

From Lawyer to Activist and from Activist to Sage: Perspectives on Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo¹

By Pamela Frydman²

“True knowledge is not attained by thinking. It is what you are; it is what you become.”³
-- Aurobindo Ghose (“Sri Aurobindo”)

“You must be the change you want to see in the world.”⁴
-- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (“Mahatma Gandhi” or “Gandhi”)

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The Practice of Renunciation

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*. *Korban* is related to the word *karov*, which mean “close.” The purpose of a sacrifice is to bring us close to our divine root. The Christian Lenten season (Lent) is a time for Christians to draw close to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit while counting the forty days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (not counting the Sundays). During Lent, many Christians give up something, such as a certain food, beverage, habit or enjoyable activity. This type giving up, or offering up, is a form of fasting, and it is also a form of sacrifice. For a carnivore to give up meat during Lent would mean that the carnivore is engaging in a meat fast. For a lover of dessert to give up desserts during Lent would mean engaging in a dessert fast.

There is a Jewish practice called *sefirat ha'omer*, or counting the omer. Omer means sheaf – or bundle – and refers to a sheaf of barley that ancient Israelite farmers would bring as a sacrifice on the second day of the Festival of Passover. Jewish people count forty-nine days from the bringing of the omer on Passover to the day before *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks.⁵ For approximate thirty-two of the forty-nine days of counting of the omer, Jewish people engage in renunciation, by not getting married, not cutting the hair, not listening to music, not purchasing new clothing, and not wearing new clothing.⁶ The Muslim practice of Ramadan is another example of engaging in renunciation in order to deepen spiritually. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn in the early morning until sunset in the evening, Ramadan is also a time for increased religious observance, self-

¹ I wish to dedicate this paper to Joe and Guin Miller who introduced me to Sri Aurobindo.

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³ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5867530.Sri_Aurobindo

⁴ <http://www.dailygood.org/story/466/gandhi-s-10-rules-for-changing-the-world-henrik-edberg/>

⁵ The Feast of Weeks, called *Shavuot* in Hebrew, begins on the fiftieth day after the ancient Israelites brought their sacrifice of an omer (sheaf) of barley. The Christian Pentacost is a parallel holy day. “Pentacost” is related to a Greek word meaning fiftieth.

⁶ Ultra Orthodox, Orthodox and Conservative Jews do not hold marriage ceremonies for approximately 32 of the 49 days of the omer. However, one may become engaged to marry during those days. Hair cuts and the purchase of new clothes and the wearing of new clothes are also not allowed. However, if there is a special reason why they are needed – such as to look attractive when seeking a mate for the purpose of marriage – then one may do so. Listening to music is allowed as part of worship and celebrations. Singing is especially welcome on the Sabbath.

reflection and turning away from undesirable behaviors and impure thoughts. The Muslim practice of Ramadan, the Christian practice of Lent and the Jewish practice of counting the omer are religious practices that help the practitioner to deepen spirituality while affirming their faith.

The Hindu practice of mauna⁷ is the practice of refinement through silence. Giving up speech and being in silence changes our relationship with the outer world which can no longer hear us. And it also changes our relationship with the inner world of our own being. Some people remain in silence for a couple of hours. Others are silent for one whole day, while still others maintain silence for weeks, months or years. Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi each engaged in the practice of mauna – refinement through silence. Gandhi practiced mauna on Mondays for many years. Sri Aurobindo practiced continuous mauna day in and day out for years and he also spent years in seclusion coming out to be with his disciples just three times a year for a day of blessing ceremony. There are many lenses through which one may endeavour to deepen our understanding of Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo. This paper is an exploration through the lens of the practice of mauna.

The Indian sage Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi⁸ (Ramana Maharshi) taught that mauna is a state beyond speech and thought during which one lives "without the ego-sense."⁹

This is also described on the website of the Ashram at Auroville that grew around Sri Aurobindo during his early years of continuous mauna practice:

The teaching of Sri Aurobindo starts from that of the ancient sages of India that behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that One Self and Spirit but divided by a certain separativity of consciousness, an ignorance of their true Self and Reality in the mind, life and body. It is possible by a certain psychological discipline to remove this veil of separative consciousness and become aware of the true Self, the Divinity within us and all.¹⁰

Gandhi's Weekly Mauna Practice

Let us seriously consider Gandhi's practice of silent mauna every Monday. Imagine that on Mondays, one devotes the day to the practice of silence and does not speak for the entire day. Either one's communications are in complete silence, or one commits his or her communications to writing such that the vocal cords remain silent, but the pen or the keyboard is active. When one has engaged in the practice of silent Mondays for an entire year, one will have been in silence for approximately one seventh of the waking hours during that year.

If you were to observe silence each Monday, what would you plan to do on Mondays? How would your Mondays affect the rest of your week? When you open your mouth to speak on Tuesday, how would your previous day of silence affect your thoughts and what comes out of your mouth as you begin to speak? How would your practice of mauna influence the emanations of your soul as they pour in and out of your consciousness on speaking days and on days of silence?

⁷ Mauna may also be spelled mouna in English.

⁸ See <http://www.sriramanamaharshi.org> for a bit of background on Ramana Maharshi.

⁹ Pranav Khullar, "When Silence Becomes the Medium of Profundity," *The Times of India*, January 18, 2007.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/When-Silence-Becomes-the-Medium-of-Profundity/articleshow/1258054.cms>

¹⁰ <http://www.auroville.org/contents/575>

I believe that contemplating these questions, and others questions, might well be part of an exploration of who was Mahatma Gandhi and how did he accomplish what he did for his own self-realisation, for the Indian movement toward independence and as an example for all of humanity.

Gandhi is famous for many short concise sound bites, although perhaps we should call them word bites, because we may not know for sure whether a particular famous phrase, sentence or paragraph was first conceived on a speaking day or a day of silence. Here is an example of a famous sentence and a famous paragraph attributed to Mahatma Gandhi:

There are many causes that I am prepared to die for but no cause that I am prepared to kill for.¹¹

A customer is the most important person on the premises. He is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption of our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider to our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so.¹²

Sri Aurobindo's early life

Let us now turn the attention to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo was born in Kalkuta, India in 1872. He was educated in England beginning at the age of seven and he returned to India at the age of 21. Sri Aurobindo began his career as an academic, and then, at age 30, he became a political activist working and agitating toward Indian independence. At age 38, Sri Aurobindo retired from political activism because of an inner calling to deepen his spiritual practice, and he entered into long periods of silent yoga and seclusion. During Sri Aurobindo's activist years, he was prosecuted and he eventually spent time in jail. The website of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram carries the following insight into Sri Aurobindo's thinking about Indian Home Rule and his turn toward a deeper spiritual practice:

For a time he thought that the necessary training must first be given through a less advanced Home Rule movement or an agitation of passive resistance of the kind created by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa. But he saw that the hour of these movements had not come and that he himself was not their destined leader. Moreover, since his twelve months' detention in the Alipore Jail, which had been spent entirely in practice of Yoga, his inner spiritual life was pressing upon him for an exclusive concentration. He resolved therefore to withdraw from the political field, at least for a time.¹³

Gandhi's early life

Let us now turn the attention to Gandhi. Gandhi was born in Porbandar, India in 1869. He studied law in accordance with his parents' wishes, first in India and then in England. After passing the English bar, Gandhi returned to India and began to practice as a lawyer. However, he found it to be very difficult, both because he was naïve and also because he was very shy. After a short time, Gandhi accepted a job with an Indian firm in South Africa where he remained for the next 21 years. While practicing law in

¹¹ <http://zenhabits.net/mahatma-gandhis-5-teachings-to-bring-about-world-peace/>

¹² From a poster displayed at the Bombay Sardovaya Mandal, Gandhi Book Centre and found on the Comprehensive Website by Gandhian Institutions (CWGI) - Bombay Sardovaya Mandal and Gandhi Research Foundation, <http://www.mkgandhi.org/about-us.html>.

¹³ <http://www.auroville.org/contents/575>

South Africa, Gandhi began his social justice activism by railing against the injustices of racial segregation. Gandhi returned to India in 1916 at the age of 47.¹⁴

The silent seclusion of Sri Aurobindo

By the time Gandhi returned to India in 1916, Sri Aurobindo had been in silence for nearly six years and he was engaged in writing for a monthly publication called *The Arya*. Over the years that Sri Aurobindo was in silence and seclusion, he attracted students who came to live near him. At first, there were just three or four students who renounced their everyday lives to engage in deep spiritual practice in the close proximity of their teacher. Over time, more and more students came to live near Sri Aurobindo and an ashram grew up around him consisting of approximately 150 devotees. Sri Aurobindo had a disciple who became his successor. She was called *The Mother*. Disciples at the ashram were required to keep a diary. Every day, the disciples' diaries were brought to Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother* who would read the diaries and write letters to the disciples. Between Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*, approximately 200 letters were written every day.

Imagine the magnetism of a former politician whose political pursuits were so intensely controversial to the British government that he was prosecuted numerous times and jailed more than once. The magnetism of this silent giant continued to appear on the written page of private letters to his disciples and public pages of articles and books that were published and distributed far and wide. Sri Aurobindo's writings pierced the hearts and minds of those who read his work. His disciples lived near him in order to feel his presence even though they only saw him three times a year when he emerged from seclusion and participated in a day long blessing ceremony. The British continued to be concerned about Sri Aurobindo even when he was in silence and seclusion, and they had officials stationed near the ashram to watch over it.

Gandhi attempts to meet Sri Aurobindo

By 1933, Mahatma Gandhi was a leader of the struggle for Indian independence. He was planning to be in Pondicherry the following year as part of his campaign to free untouchables from their plight. Gandhi endeavoured to arrange a meeting with Sri Aurobindo during the time that he anticipated being in Pondicherry. Gandhi's desire to meet Sri Aurobindo was long in the making, and likely began in the days when he read Sri Aurobindo's writing while he himself was in prison in South Africa.

By 1933, when Gandhi requested a meeting with Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo had been in continuous seclusion since 1926 and he did not wish to break his seclusion in order to meet with Gandhi. It is important to keep in mind that Sri Aurobindo's spiritual path was a path to which he felt that he had been guided. This was not a matter of a person asking himself, "how long can I hold out in seclusion?". Rather, it was a matter of feeling that he was called to the practice of silence and seclusion in order to attain a certain level of realisation. That realisation, and its continuity to fruition, were important to Sri Aurobindo, and on the face his communications with Gandhi, it appears that he refused to meet with Gandhi because of his continuing practice of seclusion. In reading their correspondence, however, it appears that there may have also been other factors that influenced Sri Aurobindo's decision to not meet Gandhi.

¹⁴ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Gandhi: An Autobiography - The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Mahadev H. Desai (Translator), Sissela Bok (Foreword). (Beacon Press: 1993). See also Charles R. DiSalvo, *M.K. Gandhi, Attorney at Law: The Man before the Mahatma*. (University of California Press: 2013). See also Glynis Board, "Gandhi's Life as a Lawyer Revealed," Public Broadcasting. <http://wvpublic.org/post/gandhis-life-lawyer-revealed>

Below are three letters that appear on the website entitled, “Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.” The first letter is from Gandhi to a person named Govinbhai Patel, the second is from Govindbhai to Sri Aurobindo, and the third is from Sri Aurobindo to Govindbhai.¹⁵

[From Gandhi to Govindbhai Patel at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram]

December 25, 1933. Bhai Govindbhai: On receipt of your letter I inquired and learnt that an invitation had been received from Pondicherry, and most probably I shall be visiting the place. If I go, I should certainly like to call on Shri Aurobindo. It would be a great disappointment to me if I could not see him. If, therefore, you can arrange for a meeting without much fuss, please do so. After the programme is finalized, I also will write and request for an interview.¹⁶

[From Govindbhai Patel to Sri Aurobindo] 28 December 1933. Here is a postcard from Gandhi. If you think he can receive something from you, please grant him permission to meet you.

[From Sri Aurobindo to Govindbhai Patel] You will have to write that I am unable to see him because for a long time past I have made it an absolute rule not to have any interview with anyone—that I do not even speak with my disciples and only give a silent blessing to them three times a year. All requests for an interview from others I have been obliged to refuse. This rule has been imposed on me by the necessity of my *sadhana* and is not at all a matter of convenience or anything else. The time has not come when I can depart from it.¹⁷

Early in Gandhi’s legal career when he was practicing law in India, he was unable to fulfill a commitment in a case because he was too shy to argue the case in court. It seems that Gandhi overcame his shyness well enough to practice law and become an activist in South Africa. After returning to India and becoming a leader in the independence movement, Gandhi seems to have further overcome his inability to speak up. By the time Gandhi wrote the letter below to Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi had not only overcome his shyness, but he had also attained a capacity for aggressive persuasion:

2 January 1934, addressed from “M. K. Gandhi” to Sri Aurobindo: . . . Perhaps you know that ever since my return to India I have been anxious to meet you face to face. Not being able to do that, I sent my son to you. Now that it is almost certain that I am to be in Pondicherry, will you spare me a few minutes & see me! I know how reluctant you are to see anybody. But if you are under no positive vow of abstinence, I hope you will give me a few minutes of your time. . . .

¹⁵ As we know, “bhai” means “brother” in many relevant languages. In addition, Govindbhai is described on the website as an “Ashram inmate.” For those not familiar with the expression “inmate” is used in Indian English and certain other forms of English to mean someone staying in that location, such as a “hostel inmate” who would be a person residing in a hostel while traveling.

¹⁶ <https://auomere.wordpress.com/2012/09/14/mahatma-gandhis-aborted-1934-attempt-to-meet-sri-aurobindo/#more-8787>. All subsequent correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Govindbhai were available on this website as of the time of the writing of this paper.

¹⁷ <https://auomere.wordpress.com/2012/09/14/mahatma-gandhis-aborted-1934-attempt-to-meet-sri-aurobindo/>

Below is Sri Aurobindo's reply:

[From Sri Aurobindo to Mahatma Gandhi:] Dear Mahatmaji, It is true that I have made no vow, for I never make one, but my retirement is not less binding on me so long as it—and the reason for it—lasts. I think you will understand that it is not a personal or mental choice but something impersonal from a deeper source for the inner necessity of work and *sadhana*. It prevents me from receiving you but I cannot do otherwise than keep to the rule I have adhered to for some years past.

According to the website of Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, the delivery of Sri Aurobindo's letter was delayed, and Gandhi wrote again to Govindbhai:

[From Mahatma Gandhi to Govindbhai] January 12, 1934, Bhai Govindbhai, I have written to you saying that I had written a long letter to Shri Aurobindo. I have received no reply till today. I have written to you in reply to your English letter, too, and said that you may ask me any questions you wish to when we meet.

It says on the website: "Sri Aurobindo surmised (correctly) that his letter must have been intercepted by the British intelligence agency. Gandhi was being closely monitored by the British to ensure that he kept his pledge of eschewing political agitation during the untouchability tour. Reports of his talks and actions were continuously filed by low-level observers and traveled all the way to the secretary of state for India in Whitehall in England."

Below is Govindbhai's next communication to Sri Aurobindo:

[From Govindbhai to Sri Aurobindo] 12 January 1934, Govindbhai Patel: Gandhi writes that he has not yet received Sri Aurobindo's answer. I hear that he asked at least a line in Sri Aurobindo's hand; and that Sri Aurobindo has written a full letter in his own hand—which he does not usually do. Is this a fact?

Sri Aurobindo replied:

[From Sri Aurobindo to Govindbhai] Yes. I wrote to him a short letter explaining the nature of my retirement and regretting that I could not break my rule so long as the reason for it existed. It was addressed to Bangalore I believe and ought to have reached him, unless it has been pocketed by the C.I.D. I suppose even if he had left Bangalore it would have been forwarded to him. You can write and inform him of the fact.

This next communication is from Gandhi:

[Gandhi to Govindbhai] January 21, 1934, Bhai Govindbhai, It seems my stay in Pondicherry will be a very brief one. But if I can, I should very much like to see Mother and to go round the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo's letter reached me yesterday after a good deal of wandering. I cannot follow all that you say in your letters. I may say this for myself, that nothing is dearer to me in this world than the search for truth.

To what was Gandhi referring when he wrote, "nothing is dearer to me in this world than the search for truth"? Was Gandhi referring to something in an additional communication that is not included in the collation set forth above? Or was Gandhi requesting a meeting with the Mother and a tour of the Ashram

as part of his personal search for truth? Or did Gandhi enlist his potent phrase about the search for truth in hopes that it would influence Sri Aurobindo to allow Gandhi to visit the Mother and tour the Ashram?

Regardless of the reason that Gandhi wrote about his search for truth, Govindbhai used the phrase in his communication below with Sri Aurobindo:

[Govindbhai to Sri Aurobindo] 24 Jan 1934, Govindbhai Patel: I am sure he will prolong his stay to see the Mother. And the Mother is Mother after all, let him have Her touch. I am sure he is not going to bother Mother by political topics. If he talks at all, he will talk about his search after Truth.

Sri Aurobindo replied:

[Sri Aurobindo to Govindbhai] With his programme it is impossible. Also I do not see any utility. You must on no account ask him to delay his departure, that is quite contrary to what we wish. His search for Truth is on fixed lines of his own and the Mother can say nothing to help him there—nor has he said that he wants any help—and the Ashram would hardly please him since it is run on quite unascetic lines contrary to his ideal.

Due to changes in Mahatma Gandhi's travel plans, he thought that he might not visit Pondicherry. Then his travel plans changed again and he realised that he would be in Pondicherry. During the period of uncertainty about whether he would or would not be in Pondicherry, a notice was posted in Sri Aurobindo's Ashram prohibiting Ashram members from attending Gandhi's meetings while he was in Pondicherry.

Ultimately, Gandhi did travel to Pondicherry. In a letter dated February 19, 1934, Gandhi wrote to Vallabhbhai Patel:

I visited Pondicherry. I could see nobody there. Mother didn't reply at all. But Govindbhai came and saw me when I was in another place. He told me the whole story. **The Ashram is being watched, and so there was some risk even in letting me visit the place.** Half the number of the inmates are Gujaratis. Govindbhai was also in the Ashram formerly. The daily routine in this Ashram is as follows: They get up at five in the morning. Every sadhaka has a separate room for himself. There are about 150 sadhakas. They come from everywhere. Among them are Dilip (Kumar Roy) and Harin Chattopadhyaya, the husband of Kamaladevi. The Ashram has rented about 40 houses. The food is similar to that provided in our Ashram. Shri Aurobindo comes out only on three days in the year. Shri Aurobindo and Mother don't sleep at all. Shri (Aurobindo) does recline in an armchair between 3.30 a.m. and 4.30 a.m., but he does not sleep. The sadhakas have to send up their diary every day. They can ask questions. Letters from Shri (Aurobindo) and Mother are delivered to them four times a day. Between them, they write about 200 letters daily. No letter remains unattended to. Shri (Aurobindo) knows innumerable languages. He reforms sadhakas through secret influence on their minds. Harin Chattopadhyaya has given up drinking, etc. Liquor and meat are forbidden in the Ashram. This is the description given by Govindbhai, and he has invited me to join the Ashram. I hope you will be satisfied with this.

It says on the Integral Yoga website that Sri Aurobindo was under British surveillance beginning in 1910. Since the Ashram evolved around Sri Aurobindo, the Ashram was under surveillance as well. It also says on the website, "It was in 1937, when a Congress government came to power in the Madras Presidency (roughly equivalent to today's Tamil Nadu state) that the surveillance finally came to an

end. Doraiswamy Iyengar, a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and a lawyer by profession, made the request to the Premier of Madras Presidency, C. Rajagopachari to have it ended.”

There is a lot consider in the above correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel as well as in the previous correspondence between Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Govindhai. One thought that comes to mind is that Sri Aurobindo relinquished all privacy in his communications by virtue of his commitment to silence and seclusion. If Sri Aurobindo wanted to inform Gandhi that it was dangerous for Gandhi to visit Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and the Ashram, there was no way for Sri Aurobindo to accomplish that without risking that the British might see the correspondence. Was Sri Aurobindo looking to protect himself and the Mother and the Ashram and its inmates? And is that why there was a notice at the Ashram forbidden Ashram members for attending Gandhi’s programme when he was in Pondicherry? Is that why Sri Aurobindo wrote that there was nothing for Gandhi to receive by such visits in terms of Gandhi’s search for Truth?

There is also the question of what it was like for Sri Aurobindo to be in silence and seclusion while remaining committed to, and active in, communication with the outside world. Did Sri Aurobindo rebuff Gandhi to solely to protect his own practice of being in seclusion?

There is also the question of why Sri Aurobindo did not want Gandhi to visit the ashram or meet with the Mother. Was this because of Sri Aurobindo’s disdain for Gandhi’s leadership methods?¹⁸ If that was the reason, might Sri Aurobindo have wished to have Gandhi in his own presence so he could present Gandhi with a letter in person to tell him to change his leadership style? Or did Sri Aurobindo foresee that doing so would have been useless?

The influence of Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual practice on his relationship to Mahatma Gandhi

In the concluding sections of *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, Padmasambhava tells his audience, “Though lacking in the power of expression, the author [Padmasambhava himself] has here made a faithful record [of his own yogic experiences]. To one who has tasted honey, it is superfluous for those who have not tasted it to offer an explanation of its taste.”¹⁹ This Buddhist teaching in the Tibetan lineage may be applied to any profession and any pursuit that one has not experienced personally. The teaching is applied in this instance to the state of consciousness of the spiritual seeker who engaged in forms of intense spiritual practice that are not experienced by most others.

The state of consciousness of a sadhu is best understood by becoming a sadhu oneself. However, that is not always possible or practical, and in the end, it is not everyone’s calling to become a sadhu. How then may one enter into an understanding of the depth of spiritual capacity of a man or woman who can live without sleep? How may we enter into an understanding of the consciousness of such a person and the spiritual realisation of such a person? And how may we understand the relationship between such a person and the outside world?

¹⁸ This refers to Sri Aurobindo’s concern that Gandhi’s leadership style in the Congress was eliciting parrot like obedience and was leading to somewhat uniform decision making between the various areas in India. Sri Aurobindo expressed that the needs in the different states were different and, therefore, should be addressed differently.

¹⁹ C. G. Jung (Author, Contributor) and Donald S. Lopez (Author, Foreword, Contributor), *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation: Or the Method of Realizing Nirvana through Knowing the Mind*, translated into English, W. Y. Evans-Wentz (Editor). (Oxford University Press: 2000).

When one engages in silence and seclusion for ongoing periods of times, one's relationship with the outside world is transformed. Sri Aurobindo retired to Pondicherry to deepen his spiritual practice. When the first three or four people began gathering around Sri Aurobindo, he did not send them away. As the population in the Ashram grew, so did Sri Aurobindo's efforts to the point that he and the Mother were reading approximately 150 diaries entries and writing approximately 200 letters every day. As of the time that Mahatma Gandhi was pressing Sri Aurobindo to meet with him, Sri Aurobindo was guiding his disciples in writing and not communicating with them in any other way except by being in their presence three days a year to bless them. Might Sri Aurobindo have provided Gandhi with the guidance he felt Gandhi needed, namely to not depend upon seeing a holy man in order to complete himself or to feel complete? It is easy to dismiss the possibility that Sri Aurobindo truly cared for Gandhi and was concerned for Gandhi's welfare and spiritual development since Sri Aurobindo refused to meet with Gandhi or to allow Gandhi to meet with the Mother or tour the Ashram, and also because of Sri Aurobindo's disparaging remarks that he made later regarding Gandhi's leadership in the Congress.

Nevertheless, after Gandhi was shot and killed, Sri Aurobindo referred kindly to Gandhi in his remarks entitled, "The light will burn on."

I would have preferred silence in the face of these circumstances that surround us. For, any words we can find fall flat on amid such happenings.

This much, however, I will say, that the light which led us to freedom, though not yet to unity, still burns and will burn on, till it conquers. I believe firmly that a great and united future is the destiny of the nation and its people.

The power that brought us through so much struggle and suffering to freedom will achieve also, through whatever strife or trouble, the aim which so poignantly occupied the thoughts of the fallen leader at the time of his tragic ending: as it brought us freedom, it will bring us unity.

A free and united India will be there, and the mother will gather around her sons and weld them into a single national strength in the life of a great and united people.

Sri Aurobindo says that he would have preferred silence in the face of these circumstances. Perhaps that is logical since Sri Aurobindo had spent so many years in silence by the time he was eulogizing Gandhi. On the other hand, perhaps Sri Aurobindo was trying to convey that silence is preferred in the face of murder. That interpretation is perhaps indicated when Sri Aurobindo says that "any words we can find fall flat on amid such happenings." That could certainly be understood as meaning that words are inadequate at a time when someone had been murdered. Sri Aurobindo's words may also be understood as meaning that words are inadequate at a time of the death of "the fallen leader." After Sri Aurobindo had sacrificed so many years of speaking, and of human contact and of sleep, it is difficult to imagine that Sri Aurobindo would mince his words or choose words without much thought. In the third paragraph of Sri Aurobindo's remarks after Gandhi's passing, Sri Aurobindo acknowledges Gandhi as the leader of the movement: He does not say "a leader." He says "the leader."

Sri Aurobindo's objections to Gandhi's leadership methodologies, and accusing Gandhi of using Stalin style tactics and not paying attention to the needs of the various states within India are more than a little troubling. At the same time, however, Sri Aurobindo's words of tribute following Gandhi's death appear to draw from a place of acknowledgement about Gandhi the leader, and not about Gandhi the overly-

stubborn-leader or overly-domineering-leader. Sri Aurobindo's tribute to Gandhi after Gandhi's death appears to be unequivocal.

The meeting that never took place

When Sri Aurobindo declined Gandhi's request for a meeting, Gandhi pressed Sri Aurobindo, pointing out that Sri Aurobindo had not taken a vow of seclusion and could, therefore, meet with Gandhi without breaking a vow. When Sri Aurobindo declined Gandhi's second request, Gandhi asked for a meeting with the Mother and a tour of the Ashram. Gandhi's connection with Sri Aurobindo and Sri Aurobindo's path does not seem to be one pointed. Rather, it seems to be global. Gandhi was not just set upon meeting with Sri Aurobindo the man, the sage, and the former leader of the independence movement. It seems that Gandhi was also wanted to experience Sri Aurobindo's legacy by meeting the Mother and touring the Ashram.

Even after not being granted a meeting with the Mother and a tour of the Ashram, Gandhi was still taken by what he learned of Sri Aurobindo and his legacy from Govindbhai as evidenced in Gandhi's above letter to Vallabhbhai Patel. In that letter, Gandhi reveals to Vallabhbhai: "The Ashram is being watched, and so there was some risk even in letting me visit the place." As discussed above, the risk may have been to everyone, including Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and the Ashram inmates. Regardless of whether Sri Aurobindo admired Gandhi the man and the spiritual seeker at the time that Gandhi requested to meet Sri Aurobindo, it appears that Sri Aurobindo may have been acutely aware that he would have been putting Gandhi at risk by meeting with Gandhi. Because of Sri Aurobindo's silence and seclusion, it would not have been safe for Sri Aurobindo to express this in writing. Perhaps that is why Govindbhai clarified with Mahatma Gandhi when the two met during Gandhi's visit to Pondicherry.

Gandhi and his teachings

Mahatma Gandhi established his own ashram. He was also a leader, or *the* leader, of the Indian independence movement, and he is known as the father of the India. This is evidenced today by the fact that Indian money bears Gandhi's photos and his photo also appears on calendars hanging in government offices. When speaking with Indians, one will sometimes hear that Gandhi is the father of India or the father of Indian independence. One also hears that the reason Gandhi's photograph is on money and on official calendars is that Gandhi is associated with honesty and one hopes that people will handle money and government matters with honesty.

In addition to being an honest man and a strong capable and successful leader, Gandhi was also a curious spiritual seeker. Gandhi's desire for freedom for Indians was powerful indeed. At the same time, however, his desire to visit Sri Aurobindo, a spiritual leader and former activist, was high enough on Gandhi's list that he did not delegate the arranging of such a meeting and instead, attempt to arrange it himself. Even after Sri Aurobindo declined Gandhi's request, Gandhi communicated directly with Vallabhbhai about his visit with Govindbhai. Gandhi was a hero in his own right, not only because of what he accomplished, but also because of his humanness. Gandhi's teachings appear to be relevant around the world and across the generations both because of his humanness and because of his vision, courage and capacity as well as the success of his endeavor in leading his people to freedom.

The famous American activist and leader of the civil rights movement in America Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, acted and inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony."

The famous scientist and discoverer of the theory of relativity Albert Einstein said, “Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”

Sri Aurobindo as a national hero and world renown spiritual teacher

If one were to ask people in India or around the world who was Mahatma Gandhi and who was Sri Aurobindo, it is likely that everyone in India would know who is Gandhi and some would know who is Sri Aurobindo. It is also likely that many people around the world have heard of Mahatma Gandhi and few have heard of Sri Aurobindo. It appears, nevertheless, that Sri Aurobindo’s activism, teachings and writings were very influential in the India independence movement. A person’s importance to the success of a cause is not always measurable in relation to their fame. Mahatma Gandhi’s high regard for Sri Aurobindo speaks volumes about how highly Gandhi regarded Sri Aurobindo. It may be fair to say that Sri Aurobindo’s early activism coupled with his later inner presence and inner realization as manifest in his teachings and writings are sufficient to declare him a national hero and prominent leader of the Indian independence movement. It may also be fair to say that Gandhi’s admiration for Sri Aurobindo adds to Sri Aurobindo’s status in Indian history.

When it comes to deep spiritual realization, however, Sri Aurobindo stands as a towering giant in his own right. Sri Aurobindo is known through his words on the printed page; through his reputation for mentoring his disciples in ways that helped them to overcome their foibles and attain realisation and in the example of his tenacity to stay the course of his spiritual commitments without the need for vows and without exception even when the exception was the leader of the Indian independence movement that Sri Aurobindo had helped to found.

Closing quotes

"All life is Yoga"²⁰ -- Sri Aurobindo

“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” -- Mahatma Gandhi

²⁰ <http://www.auroville.org/contents/575>