

## **A Passage to India**

**After 50 years, Michael Murphy revisits a source of thought and action that helped inspire the birth of Esalen Institute and ITP.**

He came from a well-to-do Salinas, California family, his father an attorney, his grandfather a physician. He was a talented golfer and all-round athlete, a well-liked member of a prestigious Stanford University fraternity.

All this changed one day at Stanford when he chanced into the classroom of Frederick Spiegleberg, a charismatic professor of Eastern thought. Murphy became one of Spiegleberg's most devoted students and a member of a small cadre of young people who met off-campus to examine and discuss the rich tapestry of Eastern philosophy and religion. He took a quarter off from Stanford to attend a small new college devoted to Eastern thought.

Murphy returned long enough to graduate from Stanford while continuing his studies of Eastern philosophies. Then came two years of military service, which he spent as a psychologist at a U.S. army base in Puerto Rico, as well as an informal coach for his fellow recruits in such sports as basketball, softball, and touch football.

### **A religious revolutionary**

His military service done, Murphy returned to San Francisco. More than ever, he found himself drawn to the life and works of one of the most remarkable East Indian spiritual leaders in world history, Aurobindo Ghose. Murphy had first read Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus, *The Life Divine*, during his early studies with Spiegleberg, and the more he learned about the author's early life, the more fascinated he became.

Child of a well-to-do Indian family, Aurobindo excelled as a student at Cambridge University in England. He mastered English, Greek, Latin, and French and became familiar with German, Italian, and Spanish. He emerged as a poet, a mystic, a visionary philosopher. He wrote literary criticism, and was also a political activist. According to Murphy, "Aurobindo in his youth was a ball of fire." In 1908 and 1909, he spent a year in prison because of his revolutionary activities on behalf of the Indian independence movement.

Aurobindo personified the integral and the transformative in his practice as he explored extraordinary states of mind, body, and spirit that could create wonders that were manifested in what are called siddhis, or "special powers." Even while jailed, Aurobindo developed some of these siddhis.

Released from jail, Aurobindo organized an ashram, a monastic community, at Pondicherry, a former French colony on the eastern edge of India. He died in 1950, but his spirit and his teachings were continued at the Aurobindo Ashram under the leadership of a woman known simply as the Mother, his spiritual collaborator.

In June of 1956, Michael Murphy, still immersed in spiritual studies, decided that nothing would do other than go to India for an extended stay of practice at the Aurobindo Ashram. He was there until October of 1957. He read, meditated, and anchored his practice in Aurobindo's belief that human nature's deepest destiny is to manifest its latent divinity.

### **An American Ashram**

Murphy returned to America hoping to open a center in the U.S. for the exploration of our greater human potentials. The Murphy family owned a large stretch of land on cliffs above the Pacific at Big Sur, California, but it would take Michael some years to convince his family to let him take it over. Early in 1962, however, inspired by Aurobindo but no means based entirely on his works, what would become Esalen Institute gave its first seminar

Esalen is indeed open to ideas Eastern or Western, new or old. At the heart of every good idea, however, is a vision of the vast potential that exists in each of us, the unused powers for the good that are simply there within, waiting to be released. And beneath it all, whatever our particular interest, is Aurobindo's underlying faith on the often neglected capacities that join body, mind, and spirit. Nor would co-founder of Esalen Michael Murphy and the Institute's president emeritus, George Leonard, have joined forces to create ITP without their understanding of the connectedness of what we term body, mind, and spirit--the true integral.

### **A new discovery**

In recent years, descriptions of a great many siddhis have been discovered in Aurobindo's voluminous unpublished papers. These discoveries whetted Michael's desire to revisit India. At around the same time, he was nominated by the Indian Parliament to the International Advisory Council of Auroville, an experimental community of 1,700 people near Pondicherry that is based on the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo.

Early in February 2007, Michael and his wife Dulce traveled to India, where they visited the Aurobindo Ashram, then Auroville. Michael had adequate time to find previously ignored material in the Ashram archives. To his surprise, he was often treated as a celebrity, as one who had done more than most others to introduce Aurobindo's life and teaching to the West.

Michael's trip has reinforced his intention to advance the transformative practice revealed by a record Sri Aurobindo kept for some twenty years of his day-to-day practice of yoga. He will work to this end with Jeffrey Kripal, an American professor of religious studies who is the author of a recently published scholarly study of Esalen Institute, and with two American researchers who live and work at the Ashram, Peter Heehs, whose monumental biography of Aurobindo will be published this year by Columbia University Press, and Richard Hartz, who has compiled a definitive bibliography of Sanskrit terms used by Aurobindo to describe the supernormal powers and higher states of consciousness he was exploring.

Michael views this project with great excitement as a further development of the Integral Transformative Practice he and George Leonard started.

— N. E. Sarawak