Chapter IX

Memory, Ego and Self-Experience

Here this God, the Mind, in its dream experiences again and again what once was experienced; what has been seen and what has not been seen, what has been heard and what has not been heard, what has been experienced and what has not been experienced, what is and what is not, all it sees, it is all and sees. *Prasna Upanishad.*

To dwell in our true being is liberation; the sense of ego is a fall from the truth of our being. *Mabopanishad.*

One in many births, a single ocean holder of all streams of movement, sees our hearts. *Rig Veda.*

The direct self-consciousness of the mental being, that by which it becomes aware of its own nameless and formless existence behind the flow of a differentiated self-experience, of its eternal soul-substance behind the mental formations of that substance, of its self behind the ego, goes behind mentality to the timelessness of an eternal present; it is that in it which is ever the same and unaffected by the mental distinction of past, present and future. It is also unaffected by the distinctions of space or of circumstance; for if the mental being ordinarily says of itself, “I am in the body, I am here, I was there, I shall be elsewhere”, yet when it learns to fix itself in this direct self-consciousness, it very soon perceives that this is the language of its changing self-experience which only expresses the relations of its surface consciousness to the environment and to externalities. Distinguishing these, detaching itself from

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1 IV. 5. 2 VI. 2. 3 IX. 5. 1.
these, it perceives that the self of which it is directly conscious
does not in any way change by these outward changes, but is
always the same, unaffected by the mutations of the body or of
the mentality or of the field in which these move and act. It is in
its essence featureless, relationless, without any other character
than that of pure conscious existence self-sufficient and eternally
satisfied with pure being, self-blissful. Thus we become aware of
the stable Self, the eternal “Am”, or rather the immutable “Is”
without any category of personality or Time.

But this consciousness of Self, as it is timeless, so is capable
also of freely regarding Time as a thing reflected in it and as either
the cause or the subjective field of a changing experience. It is
then the eternal “I am”, the unchanging consciousness on whose
surface changes of conscious experience occur in the process of
Time. The surface consciousness is constantly adding to its expe-
rience or rejecting from its experience, and by every addition it is
modified and by every rejection also it is modified; although that
deeper self which supports and contains this mutation remains
unmodified, the outer or superficial self is constantly developing
its experience so that it can never say of itself absolutely, “I
am the same that I was a moment ago.” Those who live in this
surface Time-self and have not the habit of drawing back inward
towards the immutable or the capacity of dwelling in it, are even
incapable of thinking of themselves apart from this ever self-
modifying mental experience. That is for them their self and it
is easy for them, if they look with detachment at its happenings,
to agree with the conclusion of the Buddhist Nihilists that this
self is in fact nothing but a stream of idea and experience and
mental action, the persistent flame which is yet never the same
flame, and to conclude that there is no such thing as a real
self, but only a flow of experience and behind it Nihil: there is
experience of knowledge without a Knower, experience of being
without an Existent; there are simply a number of elements,
parts of a flux without a real whole, which combine to create the
illusion of a Knower and Knowledge and the Known, the illusion
of an Existent and existence and the experience of existence.
Or they can conclude that Time is the only real existence and
they themselves are its creatures. This conclusion of an illusory existent in a real or unreal world is as inevitable to this kind of withdrawal as is the opposite conclusion of a real Existence but an illusory world to the thinker who, dwelling on the immobile self, observes everything else as a mutable not-self; he comes eventually to regard the latter as the result of a deluding trick of consciousness.

But let us look a little at this surface consciousness without theorising, studying it only in its facts. We see it first as a purely subjective phenomenon. There is a constant rapid shifting of Time-point which it is impossible to arrest for a moment. There is a constant changing, even when there is no shifting of Space-circumstance, a change both in the body or form of itself which the consciousness directly inhabits and the environing body or form of things in which it less directly lives. It is equally affected by both, though more vividly, because directly, by the smaller than by the larger habitation, by its own body than by the body of the world, because only of the changes in its own body is it directly conscious and of the body of the world only indirectly through the senses and the effects of the macrocosm on the microcosm. This change of the body and the surroundings is not so insistently obvious or not so obviously rapid as the swift mutation of Time; yet it is equally real from moment to moment and equally impossible to arrest. But we see that the mental being only regards all this mutation so far as it produces effects upon its own mental consciousness, generates impressions and changes in its mental experience and mental body, because only through the mind can it be aware of its changing physical habitation and its changing world-experience. Therefore there is, as well as a shifting or change of Time-point and Space-field, a constant modifying change of the sum of circumstances experienced in Time and Space and as the result a constant modification of the mental personality which is the form of our superficial or apparent self. All this change of circumstance is summed up in philosophical language as causality; for in this stream of the cosmic movement the antecedent state seems to be the cause of a subsequent state, or else this subsequent state seems to be the
result of a previous action of persons, objects or forces: yet in
data what we call cause may very well be only circumstance.
Thus the mind has over and above its direct self-consciousness
a more or less indirect mutable self-experience which it divides
into two parts, its subjective experience of the ever-modified
mental states of its personality and its objective experience of
the ever-changing environment which seems partly or wholly to
cause and is yet at the same time itself affected by the workings of
that personality. But all this experience is at bottom subjective;
for even the objective and external is only known to mind in the
form of subjective impressions.

Here the part played by Memory increases greatly in im-
portance; for while all that it can do for the mind with regard
to its direct self-consciousness is to remind it that it existed
and was the same in the past as in the present, it becomes in
our differentiated or surface self-experience an important power
linking together past and present experiences, past and present
personality, preventing chaos and dissociation and assuring the
continuity of the stream in the surface mind. Still even here we
must not exaggerate the function of memory or ascribe to it that
part of the operations of consciousness which really belongs to
the activity of other power-aspects of the mental being. It is not
the memory alone which constitutes the ego-sense; memory is
only a mediator between the sense-mind and the co-ordinating
intelligence: it offers to the intelligence the past data of experi-
dence which the mind holds somewhere within but cannot carry
with it in its running from moment to moment on the surface.

A little analysis will make this apparent. We have in all
functionings of the mentality four elements, the object of mental
consciousness, the act of mental consciousness, the occasion
and the subject. In the self-experience of the self-observing inner
being, the object is always some state or movement or wave
of the conscious being, anger, grief or other emotion, hunger
or other vital craving, impulse or inner life reaction or some
form of sensation, perception or thought activity. The act is
some kind of mental observation and conceptual valuation of
this movement or wave or else a mental sensation of it in which
observation and valuation may be involved and even lost, — so that in this act the mental person may either separate the act and the object by a distinguishing perception or confuse them together indistinguishably. That is to say, he may either simply become a movement, let us put it, of angry consciousness, not at all standing back from that activity, not reflecting or observing himself, not controlling the feeling or the accompanying action, or he may observe what he becomes and reflect on it, with this seeing or perception in his mind “I am angry”. In the former case the subject or mental person, the act of conscious self-experience and the substantial angry becoming of the mind which is the object of the self-experience, are all rolled up into one wave of conscious-force in movement; but in the latter there is a certain rapid analysis of its constituents and the act of self-experience partly detaches itself from the object. Thus by this act of partial detachment we are able not only to experience ourselves dynamically in the becoming, in the process of movement of conscious-force itself, but to stand back, perceive and observe ourselves and, if the detachment is sufficient, to control our feeling and action, control to some extent our becoming.

However, there is usually a defect even in this act of self-observation; for there is indeed a partial detachment of the act from the object, but not of the mental person from the mental act: the mental person and the mental action are involved or rolled up in each other; nor is the mental person sufficiently detached or separated either from the emotional becoming. I am aware of myself in an angry becoming of my conscious stuff of being and in a thought-perception of this becoming; but all thought-perception also is a becoming and not myself, and this I do not yet sufficiently realise; I am identified with my mental activities or involved in them, not free and separate. I do not yet directly become aware of myself apart from my becomings and my perception of them, apart from the forms of active consciousness which I assume in the waves of the sea of conscious force which is the stuff of my mental and life nature. It is when I entirely detach the mental person from his act of self-experience that I become fully aware first, of the sheer ego
and, in the end, of the witness self or the thinking mental Person, the something or someone who becomes angry and observes it but is not limited or determined in his being by the anger or the perception. He is, on the contrary, a constant factor aware of an unlimited succession of conscious movements and conscious experiences of movements and aware of his own being in that succession; but he can be aware of it also behind that succession, supporting it, containing it, always the same in fact of being and force of being beyond the changing forms or arrangements of his conscious force. He is thus the Self that is immutably and at the same time the Self that becomes eternally in the succession of Time.

It is evident that there are not really two selves, but one conscious being which throws itself up in the waves of conscious force so as to experience itself in a succession of changing movements of itself, by which it is not really changed, increased or diminished, — any more than the original stuff of Matter or Energy in the material world is increased or diminished by the constantly changing combinations of the elements, — although it seems to be changed to the experiencing consciousness so long as it lives only in the knowledge of the phenomenon and does not get back to the knowledge of the original being, substance or Force. When it does get back to that deeper knowledge, it does not condemn the observed phenomenon as unreal, but it perceives an immutable being, energy or real substance not phenomenal, not subject in itself to the senses; it sees at the same time a becoming or real phenomenon of that being, energy or substance. This becoming we call phenomenon because, actually, as things are with us now, it manifests itself to the consciousness under the conditions of sense-perception and sense-relation and not directly to the consciousness itself in its pure and unconditioned embracing and totally comprehending knowledge. So with the Self, — it is, immutably, to our direct self-consciousness; it manifests itself mutably in various becomings to the mindsense and the mental experience — therefore, as things are with us now, not directly to the pure unconditioned knowledge of the consciousness, but to it under the conditions of our mentality.
It is this succession of experiences and it is this fact of an indirect or secondary action of the experiencing consciousness under the conditions of our mentality that bring in the device of Memory. For a primary condition of our mentality is division by the moments of Time; there is an inability to get its experience or to hold its experiences together except under the conditions of this self-division by the moments of Time. In the immediate mental experience of a wave of becoming, a conscious movement of being, there is no action or need of memory. I become angry, — it is an act of sensation, not of memory; I observe that I am angry, — it is an act of perception, not of memory. Memory only comes in when I begin to relate my experience to the successions of Time, when I divide my becoming into past, present and future, when I say, “I was angry a moment ago”, or “I have become angry and am still in anger”, or “I was angry once and will be again if there is the same occasion.” Memory may indeed come immediately and directly into the becoming, if the occasion of the movement of consciousness is itself wholly or partly a thing of the past, — for example, if there is a recurrence of emotion, such as grief or anger, caused by memory of past wrong or suffering and not by any immediate occasion in the present or else caused by an immediate occasion reviving the memory of a past occasion. Because we cannot keep the past in us on the surface of the consciousness, — though it is always there behind, within, subliminally present and often even active, — therefore we have to recover it as something that is lost or is no longer existent, and this we do by that repetitive and linking action of the thought-mind which we call memory, — just as we summon things which are not within the actual field of our limited superficial mind-experience by the action of the thought-mind which we call imagination, that greater power in us and high summoner of all possibilities realisable or unrealisable into the field of our ignorance.

Memory is not the essence of persistent or continuous experience even in the succession of Time and would not be necessary at all if our consciousness were of an undivided movement, if it had not to run from moment to moment with a loss of direct
grasp on the last and an entire ignorance or non-possession of the next. All experience or substance of becoming in Time is a flowing stream or sea not divided in itself, but only divided in the observing consciousness by the limited movement of the Ignorance which has to leap from moment to moment like a dragon-fly darting about on the surface of the stream: so too all substance of being in Space is a flowing sea not divided in itself, but only divided in the observing consciousness because our sense-faculty is limited in its grasp, can see only a part and is therefore bound to observe forms of substance as if they were separate things in themselves, independent of the one substance. There is indeed an arrangement of things in Space and Time, but no gap or division except to our ignorance, and it is to bridge the gaps and connect the divisions created by the ignorance of Mind that we call in the aid of various devices of the mind-consciousness, of which memory is only one device.

There is then in me this flowing stream of the world-sea, and anger or grief or any other inner movement can occur as a long-continued wave of the continuous stream. This continuity is not constituted by force of memory, although memory may help to prolong or repeat the wave when by itself it would have died away into the stream; the wave simply occurs and continues as a movement of conscious-force of my being carried forward by its own original impulsion of disturbance. Memory comes in to prolong the disturbance by a recurrence of the thinking mind to the occasion of anger or of the feeling mind to the first impulse of anger by which it justifies itself in a repetition of the disturbance; otherwise the perturbation would spend itself and only recur when the occasion itself was actually repeated. The natural recurrence of the wave, the same or a similar occasion causing the same disturbance, is not any more than its isolated occurrence a result of memory, although memory may help to fortify it and make the mind more subject to it. There is rather the same relation of repeated occasion and repeated result and movement in the more fluid energy and variable substance of mind as that we see presented mechanically by the repetition of the same cause and effect in the less variable operations of
the energy and substance of the material world. We may say, if we like, that there is a subconscious memory in all energy of Nature which repeats invariably the same relation of energy and result; but then we enlarge illimitably the connotation of the word. In reality, we can only state a law of repetition in the action of the waves of conscious-force by which it regularises these movements of its own substance. Memory, properly speaking, is merely the device by which the witnessing Mind helps itself to link together these movements and their occurrence and recurrences in the successions of Time for Time-experience, for increasing use by a more and more co-ordinating will and for a constantly developing valuation by a more and more co-ordinating reason. It is a great, an indispensable but not the only factor in the process by which the Inconscience from which we start develops full self-consciousness, and by which the Ignorance of the mental being develops conscious knowledge of itself in its becomings. This development continues until the co-ordinating mind of knowledge and mind of will are fully able to possess and use all the material of self-experience. Such at least is the process of evolution as we see it governing the development of Mind out of the self-absorbed and apparently mindless energy in the material world.

The ego-sense is another device of mental Ignorance by which the mental being becomes aware of himself, — not only of the objects, occasions and acts of his activity, but of that which experiences them. At first it might seem as if the ego-sense were actually constituted by memory, as if it were memory that told us, “It is the same I who was angry some time ago and am again or still angry now.” But, in reality, all that the memory can tell us by its own power is that it is the same limited field of conscious activity in which the same phenomenon has occurred. What happens is that there is a repetition of the mental phenomenon, of that wave of becoming in the mind-substance of which the mind-sense is immediately aware; memory comes in to link these repetitions together and enables the mind-sense to realise that it is the same mind-substance which is taking the same dynamic form and the same mind-sense which is experiencing it. The
ego-sense is not a result of memory or built by memory, but already and always there as a point of reference or as something in which the mind-sense concentrates itself so as to have a co-ordinant centre instead of sprawling incoherently all over the field of experience; ego-memory reinforces this concentration and helps to maintain it, but does not constitute it. Possibly, in the lower animal the sense of ego, the sense of individuality would not, if analysed, go much farther than a sensational imprecise or less precise realisation of continuity and identity and separateness from others in the moments of Time. But in man there is in addition a co-ordinating mind of knowledge which, basing itself on the united action of the mind-sense and the memory, arrives at the distinct idea — while it retains also the first constant intuitive perception — of an ego which senses, feels, remembers, thinks, and which is the same whether it remembers or does not remember. This conscious mind-substance, it says, is always that of one and the same conscious person who feels, ceases to feel, remembers, forgets, is superficially conscious, sinks back from superficial consciousness into sleep; he is the same before the organisation of memory and after it, in the infant and in the dotard, in sleep and in waking, in apparent consciousness and apparent unconsciousness; he and no other did the acts which he forgets as well as the acts which he remembers; he is persistently the same behind all changes of his becoming or his personality. This action of knowledge in man, this co-ordinating intelligence, this formulation of self-consciousness and self-experience is higher than the memory-ego and sense-ego of the animal and therefore, we may suppose, nearer to real self-knowledge. We may even come to realise, if we study the veiled as well as the uncovered action of Nature, that all ego-sense, all ego-memory has at its back, is in fact a pragmatic contrivance of a secret co-ordinating power or mind of knowledge, present in the universal conscious-force, of which the reason in man is the overt form at which our evolution arrives, — a form still limited and imperfect in its modes of action and constituting principle. There is a subconscious knowledge even in the Inconscient, a greater intrinsic Reason in things which impose co-ordination,
that is to say, a certain rationality, upon the wildest movements of the universal becoming.

The importance of Memory becomes apparent in the well-observed phenomenon of double personality or dissociation of personality in which the same man has two successive or alternating states of his mind and in each remembers and co-ordinates perfectly only what he was or did in that state of mind and not what he was or did in the other. This can be associated with an organised idea of different personality, for he thinks in one state that he is one person and in the other that he is quite another with a different name, life and feelings. Here it would seem that memory is the whole substance of personality. But, on the other side, we must see that dissociation of memory occurs also without dissociation of personality, as when a man in the state of hypnosis takes up a range of memories and experiences to which his waking mind is a stranger but does not therefore think himself another person, or as when one who has forgotten the past events of his life and perhaps even his name, still does not change his ego-sense and personality. And there is possible too a state of consciousness in which, although there is no gap of memory, yet by a rapid development the whole being feels itself changed in every mental circumstance and the man feels born into a new personality, so that, if it were not for the co-ordinating mind, he would not at all accept his past as belonging to the person he now is, although he remembers perfectly well that it was in the same form of body and same field of mind-substance that it occurred. Mind-sense is the basis, memory the thread on which experiences are strung by the self-experiencing mind: but it is the co-ordinating faculty of mind which, relating together all the material that memory provides and all its linkings of past, present and future, relates them also to an “I” who is the same in all the moments of Time and in spite of all the changes of experience and personality.

The ego-sense is only a preparatory device and a first basis for the development of real self-knowledge in the mental being. Developing from inconscience to self-conscience, from nescience of self and things to knowledge of self and things, the Mind in
forms arrives thus far that it is aware of all its superficially conscious becoming as related to an “I” which it always is. That “I” it partly identifies with the conscious becoming, partly thinks of it as something other than the becoming and superior to it, even perhaps eternal and unchanging. In the last resort, by the aid of its reason which distinguishes in order to co-ordinate, it may fix its self-experience on the becoming only, on the constantly changing self and reject the idea of something other than it as a fiction of the mind; there is then no being, only becoming. Or it may fix its self-experience into a direct consciousness of its own eternal being and reject the becoming, even when it is compelled to be aware of it, as a fiction of the mind and the senses or the vanity of a temporary inferior existence.

But it is evident that a self-knowledge based on the separative ego-sense is imperfect and that no knowledge founded upon it alone or primarily or on a reaction against it can be secure or assured of completeness. First, it is a knowledge of our superficial mental activity and its experiences and, with regard to all the large rest of our becoming that is behind, it is an Ignorance. Secondly, it is a knowledge only of being and becoming as limited to the individual self and its experiences; all the rest of the world is to it not-self, something, that is to say, which it does not realise as part of its own being but as some outside existence presented to its separate consciousness. This happens because it has no direct conscious knowledge of this larger existence and nature such as the individual has of his own being and becoming. Here too there is a limited knowledge asserting itself in the midst of a vast Ignorance. Thirdly, the true relation between the being and the becoming has not been worked out on the basis of perfect self-knowledge but rather by the Ignorance, by a partial knowledge. As a consequence the mind in its impetus towards an ultimate knowledge attempts through the co-ordinating and dissociating will and reason on the basis of our present experience and possibilities to drive at a trenchant conclusion which cuts away one side of existence. All that has been established is that the mental being can on one side absorb himself in direct self-consciousness to the apparent
exclusion of all becoming and can on the other side absorb himself in the becoming to the apparent exclusion of all stable self-consciousness. Both sides of the mind, separating as antagonists, condemn what they reject as unreal or else as only a play of the conscious mind; to one or the other, either the Divine, the Self, or the world is only relatively real so long as the mind persists in creating them, the world an effective dream of Self, or God and Self a mental construction or an effective hallucination. The true relation has not been seized, because these two sides of existence must always appear discordant and unreconciled to our intelligence so long as there is only a partial knowledge. An integral knowledge is the aim of the conscious evolution; a clean cut of the consciousness shearing apart one side and leaving the other cannot be the whole truth of self and things. For if some immobile Self were all, there could be no possibility of world-existence; if mobile Nature were all, there might be a cycle of universal becoming, but no spiritual foundation for the evolution of the Conscient out of the Inconscient and for the persistent aspiration of our partial Consciousness or Ignorance to exceed itself and arrive at the whole conscious Truth of its being and the integral conscious knowledge of all Being.

Our surface existence is only a surface and it is there that there is the full reign of the Ignorance; to know we have to go within ourselves and see with an inner knowledge. All that is formulated on the surface is a small and diminished representation of our secret greater existence. The immobile self in us is found only when the outer mental and vital activities are quieted; for since it is seated deep within and is represented on the surface only by the intuitive sense of self-existence and misrepresented by the mental, vital, physical ego-sense, its truth has to be experienced in the mind’s silence. But also the dynamic parts of our surface being are similarly diminished figures of greater things that are there in the depths of our secret nature. The surface memory itself is a fragmentary and ineffective action pulling out details from an inner subliminal memory which receives and records all our world-experience, receives and records even what the mind has not observed, understood or noticed. Our
surface imagination is a selection from a vaster more creative and effective subliminal image-building power of consciousness. A mind with immeasurably wider and more subtle perceptions, a life-energy with a greater dynamism, a subtle-physical substance with a larger and finer receptivity are building out of themselves our surface evolution. A psychic entity is there behind these occult activities which is the true support of our individualisation; the ego is only an outward false substitute: for it is this secret soul that supports and holds together our self-experience and world-experience; the mental, vital, physical, external ego is a superficial construction of Nature. It is only when we have seen both our self and our nature as a whole, in the depths as well as on the surface, that we can acquire a true basis of knowledge.