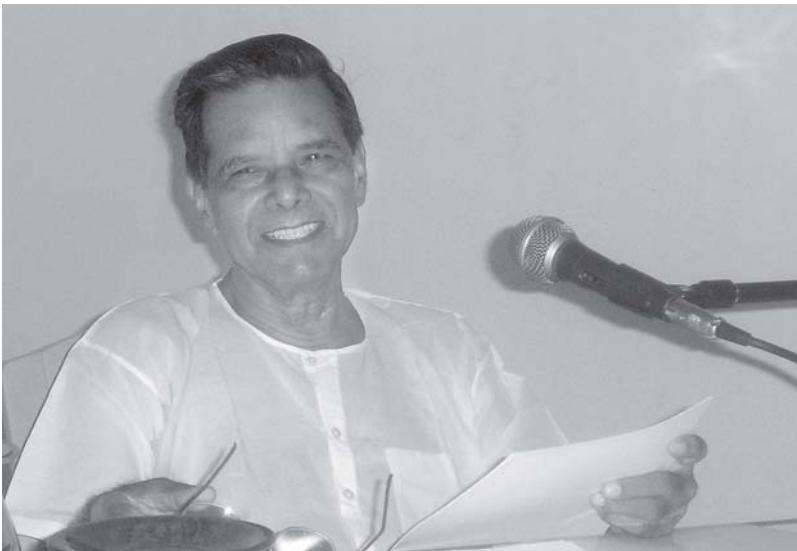
Queen, strive no more to change the secret will.

From that line onward to the end of Narad's speech, which closes on page 462, there are 72 lines: the last line of the passage reads as follows:

But leave her to her mighty self and Fate.

These wonderful 72 lines are absolutely the last piece of dictation, in prose or poetry, given by Sri Aurobindo. The last word uttered by Sri Aurobindo in *Savitri* is 'Fate'. We don't know what that should convey, what is its exact yogic-spiritual content. That in his entire yogic-spiritual career on earth Sri Aurobindo, in his physical body, should stop dictating after uttering the word 'Fate', must be occultly significant. After that, he did not dictate anything, neither in prose nor in poetry. This was around 15th November 1950.

When this dictation was over Sri Aurobindo asked Nirod if there was anything else remaining, anything to be attended to, to be revised. "Yes, two books are there," Nirod replied, "The Epilogue, and the Book of Death." These form Book Eight and Book Twelve of the Epic. About this Sri Aurobindo simply said, "We shall see later." But about the Book of Death and the Epilogue, that 'later' was not supposed to come, was not meant to come. So, the last word of dictation uttered by Sri Aurobindo was 'Fate': "...*leave her to her mighty self and Fate.*" The battle in the physical between the mighty self and Fate is now passed on to the Mother. He has done his job, he



“*attempted all, achieved all...*” and now it is her work that has to begin.

So here Sri Aurobindo is also telling us what the Mother’s task is, what she has to do, that on the foundation of his achievement the conquest has to come.

In Book Three, Canto Four, page 346, the Divine Mother grants a boon to Aswapati. This boon is expressed in 24 lines, like the 24 syllables of the Gayatri Mantra, each line as if representing a syllable, and in those 24 lines is the whole power of the Gayatri Mantra itself, the Gayatri Mantra given to us by Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo’s Gayatri.

O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry...

From that line onwards to the end of the passage are the occult-lyric details of the boon. And the Divine Mother concludes with these words:

Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will.

Compare this line with that last line, the last line of the last dictation:

... leave her to her mighty self and Fate.

Her mighty self, of unchanging will, must conquer Fate. So, the actualisation of the boon is fully embedded in that last line. That mighty self of Savitri, if it is going to change Fate, must meet Fate. *Fate shall be changed.* So when Sri Aurobindo was dictating this as his last line, he was putting into the utterance his full spiritual force, the power which he passed on to the Mother, as if saying, ‘Go ahead and accomplish the task.’

These are the kind of suggestions, the kind of difficult but luminous indications we come across in the Book of Fate. The more and more we try to probe these, the more and more we see the significance of Sri Aurobindo’s mantric poetry, and the power it possesses to make real what it utters. It gets established in the earth-consciousness as a power.

Nirod says that the dictation of *Savitri* was smooth, steady, with no hurry anywhere. Somebody once asked him if he had to take down the dictation in shorthand. He replied, “No, it was not necessary.” Such assured ease of power, of calm it had!

The version of the Book of Fate from which the work was started in 1945 was a small canto, called Canto Two in the earlier draft, the *Arya*-period draft; it was that version which was taken up as the basis for the final composition, says Nirod. Compared with that first draft, the Book of Fate has grown into “enormous length”.

We might pick up an example here. In *Savitri* we find the following:

Then after a silence, Narad made reply...

Narad has been questioned by Savitri’s mother about the riddle of this world. As we have already seen, she demands to know what kind of God he could be to have made such a miserable world, of suffering and pain. Narad keeps silent for a while. Not that he doesn’t have an answer, that he is searching for an answer; but he wants the disturbed Queen to get settled down, she who presently is ‘*passionate like sorrow*’. He wants her to quiet down, become less restless, to be able to receive what he is going to say. Then,

Tuning his lips to earthly sound he spoke,

because that is the only kind of sound which she might be able to hear and grasp.

*And something now of the deep sense of fate
Weighted the fragile hints of mortal speech.
His forehead shone with vision solemnised,
Turned to a tablet of supernal thoughts
As if characters of an unwritten tongue
Had left in its breadth the inscriptions of the gods.
Bare in that Light Time toiled, his unseen works
Detected...*

(p. 442)

Narad is looking at the course of long events, he sees how Time is toiling, fulfilling those events through his toil. Narad can see the unseen works of this toiling Time. Narad has the knowledge of all the three aspects of Time, the past, the present, the future. He has what is called the *tri-kala-drishti*, he has the vision of the three times. Narad has detected the unseen works of Time, with that vision of his. The detection of Satyavan's death is an aspect of that triple vision, and it is that which he is conveying to the concerned, and with a purpose. The cosmic dimensions are at once stretched out in its wide sweep.

At this place, the earlier version of 1916-1918 has the following lines: (*En passant*, we might notice here the change that has come about after those thirty years in the quality of *Savitri's* poetry; although the thematic essence, the substance has remained intact, the poetry has now a different tone and ambiance, a different style and comportment; with that change, even the power behind those words has acquired another edge, another luminosity, another actualizing magnificence.)

*But Narad now the seer lifted his voice
Turning on her the rapt celestial eyes
Bare to whose gaze Time toils, his unseen works
Detected.*

These last words have been retained in almost the same form, save for some verbal changes. The phrase dealing with Time's toil and his unseen works detected has something magical in it, something occult; it has a power in it, a dynamic charge.

What are the unseen works of Time? That Satyavan's death in it is a necessity. That Savitri is going to meet Yama. That Savitri is going to vanquish Yama. That Savitri is going to win the victory for which she has taken birth. Narad has detected this eventuality, and therefore he hastens down here to play his part in making that happen. That is his contribution in promoting the Avataric work.

Now I shall read a brief passage on page 425. Narad has come down to Aswapati's palace and, vis-à-vis Savitri's choice, he is about

to tell something which might not be very pleasing. But Aswapati, who has already sensed something ominous, halts him and tells him, ‘Hold on, please do not give utterance to the terrifying word.’

*O singer of the ultimate ecstasy,
Lend not a dangerous vision to the blind...* (p. 425)

That is what we are, the blind. Aswapati is warning Narad, not to give us such a vision.

This line, ‘*O singer of the ultimate ecstasy*’ is a very beautiful way of describing Narad. It is a very high compliment Aswapati is paying to him — a singer of the ultimate ecstasy. That is what Narad indeed is. But, then, why is Aswapati using such an appellation here? That appellation, that phrase is also functional, in the sense that Narad is fully conscious of what he is going to say, its wide implications also. In fact, he has come on purpose to deliver the Word of Fate. Aswapati has discerned it, he is aware that something supernatural, something portentous is around, something perhaps not very happy for the weak soul of man; we are blind, we cannot see the things that are behind the events. So he says ‘*Lend not a dangerous vision to the blind.*’ Lending such a vision to those who are blind may not be always a very proper thing to do. But, at the same time, Narad is also told by Aswapati, ‘You are a singer of the ultimate ecstasy, and therefore whatever you are going to say, whatever you are going to sing about, will prove to be the song of ecstasy. You may be apparently telling us a very unhappy thing, a very inauspicious possibility, something not acceptable to us mortals, something that cannot be borne by the human frailty; nevertheless, I am sure, whatever you are going to sing will be the song of ultimate ecstasy, will truly be benign in its universal consequence.’ Aswapati anticipates all this but, while having apprehension in what might be told, also remains restful with high confidence in Narad.

Aswapati continues speaking in the same strain, and ends with these words:

Our mind perhaps deceives us with its words

*And gives the name of doom to our own choice,
Perhaps the blindness of our will is Fate.* (p. 425)

This whole passage of 32 lines was dictated by Sri Aurobindo in one go, smoothly, steadily, without a faltering pause. That is the way in which the composition of *Savitri* had proceeded. He had seen the whole thing, and he was simply communicating what he had seen. That is how Nirod describes it: smooth, harmonious, leisurely, full of calm.

Narad in his 487-line marathon speech in Canto Two is, as I mentioned earlier, responding to the question raised by Malawi, Savitri's mother; she was remonstrating against the Creator himself. 'Is this your God, who has made a mess of this world, made a clutter like this, who has brought Death, brought Ignorance, all those thousand evil things into this world?' The Mother was once asked a very similar question and she said, point-blank, "It is a bad question." She did not care about such niceties, and she snapped at once! She would have certainly said that Malawi was asking a bad question. "What you can ask instead is," she corrected, "how has it happened?" It is not God who has made these thousand unhappy things. You can ask how it has happened. It is in the process of answering this "How?" that Narad was unravelling the riddle of this world.

He says that from the Superconscient a possibility was seen that, perhaps, something can come out of its opposite, out of the Inconscient. That possibility, because it is there, could be worked out. And, in the process, many things happened. The Mother says that four great powers went out of the Supreme Source, and they went so far away from the Supreme Source that they cut off their contact with it, and became their own opposites. It was the upshot of the absolute freedom which they had. Freedom — that is the greatest boon given by the Supreme! Such a freedom of choice is given to us, and we should use it well — we should know what to do with the freedom, what to do in that freedom!

Narad says, it was out of curiosity about the shadow thrown by Truth upon the Void that the soul had come down, come down to

experience the joy of adventure; it was curious of the negative infinity, of the '*joy of creation out of Nothingness*', and so it accepted '*the hazard's call and the danger's charm*'. And, now, there is the necessity of pain for making progress, there is the sacrifice of the purusha, there is the world-redeemer's task, there is the pragmatic aspect of not taking the Titan's road, not making bad haste in search of truth and light and bliss, there is the curiosity of the soul as to whether something can happen through this mechanism using the Inconscient as a starting point — all these are aspects of the process, explains Narad. And he tells the Queen, 'Because there was the possibility of such a thing, a possibility of evolutionary manifestation, you opted to come down here, come down in the delight of existence.'

The Queen was puzzled: If it is That we are and if it is from That we have come, then she was unable to make out, as to how at all Death and Ignorance could appear in God's strange creation. Although her '*thought is a light of Ignorance*', her utterance has the Upanishadic ring, of the Taittiriya Upanishad which says that it is from Ananda we have come, and it is to Ananda we go, from the world of bliss we have come, and to the world of bliss we are going. But when seen by the thought which is only a light of Ignorance, then the whole thing becomes an irresolvable dilemma. And Narad replies in his heavenly majesty, 'Yes, there was the shadow cast, and you were curious about that shadow; you wanted to know what that shadow could mean, you wanted to find out the Truth hidden behind that shadow, and therefore you have come here.'

Savitri's task is to bring out the great Truth which is behind that cosmic Shadow. Satyavan's death is the necessary occasion for her to enter into the darkness of Death and to see that great Truth behind Death, so that that Truth emerges and establishes itself in this creation. That is Savitri's work. Towards that Narad makes a significant contribution. Thank you.

The Problem of Pain

Talk by Dr. Alok Pandey

November 19, 2005

Dr. Alok Pandey is a practicing psychotherapist as well as a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and a much sought-after speaker on Their vision and teaching. We thought that he would be the ideal person to speak to us on this topic, and the large audience who attended his talk were not disappointed.

There is a beautiful prayer of the Mother – of course all her prayers are beautiful, but this one is perhaps especially appropriate for the topic we have chosen for this evening:

‘To turn towards Thee, unite with Thee, live in Thee and for Thee, is supreme happiness, unmixed joy, immutable peace, it is to breathe infinity, to soar in eternity, no longer feel one’s limits, escape from time and space.’

But then, the touch of divine pathos :

‘... Why do men flee from these boons as though they feared them? What a strange thing is ignorance, that source of all suffering! How miserable that obscurity that keeps men away from the very thing which would bring them happiness and subjects them to this painful school of ordinary existence fashioned almost entirely of struggle and suffering!’

June 18, 1913

(MCW Vol. 1, p.22)

A few things stand out here : first, suffering as part of the schooling process of Nature – it is a difficult process and we are going through it. Sometimes it is a long schooling because we are poor learners. And what is it driving us towards? “*To turn towards thee ...*” We have often seen and it is very true, that when all doors are closed in life it is time to turn towards that one door. However difficult it may seem, however obscure it may appear, because that’s how life is, “*To turn towards Thee ...*”, that is the solution. Then, ignorance as

the cause of suffering, pain as the process of schooling in our ordinary life, and turning towards the Divine as the source, the solution, the way to come out of it.

This is the broad canvas, but let us try to fill in the canvas. There is a very touching story of Sri Aurobindo's life, I find it very significant. It is a small story, a real anecdote. Once while he was with the Maharaja of Baroda, they were taking a walk together and they came across an old lady who was trying to lift a bundle onto her head. The Maharaja, as a good samaritan, walks up to the lady, picks up the bundle, and lifts it onto her head. Then he turns towards Sri Aurobindo, looking for a word of praise. That's what we do – 'Oh, I have done so many good things, the Divine must have recorded them, or somebody must have noticed them' But a smile comes from Sri Aurobindo, a smile of divine irony perhaps. He makes a remark that is so very significant. He says something to this effect, 'Yes, yes, yes, all this while we have been doing only this: taking the burden of man and putting it back on his own shoulders.' There is a beautiful line in *Savitri* to that effect, where Sri Aurobindo says:

*And leader here with his uncertain mind,
Alone who stares at the future's covered face,
Man lifted up the burden of his fate.* (p. 6)

The problem of pain is a really vexed one, and it doesn't go away through the simple fact of believing that this is a world created by the Divine, the Divine who is *Sat* – pure Existence, who is *Ananda* – Bliss, whose very stuff is Consciousness, who is omnipotent. Yet this world, which is full of misery, '*packed with pain*' – what is it? What or who is struggling here? And we have been passing the burden onto Man, saying "It is your own bad karma, you have called this evil onto your own shoulders." Sometimes this sounds so insensitive. As a doctor I have had patients who have suffered a myocardial infarction, a heart attack, or a fractured foot, and as it is traditionally done, people who went to visit them said, 'It is all karma, so you have to bear it.' It sounds doubly insensitive. This man has been knocked down by a lorry, and on top of it his friends tell him it is not the fault of the driver, it is not the fault of anyone else, it is his own karma from some lives back! Sri Aurobindo, as if taking a dig at this attitude,

says, "As if man had much of a role to play in the making of this universe!" There are so many cosmic forces, so many unseen things around us. How much of a role do we really have? Is it really karma?

Or there have been other ways of looking at it: it is because of some Titan, some dark adversary force who alone has subjected man to all this. Now obviously, this dark adversary is there, but surely he cannot have much say unless there is behind him some kind of a sanction. What is that sanction behind this pain, this suffering? How does ignorance manifest itself at so many levels? This of course is a broad canvas. We use the word Ignorance and say that it leads to suffering. One simplistic way of understanding this is that we are too much captured by appearances. What appears as death and disaster to our eyes, to a deeper vision is no death, no disaster but only a changing of forms. This has been one way to look at the problem of pain. But that would perhaps be cutting the problem too hastily. Some can do it, but it is not of much help to one who is really going through the process of grief. So how does pain manifest, how does ignorance manifest at different levels?

Let us trace the evolution of pain upon earth. We can see something very interesting: at the level of pure Matter, there is no pain. You can leave iron for millenniums, and it remains what it is, hid in the bowels of the earth, god knows how many millenniums and millenniums and trillenniums. You take out that iron and use it for some work, some kind of movement. The moment you use it, in a machine or as equipment, in a movement, it begins to show signs of wear and tear over a period of time. It is something very strange: that Matter, left to itself, feels no pain, undergoes no perceptible wear and tear. But add to it movement of any kind and it begins to come in clash with other forces and it begins to show wear and tear and with that comes the possibility of pain, not in Matter itself but at the next level when the force of Life tends to pull Matter, it begins to crack and it begins to have the sensation of pain. Sri Aurobindo says that this is because of the inertia of Matter. It refuses to respond. Because what really is Ignorance? Who is hiding behind the mask of Ignorance? Who is hiding in this darkness in which we cannot see? It is none else but the Supreme Godhead waiting to be born through this process. And pain is nothing but the labour-pangs of that birth-to-be. Sri Aurobindo beautifully says, "*With pain and labour all creation comes.*" Who

is hiding in this darkness? In Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo did not know what was going to happen to him, outwardly so to say, he could be sentenced to imprisonment, deportation to the Andamans. Yet, just at the time when we might be expecting a lament from him, Sri Aurobindo wrote :

*It is He in the sun that is ageless and deathless
And into the midnight His shadow is thrown.
When darkness was dense and covered in darkness
He was seated within it, immense and alone.*

(“Who”, SABCL 5:41)

He – All-Bliss, He – All-Truth, is waiting to be born. And he is born first as the force of Life. Matter begins to stir with consciousness. But Matter doesn’t want to stir: it is inert, it doesn’t want to move. So the moment there is movement it begins to crack, to cry out, and that is the first level at which pain appears. Pain comes with Life. Where there is no life there is no pain, no conscious pain. And that is because of inertia. And therefore pain is required. In human beings this inertia takes the form of inability to move forward. One is stuck with one’s fixed beliefs, one’s mechanical habit, routine – even turning to God can become a routine! Even our beliefs can become mechanical. And then pain comes to shake us up.

How does it help? How does this schooling process work? So beautifully Sri Aurobindo says in *Savitri* :

*Pain is the hammer of the Gods to break
A dead resistance in the mortal’s heart,
His slow inertia as of living stone.
If the heart were not forced to want and weep,
His soul would have lain down content, at ease,
And never thought to exceed the human start
And never learned to climb towards the Sun.* (p. 443)

So that is how we are. We lie down content, at ease. It is so easy for all of us to sink into inertia. It is the first thing! This is an in-house crowd: we know how it is: you come and join an Ashram, and the first thing is, “Oh, now it’s finished! Everything is fine, because after

all we have come here.” We don’t realise that now the grinding begins, now the hammering begins, now the chipping begins, now the shaping begins. It is very natural, because inertia is the very law of Matter. It loves inertia, it wants to remain where it is, and every time it is pulled out it cries out with pain. So that is the first impulse – pain. And pain comes to tell Matter, “No! That’s where the ignorance is.” Ignorance hides in the inertia of Matter.

But as Life begins to climb, it again ignorantly begins to seek that Oneness. And as a result in Life there is born Desire. Desire is a strange thing. There is nothing wrong with desire as such. The only problem is that first we don’t really know what it is we are desiring, and the second thing is that, as it is said, there are two things that are the source of unhappiness in life: one is not getting what you want, and the other is getting it. Only these two things. There is a very nice little story which I have always found very instructive : A person goes into a hospital setting and finds a man crying “Lulu, Lulu, oh my Lulu!” So the inspector asks, “What is wrong with him?” The answer comes, “Well, nothing much. He was in love with one Lulu, but he couldn’t get married to her. So therefore the lament. He is very unhappy.” So the inspector says, “Well, it happens in life, he will get over it.” A few beds further on there is another one crying, “Lulu, Lulu, oh my Lulu!” So once again he asks, “Who is this Lulu? She seems to be quite terrible, giving so much pain!” But the answer comes, “No, no – his problem is different. He got married to her, and now he is miserable and unhappy.” So they go a little further, and there is a third one crying out “Lulu, Lulu, oh my Lulu!” So he asks, “Now what is wrong with this guy?” The answer comes, “There is nothing wrong with him. He doesn’t know who Lulu is. He is just seeing these others crying Lulu, Lulu. So he thinks she must be someone very desirable and that he must be missing something.”

This is so very true of desire: we think something will give us happiness – until we get it we are miserable. When we get it we are miserable. And for various reasons we are miserable. And therefore they say there is a very old transaction which Nature has started which the modern market has copied. The deal is “Buy one pleasure, and get two pains free.” You don’t have to pay for it. It comes unasked for, because it is in the very nature of things. And it is in the nature of things because it is Ignorance. It is not because of ‘bad karma’.

Someone asked Sri Aurobindo – we don't have the question, but it was probably something to this effect – “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Sri Aurobindo replies, “Blows come to all.”

... blows fall on all human beings because they are full of desire for things that cannot last and they lose them or, even if they get, it brings disappointment and cannot satisfy them. To turn to the Divine is the only truth in life.

(Letters on Yoga, CWSA 22, 23, 24 p.1639)

Bad things do not happen to you because there is something bad in you. Blows come to all human beings. None can escape. And why do they come? Not because there is something bad in you, but because men are in love with things that are in their very nature transient. We love things that are transient, and we don't love the Eternal.

Just a few days back I had someone telling me, “You know, for me, parents are God.” Now this sounds very fine, it is a fine sentiment, many people like it, at least parents like it. But then, if I am so much enamoured by those who have given birth to me in one life and brought me up and nourished me, how much more love I should have for the one who has given birth to me for Time sempiternal, who has always been watching over my progress, as over a little baby, waking me up, step by step! So that is the real problem. We are in love with things that cannot last, and we do not understand that what we are really looking for in them is not there. That is why desire is another source of pain and suffering in human life.

That gives us two causes. One is inertia, the second is the principle of desire.

But then, that Godhead who is hidden in obscurity and ignorance is born as Mind. So with Mind something else comes in. Mind believes that it knows – until it notices that it is falling flat every time and learns that it does not know. It is a seeking for Knowledge, but it doesn't have the Knowledge. This is the problem with Mind. Very beautifully Sri Aurobindo summarises this in *Savitri*, where he says :

*Man, still a child in Nature's mighty hands,
In the succession of the moments lives;
To a changing present is his narrow right;*

*His memory stares back at a phantom past,
The future flees before him as he moves;
He sees imagined garments, not a face....
He waits to weigh the certitude of his thoughts,
He knows not what he shall achieve or when;* (p. 53)

This is how our life is. We try to think – and that adds to our misery. The mind adds to our misery because, at an animal level there is pain, but there is no anticipation of pain. At the level of the animal there is ignorance, but there is no awareness of the ignorance. There is limitation, but there is no conscious awareness of the limitation.

In some places there is the practice of animal sacrifice, and of course animals are sacrificed every day to the Belly God, if not to the gods on the altars – it doesn't make much difference. If you see these animals being taken, except for the moment when they are actually going to be killed, they will be munching ... you know, you take a goat and it is munching – it doesn't know that it is being taken to the altar to be sacrificed. But put a man in the same place. Even if there is no scope for him being taken, but things begin to weave inside: 'Oh if, if ... if this happens, if that happens, oh, there will be so much pain ... this is going to hurt so much.' So Mind brings in its own element of uncertainty. And with that uncertainty comes anxiety and morbid thoughts and all kinds of negative preoccupations that add to the pain. There are a number of examples in real life which one could recount. We have seen instances where people were so much in anticipation of pain due to just a simple injection – they didn't know that the injection was already given! Yet they were wincing, as if it was going to come, because the anticipation creates pain. So this is the third level.

But does pain stop there? No, there is yet another level of pain. It comes as the spiritual being begins to get extracted out of this obscurity. When Life emerges from Matter there is pain, when Mind comes out of Matter there is pain, when the Spirit begins to come out of Matter there is pain. Again we find in *Savitri* – that is the base, always the base – Sri Aurobindo says,

*An absolute supernatural darkness falls
On man sometimes when he draws near to God:
An hour arrives when fail all Nature's means;*

*Forced out from the protecting Ignorance
And flung back on his naked primal need,
He at length must cast from him his surface soul
And be the ungarbed entity within:*

(p. 11)

Why does it happen? It's an anguish. Many of us have gone through it. The mind conceives an ideal, it wants an ideal world where there is no pain, no suffering, where everything is beautiful, everything is love and peace, harmony and joy. But the first brush of life on this sensitive humanity in which the Spirit is beginning to be born – because as Spirit is being born it expects an ideal world, and yet what it finds is nothing but *'This earth is full of labour, packed with pain ... This earth is full of the anguish of the gods'* – it translates itself as anguish. What is experienced as wear and tear at the level of Matter, suffering at the level of life, anxiety at the level of mind, becomes anguish at the level of the Spirit – an anguish for perfection, for freedom from slavery of all kinds, an anguish for bliss, for Truth, for love.

And there is of course another kind of suffering which we experience in certain moments. Sri Aurobindo uses the term 'psychic suffering'. It is the suffering of the soul. There is a sweetness in it, there is a compassion in it, it suffers when it sees that the mind, life and body are making a fool of themselves, are riding a merry-go-



round of desires, are going fruitlessly and vainly in search of god knows what ... the soul sees it and suffers silently within.

So these are various types of suffering, and this is how ignorance manifests itself at different levels. Essentially we can look at it like that. We commonly understand ignorance as absence of knowledge, but in yogic terms that would be 'nescience'. Ignorance is actually that which takes away the Oneness, so that we start seeing everything as separate: 'I am separate, I am a being and I am most important to myself.' Sri Aurobindo says that one of the great mistakes that we all do is to place ourselves, our ego, at the centre of the universe, and then we expect God and everyone else to cater to our needs and desires. What a nice God that would be who would fulfil all that I ask! What a bad God who would starve me and stifle me and takes away so many things that I want to hold on to! But that is the regard of the ego. What would be the regard of the soul within us? A very different regard. For,

*The spirit rises mightier by defeat;
Its godlike wings grow wider with each fall.* (p. 458)

What the soul sees is something very different. It sees that pain is nothing but

*... the hand of Nature sculpturing men
To greatness: an inspired labour chisels
With heavenly cruelty an unwilling mould.* (p. 444)

And then the poet goes on to tell us who are those who are picked up.

*They shape with giant strokes their own; their sons
Are marked with their enormous stamp of fire.* (p. 444)

Who are the ones who are picked up? Not necessarily those whom we regard as sinners. In human life, the concept of Sin itself, Sri Aurobindo says, was a trick of Nature created to make men move a little more easily towards the divine. But man has responded to this trick of Nature with a greater cunning: he has become very acutely aware of the sins of others, and completely oblivious to his own. So

this trick of Nature hasn't worked, there was no basic truth in it, it was a trick, a device. But what is the truth? Who are the ones who are chosen for this great pain? Those who are marked out to grow in Spirit, to conquer.

Only last night somebody rang me up to tell me about a young lady who is facing imminent death because of widespread cancer. The person who called me was in distress, and I had to speak out these lines of *Savitri* – and how it changes the whole perspective!

Then this person asked me, “But won't it affect the faith of those who love her?” Now the problem is that our beliefs and our non-beliefs are so much on the surface that it really makes no difference. Many times it is very difficult to say who really believes and who doesn't believe, because we live so much on the surface. What is happening in the depths? That is of crucial importance. We see only outwardly, outward things. And there are people who seem to believe, but at the smallest pain they wince, start cursing God, and start questioning “Why me? Why me? Why have you sent this calamity to me? What kind of God are you?” – as if God is nothing but a genie in the bottle to satisfy all our desires? “My life should be happy – then it doesn't matter if the whole world is going to blazes.” We wince only when we ourselves have pain? This is the extreme degree of selfishness we can experience, even though we say that we believe. On the other hand it is also true that there are people who outwardly don't believe, but who can say that they have less faith? They go through life as if they knew that a silent hand is leading them. Though they don't speak about it, they are silently doing yoga. In fact, many times I feel a little hesitant, speaking like this, going out to give talks, because I feel there are many more who go through life in such a beautiful way and they are the ones who are a source of inspiration for all of us. They live yoga. We talk about yoga. And very often those who don't talk, walk on the path much better. So it's a disqualification, very frankly I feel – to be sitting here!

Coming back to our problem of pain – these are the types of pain that we experience, and this is how ignorance manifests as pain. So what can we do? This is one aspect of it. We are not going into the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of it – how ignorance came into existence, how the inconscient came into existence, why

it has been born – because those questions would interest a philosophical mind, but all Sri Aurobindo’s devotees need to have a bit of pragmatism in them, because he is really a spiritual realist. Otherwise we would become like the philosopher who was taking a boat ride: as he was a little way through he asked the boatman “Have you read the Vedas?” He said ‘No sir, I am totally uneducated.’ So they went on a little further. “You must have read the Gita at least, it’s a sacred scripture?” “No, sir – I have heard about it, my father used to, I believe my great grandfather used to read it, but I have to earn a livelihood.” So they went a little further and the philosopher asked, “At least you must have read something from the Ramayana?” “Well sir, it was there in my house but I couldn’t open it ...” Then suddenly they are caught in a whirlpool, the boat is sinking. The boatman asks, “Do you know how to swim, Professor?” “No, I never learnt it!” “Well I am sorry, I think your whole life is a waste!” So let us touch the pragmatic aspect, how to really handle this problem of pain.

Of course there is the spiritual solution, to get out of Ignorance, to get out of the limits of the ego – and that is what pain is trying to make us do. It is trying to enlarge us, it is trying to tell us that these are the limits and that if we live within those limits there is pain. In fact Sri Aurobindo says “What really is pain transformed, in the Divine?” He says, “Pain gets transformed into intolerable ecstasy.” After all, this world is nothing but delight, but I feel pain because in me that delight is cabined in narrow bounds, I want happiness to be within these bounds, under these conditions, and therefore the touch of the great World-Master and Artisan is felt as pain to me.

So we have seen the various sources of pain and how it manifests. But what do we do at each level?

At the level of Matter, it must open to Light. We know how much Mother has emphasised this, but we shall come back to that a little later. But what to do if we actually have a pain? If we have a toothache, or a pain in the hand or the foot – what do we do? We have to do precisely that – open to the Light. There is, beyond the borders of Ignorance, a Force, a Stillness, a Power of Immobility and Peace, and we have to bring that down to where our pain is. Now

we cannot do that if in everyday life we are not accustomed to do it. It cannot be done suddenly in one day ... although it does happen in many people instinctively that when they are in a state of deep crisis or physical pain, somehow they go through it, and afterwards, when it is over, they suddenly realise, "Oh my god, it was such a terrible thing!" – but during that intense phase it is as if something takes hold and instinctively they make the right movement. For instance fainting: fainting is the right movement when there is sudden stress or sudden physical trauma, because the being goes out of the body and it is one way to bring that peace and stillness into the body from above. But otherwise, hoping that we don't faint, we can do it voluntarily by literally pushing that power of immobility into the part that is suffering, this is one very complete way. And I can tell you that this is a very very powerful method. One can just practice it and try it and it can really help any kind of pain.

Or else one can cut oneself off from the pain. These are the two alternatives available. One is to still the turbulent movement, the vibration which gets translated in our active mental consciousness as pain. The other is to get out of the zone of pain, that is the spot where the consciousness is in a whirlpool – to cut oneself off.

Now these are all temporary solutions. This is not the permanent solution that Sri Aurobindo has mentioned. But Sri Aurobindo has also mentioned – and the Mother too was very pragmatic in her approach. People have the idea that the Mother didn't want anyone to take pain-killers or drugs. It is not true. Yes, she said that this is a temporary thing, it is not the real thing. There are psychological methods by which we can overcome pain, and one is to detach oneself from the pain, from the painful spot and turn the mind elsewhere. Hand over the responsibility to the Divine – that is the best, she says, that is 'the supreme science' – instead of all the time bothering about 'what is happening to my body?' and observing it acutely, as if the body were such a fascinating thing to observe. 'Oh, I had five hiccups in the morning, and I had ten now in the evening, so can there be something done about it?' How does it matter? Or the other alternative, to introduce immobility into that spot and it acts like a balm, or indeed much more powerfully.

Then, on the vital level, the pain caused by desire and attachment. We saw that desire comes because we are not experiencing the Oneness that all is. Here, isn't pain also a means which Nature uses to re-create that oneness? Through our mutual affection and attachments? So what should be done? The Mother tells us that while one should not ask for suffering, one should not run away from it either. That is what Sri Aurobindo says in *Savitri* also.

Pain and suffering are evolutionary mechanisms, but Sri Aurobindo is telling us, please, do not ask for suffering.

*O mortal, bear, but ask not for the stroke,
Too soon will grief and anguish find thee out.* (p. 453)

Already there is enough load of it. We don't have to ask for an additional quota. But at the same time, when it comes we should not turn away from it. What should we do then? Go into the heart of pain, touch its very core from where it originates, into its depth. Go where there is no more separation, where there is Oneness. When we lose someone whom we love, when we lose something that we cherish, what should we do? Go within, go within, go within, into the depths. There is a bedrock of consciousness where there is Oneness, and these things are not abstractions. Indeed suffering is a powerful lever with which we can open many a closed door if we know how to use it as a handle to go within. But instead we sit at the face of the door that is closed and fret and fume rather than turn around and look at the door that is opening.

This is what the problem of ignorance is. We look at the TV, we are so captured by it that when there is a scene which is full of suffering we begin to suffer – because we are attached to it, it is so real to us. And when there is something which is comical, we laugh. But we can always stand back from that horror-show and know that we are in ourselves alone and infinite. So to go into the depths and discover that bedrock of Oneness, where none is separated from anyone, where all of us are together on the breast of the Mighty Mother, that is the solution, when we face suffering due to the loss of something or someone cherished. To have non-possessiveness about anything since all belongs to the Lord and is given to us on trust for a short while, is to be ever happy and free from the pain that comes through the stress of desire.

But if we cannot do that, there is another thing we can do. It is to face life with calm fortitude and endurance and trust in the Divine.

*O mortal, bear this great world's law of pain,
In thy hard passage through a suffering world
Lean for thy soul's support on Heaven's strength,
Turn towards high Truth, aspire to love and peace.
A little bliss is lent thee from above,
A touch divine upon thy human days.
Make of thy daily way a pilgrimage,
For through small joys and griefs thou mov'st towards God.*

(p. 451)

We may not understand how it happens, but ‘*make of thy daily way a pilgrimage*’, that is the injunction. We have to do this in everyday life. This equanimity is not indifference to the touches of life, it does not mean becoming hard to pain, it is not becoming insensitive – that equanimity is not just a stark facing of life, it is not a shrinking from life either.

There was somebody who had gone away to an ashrama and was staying there, and he was asked, ‘Why did you come here?’ ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I have six daughters and you know it is so difficult to get them married, so I thought this is a nice solution for my miseries.’ So there are all kinds of things, you know, in this world. But this is not what is meant: “Oh, now I am OK, I have no pain, no suffering ... – because somebody else is going to have to take the burden on my behalf.” That is not the advice. It is not indifference, equanimity is not insensitiveness. It is something much deeper. It rests on the bedrock of faith. It is a leap of faith, to let go and surrender to the Divine, with the conviction that He is there, He will take care. When we have knowledge, we don’t need faith. When we don’t have knowledge, faith is the line that bridges the chasm.

And this letting go is again not easy for human consciousness. There is a very fine story about a man who has an accident and gets thrown over a cliff. He hangs onto the edge and cries out loud, “Anyone there?” A voice comes, “Let go.” He looks down. Below him there is nothing but a gaping abyss. Once again he calls, “Anyone there?” Once again the voice comes “Just let go. Have faith and let go.” A third time he

calls out, “Is there anyone else up there?” (*laughter*). This ‘let go’ is very difficult. It sounds very easy, and that’s why yoga has to be practiced in real life. It is a real life event. We cannot practice equanimity unless we have these everyday experiences of life. The Mother says something to this effect very beautifully in one of her Prayers: “Are not the periods of activity the anvil on which the gains of our hours of contemplation are tested?” They have to pass through the crucible where they are purified. At the end only that pure ingot of gold remains. All else is burnt away. This is what yoga is. It is a fire, and as She would say, do not touch this fire unless you are not only sincere but want to grow more and more sincere. One mistake we should not make in life or rather make it consciously, it is to tell the Divine “I want to be Yours” – because we may say it quite thoughtlessly, “Oh, how nice ...” But once we say it, nothing can hold us back. When we say it we have to be willing to be all alone, to be cast out from everything, from every paradise. There’s a beautiful aphorism of Sri Aurobindo, where he says “*God drives us out of every Eden that we may be forced to travel through the desert to a diviner Paradise*” (CWSA 12: 496) He casts us out of every Eden. The moment that we say “I want to be Yours”, the safe limits begin to crack around us, and all that was our protecting ignorance, all that was the very thing keeping us away from the Divine, it begins to break and break and break to free ‘*the ungarbed entity within*’.

This is the deep meaning of pain, and this is its significance. It shows us our limits and our weak spots. It comes to liberate us from the boundaries of our Ignorance. It is as it were an evolutionary device to push us towards a greater and greater self-exceeding. But Sri Aurobindo is a perfectionist and wants nothing short of perfect perfection. So he says, all these things are fine, these are intermediary ways – equanimity, faith, detachment, practicing immobility, courage, aspiration for light, putting into matter a plasticity and will to progress – all these are solutions, but they are just steps on the way. What is the perfect solution? The perfect solution is only when Matter, Life and Mind would be transformed into their divine equivalents. Matter is pure existence. The Self has become Matter, and now it must recover That Selfhood. What is Life? Life is pure Consciousness-Force, *Chit-Shakti*, delight fulfilling itself in manifold ways. The delight of oneness becomes the delight of union, delight of multiplicity. That is Life, it is

consciousness-force, reaching out to its aims, continuously fulfilling itself. And what is Mind, but a derivative fall from the Supramental Truth? When Mind recovers its plenary illumination. when it dwells in a self-existent knowledge where '*All Time is one body, Space a single book*' and '*Time's secrets*' are '*an oft-read book*', then there will be no more ignorance at these levels. So that is the solution.

But who will do this? Who can do this? There we come to the great mystery of December 5 and November 17. Sometimes people wonder "Well, if that be the case, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother should not have had any problems, they should be always free from pain. Did not they go through suffering and pain?" So beautifully Sri Aurobindo has answered,

*He who would save the race must share its pain:
This he shall know who obeys that grandiose urge.
The Great who came to save this suffering world
And rescue out of Time's shadow and the Law,
Must pass beneath the yoke of grief and pain;
They are caught by the Wheel that they had hoped to break,
On their shoulders they must bear man's load of fate.
Heaven's riches they bring, their sufferings count the price
Or they pay the gift of knowledge with their lives. (p. 444)*

This is the basic distinction between the old Yoga and the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo. In the old yogas, you escape from the Law: 'Here is the rule of Ignorance. This is going to remain forever. So escape from this zone of Ignorance, go into the zone of Light, don't get caught into this cycle of birth and rebirth and you are free.' But in Sri Aurobindo's Yoga there is something else. It is not enough to escape, for '*Escape however high redeems not life*', Life that has fallen here upon earth.

*Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls;
Earth is the heroic spirit's battlefield,
The forge where the Archmason shapes his works. (p. 686)*

It's a smithy. And this is the place of work. That is always our home. We have come here from there, and we have come here for a work.

The moment we live in the consciousness that we are essentially That, but we have come here for a work, all pain and suffering vanishes away. What is that work? He says, to change the very law. Not to escape from the law – to change the law. But how to change the law, unless I pass beneath the yoke of the law? Unless I experience the law, its acuteness, its bitterness, its pang, the struggle and the suffering. When one goes below it, then one sees all the details and works to change it. It is relatively easy to escape from the law. That has been done, time and time again for thousands and thousands of years by the great sages and saints all over the world. But here Sri Aurobindo comes to change the law and when one has to change the law one has to pass beneath the yoke of the law. And this is the secret of ‘*the dread mysterious sacrifice*’. ‘*Now is the debt paid, wiped off the original score.*’ ... ‘*The debt the Eternal owes to the fallen kind*’. The incarnate God takes upon Himself the burden of human suffering and pain so that our path may become easier. A small tear drop in His eyes wipes away the tears of a million. That is the secret of God’s labour and His pain in a world that is yet unfinished and betrays Him. That of course is the story from the Divine side. How we respond to this Divine holocaust is another story. How do we respond?

*Hard is it to persuade earth-nature’s change;
 Mortality bears ill the eternal’s touch:
 It fears the pure divine intolerance
 Of that assault of ether and of fire;
 It murmurs at its sorrowless happiness,
 Almost with hate repels the light it brings;
 It trembles at its naked power of Truth
 And the might and sweetness of its absolute Voice.
 Inflicting on the heights the abysm’s law,
 It sullies with its mire heaven’s messengers:
 Its thorns of fallen nature are the defence
 It turns against the saviour hands of Grace;
 It meets the sons of God with death and pain.
 A glory of lightnings traversing the earth-scene,
 Their sun-thoughts fading, darkened by ignorant minds,
 Their work betrayed, their good to evil turned,
 The cross their payment for the crown they gave,* (p.7)

This is how man responds. So essentially we have to change our response towards pain. So far we shrink from pain, or we try to escape from pain. But as His children, as Her children, we have to work and aspire for the change of the very law of pain, the very law of struggle and suffering. And for that even His children have to go through the test of this purifying fire.

We can pause here, and leave a time for questions and answers, with these lines from *Savitri* which are very very relevant and evocative. Among the boons that Savitri asks from Death – transformed into his own Divine Reality – is the secret of emerging from pain :

*Thy embrace which rends the living knot of pain
Thy oneness in which all creatures breathe
Thy magic flowing waters of deep love
Thy sweetness give to me for earth and men.* (p. 697)

‘*Thy embrace which rends the living knot of pain*’ – it is the divine embrace. When we go through life, instead of going as if we are travelling alone, struggling in yoga alone, struggling with life alone, if only we could have this sense that He is with us all the time, it is He who takes our burden upon himself. If we can take this leap of faith, this trust that it is He who strikes in the spears and rides in the chariot, He who slays without stint and is full of compassion, and if we can endure it with that equanimity, which Sri Aurobindo beautifully brings out :

*I face earth’s happenings with an equal soul;
In all are heard Thy unseen feet. Thy steps
Tread Destiny’s pathway in my front. Life’s whole
Tremendous theorem is thou complete. ...*

And what is the victory and failure of Life? He says

*Failure is cradled on Thy deathless arm
Victory is Thy passage mirrored in Fortune’s glass ...
No power can slay my soul; it lives in Thee.
Thy presence is my immortality.*

(‘The Divine Worker’ SABCL 5:143)

Sir, what is the role of the subconscious in pain?

It comes in many ways. One, the subconscious holds the slightest impressions that it registers. It is like a place where the memory of pain and the responses which we have made previously all get stamped there as a habit. Therefore, though we know mentally that we could give another response to a situation or event, the subconscious spontaneously throws up the response we are habituated to. So the subconscious is a big load – the atavism which we carry. It is the stamp of the past that lurks as a shadow and drags at our feet as we move into the future. So especially with regard to the yoga, when the journey enters into the subconscious it throws up all that. Before we experience that, it is natural for each of us to feel that everybody else is bad and you are the nice person. But when you confront the subconscious you discover what lurks within. And it is in everyone. Its role essentially is that it throws up the same habitual responses again and again – and again and again. So one has to be very very patient and persistent when the working is going on in it. No one can work upon these parts himself. It is the Divine who works. But we have to allow the Divine to work. We have to understand that this is a process and this is a stage and this is a phase. We have to go through it and if we have to go through it, we might as well go through it smilingly and cheerfully, because that makes the pain much more bearable and tolerable.

It is this subconscious which hypnotises us into believing that things are as they are, that they will never change. This is the ancient adversary which has hidden in the subconscious, and Sri Aurobindo alludes to it as *'the veil of cosmic forces'*. These are the forces which are the cause of the question the Mother raises in that Prayer we saw at the very beginning, *"Why do men flee away from these boons as though they feared them?"* It is very strange that in this town of Pondicherry or in the world with billions of people hardly a handful really want to seek a solution which is lasting. Why? What is this? And in *Savitri* Sri Aurobindo says very beautifully

*A dark concealed hostility is lodged
In the human depths, in the hidden heart of Time
That claims the right to change and mar God's work.*

*A secret enmity ambushes the world's march;
It leaves a mark on thought and speech and act:
It stamps stain and defect on all things done;
Till it is slain peace is forbidden on earth.* (p. 447)

So essentially this is the point where this darkness resides.

Of course adverse forces work in many ways. Since we have come to this point, we can just take it up – how they contribute to the problem of pain and suffering.

They have three characteristic ways of working. One is that they increase and exaggerate the movements of universal nature which drag us down. So if there is anger they push upon it and even a small irritation becomes like a volcano erupting. The second method is that they distort the image, so that what is small becomes large, out of proportion; what is truly useful and real tends to become so small. Because of the action of the adverse forces that which is true, that which is dear, that which is real, tends to become so small and insignificant, and that which is very small, would appear so very big. That is one of their roles – to make us feel that we are so very big and important. Or they show this or that small problem as so very big – out of proportion. And then a third level which is the most dangerous, they throw doubts and depression and discouragement. When these things appear it is a direct action of the adverse forces which throw heaps of suggestions on the mind. “You cannot do yoga, you are a failure, your life is miserable, everything is bad in life.”

In *Savitri* the Queen voices so many things, and Narad says

*Thy mind's light hides from thee the Eternal's thought,
Thy heart's hopes hide from thee the Eternal's will,
Earth's joys shut from thee the Immortal's bliss.
Thence rose the need of a dark intruding god,
The world's dread teacher, the creator, pain.
Where Ignorance is, there suffering too must come;* (p. 443)

So the adverse forces throw up all kinds of things and cloud our reason, obstruct it. What should we do during these moments of depression that we all go through? What is the yogic way of coming

out of it? There are so many ways of course, there are anti-depressant drugs also, but there is a very beautiful way that Sri Aurobindo gives, something to this effect: “*To all such suggestions of discouragement and failure and doubt and denial say to yourself, ‘I am Bacchus and Apollo and Ares. I am Agni, the Fire, the Force. I am Surya the creator. I am a child of immortality called by the Divine. I cannot fail.’*”

This is how we must respond to it.

Is there any way in which the specific notion of pain is different in Sri Aurobindo’s teaching from that of other spiritual or philosophical traditions?

In the traditional philosophy one origin attributed to pain is desire. One notion is that it is because of desire that the universe is created, and that as long as there is desire, as long as there is universe and as long as you are part of the universe, we are bound to experience pain. This is one explanation. In that case the only solution is to get out of the manifested universe and into some plane of consciousness, into some *laya* or nirvana, where you don’t have to come back into this.

There is another notion which is more or less parallel. In fact it takes the problem one step backward. Where does Desire come from? It comes from Ignorance. Desire is an ignorant attempt to recreate the oneness that has been lost. So the more original conception is that pain and suffering is caused by Ignorance – that is, ignorance of our true nature, of who we really are. We are really Divine so we don’t need to strive after things, to try to possess things. That is another way of understanding, that pain and struggle and suffering come because of ignorance of the true nature of things, of the true divine reality behind. Again the solution is more or less similar: get out of this world of ignorance, into some divine status and you are out of this problem of pain.

Of course there are philosophies that are purely materialistic which hold that pain and suffering are part of the struggle of nature. They don’t even try to explain, but look at pain as the inevitable result of the clash of forces. Now this is also true at one level. These philosophies do not admit the possibility of the Divine or any status of consciousness which is beyond this manifested universe. According

to them the very nature of life brings pain, because there is a clash and struggle, and because of that there is the possibility of disease, error, death, incapacity, so pain and all these things are there.

Sri Aurobindo accepts all these explanations as partial truths. He also adds the new dimension of inertia: why essentially is there pain? Because the Divine is wanting to pull this world out of that Inconscient, but there is the resistance of the Inconscience at the back. And Sri Aurobindo goes to great length to explain why this Inconscient should be there at all, why this had to come into existence at all. And we can understand it in a very simple way. For example there is a cricket match going on today I believe, between South Africa and India. So a lot of people here are waiting to get home and turn on their radio sets or the TV. Now if there were a cricket match between say Bangladesh and India, most people would not be interested, because for it to be really interesting the adversaries have to be closely matched. In the case of the manifestation, the adversary created is almost as powerful as the Creator himself. Naturally the drag which it exercises has to be very powerful. But in the process it helps in the evolutionary process. The greater the pain and the difficulty, the greater the inner strength that comes out, the greater the possibilities that begin to manifest. In a nutshell, it is because of the pull of the Inconscient in one direction and the Divine pulling out the consciousness in another direction, there is inertia, resistance to that pull, and that leads to the sense of pain, translating itself as suffering in the human consciousness. And that is why, when the divine consciousness is more active, as it is today, many new maladies are being thrown up on earth, many upheavals are taking place – precisely because the divine consciousness is much more active today than at other times. And during such phases there is a possibility of new forms of pain and suffering manifesting on earth because of the resistance of earth-nature. This idea is a new introduction of Sri Aurobindo.

And as to the solution, his solution is radically different. Till now the solution given has been to escape. I'm talking about spiritual solutions. In some way or other to find a door of exit and an individual escape from pain. Sri Aurobindo questions this. He asks, if this is so, then why was the cosmos created at all? If escape is the goal, then why all this drama and all this fuss and all this struggle? If the end is the same as the origin? Sri Aurobindo says that instead of

just escaping into that zone of light, instead of the finite merging and escaping into the infinite, dissolving in the infinite, we should aspire for the infinite to invade the finite. When the infinite invades the finite it shatters the limits. By that touch mind and life and matter here should be redeemed. The manifestation itself should become fulfilled. It must recover its lost origin. With Sri Aurobindo's vision there is a whole continuum: life is nothing else but the one Consciousness-Force which is full of delight and self-possessed power. That falls and becomes life as we know it here. It is not that life is different and that is different. So if this can recover that lost unity, even while there is an embodied existence there would be no problem of pain and suffering. There would be no incapacity, no limitation. That is the solution that Sri Aurobindo offers – a solution that is radically different – and a long process, but a more perfect and complete solution.

Since the Supramental power has come down, why do the world conditions seem to have worsened instead of getting better?

If we look at things very very impartially, both things are happening. Very interestingly the Mother has spoken about this. She has spoken about the evil becoming more evil and the good becoming more good. On one side we see things going from bad to worse. On the other side we see exceptionally new things coming up, new forms of thought, new forms of music, new forms of ideas, new forms of groups, many kinds of impulses: women's liberation, youth unrest, even things which we think are bad because we don't understand them, things that seem to be destructive, even there a seed of new construction is concealed within. Many of the old things are being brought down to the ground. All of us have old eyes that are still accustomed to the old world, so with these eyes we see the bringing down of the old world. But with a new pair of eyes, we will see right behind it the construction of a new world. The classic example is the hippie movement. The hippie movement, the coming of the Beatles, even the drug culture, appeared to many like something very negative. But if we look deeper into it we find there is a seeking, an anguish for an ideal world. Many of us will remember that song "We don't need no education" which expresses the feeling that

people are being churned out of the schools like products out of a factory. When you listen to it you feel that these singers are open to the light. There is an anguish which outwardly seems to be breaking the old world and all its forms and constructions. But right behind there is a new construction also taking place which is much more free, much more open, and with the new set of eyes we see that also happening.

After all, fifty years is a very short period, and also it depends on how we respond to the Force and the Grace. There are those who open in response, it is just a question of sincerity, and they do emerge into a much greater light. It is far easier today to contact one's own inner reality than it must have been, say, 200 years ago. Today, if one really sincerely tries to go within and get in touch with what the Mother has termed the psychic being, it is far easier than it would have been 200 years ago. I have instances of children, young boys and girls who have beautiful experiences – it is amazing! And these are genuine experiences. I am not talking about that intermediate zone where experiences are created by the vital or the mind – something very genuine.

So on one side there is the old world which is crumbling and going to pieces, which we see and cry, but that has to go for the new to come. A clear ground is being made for the New Creation to come up. That is one way to look at it.

Some people explain it as the churning of Matter, others as the digging of the subconscious: when you stir the depths then the impure things float up to the top. Sugar which appears absolutely white and pure, when we heat it on the fire after some time the white sugar leaves a brown trace which comes to the surface – this is actually the impurity which we were not seeing before. It is just the same thing with human consciousness: we have so much muck inside! Sometimes I feel, and I'm sure many of us share this sentiment, that we are sad for the Divine. We all the time feel sad for ourselves, but if we once look at His work really one can weep ...

*I have been digging deep and long
Mid in a horror of filth and mire
A bed for the golden river's song,
A home for the deathless fire.*

*Coercing my godhead I have come down
Here on the sordid earth
Ignorant, labouring, human grown
Twixt the gates of death and birth.*

(‘A God’s Labour’ SABCL 5: 132)

But how do we respond? The thousand million insincerities of everyday life – this is the response we give to the Divine. The Divine takes it, that is his greatness and divinity. The hope lies in us growing sincere by the touch of Grace – because really without that Grace it is difficult to become sincere. Layers of obscurity after obscurity. But one thing is sure, that despite all the present turmoil, and chaos and crisis, what the Mother has said, never for a moment should we vacillate in the belief that the work undertaken by Sri Aurobindo is going to succeed – never for a moment.

Already some early signs are visible, for example in the young children. How truthful and straightforward they are, how free of fear and all the hang-ups that we carry like big loads on our heads. How much freer they are! That is the work that is going on. At a very personal level I feel that it is going on at a far greater speed than what one expects. Fifty years is nothing in the history of the life of the earth. If you think of the many lives we have lived and the many that are yet to come – if we look from that vast standpoint ... which incidentally is one of the ways of escape from pain also. The Mother says, ‘Whenever you are tormented, step back from this whirlpool of forces and see how many lives you have lived and how many lives are still going to come and what is this period of pain but a small fraction in eternity?’ Fifty years is really nothing.

For example, some people ask about what Mother said, that India and Pakistan would become one – to take just as an example. Of course playing cricket is bringing people together. These are the strange ways of the Divine. These two are coming closer, thanks to cricket and earthquakes. But apart from that, how long have India and Pakistan existed as two separate nations? Fifty years. What was there before? A thousand years ago people did not even know India as India and Pakistan as Pakistan. There was an entirely different geography. And what is going to come after another 100 years we cannot conceive – who knows what is going to be where? So we

should live in that vaster state and then we see that this is a small fraction of all vast Time. Fifty years does look a lot to all of us because we live in that frame, but for the Divine it is one moment in Eternity.

There is something very nice that the Mother has said about how to face the Adversary. She has said that the Adversary can be vanquished only by a greater joy. So someone asked her, ‘Mother, unless we have conquered the Adversary, how do we get that greater joy?’ The Mother said, ‘No, go past him, laugh in his face.’ He is there to threaten us. Say to him, “Who art thou, wearing this mask? Are you not my lover who comes masked as the torturer?” The moment we have that attitude: “You want to play with me the game of fighting? Come and play it, let us fight, but let it be a game”, then we discover a deeper reality behind. It’s a question of looking at the whole of life from that perspective. It should become a way of living, so that every time we face suffering from an adversary, whether it be in the form of individual or collective suffering, we have to look beyond the mask. Even in the terrorists, we should not forget – in fact, very frankly I feel that because of them, so much awakening has come into human beings. Our world is changing today thanks to the terrorists. People are coming together and uniting, thanks to the terrorists. They would not want to unite, the nations would fight against each other, but today because there are terrorists there is a global war against terrorism. So now the earth has become a unit and a unity because there is a common enemy: no longer one nation against another nation, but an ideology – a way of life that is atavistic, a way of behaving which drags us backward, a way that takes away human freedom – this becomes the enemy, not one government against another one. Of course politics is the last thing to change, so we should give them time.

Everything helps in the process of Divine Creation, everything helps. Even destruction helps:

*He saw in Night the Eternal’s shadowy veil,
Knew death for a cellar of the house of life,
In destruction felt creation’s hasty pace,
Knew loss as the price of a celestial gain
And hell as a short cut to heaven’s gates.* (p. 231)

And sometimes that which appears worst and most terrible is actually the swiftest road, ‘*For daring Hell’s kingdoms winds the heavenly*

route—‘As Sri Aurobindo said, Hell is the shortcut. This is the shortcut he has taken us on and naturally it is a bumpy ride, we are sitting in a very big Tata Sumo on a very rough road, with rough weather all around.... But what we should know is that, even though we don’t see him, we must trust that *‘the unseen pilot holds the rudder well, he does not sleep.’*

Even those who sink in the victorious flood ...

Where do they sink? Into his breast.

*He who to some gives victory, joy and good
To some gives rest.*

(‘To R. On her Birthday’ SABCL 5:75)

So always we should stand back behind appearances, and look at life from that vaster landscape and see that *‘All are safe in the breast of the One.’* Behind even the terrorists, ultimately it is He who is playing.

What is the role of past karma in present pain?

Past karma does have a role, but not in the way we often understand it according to the popular notion. The popular notion is that you have done a good deed, you will be born in a king’s family with a silver spoon in your mouth. Obviously this is absurd, for that would mean that God values the silver spoon and the king’s palace just as we do. And it would also contradict many of the facts. Even in Indian mythology, the people who suffered most were the Pandava brothers who were born in the jungle, who lived in the jungle, who got the kingdom and were thrown back into the jungle by deceit, they won the kingdom again but decided to go back into the jungle, and they died in the jungle. While Dhuryodhana, the so-called evil one, was born in a palace, remained a king, fought like a king, died like a king. But that is the outer life. If you look at the inner life, with one there is trouble, pain, strife, even though he has a kingdom, with the others, they were also anguished but they had the delight of the Divine’s company. The repercussion of karma is essentially inner. It is an evolutionary mechanism and not a mechanism of reward and punishment, that is what Sri Aurobindo says. God is not

a big CEO, rewarding some and punishing others. It is more as if, when I do a selfish action for instance, it makes me narrow, and when I am narrow my consciousness is more obscure, more ignorant, more dull, and more unresponsive to the delight that is always there in the world. So essentially, selfish deeds bind my consciousness, make me narrow. And it is a well known thing that people who lead a selfish life really lead a very miserable life, even though outwardly they have everything.

Today we see that many people cannot smile. And it is so nice to see that by the very fact of turning to the Divine we begin to smile, we begin to laugh, even to the extent that people wonder ‘What has gone wrong with you, why are you laughing?’ – and we won’t even be able to give any tangible reason.

Karma is a mechanism for evolution, its role is to help the soul to learn. Gradually it learns that if I do this I am bound. If you take the view of the Gita, it says about tamasic action for instance ... Krishna doesn’t say that if you have done tamasic deeds you will be punished by being born half blind or with bowed legs: he says your consciousness will become dull and obscure, you will be more and more deluded. So what about rajasic karma? He says it will bring pleasure and pain together. What about sattwic karma? He says it will increase *sukham* and *prakasham* – gladness and light. Not that suddenly you will hit a jackpot. He doesn’t say that. And what happens when you turn to the Divine? That also is asked in the Gita, Arjuna says, ‘Everyone cannot get full realisation in one life, so if I fail, what will happen in my next life?’ Krishna does not give the assurance that because you have turned to God, in your next life I will ensure that you are born to a billionaire and everything is available to you on a platter. He does not say that. He says ‘You will be born into a family that is already turned towards the Divine and you will very soon regain that lost yoga, and will cover the path that is left.’ This is the real significance of karma. It is essentially an inner mechanism – of evolution, not reward and punishment.

Mother's Mantra and Savitri

How Savitri illumines Om Namō Bhagavate.

Talk and reading by Rod Hemsell

December 17, 2005

Tonight I will be speaking about mantra. Please forgive any errors or omissions, which will surely occur when we get to the point of attempting an authentic rendering of *Savitri*. It is my aspiration, nonetheless, that at that point we will not be merely speaking about mantra but hearing mantra.

But first I would like to make a few observations about *Savitri* and the Mother's mantra. I would be surprised if no one has made these before, but they seem original to me because I haven't read them anywhere yet.

You might remember that the Mother elaborated on her mantra to Satprem in 1965, and at that time she said:

Of all the formulas or mantras, the one that has the most direct effect on this body is the Sanskrit mantra: OM NAMO BHAGAVATE. The first word, OM, represents the supreme invocation, the invocation to the Supreme. The second word, NAMO, represents total self-giving, perfect surrender. The third word, BHAGAVATE, represents the aspiration, what the manifestation must become – Divine. *(Feb. 1965)*

A few years earlier she frequently commented on this mantra and its effects, for example:

When I sit in meditation or I have a minute of quiet for concentration, this mantra arises from the solar plexus, and there is a response in the cells of the body: they all start vibrating. Everything gets filled with Light!

The other day, in my bathroom, it came and took hold of the entire body. It rose and rose and all the cells were trembling.

So I remained still and let the movement develop by itself. The vibration kept mounting and mounting, expanding as the sound itself mounted, and all the cells of the body were seized with an intensity of aspiration... as if the entire body was swelling. It became so overwhelming I felt the body was about to burst.

Had I continued, something might have happened, in the sense that the cells' balance would have been affected. Unfortunately, I was unable to continue because... I didn't have time; I was going to be late. So I slowly withdrew. I put on the brakes and the effect was interrupted. But since then, whenever I repeat this mantra everything starts vibrating.

I repeat my mantra constantly, when I am awake and even when I am asleep. I say it when I get dressed, when I eat, when I work, when I speak with people. It is there all the time, in the background of everything.

That is the normal state. It creates an atmosphere of intensity almost more material than the subtle physical. And it has a great effect: it can prevent an accident.

Sometimes, one can go from a state of more or less mechanical and efficient repetition to a state of true repetition, full of power and light. ... I understand why some tantrics advise saying the mantra in the heart center. When one applies a certain enthusiasm, when each word is uttered with a certain warmth of aspiration, it changes everything. I could feel the difference in myself. Perhaps for the mantra to become true, it needs to be repeated with a kind of joy, of elation, of warmth – especially joy.”

(Compiled from Mother's Agenda, 1958-60)

Bhagavate... We know the importance that Sri Aurobindo gave to the Vedic gods: Bhaga, Bhaga Savitri. Bhaga Savitri is the creative force and bliss of the Supreme Mother, Aditi, Bhaga Savitri, Surya Savitri.

It's interesting to me to note that in 1965 – and I'll be referring tonight primarily to the Mother's Agendas of 1965 and 1969, and to passages

from *Savitri* in Book Seven, The Book of Yoga – in 1965, curiously, on three different occasions through the year, while speaking with Satprem about *Savitri*, the Mother drew his attention to one particular line: “*Annul thyself that only God may be.*” That line is from a passage in *Savitri* from The Book of Yoga:

*Consent to be nothing and none, dissolve time’s work,
Cast off thy mind, step back from form and name.
Annul thyself that only God may be.* (p. 538)

Om is the supreme invocation. *Namo* is the perfect sacrifice, the perfect self giving. *Bhagavate* is the affirmation, of the power and the light. “*Annul thyself that only God may be.*” She didn’t draw this connection specifically, but that’s what I would like to do tonight. In 1969, for example, she said:

The only way is that the ego must go!

That’s it.

When, instead of “I,” there is nothing left, just a vast sense of evenness in everything – not expressed with words, but a very stable sensation of “What you will, as You will.” Truly, the concrete sensation that this body doesn’t exist; it is just being “used,” and there is nothing but *That*.

That pressing on things.

An all-embracing, conscious immensity.

It’s almost as if I could “see” it, not visually, of course. But it’s so concrete, far more concrete than images – the vision of this immense Force, immense Vibration that keeps pressing and pressing and pressing, and the world wriggling beneath it!

Then something inside opens up, allowing it to come in and spread upon earth.

It’s the *only* solution.

All the rest is aspirations, beliefs, hopes. It’s still superhumanity, but not the supramental.

It’s still a higher humanity trying to pull its own humanity upward, but it’s hopeless, completely hopeless. I have a very clear vision of all this humanity struggling to raise itself, to grasp something up above, but refusing to give itself.

It only wants to take!

But that doesn't work. It must annul itself. Only then can something else come in and take its place.

That's the whole secret.

Yes, to annul oneself to the point of disappearance.

This is the most difficult of all: to learn to disappear."

(Dec. 69, free trans.)

I would like to reinforce this concept of the mantra with another passage from the same year. She said to Satprem one day:

More and more – the body has been learning that what happens (what happens every second) is the best thing that can happen given the general condition. It's entirely convinced of that. And it's content to do like this (*gesture of self-abandon*) and say, "Let your will be done." That's all. If it can do that in a very continuous and peaceful way, then things are fine. It's only when it tries to find out why and how and... then things go wrong. It has to be like this (*same gesture of self-abandon*): "Let Your Will be done." Then it's all right. It doesn't ask to know, only there's the old habit.

At the critical moment (there are critical moments), at the critical moment, this *surrender* (it's even more than *surrender*, it's a complete abdication of everything, of its existence and everything) it is filled with light and force. That's the Response....

So then, the various functions are taken up in turn, in a marvelously logical order, following the body's functioning. It's something marvelous, only... the body is a poor thing, a very poor thing – that's true.

Some cells even (as I have said) spontaneously repeat the mantra. Spontaneously, the mantra goes on and on being repeated, sometimes with a very great intensity; sometimes there is a sort of... (do you know the English word shyness ?), a shyness to invoke the divine, so strongly That is felt. But it melts – it melts in an awareness, a concrete perception of such a Clemency! Unbelievable – unbelievable, unthinkable, it's so wonderful..."

(Feb. 69)

It is present. Shall we not invoke it also, in an attitude of self-abdication?

I think this idea that “*Om Namō Bhagavate*” and “*Annul thyself that only God may be*” convey, the surrender, is essential in the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother: the surrender, the sacrifice.

If you think about Om Namō Bhagavate in the Vedic sense, you have what I’ll be referring to in the course on *Savitri* that’s coming up in January as the Vedic structure. There is the invocation, there is the sacrifice, and there is the affirmation. Sri Aurobindo has explained this so thoroughly in *The Secret of the Veda*.

I think this idea really begins to become explicit, in this particular book, when Savitri realizes the hopeless state of humanity. She begins to resolve herself to accept death, because it is just not worth the trouble. This desperation arises in her spontaneously, it is the cry of nature against its mortality, and there is a response that comes from her higher self. The voice of her higher self responds. It questions her purpose and her mission, deeply, accusingly, until she can only say, in response:

*Speak to my depths, O great and deathless Voice,
Command, for I am here to do thy will.* (p. 476)

And when the Voice replies, we get a transmission from Sri Aurobindo of the fundamental, essential, primal movement of the yoga of transformation.

*“Remember why thou cam’st:
Find out thy soul, recover thy hid self,
In silence seek God’s meaning in thy depths,
Then mortal nature change to the divine.
Open God’s door, enter into his trance.
Cast Thought from thee, that nimble ape of Light:
In his tremendous hush stilling thy brain
His vast Truth wake within and know and see.
Cast from thee sense that veils thy spirit’s sight:
In the enormous emptiness of thy mind
Thou shalt see the Eternal’s body in the world,*

*Know him in every voice heard by thy soul,
In the world's contacts meet his single touch;
All things shall fold thee into his embrace.
Conquer thy heart's throbs, let thy heart beat in God:
Thy nature shall be the engine of his works,
Thy voice shall house the mightiness of his Word:
Then shalt thou harbor my force and conquer Death."*

(p. 476)

She hears this word, she proceeds to obey, and the interim result:

*Only her soul remained, its emptied stage,
Awaiting the unknown eternal Will.*

(p. 536)

What would it be like to live in that state? Isn't it our job to find out?

The Mother, as she herself says in those very passages, has made "sentences" about it. *Savitri* has the power to give us perceptions of it, without which I think few of us would ever know, quite certainly, its nature, the thing itself. But with it, as she also said, it's possible for many of us to follow this path, all the way. She said in fact, as we know, that *Savitri* is enough to take us all the way to the transformation. But one must know how to hear *Savitri*.

There are two passages that follow after "*the soul's emptied stage*," that are almost identical, but appear in successive Cantos.

(This is an interesting subject in itself. It may be simply said here that it is an indication of an aspect of the Vedic structure that there is a gradation of possible responses to each cycle of sacrifice. We may see this pattern of successive gradations of experience recurring throughout *Savitri*.)

Both passages describe what living in that state of surrender is like.

I am going to read the latter passage, in the first section of Book Seven, Canto Seven, because it covers quite perfectly the movement that we have been discussing. Although the mind should not run after such associations, I think we should be receptive to certain parallels

that we can passively observe between the Mother's descriptions of her experience, and those narrated in *Savitri*, such as, for example, her phrases "a vast sense of evenness in everything" and "the body doesn't exist, it is just being used, as it were, by That" and in *Savitri*,

All was a still and even infinity (p. 554)

*Impassive the body claimed not its own voice,
But let the luminous greatness through it pass.* (p. 553)

(Rod concluded the session by reading the first section of *Book Seven, Canto Seven, 'The Discovery of the Cosmic Spirit and the Cosmic Consciousness'*.)

New Study Aid

***Savitri* : its profound and magnificent
significance**

Ananda Reddy

The recordings of a workshop on *Savitri* held at Nainital in the year 2000. About twelve and a half hours of deep deliberation on the symbolism of *Savitri* as it emerges in *Book One, Canto One*.

Set of 2 CDs in MP3 format

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News of Savitri Bhavan

February – November 2005

Regular Classes and Courses

The on-going programme of regular classes continues. All *Invocation*–readers are welcome to join any of these activities when they are in the area. :

Sunday Morning	10.30 – 12 noon	<i>Savitri Study Circle</i>
Evening	5 – 6 pm	<i>Foundation of Indian Culture</i> , led by Professor Kittu Reddy
Monday & Tuesday	4 – 5 pm	“Cultivating Concentration”, led by Jai Singh
Wednesday	4 – 5 pm	<i>Notes on the Way</i> - The Mother’s recorded talks (in French)
Thursday	4 – 5 pm	The English of <i>Savitri</i> led by Shraddhavan
Friday	5 – 6.30 pm	<i>The Synthesis of Yoga</i> led by Sraddhalu

In addition, the following special events took place from November 2005 to April 2006

Calendar of Special Events

November 5	Music programme : “Fun and Light” – Indian Classical flute and tabla, by Dutch Aurovilians
November 10	Videos on the Mother : “Glimpses of Her Life” ; and “Four Aspects of the Mother”
November 16	Guest Speaker : Dr. R.L. Kashyap on “Vedic Symbolism in Sri Aurobindo’s <i>Savitri</i> ”
November 17	Concentration in the Hall, with the Mother’s Chair, throughout the day

- November 19 Guest Speaker : Dr. Alok Pandey “The Problem of Pain” (*Savitri* Book 6, Canto 2)
- December 9 Music programme : Devotional songs by Amrita Banerji
- December 17 Guest Speaker : Rod Hemsell on “*Savitri* and the Mother’s mantra”.
- December 29 Guest Speaker : Dr. Roger Nelson on “The Global Consciousness Project”.
- December 2005 – January 2006 : Exhibition : Meditations on *Savitri*” Book Two, Cantos 6 - 15
- January 5 Guest Speaker (in Tamil): Dr. Prema Nandakumar on “Satyavan”
- January 7 Guest Speaker : R.Y. Deshpande on “The Book of Fate” (*Savitri* Book 6)
- January 28 Guest Speaker (in Tamil): A. Sunderarajan “Introduction to *Savitri*”
- January – March Extra course : *Savitri* : the Aswapati Cycle, led by Rod Hemsell
- February – March Extra Course : “The Upanishads”, led by Vladimir Iatsenko
- February – March Exhibition : “The Mother’s Care” rare photos of the Mother, arranged by Loretta
- February 2 Videos on the Mother
- February 20 Film premiere : “Meditations on *Savitri*” Book One, Canto Two, “The Issue”
- March 5 Guest Speaker : Dr. Mangesh Nadkarni on Books One and Two of *Savitri*
- March 22 Film : “L’Avenir – The Future” from the Gnostic Centre, New Delhi
- March 29 Film: “Meditations on *Savitri*” Book One, Canto Two, “The Issue”
- April 4 Film premiere : “Meditations on *Savitri*” Book One, Canto Three “The Yoga of the King” “
- April 13 Guest Speaker : R.Y. Deshpande on “Narad’s arrival in Madra”

- April 20 Music programme : Devotional songs by Amrita Banerji
- April 22 Earth Day celebration : The Mother's reading from *Savitri* Book Eleven
- April 24 Two videos on the Mother
- April 30 Guest Speaker : George van Vrekhem on "The New Planet"



Amrita Banerji singing on the New Hall on April 20, 2006

Apart from these activities there has been a time of consolidation and expansion in all the departments and activities of Savitri Bhavan.

Reading Room

In the context of the "Savitri Bibliography" research project, the entire collection of books and journals in the Reading Room was catalogued and classified. Used for this was the format prescribed for the on-line catalogue that is now being set up to link all different the libraries and collections maintained by different units of SAIER.

This review also made it possible to identify a number of works needed to make the collection more complete, which were then acquired.

On the basis of this work, a list of *Savitri*-related publications has been compiled, covering Reference Tools, Translations, Studies and Art Works. This interim list is available on request, either in the form of a booklet, or as a pdf file.

Another work which has recently been completed is a study of references to *Savitri* in the Mother's *Agenda* (English version). This research has resulted in three indexes, and a compilation of the relevant passages. The compilation is now available in our Reading Room. The indexes can be provided on request, either as photocopies or in digital form.

Audio-Visual Department

In this section too, while there was a great increase in the recorded materials made available, consolidation took the form of cataloguing and classification of all the materials in an appropriate database.

A considerable work of editing was done to make a complete reading of *Savitri* recorded by Shradhdhavan available in the form of MP3 files on a set of 2 CDs. Moreover a database had to be set up for listing the 171 tracks for these recordings.

Another significant work was the preparation of edited recordings of the Mother's talks in French entitled "Notes on the Way" . In October 2005, a new series of recorded talks of the Mother, "**Notes on the Way**" was introduced. These are audio-recordings corresponding to the passages from the Mother's *Agenda* (the record of her yoga of the body from 1956 to 1973) which she selected for publication during her lifetime. These selections have been published as a volume of the Collected Works of the Mother. The selected passages were traced, wherever available, in the complete recordings of the Mother's *Agenda* and recorded separately. When they are played, the corresponding text is provided in bi-lingual form – French original and English translation. The preparation of these recordings and texts was a research project in itself, and is being continued to cover the whole series of published selections..

Classes and Courses

The course being led by Professor Kittu Reddy of the Ashram school, on Sri Aurobindo's book *The Ideal of Human Unity*, was

completed in February 2006. A new course, on *Foundations of Indian Culture*, with a new format, was introduced from March onwards.

From January to March 2006, Savitri Bhavan hosted two series of twelve-week courses being held in the context of the Auroville Winter Integral Studies Programme. The first was a twelve week course entitled “*Savitri : the Aswapati Yoga Cycle – the Vedic structure and the psychology of transformation*”, led by Rod Hemsell. The second focused on Vedic literature and then the Upanishads, and was led by Vladimir Iatsenko.

Guest and Student Groups

For several years now, Savitri Bhavan staff have been asked from time to time to give introductory talks to visiting groups, whether of guests or visiting students. During the year 2005-06 this was another area of our work that expanded considerably, and became a regular activity during the period of August-September 2005, and December 2005 to March 2006.

The organizers of the Auroville Guest Service made a 2-hour visit to Savitri Bhavan a regular feature of their fortnightly introduction tours. Our task was to give a brief and understandable introduction to the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, how this shapes the aims and ideals of Auroville and relates to the everyday life here, and to answer their questions.

Moreover Aurovilians responsible for receiving various types of student groups made a visit to Savitri Bhavan part of the orientation process for the students. The participants in these programmes ranged from Scandinavian high school students to post-graduates and faculty from specialist colleges in the USA. One Gujarati Aurovilian brought 20 young relatives to meet us, as part of an introductory tour he was giving them. Another group was of Swedish writers, touring India for cultural exchange and inspiration. In this way, over the course of this year, we met about 15 different groups, several of whom made a point of writing to us later to express their deep appreciation for the time they had spent with us.

“Meditations on Savitri” paintings

One of the treasures of Savitri Bhavan is the unique collection of oil paintings entrusted to us by Huta. From 1961 to 1966 she worked

under the guidance of the Mother to create a series of 472 paintings illustrating selected passages from the whole of *Savitri*. It is Huta's intention that the entire series of paintings should be on view to the public in sequence, according to the Mother's expressed wish.

Display

After the opening of the New Hall in November 2004, our architect undertook research on suitable display conditions for the paintings. It is important that these should give proper protection: from dust, insects and geckos, from possible human interference, from harmful light levels and fluctuations in temperature and humidity.

It was concluded that only protective cabinets would allow us to maintain and monitor the required conditions. On the basis of this research a prototype cabinet was designed and built in the autumn of 2005, using a grant provided for the purpose by the Foundation for World Education, U.S.A.

Films

Ever since these paintings came to Auroville in June 2001, Huta has been asking us to arrange for a new set of films to be made of the paintings, to replace an earlier series prepared in Germany. It became possible to take up this work in June 2005, with the help of Italian Luigi F, now known as 'Manohar', a newcomer to Auroville who had the necessary skills.

When Manohar saw the materials available for preparing the films – digital scans of slides of the paintings, and the soundtrack provided by Huta of the Mother's reading of the relevant passages from the poem – he strongly recommended that new digital photographs should be taken of the paintings, and that the films should be prepared from these.

Digital Photographs

Ever since the paintings came to Savitri Bhavan in June 2001 it had been wished to make a full digital photographic record of them all. Now with Manohar's help we found the right person to take up the work. This was another Italian newcomer to Auroville, Giorgio Molinari, a highly experienced professional photographer. Together Manohar and Giorgio set up a photographic studio in the room where the paintings were being stored, and the work was completed in June to July 2005. These photographs are now being used by Manohar for preparing the films as requested by Huta. The first three films, covering Cantos One,

Two and Three of Book One of the poem, were shown at Savitri Bhavan in August 2005, February 2006 and April 2006.

Prints

In addition, Giorgio's photographs allow the possibility of making archival quality prints from the photographs in the actual size of the paintings. These will be invaluable both as curatorial records, and for eventual display. A start was made on this work in October 2005, when Giorgio prepared 44 prints covering Cantos 6 – 15 of Book Two of Savitri. These were exhibited in the New Hall in December 2005 to January 2006

Conservation

While this photographic work was going on, it was noticed that some of the paintings had developed dark or rusty-looking spots on the surface. When these were shown to Huta in August 2005 she expressed her readiness to take up the task of cleaning and retouching the paintings before they were put on display.

At this point Manohar put us in touch with an expert conservator who was known to him through mutual friends. Dr. Laura Tacelli is the Senior Conservator of Paintings at the Regional Laboratory of Restoration of Liguria, located in Genoa, Italy. When she was approached to give advice about the cleaning of the paintings she responded very readily. First she asked us to send her a sample panel for analysis. Huta provided an early study of hers. Dr. Tacelli arranged for it to be examined by a conservation biologist, Dr. Roberta Gasperini of Verona, as well as cleaning and restoring it in her own laboratory.

Dr. Tacelli visited Auroville for three weeks at our invitation in April 2006. She brought with her the treated sample panel, Dr. Gasperini's report, and her own report. She met Huta and saw the *Savitri* paintings, and discussed with her the methods and materials to be used for cleaning and retouching. She also had discussions with Helmut, as the Savitri Bhavan architect, and Shraddhavan, who is the project coordinator and the curator of the collection.

At this point it proved very useful that the prototype display cabinet was already available, for Dr. Tacelli was able to see it and make some suggestions for modification.

During the course of Dr. Tacelli's visit she and Shraddhavan prepared a report and recommendations for the future conservation of the paintings. This report has been submitted to Huta, who has

accepted the recommendations fully. These will form the basis for our future care and display of the paintings.

Guest Speakers

From November 2005 to April 2006 we hosted eight guest lectures on *Savitri*. Two of these were in Tamil. Transcripts of three of these talks appear in this issue. Others will come in the next one.

Construction

The first module of the future Core Building is now complete, and will be inaugurated in August 2006. Meanwhile sanction has been received for a further grant, which will allow completion of the Core Building in the period 2006-08.



New building, June 21, 2006

Important new publications

ABOUT SAVITRI
with some paintings

Pondicherry, Havyavahana Trust

The Mother's comments on *Savitri*
with paintings by Huta

Now available :

Part Three (Book One, Canto 3) with 42 full-colour prints

Part Four (Book One, Canto 4) with 19 full-colour prints

These are the last two parts of the Mother's explanations of *Savitri*, given to Huta 1968 to 1971. The Mother's comments were recorded by Huta, then transcribed by her and shown to the Mother who corrected and approved the texts. The Mother also selected the accompanying paintings by Huta, which were inspired by her comments.

Part 3 - Rs. 300 Part 4 - Rs. 250

About Savitri Bhavan

We dream of an environment in Auroville

that will breathe the atmosphere of Savitri

that will welcome Savitri lovers from every corner
of the world

that will be an inspiring centre of Savitri studies

that will house all kinds of materials and activities
to enrich our understanding and enjoyment of
Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic

that will be the abode of Savitri, the Truth that
has come from the Sun

We welcome support from everyone who feels that
the vibration of Savitri will help to manifest a better
tomorrow.

HOW TO SUPPORT THE WORK OF SAVITRI BHAVAN

Savitri Bhavan is entirely dependent on donations and financial help from all well-wishers is most welcome. Please consider in what way you could help the Dream of Savitri Bhavan to become a reality.

How to send your help

If you live in India :

- Personal cheques or DDs may be made payable to “**S.A.I.I.E.R.**” and sent to Savitri Bhavan, Auroville 605 101, Tamil Nadu India
- Money orders may be made payable to “Savitri Bhavan” and sent to the same address.
- Renewal of 100% tax exemption under Sec.35(1)(iii) of the IT Act on donations to Savitri Bhavan is awaited.

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Savitri
is a Mantra
for the transformation
of the world

The Mother