This talk is based upon the Mother’s essay “The Science of Living”, (On Education, CWM, Vol. 12, pp. 3–8).

“The mind is not an instrument of knowledge; it is incapable of finding knowledge, but it must be moved by knowledge. Knowledge belongs to a much higher domain than that of the human mind, far above the region of pure ideas. The mind has to be silent and attentive to receive knowledge from above and manifest it. For it is an instrument of formation, of organisation and action, and it is in these functions that it attains its full value and real usefulness.”

The mind is “an instrument of formation, of organisation and action”. Why? The mind gives a form to the thoughts. This power of formation forms mental entities whose life is independent of the mind that has formed them — they act as beings that are at least semi-independent. One can form a thought which then travels, goes out to someone, spreads the idea it contains. There is a mental substance just as there is a physical substance, and on this plane the mind can emanate innumerable forms. These forms can be objectivised and seen, and that is one of the most common explanations for dreams. For while you are active and while the physical eyes can see physically, some people can see mentally at the same time. But when you are asleep, your eyes are closed, the physical is asleep and the mind and vital become active.

On the mental plane all the formations made by the mind — the actual “forms” that it gives to the thoughts — return and appear to you as if they were coming from outside and give you dreams. Most dreams are like that. Some people have a
very conscious mental life and are able to enter the mental plane
and move about in it with the same independence they have
in physical life; these people have mentally objective nights. But
most people are incapable of doing this: it is their mental activity
going on during sleep and assuming forms, and these forms give
them what they call dreams.

There is a very common example — it is amusing because it
is rather vivid. If you have quarrelled with someone during the
day, you may wish to hit him, to say very unpleasant things to
him. You control yourself, you don’t do it, but your thought,
your mind is at work and in your sleep you suddenly have a
terrible dream. Someone approaches you with a stick and you
hit each other and have a real fight. And when you wake up,
if you don’t know, if you don’t understand what has happened,
you say to yourself, “What an unpleasant dream I had!” But in
fact it is your own thought which came back to you, like that.
So be on your guard when you dream that someone is unkind
to you! First of all, you should ask yourself, “But didn’t I have
a bad thought against him?”.

Thoughts are real entities which usually last until they are
realised. Some people are obsessed by their own thoughts. They
think of something and the thought returns and goes round and
round in their heads as if it were something from outside. But it
is their own formations returning again and again and striking
the mind that has formed them. That is one aspect of the matter.

Did you ever have the experience of a thought taking the
form of words or a sentence in your mind and returning over
and over again? But if you are clever enough to take a piece of
paper and a pencil and write it down—that is the end of it,
it won’t return any more, you have thrown it out of yourself.
The thing has had its little satisfaction, it has manifested itself
sufficiently and it won’t return.

And there is something more interesting still: if you have
a bad thought that annoys and disturbs you, write it down
very attentively, very carefully, putting as much consciousness
and will as you can. Then take the piece of paper and, with concentration, tear it up with the will that the thought will be torn up in the same way. That is how you will get rid of it.

The mind is an instrument of organisation. On the outer plane, some people have an organised mind. They have organised their own ideas — note that this is not a very common occurrence! — their own thoughts. But if you look inside yourself, you will see that you have the most contradictory thoughts and if you have not taken care to organise them, they dwell side by side in your head, so to say, and create utter disorder.

For instance, I used to know someone who was able to hold the most mystical ideas in his mind together with the most positivist ideas, that is, the most materialistic ideas, the negation of everything that is not purely matter. It was all unorganised and this person was constantly tossed this way and that in a perpetual confusion. Note that I don’t disapprove of your having all these ideas: it is good to be able to look at things from all sides at once and, as we were saying the other day, there is a way to reconcile the most contrary ideas. But you must take the trouble to do it, you have to organise them in your mind, otherwise you live in a chaos. I have noticed something else: people whose minds are in disorder keep their rooms and their belongings in a similar state of disorder. I have seen people who had no order in their minds and if you open their chest of drawers or their cupboards, you will find an awful mess — everything is in a jumble. There are people who are intelligent and have slips of paper on which they jot things down — authors, for example — but if by chance they need one of these notes, they have to spend an hour hunting it out and turning everything upside down! They either find the paper in the waste-paper basket or in the drawer where they put their handkerchiefs. Well, that’s how it is, isn’t it?

There are people who may not be very intelligent, but who have taken the trouble to put some order among the few ideas they have. If you open their cupboard, you will find that they have very few things, but these things are neatly and tidily

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arranged, because they have organised material things in the same way as they have organised their thoughts. The mind is therefore an instrument of organisation.

People who have some power of organisation may start by organising their little personal belongings, then their lives and the events in their lives. They may be in charge of a certain number of people — they can organise a business, a school, anything. Or else if they have the power to govern, they are able to organise a country. Some people have this power of organisation and others don’t.

I shall give you an example of someone who had this gift of organisation. It is an old story, but one can always tell old stories. I used to know Sir Akbar Hydari, who was Finance Minister and then Prime Minister of Hyderabad. Before his time, the Hyderabad finances were in the state of chaos I have just mentioned and the Government was always short of money. It was a rich area which ought not to have been in that position. Then came Sir Akbar. He became Finance Minister and from the very first year, they had a few lakhs of revenue and everything was so wonderfully organised that it was perhaps one of the only places in the world where people had no taxes to pay. They had no taxes or duties to pay and the State was never short of money and this went on throughout his whole ministry. But he fell ill and had to leave; in the end, he died. He was replaced by someone who did not have his gift of organisation and immediately, from the very first year, again they were short of 17,000 lakhs! It was the same province, with the same revenue, the same people, but Sir Akbar’s marvellous gift of organisation was no longer there. That is a true story. Very few people have this gift.

It is as if you had a large number of miscellaneous things in front of you: it would take a century to make all the possible combinations of them. Some people don’t need to do that — they have the vision, they immediately know where to put things and establish an organised relation between them so as to form something orderly and organised. This capacity for organisation
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is indispensable in life, and if you want to learn to organise, begin by organising your own drawer and you will end up by organising your own head! Some people should do both these things. You must first see the ideas in your mind before you can organise them — at least you can see your handkerchiefs and clothes! But you will find that a certain care is needed to achieve an intelligent arrangement — don’t put the things you use every day beneath the things you use once a month!

The mind is also an instrument of action. The thoughts form plans. The mind forms a plan of action and with this formation of independent and active entities which I mentioned earlier, it stirs the other parts of the being — the vital and physical — and impels them to action. It often happens that you think of some action or other — you don’t do it immediately, but the thought that wants to manifest in this action returns again and again. Perhaps you hear in your mind the words, “I must do that, I must do that,” until you leave everything and do what you have “thought”. Well, that is the mind’s power of action. Before you get it, you must learn to organise, harmonise and control your mind. But when you have that power, you can begin to act purposefully, whereas most people are tossed about by thoughts whose formation they were not even aware of.

There are many people whose thoughts come from outside, who have not taken the care to organise their mind, which is a sort of public square. So all the thoughts coming from outside meet there; sometimes there are clashes: you don’t know what to do, you can’t see anything clearly, etc. There are also people who live in a more or less neutral mental state. Suddenly, they find themselves with someone whose mind is well organised and they begin to think clearly — about things that they knew nothing of a minute ago. There are others, on the other hand, who normally think very clearly and know exactly what is going on in their minds. But they come into contact with certain people and everything gets confused, vague and muddled. They lose the thread of their thoughts and forget what they wanted to
say. This is an effect of contagion and this mental contagion is constant. There are very few people who do not receive thoughts from outside. I have known people — many people — who, for example, had a very strong faith, who could see very clearly into themselves, who knew very well what they wanted to do, etc. But when they were with other people and tried to grasp all that, to express it, they could no longer find it; instead, there was something that moved in a sort of semi-obscure confusion and they felt incapable of formulating their thought, which before had been quite clear.

There is another phenomenon which is considered spiritual, but which is spiritual only indirectly: it is when you find yourself near someone who has controlled his thought and achieved mental silence. You suddenly feel this silence coming down into yourself and something which was impossible for you half an hour earlier suddenly becomes a reality. This is a rather unusual phenomenon.

“There is another practice which can be very helpful to the progress of the consciousness. Whenever there is a disagreement on any matter, such as a decision to be taken, or an action to be carried out, one must never remain closed up in one’s own conception or point of view. On the contrary, one must make an effort to understand the other’s point of view, to put oneself in his place and, instead of quarrelling or even fighting, find the solution which can reasonably satisfy both parties; there always is one for men of goodwill.”

I said this mainly for men of action whose thinking is direct and formative, very active and dynamic. They see things in a linear way which is necessary for action; they can see that a thing must be done in such and such a way. Another person may have a thought which is equally dynamic and say, “No, it ought to be done like this.” So they quarrel, they are unable to reach an
agreement. But one can keep quiet for a minute and look at the thing calmly. The other person is not necessarily showing ill will, his point of view may be true or partially true. The question is to find out why he thinks like that. So you stop to think it over and try to identify yourself with the other’s point of view, to put yourself in his place and tell yourself, “He may have a reason for thinking as he does, and it may be better than mine.” And in this way, you must try to find the solution which can reasonably satisfy both parties. This is very important when dealing with material things. Naturally, each one sees only his own point of view and his own point of view is always selfish. It is very hard to admit another point of view, for this point of view may be “detrimental” to you. This is an absolute truth where nations are concerned. If nations, instead of being in perpetual argument about straightforward things and defending their own interests and seeing only their personal viewpoint, that is, the viewpoint of their national personality, if instead of doing all that, they attempted to understand that each nation has a right to live on earth and that it is not a matter of depriving them of this right, but of finding a compromise that would satisfy everyone. There is always a solution, but on one condition, not in order to find the solution but to implement it: individuals and nations must have goodwill.

If they have no goodwill, if they know perfectly well that they are in the wrong but don’t care, if they insist on their own interests even when they are absolutely wrong, then there is nothing to be done — you can only leave people to their fighting and mutual destruction. But if, on the contrary, there is mutual goodwill, there is always a good solution.

Can you define “compromise”?

It is an intermediate solution. It is not always the golden mean. A kind of harmonisation must be found.

I will tell you another story, the story of a merchant who set
out on a journey saying to his neighbour, “I am going away, I don’t know when I shall be back. Keep this big jar for me, I shall take it back when I return.” Some time later, the neighbour was tempted to open the jar. He did so and found, under a thick layer of dust... some gold coins! This was a great temptation for him and he began to think, “Perhaps my friend has died, perhaps he won’t return. What is the use of keeping all this money inside here? And I am so much in need of money!” So he took a few coins, a few more, many more, until all the gold in the jar had gone. The olives that concealed the gold had gone bad and so he threw them away.

One day the merchant returned and said to his neighbour, “Give me back my jar.” A few days later, the neighbour returned the jar all coated with dust, as it was before. The merchant opened the jar and found only some fresh olives. All the gold had gone. He went to the judge and explained what had happened. But the judge said, “How can I be sure you are telling the truth? Perhaps your neighbour is telling the truth.” They argued and were unable to find a solution. The merchant, who had a headache, thought, “I shall go for a walk in the city tonight.” So he strolled through the city and suddenly he saw some children playing. They had a jar, and also a merchant, a neighbour and a judge! The judge was telling the neighbour, “Open up this jar. But I see only fresh olives! How long has it been since the merchant went away?” “Two and a half years.” “Really? So you were able to keep these olives fresh for so long? Didn’t you by any chance remove what was in the jar and put in some fresh olives?” The neighbour ran away. The merchant thought, “Well, these children are far more intelligent than I am, they found the solution at once.” So he went back to his neighbour and asked him the same questions; and of course the neighbour had nothing further to say and was forced to admit the truth.