INTRODUCTION

A Talk by Pavitra

In 1964, Pavitra spoke informally about his life before coming to India – his upbringing in France, his experiences during the First World War, his visits to Japan and Mongolia, and his journey to Pondicherry. He shared these reminiscences with the students and teachers of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram International Centre of Education. Pavitra was the principal of this school. He was seventy years old at the time of this talk.
How difficult it is to be completely sincere!

I will try my best to be accurate, but what I will tell you is only the broad outlines of the voyage. I will not be able to convey to you all the stages of thinking, all the movements of feeling or even all the experiences, inner and outer.

I don't know if you have seen a film on the First World War. You have seen some on the Second, and perhaps you know the main difference, at least the practical difference, for those engaged in the fighting. In the First World War, much of the four years it lasted consisted in what is called trench warfare; that is, the two armies faced each other in trenches. They had dug trenches, shelters, and they lived day after day, night after night, in conditions that were often difficult and sometimes dangerous, though not always, with the cold and the rain as enemies and, of course, sometimes enemy shells, bullets, illness and boredom.

Well, at that time I was a young officer. I was just twenty in 1914. I had completed — I am obliged to speak about myself because you have asked me to speak about myself! — I had completed my scientific studies. I was at the École Polytechnique. I had done a year at the École Polytechnique and, like all the young men there, I had undergone some military training even before entering the school. So in 1914, when war broke out in the month of August, I had to go for training as a private in an artillery regiment, after a year of school in which we had mostly done mathematics, physics and chemistry.

War was declared just the day before I was supposed to join my regiment. So I joined the regiment, but the conditions were different and we were immediately put “under pressure”.

A Talk by Pavitra
Conversations with Sri Aurobindo

That meant horse riding four or five hours a day, which was considered to be the best training for war. There was theory — anyway, it was rather hard, and at the end of several months, because of this military training we had undergone, we were appointed sub-lieutenants, sub-lieutenants in the Artillery, and in October, the end of October, four months after the declaration of war, we left for the front. I was in a battery, a junior officer in a battery of 105s — what the English call a four-inch gun. It was a new rapid-firing weapon that France was very proud of — interesting.

Well, at that time — I won’t hide it from you — I was a young man who had the same interests of any normal young man at that age. I was like all my companions — I had the same concerns, the same interests as those around me. I liked studies. In general I liked what I did because I preferred to like it rather than to dislike it — life is better that way! (Laughter) But when I look back at my past, I cannot say that I had any spiritual aspirations. I had been brought up in the Catholic religion, but it didn’t especially interest me. I never asked myself any questions, to tell the truth.

Well, during the war we sometimes had hard knocks, so to say, difficult times, but sometimes there was also a lot of free time to be filled. I don’t know how — it was probably the hand of destiny — I started reading some books on so-called psychic phenomena — that is, phenomena that science at that time did not study at all but brushed aside, considering it outside its domain, non-scientific.

There were all sorts of things. There were telepathy, clairvoyance, phenomena involving mediums — I don’t know if you have heard of them — all those things, even the pendulum and divination, all that is rather on the border of science. I approached everything with a scientific spirit, simply to know, telling myself, “Well, here is a whole domain that science doesn’t study!” Why? Nobody knows. I never practised, I was
never interested in the actual experiences of mediums, seeing the future and all that. That was not what interested me; it was the possibility of these phenomena, their existence. Do they exist? Are they true? Are they false? Why doesn't science study them? It was not that I wanted to acquire them or know the future or things about myself — no!

Then gradually, from one book to another, I was led to read what in Europe are called books on occultism. They enable you to understand many things. I won't mention the names of any authors. Anyway, I read all that one could read on the subject: what is called magic — not black magic, that didn't interest me, but magic, the possibility of handling certain forces, of proving their existence; and then, moving on to the Middle Ages (because naturally, when one studies occultism, one must go back to the time when occultism flourished), the Kabbala, the secret initiatory societies, the Hebrew tradition, particularly the Kabbala, alchemy, the alchemists (in the spiritual sense, the transformation of nature) and then the modern occultists — the door to India.

I must say that it was Theosophy that opened the door to India to me, and for that I am extremely grateful. For one thing, in Europe there was not much else, especially at that time. It was the Theosophists who translated many of the sacred books of India and made them available to the Western intellect — one can almost say made them fashionable, though it was not yet a question of fashion — matters like reincarnation, karma, perfection on earth, the ideal of the Jivanmukta, which exist in Theosophy.

Well, for me, as far as I remember, when I found out about reincarnation and karma, they seemed quite natural to me; there was no need to discuss them. Never for a second, from the time I came across these ideas of reincarnation and karma, have I doubted them. I accepted them as a part of myself; they seemed obvious to me. I knew, besides, that one could not
prove them, so there was no point in discussing them; either one accepted them or one did not.

So with these ideas from India, I entered a new phase, a phase of... of aspiration for spiritual perfection. You see, there are two ways of studying the religions of India. One is from the outside, as the Westerners, the French, generally do, without participating in them, without living them: they study India as they would study, yes, a colony of bees or ants! One gives an account of what they think, what they do. But the other way, and the only one that interested me, was, well, to live it — first to understand it and then to live it. It was the ideal of perfection, a perfection that men could realise in the course of time, of successive lives, that really appealed to me, that seemed to me both true and worth living for.

Meanwhile the war was going on. For two years I was on what is called the front, moving from one place to another, always in the artillery, the 105s. And then for another two years or so, I was at an army headquarters. At headquarters, as an artillery intelligence officer, I had a job that was almost a desk-job, but it was very interesting because it meant collecting the information we had and giving it to the artillery corps of an army. An army comprised a variable number of army corps; each corps consisted of two or three divisions, each division contained two brigades, and each brigade was made up of a certain number of regiments (that is, several thousand men) so an army corps represented, well, one or two hundred thousand men at the front, with a considerable amount of artillery and twelve to fifteen air squadrons. My work involved collecting, examining, investigating, screening all that could be gathered by way of intelligence. And at the same time I had another work, a humane work of keeping contact with the units; the units at the front, the visitors, the foreigners, because after a while we had a lot of Americans, and there were Englishmen too.
But all the free time I had (there wasn’t much, we were very busy) I devoted to reading, often late into the night. And more and more these ideas took hold of me; I gave myself to them, I devoted myself to them. And in a few years (from 1917 I can say, so in two years) my viewpoint changed completely. I had been – I cannot say even a materialist, because I didn’t have any opinion on the subject – I had been, as I have told you, a young man who had received a scientific, logical, rigorous education, but who had never asked himself questions about these subjects; but once they had entered my thoughts, my feelings, well, I gave myself to them completely.

In 1918, there was an epidemic in France that at the time was called the Spanish fever or flu, an epidemic that lasted quite a long time and killed twenty million people throughout the world. (I recently saw a book on the subject.) Well, I had the flu exactly at the time of the Armistice – that is, in November 1918. I was at the front; we had just broken through the German lines and were marching towards Germany. It was on the German lines that I caught this flu, but it was not restricted to Germany, the whole world had it, all the countries.

That day, I can say, was the decisive day of my life. In the field-hospital at the front, under the tents where I was, the sick were dying. Each morning three or four people were dead. Well, I clearly remember the very strong idea that took away all fear of death from me: it was giving, self-giving, giving myself so that my destiny, my spiritual destiny might be fulfilled, whatever it might be, with the offering of my life, truly, sincerely, if I was supposed to die. And if I was supposed to live, well, consecration to the Divine.

I was twenty-four at the time, just over twenty-four. After that, I was demobilized quite soon and I had to take up my studies again. I did that in order to finish something I had started, without much enthusiasm; but anyway, I had nothing
else to do. So I finished the École Polytechnique, the School of Bridges and Highways, and I was appointed as a junior engineer in Paris. Then a very strong feeling seized hold of me that I could not live that life. You see, it was a life (in itself it had nothing that might repel me) it was the life of an engineer, with no lack of interesting projects; a whole section of the Seine, especially Paris, was under my jurisdiction, with all the new projects, the repairs, all that. But (how to put it?) I had had enough, it didn’t interest me; I did it because it had to be done, but my heart was no longer there.

And then, in 1920, I made the decision to give up that life and devote myself to the search for my spiritual teacher, my guru. I knew (I “knew”, well, for me it was certain) that my life was to be a life of spiritual realisation, that nothing else mattered to me, and that somewhere on earth, on earth, someone must exist who could give me, who could lead me to the light.

That was at the beginning of 1920, in the first few months of the year. I continued to work for a few months with increasing inner difficulties, and at last I asked to be discharged. You see, I had my whole family against me. This is normal. I had my parents, a father, a mother, a brother. None of them understood what I was doing or why I was doing it. My father may have understood. He was very understanding; he had followed me, he had followed me as well as he could – I mean he had tried to understand the reasons for my action, and he sympathised with me. But he said, “Look here, if these things, these psychic phenomena, interest you, all right. If you like, I will give you whatever you need to become a doctor and study them as a doctor would. For that, you can study medicine as long as you need, and then you can study these phenomena with all knowledge and method of a medical doctor.”

But what he could not understand was that I wanted to live that life.
“But no, you should not get involved, because then you lose your critical faculty. You can’t find out the truth if you adopt, if you accept an idea and try to put it into practice.”

These were the kind of difficulties I met with at home.

I can say I was a bit fanatical, like all beginners. For example, I haven’t told you that at the front, since I was junior officer, I was in charge of the officers’ mess, the officers’ dining room. I set the menu with the cook and I held the purse. Well, I had become a vegetarian (laughter), with a lot of conviction. To be a vegetarian at the front, in a French officers’ mess, I can assure you, was not easy (laughter), not easy at all! Everyone laughed at me, or else they pitied me a bit and wished that I would return to common sense, to the traditional French ideas about food.

I won’t hide from you the fact that before the war I used to drink, to drink wine sometimes, like other young people of my age. I was not particularly fond of drinking, but, after all, drinking wine is something quite normal for the French. You should not think it is completely bad. When I tell you this, you shouldn’t see it with (what shall I say?) your traditional outlook and say, “Oh, he must have been a very bad man” – because for Indians someone who drinks is usually a very bad man. I am not trying to blacken myself, nor to... I have simply told you the truth.

So I was a bit fanatical and I was ready to break everything to get out of that life. Then an opportunity came my way. I had friends who were leaving for the Far East, for Japan, and I decided to go with them. It brought me closer. For myself, I make no great distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism. Doesn’t the same spirituality enliven all the religions of India? So I left for Japan. I went not as an engineer but as an ordinary individual, so I had to earn my living there. It was not very easy, it was not very easy in an Asian country like Japan, which did not welcome foreigners unless, as in India today,
they are famous or they bring in money or they are supported by business concerns. I was none of these.

But at last, after some ups and downs, quite a few difficulties, a rather hard time, I remained in Japan for four years. Lots of experiences: the study of Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, life in the temples, work in the laboratories and, at home in the evenings, the pursuit of my studies. My studies were in Indian, Japanese and Chinese spirituality. There were alternations of light and darkness, progress and stagnation — all the difficulties that come to those who are seeking the light and who seek it alone, or at least seem to.

Then a delegation of Mongolian monks, lamas, came to Japan and visited the laboratories, the factory where I worked. I made contact with them, because my search always brought me back to Asia, to Central Asia, as a place, a centre, beneath the peaks of the Himalayas, whether the north or south — Tibet, the Himalayas. And there I saw an opportunity. I wondered if it was not an indication to go to Tibet. I made their acquaintance. It was not very easy to talk to them because we had no common language. There was an officer of the old Russian army who was Mongolian, but he didn’t know English or Chinese. And there was his wife who knew Chinese and English. So we were able to converse through this intermediary. It was not very easy! But gradually the possibility opened up of going to live for some time in their monastery, in their lamasery. It meant crossing northern China in order to get to what is called Outer Mongolia — the part of Mongolia that was under Chinese rule. This was in 1924. To put it briefly, I went with a Mongolian lama who was a very sensible, open man. I learned the Mongolian language during this time, because, well, I had to say something to him. So I applied myself to learning Mongolian. How difficult it was to find books to learn Mongolian!

So I went across northern China, Peking. I won’t tell you
about the experiences, the adventures, all that, no, I don't have time, but my attitude was somewhat like this: “I know that I am on the way to the Truth, to the one who will lead me to the Truth. I don’t know where he is, I don’t know how to reach him. All I can do is to remain completely alert and open to any sign I may perceive. If I see a door opening up in any direction, I will go through it. If I don’t see anything, well, I will wait and see.” And even today, I think it was a good attitude.

And so I left. We had to cross northern China and reach a monastery where there were only Tibetan lamas. I stayed there nine months – a whole winter, winter in a cold country, but anyway, I can’t say that I suffered from the cold. The place was well protected, completely isolated from all contacts. I didn’t see a single European during those nine months; a few Chinese – merchants – and then Mongolians. It was sometimes rather hard. One was turned within, left to oneself, with the struggles, the periods of crisis.

But what dominated was: “My God, if only I knew what I have to do on earth, whatever it is, even sweeping the street, well, I will do it happily. But what is it that I have to do?” And you see, it was already three or four years that this had been going on. “What am I supposed to do on earth? Where will I find a clear indication?”

By this time I knew of the existence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother through mutual friends. I even had, before I left France, an issue of the French *Arya* in my hands. I had seen it. I must say that it had not particularly attracted my attention. I had read the contents, I had said, “Yes, it is interesting.” But what I wanted was a contact with something. There had been, yes, the first chapters of *The Life Divine*, and then the pieces on the Eternal Wisdom. I had seen that, it was really interesting, but I tell you frankly, it didn’t touch me more than other things did.
When I was in Japan... I arrived there just after the Mother had left. It was in 1920 and the Mother had left just a few months earlier. So I heard about her, we had mutual friends, I was interested in what they told me about her, very much so, and that is why I decided to write. So I wrote to Pondicherry - I never got a reply! (Laughter) Never. I wrote twice. No reply. I think that at that time they weren't answering letters much. Perhaps... I hope that we answer a bit more often now. (Laughter)

Well, after that rather harsh winter in Mongolia, I felt very clearly that that experience was over and I must go somewhere else. But where? Well, to India. The time had come for me to go to India. Where? I didn't know. Since I was returning from Japan, I had to have somewhere to go. So to others, to my family, to my friends I said, "I am returning to Europe by way of India." But within myself I knew that I would stay in India. But I couldn't say that because they would have asked me, "Where will you go?" "Oh, I don't know!" I had nothing material to base my inner certitude on, except, "It is in India that I have to find what I am searching for." That was all.

I left. I set out again. I passed through Indo-China where my brother was a telecommunications engineer, with the wireless network of Indo-China. I stayed there a month and then went south and landed in Ceylon. I arrived in Ceylon with India in front of me - the door to India.

"Well, where will I go? Pondicherry is the nearest place, I'll go to Pondicherry. But I don't know what kind of welcome I will get there. I don't even know if I will be received at all - I have had no reply to my letters. I am going to Pondicherry because it is the nearest spot. After that? Well, we'll see. Maybe I could go to Adyar, which isn't far away. Maybe! I'll see." But the inner attitude was always the same: to see if a door would open.

I waited for three weeks in Ceylon because railway traffic
in India had been disrupted by floods. You see, it still happens! The railway lines had been cut off, so for three weeks I stayed in Colombo. Then one morning I arrived in Pondicherry by train. I put up at the Hotel d’Europe and immediately went to the Ashram. At that time Sri Aurobindo lived in the room where Anilbaran lives now, as you know.

So I asked if I could meet Sri Aurobindo. At that time, Sri Aurobindo was still seeing people, he still saw his disciples. He agreed to see me. I explained my position to him, what I was looking for, why I had left Europe, why I had come to India and what I hoped to find here. It was I who spoke the first day. He asked me to come again the next day.

In the evening I met the Mother. About the Mother I remember — I remember especially her eyes, her eyes of light. I repeated my story to her, more briefly perhaps. She spoke a few words to me and then I returned to my hotel. I remember I went for a walk on the sea-front and someone said, “Look, there are some Swadeshis!” — that meant, the people dressed in white who were members of the Ashram, There were not many. There were — how many? — about twelve or fifteen.

The next morning I went back and Sri Aurobindo received me. And it was he who spoke. He told me that what I was seeking... of course, I had explained to him my desire for liberation, I had told him that that is what I was seeking — not so much liberation from rebirth as liberation... liberation from myself, from the ego, from ignorance and sin, from falsehood, from all that makes up the ordinary human life. Liberation, Moksha, that was my ideal. I didn’t place it in some other heaven, I didn’t particularly want to avoid suffering — it was the weight of ignorance, of falsehood, of ugliness, all that. And more than avoiding something, I was looking for something positive. I was looking for light — not so much the avoidance of suffering, the end of suffering nor the end of falsehood, but Light, Knowledge, Truth.
Then he told me that there were some people in India who could give me what I was looking for, but they were not easy to meet, especially for a European. And then he continued. He considered that what I was seeking—union with God, the realisation of the Brahman—came first, as a first step, a necessary stage, but it was not everything. There was a second step—the descent of the Power of the Divine into the human consciousness in order to transform it, and this is what he, Sri Aurobindo, was trying to do. And he said to me, “Well, if you want to try, you may stay.”

I fell at his feet. He gave me his blessing and it was over. You see, a whole chapter of my life had come to an end. The search, the search for the source of light, the search for the one who would lead me to the Truth was over. Something else was beginning—the realisation, to put it into practice. But this time I had found Sri Aurobindo, I had found my guru.

So that is how I came here.

As I have told you, I was accepted. There was no Ashram then. There were a few houses that belonged to Sri Aurobindo, and the Mother looked mainly after Sri Aurobindo—after some of the disciples too, but each one was left more or less to himself. The Ashram took birth a year later, in 1926.

So I had the immense privilege of seeing Sri Aurobindo every day, of listening to him, hearing him reply every day to the questions we asked him. But that is something else and I won’t speak of it today.

Well, I have something to tell you! If you permit me to give you some advice that experience has taught me, I would say that what matters is to give yourself entirely to whatever you do. Whatever you do, do it completely—don’t do it half-heartedly. And then, try to do something that interests you. If you have the choice of a career, a profession, well, do what attracts you, do what you would like to do. Don’t look for a petty, easy life where you will be secure, where you won’t have too many
problems, too many worries, too much work. That is not the important thing. The important thing is to do something that interests you, something you can give yourself to completely. And if you do that, well, you will always be guided. Because now, looking back on my life with the perspective that age gives, I see that from the beginning, behind all that I did, even the stupidities (and there were some), even the stupidities, even the mistakes and all that, well, behind all that there was the hand, the protective guiding hand that led me on. And finally, in the end, all that I did, all my experiences (this is not to justify them), all had a meaning. And finally I reached at the place I had to reach.

There you are! Thank you.