

Article

Mirra Alfassa: Completing Sri Aurobindo's Vision

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Abstract: Mirra Alfassa's influence, power, and authority are essential to the integral yoga according to Aurobindo Ghose, yet most scholars have so far refused to examine their contours. Aurobindo saw her as the incarnation of the divine mother or *Mahāśakti* and said her spiritual growth "followed the same course" as his, which radically universalized Rāmākṛṣṇa's teaching of *vijñāna*, which he called "supermind" and she "the domain of love". Aurobindo left key parts of his supramental vision incomplete in his writings; however, Mirra claimed to complete it with new revelations that I call the "Descendant *Manonāśa* Period" of their practice. *Manonāśa* or "mental annihilation" is central to what scholars call "Yoga Advaita". Mirra's revelations include: 1. a posthuman vision of a sexless supramental humanity that is evolving now and in the future; 2. this evolution is coming with a cost: the mind and vital natures are being destroyed as we are going through an anatomical metamorphosis surpassing the one that yielded homo sapiens 300,000 years ago; 3. this shambolic process centrally involves what Mirra called "the psychic being" or evolving soul, somehow stimulating its materialization into what she called "the glorified body" in her early life in France. Though Aurobindo did not make a direct connection between the psychic being and what he called "the divine body", he thought from the beginning of their partnership in the 1920s that her body could endure supramentalization better than his, no matter how it unfolded.

Keywords: Mirra Alfassa; Aurobindo Ghose; integral yoga; supermind; psychic being; divine mother; androgyny; Yoga Advaita; *manonāśa*; *jīvanmukta*; the Cosmic Philosophy; Rāmākṛṣṇa; Śārāda Devī; *vijñāna*



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1. Confronting Bias

The authority, power, and influence of Mirra Alfassa (1878–1973) on the global integral yoga community are intimately tied to Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), as his are equally tied to her.¹ To their disciples who may have still doubted her status, the value of their partnership, or her role in their lives in the Sri Aurobindo Āśrama in the French colonial settlement of Pondicherry, India, in 1934 Aurobindo said the following:

Mother was doing Yoga before she knew or met Sri Aurobindo; but their lines of sadhana [spiritual practice] independently followed the same course. When they met, they helped each other in perfecting the sadhana. What is known as Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is the joint creation of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother; they are now completely identified—the sadhana in the Asram [sic] and all arrangement is done directly by the Mother, Sri Aurobindo supports her from behind. All who come here for practising Yoga have to surrender themselves to the Mother who helps them always and builds up their spiritual life (Aurobindo 2012, pp. 81–82).

Yet scholars who study this tradition ignore or diminish Mirra, focusing instead on Aurobindo's early adult life, especially his political work in the Indian Independence Movement in north India from about 1903 to 1910 and his transition to south India on a personal spiritual quest with a small cadre of mostly men from 1910 to 1926, the year his *āśrama* began with Mirra. Scholars also limit their focus to Aurobindo's *Arya* journal writings from 1914 to 1921, which express a unique Vedāntic approach that Mirra influenced early in the

project. There is less focus on Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*, which he created from 1916 to the last days of his life in 1950.

Mirra's presence in Aurobindo's life, which began about 1910 through correspondence, is a footnote if noted at all, and the rest of his life with her, especially from 1926 onwards, remains woefully unexamined. Eliza Kent writes,

Aurobindo recognized Mirra Alfassa as a co-creator of his system of thought and eventually came to see her as the avatar of the dynamic principle propelling the evolution of the cosmos. Yet one finds slim recognition of this in scholarship on Aurobindo of Integral Yoga. Indeed, outside of books written by her disciples, the Mother tends to play the role of controlling autocrat at worst and a "born organizer" at best. Because of this persistent bias, the Mother's role in shaping Integral Yoga has generally been under-recognized. As a result, though dozens of scholarly monographs have been written about Aurobindo and his thought, not one exists on the Mother (Kent 2013, p. 125).

This under-recognized role is also largely a bias of male scholars, represented so far by Indians, Europeans, and North Americans in equal measure. Alex Wolfers' article "The Making of an Avatar: Reading Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950)" contains the most extensive bibliography of commentary and scholarship on the integral yoga to 2017, which exposes this bias: a mere 2.5% of all current secondary literature comments on or critically evaluates the role and impact of Mirra on the integral yoga.² Even still, Wolfers acknowledges that "the transformation of Aurobindo from revolutionary to guru was a gradual process that cannot be separated from his relationship with Mirra Alfassa" (Wolfers 2017, p. 284). What about her own transformation to guru and *avatāra* in the eyes of many in the integral yoga community and an assessment of her contribution to the integral yoga? For Robert Minor, the "Mother added little to Aurobindo's thought, and she did not intend to do so" (Minor 1999, p. 42). This specious conclusion unconsciously guides scholarship today. It assumes *The Collected Works of the Mother* and *Mother's Agenda*, which total 31 volumes in the original French (30 in English translation), not to mention her creative output in music, the visual and performing arts, architecture, urban planning, and material culture are simply irrelevant. As this article will show, her voice deliberately adds much to Aurobindo's thought, including rendering it more intelligible in some ways and complicating it in others.

2. The Time Has Come to Include Mirra

When Mirra and Aurobindo first met in 1914 they recognized each other as spiritual consorts who were destined to unite their vocations into one work for the Earth's transformation. This was a celibate bond by all descriptions, yet at the time they were married to other people and working in other careers. Aurobindo tried to build the same kind of partnership with his young wife, Mrinalini Bose (1887–1918), which did not materialize. Mrinalini was a Bengali teenager from a traditional family who grew into a young woman in their marriage. This relationship lasted from 1901 to 1918 when she died of the flu during the Great Influenza Epidemic. Mirra's first marriage in Paris from 1897 to 1908 was to Henri Morisset (1870–1956), a successful painter of the Academic period in European art history. She met Aurobindo through her second husband, Paul Richard (1874–1967), who was a Christian pastor, lawyer, and then political activist, interested in occult powers. Their marriage lasted from 1911 to 1920, ending when Paul became intensely threatened by Aurobindo's puzzling relationship with his wife. Mirra had a son in the first marriage and renounced sex in the second because she became convinced that "the animal mode of reproduction was only a transitional one and that until new ways of creating life became biologically possible her own motherhood would have to remain spiritual" (Heehs 2008b, p. 254, and see The Mother 2004c, pp. 125–28). Aurobindo developed a view that "the sex force" needed to be sublimated in his yoga (Aurobindo 2014, pp. 485–548). It is not clear whether he was sexually active in his marriage, but he was childless and mainly lived apart from

Mrinalini because of his work for Indian independence and then his passion for spiritual transformation.

More than just bias, admittedly, Mirra has been sidelined because the now 38 volumes of *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* continue to challenge scholars. Arguably, it has been premature to add another figure to this critical work, a woman who was neither Hindu nor Indian, but of a complicated spiritual lineage and ethnicity, and a French citizen of yet another colonial power. I suggest that the scholarship on him has matured enough to warrant adding her. The most pertinent work for this article describes Aurobindo's indebtedness to Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836–1886) and Svāmī Vivekānanda (1863–1902). However, this scholarship ignores the limits of their influence which can be discerned more reliably with a consideration of Mirra's agency. Aurobindo and Mirra independently claimed to have achieved Rāmakṛṣṇa's highest spiritual aim yet together radically changed it, which frames this article's investigation.

This article seeks to stimulate a new avenue of scholarship on the integral yoga tradition by critically investigating Mirra's sources of power that engendered and facilitated her authority and leadership with Aurobindo that were both continuous and discontinuous with Hindu theologies and Indian religious traditions more broadly (not to mention the Abrahamic traditions in her European context). Mirra claimed that she independently acquired spiritual power via her relationship to the divine since childhood, and in 1928 Aurobindo publicly recognized it in *The Mother* (Aurobindo 2012) and *Savitri* (Aurobindo 1997b), his epic poem written over a thirty-four-year period. In *The Mother* he called Mirra the incarnation of the divine Mother or *Mahāśakti*, while his process writing *Savitri* mirrors the growth of their partnership, and according to Mirra, it expresses in its final form the essence of their combined mature revelation. As I will describe, Mirra's principle contribution to this mature revelation is *manonāśa*, or "mental annihilation", though she did not use the Sanskrit word. What scholars call "Yoga Advaita" values *manonāśa*, which is a spiritual methodology, a stadial process one endures, and/or the very goal of life. Rāmakṛṣṇa brought *manonāśa* into the modern period and Mirra universalized it. In what might be called Aurobindo's "Arya Period", he ignored its relevancy until 1949, beginning what I consider their "Descendant *Manonāśa* Period" of the integral yoga.

Throughout her life, Mirra used her influence, power, and authority to weaken broader mental structures of consciousness, including patriarchy and matriarchy, by experimenting with non-sectarian and epicene alternatives in the Sri Aurobindo Āśrama, the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE), and her civic experiment of Auroville. For example, she was asked whether one should teach girls differently than boys in physical education at SAICE owing to their menstrual cycles and she said no. Further, she said, "For God's sake can't you forget that you are a girl or a boy and try to become a human being?" (The Mother 2002, p. 290). She wanted not only to disrupt androcentrism and patriarchy, but to reorient humanity towards a future when "there are no longer any men or women, but living souls expressing their identical origin in sexless bodies" (The Mother 2002, p. 104). Mirra continued, "For one dreams of a world in which all these oppositions will at last disappear and where a being will be able to live and prosper who will be the harmonious synthesis of all that is best in the human race, uniting conception and execution, vision and creation in one single consciousness and action" (The Mother 2002, p. 105). She sought to fulfill Aurobindo's androgynous dream, one that was equally hers.³

3. Aurobindo's Experience of Supermind

The heart of their shared integral yoga is something Aurobindo called "supermind", his translation of *viññāna* found in some of the sacred texts of Vedānta (the *prasthānatrayī*) that Vedāntic schools (*saṃpradāyas*) interpret in many ways.⁴ Aurobindo discovered *viññāna* with the help of Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda. Heehs writes, "The books of Vivekānanda and his master Ramakrishna made a strong impression on him. He saw the latter as a modern representative of a tradition of spiritual experience going back to the Upanishads

and earlier” (Heehs 2008b, p. 84). Aurobindo also said they separately appeared to him after their deaths in inner spiritual visions from 1905 to 1912. Svāmī Medhānanda has done the most to explore this connection but this research fails to appreciate that these encounters revealed a new mission and a different teaching of *vijñāna* than the one found in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* (see Medhānanda 2015; Medhānanda 2018, pp. 119–24; Medhānanda 2020a; Medhānanda 2020b; Medhānanda 2021a; Medhānanda 2021b; Medhānanda 2021c; Medhānanda 2022). The theologies of *vijñāna* in *The Gospel/Divine Play* and Aurobindo’s *Arya Period* share the following: 1. *vijñāna* is “intimate knowledge” of Brahman allowing one to become *simultaneously* the transcendent *nirguṇa* Brahman (“without qualities”) and the immanent *saguṇa* Brahman (“with qualities”), 2. *saguṇa* Brahman is also known as the Universal Mother or *Mahāśakti* who in her *līlā* or sportive play has become all creation in every stage of its evolution from imperfection to perfection, and 3. Brahman is not only impersonal but personal, manifesting as *Puruṣottama*, the personal Brahman (see *Bhagavad Gītā* 10.15), while *vijñāna*, again, is the simultaneity of both.

For Rāmakṛṣṇa, such a concurrent realisation while remaining in a body is rare and remains rare. Aurobindo wanted to globalize *vijñāna*. He said, “Ramakrishna himself never thought of transformation or tried for it. ... There was no need in him for the transformation which we seek; for although he spoke of the divine man (Ishwarakoti) [also known as *vijñānī*] coming down the stairs as well as ascending, he had not the idea of a new consciousness and a new race and the divine manifestation in the earth-nature” (Aurobindo 2011, p. 163). This is a reference to Rāmakṛṣṇa’s comparison of *īśvarakoṭis* and *jīvakotiṣ* in the *Gospel*. *Jīvakotiṣ* are typical human beings who “by dint of sadhana” reach their spiritual goals by joining either the personal, immanent, *saguṇa* side of the fence of Brahman (the goal of orthodox practitioners of Abrahamic traditions and Gaudiya Vaishnavism, for example, generally valuing a unity-in-difference between the soul and the divine) or the impersonal, transcendent, *nirguṇa* side (the aim of Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta, for example, valuing a complete identification of the soul with the Oversoul). In either case, the *jīvakotiṣ* cannot simultaneously do both and cannot “come back to the plane of relative consciousness”; that is, cannot maintain consciousness of the body and remain in it after realisation of *nirguṇa* or *saguṇa* Brahman (Gupta 1992, p. 749). Rāmakṛṣṇa said, “The case is different with the *Ishvarakotis*. For them, it is like involution and evolution. Saying, ‘Not this, not this,’ they get to the roof top and find that the staircase is made of the same material—bricks, lime, and brick dust—as the roof itself. So, they walk up and down the staircase and sometimes rest on the roof” (Gupta 1992, p. 604). *Īśvarakoṭis/vijñānīs* enjoy a permanent simultaneity of both states of Brahman in a body, which Rāmakṛṣṇa claimed to have achieved through his devotion to Kālī, who led him through mastery of different religions in his context as the means to this integral realisation (Medhānanda 2018, pp. 85–116).

Although Aurobindo worked for Indian independence and was a prisoner accused of terrorism (1908–1909), he had a series of profound spiritual realisations of both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman and of *vijñāna*. Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda were part of the revelations of *vijñāna* showing him his vocation not just to achieve what Rāmakṛṣṇa did but to help materialize an entirely new species of *vijñānīs*, and that he would require a partner for this universal task. Aurobindo’s most important signal of this came on 24 November 1926, which was more of a promise than a realisation. It happened during a shared revelation in which he, Mirra, and 24 companions experienced an unusual divine force in the form of a huge wave of white light bringing a kind of uncomfortable pressure above their heads for an extended time (Heehs 2008b, pp. 344–55). It led to months of extraordinary experiences including an unbidden development of *siddhis* or powers that both gurus eventually felt had to be quarantined and ultimately rejected since the mental strain created psychological imbalance in many. Aurobindo also felt the tendency of *siddhis* to amplify the mind’s egotism opposed the manifestation of the supermind. The date of 24 November is now celebrated as the founding of their *āśrama* called “The Siddhi Day”. It is also seen as the manifestation of an intermediate consciousness that Aurobindo later called the “Overmind”.

After this revelation, Aurobindo and Mirra's roles began anew by dividing the simultaneity of *vijñāna*, and as we will see, it was apportioned according to the suitability of their bodies to manifest it. Having achieved a certain intimacy with the supermind, Aurobindo's scope of work was in seclusion to "bring it down" from the pole of *nirguṇa* Brahman for the *āśrama*. He thought this physical isolation would be temporary, but he died before the supermind manifested universally. Likewise, having encountered supermind herself (as I will examine below), Mirra's scope was with *saguṇa* Brahman, to integrate whatever Aurobindo brought down into the world, awakening inchoate supermind within matter, *Mahāśakti*'s body. Pragmatically, this meant guiding the disciplined yet flexible pattern of shared living and "integral" practice that synthesized Indian traditions through his writings and Western esoteric ones through hers. Significantly, she attempted *both* scopes of work with either pole of Brahman after he died (see [The Mother 1978a](#), 10 October 1958 for her description of this complex work).

4. Mirra's Experience of Supermind

From an early age, Mirra knew her mission was to transform the path of God-realisation from a prescriptive pattern of social renunciation to adaptable ones lived in ordinary walks of life. Because she was born to an atheist family in Paris fully engaged in a refined life of culture and learning in the La Belle Époque, she was somewhat free to make bold and varied experiments from an early age; however, because she was born to an atheist family in Paris during the La Belle Époque, she did not have a language to explain her experiments to herself and others. She constructed her own grammar as she went along while her parents, for example, were concerned this strange child would rather meditate than go to the circus ([The Mother 2003b](#), p. 197). Mirra later admitted, however, that she was born knowing her vocation in broad outline using personal terms given to her that were identical to Aurobindo's teaching, as they later discovered. As an 11 to 13-year-old girl, Mirra said, "a series of psychic and spiritual experiences ... revealed to me not only the existence of God but man's possibility of uniting with Him, of realising Him integrally in consciousness and action, of manifesting Him upon Earth in a life divine. This, along with a practical discipline for its fulfillment, was given to me during my body's sleep by several teachers, some of whom I met afterwards on the physical plane" ([The Mother 2004b](#), p. 39). She later identified one of those teachers as *Kṛṣṇa*, her new word for the personal and immanent divine. At the time she was reading the *Bhagavad Gītā* in a poor French translation and Vivekānanda's *Rajayoga*. She recognized this *Kṛṣṇa* figure as Aurobindo when she first saw him in 1914. When she returned to him in 1920 after WWI, she learned Aurobindo's language to consolidate and refine her understanding. It would be a mistake, however, to think semantic influence went in only one direction.

From about 1904 to 1908 Mirra and her first husband Henri participated in a small Western esoteric community called "La Mouvement Cosmique", introduced by her brother Matteo, who was a member. She met her second husband Paul in this group as well. Its syncretic teachings called "La Philosophie Cosmique" gave her language for her experience. It claimed to restore a "primordial lost tradition" that prophesied a new human species and new creation because of a new descent of divine force. Its emphasis on awakening powerful psychic abilities as an expression of this new species also affirmed her occult gifts that she knew since childhood such as clairvoyance, influencing events from a distance, out-of-body travel, and psychological and physical healing, to name a few. An unusual elder couple, Alma Théon (née Mary Chrystine Woodroffe Ware, 1839–1908) from Berkshire, England, and Max Théon (né Eliezer Mordechai Bimstein, 1850–1927) from Warsaw, Poland founded the Cosmic Movement ([Heehs 1979, 2011, 2020](#); [Huss 2015, 2016, 2018, 2020](#)). We might say that they played a similar role for Mirra as Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda played for Aurobindo. Mirra met Alma and Max in Paris but mainly spent time with them in Tlemcen, Algeria where they later settled. Alma possessed many of the same occult powers as Mirra (Max to a lesser degree) while the Théons thought of themselves as spiritual consorts called *dualités*. They published many works from 1901–1908, including the periodicals *La Revue*

Cosmique and *La Tradition Cosmique*. Mirra translated many issues from English to French and contributed articles of her own.

What is most important about this phase with the Théons is that Mirra claimed to discover *vijñāna* or supermind. She called it “the world of Truth”, “domain of love”, or simply *frontière*, the “border” between form and formlessness or noise and silence where one experiences “perfect unity, identity – with no longer any forms corresponding to those of the lower worlds. It was a Light! An almost immaculate white light, yet with something of a golden-rose [*rose-doré*] in it (words are crude). This Light and this Experience were truly wonderful, inexpressible in words” ([The Mother 1978b](#), 7 November 1961). The Théons and Mirra described 12 planes of consciousness that one ascends including the golden-rose “domain of love” and then the “formless” “white light” plane of God-realisation where the soul joins the divine in a formless and silent unity. Mirra said that Madam Théon was able to travel up and down this duodecuple staircase, such as Rāmakṛṣṇa’s *īśvarakoṭi/vijñānī*, and Mirra learned to do the same “with great dexterity” ([The Mother 1978b](#), 7 November 1961). On either pole of the staircase, Mirra said she discovered something new. At the upper golden-rose extremity she said,

I found myself in the presence of the “principle”, a principle of the human form. It didn’t resemble man as we are used to seeing him, but it was an upright form, standing just on the border [*frontière*] between the world of forms and the Formless, like a kind of standard. At that time nobody had ever spoken to me about it and Madame Théon had never seen it – no one had ever seen or said anything. But I felt I was on the verge of discovering a secret. Afterwards, when I met Sri Aurobindo and talked to him about it, he told me, “It is surely the prototype of the supramental form”. I saw it several times again, later on, and this proved to be true ([The Mother 1978b](#), 7 November 1961).

Mirra claimed she also discovered the same figure in the lowest extreme of consciousness. She said,

when I was working with Théon at Tlemcen (the second time I was there [in 1907]), I descended into the total, unindividualized – that is, general – Inconscient And there I suddenly found myself in front of something like a vault or a grotto (of course, it was only something ‘like’ that), and when it opened, I saw a Being of iridescent light reclining with his head on his hand, fast asleep. All the light around him was iridescent. When I told Théon what I was seeing, he said it was “the immanent God in the depths of the Inconscient”, who through his radiations was slowly waking the Inconscient to Consciousness. But then a rather remarkable phenomenon occurred: when I looked at him, he woke up and opened his eyes, expressing the beginning of conscious, wakeful action ([The Mother 1978b](#), 7 November 1961).

Mirra found something the Théons and even Rāmakṛṣṇa and Aurobindo did not: on either limit of creation where *vijñāna* exists in full realisation above and potential realisation below, there is the blueprint (really a “golden-roseprint”) for a divine human form, an archetypal *vijñānī* that is awake above and asleep below. Yet, the one underneath was rousing, signaling for her the preparedness of a *vijñānī* species to manifest in the evolution of the human species.

5. Manifesting Supermind Together

According to Heehs, the Cosmic Philosophy’s concepts of *dualité d’être, l’être psychique, le corps glorieux*, and *les hostiles*, or “the duality of being”, “the psychic being”, “the glorified body” and “the hostiles” are especially important concepts that Mirra allied with Aurobindo’s interpretation of Rāmakṛṣṇa’s *Vijñāna* Vedānta ([Heehs 2011, 2020](#)). As will become clear, the joint labor that Mirra and Aurobindo aspired to do was to manifest the soul as a body, or in her language, to manifest the nondual nature of the psychic being as the glorified body through the creative process of negotiating hostile forces in creation. I

will briefly describe the psychic being below, which is their concept for the evolving soul. We do not have space to explore their notion of the hostiles, but they are part of Mirra's and the Théons' response to the problem of evil. They are instrumental cosmic forces of disequilibrium that may occasion evil, but their larger purpose is to stimulate and fuel all progress in the evolution of consciousness in the psychic being. The Théons defined the *dualité d'être* as "the fusion of two beings who are in mutual affinity", a symbol they sought to embody as a couple to achieve their spiritual goal of "restoring" "the glorified body" and the cosmos (Godwin et al. 1995, p. 214). They linked this body to the ideal androgynous body of Adam in Genesis 1:26–27 and Lurianic Kabbalistic mythology, as well as to the "new creation" prophesied in the New Testament (2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1, but also Isaiah 65:17, 66:22).⁵ The Théons encouraged Mirra to find a *dualité d'être* for herself. She chose Paul Richard against their wishes, though one imagines Aurobindo would have thrilled them.

Mirra was convinced Aurobindo was the supramental *avatāra* or descent of the personal divine into human form, and in 1928 he published in *The Mother* that Mirra was the incarnation of the *Mahāśakti* and her four powers of *Maheśvarī*, *Mahākālī*, *Mahālakṣmī*, and *Mahāsarasvatī*, or "wisdom, strength, harmony, and perfection". One can find these names interpreted differently in the *Devī Māhātmya* (5th/6th century CE) and its commentary, so the influence seems to be superficial, though more research is needed (See Coburn 1991, pp. 136–37). For Aurobindo, *Mahāśakti*'s quaternity enacts his supramental vision to unite spirit and matter, stimulating a new consciousness throughout the universe. This requires more research as well, but in his Bengali context, he may have been inspired to partner with Mirra because of the relationship between Rāmakṛṣṇa and his wife Śārāda Devī (1853–1920). Rāmakṛṣṇa considered Śārāda to be the incarnation of the divine *Śakti* as well, and many devotees describe her as the perfect flowering of Rāmakṛṣṇa's teaching of *Vijñāna* Vedānta to whom devotion can be directed. This affected her self-understanding as well (Sen 2022).

Aurobindo saw Mirra as not only his *Śakti* but also his sole spiritual successor, which in some ways Śārāda shared with Vivekānanda in their lineage. Most importantly, Aurobindo saw Mirra as the object of his spiritual vision through whom he would transform the human race. Śārāda broke out of conventional social and religious boundaries to welcome and influence peoples of all castes and religions, but, like her husband, was not interested in a universal transformation of matter. Mirra troubled the same social and religious boundaries as Śārāda but also worked on the cellular boundaries of the body. This meant becoming the "principle of the human form" that she saw in her early visions, initiating what Aurobindo later called "The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth", the title of his last set of prose writings in 1949–50 that included speculations about "The Divine Body" and "The Perfection of the Body" (Aurobindo 1998, pp. 517–92). Mirra was his ultimate poetic composition, we might say, the prototype of their posthuman vision of life that makes the supermind possible for all. In this pioneering posthuman role, Mirra thought of herself as "an apprentice", just "learning the trade" (The Mother 1978a, 10 May 1958). This was especially true after 29 February 1956. That evening as she was meditating with children of the Āśrama school, she later said she had a powerful vision of breaking down the golden door in that *frontière* that divides "the world of forms and the Formless" with a golden hammer, her golden body as large as the universe (The Mother 1978a, 29 February 1956; The Mother 2004d, p. 94). As a result, she claimed supramental force began to permanently rain down on the Earth initiating the supramental age. Every leap year the global integral yoga community celebrates this event as "The Golden Day", which fulfills the promise of "The Siddhi Day".

As early as 1927, Aurobindo predicted something enigmatic about their shared work. He told Mirra, "We can't both remain upon earth, one must go". Then she said to him, "I am ready, I'll go". He replied, "No, you can't go, your body is better than mine, you can undergo the transformation better than I can do" (The Mother 1981b, 26 July 1969). Much more could be explored about this statement, such as why would the death of one of them be required for the transformation they sought. It seems a performance of the

Mahābhārata legend that inspired his poem *Savitri*, which tells the tale of Prince Satyavān's death and the ability of his wife, Sāvitṛī, to rescue him from it—a suttee U-turn. The point I want to highlight here, beyond the fact that Aurobindo seems to have planned for his leave-taking before the universal supramental manifestation, is that he felt Mirra's body was more capable of channeling it, embodying its *om* point.

Her work after he died is consequential, not an aberration, no matter how it may have altered his earlier speculations—which it did. Aurobindo was notably open to being surprised by how the supermind might manifest, so he did not want the details of his *Arya* Period works such as *The Life Divine* or *The Synthesis of Yoga* set into stone. Just as he criticized the Rāmākṣṇa Mission and Śārāda Devī for keeping “too much to the forms of” Rāmākṣṇa and Vivekānanda, not keeping “themselves open [as he thought he had] for new outpourings of their spirit,—the error of all ‘Churches’ and organised religious bodies”, so too he warned against doing the same with his own (Aurobindo 2006, p. 179. See also Heehs 2000, 2008a). According to *Mother's Agenda*, Mirra remained open to Aurobindo's spirit in profound ways, especially after 1956, by “undergoing the transformation” as he hoped, what she called awakening “the consciousness in the cells”. For her, this personal work was intimately tied to the evolution of the cosmos mediated by her practical administration of the ever-changing communal life of the Āśrama and its over 80 departments, the school for children from kindergarten to college, and at 90 years old, the creation of a small global township designed for 50,000 citizens.

Looking back at her life in 1971, Mirra wrote about this wide-ranging work and its purpose to conquer the forces of death and division, saying the “task of completing Sri Aurobindo's vision has been given to the Mother. The creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken. By the very nature of things, it is an ideal because the state of nature that makes it necessary must be *surpassed*. We aspire for the time when Sri Aurobindo will no longer have to die” (The Mother 1981d, 1971, emphasis added). Aurobindo's and Mirra's lives might be read not only as performing Aurobindo's *Savitri*, but also the *Devī Māhātmya* (both, if not permanently fixing roles). This is the story of how the *Devas*, too weak to accomplish the task individually, solicited the *Mahādevī* to embody their combined power to conquer the hostile forces (*asuras*) that threatened the cosmic *dharma*. In the original tales, Sāvitṛī and the *Mahādevī* helped not only the *Devas* but earthly kings regain lost kingdoms to preserve the *dharmic* status quo, making sure that (altering Robert Browning's line), “the Gods are in their heavens and all's right with the patriarchal world”. In Aurobindo's evolutionary version of *Savitri* and his four-fold vision of the *Mahāśakti* that he claimed Mirra embodied, such a caste-based world and its mortal nature has outlived its usefulness and must be surpassed not restored. Indeed, this world has become an *asuric* manifestation. His *Mahāśakti* encourages downward mobility, so all castes become androgynous *śūdras* of an utterly new creation where golden heaven and red Earth are no longer two but one. How did Mirra claim to accomplish this *rose-doré*?

6. Universal Mental Transformation or Annihilation?

I suggest Mirra's primary revelation and principle contribution to the integral yoga has to do with her experience of “surpassing” the mind, as “supermind” implies (see Beldio 2018a, 2018b for my initial research on this topic). For her, this meant a permanent “mental silencing”, which began when she first met Aurobindo in March 1914. She claimed her mind stilled in his presence and “never started up again. Silence settled. In addition, the consciousness was established above the head” and in the heart centre (The Mother 1978a, 6 June 1958). This seems to mirror Aurobindo's experience in January 1908 when he began a yogic practice with a Vaiṣṇava guru to control his mind for his political work but inconveniently lost consciousness of the world. He said, “my mind became full of an eternal silence” that never left, which he awkwardly tried to balance with his political work (Aurobindo 2011, p. 247). He also called this *nirvāṇa*, a realisation of *nirguṇa* or “the silent Brahman” (see *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.72, 5.24–26, 6.15 for this use of *nirvāṇa*).

Mirra speculated about a potential *universal* mental silencing a few years later. Before Mirra left Japan for Pondicherry in 1920 she wrote an essay that included theories about the mind's destiny for humanity. At this time, she thought intuition would replace it as an intermediate faculty of the "superman", itself an intermediate species.⁶ She wrote that the intuition, "which is exceptional, almost abnormal now, will certainly be quite common and natural for the new race, the man of tomorrow. However, the constant exercise of it will probably be detrimental to the reasoning faculties. As man possesses no more the extreme physical ability of the monkey, so also will the superman lose the extreme mental ability of man, this ability to deceive himself and others" (*The Mother* 2004a, pp. 163–64). This text notes the potential of the mind to be purified of its deceptive nature; however, this is a redaction. The original ends, "perhaps all of the power of reasoning; and, even, the organ itself may become useless [*inutiles*], disappear [*disparaître*] little by little as the monkey's tail, which was of no use for man, disappeared from his physical body" (*The Mother* 2004a, p. 164). Meeting Aurobindo in 1914 seems to have convinced Mirra the mind was not needed for the future evolution of humanity, yet in coming back in 1920 she changed her view for the next 29 years, altering her remarks for the āśramites.

When she arrived in 1920, Aurobindo was convinced that the mind could be transformed and so he was trying to change with supramental force the deceptive nature of the entire mental sheath (*manaḥkośa*) that enfolds humanity, but without success. She remembered, "'It's strange,' he said to me, 'it's an endless work! Nothing seems to get done'" (*The Mother* 1978b, 7 November 1961). Mirra told him that she noticed this same revolt in her spiritual work with the Théons and suggested that they leave it be and go below to what Aurobindo called the vital, physical, subconscious, and finally the inconscient levels to stimulate a transformation from there. With the supramentalization of these lower sheaths, an opening might be made with the mind afterwards. However, they did not return to the mental work. As I will show below, in the late 1940s they began to teach as Mirra had done before she arrived in 1920 that the *manaḥkośa* and *prāṇakośa* would "disappear" while the supramental sheath (*vijñānakośa*) "replaced" them, integrating with the material sheath (*annakośa*).

Much later in 1968, Mirra used the same words as her earlier essay, which was no longer a speculation but based on personal experience that both her mind and vital sheaths "took a hike" (*envoyés en promenade*) after a certain period of intense supramental "penetration" and her body was "truly left to its own devices" (*vraiment laissé à ses propres moyens*) to become something new (*The Mother* 1981a, August 28, 1968, my translation). This experience seems to have been more than permanently silencing her individual mind as she experienced in 1914, and, further, it surprisingly affected a transformative process in the body, not transcending it. She was led to say that both the mind and vital sheaths "strike me as transitory instruments [*d'instruments passagers*] which will be replaced [*remplacés*] by other states of consciousness. You understand, they are a phase in the universal development, and they will be... they will fall off [*ils tomberont*] as instruments that have outlived their usefulness [*ne sont plus utiles*]" (*The Mother* 1981a, 28 August 1968).

Aurobindo evolved in his view of the mind. Early on, in his *Arya* Period, he consistently described the potential of the mind to go forward into the new creation, maturing as though on a Jacob's ladder to supermind and beyond to *saccidānanda*. As early as 1910 he said that though the mass of humanity had yet to master the rational mind or *buddhi*, largely still struggling to master the "sense mind" or *manas*, he thought (like Mirra) the next rung after *buddhi* is what he called the "intuitive mind" or *vijñānabuddhi*, a reliable means to his goal (*Aurobindo* 2003, pp. 383–88 and 433–37).⁷ The intuition, in this etymology, is the *buddhi* infused with *vijñāna*, not a dissolution of the *buddhi*. In *The Mother* he captures this confidence in mental and vital transformation through *Mahāśakti*'s personality and power of "wisdom:" "Imperial MAHESHWARI is seated in the wideness above the thinking mind and will and *sublimates and greatens them* into wisdom and largeness or *floods with a splendour beyond them*" (*Aurobindo* 2012, p. 18, emphasis added. Capital letters in original). In *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Human Cycle*, and *The Ideal of Human*

Unity, works he conceived in the *Arya* Period, one sees him working out how this mental progress for the future species might unfold in sundry ways in his metaphysics, yogic theory, and socio-political theory (Aurobindo 2005, pp. 120–84; Aurobindo 1999, pp. 391–425, 465–510, 783–910; Aurobindo 1997a).

However, the editors of *The Synthesis of Yoga*—the text that directly addresses mental discipline and growth of consciousness beyond the mind, note that it “was left incomplete when the *Arya* ceased publication in January 1921. Before abandoning the work, Sri Aurobindo wrote part of a chapter entitled ‘The Supramental Time Consciousness,’ which was meant to follow the last published chapter of ‘The Yoga of Self-Perfection’. He never completed this chapter and never published the portion that he had written” (Aurobindo 1999, p. 913). “The Yoga of Self-Perfection” is the last part of the book specifically about the integral yoga’s “supramental change”, the third stage of his yoga’s “triple transformation”, so if there was any place where he might have approached a new description of “surpassing” the mental and vital sheaths through a destruction of the *mānasa buddhi* in this last phase of his life, it would have been there.⁸ At Mirra’s request, he attempted something akin in his last essays, “The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth”; however, they are incomplete as well. It would seem that his own experience of mental dissolution prevented his writing about it. Mirra confirmed this saying, “What struck me is that he never wanted to write anything else [other than *Savitri*]. To write those articles for the *Bulletin* [‘The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth’] was really a heavy sacrifice for him. He had said he would complete certain parts of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, but when he was asked to do so, he replied, ‘No, I don’t want to go down to that mental level!’ *Savitri* comes from somewhere else altogether. And I think that *Savitri* is the most important thing to speak about” (The Mother 1978b, 23 September 1961). It is in this last set of essays from 1949–50 that he seems to join Mirra’s original speculations regarding the mind’s disappearance as the key to a new human species and body. About the new “divine body” he wrote, “For it may well be that the evolutionary urge would proceed to a change of the organs themselves in their material working and use and diminish greatly the need of their instrumentation and even of their existence” (Aurobindo 1998, p. 555, emphasis added). This is a speculation about the dissolution of the physical brain (indeed, all internal organs), not the mental and vital sheaths, but such an idea of vestigiality and even disappearance of the internal organs seems a logical (though very curious!) outcome of this fundamental transformation of consciousness occasioned by the annihilation of the *manahkośa* and *prāṇakośa*. In her 1953 commentary, Mirra related this idea to Tantric anthropology: “For the organs are only the material symbols of centres [*cakras*] of energy; they are not the essential reality; they simply give it a form or a support in certain given circumstances” (The Mother 2003b, p. 59). An āśramite commented in 1962, “Sri Aurobindo spoke of replacing the organs by the functioning of the *chakras*”. Mirra responded, “Yes, yes. He said [it would be accomplished in] three hundred years!” (The Mother 2001, p. 144).

I suggest this development in Aurobindo’s last essays beginning in 1949 is the end of the *Arya* Period and the beginning of their mature teaching, what I call their “Descendant *Manonāśa* Period”, ending with Mirra’s passing in 1973. She never used *manonāśa* or “mental annihilation”, but her descriptions compare to others who did, both in previous periods of Hindu theology and praxis and in her own context.

7. Medieval Hindu Lineages of *Manonāśa*

In Sanskrit texts, *manonāśa* or annihilation (*nāśa*) of the mind (*manas*) in spiritual practice is not mental illness, even if they are notoriously difficult to distinguish, especially if *manonāśa* manifests in ways that seem insane or induced by psychoactive drugs. In Āyurvedic texts June McDaniel notes three etiologies for both “mad and ecstatic behavior” and their cures:

Endogenous (*nija*) diseases are biological imbalances, which are cured by herbs and drugs. Mental (*mānasika*) diseases result from negative emotion, mental strain, and an imbalance of *guṇas* or qualities and are cured by yoga and moral

action. Exogenous disease (*āgantū*) is a result of outside invasion and includes God and ghost possession, which is cured by sacrifice or exorcism. Thus, there are three major understandings of mad and ecstatic behavior possible: the biological, the psychological, and the spiritual (McDaniel 1989, p. 11).

Dominik Wujastyk comments on this typology noting that Sanskrit sacred texts use the concepts of *unmāda* (“insanity”) and an *unmattaka/ā* (a “mad person”) to describe spiritual heroes. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, Rāma is described as an *unmattaka*, who “sighs, faints, and cries aloud” in search of his beloved Sītā, which are symptoms of the “insanity caused by loss” (a *mānasika* disease) that Vāgbhāṭa listed in his seventh-century Āyurvedic text, *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* (“The Heart of Medicine”) (Wujastyk 2003, p. 203).⁹ Vāgbhāṭa wrote that insanity caused by loss is one of six kinds that arise “when the pathways in the heart along which mind flows are destroyed” (Wujastyk 2003, p. 244).¹⁰ Wujastyk notes that in “classical Āyurveda, consciousness (*citta*, *cetanā*) is located in the heart” (Wujastyk 2003, p. 202).¹¹ This location is consequential for Mirra and Aurobindo, as we will see; however, no matter the etiology and location, insanity causes the body to lose “any sense of joy or sorrow, and [to wander] about purposelessly, like a chariot which has lost its driver” (Wujastyk 2003, p. 245). This is a reference to the chariot image in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.3–1.3.4: “Know the body [*śarīra*] for a chariot and the soul [*ātman*] for the master of the chariot: know Reason [*buddhi*] for the charioteer, and the mind [*manas*] for the reins only. The senses [*indriya*], they speak of as the steeds and objects of sense [*viśaya*] as the paths in which they move; and One yoked [*yukta*] with Self [*ātman*] and the mind and the senses is the enjoyer [*bhoktr*], say the thinkers” (Aurobindo 2001, p. 114). *Unmāda* or insanity in this system is a state in which both the *buddhi* or “rational mind” and the *manas* or “sense mind” are unable to function healthily. With both the driver and the reins lost, the chariot and horses “wander about purposelessly”, wildly taking the precious cargo of the soul into ruin with the body. In this context, *unmāda* is an unintended infirmity that requires careful and caring therapy to reunite (*yuj*) and balance the system of chariot, charioteer, reins, and horses so that one may again become “the enjoyer”.

Conversely, *manonāśa* is the very means to permanent enjoyment and is even identified with this telos. According to Mirra’s contemporary, Meher Baba (1894–1969), *manonāśa* is a process that spontaneously begins after a very long period of organic evolution and human rebirth that first develops the mind (see Meher Baba 1997). Once these phases are finished, *manonāśa* happens over many more lives that may manifest as: 1. a *sālik* or “sober” state in which one is conscious of the gross plane yet may be unaware of the spiritual plane one happens to be on, 2. a *mast* or “God-intoxicated” state in which one is completely enchanted by the spiritual plane one is on yet unconscious of the gross plane, or 3. a state that alternates between them (Meher Baba 1997, p. 136; Donkin 1988). Rāmākṛṣṇa’s Tantric guru, Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī called the ultimate *mast* state *mahābhāva* or “divine madness” (McDaniel 1989, pp. 92–103). Rāmākṛṣṇa seems to be pivotal in bringing a teaching of *manonāśa* into the modern period, exemplifying Meher Baba’s third state of one who oscillates between God-intoxication and sobriety, while Mirra and Aurobindo exemplify *sāliks*. Rāmākṛṣṇa said, “When the mind is annihilated [*moner naś*], when it stops deliberating pro and con, then one goes into samadhi, one attains the Knowledge [*jñāna*] of Brahman” (Gupta 1992, p. 802). Unlike clinical insanity or states caused by psychoactive drugs, the resulting God-intoxication (or God-sobriety) in *manonāśa* is not a disease in search of healing but is the ultimate cure of embodied life. Staying with the Kaṭha Upaniṣad’s chariot image, in this spiritual context, dissolution of the *buddhi* and *manas* is a welcomed outcome ensuring the soul takes the role of both the charioteer and the reins. From the outside, this might look insane if one is a *mast*, unconscious of the gross plane and conscious only of the subtle planes, causal planes, or *nirguṇa* Brahman, depending on one’s spiritual advancement.¹²

Classical Sanskrit literature that values *manonāśa* associates it with *jīvanmukti* or “liberation while living”, with Advaita Vedānta a notable proponent.¹³ This is a specific case of *mukti* that is believed to be achieved while one remains in a gross body versus accounts of liberation after death or “bodiless liberation”, alternatively called *videhamukti* or *adehamukti*.

As such, *jīvanmukti* was originally pursued (it is thought) more by the householder (*gṛhastha*) than the wandering renunciate (*pravrajita* or *saṃnyāsa*) (Slaje 2000, p. 177).¹⁴ Somewhat controversially, Andrew Fort groups practices of *manonāśa* and *jīvanmukti* under the title “Yogic Advaita”, which “holds to Śaṅkara’s view that knowledge of the nondual self brings liberation ... , yet adds emphasis to Sāṃkhya concepts and Yoga practices, particularly exerting control of mental states and modifications (and even urging ‘destroying the mind’)” or *manonāśa*, which is “a mental therapy which assists and safeguards liberation” while remaining in a body (Fort 2015, pp. 249, 261). For the sake of convenience, I will use “Yoga Advaita” though the texts and the figures that I group under its heading did not use it.¹⁵

The anonymous Sanskrit text from Kashmir called the *Mokṣopāya*, “The Means to Release”, belongs to the earliest part of this tradition. Some scholars date it to the tenth century while Christopher Chapple suggests the sixth century CE (Chapple 1984, pp. ix–xv). From the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, the *Mokṣopāya* was eventually modified into the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* or “Vāsiṣṭha’s Treatise on Yoga”, a pan-Indian text that popularized the notion of *jīvanmukti* through the story of Rāma.¹⁶ Though Slaje has critically explored the differences, he wrote, “basically, the *Mokṣopāya* [Śāstra] (MŚ) and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (YV) are identical” (Slaje 2000, p. 171).

The MŚ describes a tri-partite method to become a *jīvanmukta*: 1. *vicāra* (reflection), 2. *jñāna* (valid knowledge), and 3. *vairāgya* (complete detachment). The practice involves using the mind to undo the mind’s existence to unveil the *ātman*. In *vicāra*, one reflects upon the unreality of the world. Once achieved, this is followed by a reflection on the nature of the reflector, on one’s subjecthood as also being just as false and unreal as the world. When this is sincerely achieved, true and valid knowledge of the self (*ātma-jñāna*) dawns that allows one to experience complete detachment (*vairāgya*) from the world even while one lives in it. This effort also involves the destruction of “impressions” or *vāsanās*. As Slaje writes, the MŚ

quite often states that psychic impressions establishing intentional references to one’s self are to be eliminated by knowledge. Only by knowing, does the mind (*citta*, *manas*) cease to function in the way of projecting a ‘real world’ outside. It destroys the responsible *vāsanā* and—consequently—also itself, for the mind is equated with *vāsanās*. Thereupon the mind is considered as having vanished (*mṛta*) as a *citta* [or instrument of consciousness] (Slaje 2000, p. 178).

A *jīvanmukta* is by this understanding one who has successfully used the pursuit of true knowledge to achieve *manonāśa*, which destroys not only the mind but its *vāsanās*.

Further development of Yogic Advaita is found in the work of Vidyāranya (1296–1386), a monastery head (*śaṅkarācārya*) of Sringeri Math in Karnataka State. He wrote a text entitled *Jīvanmuktiviveka* or “Discerning Liberation while Living” (JMV) written for male renunciates that also teaches *jñāna* (knowledge of the divine self) cannot be achieved without *manonāśa* and *vāsanā kṣaya* or dissolution of impressions.

8. Contemporary Yoga Advaitins

Besides Rāmakṛṣṇa’s teaching of *manonāśa* (though he used the Bangla word *moner nāś*)¹⁷, three other lineages of Yoga Advaita followed. The second is with Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) and his inheritors Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) and Papaji (1910–1987). Ramana discussed many techniques for achieving the state of *jīvanmukti* or “Self-realisation”. This goal for him included destroying the mind through the annihilation of impressions (*vāsanā kṣāya*). He wrote, “one should not identify oneself with appearances; one should never relinquish one’s Self. This is the proper means for the destruction of the mind (*manonāśa*) which is of the nature of seeing the body as Self, and which is the cause of all the aforesaid obstacles” (Maharshi 1997, p. 7).

The third lineage is with Svāmī Śivānanda (1887–1963) who was a Tamil initiated by an Advaita Vedāntin guru in Rishikesh, Viśvānanda Sarasvatī, and began there the well-known international outreach called the Divine Life Society. He directed his students to

study the Vedas and other important texts, including the YV. In a Vedic vein of theft imagery, he called the *manas* “the stealer of Atman” so it must be “slayed” by “Vichara [deliberation], Manana [thoughtful reflection on the *śruti*], and Nididhyasana (constant and profound meditation) on Brahman”. Like the JMV, Śivānanda said that the “extinction of Vasanas (Vasana-Kshaya), Manonāśa (annihilation of the mind) and Tattva-Jnana (understanding of the Reality), when practised together for a long time are regarded as fruitful” (Śivānanda n.p.).

The fourth lineage includes Meher Baba. He was born an Irani Zoroastrian but received the bulk of his teaching from a Hindu, Upasni Maharaj (1870–1941). Upasni spoke of mental annihilation in terms of destroying the *indriyas* or “sense organs”, the mind (*manas*) being the most important.¹⁸ Dramatic accounts of Upasni’s own experiences of mental annihilation can be found throughout *Upasni Maharaj: A Perfect Master of India*, including the chapters “The Severing of Maharaja’s Head” and “Maharaj’s Experiment to Destroy His Lower Mind” (Irani and Desai 2020, pp. 142ff and 163ff).

Echoing Mirra’s description of the supermind as the “domain of love”, in 1953 Meher Baba gave an address to Śivānanda’s *āśrama* about *manonāśa* saying, “Only when we transcend intellect and enter the domain of love can we aspire for liberation” (Kalchuri 2023, p. 3276). To achieve this, he later clarified to a French professor “There is only one true yoga and that is ‘you go.’ The meaning of yoga is as simple as that. I know of no other yoga than ‘you ... go.’ You are your own curtain, and only when you go, can You come. The problem is how will you go? The only solution is love. When you ‘go’ ... through love for God the Beloved, you ‘come’ ... as you really are” (Kalchuri 2023, p. 4537). Echoing Rāmākṛṣṇa, Meher Baba clarified in another context that it is the *mind* that “goes”, not the ego (See Gupta 1992, p. 755–56). Meher Baba said, “Mind is never transformed. Ego is transformed once only” (Kalchuri 2023, p. 2992). For him,

The real goal of life is not death of the ego, but of the mind! Therefore when Muhammad or Zoroaster or Jesus talked of being born once or dying once, they meant the death of the mind. Mind is born from the very beginning, even before the stone state. This birth is once, and also the death of the mind takes place only once. When the mind dies, the false ego is transformed into Reality. Real Ego is never born and never dies. Ego is always real but due to the mind, it feels and acts as limited and false I (Kalchuri 2023, p. 2992).

Meher Baba fleshes out his theory of *manonāśa* in his *Discourses*, which details his understanding of spiritual practices to achieve *mukti*, and in *God Speaks*, which explains “the divine theme of creation and its purpose”. Gathering and then removing (“winding and unwinding”) *saṃskāras* is the basis of his teaching, comparable to *vāsanā-kṣāya* in the previous period of Yoga Advaita (Meher Baba 2007, pp. 58–88).

Yogic Advaita is not a monolith, but it values *manonāśa* as “a mental therapy which assists and safeguards liberation” as Fort defines it. It has many stages, yet it is integrated with the goal of *mukti* itself as the final annihilation of the mind since the mind chronically prevents knowledge of the divine ego (*ātma-jñāna*). In each teaching one seeks to free the ego of the mind and its impressions (called *vāsanās* or *saṃskāras*) and senses (*indriyas*), since the ego is understood to have developed its (false) sense of individuality using the mind to identify not with the infinite self (*ātman*) but with falsehood in all its finite forms, including the body, life, and itself. Once freed, the ego expands into its unbounded dimensions: the divine ego. It would seem, as Meher Baba made so plain, the ego is capable of transformation but not the mind—something Mirra and Aurobindo discovered late in their collaboration. Finally, Yoga Advaita uniformly values *videhamukti* or bodiless liberation above *jīvanmukti* based on the shared view that the life and body are seen as projections of the mind, and therefore equally incapable of transformation. When the mind goes, so goes the consciousness of the body and its karma. As Ramana said, “[t]he body itself is a disease” so, “one who has got the conviction that he is not the body will become liberated even if he doesn’t desire it” (Godman 2000, n.p.). Inescapably, with *manonāśa* comes *śarīranāśa*.

9. Mirra's Two *Manonāśas*

Mirra also described the mind's inability to be transformed. Yet for her, transcendence of the body was a provisional step not a necessarily permanent outcome of *mukti*. Mirra sought union since childhood with her soul or "psychic being", the indwelling divine spark that evolves consciousness from form to form and then from human life to human life in rebirth leading ultimately to the threshold of the *ātman*. She also described union with the *ātman* proper, processes that Aurobindo called "the psychic change" and "the spiritual change", respectively, in his descriptions of "the triple transformation". She said she completed the psychic change in 1906 during her work with the Théons ([The Mother 1981e](#), 15 April 1972). As an example of the spiritual change, Mirra described her experience of *vairāgya* (complete detachment) in a prayer while in Japan in 1915:

But this earth itself is strange to ["my whole being"], and as it is not aware of anything else except the Eternal Silence, all life that has form appears remote and almost unreal to it; it seems strange to it that anyone could desire anything since it does not exist, or prefer one thing to another since neither is there. But at the same time it does not see why it should object to any action whatever it may be, since all actions are equally unreal, and it does not feel the necessity to flee from a world which does not exist and cannot be a burden, since its existence is so inexistent ([The Mother 2003a](#), p. 301).

Mirra continued with a gesture towards the third "supramental change" saying, "The hour has not yet come for joyful realisations in outer physical things. The physical being is plunged once again into the dull, monotonous night from which it wanted to withdraw too hastily; and Thy realised will, O Lord of Truth, has come to tell the constructing mind: 'You don't think this is true, and yet it is'" ([The Mother 2003a](#), p. 301). This impulse has more in common with Tantra and Kaśmiri nondual Śaivism than Yogic Advaita. However, these practices aspire for an embodied perfection at an individual, elite level, whereas Mirra's prayer signals a universal change in the human species, something unthinkable to "the constructing mind".

This leads to a heuristic distinction in which one may describe a personal and individual *jīvanmukti* in the mold of Yoga Advaita, and alternatively, a universal "joyful realisation in outer physical things" in the mold of Tantra. The first description is what we may call an "ascendant spiritual approach" that leads to an unsolicited yet inevitable transcendence of one's individual body even as one remains in it when *mukti* is achieved, and the second description is what we may call a "descendant spiritual approach" on the path to *mukti* that deliberately aids a process of transformation of all matter and all bodies, invulnerable to disease and death. From this distinction, we might classify two kinds of *manonāśa*: an "ascendant *manonāśa*" that characterized Mirra's personal yogic advancement in the psychic and spiritual changes early in life (comparable to the *jīvanmuktas* such as Ramana), and also a "descendant *manonāśa*" that the descent of the supermind occasions in the supramental change (comparable to no one, save Meher Baba. See [Beldio 2022](#) and [Beldio forthcoming](#)). Like Yoga Advaita, her yoga recognizes the necessity of transcending the body to achieve inner liberation in psychic and spiritual changes. Yet, not unlike Advaita Śaivism and Tantra, her yoga also recognizes the aspiration to remain in a body to aid its supramentalization along with the cosmos at the same level of perfectibility as the psychic being.

10. The Psychic Being

Alma Théon coined the term "psychic being", while she and Max introduced it to Mirra who in turn brought it to Aurobindo ([Sri Aurobindo and The Mother 1999](#)). Aurobindo identified it as the inner *puruṣa* ("primeval person") of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad 4.12: "The Puruṣa who is seated in the midst of ourself [*ātman*] is no larger than the finger of a man. He is the lord of what was and what shall be; Him having seen one shrinketh not from aught nor abhorreth any. This is the thing thou seekest" (Aurobindo's translation, [Aurobindo 2001](#), p. 119). Though Stephen Phillips dismisses the provenance of the psychic being through Mirra, he rightly notes that it has a partial resonance with Tantric traditions

and their theory of the *cakras* in the subtle body (*śūkṣma deha*) and with the Vedāntic theory of the five interlacing selves (*ātmas* or *kośas*). Like classical Āyurveda, in which consciousness (*citta*, *cetanā*) is seated in the heart, both Tantra and Vedānta recognize a benevolent soul or “psychic” centre behind the emotional heart. In front is the *anāhata* or heart *cakra* and behind is the spiritual heart or *hṛd*, home of the psychic presence. As Tantric systems describe it, this hidden centre constellates all other parts of our being, the *cakras* above and below itself, all of which are “formations of ‘Divine Energy,’ *śakti*, not of material or life energies [the *prāṇakośa*]” (Phillips 2020, p. 182). In Vedāntic systems, this psychic centre organises the mind, life, and body below, and connects this lower hemisphere with the upper one, with *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda* (being, consciousness, and bliss).

Other features of the psychic being are crucial to Mirra’s teaching. Like Aurobindo, she emphasized its *progressive* evolution. As Phillips notes: “The main difference is that it is ‘progressive’ manifestation for Aurobindo, whereas for classical Tantrics, nothing like that is stressed, although it is commonly thought that one can make spiritual progress over a lifetime or stretch of lifetimes, resulting eventually in ‘liberation’” (Phillips 2020, pp. 184–85). Mirra adds the most important difference: the psychic being will eventually manifest as cell, tissue, and form.

In 1970, just three years before Mirra died, she said that one of her students “was here, just in front of me, kneeling, and I saw her psychic being towering above by this much (gesture about eight inches), taller. *It’s the first time*. Her physical being was short, and the psychic being was tall, like this. And it was a sexless being [*un être insexué*]: neither man nor woman. So ... I said to myself, ‘*But the psychic being is the one that will materialize and become the supramental being!*’” (The Mother 1981c, 1 July 1970, emphasis added). Though Aurobindo wrote about the evolving influence of the psychic being, he makes no mention of it materializing as a body in any of his texts.

The psychic being is critical for the integral yoga given what Mirra described as its capacity to join the subtle and causal planes of consciousness and eventually the *ātman* itself, but also to manifest these in and as a physical body, even to walk the nondual “Eternal Silence” on Earth. *L’être psychique* is therefore the fulcrum on which consciousness pivots from an ascendant to descendant spiritual practice, an ascendant to descendant *manonāśa*, an individual to collective liberation, and an indirect to direct manifestation of itself as a new human species. In the imagery of the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, it is the secret fire within the chariot and horses destined to manifest as its own vehicle, rendering the previous one *inutiles*.

11. Conclusions

Mirra’s influence, power, and authority are essential to the integral yoga that she and Aurobindo co-created, yet most scholars have so far refused to examine their contours. Aurobindo said her spiritual growth in France, Algeria, and Japan “followed the same course” of *vijñāna* as his, what he called the “triple transformation” in the *Arya* Period that radically universalized Rāmakṛṣṇa’s *Vijñāna* Vedānta. Aurobindo left key parts of his vision incomplete in *The Synthesis of Yoga* in 1921 and in his last essays on “The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth” in 1950. However, Mirra claimed to complete this vision with revelations that radically innovated his Supramental Vedānta leading to what I call the Descendant *Manonāśa* Period of their practice. These include at least three new revelations. First, in the early 1900s, she discovered the archetypal “golden-rose” prototype of the future sexless *vijñānī* at both ends of the staircase of consciousness, and upon her final arrival to Pondicherry in 1920, she began a work with Aurobindo to aid its global manifestation. Second, Mirra’s experience of the Golden Day in 1956 and thereafter confirmed the eventual success of this evolution now and in the future, but it is coming with a cost: instead of transformation, the mind and vital natures are beginning to be annihilated. Increasingly deprived of these sheaths and left “to its own devices”, she found that the current physical body is entering an anatomical metamorphosis surpassing the one that yielded homo sapiens 300,000 years ago. Thirdly, she discovered in 1970 that this shambolic process cen-

trally involves the psychic being, somehow stimulating its materialization into what she originally called *la corps glorieux*. Though Aurobindo did not make the direct connection between the psychic being and what he called in 1949 “the divine body”, he thought from the beginning of their partnership in the 1920s that her body could endure the transformation better than his, no matter how it unfolded. It is time we critically examine what he may have meant by this, beginning with her experience of it.

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Notes

- ¹ I use “Mirra”, “Aurobindo” and “integral yoga” instead of “The Mother”, “Sri Aurobindo”, and “the Integral Yoga”. I want Mirra to be understood as an important “holy woman” on her own terms who spoke of their spiritual practice as “the integral yoga” whereas Aurobindo usually wrote “the integral Yoga”.
- ² I count 1012 entries of secondary literature in Wolfer’s bibliography, 987 that focus on Aurobindo without any significant consideration of her, while 25 focus on Mirra or at least consider her along with Aurobindo, and many of these are written by and for devotees.
- ³ Though the use of androgyny is crucial to this yoga, I will not explore it here. I have done so in [Beldio \(2015\)](#).
- ⁴ See *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II and III and *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.41, 6.8, 7.2, 9.1, and 18.42. Part of the difficulty is etymological. *Vi* is a prefix that may do nothing to the meaning of the root word, it may intensify it or may give an opposite meaning. *Jñāna* is a cognate of “know”, specifically “knowing” that is achieved when the *ātman* realises Brahman.
- ⁵ *हृद्भूत*, *hā’ādām*, or “the earth creature” might be seen as sexually undifferentiated before the rib-taking incident. (Cf. [Trible 1973, 1988](#)).
- ⁶ Concurrently, Aurobindo was writing in *Arya* about intuition and other intermediate faculties leading to the supermind and the “Gnostic Being”. See [Aurobindo \(2005\)](#), pp. 953–98).
- ⁷ His visions of Vivekānanda in the Alipore Jail in 1908–9 concerned intuition and its capacity to lead to *vijñāna*. See [Aurobindo \(2006\)](#), p. 179).
- ⁸ His “triple transformation” includes 1. “the psychic change” (stage of purification), 2. “the spiritual change” (stage of liberation), and 3. the supramental change (stage of perfection). See [Aurobindo \(2005\)](#), pp. 924–54).
- ⁹ For the section “On Insanity”, *Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdayasaṃhitā* 6.6, see [Wujastyk \(2003\)](#), pp. 244–51). McDaniel makes the same point about Sanskrit sacred literature and madness. See [McDaniel \(1989\)](#), especially pp. 11–17.
- ¹⁰ In addition to loss, the other five that Vāgbhāṭa lists are the insanities of “wind”, “choler”, “phlegm”, “conjunction”, and “poison”.
- ¹¹ Wujastyk notes one exception, the author Bhela, who considered the head as the location of the *manas*, though he “locates the more essential category of consciousness or reason (*citta*) in the heart” ([Wujastyk 2003](#), p. 202, n. 12).
- ¹² Meher Baba made this pithy distinction: “Mind stopped, is God. Mind working, is man. Mind slowed down, is mast. Mind working fast, is mad” ([Donkin 1988](#), p. 19).
- ¹³ Ramanuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Nimbārka’s Svābhavīka Bhedābheda Vedānta, Vallabha’s Śuddhādvaita Vedānta, and Madhva’s Dvaita Vedānta reject the possibility of liberation while living, though Caitanya’s Acintyābheda and Pratyabhijñā Śaivism accept *jīvanmukti*. See [Medhānanda \(2020a\)](#), p. 7.
- ¹⁴ Stephanie Jamison’s recent ground-breaking scholarship would seem to add philological support for this theory. See [Jamison \(2019\)](#), pp. 3–19.
- ¹⁵ Staje objects to Fort’s use of the word “yogic” to describe these spiritual disciplines on a few interesting grounds, but I agree with other scholars that Fort intends a broad use of the term that makes it apposite. See [Slaje \(2000\)](#) and the rejoinder of [Funes Maderey \(2017\)](#).
- ¹⁶ Similar constructions of ‘mindlessness’ can also be found in the works of early Advaitins such as The *Āgamaśāstra of Gauḍapāda* as well as early medieval texts of Haṭha-yoga and Raja-yoga.
- ¹⁷ I am grateful to Jeffery Long and Svāmī Medhānanda for their help in this Bengali translation of Sri Rāmākṛṣṇa’s words.
- ¹⁸ See [Maharaj \(2011\)](#), pp. 76–80). Aurobindo referenced the *indriyas* in relation to the *manas* in the same way, calling it the “sixth sense” though “in fact it is the only true sense organ and the rest are no more than its outer conveniences and secondary instruments”. [Aurobindo \(1999\)](#), p. 864).

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