“[This yoga] cannot be done if you insist on identifying these lowest things of the Ignorance with the divine Truth or even the lesser truth permissible on the way. It cannot be done if you cling to your past self and its old mental, vital and physical formations and habits; one has continually to leave behind his past selves and to see, act and live from an always higher and higher conscious level. It cannot be done if you insist on ‘freedom’ for your human mind and vital ego. All the parts of the human being are entitled to express and satisfy themselves in their own way at their own risk and peril, if he so chooses, as long as he leads the ordinary life. But to enter into a path of yoga whose whole object is to substitute for these human things the law and power of a greater Truth and the whole heart of whose method is surrender to the Divine Shakti, and yet to go on claiming this so-called freedom, which is no more than a subjection to certain ignorant cosmic Forces, is to indulge in a blind contradiction and to claim the right to lead a double life.

“Least of all can this yoga be done if those who profess to be its sadhaks continue always to make themselves centres, instruments or spokesmen of the forces of the Ignorance which oppose, deny and ridicule its very principle and object.”

Sri Aurobindo, Letters on Yoga, p. 1310

Is it the same thing, the same work, to be conscious that the nature must be changed and to master the different parts of the being?

One precedes the other. First of all one must be conscious, then
control, and by continuing the mastery one changes one’s character. Changing the character is what comes last. One must control bad habits, the old habits, for a very long time for them to drop off and the character to change.

We may take the example of someone who has frequent depressions. When things are not exactly as he would like them to be, he becomes depressed. So, to begin with, he must become aware of his depression—not only of the depression but of the causes of depression, why he gets depressed so easily. Then, once he has become conscious, he must master the depressions, must stop being depressed even when the cause of depression is there—he must master his depression, stop it from coming. And finally, after this work has been done for a sufficiently long time, the nature loses the habit of having depressions and no longer reacts in the same way, the nature is changed.

What does being “spokesmen of the forces of the Ignorance” mean?

The forces of the Ignorance in the present world always seek people who can express their ignorance in the world. This is not difficult! There are many people ready to say ignorant things, that is, to deny all spiritual realisation, deny the capacity for progress, deny the possibility of realising another life than this existing one, deny that human nature can be changed, and so on; or if you like, ready to affirm that it is impossible to escape from illness, that it is impossible to escape death, impossible to understand; ready to assert that never will the Light and Knowledge be attained, and so on. Those who say these things are the spokesmen of the Ignorance. Instead of expressing the forces of Light and Knowledge they serve to express the forces of the Ignorance—is it clear?
Questions and Answers

Sri Aurobindo says here, “... The aspiration and tapasya needed [are] too constant...”

Yes, one cannot do the yoga if one does not take it seriously. For one must be very serious to have a constant aspiration and do tapasya. If one is not serious, for five minutes one has an aspiration and for ten hours one hasn’t; for one day there is a great urge and for a month nothing, and so on. Well, one can’t do yoga in these conditions. It must be a continuous, constant thing which does not flag. If one forgets or slackens, one cannot do yoga.

Should not one be born with a great aspiration?

No, aspiration is a thing to be developed, educated, like all activities of the being. One may be born with a very slight aspiration and develop it so much that it becomes very great. One may be born with a very small will and develop it and make it strong. It is a ridiculous idea to believe that things come to you like that, through a sort of grace, that if you are not given aspiration, you don’t have it — this is not true. It is precisely upon this that Sri Aurobindo has insisted in his letter and in the passage I am going to read to you in a minute. He says you must choose, and the choice is constantly put before you and constantly you must choose, and if you do not choose, well, you will not be able to advance. You must choose; there is no “force like that” which chooses for you, or chance or luck or fate — this is not true. Your will is free, it is deliberately left free and you have to choose. It is you who decide whether to seek the Light or not, whether to be the servitor of the Truth or not — it is you. Or whether to have an aspiration or not, it is you who choose. And even when you are told, “Make your surrender total and the work will be done for you”, it is quite all right, but to make your surrender

1 Letters on Yoga, p. 1310.
total, every day and at every moment you must choose to make your surrender total, otherwise you will not do it, it will not get done by itself. It is you who must want to do it. When it is done, all goes well, when you have the Knowledge also, all goes well, and when you are identified with the Divine, all goes even better, but till then you must will, choose and decide. Don’t go to sleep lazily, saying, “Oh! The work will be done for me, I have nothing to do but let myself glide along with the stream.” Besides, it is not true, the work is not done by itself, because if the least little thing thwarts your little will, it says, “No, not that!...” Then?

What is “the lesser truth permissible on the way”?

One cannot at the outset, immediately, attain the supreme Truth. There are things on the way which are more true than those you know but which are not the Truth, and these things are like discoveries one makes: suddenly one has a kind of illumination, one discovers a law, finds a lever, sees a road opening before one; it is not the supreme Truth, not the supreme experience, it is not what comes when one is identified with the Divine, but it is like something which has fallen from there and entered you, and gives you a partial illumination. These partial illuminations are just what he calls “lesser truths”.

What is the true meaning of “tapasya”?

Tapasya is the discipline one imposes upon oneself to arrive at the discovery of the Divine.

Are tapasya and aspiration the same thing?

No, you can’t do tapasya without aspiration. Aspiration is first, the will to attain something. Tapasya is the process — there is indeed a process, a method.
Questions and Answers

Isn’t the lower vital conscious of the work going on in it?

Then, if it is logical and well-meaning, it ought to admit the presence of the Divine. You understand, it is a vicious circle; it does not want the Divine to be there and it denies Him because it is much troubled that there is this discipline which will oblige it to change, to master itself, check its desires, bow its head instead of always protesting, so it says violently, “There is no Divine.” But it may very well know, at the same time, that the work has begun and, consequently, have the proof that the Divine is there. But it will deny Him all the same, it is ill-willed, it uses this argument wilfully to avoid making an effort.

What is the difference between the “old habits” and the “old formations” Sri Aurobindo speaks about?

It is almost the same thing. Your body, for instance, has certain reactions to cold, heat, hunger, and you are in the habit of having these reactions, and this habit has made a kind of formation in your physical nature, that is, a crease, a fixed crease of the body, and that’s how it is. Formations are the result of habits. Similarly, there are “formations” of character; for instance, if you are in the habit of getting angry when things do not please you, the habit makes a sort of inner crease in your nature, and every time a thing doesn’t please you, automatically, without any control, you will get angry. This is what is called a “formation”, they are habits which have become like a part of your character.

If one is too serious in yoga, doesn’t one become obsessed by the difficulty of the task?

There is a limit to be kept!... But if one chooses one’s obsession well, it may be very useful because it is no longer quite an obsession. For example, one has decided to find the Divine within oneself, and constantly, in every circumstance, whatever
happens or whatever one may do, one concentrates in order to enter into contact with the inner Divine. Naturally, first one must have that little thing Sri Aurobindo speaks about, that “lesser truth” which consists in knowing that there is a Divine within one (this is a very good example of the “lesser truth”) and once one is sure of it and has the aspiration to find it, if that aspiration becomes constant and the effort to realise it becomes constant, in the eyes of others it looks like an obsession, but this kind of obsession is not bad. It becomes bad only if one loses one’s balance. But it must be made quite clear that those who lose their balance with that obsession are only those who were quite ready to lose their balance; any circumstance whatever would have produced the same result and made them lose their balance — it is a defect in the mental structure, it is not the fault of the obsession. And naturally, he who changes a desire into an obsession would be sure to go straight towards imbalance. That is why I say it is important to know the object of the obsession.

_Someone has said that he who is capable of pushing his fixed idea to the point of madness will see the light._

If you concentrate on any idea with sufficient obstinacy, you will “go through”, as the occultists say, and behind the idea upon which you concentrate, you will find the light. But this is a bit risky.

_This means that he who is capable of this kind of concentration will see the light._

Surely. That, surely. If one is capable of this kind of concentration, it is very good, but one must know upon what to concentrate. That is the important point.

_How can one know whether the surrender is total or not?_
Questions and Answers

This does not seem to me difficult. One may try out a little exercise. One may say, “Let me see, I surrender to the Divine, I want Him to decide everything in my life.” This is your starting point. A little exercise: the Divine is going to decide that such and such a thing happens, precisely something in contradiction with your feeling. Then one tells oneself, “Well, and if the Divine tells me, ‘You are going to give that up’”—you will see quite easily, immediately, what the reaction is; if it causes a little prick like this, inside, you may tell yourself, “The surrender is not perfect”—it pricks, it pricks....

“On one side there is the supramental realisation, the overshadowing and descending power of the supramental Divine, the light and force of a far greater Truth than any yet realised on the earth, something therefore beyond what the little human mind and its logic regard as the only permanent realities, something whose nature and way and process of development here it cannot conceive or perceive by its own inadequate instruments or judge by its puerile standards; in spite of all opposition this is pressing down for manifestation in the physical consciousness and the material life. On the other side is this lower vital nature with all its pretentious arrogance, ignorance, obscurity, dullness or incompetent turbulence, standing for its own prolongation, standing against the descent, refusing to believe in any real reality or real possibility of a supramental or superhuman consciousness and creation, or, still more absurd, demanding, if it exists at all, that it should conform to its own little standards, seizing greedily upon everything that seems to disprove it, denying the presence of the Divine,—for it knows that without that presence the work is impossible,—affirming loudly its own thoughts, judgments, desires, instincts, and, if these are contradicted, avenging itself by casting abroad doubt, denial, disparaging criticism,
revolt and disorder. These are the two things now in presence between which every one will have to choose.

“For this opposition, this sterile obstruction and blockade against the descent of the divine Truth cannot last for ever. Every one must come down finally on one side or the other, on the side of the Truth or against it. The supramental realisation cannot coexist with the persistence of the lower Ignorance; it is incompatible with continued satisfaction in a double nature.”

Sri Aurobindo, Letters on Yoga, pp. 1310-11

If the lower nature is completely ignorant, how can it “choose”?

It is not absolutely ignorant. Things are not so absolute; it can feel there is something lacking. All depends upon that. Naturally, those who are quite satisfied with themselves as they are — it is not worth the trouble trying to change them, because they don’t want it. But in fact, even in the lower nature, it is possible to have a kind of feeling that things could be better. For example, take someone whose health is bad or who is weak, who has desires but is too weak to fulfil them, who has ambitions but no capacity; such a person will perhaps tell himself, “Oh! If I were better than I am, if I knew a little more, if I were a little stronger, if I understood a little what ought to be done...” Or suppose, for instance, in ordinary life, someone who needs to earn his living and must choose a job, and the job offered is not to his liking; he is caught in this dilemma: not to have anything to eat or to accept this unpleasant situation; he finds himself facing this problem and says, “What should I do?” He does not know, does not understand; but even in his stupidity he will have a sort of impression that it would be better if he could see a little more clearly, could know a little better, could have some elements of foresight. Then this awakens a slight aspiration for progress — it is the beginning of a choice. Someone has said that
if there were no ticks to bite the dogs, they would always be in a state of inertia, stretched out on the ground, motionless. Now, these trouble them, they begin to scratch, they move, and this awakens them a little from their tamas. For men, it is the same thing. When they have a small desire which they cannot satisfy, they are a little shaken up: they come out of their inertia and try to find a solution to their problem. It is like that. There is no absolute unconsciousness — there is no absolute ignorance, no absolute night. Behind all unconsciousness, behind all ignorance, behind the night, there is always the supreme Light which is everywhere. The least little thing suffices for a beginning of contact to be established.

At the beginning of this letter Sri Aurobindo writes that he has “no intention of giving his sanction to a new edition of the old fiasco.” Does the word “fiasco” refer to something particular or general?

It refers to all the Teachers who have come to the world. One has said, “I bring Love”, another “I bring Peace”, another “I bring Liberation”, and then, there has been a little change within, something has awakened in the depths of men’s consciousness, but externally everything has remained just the same. It is this which makes it a fiasco.

Don’t the inner realisation and experiences help in the outer change?

Not necessarily. They help only if one wants it; otherwise, on the contrary, one detaches oneself more and more from the outer nature. This is what happens to all those who seek mukti, liberation; they reject their outer nature with its character and habits as something altogether contemptible with which one

2 Letters on Yoga, p. 1306.
should not busy oneself; they withdraw all their energies, all forces of consciousness towards the heights, and if they do it with sufficient perfection, generally they leave their body once for all. But in the immense majority of instances, they do it only partially and, when they come out of their meditation, their contemplation, their trance or their samadhi, they are generally worse than others because they have left their outer nature aside without working on it at all. Even ordinary people, when their defects are a little too glaring, try to correct them or control them a little so as not to have too much trouble in life, while these people who think that the right attitude is to leave one’s body and one’s outer consciousness completely and withdraw entirely to the “spiritual heights”, treat that like an old coat one throws aside and does not mend — and when one takes it back it is full of holes and stains.

That does not help. It helps only if one has the sincere will to change; if one sincerely has the will to change, it is a powerful help because it gives you the force to make the change, the fulcrum to make the change. But one must sincerely want to change.