OUR FIRST step in this path of knowledge, having once determined in our intellect that what seems is not the Truth, that the self is not the body or life or mind, since these are only its forms, must be to set right our mind in its practical relation with the life and the body so that it may arrive at its own right relation with the Self. This it is easiest to do by a device with which we are already familiar, since it played a great part in our view of the Yoga of Works; it is to create a separation between the Prakriti and the Purusha. The Purusha, the soul that knows and commands has got himself involved in the workings of his executive conscious force, so that he mistakes this physical working of it which we call the body for himself; he forgets his own nature as the soul that knows and commands; he believes his mind and soul to be subject to the law and working of the body; he forgets that he is so much else besides that is greater than the physical form; he forgets that the mind is really greater than Matter and ought not to submit to its obscurations, reactions, habit of inertia, habit of incapacity; he forgets that he is more even than the mind, a Power which can raise the mental being above itself; that he is the Master, the Transcendent and it is not fit the Master should be enslaved to his own workings, the Transcendent imprisoned in a form which exists only as a trifle in its own being. All this forgetfulness has to be cured by the Purusha remembering his own true nature and first by his remembering that the body is only a working and only one working of Prakriti.

We say then to the mind “This is a working of Prakriti, this is neither thyself nor myself; stand back from it.” We shall find, if we try, that the mind has this power of detachment and
can stand back from the body not only in idea, but in act and as it were physically or rather vitally. This detachment of the mind must be strengthened by a certain attitude of indifference to the things of the body; we must not care essentially about its sleep or its waking, its movement or its rest, its pain or its pleasure, its health or ill-health, its vigour or its fatigue, its comfort or its discomfort, or what it eats or drinks. This does not mean that we shall not keep the body in right order so far as we can; we have not to fall into violent asceticisms or a positive neglect of the physical frame. But we have not either to be affected in mind by hunger or thirst or discomfort or ill-health or attach the importance which the physical and vital man attaches to the things of the body, or indeed any but a quite subordinate and purely instrumental importance. Nor must this instrumental importance be allowed to assume the proportions of a necessity; we must not for instance imagine that the purity of the mind depends on the things we eat or drink, although during a certain stage restrictions in eating and drinking are useful to our inner progress; nor on the other hand must we continue to think that the dependence of the mind or even of the life on food and drink is anything more than a habit, a customary relation which Nature has set up between these principles. As a matter of fact the food we take can be reduced by contrary habit and new relation to a minimum without the mental or vital vigour being in any way reduced; even on the contrary with a judicious development they can be trained to a greater potentiality of vigour by learning to rely on the secret fountains of mental and vital energy with which they are connected more than upon the minor aid of physical aliments. This aspect of self-discipline is however more important in the Yoga of self-perfection than here; for our present purpose the important point is the renunciation by the mind of attachment to or dependence on the things of the body.

Thus disciplined the mind will gradually learn to take up towards the body the true attitude of the Purusha. First of all, it will know the mental Purusha as the upholder of the body and not in any way the body itself; for it is quite other than
the physical existence which it upholds by the mind through the agency of the vital force. This will come to be so much the normal attitude of the whole being to the physical frame that the latter will feel to us as if something external and detachable like the dress we wear or an instrument we happen to be carrying in our hand. We may even come to feel that the body is in a certain sense non-existent except as a sort of partial expression of our vital force and of our mentality. These experiences are signs that the mind is coming to a right poise regarding the body, that it is exchanging the false view-point of the mentality obsessed and captured by physical sensation for the view-point of the true truth of things.

Secondly, with regard to the movements and experiences of the body the mind will come to know the Purusha seated within it as, first, the witness or observer of the movements and, secondly, the knower or perceiver of the experiences. It will cease to consider in thought or feel in sensation these movements and experiences as its own but rather consider and feel them as not its own, as operations of Nature governed by the qualities of Nature and their interaction upon each other. This detachment can be made so normal and carried so far that there will be a kind of division between the mind and the body and the former will observe and experience the hunger, thirst, pain, fatigue, depression, etc. of the physical being as if they were experiences of some other person with whom it has so close a rapport as to be aware of all that is going on within him. This division is a great means, a great step towards mastery; for the mind comes to observe these things first without being overpowered and finally without being at all affected by them, dispassionately, with clear understanding but with perfect detachment. This is the initial liberation of the mental being from servitude to the body; for by right knowledge put steadily into practice liberation comes inevitably.

Finally, the mind will come to know the Purusha in the mind as the master of Nature whose sanction is necessary to her movements. It will find that as the giver of the sanction he can withdraw the original fiat from the previous habits of
Nature and that eventually the habit will cease or change in the direction indicated by the will of the Purusha; not at once, for the old sanction persists as an obstinate consequence of the past Karma of Nature until that is exhausted, and a good deal also depends on the force of the habit and the idea of fundamental necessity which the mind had previously attached to it; but if it is not one of the fundamental habits Nature has established for the relation of the mind, life and body and if the old sanction is not renewed by the mind or the habit willingly indulged, then eventually the change will come. Even the habit of hunger and thirst can be minimised, inhibited, put away; the habit of disease can be similarly minimised and gradually eliminated and in the meantime the power of the mind to set right the disorders of the body whether by conscious manipulation of vital force or by simple mental fiat will immensely increase. By a similar process the habit by which the bodily nature associates certain forms and degrees of activity with strain, fatigue, incapacity can be rectified and the power, freedom, swiftness, effectiveness of the work whether physical or mental which can be done with this bodily instrument marvellously increased, doubled, tripled, decupled.

This side of the method belongs properly to the Yoga of self-perfection; but it is as well to speak briefly of these things here both because we thereby lay a basis for what we shall have to say of self-perfection, which is a part of the integral Yoga, and because we have to correct the false notions popularised by materialistic Science. According to this Science the normal mental and physical states and the relations between mind and body actually established by our past evolution are the right, natural and healthy conditions and anything other, anything opposite to them is either morbid and wrong or a hallucination, self-deception and insanity. Needless to say, this conservative principle is entirely ignored by Science itself when it so diligently and successfully improves on the normal operations of physical Nature for the greater mastery of Nature by man. Suffice it to say here once for all that a change of mental and physical state and of relations between the mind and body which increases the
purity and freedom of the being, brings a clear joy and peace and multiplies the power of the mind over itself and over the physical functions, brings about in a word man’s greater mastery of his own nature, is obviously not morbid and cannot be considered a hallucination or self-deception since its effects are patent and positive. In fact, it is simply a willed advance of Nature in her evolution of the individual, an evolution which she will carry out in any case but in which she chooses to utilise the human will as her chief agent, because her essential aim is to lead the Purusha to conscious mastery over herself.

This being said, we must add that in the movement of the path of knowledge perfection of the mind and body are no consideration at all or only secondary considerations. The one thing necessary is to rise out of Nature to the Self by either the most swift or the most thorough and effective method possible; and the method we are describing, though not the swiftest, is the most thorough-going in its effectivity. And here there arises the question of physical action or inaction. It is ordinarily considered that the Yogin should draw away from action as much as possible and especially that too much action is a hindrance because it draws off the energies outward. To a certain extent this is true; and we must note farther that when the mental Purusha takes up the attitude of mere witness and observer, a tendency to silence, solitude, physical calm and bodily inaction grows upon the being. So long as this is not associated with inertia, incapacity or unwillingness to act, in a word, with the growth of the tamasic quality, all this is to the good. The power to do nothing, which is quite different from indolence, incapacity or aversion to action and attachment to inaction, is a great power and a great mastery; the power to rest absolutely from action is as necessary for the Jnanayogin as the power to cease absolutely from thought, as the power to remain indefinitely in sheer solitude and silence and as the power of immovable calm. Whoever is not willing to embrace these states is not yet fit for the path that leads towards the highest knowledge; whoever is unable to draw towards them, is as yet unfit for its acquisition.

At the same time it must be added that the power is enough;
the abstention from all physical action is not indispensable, the aversion to action mental or corporeal is not desirable. The seeker of the integral state of knowledge must be free from attachment to action and equally free from attachment to inaction. Especially must any tendency to mere inertia of mind or vitality or body be surmounted, and if that habit is found growing on the nature, the will of the Purusha must be used to dismiss it. Eventually, a state arrives when the life and the body perform as mere instruments the will of the Purusha in the mind without any strain or attachment, without their putting themselves into the action with that inferior, eager and often feverish energy which is the nature of their ordinary working; they come to work as forces of Nature work without the fret and toil and reaction characteristic of life in the body when it is not yet master of the physical. When we attain to this perfection, then action and inaction become immaterial, since neither interferes with the freedom of the soul or draws it away from its urge towards the Self or its poise in the Self. But this state of perfection arrives later in the Yoga and till then the law of moderation laid down by the Gita is the best for us; too much mental or physical action then is not good since excess draws away too much energy and reacts unfavourably upon the spiritual condition; too little also is not good since defect leads to a habit of inaction and even to an incapacity which has afterwards to be surmounted with difficulty. Still, periods of absolute calm, solitude and cessation from works are highly desirable and should be secured as often as possible for that recession of the soul into itself which is indispensable to knowledge.

While dealing thus with the body we have necessarily to deal also with the Prana or life-energy. For practical purposes we have to make a distinction between the life-energy as it acts in the body, the physical Prana, and the life-energy as it acts in support of the mental activities, the psychical Prana. For we lead always a double life, mental and physical, and the same life-energy acts differently and assumes a different aspect according as it lends itself to one or the other. In the body it produces those reactions of hunger, thirst, fatigue, health, disease, physical
vigour, etc. which are the vital experiences of the physical frame. For the gross body of man is not like the stone or the earth; it is a combination of two sheaths, the vital and the “food” sheath and its life is a constant interaction of these two. Still the life-energy and the physical frame are two different things and in the withdrawal of the mind from the absorbing sense of the body we become increasingly sensible of the Prana and its action in the corporeal instrument and can observe and more and more control its operations. Practically, in drawing back from the body we draw back from the physical life-energy also, even while we distinguish the two and feel the latter nearer to us than the mere physical instrument. The entire conquest of the body comes in fact by the conquest of the physical life-energy.

Along with the attachment to the body and its works the attachment to life in the body is overcome. For when we feel the physical being to be not ourselves, but only a dress or an instrument, the repulsion to the death of the body which is so strong and vehement an instinct of the vital man must necessarily weaken and can be thrown away. Thrown away it must be and entirely. The fear of death and the aversion to bodily cessation are the stigma left by his animal origin on the human being. That brand must be utterly effaced.