I have spent the past 50 years of my life dedicated to building Auroville in service to The Mother. Looking back, I see my path was laid out for me from the start, developing step by step with the unexpected events that seemed negative, but turned out to be positives – leading me forward to my deep and deeply-desired inner goal. These surprising turns in my life began with my childhood.

I was born in Saint-Sauveur de Bergerac, close to Mouleydier, a small rural village in the Perigord region of France. Our house was one of those old dilapidated farmhouses one can still see in the French countryside.
Down the hill, there was a huge forest of several square kilometers that bordered a dirt road. This forest was where my younger brothers and I joyfully spent our free time off from school. We were 11 in our family – my two parents plus 9 kids– we were poor but happy.

My life completely changed to drama in 1964, when I was 13. For reasons I didn't understand, the government’s social welfare system shifted us kids to a childcare center then to a foster family in the city of Sarlat. Summer ‘64 was a very hard time for me and my little brother and sister, interned in a “safe house” without being told why. While I came from a Catholic family, I had absolutely no spiritual nor religious knowledge nor had I been baptized. The man under whose care I was put undertook to instruct me in religious subjects. It had to be done with tact and care so that the rebellious unhappy child that I had become would not explode from an inner revolt to an open one.

The fact is that meeting this man changed my life and unexpectedly gave me something precious. For the first time I discovered the beginnings of faith in something that I had not yet perceived. For my first Christmas evening, a traditional Provençal nativity scene was put in my foster parents’ living room. I asked myself what it was and why it was there and it seems that the replies I got were good enough, because a thirst to know more about the baby Jesus got born in me. Faith, when it is sincere, is contagious and I had only one craving - to believe, to love, to get hold on something that was worth living for, and to give me strength to face life positively - a means to transform my inner revolt in something constructive!

Slowly but surely this fragile flame started to burn strongly in me to become an inextinguishable fire. So, at an age when most children start to lose faith in God, I voluntarily and consciously made my first steps in the Catholic religion. I chose my foster father as my godfather, was baptized at Sarlat’s cathedral, did my communions and became a perfect believer. My progression during the next four years was marked by the start of an intense spiritual search which lasted long after.

In 1965, I started school in Sarlat, with another life-positive turn of events. The teacher there perceived my real capacities, and for the first time, I was not sent to sit in the last row of the classroom, as had always been the case in my village. This teacher understood me, and in less than 6 months I went from being the last in the class to being amongst the first 10 – a feat I owe to this intelligent man. He quickly mentored me to get my school certificate and then succeed with the Technical College entrance examinations for me to become a cabinet-maker.

My godfather carried on with his religious teaching, but at age 15 I soon found it was far from being enough, and my quest pushed me to ask more and more precise questions.
Pretty soon, I “trespassed” beyond religious limits to tread into the unlimited domains of spirit where it sails beyond the understandable and the admissible, into spirituality, esotericism and even gnosis - forbidden travel in the Catholic religion. My wish and thirst were to go further.

So, I dived into whatever spiritual books were available in my godfather’s bookshelves and others that I could purchase with the little pocket money I was allowed (most of my money was put into a saving account which I would get when I reached my majority). It was something else that I was looking for, and apparently, it was not in France that I could find it. I tracked down one or two interesting books. “Autobiography of a Yogi” by Paramahansa Yogananda was my first initiation to India. The departure for India, the country that became my aspiration, was already brewing.

However, until I got to India, I hadn’t read anything by Sri Aurobindo or the Mother, even though their names were familiar to me.

The next landmark moment on my path came one day in June 1970, when my godfather became unwell and I couldn’t see him for three days. On the fourth day I could at last talk to him, but he wasn’t very forthcoming. I urged him to tell me what had happened to him, and he finally related a vision that he had had:

“I saw a city, round, crowned with a column of white light climbing towards the sky; the inhabitants of this city look like happy, spiritual people… While visiting the city (which he called New Jerusalem, due to his Christian background), I was in the company of a lady wearing a long white dress. After this visit, the lady took me outside the city; however, to do so, I had to go through a kind of fog, dark and slimy, and the lady told me that this fog was the world resistance to the change that is coming…”

The description of his vision, like most of the spiritual knowledge that I got from my godfather, became recorded deep in my consciousness. However, in those days, I didn’t know of any place upon Earth where such a city existed; consequently, it was for the future and not useful for the time being.

It was only in 1972, right in the first months of my stay in Auroville that this vision came back to my conscious memory - and then I understood why it had been given to me and the reason for my presence in Auroville. This was the place where I was destined to live!

That year of 1972 was a real turning point - I was going to be 21, a legal adult, free to do what I choose. I had long been waiting for the 28th March – my birthday - and on that day, I resigned from my job. The next day I left Sarlat and took the train to the bigger city of Perigueux to claim the funds held in trust in my bank account. Then, I prepared my trip to India. Can you imagine? - I was a boy who didn’t know much other than his immediate entourage, had never travelled very much or far in France, and never alone, who spoke only French, and who, as if struck by lightning, embarked for the unknown - India!

I had made the mistake of calling a travel agency whose sole idea was to sell me an expensive one-way ticket on Air France and they hadn’t thought to tell me that I required a visa for India. So I went to Paris on the 20th of April to take the flight and on arrival at the airport of Delhi, I found that without a visa I couldn’t stay in the country! With the help of an air hostess, the Indian immigration officers gave me a Transit Visa valid for 21 days - a generosity that no other country would ever give! From Delhi, I took a domestic flight to Patna in North India, and from there a local train to get to Ranchi. There I went to the Ashram of Paramahansa Yogananda where a place to stay had been offered to me by their head office in America.
When I arrived in front of the Ashram’s main building, I was met by a European dressed in a long orange robe. He looked like a religious follower, the type I was running away from in Europe. In less than 3 minutes, my decision was taken: “Go, this is not your place!”

So I went on to Calcutta and arrived at the railway station where there was a huge crowd. Calcutta is normally like an ant-hill swarming with people, however, now it was overflowing with refugees fleeing the war with Pakistan for the liberation of Bangladesh. Not knowing why I was in this city rather than in another, I started to look for the Alliance Française - and don’t ask how I knew about it, because I don’t know myself! And there I was told to go to Pondicherry, a former French colony with French-speakers. Looking at the map, I decided to go. But I had to go back to the railway station and take a ticket for Madras, thus embarking on an absolutely folkloric voyage.

In those days, Indian trains still ran on steam, and the so-called “Express” train between Calcutta and Madras took more than three full days, stopping at all the stations along the way (each for a long time) and at a speed that never went over 70 kms per hour. As I didn’t speak English, I used a dictionary and wrote on pieces of paper so I could communicate with educated passengers in my compartment.

In Indian trains one can find the real population of the country. At the age of 12, I had already taken a firm resolution to learn the language of any country in which I would later live, and it was in that train that my taste for communication grew. Today, I can communicate without any problem with the local population of the villages around Auroville in their mother tongue, Tamil (the most ancient spoken language in the world).

The food was far too spicy for my taste and I wasn’t yet accustomed to eating with my hand, so I had to be happy with bananas and biscuits all along the way. When reaching Madras, I wanted to carry on to Pondicherry but I had no more money! A Pondy-based Navy officer bought me the ticket (9 Rupees!). The train took the complete night to reach Pondicherry (160 km) arriving at 7 am. From there, I was taken by rickshaw, whose driver, without asking my opinion, dropped me in front of the main door of what I later learned was the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

With the situation I found myself in (I paid the rickshaw driver with two nylon shirts), I didn’t dare protest and I waited for the Ashram to open. It was at that moment that I realized my situation, which was depressing: I was in Pondicherry, a place totally unknown to me, at 13 thousand kilometers from home in a western suit in the scorching month of April, with no money, no return ticket and to top it all, with no visa to stay! However, I soon realized that something, a force, had guided me so far, so there must be a logical continuation to this adventure. A couple of Frenchmen, seeing my very obvious dismay, told me this was the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

And that was what I did when the door opened at 8 am. I was taken to an office where I had an interview with Mr. Andre (who was the son of The Mother). He then sent me to Cours Chabrol, to the beach-side administrative offices of Auroville, a city under construction north of Pondicherry, and where I could find employment. I was given a room in the Auroville Guest House in Pondicherry and spent the rest of the day and night sleeping. The next morning, as instructed, I took the bus in front of the office and after a few kilometers, the bus climbed a rough canyon to arrive at this place which my godfather had foreseen – even if I still didn’t know it yet!

In 1972, Auroville was being built on what was then a desert plateau over which dusty winds blew in summer and in the monsoon heavy downpours flushed the little remaining red top-soil into the ocean through the surrounding heavily eroded canyons.
There were three hamlets composed of some mud huts covered with palm leaves, inhabited by the plateau’s villagers. Aspiration, the largest community of Aurovilians, was at the edge of the Kuilapalayam village and it was my first halting place. There were different types of huts, all covered with straw. In the same area, there were a few buildings under construction: Last School, the Polyester unit, a maintenance workshop, Auropress, a handmade paper factory, and a dispensary.

When I came down from the bus, in that day of 26th April 1972 while walking to Matrimandir, I knew that I had reached the goal of my search. It was here that I would live from then on, in this piece of hot, arid land because there was a task to be done. I was invited to a great Adventure and I had arrived on the shore of this desert to plant and build an as-yet non-existing world. It was as if I disembarked on a new planet. For the task, one would have to roll up one’s sleeves, take a spade and get to work! And this is how I started to teach carpentry to some of the school children of Aspiration.

My first encounter with the Mother took place on 16th July 1972. A few days before, I requested this meeting via the persons in charge of Auroville’s administration. Normally, the Mother would not receive the visit of Aurovilians unless it was for their birthdays, nevertheless, my request was accepted! On that morning, I climbed the stairs up to her room and put myself in the waiting line. Against the left-hand side of the door, there was a man sitting in the lotus position, waiting for the visits to finish. That man was Satprem, the Mother’s confident, and that is when I saw him for the first time.

People in front of me went on entering Mother’s room slowly. After a never-ending time, I also entered Mother’s room and saw her sitting on her elevated armchair. In silence, I gave her a bouquet of rose flowers and she put one of her hands on my head and gave me a sachet of blessing flowers. After a while, I went out of her room, climbed down the stairs and went out …

The second time I saw her was the next month in very special circumstances on 15th August: Sri Aurobindo’s birthday, a day when the Mother came out on her balcony to observe the crowd of disciples who gathered in the street below. It was also Indian Independence Day and in that year of 1972 it was the celebration of Sri Aurobindo’s birth centenary. Several thousands of people were waiting for The Mother to come out.
As far as I was concerned, I could not see myself participating in a gigantic crowd bath in the street! So, I decided to explore the area to find a good place to see The Mother in all quietness. I found a house with a terraced roof on the other side of the road just opposite to The Mother’s room. I knocked at the door and I asked the lady who opened it if I could go on the terrace for the Darshan. She said yes and that I should be there at 4 pm. This lady was Sujata, Satprem’s companion.

At the stated time, I came and as promised, I was led to the roof where I sat down with the others who were there. On that blessed day of Sri Aurobindo’s birthday, not only did I see the Mother for the second time, but I also met Satprem, Sujata and Roger Anger all together on that roof! This is for me an unforgettable memory. Here is the photo I took of The Mother from the roof on that day:

![Image of The Mother from a roof](image)

Shortly after that, I was accepted in Auroville by the Mother.

I had the occasion to see Satprem several times in Pondy and in Auroville, and once, in his house at Nandanam Garden outside Pondy, to protect the recordings of his conversations with the Mother, which were published after as the 13 volumes of “The Mother’s Agenda”. Another time, it was in Auroville at the time of the publication of his three books describing Mother’s yogic experiences. I saw Roger more than 100 times, and I had the honor of working on buildings designed under his direction at Auromodel with my friends Cristo, Alain Antoine and Pierre Elouard. In the Nineties, I also worked in his office of urban planning then known as Aurofuture.

Starting in 1974, I started to work on a building site in Auromodel for all the carpentry work. Then in 1975, I was asked to shift to a larger workshop in the Economic zone of Auroville, north of the Matrimandir in what would later become the Auromode workplace. I had a workshop with about 40 workers and some old machines doing all sorts of carpentry work, mostly for Auroville. It was an incredible experience with the local population. Having been a manual worker in France helped me to mingle easily with them, and it was a great occasion to really learn spoken Tamil.

In March 1976 on my 25th birthday, I was asked to meet with Navajata, then Chairman of the Sri Aurobindo Society.
He told me that from then on, all workshops would be legally registered under Aurotrust, for which he was also the Chairman. I responded that I must consult with my fellow Aurovilians. His reply was sharp and without ambiguity: “If you refuse, your visa will be cancelled and you will have to go back to France”. This is how and when the struggle started between the Aurovilians and those who tried to claim ownership over the Mother’s Dream.

In 1977, due to this struggle, Roger resigned from his post and went back to France. In 1984, with a few friends, we organized a meeting with him where I undertook to convince Roger to come back to Auroville because, according to me and many others, Auroville was going adrift. I told him straightforwardly that he could not abandon the mission that was entrusted to him by the Mother. It seems that this convinced him because a few months later, he came back! On 15th October 1987, he was reinstated by the community in his official functions as Chief Architect of Auroville. In 1988, he was also recognized as such by Government of India officials and named member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation.

In the meantime, in 1976 I had to close down the workshop, but I decided to stay and settle in that area, and I named it Revelation. It is located between the economic zone and the cultural zone of the planned future city on the north, in the part that was designated to be an Auroville park (the largest one, in fact). Using the available maps, I started to trace the limits of the park on the ground. But not all the land belonged to Auroville and/or some was squatted on - so my first job was to get all this land under Auroville’s control. This wasn’t so hard since somehow Mother’s force was at work, and I was just an instrument.

However there were no trees! I then decided that instead of working with dead wood as I had as a carpenter, I would thereafter work with creating living wood!!

Having the force of will to accomplish this act of creation was indeed an incredible moment in my life. Alone, I gathered knowledge and resources to study tree species, many seedlings were given by the Matrimandir Nursery, and seeds were also collected from many areas in Tamil Nadu.
The results came with the planting of different tree varieties whose size and flower colors varied according to their area in the park. The park itself expanded to almost 20 hectares in the period from 1978 to 1980. More land was purchased with the help of Aurovilians.

Then in Revelation I built a one-story mud-brick house (still standing now) - the first house in Auroville’s City zone to have fero-cement roof...

Here is the workshop that I used as a carpentry factory, and as a farm building after:

Then, in 1979, some people joined the community who wanted to use the building as a cloth-making unit. So, I decided it was time for me to move on and forgo what I had created. This was a step in the lesson of renunciation – leaving the fruit of my works to others.
Seeking another area to express the creative energy that was flowing through me, I created 3 more Auroville communities, with the help of Mother. Each had a large number of trees that I planted with the aim of giving beauty and diversity.

And as for Revelation, the three bear the names I gave: Sharanalayam (in 1979 - a failed attempt in what is now Hermitage), Horizon (in 1980), and Rêve (in 1982). Revelation's name came to me as a revelation in my attempt to claim back Auroville lands. Horizon's name came to me because it reminded me of Akhenaton's first attempt to create a city that belonged to no one in particular. Here is the home I built in Rêve:

![Home in Rêve](image)

I moved on from all of these places and I’m no longer living in any of them – passing them on as service offerings to Mother. And in so doing, I was able to create and build in other ways for Auroville. Since then, I have worked for Auroville’s development and the community’s benefit in a variety of areas, all enriching and gratifying to me:

- From 1982 up to 1991 and again from 2001 till 2006, I was responsible for security arrangements for Auroville

- In 1985, I had the honor of being part of an Auroville team visiting the Prime Minister of India in Delhi:
- In the same year I was involved in a youth camp conference on religion and peace at Gandhigram University:

- Then in 1989, worked in the Auroville architect’s office with planning and data gathering:

- In 1998, I was deeply involved in the move to secure the Auroville Master Plan as foreseen in the Auroville Foundation Act

- And in 1999 I was part of the Working Committee to secure approval of this plan by the Residents Assembly and by the Governing Board

In the photo just below I am seated next to Roger Anger and members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, listening to Frederick who was addressing the group:
- In the hard and dramatic event of the tsunami in 2004 I was present and helping the refugees and the Tamil Nadu Government officials at our villages’ refugee camp:

Now, I am still looking after land-related issues for which I have a mandate from a former Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and from the Town Development Council.
And with all of this creating and building together, I’ve had years of happy interactions and collaboration with fellow hardworking Aurovilians, as you can see in this photo of me with Claudine and Rathinam:

In fact, it's hard to distinguish between my life and Auroville’s - and impossible to give all the details of a whole existence dedicated to Auroville.

I thank the Mother to have allowed me to be of service for her project for so long, working with dedication for over the past 50 years!

Paul Vincent
Auroville, 26 July 2022