

# Integral Education: Founding Vision and Principles

Bahman A.K. Shirazi<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This introductory article gives a brief account of the founding vision and ontological and epistemological principles of the integral framework expounded by Haridas Chaudhuri and some of his original collaborators at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). A brief biographical account of Sri Aurobindo and Mother Mirra Alfassa, originators of integral yoga and education, is provided and some of the principle tenets of an integral worldview that informs the philosophy of integral education are discussed.

**Keywords:** Haridas Chaudhuri, integral education, integral philosophy, integral worldview, Mother Mirra Alfassa, Sri Aurobindo.

## Introduction

The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be regarded as a crucial turning point in the history of the evolution of consciousness on our planet Earth—the beginning of profound transformations of consciousness marked by a significant leap from a predominantly mind-centered consciousness, to an emerging all-inclusive, spirit-centered integral consciousness.

Jean Gebser was one of few western visionary philosophers who had anticipated the arrival of this new modality of consciousness. Before him, others such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Rudolph Steiner also offered world views that indicated that a certain convergence and a culmination point in the long history of terrestrial evolution could be anticipated. Moreover, beginning in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eastern movements such as the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement, Meher Baba's work, and the eastern-inspired theosophical movement were also exploring and preparing the grounds for the arrival of this new era. The most explicit and pragmatic work in the adventures and the advent of integral consciousness, however, may be credited to the works Sri Aurobindo and Mother Mirra Alfassa, the originators of integral yoga.

Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950) was India's foremost philosopher, poet, and spiritual figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At age seven he was sent to England where he mastered Western classical literature and languages. He returned to India at age twenty-one and soon mastered classical Indian literature and languages as well. He was active in the Indian independence movement until 1910 when he moved to Pondicherry to pursue his spiritual work. From 1910 to 1950 his spiritual practice focused on the reconciliation of the spiritual and

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<sup>1</sup> Bahman A.K. Shirazi, PhD is archivist and adjunct faculty at the California Institute of Integral Studies. For nearly three decades he has studied, taught, and worked in a number of academic and administrative roles at CIIS. Bahman's main academic focus has been in the areas of integral, transpersonal, and Sufi psychologies in which he has published a number of book chapters and articles and presented at a number of international conferences. He organizes an annual symposium on integral consciousness at CIIS. [bshirazi@ciis.edu](mailto:bshirazi@ciis.edu)



material realities with the ultimate goal of utilizing the most powerful spiritual forces to accelerate and transform human evolution. He recognized that the current human state of consciousness is merely a transitional state with endless potential for spiritual development and called for the integration of Eastern and Western cultural and knowledge traditions.

Sri Aurobindo rejected the notion of illusoriness of the phenomenal world and recognized spiritual and material realities as equally real dimensions of a whole and indivisible spectrum of reality. He reconciled several major schools of Vedanta with the essential teachings of the Tantric approach, thus synthesizing a comprehensive approach known as Integral Yoga, emphasizing a balanced approach to spiritual development with equal emphasis on knowledge/wisdom, love/compassion and action.

He stressed the purposefulness of human life on earth as embodiment of spirit and taught that human suffering stems from ignorance and unconsciousness due to disharmony between physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions. He rejected the world-negating as well as individualistic approaches to spiritual development as escapism and embraced embodied spirituality and the reintegration of the feminine Divine. (Shirazi, 2009a)

The Mother (Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973) was an extraordinary mystic and spiritual leader, and was Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator. As a child she had a series of spiritual experiences leading to her realization of the Divine. She was also an accomplished artist, musician, and writer. In 1914 she met Sri Aurobindo and six years later joined him in Pondicherry where she stayed for the rest of her life to collaborate with him in his spiritual mission aimed at complete transformation of human consciousness.

The Mother oversaw the daily activities of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, founded the International Centre of Education, and in 1968 founded Auroville, an experimental international community devoted to human unity. The Mother's spiritual work was concerned with activation of the highest human spiritual potential and the transformation of the physical body at the cellular level (Shirazi, 2009b). Sri Aurobindo and the Mother affirmed on numerous occasions that their consciousness were one and the same.

Haridas Chaudhuri (1913-1975), an Indian professor of philosophy who wrote the first doctoral dissertation on the works of Sri Aurobindo stated:

The philosophy of Sri Aurobindo is all-comprehending in its integration of the past, and prophetic in its vision of the future. As a connected view of the totality of existence, it brings to light the ultimate unifying principle of life. On the basis of a balanced appreciation of the multifarious values of life, it shows how to reconcile the various conflicts of our human existence. Out of a broad survey of cosmic evolution it evolves a creative idea which bids fair to impart a new rhythm to the historical order. In reaffirming the central truths of ancient wisdom in the context of our present-day problems, it creates new values and opens up new vistas of human progress. In an endeavor to meet the challenge of the present age, it gives a new dynamic form to the spiritual heritage of the human race—a unified and integrated form to the highest cultural values of East and West.

With a penetrative insight into the profound meaning of life it lays the foundation for a complete art of harmonious and creative living. (Chaudhuri & Spiegelberg, 1960, p. 17)

In the fall of 1950 Haridas Chaudhuri was invited by Frederick Spiegelberg—a spirited professor of Indic and Slavic studies at Stanford University who was charged with the task of forming the core faculty of a new and unique pioneering graduate school called the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco—to come to America to bring his expertise on Integral yoga and philosophy to a dynamic educational exchange that made a major contribution to the cultural and spiritual life of the San Francisco Bay Area, and eventually to other parts of the western hemisphere. Later Chaudhuri implemented his integral vision of higher education in the initial curriculum design at the California Institute of Asian (now Integral) Studies.

The following statement by Chaudhuri provides the context in which the need for an integral approach to education becomes apparent.

The widespread discontent of modern youth the world over is a manifestation of the hunger of the soul for authentic and universal spiritual values. It is also an expression of disenchantment with established educational systems with their overemphasis upon intellectual, vocational, and technological values. Out of the inner anguish of fragmented living, there is a passionate reaching out for wholeness of being. Without the balancing of the intellectual with the emotional, the vocational with the spiritual, and the technological with the humanistic dimensions of human existence, it is rightly felt that man cannot be fully human. Nor can he be fully happy without the full flowering of the holistic urge inherent in life. (Chaudhuri, 1974, p. 50)

This is as relevant today as it was at the time of the publication of this statement.

Shortly before his passing Chaudhuri summarized his basic ideas on integral education in an article titled *Education for the Whole Person*. He wrote: "... integral or holistic education does no doubt pose a serious challenge to all those responsible for curricular development in educational institutions. It poses a new responsibility of serious proportions upon all teachers and educators with sincere dedication" (Chaudhuri, 1974, p. 51).

He summarized his fundamental principles of integral education in the need for inclusion of following five aspects: "(1) The physical or bodily aspect; (2) The socio-ethical aspect; (3) The instinctual-emotional aspect; (4) The cognitive-pragmatic-vocational aspect; (5) The religious-mystical-humanistic aspect." (p. 51) These various dimensions were consequently reflected in the academic curricula of CIIS programs in the 1970s, 80s and 90s and class syllabi were structured according to three broad dimensions: Cognitive/didactic, experiential/self-reflective, and applied/practical.

As Ryan (2005) summarized:

There may be numerous facets to the ideal 'Integral' education, but three stand out. First, the Integralists believed that education should be of the whole human being; it must involve the physical, the emotional, the mental, and the spiritual. Second, it must be global and have

reference to the, “total human situation” ... Third, it must attempt to surmount the contradictions and antagonisms inherent in ordinary human cultural and philosophical positioning. (p. 25)

A more systematic attempt was undertaken in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century at CIIS to reflect on what integral education means and how various academic programs interpret and apply its principles and practices in their respective fields. As part of this process, the Integral Education Committee produced the following definition for integral education.

Education at CIIS is designed to foster rigorous intellectual development and personal growth through self-reflection. We believe that teaching and learning are most effective when they recognize and reflect diverse ways of knowing and connect difference and similarity. CIIS advances the education of the whole person (body, mind and spirit) by integrating knowledge of the interior and exterior dimensions of our lives. Committed to building a better and more inclusive world, academic programs encourage students to pursue inquiry that transcends disciplinary boundaries and situates their work in communities outside their own.

Some of the work of the members of the Integral Education Committee and other faculty were published in two consecutive issues (fall 2005 and winter 2006) of the journal *ReVision*.

In his CIIS commencement address, Parker Palmer (2007), a contemporary leader in holistic education, described CIIS in the following way.

What happens at CIIS is very nearly unique in the world of higher education. It is also revolutionary, and probably has more revolutionary potential than those of us who are dedicated to this form of education may realize.... And what is the revolution I have in mind? It's an intellectual and cultural transformation that takes the reality and power of the inner world just as seriously as our culture takes the reality and power of the outer world. It's a revolution that links inner and outer, that rejoins soul and role, that understands that the world we live in is constantly being co-created by the interplay of what is within us and what is around us. It's a revolution in which we understand that no one is truly educated until heart and mind have been joined with action and we have learned to think and act the world together rather than think and act the world apart.

## **Integral Worldview: Fundamental Assumptions**

In the chapter on education, in his book, *The Evolution of Integral Consciousness*, Chaudhuri wrote:

We are living in the twentieth century and we are citizens of the world. It is for us to be able to draw on the limitless wisdom of East and West and North and South. That is the great privilege of modern man. The cultural heritage of the entire human race is open to him. Wherever there is truth, wherever there is wisdom, we can freely draw upon it and bring it together in a grand synthesis. (Chaudhuri, 1977, p. 43)

Based on my conversations over several years with two of Haridas Chaudhuri's closest colleagues and founders of the first two programs at CIIS, Paul Herman and Dionne Sommers, I have put together the following list of ontological and epistemological principles and assumptions that inform the integral worldview and, by extension, the philosophy of integral education.

1. Balance and harmony are the ultimate laws of life and the essential goal of existence;
2. Experience of higher truths presuppose and result from an integration of all levels of consciousness: unconscious, sub-conscious, conscious, and supra-conscious;
3. Highly integrated consciousness is characterized by transcendence of the dualistic framework characteristic of mentally-dominated consciousness (the common fabric of human consciousness at the present stage of evolution);
4. At highly integrated spheres of consciousness the duality between subject and objects of experience (self vs. the universe) disappears;
5. Duality reflects the polarized structure of reality; it is a fact of life. Dualism, or dualistic thinking, however, is the natural product of the ordinary mental functions that results in perception of opposites as essentially independent (rather than complementary) aspects of a vaster unified reality;
6. Reality is a multidimensional whole. All diversified appearances are expressions of a unified whole;
7. Due to this multidimensional nature of reality all *truths* are valid in specific places for specific durations of time;
8. Any principle taken to its extreme transforms into its own opposite;
9. Reality can be found half way between truths and falsehoods;
10. Truths and falsehoods are characteristics of statements or theses about reality. Reality transcends truth-and-falsehoods;
11. Increasingly holistic truths can be arrived at through the method of *integral dialectics* (also known as dialectical synthesis);
12. Integral dialectics is the application of an organismic dialectical process to the totality of human *onto-psycho-somatic* (spirit/mind/body) organism;
13. Symbolic abstractions (such as language and thought etc.) are not capable of representing the whole of reality;
14. The same truth can be expressed in different conceptual frameworks.

## Key Assumptions of a Holistic Paradigm in Healing

The integral framework holds that healing and wholeness are intimately interconnected. As the etymology suggests, the Greek word *holos* is the common root of the terms: healing, health and wholeness.

1. Human beings have a natural right to, and an *innate potential for, wholeness*; and *urge toward wholeness* is the primary motive in human life;
2. This essential wholeness is already present at the innermost core of the human psyche and our evolutionary challenge is to manifest this wholeness in our embodied existence;
3. Healing is the process of *restoration of wholeness*;
4. Reality is more than a mental construction—it is *non-dual* and *multidimensional*;

5. This implies that mentally constructed categories and labels about mental health or illness are not always capable of representing the more complex reality of lived experience. To fully understand human developmental growth and its impediments, one must take into account the uniqueness of each individual;
6. Mental disorders are not ultimately separable from physical, emotional, and spiritual problems; therefore, diagnoses and interventions must take into account the whole person; often symptoms manifested at one level have roots originating at another level.
7. Psychological disorders may be multi-faceted and their causes are not always reducible to physical (genetic or biological/biochemical) factors.
8. We need to have viable models for understanding human health and wholeness, rather than the current clinical models that tend to use only pathological categories for clinical assessment and treatment.

In the larger world today, there is a need for new viable models of optimal psychological health and healing based on the whole-person understanding. Clinical and psychotherapeutic assessment is still done primarily on the basis of psychopathology and clinical categories. Such models need to take into account not only mental, but emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions of human existence and their complex relationship during the course of lifespan development.

Almost half of CIIS students are enrolled in counseling and clinical psychology programs that acknowledge and work with the above principles in their academic and professional training.

I conclude with the following words by Haridas Chaudhuri:

We are going through a very transitional period of terrestrial evolution. In this period of transition and transitional crises, all the latent contradictions and discrepancies of human nature come to the foreground of our consciousness, resulting in a very chaotic situation in the fact that we see so much darkness around us. However, Aurobindo reminds us that the night is darkest before the dawn. It is also the strategy of nature that, as these things come to the front, as our problems come out in all their nakedness, we have a chance to understand them, and do something about them. The problems that we see today—the problems of division and separation, the problems of conflict and crisis—are ultimately traceable to the level of consciousness on which we are functioning now; that is, the mental level. (Chaudhuri, 1979, p. 6)

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