August 5, 1961

(Mother gives Satprem some flowers.)

This is Skill in Works. And Mahalakshmi, which means success. Tomorrow I'm going downstairs.

Oh, yes?

You didn't know? Tomorrow is Sunday, I'm distributing saris and napkins. So, mon petit, do you have any questions?

Not many more. Some small details.

Could you hand me a fan? The mosquitoes are a nuisance. Well then?

First of all, in the “Questions and Answers” you speak of the ‘reversal of consciousness’. Is this synonymous with the psychic realization? Because in one Conversation you connect the two things: the reversal of consciousness and the discovery of the psychic being.

It's the result of this discovery. In fact, it's the result of union with the psychic being.

Another detail. In several places, Sri Aurobindo speaks of the ‘circumconscient’ or ‘environmental consciousness’ through which we enter into contact with the external world. Is this the same as the ‘subtle physical’, the subtle envelope? What is this circumconscient?

It's the encircling consciousness. Isn't it called the ‘milieu’ in French?

No, the milieu isn't personal.

Does he speak of it as being something personal?

Yes, there is subconscient, conscient, subliminal and circumconscient.

Oh!

Perhaps I should bring you the passage where he speaks about it.

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1 Phlox.
2 *Nymphaea* (Water Lily), pure white with golden center.
3 For the preparation of Satprem's book on Sri Aurobindo.
Yes, because I don't quite understand. You see, the subtle physical extends a long way beyond the body.

Then comes what Theon called the ‘nervous sub-level’, which lies between this subtle physical and the vital. And it acts as a protection: if it is stable, harmonious and strong, it protects you — it protects you even physically — from contagious diseases, for instance, and even from accidents. I experienced it when I was living at Val-de-Grâce. It was the year I resolved to attain union with the psychic being and I was concentrated on this from morning to night and night to morning. Every day I spent some time in the Luxembourg Gardens. They were right near the house, but to get there I had to go all the way down Rue du Val-de-Grâce and cross Boulevard Saint Michel, where there were streetcars, automobiles, buses — the whole circus. I would remain in my concentration the whole time, and once, while crossing the boulevard, I felt a shock about this far from my body [slightly more than arm's length], so spontaneously I jumped back — just enough for the streetcar to pass by. I hadn't heard anything; I was totally absorbed, and without that warning I would surely have been run over; instead, I jumped back just in time, and the streetcar sped by. I understood then that this nervous sheath was something entirely concrete, because what I had felt was not an idea of danger but a shock — a material SHOCK.

So it's true that as long as this envelope is strong and undamaged, you are protected. But for instance, if you are over-tired or worried or flustered — anything that brings disorder into the atmosphere seems to make holes in this envelope, and all kinds of things can enter.

Perhaps this is what Sri Aurobindo is speaking of.

*But isn't this the subtle physical?*

It surrounds the subtle physical.

*First there is the subtle physical and then the circumconscient?*

Yes; the subtle physical is visible — visible. You have seen heat vibrations when it's very hot, haven't you? That's the subtle physical — one form of it.

The subtle physical is right here *(gesture on the surface of the skin)*. Some people are sensitive in the subtle physical; you move your hand near them and they feel it immediately. Others don't even notice — it depends on the subtle physical's sensitivity. And the circumconscient surrounds it like an envelope. If there are no tears in it, this envelope is a magnificent protection. And it's not dependent on any spiritual or intellectual rationale, but on a harmony with Nature and life, a kind of stability in the material being. People with strong envelopes are almost always in good health and succeed in what they do. It isn't

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4 We are not sure, finally, if this envelope and the circumconscient are one and the same thing, but this is how Sri Aurobindo speaks of it: “The first thing one sees when one has broken the barrier is the vital-physical body. It is around the physical body and with the physical it forms as it were the ‘nervous envelope’. The force of a disease has to break through it to reach the body — except for the attacks on the most material parts. You can then feel the disease coming and also feel in the nervous envelope the part of the body which it is going to, or intending to, attack because what is in the nervous envelope has a material counterpart in the body. Thus it is the vital-physical which is first attacked and then the force takes the form of a disease in the system. I had myself the experience of fever all around the body.” *(A.B. Purani, Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo, Volume 1, p. 232)*
something mental — when they do a work it comes out nicely, if they want to meet someone, they meet him. Things of this nature.

The circumconscient must be that.

Is it through this envelope that we come into contact with others?

Ah, yes, I should think so! When you are sensitive, mon petit, it becomes almost unbearable to be in a tightly packed crowd — it's all mixed up, and it's horrible. There is a suffocating sense of intrusion, as if you were inside things you hadn't chosen to have near you!

Is that all?

Another detail. Is there a difference between sleep and death, or are they the same?

Death and sleep? Oh, no!

They are not the same.

No.... Are you thinking of Buddha? (Ah, I thought of this two or three days ago; it came suddenly and I wondered why!) I remembered that before Buddha left his home, he passed through the rooms of the palace and saw his wife and parents sleeping and it felt to him as though they were dead. That's where we hear of sleep being like death.

But isn't it like death? ... When you are asleep, you aren't in your body: everything else goes out just as it does at the time of death, doesn't it?

Oh, no! Not at all. No. The cataleptic state of trance is like death, yes, except for the link that remains — only a link remains, but otherwise one has entirely gone out. Actually, the body becomes cataleptic only when one has entirely gone out; otherwise everything that is most material in the vital remains.

I mean, aren't the places you go to in sleep the same as the ones you go to in death?

No, no, no. Most of the time in sleep, with very few exceptions, one is in contact with all that rises up from the subconscient: a cerebral subconscient, an emotive subconscient, a material subconscient; this is what produces ninety-nine percent of the dreams people have. Sometimes — usually — the mind goes wandering, but ninety-nine and a half percent of the time, one remembers nothing when it returns, because the link is not properly established.

The purpose of sleep is to re-establish contact with the consciousness of Sachchidananda. But I don't think one person in a hundred does so! They enter into unconsciousness far more than into Sachchidananda.

Yet no two sleeps are the same, mon petit! And it's the same with deaths, no two are the same. But sleep and death are different because ... they are different STATES. As long as you have a body, you are not in the same state as when you are ‘dead’. There is a period of seven days after the doctors declare you ‘dead’ when you are still in an intermediary state; but the
actual state of death itself is completely different BECAUSE there is no longer this physical base.

Once when I was at Tlemcen with Theon (this happened twice, but I'm not sure about the second time because I was alone), my body was in a cataleptic state and I was in conscious trance.... It was a peculiar kind of catalepsy in the sense that my body could speak, though very slowly — Theon had taught me how to do it. But this is because the ‘life of the form’ always remains (this is what takes seven days to leave the body) and it can even be trained to make the body move — the being is no longer there, but the life of the form can make the body move (in any case, utter words). However, this state is not without danger, the proof being that while I was working in trance, for some reason or other (which I no longer remember, but obviously due to some negligence on the part of Theon who was there to watch over me), the cord — I don't know what to call it — went snap! The link was cut, malevolently\(^5\), and when it was time and I wanted to return, I could no longer re-enter my body. But I was still able to warn him: “The cord is cut.” Then he used his power and knowledge to help me come back — but it was no joke! It was very difficult.\(^6\) And this is when I had the experience of the two different states, because the part that had gone out was now without the body's support — the link was cut. Then I knew. Of course, I was in a special state; I was doing a fully conscious work with all the vital power, and I was in control not only of my surroundings but.... You see, what happens is a kind of reversal of consciousness: you begin to belong to another world; you feel this quite distinctly. Theon instantly told me to concentrate (I was finding it all interesting — Mother laughs — I was making experiments and getting ready to go wandering off, but he was terribly scared that I would die on him!). He begged me to concentrate, so I concentrated on my body.

When I re-entered, it hurt terribly, terribly — an excruciating pain, like plunging into a hell.

\[\text{Into a ... ?}\]

\[\text{Into a hell (Mother laughs).}\]

\[\text{It was frightful. It doesn't last long.}\]

\[\text{He made me drink half a glass of cognac (he always made me take some every day after the trance because I would work in trance for more than an hour, which is generally a forbidden practice). Still, I am quite sure that with anybody but me and him, this would have been the end. I would not have reentered.}\]

\[\text{So I know a little bit, even in my outermost consciousness. A little bit, that's all.}\]

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5 Through Theon's malevolence, in fact.

6 Satprem remembers that a few years earlier Mother had told him about the circumstances of this incident: during her work in trance, Mother discovered the location of the ‘mantra of life’ — the mantra that has the power to create life (and to withdraw it, as well). Theon, an incarnation of the Asura of Death, was of course quite interested and told Mother to repeat this mantra to him. Mother refused. Theon became violently angry and the link was cut (the link that connected Mother to her body). When he realized the catastrophe his anger had caused, Theon grew afraid (for he knew who Mother was) and he then, as Mother recounts, made use of all his power to help her re-enter her body. Later, Mother gave this mantra to Sri Aurobindo ... who let it quietly sink into oblivion. For it is not through a mantra that the secret of life (or death) is to be mastered, but through knowledge of the true Power — in other words, ultimately, knowledge of the reality of Matter and the mechanism of death: it is the whole cellular yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother.
No, sleep is something else. Yes, something else. It's more like a relapse into Inconscience — a sort of invasion of tamsa.

We all know, of course, that the Divine Consciousness is there in the depths of the Inconscient; but even so, sleep appears to be a fall, and there are people who fall almost completely back into the Inconscient and come out of their sleep far duller than when they entered it. But for some reason, probably due to the necessities of the Work, I have never to my knowledge had a fully unconscious sleep.

There was another thing (laughing): even as a young child, I would all of a sudden, right in the middle of an action or a sentence or anything at all, go into trance — and nobody knew what it was! They would all think I had gone to sleep! But I remained conscious, with an arm raised or in the middle of a word — and poof! No one there (Mother laughs). No one there outwardly, but inwardly quite an intense, interesting experience. That used to happen to me even when I was very young.

I remember once (I must have been ten or twelve years old at the time), there was a luncheon at my parents' house for a dozen or so people, all decked out in their Sunday best — they were family but all the same it was a ‘luncheon’ and there was a certain protocol; in short, one had to behave properly. I was at one end of the table next to a first-cousin of mine who later became director of the Louvre for a while (he had an artistic intelligence, a rather capable young man). So there we were, and I remember I was observing something rather interesting in his atmosphere (mind you, although the faculties were already there, I knew nothing about occult things; if someone had spoken to me of ‘auras’ and all that.... I knew nothing). I was observing a kind of sensation I had felt in his atmosphere and then, just as I was putting the fork into my mouth, I took off! What a scolding I got! I was told that if I didn't know how to behave, I shouldn't come to the table! (Mother goes into peals of laughter.)

It was during this period that I used to go out of my body every night and do the work I've spoken of in Prayers and Meditations (I only mentioned it in passing). Every night at the same hour, when the whole house was very quiet, I would go out of my body and have all kinds of experiences. And then my body gradually became a sleepwalker (that is, the consciousness of the form became more and more conscious, while the link remained very solidly established). I got into the habit of getting up — but not like an ordinary sleepwalker: I would get up, open my desk, take out a piece of paper and write ... poems. Yes, poems — I, who had nothing of the poet in me! I would jot things down, then very consciously put everything back into the drawer, lock everything up again very carefully and go back to bed. One night, for some reason or other, I forgot and left it open. My mother came in (in France the windows are covered with heavy curtains and in the morning my mother would come in and violently throw open the curtains, waking me up, brrm!, without any warning; but I was used to it and would already be prepared to wake up — otherwise it would have been most unpleasant!). Anyway, my mother came in, calling me with unquestionable authority, and then she found the open desk and the piece of paper: “What's that?!” She grabbed it. “What have you been up to?” I don't know what I replied, but she went to the doctor: “My daughter has become a sleepwalker! You have to give her a drug.”

It wasn't easy.

I remember once.... She scolded me quite often (but it was very good, a very good lesson), she scolded me very, very often — for things I hadn't even done! Once she came down on me for something I had done but which she hadn't understood (I had done it with the best of intentions); I had given something to someone without her permission, and she

7 Tamas: inertia, obscurity.
8 February 22, 1914.
reproached me for it as though it were a crime! At first I stiffened and said, “I didn't do it.” She started to say I was lying. Then all at once, mutely, I looked at her and felt ... I felt all this human misery and all this human falsehood, and soundlessly the tears began to fall. “What! Now you're crying!” she said. At that, I became a bit fed up. “Oh, I'm not crying about myself,” I told her, “but about the world's misery.”

“You're going mad!” She really believed I was going mad.

It was quite funny.

It's strange... I say ‘strange’ because it's due to her that I took birth in this body, that it was chosen. When she was very young she had a great aspiration. She was exactly twenty years older than I; she was twenty when I was born and I was her third child. The first was a son who died in Turkey when he was two months old, I think — they vaccinated him against smallpox and poisoned him, (laughing) god knows what it means! He died of convulsions. Next was my brother who was born in Egypt, at Alexandria, and then me, born in Paris when she was exactly twenty years old. At that time (especially since the death of her first child) she had a kind of GREAT aspiration in her: her children had to be “the best in the world”. It wasn't an ambition, I don't know what it was. And what a will she had! My mother had a formidable will, like an iron bar, utterly impervious to all outside influence. Once she had made up her mind, it was made up; even if someone had been dying before her eyes, she wouldn't have budged! And she decided: “My children will be the best in the world.”

One thing she did have was a sense of progress; she felt that the world was progressing and we had to be better than anything that had come before — and that was sufficient.

It's strange, but that was sufficient.

Did I tell you what happened to my brother? No?... My brother was a terribly serious boy, and frightfully studious — oh, it was awful! But he also had a very strong character, a strong will, and there was something interesting about him. When he was studying to enter the Polytechnique, I studied with him — it interested me. We were very intimate (there were only eighteen months between us). He was quite violent, but with an extraordinary strength of character. He almost killed me three times,9 but when my mother told him, “Next time, you will kill her,” he resolved that it wouldn't happen again — and it never did. But what I wanted to tell you is that one day when he was eighteen, just before the Polytechnique exams, as he was crossing the Seine (I think it was the Pont des Arts), suddenly in the middle of the bridge ... he felt something descend into him with such force that he became immobilized, petrified; then, although he didn't exactly hear a voice, a very clear message came to him: “If you want, you can become a god” — it was translated like that in his consciousness. He told me that it took hold of him entirely, immobilized him — a formidable and extremely luminous power: “If you want, you can become a god.” Then, in the thick of the experience itself, he replied, “No, I want to serve humanity.” And it was gone. Of course, he took great care to say nothing to my mother, but we were intimate enough for him to tell me about it. I told him, “Well (laughing), what an idiot you are!”

That's the story.

At that moment he could have had a spiritual realization: he had the right stuff.

Three years later I had that experience — I've told you about it — of the Light piercing through me; I physically saw it enter into me. It was obviously the descent of a Being — not

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9 On another occasion, Mother told Sujata more about these three times her brother almost killed her: “One day we were playing croquet, and either because he got beaten or for some other reason, he flew into a rage and struck me hard with his mallet; fortunately I escaped with only a slight scratch. Another time, we were sitting in a room and he threw a big chair towards me — I ducked just in time and the chair passed over my head. A third time, as we were descending from a carriage, he pushed me down under it; luckily the horse didn't move.”
a past incarnation, but a Being from another plane. It was a golden light — the incarnation of a divine consciousness. Which proves that she succeeded for both her children.

But she...

She was down on her knees before my brother. My mother scorned all religious sentiments as weakness and superstition and she absolutely denied the invisible. “It's all brain disease,” she would say! But she could say just as well, “Oh, my Matteo is my God, he is my God.” The devil knows why, but in Alexandria she gave him the Italian name Matteo! And she truly treated him like a god. She left him only when he married, because then she really couldn't continue to follow him around any longer.

But what's interesting, for instance, is that when her father died she knew it; she saw him. She thought it was a dream — “a stupid dream”. But he came to let her know he was dead and she saw him. “It's nothing,” she said, “a dream!” (Mother laughs)

When my grandmother died.... My grandmother had the occult sense. She had made her own fortune (a sizeable fortune) and had had five children, each one more extravagant than the other. She considered me the only sensible person in the family and she shared her secrets with me. “You see,” she told me, “these people are going to squander all my money!” She had a sixty year old son (she had married in Egypt at the age of fifteen, and had had this son when she was quite young). “You see this boy, he goes out and visits impossible people! And then he starts playing cards and loses all my money!” I saw this ‘boy’, I was there in the house when he came to her and said very politely, “Good-bye, mother, I'm going out to so-and-so's house.” “Ah, please don't waste all my money, and take an overcoat — it's getting chilly at night.” Sixty years old! It was comical.... But to return to my story, after my grandmother died (I took a lot of care over her), she came to my mother (my mother was with her when she died; they embalmed her — she had gotten it into her head that she wanted to be burned, and since she died at Nice they had to embalm her so she could be burned in Paris). I was in Paris. My mother arrived with the body and told me, “Just imagine, I'm constantly seeing her! And what's more, she gives me advice! ‘Don't waste your money!’ she tells me.” “Well, she's right, one must be careful,” I replied. “But look here, she's dead! Dead! How can she talk to me! She's dead, I tell you, and quite dead at that!” I said to her, “What does it mean, to die?”

It was all very funny.

There was another reason.... My father was wonderfully healthy and strong — well-balanced. He wasn't very tall, but stocky. He did all his studies in Austria (at that time French was widely spoken in Austria, but he knew German, he knew English, Italian, Turkish...), and there he had learned to ride horses in an extraordinary manner: he was so strong that he could bring a horse to the ground simply by pressing his knees. He could break anything at all with a blow of his fist, even one of those big silver five-franc pieces they had in those days — one blow and it was broken in two. Curiously enough, he looked Russian. I don't know why. They used to call him Barine. What an equilibrium — an extraordinary physical poise! And not only did this man know all those languages, but I never saw such a brain for arithmetic. Never. He made a game of calculations — not the slightest effort — calculations with hundreds of digits! And on top of it, he loved birds. He had a room to himself in our apartment (because my mother could never much tolerate him), he had his separate room, and in it he kept a big cage... full of canaries! During the day he would close the windows and let all the canaries loose....

And could he tell stories! I think he read every novel available, all the stories he could find — extraordinary adventure stories, for he loved adventures. When we were kids he used to let us come into his room very early in the morning and, while still sitting in bed, tell us stories from the books he had read — but he told them as if they were his own, as if he'd had
extraordinary adventures with outlaws, with wild animals.... Every story he picked up he told as his own. We enjoyed it tremendously!

But one day when my brother had disobeyed him (Matteo must have been ten or eleven, and I perhaps nine or ten), I came into the dining room and saw my father sitting on a sofa with my brother across his knees; he had pulled down his trousers and was spanking him, I don't know what for. It wasn't a very serious spanking, but still.... I came in, drew myself up to my full height and said, “Papa, if you ever do that again, I am leaving this house!” And with such authority, mon petit! He stopped and never did it again.

Some very funny stories!

Anyway, I think that's enough for now. How I have chatted away! You always make me chat!