Chapter III

The Purified Understanding

THE DESCRIPTION of the status of knowledge to which we aspire, determines the means of knowledge which we shall use. That status of knowledge may be summed up as a supramental realisation which is prepared by mental representations through various mental principles in us and once attained again reflects itself more perfectly in all the members of the being. It is a re-seeing and therefore a remoulding of our whole existence in the light of the Divine and One and Eternal free from subjection to the appearances of things and the externalities of our superficial being.

Such a passage from the human to the divine, from the divided and discordant to the One, from the phenomenon to the eternal Truth, such an entire rebirth or new birth of the soul must necessarily involve two stages, one of preparation in which the soul and its instruments must become fit and another of actual illumination and realisation in the prepared soul through its fit instruments. There is indeed no rigid line of demarcation in sequence of Time between these two stages; rather they are necessary to each other and continue simultaneously. For in proportion as the soul becomes fit it increases in illumination and rises to higher and higher, completer and completer realisations, and in proportion as these illuminations and these realisations increase, becomes fit and its instruments more adequate to their task: there are soul-seasons of unillumined preparation and soul-seasons of illumined growth and culminating soul-moments more or less prolonged of illumined possession, moments that are transient like the flash of the lightning, yet change the whole spiritual future, moments also that extend over many human hours, days, weeks in a constant light or blaze of the Sun of Truth. And through all these the soul once turned Godwards grows
towards the permanence and perfection of its new birth and real existence.

The first necessity of preparation is the purifying of all the members of our being; especially, for the path of knowledge, the purification of the understanding, the key that shall open the door of Truth; and a purified understanding is hardly possible without the purification of the other members. An unpurified heart, an unpurified sense, an unpurified life confuses the understanding, disturb its data, distort its conclusions, darken its seeing, misapply its knowledge; an unpurified physical system clogs or chokes up its action. There must be an integral purity. Here also there is an interdependence; for the purification of each member of our being profits by the clarifying of every other, the progressive tranquillisation of the emotional heart helping for instance the purification of the understanding while equally a purified understanding imposes calm and light on the turbid and darkened workings of the yet impure emotions. It may even be said that while each member of our being has its own proper principles of purification, yet it is the purified understanding that in man is the most potent cleanser of his turbid and disordered being and most sovereignly imposes their right working on his other members. Knowledge, says the Gita, is the sovereign purity; light is the source of all clearness and harmony even as the darkness of ignorance is the cause of all our stumblings. Love, for example, is the purifier of the heart and by reducing all our emotions into terms of divine love the heart is perfected and fulfilled; yet love itself needs to be clarified by divine knowledge. The heart’s love of God may be blind, narrow and ignorant and lead to fanaticism and obscurantism; it may, even when otherwise pure, limit our perfection by refusing to see Him except in a limited personality and by recoiling from the true and infinite vision. The heart’s love of man may equally lead to distortions and exaggerations in feeling, action and knowledge which have to be corrected and prevented by the purification of the understanding.

We must, however, consider deeply and clearly what we mean by the understanding and by its purification. We use the
word as the nearest equivalent we can get in the English tongue to the Sanskrit philosophical term buddhi; therefore we exclude from it the action of the sense mind which merely consists of the recording of perceptions of all kinds without distinction whether they be right or wrong, true or mere illusory phenomena, penetrating or superficial. We exclude that mass of confused conception which is merely a rendering of these perceptions and is equally void of the higher principle of judgment and discrimination. Nor can we include that constant leaping current of habitual thought which does duty for understanding in the mind of the average unthinking man, but is only a constant repetition of habitual associations, desires, prejudices, prejudgments, received or inherited preferences, even though it may constantly enrich itself by a fresh stock of concepts streaming in from the environment and admitted without the challenge of the sovereign discriminating reason. Undoubtedly this is a sort of understanding which has been very useful in the development of man from the animal; but it is only one remove above the animal mind; it is a half-animal reason subservient to habit, to desire and the senses and is of no avail in the search whether for scientific or philosophical or spiritual knowledge. We have to go beyond it; its purification can only be effected either by dismissing or silencing it altogether or by transmuting it into the true understanding.

By the understanding we mean that which at once perceives, judges and discriminates, the true reason of the human being not subservient to the senses, to desire or to the blind force of habit, but working in its own right for mastery, for knowledge. Certainly, the reason of man as he is at present does not even at its best act entirely in this free and sovereign fashion; but so far as it fails, it fails because it is still mixed with the lower half-animal action, because it is impure and constantly hampered and pulled down from its characteristic action. In its purity it should not be involved in these lower movements, but stand back from the object, and observe disinterestedly, put it in its right place in the whole by force of comparison, contrast, analogy, reason from its rightly observed data by deduction, induction, inference and
holding all its gains in memory and supplementing them by a chastened and rightly-guided imagination view all in the light of a trained and disciplined judgment. Such is the pure intellectual understanding of which disinterested observation, judgment and reasoning are the law and characterising action.

But the term buddhi is also used in another and profounder sense. The intellectual understanding is only the lower buddhi; there is another and a higher buddhi which is not intelligence but vision, is not understanding but rather an over-standing in knowledge, and does not seek knowledge and attain it in subjection to the data it observes but possesses already the truth and brings it out in the terms of a revelatory and intuitional thought. The nearest the human mind usually gets to this truth-conscious knowledge is that imperfect action of illumined finding which occurs when there is a great stress of thought and the intellect electrified by constant discharges from behind the veil and yielding to a higher enthusiasm admits a considerable instreaming from the intuitive and inspired faculty of knowledge. For there is an intuitive mind in man which serves as a recipient and channel for these instreamings from a supramental faculty. But the action of intuition and inspiration in us is imperfect in kind as well as intermittent in action; ordinarily, it comes in response to a claim from the labouring and struggling heart or intellect and, even before its givings enter the conscious mind, they are already affected by the thought or aspiration which went up to meet them, are no longer pure but altered to the needs of the heart or intellect; and after they enter the conscious mind, they are immediately seized upon by the intellectual understanding and dissipated or broken up so as to fit in with our imperfect intellectual knowledge, or by the heart and remoulded to suit our blind or half-blind emotional longings and preferences, or even by the lower cravings and distorted to the vehement uses of our hungers and passions.

If this higher buddhi could act pure of the interference of

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1 The Divine Being is described as the adhyakṣa, he who seated over all in the supreme ether over-sees things, views and controls them from above.
these lower members, it would give pure forms of the truth; observation would be dominated or replaced by a vision which could see without subservient dependence on the testimony of the sense-mind and senses; imagination would give place to the self-assured inspiration of the truth, reasoning to the spontaneous discernment of relations and conclusion from reasoning to an intuition containing in itself those relations and not building laboriously upon them, judgment to a thought-vision in whose light the truth would stand revealed without the mask which it now wears and which our intellectual judgment has to penetrate; while memory too would take upon itself that larger sense given to it in Greek thought and be no longer a paltry selection from the store gained by the individual in his present life, but rather the all-recording knowledge which secretly holds and constantly gives from itself everything that we now seem painfully to acquire but really in this sense remember, a knowledge which includes the future\(^2\) no less than the past. Certainly, we are intended to grow in our receptivity to this higher faculty of truth-conscious knowledge, but its full and unveiled use is as yet the privilege of the gods and beyond our present human stature.

We see then what we mean precisely by the understanding and by that higher faculty which we may call for the sake of convenience the ideal faculty and which stands to the developed intellect much in the same relation as that intellect stands to the half-animal reason of the undeveloped man. It becomes evident also what is the nature of the purification which is necessary before the understanding can fulfil rightly its part in the attainment of right knowledge. All impurity is a confusion of working, a departure from the dharma, the just and inherently right action of things which in that right action are pure and helpful to our perfection and this departure is usually the result of an ignorant confusion\(^3\) of dharmas in which the function lends itself to the demand of other tendencies than those which are properly its own.

\(^2\) In this sense the power of prophecy has been aptly called a memory of the future.

\(^3\) sankara.
The first cause of impurity in the understanding is the intermiscence of desire in the thinking functions, and desire itself is an impurity of the Will involved in the vital and emotional parts of our being. When the vital and emotional desires interfere with the pure will-to-know, the thought-function becomes subservient to them, pursues ends other than those proper to itself and its perceptions are clogged and deranged. The understanding must lift itself beyond the siege of desire and emotion and, in order that it may have perfect immunity, it must get the vital parts and the emotions themselves purified. The will to enjoy is proper to the vital being but not the choice or the reaching after the enjoyment which must be determined and acquired by higher functions; therefore the vital being must be trained to accept whatever gain or enjoyment comes to it in the right functioning of the life in obedience to the working of the divine Will and to rid itself of craving and attachment. Similarly the heart must be freed from subjection to the cravings of the life-principle and the senses and thus rid itself of the false emotions of fear, wrath, hatred, lust, etc. which constitute the chief impurity of the heart. The will to love is proper to the heart, but here also the choice and reaching after love have to be foregone or tranquillised and the heart taught to love with depth and intensity indeed, but with a calm depth and a settled and equal, not a troubled and disordered intensity. The tranquillisation and mastery of these members is a first condition for the immunity of the understanding from error, ignorance and perversion. This purification spells an entire equality of the nervous being and the heart; equality, therefore, even as it was the first word of the path of works, so also is the first word of the path of knowledge.

The second cause of impurity in the understanding is the illusion of the senses and the intermiscence of the sense-mind in the thinking functions. No knowledge can be true knowledge which subjects itself to the senses or uses them otherwise than as first indices whose data have constantly to be corrected and overpassed. The beginning of Science is the examination of the truths 4 sama and dama.
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of the world-force that underlie its apparent workings such as our senses represent them to be; the beginning of philosophy is the examination of the principles of things which the senses mistranslate to us; the beginning of spiritual knowledge is the refusal to accept the limitations of the sense-life or to take the visible and sensible as anything more than phenomenon of the Reality.

Equally must the sense-mind be stilled and taught to leave the function of thought to the mind that judges and understands. When the understanding in us stands back from the action of the sense-mind and repels its intermiscence, the latter detaches itself from the understanding and can be watched in its separate action. It then reveals itself as a constantly swirling and eddy-ing undercurrent of habitual concepts, associations, perceptions, desires without any real sequence, order or principle of light. It is a constant repetition in a circle unintelligent and unfruitful. Ordinarily the human understanding accepts this undercurrent and tries to reduce it to a partial order and sequence; but by so doing it becomes itself subject to it and partakes of that disorder, restlessness, unintelligent subjection to habit and blind purposeless repetition which makes the ordinary human reason a misleading, limited and even frivolous and futile instrument. There is nothing to be done with this fickle, restless, violent and disturbing factor but to get rid of it whether by detaching it and then reducing it to stillness or by giving a concentration and singleness to the thought by which it will of itself reject this alien and confusing element.

A third cause of impurity has its source in the understanding itself and consists in an improper action of the will to know. That will is proper to the understanding, but here again choice and unequal reaching after knowledge clog and distort. They lead to a partiality and attachment which makes the intellect cling to certain ideas and opinions with a more or less obstinate will to ignore the truth in other ideas and opinions, cling to certain fragments of a truth and shy against the admission of other parts which are yet necessary to its fullness, cling to certain predilections of knowledge and repel all knowledge that does not
agree with the personal temperament of thought which has been acquired by the past of the thinker. The remedy lies in a perfect equality of the mind, in the cultivation of an entire intellectual rectitude and in the perfection of mental disinterestedness. The purified understanding as it will not lend itself to any desire or craving, so will not lend itself either to any predilection or distaste for any particular idea or truth, and will refuse to be attached even to those ideas of which it is the most certain or to lay on them such an undue stress as is likely to disturb the balance of truth and depreciate the values of other elements of a complete and perfect knowledge.

An understanding thus purified would be a perfectly flexible, entire and faultless instrument of intellectual thought and being free from the inferior sources of obstruction and distortion would be capable of as true and complete a perception of the truths of the Self and the universe as the intellect can attain. But for real knowledge something more is necessary, since real knowledge is by our very definition of it supra-intellectual. In order that the understanding may not interfere with our attainment to real knowledge, we have to reach to that something more and cultivate a power exceedingly difficult for the active intellectual thinker and distasteful to his proclivities, the power of intellectual passivity. The object served is double and therefore two different kinds of passivity have to be acquired.

In the first place we have seen that intellectual thought is in itself inadequate and is not the highest thinking; the highest is that which comes through the intuitive mind and from the supramental faculty. So long as we are dominated by the intellectual habit and by the lower workings, the intuitive mind can only send its messages to us subconsciously and subject to a distortion more or less entire before it reaches the conscious mind; or if it works consciously, then only with an inadequate rarity and a great imperfection in its functioning. In order to strengthen the higher knowledge-faculty in us we have to effect the same separation between the intuitive and intellectual elements of our thought as we have already effected between the understanding and the sense-mind; and this is no easy task, for
not only do our intuitions come to us incrusted in the intellectual action, but there are a great number of mental workings which masquerade and ape the appearances of the higher faculty. The remedy is to train first the intellect to recognise the true intuition, to distinguish it from the false and then to accustom it, when it arrives at an intellectual perception or conclusion, to attach no final value to it, but rather look upward, refer all to the divine principle and wait in as complete a silence as it can command for the light from above. In this way it is possible to transmute a great part of our intellectual thinking into the luminous truth-conscious vision, — the ideal would be a complete transition, — or at least to increase greatly the frequency, purity and conscious force of the ideal knowledge working behind the intellect. The latter must learn to be subject and passive to the ideal faculty.

But for the knowledge of the Self it is necessary to have the power of a complete intellectual passivity, the power of dismissing all thought, the power of the mind to think not at all which the Gita in one passage enjoins. This is a hard saying for the occidental mind to which thought is the highest thing and which will be apt to mistake the power of the mind not to think, its complete silence for the incapacity of thought. But this power of silence is a capacity and not an incapacity, a power and not a weakness. It is a profound and pregnant stillness. Only when the mind is thus entirely still, like clear, motionless and level water, in a perfect purity and peace of the whole being and the soul transcends thought, can the Self which exceeds and originates all activities and becomings, the Silence from which all words are born, the Absolute of which all relativities are partial reflections manifest itself in the pure essence of our being. In a complete silence only is the Silence heard; in a pure peace only is its Being revealed. Therefore to us the name of That is the Silence and the Peace.