Chapter VIII

The Methods of Vedantic Knowledge

This secret Self in all beings is not apparent, but it is seen by means of the supreme reason, the subtle, by those who have the subtle vision. \textit{Katha Upanishad}.\textsuperscript{1}

But what then is the working of this Sachchidananda in the world and by what process of things are the relations between itself and the ego which figures it first formed, then led to their consummation? For on those relations and on the process they follow depend the whole philosophy and practice of a divine life for man.

We arrive at the conception and at the knowledge of a divine existence by exceeding the evidence of the senses and piercing beyond the walls of the physical mind. So long as we confine ourselves to sense-evidence and the physical consciousness, we can conceive nothing and know nothing except the material world and its phenomena. But certain faculties in us enable our mentality to arrive at conceptions which we may indeed deduce by ratiocination or by imaginative variation from the facts of the physical world as we see them, but which are not warranted by any purely physical data or any physical experience. The first of these instruments is the pure reason.

Human reason has a double action, mixed or dependent, pure or sovereign. Reason accepts a mixed action when it confines itself to the circle of our sensible experience, admits its law as the final truth and concerns itself only with the study of phenomenon, that is to say, with the appearances of things in their relations, processes and utilities. This rational action is incapable of knowing what is, it only knows what appears

\textsuperscript{1} I. 3. 12.
to be, it has no plummet by which it can sound the depths of being, it can only survey the field of becoming. Reason, on the other hand, asserts its pure action, when accepting our sensible experiences as a starting-point but refusing to be limited by them it goes behind, judges, works in its own right and strives to arrive at general and unalterable concepts which attach themselves not to the appearances of things, but to that which stands behind their appearances. It may arrive at its result by direct judgment passing immediately from the appearance to that which stands behind it and in that case the concept arrived at may seem to be a result of the sensible experience and dependent upon it though it is really a perception of reason working in its own right. But the perceptions of the pure reason may also — and this is their more characteristic action — use the experience from which they start as a mere excuse and leave it far behind before they arrive at their result, so far that the result may seem the direct contrary of that which our sensible experience wishes to dictate to us. This movement is legitimate and indispensable, because our normal experience not only covers only a small part of universal fact, but even in the limits of its own field uses instruments that are defective and gives us false weights and measures. It must be exceeded, put away to a distance and its insistences often denied if we are to arrive at more adequate conceptions of the truth of things. To correct the errors of the sense-mind by the use of reason is one of the most valuable powers developed by man and the chief cause of his superiority among terrestrial beings.

The complete use of pure reason brings us finally from physical to metaphysical knowledge. But the concepts of metaphysical knowledge do not in themselves fully satisfy the demand of our integral being. They are indeed entirely satisfactory to the pure reason itself, because they are the very stuff of its own existence. But our nature sees things through two eyes always, for it views them doubly as idea and as fact and therefore every concept is incomplete for us and to a part of our nature almost unreal until it becomes an experience. But the truths which are now in question, are of an order not subject to our normal experience. They are, in their nature, “beyond the perception of the senses
but seizable by the perception of the reason.” Therefore, some other faculty of experience is necessary by which the demand of our nature can be fulfilled and this can only come, since we are dealing with the supraphysical, by an extension of psychological experience.

In a sense all our experience is psychological since even what we receive by the senses, has no meaning or value to us till it is translated into the terms of the sense-mind, the Manas of Indian philosophical terminology. Manas, say our philosophers, is the sixth sense. But we may even say that it is the only sense and that the others, vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste are merely specialisations of the sense-mind which, although it normally uses the sense-organs for the basis of its experience, yet exceeds them and is capable of a direct experience proper to its own inherent action. As a result psychological experience, like the cognitions of the reason, is capable in man of a double action, mixed or dependent, pure or sovereign. Its mixed action takes place usually when the mind seeks to become aware of the external world, the object; the pure action when it seeks to become aware of itself, the subject. In the former activity, it is dependent on the senses and forms its perceptions in accord with their evidence; in the latter it acts in itself and is aware of things directly by a sort of identity with them. We are thus aware of our emotions; we are aware of anger, as has been acutely said, because we become anger. We are thus aware also of our own existence; and here the nature of experience as knowledge by identity becomes apparent. In reality, all experience is in its secret nature knowledge by identity; but its true character is hidden from us because we have separated ourselves from the rest of the world by exclusion, by the distinction of ourself as subject and everything else as object, and we are compelled to develop processes and organs by which we may again enter into communion with all that we have excluded. We have to replace direct knowledge through conscious identity by an indirect knowledge which appears to be caused by physical contact and mental sympathy. This limitation is a fundamental creation of the ego and an instance of the manner
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in which it has proceeded throughout, starting from an original falsehood and covering over the true truth of things by contingent falsehoods which become for us practical truths of relation.

From this nature of mental and sense knowledge as it is at present organised in us, it follows that there is no inevitable necessity in our existing limitations. They are the result of an evolution in which mind has accustomed itself to depend upon certain physiological functionings and their reactions as its normal means of entering into relation with the material universe. Therefore, although it is the rule that when we seek to become aware of the external world, we have to do so indirectly through the sense-organs and can experience only so much of the truth about things and men as the senses convey to us, yet this rule is merely the regularity of a dominant habit. It is possible for the mind — and it would be natural for it, if it could be persuaded to liberate itself from its consent to the domination of matter, — to take direct cognisance of the objects of sense without the aid of the sense-organs. This is what happens in experiments of hypnosis and cognate psychological phenomena. Because our waking consciousness is determined and limited by the balance between mind and matter worked out by life in its evolution, this direct cognisance is usually impossible in our ordinary waking state and has therefore to be brought about by throwing the waking mind into a state of sleep which liberates the true or subliminal mind. Mind is then able to assert its true character as the one and all-sufficient sense and free to apply to the objects of sense its pure and sovereign instead of its mixed and dependent action. Nor is this extension of faculty really impossible but only more difficult in our waking state, — as is known to all who have been able to go far enough in certain paths of psychological experiment.

The sovereign action of the sense-mind can be employed to develop other senses besides the five which we ordinarily use. For instance, it is possible to develop the power of appreciating accurately without physical means the weight of an object.
which we hold in our hands. Here the sense of contact and pressure is merely used as a starting-point, just as the data of sense-experience are used by the pure reason, but it is not really the sense of touch which gives the measure of the weight to the mind; that finds the right value through its own independent perception and uses the touch only in order to enter into relation with the object. And as with the pure reason, so with the sense-mind, the sense-experience can be used as a mere first point from which it proceeds to a knowledge that has nothing to do with the sense-organs and often contradicts their evidence. Nor is the extension of faculty confined only to outsides and superficies. It is possible, once we have entered by any of the senses into relation with an external object, so to apply the Manas as to become aware of the contents of the object, for example, to receive or to perceive the thoughts or feelings of others without aid from their utterance, gesture, action or facial expressions and even in contradiction of these always partial and often misleading data. Finally, by an utilisation of the inner senses, — that is to say, of the sense-powers, in themselves, in their purely mental or subtle activity as distinguished from the physical which is only a selection for the purposes of outward life from their total and general action, — we are able to take cognition of sense-experiences, of appearances and images of things other than those which belong to the organisation of our material environment. All these extensions of faculty, though received with hesitation and incredulity by the physical mind because they are abnormal to the habitual scheme of our ordinary life and experience, difficult to set in action, still more difficult to systematise so as to be able to make of them an orderly and serviceable set of instruments, must yet be admitted, since they are the invariable result of any attempt to enlarge the field of our superficially active consciousness whether by some kind of untaught effort and casual ill-ordered effect or by a scientific and well-regulated practice.

None of them, however, leads to the aim we have in view, the psychological experience of those truths that are “beyond perception by the sense but seizable by the perceptions of the
reason”, *buddhigrāhyam atīndriyam*. They give us only a larger field of phenomena and more effective means for the observation of phenomena. The truth of things always escapes beyond the sense. Yet is it a sound rule inherent in the very constitution of universal existence that where there are truths attainable by the reason, there must be somewhere in the organism possessed of that reason a means of arriving at or verifying them by experience. The one means we have left in our mentality is an extension of that form of knowledge by identity which gives us the awareness of our own existence. It is really upon a self-awareness more or less conscient, more or less present to our conception that the knowledge of the contents of our self is based. Or to put it in a more general formula, the knowledge of the contents is contained in the knowledge of the continent. If then we can extend our faculty of mental self-awareness to awareness of the Self beyond and outside us, Atman or Brahman of the Upanishads, we may become possessors in experience of the truths which form the contents of the Atman or Brahman in the universe. It is on this possibility that Indian Vedanta has based itself. It has sought through knowledge of the Self the knowledge of the universe.

But always mental experience and the concepts of the reason have been held by it to be even at their highest a reflection in mental identifications and not the supreme self-existent identity. We have to go beyond the mind and the reason. The reason active in our waking consciousness is only a mediator between the subconscious All that we come from in our evolution upwards and the superconscious All towards which we are impelled by that evolution. The subconscious and the superconscious are two different formulations of the same All. The master-word of the subconscious is Life, the master-word of the superconscious is Light. In the subconscious knowledge or consciousness is involved in action, for action is the essence of Life. In the superconscious action re-enters into Light and no longer contains involved knowledge but is itself contained in a supreme

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2 *Gītā*, VI. 21.
consciousness. Intuitional knowledge is that which is common between them and the foundation of intuitional knowledge is conscious or effective identity between that which knows and that which is known; it is that state of common self-existence in which the knower and the known are one through knowledge. But in the subconscient the intuition manifests itself in the action, in effectivity, and the knowledge or conscious identity is either entirely or more or less concealed in the action. In the superconscient, on the contrary, Light being the law and the principle, the intuition manifests itself in its true nature as knowledge emerging out of conscious identity, and effectivity of action is rather the accompaniment or necessary consequent and no longer masks as the primary fact. Between these two states reason and mind act as intermediaries which enable the being to liberate knowledge out of its imprisonment in the act and prepare it to resume its essential primacy. When the self-awareness in the mind applied both to continent and content, to own-self and other-self, exalts itself into the luminous self-manifest identity, the reason also converts itself into the form of the self-luminous intuitional\(^3\) knowledge. This is the highest possible state of our knowledge when mind fulfils itself in the supramental.

Such is the scheme of the human understanding upon which the conclusions of the most ancient Vedanta were built. To develop the results arrived at on this foundation by the ancient sages is not my object, but it is necessary to pass briefly in review some of their principal conclusions so far as they affect the problem of the divine Life with which alone we are at present concerned. For it is in those ideas that we shall find the best previous foundation of that which we seek now to rebuild and although, as with all knowledge, old expression has to be replaced to a certain extent by new expression suited to a later mentality and old light has to merge itself into new light

\(^3\) I use the word “intuition” for want of a better. In truth, it is a makeshift and inadequate to the connotation demanded of it. The same has to be said of the word “consciousness” and many others which our poverty compels us to extend illegitimately in their significance.
as dawn succeeds dawn, yet it is with the old treasure as our initial capital or so much of it as we can recover that we shall most advantageously proceed to accumulate the largest gains in our new commerce with the ever-changeless and ever-changing Infinite.

Sad Brahman, Existence pure, indefinable, infinite, absolute, is the last concept at which Vedantic analysis arrives in its view of the universe, the fundamental Reality which Vedantic experience discovers behind all the movement and formation which constitute the apparent reality. It is obvious that when we posit this conception, we go entirely beyond what our ordinary consciousness, our normal experience contains or warrants. The senses and sense-mind know nothing whatever about any pure or absolute existence. All that our sense-experience tells us of, is form and movement. Forms exist, but with an existence that is not pure, rather always mixed, combined, aggregated, relative. When we go within ourselves, we may get rid of precise form, but we cannot get rid of movement, of change. Motion of Matter in Space, motion of change in Time seem to be the condition of existence. We may say indeed, if we like, that this is existence and that the idea of existence in itself corresponds to no discoverable reality. At the most in the phenomenon of self-awareness or behind it, we get sometimes a glimpse of something immovable and immutable, something that we vaguely perceive or imagine that we are beyond all life and death, beyond all change and formation and action. Here is the one door in us that sometimes swings open upon the splendour of a truth beyond and, before it shuts again, allows a ray to touch us, — a luminous intimation which, if we have the strength and firmness, we may hold to in our faith and make a starting-point for another play of consciousness than that of the sense-mind, for the play of Intuition.

For if we examine carefully, we shall find that Intuition is our first teacher. Intuition always stands veiled behind our mental operations. Intuition brings to man those brilliant messages from the Unknown which are the beginning of his higher knowledge. Reason only comes in afterwards to see what profit it can have
of the shining harvest. Intuition gives us that idea of something behind and beyond all that we know and seem to be which pursues man always in contradiction of his lower reason and all his normal experience and impels him to formulate that formless perception in the more positive ideas of God, Immortality, Heaven and the rest by which we strive to express it to the mind. For Intuition is as strong as Nature herself from whose very soul it has sprung and cares nothing for the contradictions of reason or the denials of experience. It knows what is because it is, because itself it is of that and has come from that, and will not yield it to the judgment of what merely becomes and appears. What the Intuition tells us of, is not so much Existence as the Existent, for it proceeds from that one point of light in us which gives it its advantage, that sometimes opened door in our own self-awareness. Ancient Vedanta seized this message of the Intuition and formulated it in the three great declarations of the Upanishads, “I am He”, “Thou art That, O Swetaketu”, “All this is the Brahman; this Self is the Brahman”.

But Intuition by the very nature of its action in man, working as it does from behind the veil, active principally in his more unenlightened, less articulate parts, served in front of the veil, in the narrow light which is our waking conscience, only by instruments that are unable fully to assimilate its messages,—Intuition is unable to give us the truth in that ordered and articulated form which our nature demands. Before it could effect any such completeness of direct knowledge in us, it would have to organise itself in our surface being and take possession there of the leading part. But in our surface being it is not the Intuition, it is the Reason which is organised and helps us to order our perceptions, thoughts and actions. Therefore the age of intuitive knowledge, represented by the early Vedantic thinking of the Upanishads, had to give place to the age of rational knowledge; inspired Scripture made room for metaphysical philosophy, even as afterwards metaphysical philosophy had to give place to experimental Science. Intuitive thought which is a messenger from the superconscient and therefore our highest faculty, was supplanted by the pure reason which is only a sort of deputy
and belongs to the middle heights of our being; pure reason in its turn was supplanted for a time by the mixed action of the reason which lives on our plains and lower elevations and does not in its view exceed the horizon of the experience that the physical mind and senses or such aids as we can invent for them can bring to us. And this process which seems to be a descent, is really a circle of progress. For in each case the lower faculty is compelled to take up as much as it can assimilate of what the higher had already given and to attempt to re-establish it by its own methods. By the attempt it is itself enlarged in its scope and arrives eventually at a more supple and a more ample self-accommodation to the higher faculties. Without this succession and attempt at separate assimilation we should be obliged to remain under the exclusive domination of a part of our nature while the rest remained either depressed and unduly subjected or separate in its field and therefore poor in its development. With this succession and separate attempt the balance is righted; a more complete harmony of our parts of knowledge is prepared.

We see this succession in the Upanishads and the subsequent Indian philosophies. The sages of the Veda and Vedanta relied entirely upon intuition and spiritual experience. It is by an error that scholars sometimes speak of great debates or discussions in the Upanishad. Wherever there is the appearance of a controversy, it is not by discussion, by dialectics or the use of logical reasoning that it proceeds, but by a comparison of intuitions and experiences in which the less luminous gives place to the more luminous, the narrower, faultier or less essential to the more comprehensive, more perfect, more essential. The question asked by one sage of another is “What dost thou know?”, not “What dost thou think?” nor “To what conclusion has thy reasoning arrived?” Nowhere in the Upanishads do we find any trace of logical reasoning urged in support of the truths of Vedanta. Intuition, the sages seem to have held, must be corrected by a more perfect intuitive; logical reasoning cannot be its judge.

And yet the human reason demands its own method of satisfaction. Therefore when the age of rationalistic speculation began, Indian philosophers, respectful of the heritage of the past,
adopted a double attitude towards the Truth they sought. They recognised in the Sruti, the earlier results of Intuition or, as they preferred to call it, of inspired Revelation, an authority superior to Reason. But at the same time they started from Reason and tested the results it gave them, holding only those conclusions to be valid which were supported by the supreme authority. In this way they avoided to a certain extent the besetting sin of metaphysics, the tendency to battle in the clouds because it deals with words as if they were imperative facts instead of symbols which have always to be carefully scrutinised and brought back constantly to the sense of that which they represent. Their speculations tended at first to keep near at the centre to the highest and profoundest experience and proceeded with the united consent of the two great authorities, Reason and Intuition. Nevertheless, the natural trend of Reason to assert its own supremacy triumphed in effect over the theory of its subordination. Hence the rise of conflicting schools each of which founded itself in theory on the Veda and used its texts as a weapon against the others. For the highest intuitive Knowledge sees things in the whole, in the large and details only as sides of the indivisible whole; its tendency is towards immediate synthesis and the unity of knowledge. Reason, on the contrary, proceeds by analysis and division and assembles its facts to form a whole; but in the assemblage so formed there are opposites, anomalies, logical incompatibilities, and the natural tendency of Reason is to affirm some and to negate others which conflict with its chosen conclusions so that it may form a flawlessly logical system. The unity of the first intuitive knowledge was thus broken up and the ingenuity of the logicians was always able to discover devices, methods of interpretation, standards of varying value by which inconvenient texts of the Scripture could be practically annulled and an entire freedom acquired for their metaphysical speculation.

Nevertheless, the main conceptions of the earlier Vedanta remained in parts in the various philosophical systems and efforts were made from time to time to recombine them into some image of the old catholicity and unity of intuitional thought. And behind the thought of all, variously presented, survived as
the fundamental conception, Purusha, Atman or Sad Brahman, the pure Existent of the Upanishads, often rationalised into an idea or psychological state, but still carrying something of its old burden of inexpressible reality. What may be the relation of the movement of becoming which is what we call the world to this absolute Unity and how the ego, whether generated by the movement or cause of the movement, can return to that true Self, Divinity or Reality declared by the Vedanta, these were the questions speculative and practical which have always occupied the thought of India.