21 November 1956

Mother distributes the booklet *Thoughts and Glimpses*, then glances through one of the copies:

Five paragraphs dealing with five modes of being or five states of being, and the same thing recurs in all the different domains:

“When we have passed beyond knowings, then we shall have Knowledge. Reason was the helper; Reason is the bar.”

*Sri Aurobindo, Thoughts and Glimpses, SABCL, Vol. 16, p. 377*

This is about the mental being in man, that is, his mental activities; and Sri Aurobindo contrasts knowings with Knowledge.

Actually I should be the one to ask you if you know what Sri Aurobindo means by “knowings”, and why he contrasts them with Knowledge. For if I explain all this to you without your making any effort, it is (laughing) spoon-feeding you, giving you a meal all cooked without your taking the trouble to cook it! And the result will be that sooner or later, in half an hour or in a day’s time, you will have completely forgotten what I told you and it will have had no effect on you. I should like someone to tell me what he understands by “knowings”. *(To a child)* Tell me, come along.

*It is the knowledge acquired through outer studies.*

It is obviously that. It is everything that can be learnt through the study of outer phenomena and in all fields of mental activity, all that can be learnt by material observation and technical studies in different subjects, scientific, artistic, philosophical, literary; in fact all that the human mind has produced through the external
study of life and things: all that can be found in books, all that can be found through the direct study of Nature and all that can be found by reasoning, deduction, analysis and all the speculative activities of the human mind.

And Sri Aurobindo puts reason at the summit of man’s mental activity; he tells us that in the development of the mind, reason is the surest guide, the master, so to speak, who prevents you from deviating from the path or taking the wrong one, from straying away and losing your common sense. He makes reason the arbiter of man’s mental activity, which guides and controls; and so long as you have to deal with mental activities, even the most speculative, it is reason which must guide you and prevent you from going astray from the right path and entering more or less fantastic and unhealthy imaginations.

But if you want to attain true knowledge, that is, spiritual knowledge, which can be obtained only through identification, you must go beyond this reason and enter a domain higher than the mind, where one is in direct contact with the Light either of the Overmind or the Supermind. And Sri Aurobindo says this, that so long as you are in the mental field, reason helps you, it is your helper, your guide; but if you want to have true knowledge by identity, reason becomes a limitation and a bar. That is not to say that you should lose it! But it must be subordinated to your movement of ascent. Sri Aurobindo does not tell you to become unreasonable, he says you must pass beyond reason into a higher Truth and Light.

And what is interesting in the structure of this section is that the reflection Sri Aurobindo makes about the mental being, the intellectual activity of man, he also makes for the vital activity, the power of action and realisation. He takes mental activity as the basis of human life, for it belongs to man in his own right, exclusively; and in the process of life, that is, of human existence, human realisation, thought normally comes first. Man, because he is a thinking being, first gets an idea, then he invests this idea with a force, a vital power, a power for action, and changes

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it, transforms it into will. This will is then concentrated on
the object to be realised, and with the vital force and effort
added to the thought, the conception, it becomes the lever of
action.

But here Sri Aurobindo uses a word which is not “will”, he
speaks of “willings”:

“When we have passed beyond willings, then we shall
have Power. Effort was the helper, Effort is the bar.”

*Thoughts and Glimpses, SABCL, Vol. 16, p. 377*

And he contrasts these “willings” — that is, all these superficial
wills, often opposite and contradictory and without any lasting
basis because they are founded on what he calls a “knowing”
and not on knowledge — with the true will. These willings are
necessarily fragmentary, passing, and often in opposition to one
another, and this is what gives to the individual life and even
to the collective its nature of incoherence, inconsistency and
confusion.... The word “will” is normally reserved to indicate
what comes from the deeper being or the higher reality and what
expresses in action the true knowledge which Sri Aurobindo has
contrasted with knowings. So, when this will which expresses
the true knowledge manifests in action, it manifests through
the intervention of a deep and *direct* power which no longer
requires any effort. And that is why Sri Aurobindo says here
that the true power for action cannot come until one has gone
beyond the stage of willings, that is, until the motive of action is
the result not of a mere mental activity but of true knowledge.

True knowledge acting in the outer being gives true power.

This seems to be an explanation, the real explanation of that
very familiar saying which is not understood in its essence but
expresses a truth: “Where there’s a will, there’s a way”, to will is
to have the power. It is quite obvious that this does not refer to
“willings”, that is, to the more or less incoherent expression of
desires but to the true will expressing a true knowledge; for this
true will carries in itself the force of truth which gives power — an invincible power. And so, when one expresses “willings”, to be able to apply them in life and make them effective, some effort must come in — it is through personal effort that one progresses, and it is through effort that one imposes one’s willings upon life to make it yield to their demands — but when they are no longer willings, when it is the true will expressing the true knowledge, effort is no longer required, for the power is omnipotent.

Now, I should like you to ask me questions on what I have just told you.

So? Nothing?

Mother, what is the first step to take to have knowledge?

The first step?... To get rid of the illusion of the absolute value of “knowings”, that is, of human knowledge and mental activity. First, to come out of the illusion that they really have a concrete and absolute value.

And you will notice that this is perhaps the most difficult thing to do; it is the most difficult step, for, when you study general subjects like science, the different branches of science or philosophy and all such activities, when you study them a little seriously and deeply, you very easily come to the sense of the relativity of this knowledge. But when you come down a step again, just to the next level of mental activity and look at the different problems of life — for example, what should be done in this or that case, the conditions for realising something, a skill one wants to learn, or even the different necessities of life, the conditions of living, of health — you will find that generally a rational being, or somebody about to become one, forms a set of ideas for himself, which are really knowings: such a thing will produce such an effect, or in order to obtain this thing, that other must be done, etc. And you have a whole mental construction in yourself, made of observations, studies, experiments; and the more you advance in age, the greater becomes the number of
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experiments and results of study and observation. You make for yourself a sort of mental structure in which you live. And unless you are powerfully intelligent, with an opening to the higher worlds, you have an innate, spontaneous, unshakable conviction of the absolute worth of your observations, and even without your having to think, it acts automatically in your being; by a sort of habit this thing inevitably brings that particular result. So for you, when this has happened quite often, the habit of associating the two movements naturally gives rise within you to the feeling of the absolute value of your ideas or your knowings about yourself and your life. And there it is infinitely more difficult to come to an understanding of the relativity — the uncertainty bordering on illusion — of that knowledge. You find this out only if, with a will for spiritual discipline and progress, you look at these things with a deep critical sense and see the kind of bondage into which you have put yourself, which acts without any need of intervention from you, automatically, with the support of the subconscious and that kind of automatism of reflexes which makes causes and effects follow each other in a habitual order without your being in the least aware of it.

Well, if you want to attain knowledge, the first thing, the first indispensable step is not to believe in the validity of those things. And if you observe yourself, you will realise that this belief in the validity of these observations and deductions is almost absolute in you. It expresses itself through all sorts of ideas which reasonably enough appear evident to you, yet are exactly the limitations which prevent you from reaching knowledge by identity. For instance, if a man plunges into the water without knowing how to swim, he will be drowned; if there is a fairly powerful wind, it will upset things; when it rains, you get wet, etc. — you see, there are instances like this at every second, it is like that. And this seems so obvious to you that when you are told, “Well, but no, this is a relative knowledge, it is like that but it could be different”, the one who tells you this seems to you a priori half-mad. And you say, “But still, these things
are concrete! These are things we can see, touch, feel, these are proofs our senses give to us every minute, and if we do not take our stand on them, we are sure to go astray and enter the irrational."

So, if you remember what Sri Aurobindo has said, you will understand that the first condition for having knowledge is to go beyond reason. That is why he says, “Reason was the helper” — yes, during the whole childhood of humanity and the whole period of growth of the individual being — but if you want to go beyond the human being, the ordinary human state, well, you must go beyond reason; and these things which seem to you so obvious that they are indisputable, you should be able to understand, to feel from within yourself that they are absolutely relative and that what seems completely similar, identical in everyone’s experiences, these very things, if seen from above with a higher consciousness, become absolutely subjective and relative and are only individual formations adapted to the individual need and consciousness, and that instead of having an absolute reality, they have only an altogether relative reality which completely disappears as soon as you rise to a higher level.

So now, if you look at the state of your thought in this light, you will see that it is not so easy to take even this first step. Examples can be given, but they are superficial examples, very fragmentary in themselves, and have only an altogether relative value, as for instance this, which I have many a time given you, about medical knowledge in the world: if you have studied enough or lived long enough, that is, a fairly good number of years, you will find that with the same authority, the same certitude, the same conviction, at one time certain things are not only considered bad, but on the basis of an absolute knowledge, an unquestionable observation, they are reputed to have a certain effect, and at another time these very unquestionable observations lead to diametrically opposite results. Very often I give an example which I happened to observe, especially as regards the value of certain foods and their effects on the
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body, like certain fruits or vegetables: at a particular time in medical history — not so long ago, about fifty or sixty years ago — when you had a certain illness, the doctor gave you a list of things recommending to you with absolute seriousness not to touch any of these lest you become even more ill — I could give you the list, but it is not interesting. Well, about these very same things, fifty or sixty years later, not the same doctor perhaps but another one will tell you with the same seriousness, the same unquestionable certitude and authority that these are the very things you must eat if you want to be cured! So if you have observed things pretty well and have a slightly critical mind, you can tell yourself, “Oh! it must depend on people or perhaps on the period.” And I shall tell you, as the doctor-friend I knew in France forty or fifty years ago used to tell all his patients, “Take a remedy while it is in fashion, for then it will cure you.” There.

Well, there is a kind of finely sensitive state, in which one understands this extraordinary relativity of things, a state in which it becomes so acute that to affirm something, to say “This is like that” or “Such a thing has that particular result”, spontaneously seems to you a stupidity.... But before reaching that point, one may reflect a little and say, “After all, we shall believe in a particular thing so long as it is in fashion.”

Is that all?

Mother, this question arises because in our studies at school we feel at times a great distaste and ask ourselves, “What’s the use of all this?”. So with what attitude should we study?

I have always said that studies have the same effect on the brain as gymnastics on the muscles. For example, mental gymnastics are very necessary to make one’s mental activity supple, to strengthen and enrich it and give it a subtlety of understanding it would not have if you didn’t do these gymnastics. Of
late — indeed for quite a long time already — I have noticed, for instance, that if I am unfortunate enough to read to you something with philosophical terms or to speak to you from a slightly philosophical point of view, you cannot follow. And that is simply because you have not done any philosophical gymnastics. It is not that you are not intelligent, it is not that you don’t have the capacity to understand: it is because you haven’t done the proper gymnastics. I could tell you the same thing in another way: you have not learnt the language. But the same words are used, only with a slightly different relation between them, with different turns of phrase, with a different mental attitude to things. Well, this difference of attitude you cannot have unless you have done the corresponding gymnastics. And it is very easy for you to understand this example, for you all know very well that you could never do your athletic exercises if you were not trained. Even if you have special abilities, even if you are gifted, if you do not practise and train yourself, you cannot do them. Consider all your agility exercises, if you were asked to do them on the first day, you could not, it would be quite impossible, and you know it very well. If someone were to tell you spontaneously, “Ah! now do this” — say, a certain kind of jump, what used to be called the flying somersault — you would say, “This person is truly unreasonable, it is impossible!” Well, this is the same thing; if I take certain books and read them to you, you cannot follow because you have completely neglected philosophical mental gymnastics. It is exactly the same thing if someone who has not done mathematics is asked to follow a mathematical reasoning — he won’t be able to.... And so, this means that if you want to express fully, totally, the deeper reality of your being, you will express it in a much richer, more integral, more varied, more productive way if all the parts of your being are fully developed like this by appropriate gymnastics.

I believe I have already explained this to you once. If it were a question of leading what till today was considered the true spiritual life, that is, of giving up altogether all physical
activities in order to unite with the supreme divine Reality and remain in this union, of leaving life and all outer expression and going away into Nirvana, into an identity which not only will no longer be expressed in the world, but which takes you out of the world completely, then it is obvious that all these gymnastics, whether physical, vital, sensory or mental, are absolutely useless, and that those people considered all this simply a waste of time and quite futile. But for us who want to realise almost the very opposite, that is, who, after having identified ourselves with the supreme Reality, want to make It descend into life and transform the world, if we offer to this Reality instruments which are refined, rich, developed, fully conscious, the work of transformation will be more effective.

And that is why instead of telling you when you are a little mite, to do (laughing) what those little children are asked to do, to sit still and enter or pretend to enter into meditation, instead of telling you that you must be in constant contemplation and totally indifferent to all things in the world, that you must have only one thought, to prepare yourself to receive the divine Grace, instead of that you are told, “No, try to become developed and conscious beings who know things and have healthy, strong, agile bodies capable of doing exceptional things, an adequate will and a rich, supple, agile mind; these will be useful for the future realisation.”

That is why, moreover, people who are used to judging from appearances and without knowing what they are talking about, say that in the Ashram there is no spiritual life, that we lead an altogether material life. That’s how it is! But it is so much the worse for them, it is not any the worse for us; indeed it is all the same to us.

There we are. No more questions? Nobody has anything to say?