

Chapter Eight

The Physical Consciousness

The Physical Consciousness and Its Parts

The physical consciousness is that part which directly responds to physical things and physical Nature, sees the outer only as real, is occupied with it — not like the thinking mind with thought and knowledge, or like the vital with emotion, passion, subtler satisfaction of desire. If this part is obscure, then it is difficult to bring into it the consciousness of deeper or spiritual things, feelings etc. even when the mind or the vital are after these deeper things.

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You ask whether the mind and vital do not come in the way as well as the physical. Yes, but when I speak of the physical consciousness, I mean the physical mind and the physical vital as well as the body consciousness proper. This physical mind and physical vital are concerned with the small ordinary movements of life and are governed by a very external view of things and by habitual small reactions and do not respond at once to the inner consciousness not because they are in active opposition to it, as the vital mind and vital proper can be, but because they find it difficult to change their habitual movements. It is this now that you feel and that makes you think you have a poor responsiveness to the inner experience. But that is not a fact; in your mind and in a great part of your vital there is a considerable capacity of response. As for the physical its difficulty is universal in everybody and not peculiar to you. It has come up because it always comes up in the sadhana when the physical consciousness has to be worked upon for the necessary change. As soon as that is done, the difficulty you feel will first diminish and then go.

It is this work that is going on and when you felt the white light in meditation and the result which lasted even after opening

the eyes, the head and eyes cool and all vast and wide, it was this working taking place in your physical mind to change it. The rest of the physical consciousness was still undergoing another kind of working and so felt heat and not this release and wideness. But afterwards the working can go down first to the heart and then still lower and to all the body and the same release and wideness come there. Naturally, at present these results are not permanent but only for a time, they come as experiences, not lasting realisations. But it cannot be otherwise at the present stage. These experiences, however passing, are meant to prepare and do prepare the different parts of the nature.

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They [*the physical mind and vital physical*] are very near to it [*the Inconscient*] — except that part of the physical mind which is trained to deal with physical objects and affairs. But that is agile and active and competent only in its own limits. When it has to deal with supraphysical things it becomes incompetent, often imbecile and yet positive and arrogant and dogmatic in its ignorance. The rest of the physical consciousness is near to the inconscient. Here again in its own field it can have accurate perceptions and instincts if it is able to act spontaneously; but usually in the human being it is not allowed to do so, for the mind and vital intervene. The vital physical is entirely irrational in its action — even when it is right, it cannot explain why; for it is made more of automatic or habitual instincts, impulses, sensations and feelings than anything else. It is the mind that gives reasons and justifications to its movements and if the mind stands back and judges and questions, the vital physical can only answer “I want”, “I like”, “I dislike”, “I feel like that”.

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Each plane of our being — mental, vital, physical — has its own consciousness, separate though interconnected and interacting; but to our outer mind and sense, in our waking experience, they are all confused together. The body, for instance, has its own consciousness and acts from it, even without any conscious

mental will of our own or even against that will, and our surface mind knows very little about this body consciousness, feels it only in an imperfect way, sees only its results and has the greatest difficulty in finding out their causes. It is part of the Yoga to become aware of this separate consciousness of the body, to see and feel its movements and the forces that act upon it from inside or outside and to learn how to control and direct it even in its most hidden and (to us) subconscious processes. But the body consciousness itself is only part of the individualised physical consciousness in us which we gather and build out of the secretly conscious forces of universal physical Nature.

There is the universal physical consciousness of Nature and there is our own which is a part of it, moved by it, and used by the central being for the support of its expression in the physical world and for a direct dealing with all these external objects and movements and forces. This physical consciousness-plane receives from the other planes their powers and influences and makes formations of them in its own province. Therefore we have a physical mind as well as a vital mind and the mind proper; we have a vital physical part in us — the nervous being — as well as the vital proper; and both are largely conditioned by the gross material bodily part which is almost entirely subconscious to our experience.

The physical mind is that which is fixed on physical objects and happenings, sees and understands these only, and deals with them according to their own nature, but can with difficulty respond to the higher forces. Left to itself, it is sceptical of the existence of supraphysical things, of which it has no direct experience and to which it can find no clue; even when it has spiritual experiences, it forgets them easily, loses the impression and result and finds it difficult to believe. To enlighten the physical mind by the consciousness of the higher spiritual and supramental planes is one object of this Yoga, just as to enlighten it by the power of the higher vital and higher mental elements of the being is the greatest part of human self-development, civilisation and culture.

The vital physical on the other hand is the vehicle of the

nervous responses of our physical nature; it is the field and instrument of the smaller sensations, desires, reactions of all kinds to the impacts of the outer physical and gross material life. This vital physical part (supported by the lowest part of the vital proper) is therefore the agent of most of the lesser movements of our external life; its habitual reactions and obstinate pettinesses are the chief stumbling-block in the way of the transformation of the outer consciousness by the Yoga. It is also largely responsible for most of the suffering and disease of mind or body to which the physical being is subject in Nature.

As to the gross material part it is not necessary to specify its place, for that is obvious, but it must be remembered that this too has a consciousness of its own, the obscure consciousness proper to the limbs, cells, tissues, glands, organs. To make this obscurity luminous and directly instrumental to the higher planes and to the divine movement is what we mean in our Yoga by making the body conscious, — that is to say, full of a true, awake and responsive awareness instead of its own obscure, limited half-subconscience.

There is an inner as well as an outer consciousness all through our being, upon all its levels. The ordinary man is aware only of his surface self and quite unaware of all that is concealed by the surface. And yet what is on the surface, what we know or think we know of ourselves and even believe that that is all we are, is only a small part of our being and far the larger part of us is below the surface, the frontal consciousness. Or, more accurately, it is behind the frontal consciousness, behind the veil, occult and known only by an occult knowledge. Modern psychology and psychic science have begun to perceive this truth just a little. Materialistic psychology calls this hidden part the Inconscient, although practically admitting that it is far greater, more powerful and profound than the surface conscious self, — very much as the Upanishads called the superconscient in us the Sleep self, although this Sleep self is said to be an infinitely greater Intelligence, omniscient, omnipotent, Prajna, the Ishwara. Psychic science calls this hidden consciousness the subliminal self, and, here too, it is seen that this subliminal self

has more powers, more knowledge, a freer field of movement than the smaller self that is on the surface. But the truth is that all this that is behind, this sea of which our waking consciousness is only a wave or series of waves, cannot be described by any one term, for it is very complex. Part of it is subconscious, lower than our waking consciousness; part of it is on a level with it but behind and much larger than it; part is above and superconscious to us. What we call our mind is only an outer mind, a surface mental action, instrumental for the partial expression of a larger mind behind of which we are not ordinarily aware and can only know by going inside ourselves. So too what we know of the vital in us is only the outer vital, a surface activity partially expressing a larger secret vital which we can only know by going within. Equally, what we call our physical being is only a visible projection of a greater and subtler invisible physical consciousness which is much more complex, much more aware, much wider in its receptiveness, much more open and plastic and free.

If you understand and experience this truth, then only you will be able to realise what is meant by the inner mental, the inner vital, the inner physical consciousness. But it must be noted that this term “inner” is used in two different senses. Sometimes it denotes the consciousness behind the veil of the outer being, the mental or vital or physical within, which is in direct touch with the universal mind, the universal life forces, the universal physical forces. Sometimes, on the other hand, we mean an inmost mental, vital, physical, more specifically called the true mind, the true vital, the true physical consciousness which is nearest to the soul and can most easily and directly respond to the Divine Light and Power. There is no real Yoga possible, still less any integral Yoga, if we do not go back from the outer self and become aware of all this inner being and inner nature. For then alone can we break the limitations of the ignorant external self which receives consciously only the outer touches and knows things indirectly through the outer mind and senses, and become directly aware of the universal consciousness and the universal forces that play through us and around us. And

then only too can we hope to be directly aware of the Divine in us and directly in touch with the Divine Light and the Divine Force. Otherwise we can feel the Divine only through external signs and external results and that is a difficult and uncertain way and very occasional and inconstant, and it leads only to belief and not to knowledge, not to the direct consciousness and awareness of the constant presence.

As for instances of the difference, I may give you two from the opposite poles of experience, one from the most external phenomena showing how the inward opens to the awareness of universal forces, one of spiritual experience indicating how the inward opens to the Divine. Take illness. If we live only in the outward physical consciousness, we do not usually know that we are going to be ill until the symptoms of the malady declare themselves in the body. But if we develop the inward physical consciousness, we become aware of a subtle environmental physical atmosphere and can feel the forces of illness coming towards us through it, feel them even at a distance and, if we have learned how to do it, we can stop them by the will or otherwise. We sense too around us a vital physical or nervous envelope which radiates from the body and protects it, and we can feel the adverse forces trying to break through it and can interfere, stop them or reinforce the nervous envelope. Or we can feel the symptoms of illness, fever or cold for instance, in the subtle physical sheath before they are manifest in the gross body and destroy them there, preventing them from manifesting in the body. Take now the call for the Divine Power, Light, Ananda. If we live only in the outward physical consciousness, it may descend and work behind the veil but we shall feel nothing and only see certain results after a long time. Or at most we feel a certain clarity and peace in the mind, a joy in the vital, a happy state in the physical and infer the touch of the Divine. But if we are awake in the inward physical, we shall feel the light, power or Ananda flowing through the body, the limbs, nerves, blood, breath and, through the subtle body, affecting the most material cells and making them conscious and blissful and we shall sense directly the Divine Power and Presence. These are

only two instances out of a thousand that are possible and can be constantly experienced by the sadhaka.

Living in the Physical Consciousness

So far as it [*living in the physical consciousness*] can be said to be distinguishable by outward signs, it is a state of fundamental passivity in which one is and does what the forces of the physical plane make one be and do. When one lives in the mind, there is an active mental intelligence and mental will that tries to control and shape action and experience and life and everything else. When one is in the vital one is full of energy and enthusiasm and passion and force which may be right or wrong, but is very much alive. These things in the physical inertia either disappear or become weak or are forces that act upon the system occasionally but are not possessed by it. This condition may not be absolute, for one has a mind and a vital, but it is what predominates. There are two ways of getting out of this — one is to rise above in the self and see the physical from there as an instrument, not oneself, the other is to bring down the divine Force from above and make the physical the instrument of that Force.

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The forces of the physical mind, vital physical, material consciousness [*are the forces of the physical plane*]. Of course, as I said, the statement must be taken with a qualification, for the true mind and vital are also there, but in this condition [*of passivity and inertia*] it is the forces of the physical consciousness that predominate and determine the general condition which is a proneness to *aprakāśa* and sometimes *apavr̥tti*.

The Opening of the Physical Consciousness

The physical consciousness? It opens just like the rest, receives a new consciousness, obeys the Force, feels a change even in the cells, aspires to and seeks self-giving and union with the Divine.

The True Activity of the Senses

It [*the true activity of the senses*] is to record the divine or true appearance of things and return to them the reaction of an equal Ananda without dislike or desire.

The Physical Parts of the Mind and Emotional Being

Everything has a physical part—even the mind has a physical part; there is a mental physical, a mind of the body and the material. So the emotional being has a physical part. It has no location separate from the rest of the emotional. One can only distinguish it when the consciousness becomes sufficiently subtle to do so.

The Mental Physical or Mechanical Mind

That is the nature of the mental physical to go on repeating without use the movement that has happened. It is what we call the mechanical mind—it is strong in childhood because the thinking mind is not developed and has besides a narrow range of interests. Afterwards it becomes an undercurrent in the mental activities. It must now have risen up with the other characteristics of the mental physical because it is in the physical that the action has come down. Sometimes also when there is silence of the mind, these things come up till they also are quieted down.

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The mechanical mind is a sort of engine—whatever comes to it it puts into the machine and goes on turning it round and round—no matter what it is.

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From what you describe it seems that you have got into contact with the mechanical mind whose nature is to go on turning

round in a circle on the thoughts that come into it. This sometimes happens when the thinking mind is quiet. This is part of the physical mind and you should not be disturbed or alarmed by its rising up, but see what it is and quiet it down or get control of its movements.

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What is called the mechanical mind is necessary for the maintenance (in the physical) of things gained — it is by conservation and repetition that Nature does that. The subconscious is the basis of conservation and the mechanical mind is the means of repetition. Only they have to be enlightened and change and conserve and repeat the new divine things and not the old undivine ones.

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If there is a strong activity of the higher parts of the consciousness, the possibility of the mechanical mind working is very much diminished. It may come up in moments of relaxation or fatigue but usually it is active only in a subordinate way that does not attract notice.

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When the higher consciousness takes hold of the mechanical mind, it ceases to be mechanical.

The Vital Physical

The physical vital is the being of small desires and greeds etc. — the vital physical is the nervous being; they are closely connected together.

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The vital physical governs all the small daily reactions to outward things — reactions of the nerves and the body consciousness and the reflex reactions and sensations; it motives much of the ordinary actions of man and joins with the lower parts of

the vital proper in producing lust, jealousy, anger, violence etc. In its lowest parts (vital-material) it is the agent of pain, physical illness etc.

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The vital physical forces can be received from anywhere by the body, from around, below or above. The order of the planes is in reference to each other, not in reference to the body. In reference to each other, the vital physical is below the physical mind, but above the material: but at the same time these powers interpenetrate each other.

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The body energy is a manifestation of material forces supported by a vital-physical energy which is the vital energy precipitated into matter and conditioned by it.

The Material Consciousness or Body Consciousness

By material is meant the body consciousness, the consciousness of Matter etc. Physical is a wider term. There is for instance a physical mind (which cannot be called material) dealing with outside earthly things.

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A great part of the body consciousness is subconscious and the body consciousness and the subconscious are closely bound together. The body and the physical do not coincide—the body consciousness is only part of the whole physical consciousness.

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What you describe is the material consciousness; it is mostly subconscious, but the part of it that is conscious, is mechanical, inertly moved by habits or by the forces of the lower nature. Always repeating the same unintelligent and unenlightened movements, it is attached to the routine and established rule of what already exists, unwilling to change, unwilling to

receive the Light or obey the higher Force. Or, if it is willing, then it is unable. Or if it is able, then it turns the action given to it by the Light or the Force into a new mechanical routine and so takes out of it all soul or life. It is obscure, stupid, indolent, full of ignorance and inertia, darkness and slowness of *tamas*.

It is this material consciousness into which we are seeking to bring first the higher (divine or spiritual) Light and Power and Ananda, and then the supramental Truth which is the object of our Yoga. But there is an obstinate dark and inert resistance both from material Nature and from the physical consciousness of the *sadhaks* — of which the lower vital and the material consciousness, both of them still unregenerated, are the cause.

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It [*the material*] is the most physical grade of the physical — there is the mental physical, the vital physical, the material physical.

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Yes — or at least it [*the material consciousness*] is a separate part of the physical consciousness. Physical mind for instance is narrow and limited and often stupid, but not inert. Matter consciousness is on the contrary inert as well as largely subconscious — active only when driven by an energy, otherwise inactive and immobile. When one first falls into direct contact with this level, the feeling in the body is that of inertia and immobility, in the vital physical exhaustion or lassitude, in the physical mind absence of *prakāśa* and *pravṛtti* or only the most ordinary thoughts and impulses. It took me a long time to get down any kind of light or power into this level. But when once it is illumined, the advantage is that the subconscious becomes conscient and this removes a very fundamental obstacle from the *sadhana*.

The Gross Physical and the Subtle Physical

By the gross physical is meant the earthly and bodily physical

— as experienced by the outward sense mind and senses. But that is not the whole of Matter. There is a subtle physical also with a subtler consciousness in it which can (for instance) go to a distance from the body and yet feel and be aware of things in a not merely mental or vital way. As for mind and vital they are everywhere — there is an obscure mind and life even in the cells of the body, the stones or in molecules and atoms.

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It [*the subtle physical*] is difficult to realise without definite experience, e.g. as when light or ananda or force come into the body and one feels it working as if in the cells, yet with a little attention it becomes clear that it is not the material cells, but something more subtle that feels it.

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There is what is called the nervous envelope surrounding the body — you are probably seeing the *sūkṣma* and the nervous envelope in one view. The *sūkṣma deha* contains the *sthūla deha*. Only it is not bound to itself and can contract or expand unlike the material body.

The Physical Nerves and the Subtle Nerves

The physical nerves are part of the material body, but they are extended into subtle nerves in the subtle body and there is a connection between the two.

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Yes, there are nerves in the subtle body.

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The physical nerves have many centres or plexuses. The nervous being proper is part of the physical — and it starts from the physical centre, the Muladhara.

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The nerves are distributed all over the body—but the vital-physical action is concentrated in its origin between the Muladhara and the centre just above it.

The Sheaths of the Indian Tradition

Yes [*the inner being is made up of sheaths*]. Sheaths is simply a term for bodies, because each is superimposed on the other and acts as a covering and can be cast off. Thus the physical body itself is called the food sheath and its throwing off is what is called death.

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You can only distinguish [*the different sheaths*] either by intuition or by experience and then you have established direct knowledge of the different sheaths.