

## Steps on the way...

### Dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

Dear reader: This file contains the work I have been doing since my retirement in 2009. In this work, my main focus has been to introduce Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to the Arabic reader. Besides translating selections from their works, I have worked on a few short notes related to Islam and to my own spiritual development. I thought these notes might help the Arabic reader with some of the concepts appearing in these translations that are commonly not found in Arabic literature.

Zackaria

April 2017

#### Translated Books

##### [Selections from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in Arabic](http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/Selections-Sri-Aurobindo-Mother.pdf)

<http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/Selections-Sri-Aurobindo-Mother.pdf>

##### [Anthology from the Mother in Arabic](http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/en-Anthology-Mother.pdf)

<http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/en-Anthology-Mother.pdf>

##### [Integral Healing](http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/en-ih-sel.pdf)

<http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/en-ih-sel.pdf>

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## The Encounter

At the age of 23, studying on a doctoral scholarship in Germany, I had everything a young man wishes to possess: health, affluence and success. I had come two years earlier from Egypt to a different culture, but the change proved to be anything but a cultural "shock". As a student, I had rented a room in the apartment of a highly educated woman, who, seeing how much I was taken by classical music, encouraged me to learn piano and introduced me to a German composer, living in the area, who was also an author of some renown. Besides piano and music, he took up my education in literature and art. All this was going on parallel to my actual engineering studies. Germany was the ideal place for the intellectually insatiable person I was. Visiting the great German cathedrals and museums with my host, going to concerts, hiking in the Black Forest not far from where I lived, and making trips to adjacent European countries, I felt I was starting to live for the first time. Yet, Germany had much more in store for me....

Having been born in a well-known and respected Egyptian family, I had in many ways a privileged childhood. The Islam I grew up with was tolerant, open-minded, and progressive. My grandfather and his brothers had fought against the British occupation: one was exiled to the Seychelles, another jailed in Upper Egypt, but this did not prevent a third brother from marrying an Englishwoman, nor did it prevent the family from sending some of its children to European and American schools.

I hardly knew my parents: my father, a successful lawyer, was most of the time in his office, and when at home, he, like most men of his generation, was not in the habit of sharing much time with his children. My mother constantly complained from breathing difficulties and kept to bed most of the time. The care of the children was left to a nurse and other help personnel. My father had collected a marvelous library in his study: leather-bound volumes of classical Arabic literature, side by side with French and English books regularly sent to him by bookstores in downtown Cairo. I must have been seven, when I started to sneak to this otherwise rarely frequented study, shut the door behind me and lose myself in whatever, at my age, I could make out of its treasures. This study room soon became my magical world, a world of adventure, heroism and beauty to which I could take refuge whenever I felt lonely.

The sunshine of my early childhood was soon to give way to mounting clouds. The 1952 revolution changed Egypt dramatically; and, in the "nationalization" wave that followed, my family lost most of its possessions. Soon after, my father died suddenly with a heart attack. With the onset of puberty not long after that, my exile from Paradise was complete. I experienced for the first time real anguish and sorrow. A sort of chronic "bad conscience" took hold of me and made me go around with bent shoulders as if carrying a crushing load. The feeling I often had of being lifted up and soaring on wings was gone. Life became a challenge that had to be met with a great effort of will. In my college years, I studied with ferocious determination. Excellence at school was the one expectation my father had again and again stressed to his children. Unconsciously I wanted to fulfill his wish, but my more urgent need

was to get a scholarship that would enable me to study abroad and to discover a wider and more stable world than the one I was living in. At the age of twenty, my wish was granted: I completed my engineering studies and received a scholarship to do graduate work in Germany.

In Germany I started avidly pursuing venues of which I didn't have the faintest inkling only a short time before. One day, flipping through the books of my host, I grabbed an undistinguished book with the title "Der Integrale Yoga". Till then I had thought yoga nothing more than extreme "physical exercises" developed in India, and I searched in the book for the usual photos of yogis in impossible postures. Instead I found dense texts with long sentences and many difficult Sanskrit words. The book turned out to be a compilation of texts by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, of whom I had never heard before. I put the book back on the shelf; I had anyway a huge list of other things I urgently needed to do. There was no reason for me to ever return to this book, but I did return to it again and again in the following weeks. It was destined to trigger a turning point in my life.

The affirmations of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were a refreshing blend of an inconceivable spiritual fairytale with down-to-earth reports of lived experiences. They were about a "psychological" spirituality, which was different from the occult and ascetic spirituality I had heard about so far. The texts were objective reports of experiences; there was in them no eagerness to convince, no promises of easy and fast rewards and no threats of terrible consequences if one chose to drop them and go other ways. There was no mention of sin or regret over past mistakes; they talked only of restoring harmony and balance and putting each thing in its right place. They taught that a soul could not be lost for all eternity but only delayed in its growth and evolution; and that man's goal was to participate consciously in his own evolution and to hasten it according to his capacities and means.

But there was something else that attracted me to the book: I was much intrigued and perplexed by the authority and the sublime height from which Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were writing: something in their assertions seemed "simply too much", and yet the doubter in me could not dismiss statements that sounded so authentic and true as exaggerations and pretense. I wanted to get to the bottom of it all, and I was conceited enough to take the matter as a challenge and to tell myself: "Here is a challenge for you!" The teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother filled the emptiness inside me that all my previous intellectual pursuits had not been able to fill. I finally understood that true growth should be the growth of the being as a whole, and that true knowledge was not just knowledge of the mind but also that of the heart and the soul. The goal was far and high, but the path was clearly shown; I just had to step on it and start walking.

Outwardly things were shaping up nicely for me. Inwardly the words of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had started to ferment. And then something strange happened. I had just finished the first half of my doctoral program and had all reasons to celebrate. Instead, I suddenly found myself in a severe depression, the kind that makes you afraid to leave bed in the morning and that haunts you with suicidal thoughts the rest of the day. No one understood what was happening, nor did I understand what was going on inside me. In one of my most desperate

moments, I remembered the Integral Yoga book. I looked at Sri Aurobindo's photo and felt a faint but unmistakable quiver in my heart, upon which I fell into a sound sleep, something I hadn't been able to do for quite some time. Next day I knew I was mending, and things started to change. The change was slow and hesitant at first, but I somehow managed, in a month or so, to get over my depression and to resume normal life.

A long journey had started for me. In the following decades, demolition and construction went on simultaneously inside me, and my path meandered in totally unexpected ways. My career enabled me to live in many countries and meet people whom I never imagined I would meet in real life. It was not always easy to fulfill previous commitments while aspiring to give myself fully to a new orientation and a distant aim. The discrepancy between the high Ideal and the realities I was living in was still too great, and my inner resistance created hardships. Most difficult of all, was my inability to make myself understood by those whose lives were closely bound with mine, and who were necessarily affected by my actions. On the whole my lot was much better than that of millions of others, and I had no reasons to complain.

With the passage of time, the pieces of life's huge puzzle started to fall one after the other into place. To my amazement I discovered that, despite my many meanderings and aberrations, I finally landed not too far from where I aspired to be. I started to see how every leg of the long journey had been a necessary preparation and to perceive the incredible Grace that has guided me through many detours and much stumbling to the "niche" that was all along intended for me. Life started to become simple and serene; the need for straining and effort grew less; the conflict between "Inner work" and "outer work" lost its edge; the fears and worries that had long haunted me began to fall away; and I started to grasp faintly what Sri Aurobindo must have had in mind when he wrote his "Life Divine." I am approaching my seventieth birthday, and my hope seems increasingly justified that the exile from Paradise I experienced almost sixty years ago was not final after all.

## Preparing for the Winter Journey

*To Sri Aurobindo and the Mother:*

*In eternal gratitude for the incredible love and “divine cunning”, with which they have guided me through life.*

### Prolog

Following is as a succession of snapshots of “little” incidents that have remained vivid in my memory: “moments of the soul” whose significance became much later clear to me. I see them now as the signposts of the road I travelled. They reveal moments when the Divine Grace intervened most visibly in my life, or when my soul managed to break through and alert me of things yet to come. I see them as an irrefutable proof that we all carry in ourselves an entity that knows far ahead and better than our minds. Seen from this point of view, I hope my story will be of some interest to other seekers as well.

The story is woven around the theme of love, and how to transform it from merely human love into a more divine form. It is the topic that has most fascinated and challenged me all my life. The plot of the story winds through three stages of growth in which I have experienced love very differently: The early phase of childhood and adolescence, in which love was covered up by thick layers of unconsciousness, followed by the phase of manhood when love became conscious, but was still hampered by the domination of the head, and finally the phase of maturity and ripeness when love slowly developed into an inner blissful self-giving without expectation of return.

Parts of the story are written in the third person, others in the first-person form; some are written in the past, and some in the present tense. This is because I saw myself sometimes a detached spectator reviewing my life from a distance; at other times I relived, while writing, incidents that have moved me deeply in the past.

The story is true in the sense of being an account of actually lived experiences, but some outer details relating to other individuals had to be modified, for obvious reasons. To write succinctly, I had to leave much unsaid; I hope the readers will not mind weaving for themselves a coherent picture from the following scattered brush-strokes.

On an autumn afternoon, Lodi, California

His morning work done, and following his habitual routine, he carried his lunch and a few books to the little garden and installed himself in the sunniest spot. In front of him lay the star-shaped lotus pond where gold fishes and tadpoles swam merrily. The lotuses had lost their bloom by now, but they were to him the everlasting symbol

of the One who has given him everything he cherishes in life. Around him were trees and blossoming shrubs; a little further behind vineyards stretched far and wide. Above him arched a marvelous dome of serene light dotted with little puffs of white clouds.

Having finished his meal, he made himself comfortable in his garden chair and closed his eyes. He waves of ecstasy and bliss came towards him from all sides: from the roses, the birds, the butterflies, the bees and from the tiny lizards bathing in the sun at the edge of the pond. His limbs became heavier and heavier, as stillness settled upon him more and more. Ecstasy and bliss now began to well up from his inner being as well. In front of his inner eye, the sunny spaces of his life stretched with undiminished splendor; he could revisit countries where he had lived and commune with people who have long disappeared from his life. The self-torment, disappointments and sorrows of earlier years seemed now shrouded in a soft haze, as if belonging to someone else, with whom he had been intimately associated, and of whom only memories remained.

A state of wonder and awe got hold of him. He wondered about the long and unplanned journey that took him, fifty years earlier, from his native country, made him study, work and live in other climes and meander in terrains he hadn't heard of before, only to bring him finally to his true niche: the spiritual community in where he now lived.

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## Egypt

1947 I was four, maybe even three, years old; living with my parents not far from the Pyramids of Giza. I still hear my mother calling for dinner; she had just heated a puree our governess Paula had prepared for my brother and me before taking off for a personal matter of her own. Paula had been hired by my parents after my birth, and since then, she had rarely left us for more than a day or two. Every time she left, I clung to her crying frantically for fear she might not return.

My mother was the only one around that evening who could feed the children. She was in particularly high spirits, full of tenderness and smiles. It will be the only time that my mother will ever feed or prepare a meal for her children again. She was soon to succumb to depressions that will keep her mostly bedridden and totally absorbed in herself for the rest of her life.

1951 I must have been 8 years old when, for the first time, I became aware of the dynamics between the opposite sexes. In the rarely-used study of my father, which was then my hiding place and sanctuary, I was browsing the shelves for a book not too difficult to read. I grabbed a large volume on the performing arts and was flipping through it, when a ballet scene caught my attention: a ballerina standing on one leg, with her other leg stretched horizontally; her male partner bending on her pointed foot, barely touching it with his hands, in profound adoration. The uncommon motif of the scene, the beauty of the dancers, the elegance of the costumes and the grace of the movements seemed to me to come from a different planet. I experienced for the first time an entrancing mixture of ecstasy, mystery, awe and bewilderment. The scene both captivated and shocked me and I could not explain to myself the fascination and hold it had on me. At that moment I had lost the simplicity and unity of being of early childhood. I could know then that regaining my lost simplicity and unity will be the major endeavor of my coming years.

That a man should adore a woman in that way was something I had never heard of or read about till then; and I was not sure if it was "the right thing to do". The first clue for resolving my conflict came many years later, after I had acquired some familiarity with Indian spirituality and become aware of the inborn need in all human beings for worship and adoration. India also taught me to see the Divine not only as the mighty Creator and Lord of the Day of Judgment, but also as the loving Universal Mother and the Goddess of supreme charm and beauty... more about this later in the story...

1953 It was the end of the school year, and the students of the middle school had just received their certificates. Though I was the youngest of the class, I had received the highest scores. The school bus dropped me in front of our house; I galloped the stairs, certificate in hand, to my father's room. I knew how happy my results will make him; he had always maintained that success at school was the key to happiness and success in later life. The school must have already informed him; I see him coming towards me with beaming face and wide open arms. He takes me up in his embrace and covers my face with kisses. It will be the only time he will ever show me his love again.

My father was a self-made man who had managed to rise from middle to upper class by erudition and hard work. Now he was working himself to death to "secure a good life" for his children, and to spare them the battles he had to fight himself. Unfortunately things did not work out as he had hoped. The military coup of July 1952 had just taken place a few months back, and the new regime was quickly changing the destinies of Egypt. As a finance specialist, my father must have sensed that the fruits of his labor will soon be taken away from him. Nobody suspected on that day that he had only one more year to live.

1957 I do not remember how my classmates convinced me that evening to go out with them. I had been moved up a grade to be in the same class with my elder brother; most students of the class were two years older than me.

The evening started harmlessly enough; we all went to a late movie followed by a snack in one of the cafés of downtown Cairo. One of the boys suddenly suggested we go “prostitute hunting”, an adventure he had heard the guys of the higher grade bragging about. The group approved; we drove to the outskirts of Cairo where prostitutes stand at night waiting for customers. They found a poor shabbily-dressed woman of venerable age, who must have been so desperate to accept to step in a car driven by a bunch of hyped young teens. To avoid police patrols, one of the boys had to drive around in dark streets, while the others took turns in trying their luck with the woman in the back of the car. Finally they stopped the car and put her out accompanied by insults and jeer. I no longer recall if they had given her any money; they didn’t have much of it in their pockets anyway. The utter brutality and brutishness of what I witnessed that evening, still haunts me today.

This incident stands in my memory as the exact opposite pole to the ballet scene, so full of adoration, tenderness and grace, which had moved me so deeply six years back. The ballet scene left me with an ideal to dream of in the following years: I intensely yearned for a love of total self-giving to someone higher, better and nobler than me. I was not much concerned about the “practicality” or the chances of fulfilling such a highly idealized dream; dreams have their own reality, and they can make us happy, even when they don’t materialize. I was somewhat baffled and bewildered that nobody around me seemed to feel or think in the same way. In moments of doubt, I suspected even that something might be wrong with me.

What a comfort it was, when much later I discovered, that my ideal and dream had been, for millennia, part and parcel of the traditions of India: India that paradise of the soul where the Feminine is worshipped everywhere. I could see then how the worship of a Universal Mother and Goddess has given India much of its characteristic charm, gentleness and tolerance. I also saw how the gentleness and compassion of the Madonna, the examples of the women saints and the works of caring nuns - have all prepared the ground in the Christian world for a growing charity, welfare and social justice.

1961 The sun was about to set on a hot summer day during the fasting month of Ramadan. Men, mostly from the disadvantaged class, were gathering in the foyer of the mosque: policemen guarding nearby embassies, taxi drivers who had been confined to blistering cars all day long, petty peddlers, street sweepers... etc. Their lips were visibly cracked from thirst; they had been subjected to a ferocious heat all day, and haven’t had a drop of drink since dawn. The much awaited “canon” shot, that announces the end of the day’s fasting, has just sounded: the men drink some water, eat a few dates and arrange themselves in rows for a short prayer of gratitude. They

sit in small groups on the floor around large dishes of black beans. A mosque clerk hands out to each of them a couple of pita loaves, a few shallots and a handful of dates. They take turns in dipping bread into the dishes to scoop up mouthfuls of the black stew. At the end of the meal, they light cigarettes and drink tea offered to them by the same clerk. Their voices become louder and livelier with their growing sense of completed duty and the wafting of the cooler evening breeze: How good life can be!

Soon the Muezzin will call for the night prayer; some will perform it and hurry to catch one of the busses that will carry them to the less fortunate quarters of Cairo where they live. Others will linger on to listen to the Koran recitations traditionally held in mosques every night in Ramadan. They will soon be ecstatically swaying to the rhythm of the verses, thrilled by the feats of the biblical prophets, chilled by descriptions of the blazing hellfire that awaits the wrongdoers, and elated by the rewards and boons promised in heaven for those who fast Ramadan. They have by now forgotten the aches and ordeals of the day and leave the mosque fortified enough to carry on one more day.

I liked to frequent this little mosque not far from where I lived; the Imam in charge seemed always to choose for his recitations the Koran passages I like most. They are the early passages of the Koran; the Prophet was then still a happy trader living with his family and in the habit of retreating alone to a mountain near Mecca to meditate. They are wonderfully mystical and poetical; they call for submission to the compassionate Creator, praise the marvels of his creation, call for brotherhood and justice among men, and retell in a captivating way the stories of the Old and New Testaments. The Meccan verses have a different timbre from the later verses received in Medina after Mohammed had taken on himself the responsibility of defending and organizing the growing community of illiterate and unruly Bedouins that had followed him there.

How I have wished, already then, that the Meccan verses would be revered as the core of the Koran. A quarter of a century later, a Sudanese reformer dared publically to suggest rearranging the Koran in two parts, one containing the “ever-lasting message”, the other the “temporal” verses that were tailored to suit the needs of that particular community at that particular time. He was executed by his government in 1985.

1963 The last day of senior exams at the school of engineering, Cairo University. With a heavy heart, I enter the electronics lab: my graduation project was not working; it had to be tested on that day. The project consisted in designing an oscillator covering a certain range of radio frequencies. The examiner looked in dismay at my shabby box and started immediately to fumble around in my circuit trying to find proper nodes, where he could attach the probes of his testing device. He turned the tuning dial: a sigh of bewilderment and relief rose up from my depths. I could hardly believe my eyes: a perfect sine wave was standing on the oscilloscope screen! My circuit was

working after all; I had tried any number of times before, but could never bring it to do that. The examiner must have changed, by his random fumbling, the stray capacitances of the wires and components in a way that made resonance possible. What was the probability for such a thing to occur at the exact moment that counted?! I had just experienced one of the saving miracles of my life. The examiner smiled, and something in my soul smiled as well. Now the goal I had strived so desperately to achieve in the past years seemed closer than ever before.

1964 The ship destined for Genoa, Italy, is still standing at one of the piers of the port of Alexandria. I am on the top deck waving goodbye to college friends, who had travelled all the way from Cairo to see me off. It was end of October, the sky was overcast; Alexandria seemed forlorn and desolate after the summer vacationers had left. Inside me things were quite different; a new phase of life was about to begin. Hard work and "luck" have helped me in securing a highly prized scholarship, one of the few destined to a Western country that year. The scholarship was the only way I could leave a world that had been collapsing in front of my eyes. In the last ten years, I had to put my emotions on hold and to push myself to the utmost to reach this moment; and now it has come. I was supremely happy, and the ship was about to leave. I will not return to Egypt after twelve years, and by then, I will be a different man.

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Germany:

*1964-1966: In an earlier story, I have narrated how my "encounter" with the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother while studying in Germany became the turning point of my life. To avoid repetition, I will limit myself in the present story to those inner developments and psychological experiences of my twelve years in Germany that were not mentioned in my earlier story.*

1967 Scholarship holders studying in German universities were invited that year to an orientation held in one of Germany's finest sea resorts. They were to travel together by bus from Frankfurt northwards all the way to the Baltic Sea. I happened to sit beside a young woman; on introducing ourselves we discovered we come from the same country and even the same city. In the casual conversation that ensued, we were further amazed to find out that our families shared some common ties. She was 21 years of age at that time, but she carried around her the atmosphere of a girl of fourteen who knows nothing about the cares and complications of life, and who is still perfectly happy in the fold of her family. Her joyfulness was contagious; I felt totally at ease beside her from the first moment, as if she had been a friend whom I had known all my life. Toward the end of the trip, I knew that we will be man and wife one day.

I asked her if I may write to her; she gave me her address. A month later, I proposed to her in a letter, and after what seemed an interminably long time, she wrote she would have first to consult with her parents, before giving me her final decision. A few months later, we were engaged; marriage followed three years later. I changed university and moved to Munich, where she was studying, to live with her. We shared together thirty years of life journey, after which we had, with heavy hearts, to separate.

1970 Soon after our marriage, my wife asked me one morning: "Is something wrong? Why do you grind your teeth so often in sleep?" I told her reassuringly: "O, nothing, it is just a bad sleeping habit!" This was not true though; a conflict was growing in me: the conflict between, what I then considered, my spiritual calling and my married life.

For some time, I had been intensely practicing yoga according to books written decades ago for practitioners who chose, or were expected, to lead a celibate life. And I was practicing on my own; there was hardly anyone around to guide me. I didn't know then that the Mother had recently launched the City of Auroville and invited to it all men of good will, whether celibate, married or in partner relationships. My wife did not show much interest in yoga; she had behind her a very happy childhood and adolescence and saw no reason to deviate from her former life. In contrast to her, I had witnessed a lot of suffering in others and experienced it in myself; I wanted with all my being to change. When I discovered that Sri Aurobindo's yoga was about the transformation of man into something happier and nobler, I delved into it with all the passion and avidness of youth. I tried hard to live outwardly the normal married life, while keeping yoga for myself. Things worked well at the beginning, but I was changing fast, and not always in positive ways.

After my arrival in Germany, I lost my former ambitions of worldly success and was now trying to balance my mentally-lopsided education by playing music, swimming and enjoying nature. I knew from my readings that often beginners of yoga have to be very patient and endure hardships first, before any improvements become visible; but I did not anticipate my hardships would be as great and prolonged as they turned out to be. Health issues cropped up one after the other, and I was constantly losing weight. I needed more and more hours of solitude, and became less and less "fun to be with". I had finally to consult a physician, and was astounded, when he asked me after taking my vital signs: "How did you manage to leave your bed and come here in this state? Your blood pressure is dangerously low." I lagged behind in my research and ultimately lost my scholarship. I had to return to Egypt after twelve years, my task uncompleted. Soon after my return, I met coincidentally a former colleague of mine. He looked somewhat puzzled and did not recognize me at first. When I introduced myself by name, he stared at me for a few seconds, suddenly bounced back making a full turn around himself and holding his head between with hands while murmuring: "Not possible! Not possible! What happened to you? What on earth has changed you in this way?"

My wife tried valiantly to cope with the fact that the man she chose was changing on her, without her being able to see any convincing reason for the change. She carried her grief in herself, which came at the expense of her former joyfulness and exuberance. Watching her develop in this way was much harder ordeal for me to bear than all what I had personally to go through...

## USA

*1984-1997: My wife managed to survive rather well the difficult years that followed our return to Egypt. We completed our Ph.D.'s and got teaching jobs in Cairo universities. My health improved, even though I remained somewhat weakened and excessively underweight. My wife showed remarkable fortitude in dealing with the whole situation. Sunshine and hope returned unexpectedly to our lives, when our applications were accepted by an American University. We moved to the US; our teaching contracts were renewed on several consecutive years. This qualified us to apply for citizenship, and we soon became American citizens. Quiet and pleasant years filled with study, work, and occasional travel followed. Our situation became stable enough to allow us think seriously about having children, but when the gynecologist enumerated to us the risks of possible fetus deformations for a woman conceiving after forty, we gave up the idea. It was a much bigger disappointment for my wife, than it was for me..*

1997 Houston, Texas: I am sitting outside in the waiting room in an attorney's office. My wife is in conference with the lawyer, who will advise her, as is customary in Islamic tradition, to reconsider her application for divorce. I reflect with burdened heart on our thirty years together since we met on a happy bus trip. We have been to each other family, daily companions and friends. And we had experienced together the ups and downs of life. It has been a good marriage; we were compassionate and caring to each other. The only reason for being in that office on that day was that we were yearning for two different worlds. She was yearning for the happiness of her childhood and considered faithfulness to family, tradition and heritage her first duty. I was yearning to participate in the preparation of a new world, in which ignorance and suffering will have no place. I had lived for decades a double life; it worked at a great cost for me, but now I could no longer dissimulate, and I wanted to dedicate myself totally to the single cause that made my life meaningful. We have both tried hard to uphold the marriage in the hope that something might still come and narrow the widening gap between us, but nothing came. Finally we had to admit the futility of continuing a life in which each of us was blocking the other's way.

The divorce was sealed, and a month later I moved to Auroville. On a couple of occasions in the following years, we needed urgently each other's help; and we had the chance to support and stand by each other again. On one of these happy

occasions, we had a good laugh when one of us remarked that our marriage has actually never worked as well, as when we were already divorced!

## Auroville

Early in the new millennium: It is evening; no meditations are scheduled in the *Inner Chamber* at this time. The cleaning team is performing its routine tasks: vacuuming carpets, replacing cushion covers, and polishing columns and stairs. Following the customary practice for Auroville new-comers to dedicate part of their time to community services, I opted to join the *Matrimandir* cleaners, a choice that would lead me to one of the most significant experiences of my life.

The light emanating from the large crystal, the perfect beauty of the design, the lingering aspirations of thousands who have already meditated in this sacred space, all combined in creating in the Chamber an unearthly atmosphere. I could see her darting back and forth across the room doing her work with remarkable skill and speed. From time to time she would beckon to me to help her lift a heavy object or reposition a carpet into its right place. Our roads had crisscrossed a few times before in different venues of the small city. Though she was a key participant in several projects, I noticed that she never pushed herself in the lime-light. She was always going about one work or another with the ease and cheerfulness of those deriving their happiness from an inner source.

One evening, in the silence of the chamber, suddenly an overwhelming wave of recognition and gratitude rushed upon me: Here she was at last; the one for whom I had searched all my life, the one whom I could adore, just for the sake of adoration. Since I was not expecting any return, I was no longer subject to the fleeting joys and sorrows of human love. In the following days and months, I prayed intensely to be spared making a fool of myself by putting a holy name on a common passion. I searched my soul for any signs of reproach or disapproval, any warnings or foreboding of a pending spiritual disaster, but found none. Love, as I was experiencing it now, was very different from what usually goes by that name...

It was the day before her birthday. As "chance" would have it, I saw a vacant spot at the table where she was sitting in one of Auroville's cafes. To my question if I may join her, I got a welcoming nod. After lunch, I found myself telling her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world: "I have adoration for you!" Her reaction will remain with me as one of the most beautiful reactions I have witnessed in my life. She looked at me quietly for some time; in her expression I could read amazement, faint surprise and deep understanding at the same time. There was no trace of indignation, defensiveness or judgment in her eyes. It was as if she was telling me: "O, I have been suspecting something like this for some time. I know very well what you are talking about. But surely you know you will have to leave it at that?!" The few words she then uttered confirmed what I had already perceived; she said smiling: "You will have to be

very quiet now!", and with her usual ease she steered the conversation to a different topic.

In the few months that followed, a mostly silent friendship grew between us. I had several chances to express, by little symbolic acts my devotion to her; she always received my gestures with dignified humility and simplicity. We were linked by our dedication to a common higher goal, and it was understood that this goal was the base of any relationship between us. I had learned the art of deriving abiding ecstasy and bliss from an occasional smile or a tiny symbolic act. I had no need for more.

After a few months, I had to leave Auroville; urgent matters waited for me elsewhere. My sun disappeared behind dense clouds for some time. Ultimately it reappeared, now transformed through distance into a bright star that never fails to guide me when I am in the dark. Several years later, I can still in lucent moments feel her presence and see her walking ahead beckoning to me to hasten my steps....

Knowing her has assured me that the archetype of the Feminine I was dreaming of was not just a mirage. Through her I discovered that what I always wanted all those years was to be allowed to love. I had managed somehow to live without being loved; what was much harder was not being able to love. I started to see my bent for adoration in a wider context, and I no longer suspected it to be some kind of refined eroticism. Many experiences had been necessary to teach me how to love properly, but once the lesson was learned, the one worthy of love and adoration appeared in my life. She has set me free from my former romanticizing weaknesses and yearnings... All the deprivations, pangs and joys of my meandering path have proven to be exactly what I needed to understand that human love is nothing but a tiny current from the universal ocean of divine Love, and that the one whom we adore is only the gatekeeper who admits us into the eternal gardens of paradise... After her, the chapter of human love was happily closed for me; I became ready to dedicate myself to the next chapter: that of widening love into something... truly divine.

2008 Auroville: My short visit to Auroville was about to end. During my stay, I met, as usual, with my Aurovilian friend Walter, and he has again suggested I should translate Sri Aurobindo and the Mother into Arabic. I had always succeeded in evading his suggestion by one "convincing" argument or another. Walter hasn't given up; he mentions casually that a Japanese professor, an acquaintance of his, has just finished translating "*The Life Divine*" into Japanese. I cringed when I imagined what a colossal project that would be for me, with my technical and non-literary background, and with the shreds of Arabic still in my command.

The taxi that will take me from Auroville to the Chennai Airport was already waiting for me outside, when Walter appeared on his motorbike. He pressed a book in my hand saying: "Translate this!" It was a compilation of writings by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother with the title: "*Integral Healing*." On the long flight back to Cairo I read, at

random, short passages in the book. In the next weeks, whenever I had a long break between the classes I was teaching, I translated at random short passages from the book. This exercise filled me with peace and serenity. Slowly it dawned upon me, that translating Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is the best occupation I could pursue during my retirement. I continued teaching till the end of the semester and resigned from my teaching position. A month later I moved to the *Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham* in Lodi, California.

Walter had given me a new focus for my life. In the following years, I became more and more aware that contributing to bridging the gap between the world I was born into and the world I consciously chose is the task for which I had been unknowingly prepared since childhood.

2016 The earlier incidents given above have been written in 2013 after I discovered having prostate cancer. This explains why I chose the title "*Preparing for the Winter Journey*" for the story. In writing it, I tried to take stock of my life and to say farewell, in a subtle way, to those who have played major roles in my life. Now that the cancer has been removed and the Grace has given me a fresh term of life, I am in the fortunate position of being able to report on recent positive developments.

Gratitude wells from my heart for having lived long enough to see the main aspirations of my life come true. A greater equality has manifested in the last years, accompanied by an increased energy for work. I had to go through an extremely painful experience lately, but after the initial impact subsided, the words of Sri Aurobindo: "It is finished the dread mysterious sacrifice" (*Savitri*, Book 6, Canto 2) kept welling up inside me for days and days — giving me comfort and hope. Whenever I am still attacked by doubts or sorrow, I remind myself of these words and look at the enfolding drama with a smile...

### Epilog:

The sun has gradually shifted in the sky; he was now in the shade and was beginning to feel the cold. He remembered all the things he was planning to do that afternoon, but lingered a few minutes more hoping his inner voices might still have something to communicate to him. When nothing came, he started to stir and to set his stiff limbs into motion. He knew that any further reflection and musing would have to wait for another day...

## Are you still a Moslem? Memories of a happy Islam

A few years ago, I received an unexpected call from my nephew then living with his parents in Cairo; I had been living outside Egypt for many years already. Last time I had seen him, he was a playful little boy. Receiving a call from him surprised me because he had never called before; but the real surprise came when he proceeded directly to ask me: "Uncle, are you still a Moslem!?"

In the pause that ensued, my intricate relationship with my folks in Egypt sped with lightning speed through my mind. I smiled at the thought that my early-teen nephew dared at last to ask me the question everyone back home wanted to know: "Why, at the age of sixty-six, had I left my birth-country, where I had been living in relative ease, to move for good to an ashram dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother?" My family and friends had known for some time that I was translating the works of these great spiritual masters into Arabic, but translating was one thing and migrating to live in an ashram was quite another.

My spontaneous reply to my nephew ran something like: "Yes, I am still Moslem, but I am also Christian, Hindu and Buddhist and everything else that has in it a kernel of truth, goodness and beauty." He kept silent, then hastily mumbled good-bye, and hung up. We have not talked with each other since.

Now that my nephew is slowly edging into manhood, and the falling autumn leaves are reminding me of the shortness of human life, I feel a growing urgency to share my Islam experiences with whomever cares to know them. What I want to say is not meant for everyone though; it is meant only for those young and open in mind and heart.

The reason I am sharing my experiences with Islam is that they represent a life story I can truthfully narrate and because I believe that, with some good will, we can always learn from true life stories, even when we do not agree with the message conveyed. But the strongest motivation for me to share is to express my concern for young Moslems who are currently living, in many countries, under extremely difficult circumstances and who have to witness how things are steadily worsening around them. It is no secret that lately Islam has lost much of the sympathy and esteem it once enjoyed worldwide, and that the opportunities for Islamic countries to reintegrate into the rest of the world seem to dwindle from year to year.

### The happy Islam I have experienced

I grew up in Egypt around the middle of the last century. The Islam I found was remarkably tolerant and appealing. Though personally I did not have a happy childhood, my difficulties had nothing to do with Islam (but rather with the particular

mode of life in my parents' home). In fact, Islam was one of the sunniest aspects of my childhood, a fact I did not become aware of until much later.

Original Islam was marked by striking tolerance; it is enough to contemplate the following famous verses from the Quran:

“Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians and Sabaens\*, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and performs righteous deeds shall have their reward from their Lord. They shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”

\* The Sabaens follow a Gnostic religion the Prophet must have come across during his travels. There is no doubt in my mind that had the Prophet known the highly developed religions of the Far East [such as Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism...] he would have included them in the verses above.

My folks (and by “folks” I do not mean just first-degree relatives but the extended family with its large network of interrelated friends and acquaintances) practiced Islam in a remarkably uncomplicated way. Simply put, they were Moslems and happy about it; it would not have occurred to them they could be otherwise.

They did not care much for the juristic and theological divisions which have afflicted Islam over long stretches of its history. Strangely enough, the same divisions have come to the forefront in the consciousness of many Moslems today. My folks performed the prescribed religious duties freely: some prayed, others fasted, still others completed the pilgrimage, and a few completed all their religious obligations; they did not condemn or extoll others because of that. Youngsters in my family were free to practice on their own without censorship or pressure. The remarkable thing is that I saw no one misusing this freedom. My folks were, on the whole, decent, honest and hard-working, they loved their families and cared for the wellbeing of the people who worked for them.

Tensions between Moslems, Christians and Jews living in Egypt were almost unknown at that time. The presence of the British as the de facto rulers of the country welded Egyptians into a common national identity. A great majority of Egyptians hated the presence of the British; some actively resisted and fought against it and were detained in prisons or deported out of the country. National feelings did not make them averse to everything Western though. Many professionals sent their children to Western schools to make them multi-lingual. In these schools, Moslem and Christian children went to separate religion classes.

My parents did not talk religion with their children, and precisely their silent and unpretentious Islam had a lasting effect on me. I was deeply touched to see my father silently reading the Quran whenever he allowed himself some relaxed time at home, and I was similarly touched when I saw my mother, who suffered from chronic depression, cling to her Quran when she was in a crisis and pray fervently for relief.

Around my eighth year I developed a voracious appetite for reading, and I was specially fascinated by the popular booklets describing the glories and heroic deeds of the great figures of Islam. In the religion class at school, I got my first glimpses of the Quran. I could already then feel the power and beauty of its rhymed prose and appreciate the impact it must have had on the Arabs who heard it for the first time. In my early teens I developed the habit of visiting a nearby mosque where I enjoyed listening to recitations of the Quran. I was particularly attracted to those parts which describe the glory of God and the wonders and beauty of His creation and which call for compassion, brotherhood and equality of all people, and I was less interested in the later parts detailing the laws, prohibitions and punishments.

The members of my larger family dressed in a conservative European fashion; women were not veiled, elderly women and widows chose sometimes to cover their hair with a scarf. In large family gatherings, women and men were not strictly separated; if there was any separation, it came quite naturally because men liked to talk about their work and discuss politics, while women preferred to talk about children and domestic affairs. Men and women maintained a natural reserve; they often addressed each other using titles that varied according to rank, age, and degree of relationship. They naturally avoided showing too much familiarity or asking each other personal questions. Married and engaged couples avoided displaying their mutual tender affections towards each other in front of the rest of the family.

Talented young Egyptians were broadly educated, either in Egypt itself or in Europe; no wonder that some of them became the best thinkers and writers Egypt has produced in modern times. They interpreted Islamic civilization in biographies and novels which, in my view, have not been equaled to this day.

Having said all this, I would like to emphasize that it is by no means my intention to glorify the people among whom I grew up. I believe that the exceptional tolerance and openness they have evidenced resulted mainly from the fortunate circumstances they lived in. They, like most people, were mainly occupied with worldly matters and simply lived their Islam without thinking much about it. And yet, their example furnishes me with the point I want to make here, namely that the excessive and often violent religious zeal of the extremely conservative Moslems of today does not necessarily produce a better Islam, rather the opposite. Often these zealous people justify their extreme conservatism by the fear of losing their faith if they would relax in even the tiniest detail of the law. According to my experience and understanding, the people I have described in the previous paragraphs lived their Islam without coercion or fear and managed well in leading a happy and appealing version of Islamic life. Islam, rightly understood and practiced, offers a healthy and resilient way of life that stands on the strength of its own truth. There is no compelling need for conservative Moslems to fear "contamination" by other traditions. Believers who are firm in their own religion should be able to live anywhere and everywhere without losing it. The truly important thing today is to have enough fairness to grant other

people the right to cherish their religions as well; otherwise only two alternatives remain: either to live in alienation and isolation or to be in constant conflict with everyone else. In the multicultural world of today, people do not really care about the religions of other people. Religion, or the lack of it, has become rather a private affair. On the other hand, people are welcome and sought everywhere as long as they are qualified, dependable, honest and socially agreeable.

### Aspirations for the future of Islam

1) I wish and hope that young Moslems would acquire the habit of learning from every occasion and thus go far beyond the school education they have received. In Egypt of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the quality of education, particularly in languages, has dropped far below what it was in the first half of the century. The neglect of foreign languages led to a narrowing of the horizon of many young people, and they consequently became dependent on the local media and happenings to form their views about life. Unfortunately, the media and the clergy have often bombarded young people with Islamic ideological and juristic issues that had been discussed, almost in the same manner, a thousand years ago. These young people were seldom taught that Islam is infinitely more than cut-and-dry legalistic doctrines. The result was that they know and care little about the glorious achievements of Islam in Bagdad, Isfahan and Cordoba and about the great Moslem philosophers, physicians, astronomers, architects and mathematicians whose works were studied in European universities all through the Middle Ages. Lacking adequate background in philosophy, these young people find it difficult to grasp that the holy texts of Islam (or of any religion, for that matter) can be interpreted in a symbolic and psychological way that often reveals more of the truth contained in them than a strictly literal interpretation could ever reveal.

Most damaging, in my opinion, was the fact that young Moslems were seldom taught that their Prophet was, first and foremost, a messenger of peace and compassion who did all he could to avoid direct confrontation with his own people until he was forced, in the last years of his life, to defend his people and himself against their fierce and unrelenting assaults. One just needs to remember that as soon as the Prophet finally entered victoriously into Mecca, he declared general amnesty and forgave all those who had been inflicting untold injury, humiliation and torture on his followers. One needs only to remember that the only mention of war in the Prophet's *Last Sermon of Farewell*, was an exhortation to his people to respect the traditional prohibition of war during the four holy months of every year. In the rest of the Sermon the Prophet urged his people to regard life and property as a sacred trust, to consider their wives a trust from Allah, to refrain from hurting others, to be honest and to fulfill their worldly and religious obligations.

Young Moslems were seldom taught that civil courage can be much greater than dying on the battlefield. The Prophet demonstrated his greatest courage when he dared, single-handedly at first, to confront his people with a new religion that went a

gainst all their cherished pre-Islamic notions and values. When he asked proud tribal Arabs, for whom making war was the normal way of life, to be humble in front of Allah, the God of mercy and compassion in whose eyes they and their slaves were equal — his new religion must have appeared to them sheer madness and an unacceptable provocation.

Young Moslems today often ignore the fact that the Prophet, before developing into the phenomenal man of action he became in his last years, was for a long time a deeply spiritual and peaceful traveling merchant who carefully studied the world around him. In his free time, he spent many solitary nights contemplating on the top of a nearby mountain — thus preparing himself for the revelations he would receive and the great actions he would later perform. Today we witness some young Moslems, who have hardly any experience or knowledge, assume for themselves the right to change the world according to their own understanding and in violent ways that are totally un-Islamic.

2) I also wish and hope that Moslems would understand the simple equation that to live peacefully in the world, they need to begin by establishing peace in and among themselves, not a superficial peace that collapses by the first provocation, but a solid and lasting peace. Once this solid peace is established, the extreme violence committed in the name of Islam in the last decades — would become unthinkable and would appear in its true light: an irrational folly that has caused an incalculable damage to Islam.

Establishing such solid peace is not easy though, and it requires a sustained spiritual endeavor. The topic of spirituality is too wide and sensitive to be discussed here. The one particular thing I would like to say in this article is to mention the great contributions of the Sufis to world spirituality. Today Sufism is the most warmly accepted aspect of Islam worldwide. It is time for Moslems to re-evaluate their relationship to Sufism and to try to learn from it how to awaken in their hearts the Love of God and His creation which is a much more effective guide to keep humans on the right track than the fear of God's punishment.

This article is my answer to the question put to me by my nephew that I mention in the beginning of this article. May I end by adding one more detail which would complete my answer to his question: The reason I have left Egypt to spend my remaining years in an ashram dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is that I find this ashram to be, for me, the most suitable place, to deepen, in and around myself that solid peace I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the peace on which, in the long run, a divine life can be established on earth.

Zackaria M Moursi, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017

“If mankind only caught a glimpse of what infinite enjoyments, what perfect force, what luminous reaches of spontaneous knowledge, what wide calms of our being lie

waiting for us in the tracts which our animal evolution has not conquered, they would leave all and never rest till they had gained these treasures." Sri Aurobindo

## The Return of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan A symbolic Reverie

### Introduction

Hayy ibn Yaqzan (Arabic: Alive son of Awake), is the name of the protagonist of one of the masterpieces of the Arabic literature of the Golden Age of Islam. Its topic has been taken up, in succession, by a few of the most cosmopolitan Arabic minds. The first of these was the illustrious physician/philosopher of the 11th Century **Ibn Sina** (Latin: Avicenna). Today the story is mostly associated with the Andalusian philosopher/physician of the 12th Century **Ibn Tofail**, whose version had a profound influence on the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment in Europe. It is the story of an infant whose mother abandons it on a raft to protect his life. The child lands on an inhabited island and is raised by a gazelle without any contact with human beings. When his gazelle mother dies of old age, he tries desperately to revive her and dissects her body to find out what caused her death. This incident taught the growing child to exercise his reasoning faculties in understanding the workings of Nature. With time, he matures and reaches the highest ranges of mind and intuits the Unity of all creation and the necessity for the existence of a Maker who is the Origin of all things. Later on, a religious castaway lands on the island and joins Hayy. He teaches him human speech, and together they discover that the knowledge Hayy acquired through reasoning fully agrees with the Knowledge the religious man received from his Holy Scriptures. Ibn Tofail's story "Hay ibn Yaqzan" became, five centuries later, the model for Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" and, still later, other stories like Jungle Book and Tarzan.

Readers interested to know more than the above summary, will find good materials on the web and YouTube such as the full text of Ibn Tofail in several languages, and the original Arabic text in the form of an audio book.

I offer my symbolic story "The Return of Hayy ibn Yaqzan" as an ardent prayer that the spirit of the Golden Age of Islam, characterized by an intense seeking for Knowledge and Unity may return and replace the current spirit of defeatism, apathy and isolation.

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One day, long ago, Hayy suddenly stood in front of my house, as if he had materialized from nowhere. The house, a fine mansion that had belonged to countless generations of my family, was at the time quite dilapidated, though some signs of its bygone glory were still recognizable. My immediate ancestors had not done much to maintain it; and I, the only resident now, hadn't fared better either. To keep up appearances, I tried to keep the front yard facing the elegant quiet street in good shape, while totally neglecting the huge garden at the back of the house. The garden was all covered now by tall weeds; only a few old trees were still distinguishable in the general disarray. Only two wings of the house were used, one by myself; the other by occasional friends and family when they paid me a visit.

It was a warm and sunny spring afternoon; I was happily planting flower bulbs in the front yard, when I noticed a man standing there looking hesitantly around. I had not heard any car that might have dropped him off where he stood; and I was somewhat surprised by his sudden appearance. He was neatly dressed, had thick dark black hair and a dark tan; I thought he must be quite strong to be able to move around with such a heavy suitcase.

Advancing towards the fence, I offered my help. He asked me, in good English and an accent I could not identify, if I knew of any apartment in the immediate neighborhood he could rent for a few months. He introduced himself by his first name and added that he liked the area because of its neatness and quietness and that he would much rather have private quarters than stay in a hotel. His dignified face, and the way he spoke, filled me with so much trust and confidence, that I spontaneously offered him my vacant guest wing. He stepped in, inspected the rooms and seemed quite satisfied. A sudden inspiration moved me to tell him: "If you like, you are welcome to have my rooms; I will not charge you any rent, if you promise to help me, in return, with some manual work around the garden and the house." He jumped at my suggestion saying that renovating old houses was exactly what he loved to do, whenever he got the chance. We marveled at having reached such a fortunate arrangement for both of us in less than ten minutes.

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In the following days, I rarely saw Hayy. I used to leave for work early in the mornings; and when I came back in the afternoon, I was always delighted to discover some improvements in the property that were not there the day before. We did meet occasionally in the kitchen, which he was entitled to use. Otherwise, Hayy was quiet and retiring; hardly any sounds came to me from his quarter. The only signs of his presence were the lights showing in his windows or from under his door. From the quantity of books he received regularly at the post office, I assumed he must be filling his evenings with reading or doing some kind of research.

The ingenuity and caliber of the work Hayy was investing, day after day, in a house not his own, filled me with gratitude and appreciation. He had already done unasked in a few weeks work whose value would easily cover his rent for a year. My wish to know him better grew steadily, and I finally asked him if he would care to share dinner with me. Cooking for two, I said, was, after all, hardly more effort, and surely more satisfying, than cooking for myself alone. He thankfully accepted.

Our relationship entered a new phase. We developed the habit of spending some time chatting together after dinner. In the beginning, he had a lot to tell me about the projects he would still like to carry out for me. The material expenses for these projects were always modest and within the range I could afford, and I gladly went along with everything he suggested.

Slowly the ice of formality and reserve began to recede in front of the warmth and the cordiality steadily growing between us. At first we talked about general topics. Hayy seemed not particularly interested in the local news, but showed, on the other hand, great interest in the global issues of the day. He loved to link these issues to events of world history and to reflect upon their probable developments in the future. Whenever I dared to ask Hayy personal questions, he evaded either by skillfully changing the topic or by giving enigmatic replies which left me as much in the dark as I had been before. The few times I insisted on getting from him a clear response, he simply ignored my question and leaned back, with closed eyes, in his armchair. One time, on protesting that all I knew about him was his first name, I told Hayy I needed, for legal reasons, to know at least his full name; he was, after all, my tenant. Unperturbed, he said: "Nonsense, my first name should do; it is the name people have associated me with in the last eight hundred years!" I must admit that I did not appreciate his sense of humor. But I had learned my lesson. I decided to stop putting him under pressure and to be more cautious in approaching him in the future. Fortunately, I did find an approach that worked.

My new approach consisted in sharing more of my own life, without expecting Hayy to reciprocate. I had always wished for a close friend with whom I could converse about deeper issues of the heart. One evening, I casually mentioned to Hayy that, from time to time, I have bouts of unpleasant thoughts, feelings of loneliness and apprehensions of aging and death. To my gratification, he listened with great attention and concentration. He asked me to say more and listened silently, occasionally giving an approving nod or an expression of genuine empathy. He was very reticent in offering ready-made solutions, and whenever I specifically asked for advice, he used to say: "I do not believe in the utility of advice. Do not worry though. Someday soon you will find yourself the answers to all your questions. There is only one piece of advice that I can give you, and it is the only one you will ever get from me: to become conscious of the Divine Presence in yourself, and to surrender totally to this Presence. To live this highest knowledge concretely is a major achievement; it does not happen overnight. If you really want it, you must want it with all your heart, and you must have a lot of patience and perseverance. But you will be helped, and one day you will reach your goal."

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Days and weeks sped by. The house was being gradually transformed in front of my eyes. Every time I went into the garden, I was overwhelmed by waves of bliss and gratitude. This outer change reflected positively on my inner state and gave me ultimately the strength to make some important decisions. I stopped taking new assignments at work and started joining Hayy in completing the outstanding renovation projects. I felt carried by a new force hitherto unknown to me. My health improved considerably; headaches, insomnia, and depressions

seemed now a thing of the past. I wondered how the encounter with one human being, who concretely demonstrates to us true love and selflessness, could influence my life in such a dramatic way. Hayy's single example was enough to efface countless disappointments and setbacks I had experienced in the past.

I can recall only one incident in which Hayy went totally out of his reticence. I provoked him one evening by saying: "What are all these books you receive? One would suspect you must be trading in them!" He smiled and said: "I am glad you asked; I was waiting for an opportunity to tell you about my other interests. For ages I have been very active in building philosophical bridges, that is, in finding a synthesis between seemingly conflicting views which had divided people into camps ready to fight each other to the last breath. The ancient conflict between Matter and Soul or Nature and God has troubled humanity since times immemorial; but seems now to have been widely resolved. Then came the great conflict between Religion and Science, but humanity seems to have gone beyond that one as well. An increasing number of scientists succeed these days in harmonizing their Science with their Spiritual Convictions. Humanity is now ready for the Grand Synthesis, namely the ancient knowledge, particularly well-developed in India, that God and His Creation are **One**. If this knowledge is concretely applied, and not confined to the realm of metaphysics, it would solve all the problems afflicting the world today. I am one of many who are currently working towards narrowing the gap between the notion of God the One and Only and that of God the One and All. With some goodwill and flexibility, one can see that if God is everything, He will also necessarily be The One and Only, since nothing could exist outside Him. What I have just said might sound like irrelevant metaphysical chatter to you; but in fact, if well understood and applied, it will remove a great deal of the suspicion and alienation still separating major religious groups today, thus paving the road towards establishing a united humanity and a lasting Peace on earth."

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One marvelous autumn day, Hayy and I were silently contemplating the garden, now awash in the bright colors of trees, flowers and butterflies and the happy sounds of birds, frogs and bees, when he suddenly declared: "As you remember, my plan has been, from the beginning, to spend only a few months here. Soon I will have to leave; the call to my next assignment is becoming more urgent. The last day of this month will be my last day here."

Though I had been expecting this announcement for some time, it struck me with great force when it finally came; I had to pull together all my inner resources to control my emotions. In my agony, a faint hope shimmered through my head and made me appeal to Hayy to become the co-owner and heir to my property. My hope was that sharing the property with him would guarantee keeping our contact alive. Hayy's face lit up. He said: "What you have just said makes me very happy, but not for the reasons you would expect. I am deeply comforted to see how much progress you have made inwardly and outwardly in the last months, and I know now for sure that you will be able to progress further on your own. I cannot accept your offer, for which I thank you warmly all the same. Financially, I am well cared for, and I always receive what I need for my work. To do the kind of work I do, one should not have attachments of any kind. I have no doubt though that you will be guided and shown the best way for investing your money to the welfare of all, thus securing your own happiness."

A long pause ensued. I felt strongly the inappropriateness of words in such a moment of the soul. In addition, Hayy was in deep concentration, and I did not want to shake him out of it. He finally looked at me and said with a big smile: "I still have one request: that we spend some time meditating together in the remaining days. I suggest we meditate, for half an hour each day. We can do it after supper. It would be a great help if we refrain from all unnecessary talk. Should your meditation bring up relevant issues you would care to share, you are welcome to do that the next morning. In these meditations, I will try to establish an inner contact with you. If I succeed, it would make it easier for me to make contact from wherever I may be in the future."

His wish to maintain contact dispersed much of my gloom, and I willingly accepted his proposal. I had never done any serious meditation before, though I had developed, in the course of my education and career, some capacity for concentration. I welcomed the opportunity of meditating with a friend, whom I highly admired and who had grown to be my mentor and guide.

Already by the first meditation, I noticed a great difference. Very soon, a solid peace came down that shut out quite naturally all stray thoughts. I felt as if I had invisible wings with which I could travel instantly to distant places I had visited in earlier travels. My travels were not limited to space alone; I could as easily travel in time. In a later meditation, incidents, totally forgotten or suppressed, suddenly surfaced in my mind, in all their colorful details. I saw them now in a different light and could intuit in them significances I had never thought of before. I understood how they had influenced the overall flow of my life. Whenever painful memories surfaced, I could infuse them with new meanings, thus imbedding them in peace. In later meditations, I relived the highlights of my relationships with departed relatives and friends and recognized the deeper reasons for the experiences we shared together. In some meditations, I did not get into trance at all; I just sat quietly reviewing my life, giving thanks for all its blessings and asking for guidance and help in surmounting whatever obstacles I seemed to have at that time. I invariably experienced the next day, or soon after, that these obstacles were either removed or they proved to have had no reality in the first place.

In one of the meditations I saw my entire life as one natural sequence of events pointing in a certain direction, and I knew with certainty how I should design my future life. I decided in the meditation itself to retire at the first opportunity; I had worked long enough, and it was time for me to live according to the dictates of my soul, and not according to the necessities of life. I wondered why I had delayed taking this decision so long, since my financial situation had always been secure. A new framework for my life stood complete; all I needed was to fill in the details.

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The last day came. When it arrived, I resisted with all my strength getting sentimental about Hayy's imminent departure. All I can remember about the last meditation is that it was peaceful and blissful and much longer than all our previous meditations.

When I opened my eyes, the room was dark. My trance must have lasted for an hour or so. Hayy was not in his chair; I assumed he must have retired to his room to prepare for his early departure next morning. I went to his room and found no light shining from under the door. He must have already gone to bed. I decided to sleep on the living room sofa, to be sure I could hear him next morning and drive him to the nearby train station. When I woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. I jumped from the sofa and went directly to his room. The door was shut. All this seemed very strange to me; I opened the door and looked inside. Everything was absolutely still, and the room gave me the impression that it had not been touched for some time. I looked around for any farewell note he might have left me, but could find none. I rushed to the station in the hope his train might have had a delay. The station was very quiet; only individual passengers were moving about. I went to the ticket counter to ask about the destinations of the trains which had left early that morning. I was told there hadn't been any. The last train had left the station the evening before.

I came home with a heavy heart. The house was sparkling in golden light. I took a stroll in the garden and was immediately welcomed by the teeming and blissful life of plants, birds and insects. From the way Hayy had arranged things so he could disappear unnoticed, I knew I would probably never set eyes on him again. But he had expressed his wish to keep inner contact, and I was sure I would receive an inner sign soon. To avoid falling back into loneliness and gloom, I decided to start that same day preparing for big changes in my outer life. Since that day, I have kept up my meditations; they seemed to me the most probable means of contact.

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The last months had brought many surprises, but the last big one was yet to come. About a month after his disappearance, I happened to be in the university library not far from my house. While casually browsing the shelves in the World Literature section, I chanced on a book titled *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. The title resonated strongly with something deep inside me; I was immediately drawn to the book and opened it at random. My eyes fell on the following paragraph:

*“He next considered those Bodies which have neither Sense, Nutrition nor Growth, such as Stones, Earth, Water, Air, and Flame,.... upon which Contemplation it appeared to him that all Bodies, **as** well those that had Life, **as** those that had not, as well those that moved, as those that rested in their Natural places were **One.**”*

A few pages later I read: *“And when he perceived that all things which did exist were the one Maker’s Workmanship, he looked them over again, considering in them attentively the Power of their Author, and admiring the Wonderfulness of the Workmanship, and such accurate Wisdom and subtle Knowledge. And there appeared to him in the most minute Creatures (much more in the greater) such Footsteps and wonders of the Work of Creation, that he was swallowed up with Admiration, and fully assured that these things could not proceed from any other than an Agent of infinite Perfection, nay that was above all Perfection...”*

Suddenly lightning tore through my whole being. In a flash, I knew at last who Hayy was. All his mysterious assertions such as “having been known by that name in the last eight hundred years” and “having worked for ages on building philosophical bridges” acquired suddenly their true significance. He had come into my life to show me, by example, what it takes to guide and help other people, and he always insisted I should discover the Inner Divine Guide within myself, to be able to stand on my own feet. Since this stunning recognition, I have endeavored to follow Hayy’s example and to realize his maxim.

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Twenty years have passed since; I am now what people commonly call an “old man” — I have to say that old age is not that bad after all. Until this day, I have never shared my experience with Hayy with anyone; I saw no point in exposing myself to incredulity and ridicule. But major changes have happened in the world in these last years, and people from all walks of life and from the four quarters of the globe, have been increasingly opening to spirituality. I am now convinced that a few of these know that symbols, ideals and dreams can sometimes influence and change our lives much more strongly and positively than mere facts and so-called concrete realities. To these few I dedicate my story.

PS:

- My warmest thanks to John Robert Cornell for his perceptive editing of this story
- The two paragraphs cited above are taken from the excellent English translation of “Hayy ibn Yaqzan” made by the Orientalist Simon Ockley in the early 18th Century.

## The Need to Translate Sri Aurobindo and the Mother into Arabic

Early in the 20th Century, in India, Sri Aurobindo had major experiences that crystallized in a new vision for humanity; at about the same time, the Mother, then living in Paris, had the same vision. They both foresaw, unknown to each other, the dawn of a new consciousness of Oneness unifying humans with the entire existence, and changing them into nobler and higher beings, endowed with more knowledge and self-mastery, and thus gradually transforming earthly life into a “Life Divine”[1].

Today, early in the 21st Century, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are considered by thousands all over the world to be among the greatest spiritual figures of modern times. We find the number of those deriving guidance from their teachings rising steadily, their works being translated into most of the major world languages; books, dissertations, radio stations, songs and videos being dedicated to them. We also find that several communities around the globe, most notably the international city of Auroville in South India, have been modeled on their vision and teachings [2]. For all these reasons and many more, the translator finds it is time Sri Aurobindo and the Mother should enter the sphere of awareness of the Arabic reader.

We can witness today a new consciousness of Oneness penetrating, at an ever accelerating pace, the entire globe. The signs of unification are unmistakable: in politics and trade, in technology and science, on the web and other media, in culture and sports, and even in fashion and entertainment. Unexpected ways of living and modes of interaction are dramatically improving the quality of life in many countries of the world. The spreading of this consciousness has become for many the only hope for saving a world besieged by war, environmental degradation, social inequality, famine, fundamentalism and radicalism.

A most efficient antidote for fundamentalism, oppression and violence can be found in Indian thought which has given humanity over millennia the most sublime notions of All-unity and the most vivid examples of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Seeing the Divine everywhere and in all beings, Indian thought has always called for reverence, compassion and gentleness, not only toward other human beings, but toward all forms of animate and inanimate life. The Divine is worshipped in India, not only as the omnipotent Creator, but also as the Mother of the Universe, who not only cares for the smallest of her creations, but also feels them as intimate parts of her own being. In this worldview, violence against humans, animals or nature would be violence against the Divine Mother herself. The main attitude of Indian thought towards the Divine is not just an attitude of veneration and awe, but also, and foremost, that of love and adoration. Though Sri Aurobindo and the Mother based themselves on Indian thought, they did not stop there: they were equally at home in Western thought, and in a perfect synthesis of both, they fashioned their own sublime vision that aims at realizing heaven on earth.

The teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, referred to as the Integral Yoga, are about a new consciousness and about practical psychology [3] and have nothing to do with religious ideologies [4] or with world renunciation or with occultism and so-called supra-normal phenomena. They hold rather that man is a transitional being evolving to the “beyond man” or “superman”[5] and that humans are capable of consciously participating in their own evolution. These teachings are about transforming the human into a higher and nobler being, a transformation that can be carried out methodically and without recourse to occult powers or artificial “miracles”. In the same way as science discovers the laws governing the outer working of Nature and uses these laws to change the physical world, yoga discovers the laws that govern the inner workings of Nature and utilizes them to effect the transformation of mankind itself. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother did not conceal the difficulty of their yoga. They maintained that although the transformation of human nature was considered impossible in the past due to its extreme difficulty, it can be done and concrete results can be achieved within one human life-span.

The Integral Yoga is a yoga of self-giving to the Divine and requires not only a long preparation and an integral education of the being, but also sincerity, fortitude and one-pointed determination. It is evident that these are matters that cannot be attained overnight. Fortunately though, the difficulty applies only to the early stages of practice. Many of those who have practiced the Integral Yoga long enough with dedication, have testified that, in the measure that their nature was transformed, a power, greater than their own, took up the charge of their progress, so that, in its advanced stages, the practice became a happy and spontaneous progression from “light to light”, and from “joy to joy”.

The aim of the Integral Yoga is not an escape from this world to a world of peace and bliss beyond, but rather the transformation of this very life from a life beset with misery, violence, sorrow and pain, to a “Life Divine”. Nor does the Integral Yoga lay down a uniform path for everyone to follow, but shows each individual how to develop and walk his/her own path guided by his/her own inner Light. It does not promise rewards in this life or in a life hereafter, though rewards, unexpected and undreamt of, are sure to come.

The readers who will appreciate and benefit the most from the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are those who are able to see that Truth has many facets, and are thus open to accept the validity of views other than their own inherited beliefs. These teachings requires a mind supple and flexible enough to recognize that the same words can carry different shades of meaning depending on their context, and on whether they are meant in a literal, metaphorical or poetical sense.

The works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother do not disclose themselves fully on a first or a hasty reading. One has often to reread them and to allow oneself enough time for truly understanding and assimilating.

Those who follow this path experience a noticeable change in their own consciousness, and as a result of that, positive change in their lives. They find themselves pursuing their inner quest and journey free from fear and doubt. By slowly discovering the true value of things, they become able to look with a smile upon many of the life problems that had hitherto seemed intractable to them. They learn to work with greater energy and to find joy in whatever work they may be doing and to derive happiness from things they did not even notice before. They discover that they need less material things, while being yet able to surround themselves with abundance, beauty, serenity and meaning. They discover that the joy of self-giving far outweighs the joys they used to claim from life and others. They experience how the growing peace within themselves reflects positively on their health, and learn how to avoid and even heal many of the minor ailments that used formerly to trouble them. And finally, they become in a far better position to overcome their own weaknesses and resistances, to discern the meaning of things that happens to them, and to perceive the Grace that is guiding every step of their lives.

When we follow sincerely our own calling and persevere on our chosen path; we arrive one day at the highest truth: that all beings are but different modes and manifestations of the One and Multiple Supreme, and that we are, therefore, entitled to and capable of realizing Him in ourselves and manifesting Him in our lives.

May the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother bring the Arabic reader as much peace, strength and happiness as they have brought me.

August 2014

#### References

[1] The title of one of Sri Aurobindo's major works

[2] See: <http://www.auroville.org>

[3] "Yoga is nothing but practical psychology", Sri Aurobindo, Centenary Library, 22:32 [4] "I may say that it is far from my purpose to propagate any religion, new or old, for humanity in the future. A way to be opened that is still blocked, not a religion to be founded, is my conception of the matter." Sri Aurobindo, "on Himself", 1335, p. 125

[5] The being that will replace man as the next step in natural evolution whose mind will attain to the Supermind or the Truth Consciousness.

<http://www.SriAurobindo-inArabic.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UoCGpjijg>

## Sri Aurobindo and J.S. Bach

A personal experience

More than half a century ago, I left Egypt, at the age of twenty-one, to pursue graduate studies in Germany. The memoirs of how Europe impacted me I have included in an autobiographical short story titled "Preparing for the Winter Journey."<sup>1</sup> Today, I reuse a small part of these memoirs as a backdrop for the following experience:

Soon after my arrival in Germany, while leisurely turning the dial of my radio, I discovered Western classical music. Immediately a whole new world opened for me. Music soon became the haven in which I took shelter at the end of days filled with technical and mental work. As a student, I had the good fortune of renting a room in an apartment owned by a lady of some culture, who encouraged me to buy a piano and allowed me to place it and practice in her living room. She introduced me to a pianist of some renown who agreed to teach me from scratch. He did not believe in the efficacy of finger exercises, and started me immediately on the C-major Two-part Invention of Bach. This short invention, my first piece ever, I practiced for hours every day over seven months without ever tiring of it. It was the beginning of an "addiction" to Bach whose music had triggered a first psychic opening in me.

At about the same time, I came across the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (the story of how these writings have impacted me I have published under the title "The Encounter."<sup>2</sup>) I was extremely mentally lopsided in those days and, for a long time, I had to inch my way patiently and laboriously into the world of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother until they ultimately became the center and the circumference of my life. Amazingly, my entry in the world of music happened, in contrast, almost instantly, though I cannot claim any inborn musical talents..

Since these early days, half a century ago, to this day, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have been my "staff of life," while Bach has remained my main emotional-vital support. Strangely, during all this time, I took this happy arrangement for granted and was not aware of any special link between these great masters filling my life. Recently, one such link dawned on me through a remark made by the French philosopher G. Deleuze<sup>3</sup> in a talk he gave in 1978 titled "What is the Creative Act?"<sup>4</sup> Following are some excerpts from this talk:

"...there is a fundamental affinity between a work of art and an act of resistance... What is this mysterious relationship between a work of art and an act of resistance when the men and women who resist have neither the time nor sometimes even the culture necessary to have the slightest connection with art? I do not know. Malraux<sup>5</sup> developed an admirable philosophical concept. He said something very simple about art. He said it was the only thing that resists death. Think about it... what resists death? You only have to look at a statuette from three thousand years before the Common Era to see that Malraux's statement is a pretty good one. Bach's music is an act of resistance, an active struggle against the separation of the profane and the sacred..."

For Deleuze, Art plays the same role Yoga plays for Sri Aurobindo. Both art and yoga resist the paralysis of the soul under the weight of unconsciousness. Deleuze's call ties well with the one Sri Aurobindo sounded sixty years earlier: "... the **soul**, the inner being, its powers, its possibilities, its growth, its expression and the creation of a true, beautiful and helpful environment for it — (is) the **one thing of first and last importance**."<sup>6</sup> The unification of the Sacred and the Profane is the cornerstone of the yoga of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother who always maintained that "All Life is Yoga" and who dedicated their lives towards establishing the Life Divine on earth.

While listening to Bach's cantatas and passions, I often wondered how, in scenes describing Christ's sufferings, his music can be so full of an infinitely tender sorrow and, at the same time, of a sublimely divine joy. In fact, some of his movements are so joyous as to qualify as an invitation to dance (for instance, the 'cum spiritu sanctu' of the B-minor mass<sup>7</sup>). Instead of lamenting, Bach celebrates Christ's consummation of his mission in much the same way as Sri Aurobindo does in the following lines from His epic Savitri:

"It is finished, the dread mysterious sacrifice,  
Offered by God's martyred body for the world; ....  
He has trod with bleeding brow the Saviour's way.  
He who has found his identity with God  
Pays with the body's death his soul's vast light<sup>8</sup>."

In her last years, the Mother spoke increasingly of vibrations tying the whole universe together. One can only marvel at how a common divine vibration acted across space and time and moved the Avatars of the Supermind Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and "the immortal god of harmony,"<sup>9</sup> Bach, to elevate life and resist death with such irresistible power and mastery — thus helping humanity on its way to the Life Divine.

1) <http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/preparing-winter-journey.pdf>

2) <http://www.sriarobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/en-encounter.pdf>

3) Gilles Deleuze: *The Seven Quartets of Becoming*, Debashish Banerji

4) Gilles Deleuze: What is the Creative Act? [http://youtu.be/a\\_hifamdISs](http://youtu.be/a_hifamdISs)

5) André Malraux: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9\\_Malraux](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_Malraux)

6) Sri Aurobindo, *The Coming of the Subjective Age, The Human Cycle*

7) Bach, B minor mass: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7F7TVM8m95Y>

8) Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Book 6, Canto 2

9) According to Beethoven's homage to Bach.

PS: My sincere thanks to John Robert Cornell for his gracious editing of this little article.