Chapter XI

The Boundaries of the Ignorance

One who thinks there is this world and no other.

Katha Upanishad.\(^1\)

Extended within the Infinite, . . . headless and footless, concealing his two ends.\(^2\)

Rig Veda.\(^3\)

He who has the knowledge “I am Brahman” becomes all this that is; but whoever worships another divinity than the One Self and thinks, “Other is he and I am other”, he knows not.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.\(^4\)

This Self is fourfold — the Self of Waking who has the outer intelligence and enjoys external things, is its first part; the Self of Dream who has the inner intelligence and enjoys things subtle, is its second part; the Self of Sleep, unified, a massed intelligence, blissful and enjoying bliss, is the third part . . . the lord of all, the omniscient, the inner Control. That which is unseen, indefinable, self-evident in its one selfhood, is the fourth part: this is the Self, this is that which has to be known.

Mandukya Upanishad.\(^5\)

A conscious being, no larger than a man’s thumb, stands in the centre of our self; he is master of the past and the present; . . . he is today and he is tomorrow.

Katha Upanishad.\(^6\)

I T IS now possible to review in its larger lines this Ignorance, or this separative knowledge labouring towards identical knowledge, which constitutes our human mentality and, in an obscurer form, all consciousness that has evolved below our

\(^{1} \text{I. 2. 6.}\)
\(^{2} \text{Head and feet, the superconscient and the inconscient.}\)
\(^{3} \text{IV. I. 7, 11.}\)
\(^{4} \text{I. 4. 10.}\)
\(^{5} \text{Verses 2-7.}\)
\(^{6} \text{II. I. 12, 13.}\)
level. We see that in us it consists of a succession of waves of being and force, pressing from outside and rising from within, which become stuff of consciousness and formulate in a mental cognition and mentalised sensation of self and things in Time and Space. Time presents itself to us as a flow of dynamic movement, Space as an objective field of contents for the experience of this imperfect and developing awareness. By immediate awareness the mental being mobile in Time lives perpetually in the present; by memory he saves a certain part of his experience of self and things from streaming away from him entirely into the past; by thought and will and action, by mind energy, life energy, body energy he utilises it for what he becomes in the present and is yet to become hereafter; the force of being in him that has made him what he is works to prolong, develop and amplify his becoming in the future. All this insecurely held material of self-expression and experience of things, this partial knowledge accumulated in the succession of Time, is co-ordinated for him by perception, memory, intelligence and will to be utilised for an ever-new or ever-repeated becoming and for the mental, vital, physical action which helps him to grow into what he is to be and to express what he already is. The present totality of all this experience of consciousness and output of energy is co-ordinated for relation to his being, gathered into consistency around an ego-sense which formulates the habit of response of self-experience to the contacts of Nature in a persistent limited field of conscious being. It is this ego-sense that gives a first basis of coherence to what otherwise might be a string or mass of floating impressions: all that is so sensed is referred to a corresponding artificial centre of mental consciousness in the understanding, the ego-idea. This ego-sense in the life stuff and this ego-idea in the mind maintain a constructed symbol of self, the separative ego, which does duty for the hidden real self, the spirit or true being. The surface mental individuality is, in consequence, always ego-centric; even its altruism is an enlargement of its ego: the ego is the lynch-pin invented to hold together the motion of our wheel of nature. The necessity of centralisation around the ego continues until there is no longer need of any such device or contrivance because there
has emerged the true self, the spiritual being, which is at once wheel and motion and that which holds all together, the centre and the circumference.

But the moment we study ourselves, we find that the self-experience which we thus co-ordinate and consciously utilise for life, is a small part even of our waking individual consciousness. We fasten only upon a very limited number of the mental sensations and perceptions of self and things which come up into our surface consciousness in our continual present: of these again memory saves up only a scanty part from the oblivious gulf of the past; of the storings of memory our intelligence utilises only a small portion for co-ordinated knowledge, will utilises a still smaller percentage for action. A narrow selection, a large rejection or reservation, a miserly-spendthrift system of waste of material and unemployment of resources and a scanty and disorderly modicum of useful spending and utilisable balance seems to be the method of Nature in our conscious becoming even as it is in the field of the material universe. But this is only in appearance, for it would be a wholly untrue account to say that all that is not thus saved up and utilised is destroyed, becomes null and has passed away ineffectually and in vain. A great part of it has been quietly used by Nature herself to form us and actuates that sufficiently large mass of our growth and becoming and action for which our conscious memory, will and intelligence are not responsible. A still greater part is used by her as a store from which she draws and which she utilises, while we ourselves have utterly forgotten the origin and provenance of this material which we find ourselves employing with a deceptive sense of creation; for we imagine we are creating this new material of our work, when we are only combining results out of that which we have forgotten but Nature in us has remembered. If we admit rebirth as part of her system, we shall realise that all experience has its use; for all experience counts in this prolonged building and nothing is rejected except what has exhausted its utility and would be a burden on the future. A judgment from what appears now in our conscious surface is fallacious: for when we study and understand, we perceive that
only a little of her action and growth in us is conscious; the bulk of it is carried on subconsciously as in the rest of her material life. We are not only what we know of ourselves but an immense more which we do not know; our momentary personality is only a bubble on the ocean of our existence.

A superficial observation of our waking consciousness shows us that of a great part of our individual being and becoming we are quite ignorant; it is to us the Inconscient, just as much as the life of the plant, the metal, the earth, the elements. But if we carry our knowledge farther, pushing psychological experiment and observation beyond their normal bounds, we find how vast is the sphere of this supposed Inconscient or this subconscient in our total existence,—the subconscient, so seeming and so called by us because it is a concealed consciousness,—and what a small and fragmentary portion of our being is covered by our waking self-awareness. We arrive at the knowledge that our waking mind and ego are only a superimposition upon a submerged, a subliminal self,—for so that self appears to us,—or, more accurately, an inner being, with a much vaster capacity of experience; our mind and ego are like the crown and dome of a temple jutting out from the waves while the great body of the building is submerged under the surface of the waters.

This concealed self and consciousness is our real or whole being, of which the outer is a part and a phenomenon, a selective formation for a surface use. We perceive only a small number of the contacts of things which impinge upon us; the inner being perceives all that enters or touches us and our environment. We perceive only a part of the workings of our life and being; the inner being perceives so much that we might almost suppose that nothing escapes its view. We remember only a small selection from our perceptions, and of these even we keep a great part in a store-room where we cannot always lay our hand upon what we need; the inner being retains everything that it has ever received and has it always ready to hand. We can form into co-ordinated understanding and knowledge only so much of our perceptions and memories as our trained intelligence and mental
capacity can grasp in their sense and appreciate in their rela-
tions: the intelligence of the inner being needs no training, but
preserves the accurate form and relations of all its perceptions
and memories and, — though this is a proposition which may be
considered doubtful or difficult to concede in its fullness, — can
grasp immediately, when it does not possess already, their sig-
nificance. And its perceptions are not confined, as are ordinarily
those of the waking mind, to the scantly gleanings of the physical
senses, but extend far beyond and use, as telepathic phenomena
of many kinds bear witness, a subtle sense the limits of which
are too wide to be easily fixed. The relations between the surface
will or impulsion and the subliminal urge, mistakenly described
as unconscious or subconscious, have not been properly studied
except in regard to unusual and unorganised manifestations and
to certain morbidly abnormal phenomena of the diseased human
mind; but if we pursue our observation far enough, we shall find
that the cognition and will or impulsive force of the inner being
really stand behind the whole conscious becoming; the latter
represents only that part of its secret endeavour and achievement
which rises successfully to the surface of our life. To know our
inner being is the first step towards a real self-knowledge.

If we undertake this self-discovery and enlarge our knowl-
edge of the subliminal self, so conceiving it as to include in it
our lower subconscient and upper superconscient ends, we shall
discover that it is really this which provides the whole material
of our apparent being and that our perceptions, our memories,
our effectuations of will and intelligence are only a selection
from its perceptions, memories, activities and relations of will
and intelligence; our very ego is only a minor and superficial
formulation of its self-consciousness and self-experience. It is,
as it were, the urgent sea out of which the waves of our con-
scious becoming arise. But what are its limits? how far does it
extend? what is its fundamental nature? Ordinarily, we speak
of a subconscious existence and include in this term all that is
not on the waking surface. But the whole or the greater part
of the inner or subliminal self can hardly be characterised by
that epithet; for when we say subconscious, we think readily
of an obscure unconsciousness or half-consciousness or else a submerged consciousness below and in a way inferior to and less than our organised waking awareness or, at least, less in possession of itself. But we find, when we go within, that somewhere in our subliminal part,—though not co-extensive with it since it has also obscure and ignorant regions,—there is a consciousness much wider, more luminous, more in possession of itself and things than that which wakes upon our surface and is the percipient of our daily hours; that is our inner being, and it is this which we must regard as our subliminal self and set apart the subconscious as an inferior, a lowest occult province of our nature. In the same way there is a superconscient part of our total existence in which there is what we discover to be our highest self, and this too we can set apart as a higher occult province of our nature.

But what then is the subconscious and where does it begin and how is it related to our surface being or to the subliminal of which it would seem more properly to be a province? We are aware of our body and know that we have a physical existence, even very largely identify ourselves with it, and yet most of its operations are really subconscious to our mental being; not only does the mind take no part in them but, as we suppose, our most physical being has no awareness of its own hidden operations or, by itself, of its own existence; it knows or rather feels only so much of itself as is enlightened by mind-sense and observable by intelligence. We are aware of a vitality working in this bodily form and structure as in the plant or lower animal, a vital existence which is also for the most part subconscious to us, for we only observe some of its movements and reactions. We are partly aware of its operations, but not by any means of all or most of them, and rather of those which are abnormal than those which are normal; its wants impress themselves more forcibly upon us than its satisfactions, its diseases and disorders than its health and its regular rhythm, its death is more poignant to us than its life is vivid: we know as much of it as we can consciously observe and use or as much as forces itself upon us by pain and pleasure and other sensations or as a cause of nervous or
physical reaction and disturbance, but no more. Accordingly, we suppose that this vital-physical part of us also is not conscious of its own operations or has only a suppressed consciousness or no-consciousness like the plant or an inchoate consciousness like the incipient animal; it becomes conscious only so far as it is enlightened by mind and observable by intelligence.

This is an exaggeration and a confusion due to our identification of consciousness with mentality and mental awareness. Mind identifies itself to a certain extent with the movements proper to physical life and body and annexes them to its mentality, so that all consciousness seems to us to be mental. But if we draw back, if we separate the mind as witness from these parts of us, we can discover that life and body—even the most physical parts of life—have a consciousness of their own, a consciousness proper to an obscurer vital and to a bodily being, even such an elemental awareness as primitive animal forms may have, but in us partly taken up by the mind and to that extent mentalised. Yet it has not, in its independent motion, the mental awareness which we enjoy; if there is mind in it, it is mind involved and implicit in the body and in the physical life: there is no organised self-consciousness, but only a sense of action and reaction, movement, impulse and desire, need, necessary activities imposed by Nature, hunger, instinct, pain, insensibility and pleasure. Although thus inferior, it has this awareness obscure, limited and automatic; but since it is less in possession of itself, void of what to us is the stamp of mentality, we may justly call it the submental, but not so justly the subconscious part of our being. For when we stand back from it, when we can separate our mind from its sensations, we perceive that this is a nervous and sensational and automatically dynamic mode of consciousness, a gradation of awareness different from the mind: it has its own separate reactions to contacts and is sensitive to them in its own power of feeling; it does not depend for that on the mind’s perception and response. The true subconscious is other than this vital or physical substratum; it is the Inconscient vibrating on the borders of consciousness, sending up its motions to be changed into conscious stuff, swallowing into its depths.
impressions of past experience as seeds of unconscious habit and returning them constantly but often chaotically to the surface consciousness, missioning upwards much futile or perilous stuff of which the origin is obscure to us, in dream, in mechanical repetitions of all kinds, in untraceable impulsions and motives, in mental, vital, physical perturbations and upheavals, in dumb automatic necessities of our obscurest parts of nature.

But the subliminal self has not at all this subconscious character: it is in full possession of a mind, a life-force, a clear subtle-physical sense of things. It has the same capacities as our waking being, a subtle sense and perception, a comprehensive extended memory and an intensive selecting intelligence, will, self-consciousness; but even though the same in kind, they are wider, more developed, more sovereign. And it has other capacities which exceed those of our mortal mind because of a power of direct awareness of the being, whether acting in itself or turned upon its object, which arrives more swiftly at knowledge, more swiftly at effectivity of will, more deeply at understanding and satisfaction of impulse. Our surface mind is hardly a true mentality, so involved, bound, hampered, conditioned is it by the body and bodily life and the limitations of the nerve-system and the physical organs. But the subliminal self has a true mentality superior to these limitations; it exceeds the physical mind and physical organs although it is aware of them and their works and is, indeed, in a large degree their cause or creator. It is only subconscious in the sense of not bringing all or most of itself to the surface, it works always behind the veil: it is rather a secret intraconscient and circumconscient than a subconscient; for it envelops quite as much as it supports the outer nature. This description is no doubt truest of the deeper parts of the subliminal; in other layers of it nearer to our surface there is a more ignorant action and those who, penetrating within, pause in the zones of lesser coherence or in the No-man’s-land between the subliminal and the surface, may fall into much delusion and confusion: but that too, though ignorant, is not of the nature of the subconscious; the confusion of these intermediate zones has no kinship to the Inconscience.
We might say then that there are three elements in the totality of our being: there is the submental and the subconscient which appears to us as if it were inconscient, comprising the material basis and a good part of our life and body; there is the subliminal, which comprises the inner being, taken in its entirety of inner mind, inner life, inner physical with the soul or psychic entity supporting them; there is this waking consciousness which the subliminal and the subconscient throw up on the surface, a wave of their secret surge. But even this is not an adequate account of what we are; for there is not only something deep within behind our normal self-awareness, but something also high above it: that too is ourselves, other than our surface mental personality, but not outside our true self; that too is a country of our spirit. For the subliminal proper is no more than the inner being on the level of the Knowledge-Ignorance, luminous, powerful and extended indeed beyond the poor conception of our waking mind, but still not the supreme or the whole sense of our being, not its ultimate mystery. We become aware, in a certain experience, of a range of being superconscient to all these three, aware too of something, a supreme highest Reality sustaining and exceeding them all, which humanity speaks of vaguely as Spirit, God, the Oversoul: from these superconscient ranges we have visitations and in our highest being we tend towards them and to that supreme Spirit. There is then in our total range of existence a superconscience as well as a subconscious and inconscience, overarching and perhaps enveloping our subliminal and our waking selves, but unknown to us, seemingly unattainable and incommunicable.

But with the extension of our knowledge we discover what this spirit or oversoul is: it is ultimately our own highest deepest vastest Self, it is apparent on its summits or by reflection in ourselves as Sachchidananda creating us and the world by the power of His divine Knowledge-Will, spiritual, supramental, truth-conscious, infinite. That is the real Being, Lord and Creator, who, as the Cosmic Self veiled in Mind and Life and Matter, has descended into that which we call the Inconscient and constitutes and directs its subconscious existence by His supramental
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will and knowledge, has ascended out of the Inconscient and
dwells in the inner being constituting and directing its subliminal
existence by the same will and knowledge, has cast up out of the
subliminal our surface existence and dwells secretly in it over-
seeing with the same supreme light and mastery its stumbling
and groping movements. If the subliminal and subconscient may
be compared to a sea which throws up the waves of our surface
mental existence, the superconscience may be compared to an
ether which constitutes, contains, overroofs, inhabits and deter-
mines the movements of the sea and its waves. It is there in this
higher ether that we are inherently and intrinsically conscious of
ourself and spirit, not as here below by a reflection in silent mind
or by acquisition of the knowledge of a hidden Being within us;
it is through it, through that ether of superconscience, that we
can pass to a supreme status, knowledge, experience. Of this
superconscient existence through which we can arrive at the
highest status of our real, our supreme Self, we are normally
even more ignorant than of the rest of our being; yet is it into the
knowledge of it that our being emerging out of the involution
in Inconscience is struggling to evolve. This limitation to our
surface existence, this unconsciousness of our highest as of our
inmost self, is our first, our capital ignorance.

We exist superficially by a becoming in Time; but here again
out of that becoming in Time the surface mind, which we call
ourselves, is ignorant of all the long past and the long future,
aware only of the little life which it remembers and not of all
even of that; for much of it is lost to its observation, much
to its memory. We readily believe,—for the simple and com-
pelling but insufficient reason that we do not remember, have
not perceived, are not informed of anything else,—that we came
into existence first by our physical birth into this life and shall
cease to exist by the death of this body and the cessation of
this brief physical activity. But while this is true of our physical
mentality and physical vitality, our corporeal sheath, for they
have been constituted at our birth and are dissolved by death,
it is not true of our real becoming in Time. For our real self in
the cosmos is the Superconscient which becomes the subliminal
self and throws up this apparent surface self to act out the brief and limited part assigned to it between birth and death as a present living and conscious self-formation of the being in the stuff of a world of inconscient Nature. The true being which we are no more dies by the cessation of one life than the actor ceases to exist when he has finished one of his parts or the poet when he has poured out something of himself in one of his poems; our mortal personality is only such a role or such a creative self-expression. Whether or no we accept the theory of many births of the same soul or psychic being in various human bodies upon this earth, certain it is that our becoming in Time goes far back into the past and continues far on into the future. For neither the superconscient nor the subliminal can be limited by a few moments of Time: the one is eternal and Time is only one of its modes; to the other, to the subliminal, it is an infinite field of various experience and the very existence of the being presupposes all the past for its own and equally all the future. Yet of this past which alone explains our present being, our mind knows, if knowledge it can be called, only this actual physical existence and its memories; of the future which alone explains the constant trend of our becoming, it knows nothing. So fixed are we in the experience of our ignorance that we even insist that the one can be known only by its vestiges and the other cannot be known, because the future is not yet and the past is no longer in existence; yet are they both here in us, the past involved and active, the future ready to evolve in the continuity of the secret spirit. This is another limiting and frustrating ignorance.

But even here the self-ignorance of man does not end; for not only is he ignorant of his superconscient Self, of his subliminal self, of his subconscient self, he is ignorant of his world in which he presently lives, which constantly acts on and through him and on which and by which he has to act. And the stamp of his ignorance is this, that he regards it as something quite separate from him, as not-self because it is other than his individual nature-formation and his ego. So too when he confronts his superconscient Self, he thinks of it first as something quite other than he, an external, even extracosmic God; when he confronts
and becomes aware of his subliminal self, it seems to him at first another greater person or another consciousness than his own which can support and guide him. Of the world he regards only one little foam-bubble, his life and body, as himself. But when we get into our subliminal consciousness, we find it extending itself to be commensurate with its world; when we get into our superconscient Self, we find that the world is only its manifestation and that all in it is the One, all in it is our self. We see that there is one indivisible Matter of which our body is a knot, one indivisible Life of which our life is an eddy, one indivisible Mind of which our mind is a receiving and recording, forming or translating and transmitting station, one indivisible Spirit of which our soul and individual being are a portion or a manifestation. It is the ego-sense which clinches the division and in which the ignorance we superficially are finds its power to maintain the strong though always permeable walls it has created to be its own prison. Ego is the most formidable of the knots which keep us tied to the Ignorance.

As we are ignorant of our existence in Time except the small hour which we remember, so we are ignorant of ourselves in Space except the small span of which we are mentally and sensationally conscious, the single body that moves there and the mind and life which are identified with it, and we regard the environment as a not-self we have to deal with and use: it is this identification and this conception that form the life of the ego. Space according to one view is only the coexistence of things or of souls; the Sankhya affirms the plurality of souls and their independent existence, and their coexistence is then only possible by the unity of Nature-force, their field of experience, Prakriti: but, even granting this, the coexistence is there and it is in the end coexistence in one Being. Space is the self-conceptive extension of that one Being; it is the one spiritual Existence displaying the field of movement of its Conscious-Force in its own self as Space. Because that Conscious-Force concentrates in manifold bodies, lives, minds and the soul presides over one of them, therefore our mentality is concentrated in this and regards this as itself and all the rest as not-self, just as it regards
its one life on which it concentrates by a similar ignorance as its whole term of existence cut off from the past and the future. Yet we cannot really know our own mentality without knowing the one Mind, our own vitality without knowing the one Life, our own body without knowing the one Matter; for not only is their nature determined by the nature of that, but by that their activities are at every moment being influenced and determined. But, with all this sea of being flowing in on us, we do not participate in its consciousness, but know of it only so much as can be brought into the surface of our minds and co-ordinated there. The world lives in us, thinks in us, forms itself in us; but we imagine that it is we who live, think, become separately by ourselves and for ourselves. As we are ignorant of our timeless, of our superconscient, of our subliminal and subconscious selves, so are we ignorant of our universal self. This alone saves us that ours is an ignorance which is full of the impulse and strives irresistibly, eternally, by the very law of its being towards the realisation of self-possession and self-knowledge. A many-sided Ignorance striving to become an all-embracing Knowledge is the definition of the consciousness of man the mental being, — or, looking at it from another side, we may say equally that it is a limited separative awareness of things striving to become an integral consciousness and an integral Knowledge.