What is the nature of the power that thought possesses? How and to what extent am I the creator of my world?

According to the Buddhist teachings, every human being lives and moves in a world of his own, quite independent of the world in which another lives; it is only when a certain harmony is created between these different worlds that they interpenetrate and men can meet and understand one another. This is true of the mind; for everybody moves in a mental world of his own, created by his own thoughts. And it is so true that always, when something has been said, each understands it in a different way; for what he catches is not the thing that has been spoken but something he has in his own head. But it is a truth that belongs to the movement of the mental plane and holds good only there.

For the mind is an instrument of action and formation and not an instrument of knowledge; at each moment it is creating forms. Thoughts are forms and have an individual life, independent of their author: sent out from him into the world, they move in it towards the realisation of their own purpose of existence. When you think of anyone, your thought takes a form and goes out to find him; and, if your thinking is associated with some will that is behind it, the thought-form that has gone out from you makes an attempt to realise itself. Let us say, for instance, that you have a keen desire for a certain person to come and that, along with this vital impulse of desire, a strong imagination accompanies the mental form you have made; you imagine, “If he came, it would be like this or it would be like that.” After a time you drop the idea altogether, and you do not know that even after you have forgotten it, your thought continues to exist. For it does still exist and is in action, independent of you, and it would need a great power to bring it back from its work. It is working
in the atmosphere of the person touched by it and creates in
him the desire to come. And if there is a sufficient power of
will in your thought-form, if it is a well-built formation, it will
arrive at its own realisation. But between the formation and the
realisation there is a certain lapse of time, and if in this interval
your mind has been occupied with quite other things, then when
there happens this fulfilment of your forgotten thought, you may
not even remember that you once harboured it; you do not know
that you were the instigator of its action and the cause of what
has come about. And it happens very often too that when the
result does come, you have ceased to desire or care for it. There
are some men who have a very strong formative power of this
kind and always they see their formations realised; but because
they have not a well-disciplined mental and vital being, they
want now one thing and now another and these different or
opposite formations and their results collide and clash with one
another. And these people wonder how it is that they are living
in so great a confusion and disharmony! They do not realise
that it is their own thoughts and desires that have built the
circumstances around them which seem to them so incoherent
and contradictory and make their life almost unbearable.

This is a knowledge of great importance, if it is given along
with the secret of its right use. Self-discipline and self-mastery are
the secret; the secret is to find in oneself the source of the Truth
and that constant government of the Divine Will which can
alone give to each formation its full power and its integral and
harmonious realisation. Men generally form thoughts without
knowing how these formations move and act. Formed in this
state of confusion and ignorance, they clash with one another
and create an impression of strain and effort and fatigue and
the feeling that you are cutting your way through a multitude of
obstacles. These conditions of ignorance and incoherence set in
motion a confused conflict in which the strongest and the most
enduring forms will have victory over the others.

There is one thing certain about the mind and its workings;
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it is that you can understand only what you already know in your own inner self. What strikes you in a book is what you have already experienced deep within you. Men find a book or a teaching very wonderful and often you hear them say, “That is exactly what I myself feel and know, but I could not bring it out or express it as well as it is expressed here.” When men come across a book of true knowledge, each finds himself there, and at every new reading he discovers things that he did not see in it at first; it opens to him each time a new field of knowledge that had till then escaped him in it. But that is because it reaches layers of knowledge that were waiting for expression in the subconscious in him; the expression has now been given by somebody else and much better than he could himself have done it. But, once expressed, he immediately recognises it and feels that it is the truth. The knowledge that seems to come to you from outside is only an occasion for bringing out the knowledge that is within you.

The experience of misrepresentation of something we have said is a very common one and it has a similar source. We say something that is quite clear, but the way in which it is understood is stupefying! Each sees in it something else than what was intended or even puts into it something that is quite the contrary of its sense. If you want to understand truly and avoid this kind of error, you must go behind the sound and movement of the words and learn to listen in silence. If you listen in silence, you will hear rightly and understand rightly; but so long as there is something moving about and making a noise in your head, you will understand only what is moving in your head and not what is told you.

Why is one pursued by a host of adverse conditions, when one first becomes acquainted with Yoga? Someone has said that when you open the door to Yoga, you are confronted by a multitude of obstacles. Is this true?

It is not an absolute rule; and much depends upon the person.
Adverse conditions come to many as a test for the weak points in their nature. The indispensable basis for Yoga, which must be well established before you can walk freely on the path, is equanimity. Naturally, from that point of view, all disturbances are tests which you have to pass. But they are necessary too in order to break down the limits which your mental constructions have built around you and which prevent your opening to the Light and the Truth. The whole mental world in which you live is limited, even though you may not know or feel its limitations, and something must come and break down this building in which your mind has shut itself and liberate it. For instance, you have some fixed rules, ideas or principles to which you attribute an absolute importance; most often it is an adherence to certain moral principles or precepts, such as the commandment “Honour thy father and mother” or “Thou shalt not kill” and the rest. Each man has some fad or one preferred shibboleth or another, each thinks that he is free from this or that prejudice from which others suffer and is willing to regard such notions as quite false; but he imagines that his is not like theirs, it is for him the truth, the real truth. An attachment to a rule of the mind is an indication of a blindness still hiding somewhere. Take, for example, the very universal superstition, prevalent all over the world, that asceticism and spirituality are one and the same thing. If you describe someone as a spiritual man or a spiritual woman, people at once think of one who does not eat or sits all day without moving, one who lives in a hut in great poverty, one who has given away all he had and keeps nothing for himself. This is the picture that immediately arises in the minds of ninety-nine people out of a hundred, when you speak of a spiritual man; the one proof of spirituality for them is poverty and abstinence from everything that is pleasant or comfortable. This is a mental construction which must be thrown down if you are to be free to see and follow the spiritual truth. For you come to the spiritual life with a sincere aspiration and you want to meet the Divine and realise the Divine in your consciousness and in your life; and
then what happens is that you arrive in a place which is not at all a hut and meet a Divine One who is living a comfortable life, eating freely, surrounded by beautiful or luxurious things, not distributing what he has to the poor, but accepting and enjoying all that people give him. At once with your fixed mental rule you are bewildered and cry, "Why, what is this? I thought I was to meet a spiritual man!" This false conception has to be broken down and disappear. Once it is gone, you find something that is much higher than your narrow ascetic rule, a complete openness that leaves the being free. If you are to get something, you accept it, and if you are to give up the very same thing, you with an equal willingness leave it. Things come and you take them up; things go and you let them pass, with the same smile of equanimity in the taking or the leaving.

Or, again, you have adopted as your golden rule, "Thou shalt not kill", and have a horror for cruelty and slaughter. Do not be surprised if you are immediately put in the presence of killing, not only once but repeatedly, until you understand that your ideal is no more than a mental principle and that a seeker of the spiritual truth should not be bound and attached to a mental rule. And when once you are free from it, you will find perhaps that all these scenes which troubled you — and were indeed sent in order to trouble you and shake you out of your mental building — have, singularly enough, ceased altogether to happen in your presence.

When you come to the Divine, you must abandon all mental conceptions; but, instead of doing that, you throw your conceptions upon the Divine and want the Divine to obey them. The only true attitude for a Yogi is to be plastic and ready to obey the Divine Command whatever it may be; nothing must be indispensable to him, nothing a burden. Often the first impulse of those who want to live the spiritual life is to throw away all they have; but they do it because they want to be rid of a burden, not because they want to surrender to the Divine. Men who possess wealth and are surrounded by the things that give
them luxury and enjoyment turn to the Divine, and immediately their movement is to run away from these things, — or, as they say, “to escape from their bondage”. But it is a wrong movement; you must not think that the things you have belong to you, — they belong to the Divine. If the Divine wants you to enjoy anything, enjoy it; but be ready too to give it up the very next moment with a smile.

What are physical ailments? Are they attacks by the hostile forces from outside?

There are two factors that have to be considered in the matter. There is what comes from outside and there is what comes from your inner condition. Your inner condition becomes a cause of illness when there is a resistance or revolt in it or when there is some part in you that does not respond to the protection; or even there may be something there that almost willingly and wilfully calls in the adverse forces. It is enough if there is a slight movement of this kind in you; the hostile forces are at once upon you and their attack takes often the form of illness.

But are not illnesses sometimes the result of microbes and not a part of the movement of the Yoga?

Where does Yoga begin and where does it end? Is not the whole of your life Yoga? The possibilities of illness are always there in your body and around you; you carry within you or there swarm about you the microbes and germs of every disease. How is it that all of a sudden you succumb to an illness which you did not have for years? You will say it is due to a “depression of the vital force”. But from where does the depression come? It comes from some disharmony in the being, from a lack of receptivity to the divine forces. When you cut yourself off from the energy and light that sustain you, then there is this depression, there is created what medical science calls a “favourable ground” and
something takes advantage of it. It is doubt, gloominess, lack of confidence, a selfish turning back upon yourself that cuts you off from the light and divine energy and gives the attack this advantage. It is this that is the cause of your falling ill and not microbes.

But has it not been found that by improved sanitation the health of the average citizen improves?

Medicine and sanitation are indispensable in the ordinary life, but I am not speaking now of the average citizen, I am speaking of those who do Yoga. Still there is this disadvantage of sanitation that while you diminish the chances of catching an illness, you diminish also your natural power of resistance. Attendants in hospitals, who are always washing with disinfectants, find that their hands become more easily infected and are much more susceptible than the hands of others. There are people, on the contrary, who know nothing of hygiene and do the most insanitary things and yet remain immune. Their very ignorance helps them because it shuts them to the suggestions that come with medical knowledge. On the other hand, your belief in the sanitary precautions you take helps them to work. For your thought is, “Now I am disinfected and safe”, and to that extent it makes you safe.

But why then are we to take sanitary precautions such as drinking only filtered water?

Is any one of you pure and strong enough not to be affected by suggestions? If you drink unfiltered water and think, “Now I am drinking impure water”, you have every chance of falling sick. And even though such suggestions may not enter through the conscious mind, the whole of your subconscious is there, almost helplessly open to take any kind of suggestion. In life it is the action of the subconscious that has the larger share and it acts
a hundred times more powerfully than the conscious parts. The normal human condition is a state filled with apprehensions and fears; if you observe your mind deeply for ten minutes, you will find that for nine out of ten it is full of fears — it carries in it fear about many things, big and small, near and far, seen and unseen, and though you do not usually take conscious notice of it, it is there all the same. To be free from all fear can come only by steady effort and discipline.

And even if by discipline and effort you have liberated your mind and your vital of apprehension and fear, it is more difficult to convince the body. But that too must be done. Once you enter the path of Yoga you must get rid of all fears — the fears of your mind, the fears of your vital, the fears of your body which are lodged in its very cells. One of the uses of the blows and knocks you receive on the path of Yoga is to rid you of all fear. The causes of your fears leap on you again and again, until you can stand before them free and indifferent, untouched and pure. One has a fear of the sea, another the fear of fire. The latter will find, it may be, that he has to face conflagration after conflagration till he is so trained that not a cell of his body quivers. That of which you have horror comes repeatedly till the horror is gone.

One who seeks the transformation and is a follower of the Path, must become through and through fearless, not to be touched or shaken by anything whatever in any part of his nature.