

Old ideas of mind

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Knowing an object

In the Mahābhārata, there is a story about the focusing of mind. When the princes have been trained at arms, their teacher Droṇa puts them to a test. In the branches of a tree, he fixes a target, which has been crafted to represent a bird. Then he calls the princes, and says to them:

‘You will be called in turn. When called, take careful aim, to cut the head clean off the bird. I’ll tell you when to shoot.’

First is Yudhisṭhira, the eldest. As he stands aiming, with his bow drawn, Droṇa asks:

‘Do you see the bird, in the tree?’

‘Yes Sir, I do.’

‘Very well. Now, can you see the tree, or me, or your brothers and cousins here?’

‘Yes Sir, I see the tree, and you, and all the others here.’

‘Then step aside. You’ve had your turn.’

Duryodhana is next. The same thing happens again. Duryodhana takes aim, is questioned, and told to step aside. As the princes take their turns, the same thing keeps happening again. Finally, it is Arjuna’s turn.

Droṇa asks: ‘Do you see the bird?’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Well, can you see the tree? Or me? Or the others here?’

‘No Sir. I see the bird.’

‘Then describe it.’

‘Sorry Sir. I don’t see its body. Just the head.’

At last, Droṇa is satisfied: ‘Shoot!’ he says.

The arrow flies to its target, and the head falls to the ground.

Like many old stories, this one tells a moral tale. But it does something else, as well. It’s meant to show a truer picture, of how things are.

Nearly all the princes think that they see many things. They look around, and see a world outside. Most people picture their experience in this way. In this picture, there is a knowing person at the centre, surrounded by a world that’s somehow known. An illustration is shown in figure 1.

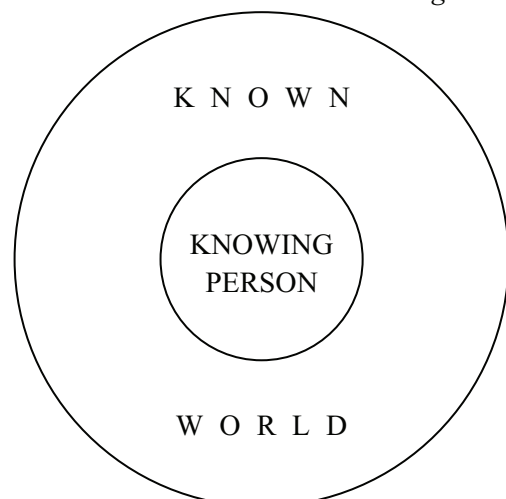


Figure 1

Of course, this picture can be rather misleading. In it, one's mind and body seem the centre of the world; and that can make them seem unduly important. So there is something basically confusing here: in this picture that we see a surrounding world, with many things in it.

As Arjuna stands aiming at the target, he has left this confusing picture behind. He sees no world that mixes many things. Instead, he is quite clear that what he sees is just one object which appears in mind. He does not see the world at large, nor the princes beside him, nor his teacher Droṇa, nor the tree in front of him, nor even the body of the bird he's aiming at. He cannot even describe the bird. For what he sees is just the head, as a single point on which his attention is focused.

Outside the single focus of attention, Arjuna sees nothing. All else is understood, at the background of experience. From that background, all of his experience is drawn forward, to focus on the object that appears. This gives us another picture of our subjective experience. It is shown in figure 2. Here, the mind is focused upon a limited object: by drawing attention from an underlying basis of understanding, at the background of experience.

In the Mahābhārata, the second picture is dramatized as an ideal of mental concentration, in the life of an epic hero. It's dramatized that way to make people take notice of it. But it is more than a prescribed ideal. It's also meant as a more accurate description of our subjective experience: as we know it actually, at each moment of time.

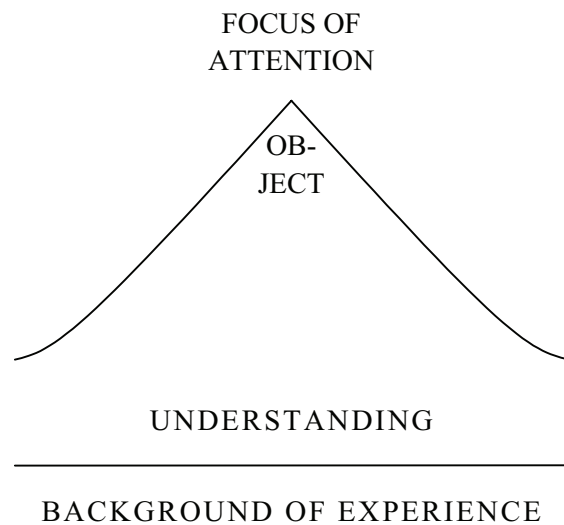
In fact, no one sees the whole world, all at once. Over a period of time, one may see many things; and then think of them together, in a single thought. Or one may see some single thing; and then analyse it into many things, in the course of further thoughts. In either case, it takes time for different things to show up in one's mind.

In the present moment, as it is immediately experienced, there is no time for different things to show or to be analysed. What appears is just one object, in the narrow focus of attention. The narrow focus makes the object limited. It excludes other objects, at the apparent surface of the mind. These other things that don't appear are understood below the surface, at the background of experience.

This does not only happen at rare moments of mental concentration. It happens everyday, all the time. The old ideal of concentration shows us how we see things everyday. It shows our common, everyday experience. That's what is described in the preceding figure 2.

To make things more concrete, let me give you an everyday example. Suppose that I am driving a car, and I notice that the engine is sounding a little odd. At this moment, sound appears, at the tip of my attention. But, in the attention that I give to the sound, many things are understood. I hear the sound; but in that hearing I understand how the car was sounding before, what other things have been happening to the car, who else drives the car, who needs it and for what, the sort of car it is, how it can be

Figure 2



repaired, my previous experiences with cars and machines and mechanics, and so on. All these and other things are drawn upon, from the background of experience.

This background understanding is an inner basis, which supports the limited perceptions of our minds. At any time, what we see is limited, excluding other things. But we understand it on a broader basis, which relates it to the rest of our experience. This broader basis is *subjective*. It is found by reflecting *inward*: to what we understand, beneath the objects that appear in mind.

At the surface of the mind, attention turns from one thing to another. So there's a stream of limited perceptions. It is a stream of changing show, rather like the moving pictures on a video screen. The question is: what's underneath this changing stream of mental show? What is there at the depth of mind, beneath its mental pictures?

When we speak about the depth of our minds, we often use the words 'unconscious' or 'subconscious'. We are then thinking of the mind objectively, as a sort of computer. The surface show of mind is the computer screen. Beneath the surface, the mind stores data and makes complex calculations. The results are shown in changing pictures and appearances, seen at the surface of the mind. In this conception, the mind is a highly complex process of activity, which records information and makes use of it. Most of the mind's activity is hidden, but it produces the appearances we see. The hidden part is what we call 'subconscious' or 'unconscious'.

So, beneath the surface of our minds, there seems to be an inner depth that is both dark and mysterious. In the Upanishads, this dark-seeming depth is described as 'antar-hriday-ākāsha' or as an 'inner space within the heart'. And it is further pictured by the word 'guhā', which means a 'cave' or an 'inner recess', with all the sense of hidden mystery that this picturing suggests.

But the Upanishads don't stop there. They say that it is not enough to construct an objective picture of the mind, as we do in the science of psychology. All such picturing belongs to just the surface of the mind. And when the depth of mind is viewed thus superficially, from the pictured surface, this depth must of course seem hidden and dark. What's actually beneath the surface cannot in the end be found by any objective psychology or any mental picturing.

It's not enough to stay at the pictured surface and look down from there, to what seems hidden and thus dark beneath. Instead, one has to go down oneself, reflecting back into the subjective depth of one's own experience. That subjective reflection is achieved through a relentless philosophical enquiry, which won't take anything for granted, but asks uncompromising questions about one's own pictures and the assumptions on which they are based.

In particular, the Upanishads question our habitual assumption that consciousness is an activity of mind. Our mental activities – of perception, thought and feeling – produce a changing stream of apparent objects that come and go in each person's experience. At any given moment, the mind acts so as to make some seeming object appear. The Upanishads point out that this mental action can never amount to 'prajnyāna' or 'consciousness'.

Without the illumination of consciousness, no object nor any action could appear. In the course of experience, objects and actions keep appearing and disappearing. They come and go; but every one of them is lit by consciousness. Thus, consciousness is always present, illuminating all appearances and disappearances. It is that principle of knowing light which is shared in common by all moments of experience, beneath all differences and changes of appearance.

That's what is meant by the word 'consciousness'. 'Conscious-' means 'knowing'. The suffix '-ness' means a 'common principle'. Putting the two together, we get the word 'consciousness'. It thus implies a common principle that underlies all states of knowing.

In different states, different things are known. But nothing can be known without the light of consciousness. That light is common to all states that we experience. It underlies the changing stream of states that come and go.

That light is consciousness itself. It is not an object, nor an activity. Instead, it is what lights all objects and activities. And it is found beneath all changing

states, of mind and understanding. In all these changing states, it is their common background: remaining always present, while they change and pass. This conception is illustrated in figure 3. It is much the same as the previous figure 2, except that the underlying background is now called 'consciousness'.

But here, it must be understood that the word 'consciousness' is being used in a special way that has been clarified by philosophical reflection. The word no longer means a 'knowing' that is identified with our changing perceptions of apparent objects, nor with our changing thoughts and feelings about such objects. Instead, it is a background knowing which lights the mind from deep within. Here knowledge carries on, as quiet understanding. This is a knowing which does not distract attention. Instead, it continues quietly, beneath the clamouring perceptions, thoughts and feelings that keep replacing one another at the surface of the mind. Through its quiet continuity, it enables us to take into account what our partial minds don't make appear. Thus, it is the source of all co-ordination and integrity.

In this conception, consciousness is treated as something fundamental. So there are different ways of looking at it. First, it is the knowing light which illuminates our minds. But it is not a superficial light, found at the changing surface of appearance. Instead, it's the unchanging background, found beneath all appearances that come and go. Thus, it is like a changeless screen, upon which changing pictures are drawn. It is an ever-present screen, behind our mental picturing.

But this screen is not an object that *transmits* or *reflects* light. Instead, as consciousness, it *is* light. In itself, it is just light, unmixed with anything else. But, in the pictures that we see, this light of consciousness gets mixed with changing qualities and objects.

Beneath the pictures in our minds, consciousness is their unpictured background, and their unmixed light as well. These are two ways of looking at it.

How are the pictures drawn, upon the screen of consciousness? How does its light get mixed, to form the pictures that we see? These questions are answered by the traditional idea of 'life' and 'living energy', or 'prāṇa' as it is called in Sanskrit. This is a further way of looking at consciousness. Here, consciousness is seen as underlying life. It is the inner source of life, expressed in all our feelings, thoughts and living

Figure 3

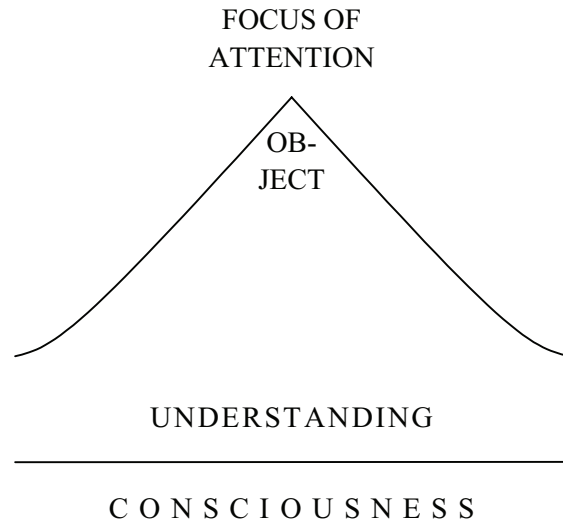
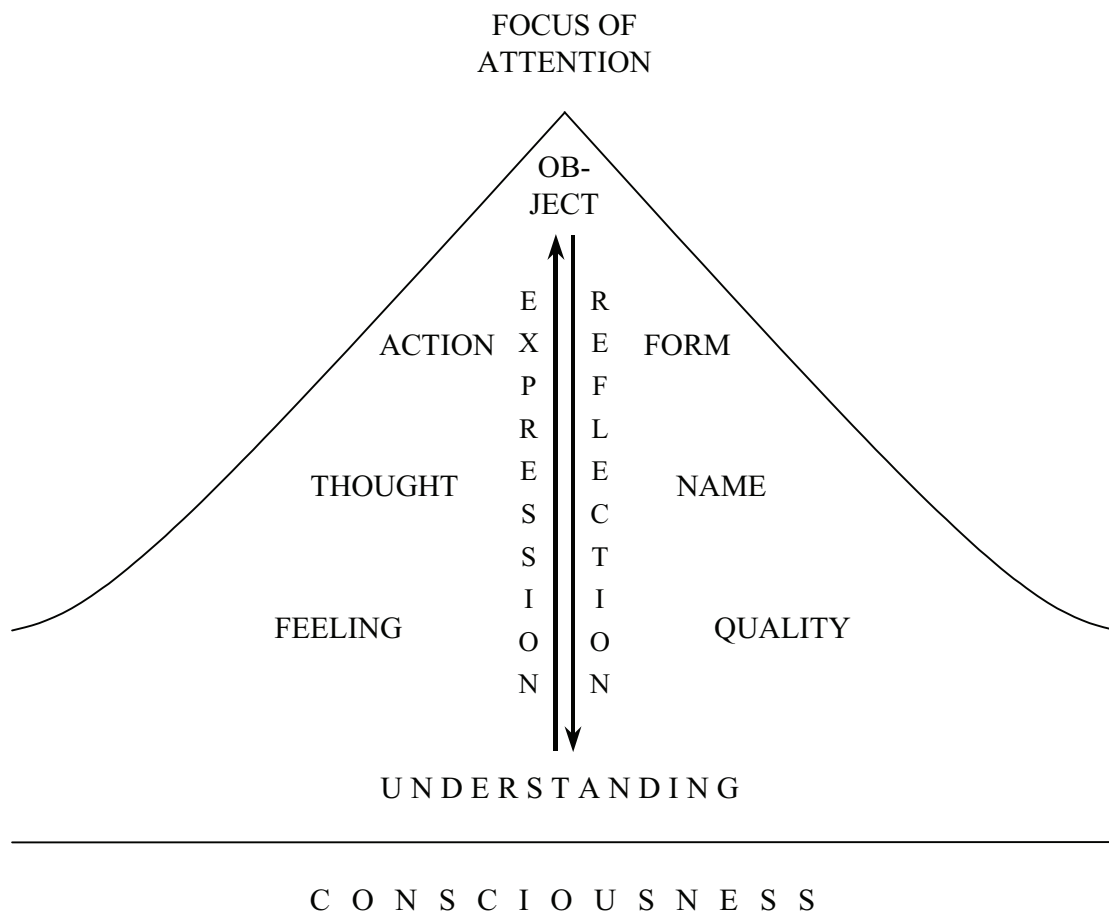


Figure 4



acts. This conception can be illustrated by adding to our previous diagram, as in figure 4. The addition shows a cycle of expression and reflection.

From underlying consciousness, our understanding is expressed in what we feel and think and do. Thus our attention turns to objects that we see. Then, as each object is perceived, there's a reflection back. Through the object's form and name and quality, its perception is taken back into the depth of mind. There each perception is assimilated into understanding.

By thus assimilating our perceptions, we learn from experience. As each perception is absorbed, it brings about a further state of understanding. That is again expressed in further feelings, thoughts and actions: which turn attention towards further objects. Their perception is again absorbed, by a reflection back to underlying consciousness. From there, the cycle keeps repeating, thus enabling us to learn.

If you look again at figure 4, you will notice that it shows five levels, in our experience of the world.

- At the top, there is a level of objects, where our limited attention gets focused.
- Next is a second level, of action and form. Here, action turns attention to various objects, and our experience is given shape.
- Third is a level of thought and name. Here, thoughts direct our actions, and names are used to describe the forms that we perceive.

- Fourth is a level of feeling and quality. Here, feelings motivate our thoughts and acts, through an intuitive judgement of qualities and values.
- And fifth, there is a level of understanding: which expresses knowledge and assimilates what has been learned.

In the Indian tradition, these five levels are called ‘koshas’ or ‘coverings’. They are five layers of personality, through which the world is known. One by one, these layers are meant to be uncovered, thus going down through deeper levels of experience.

- The outermost layer is called the ‘annamaya kosha’ or the ‘covering of food’. It is a person’s body, seen as a material object. Through this body, other objects are perceived, in a world of matter.
- Proceeding inwards, the second layer is called the ‘prāṇamaya kosha’ or the ‘covering of energy’. Here, the body is seen as a living organism, made of flowing energy. The flow takes place in resonating currents, called ‘nāḍis’. These currents function organically, as they resonate in sympathy with each other and with the world outside. Thus, they form an organic pattern of living activity, which perceives a functioning world of fluid energy and happening.
- The third layer is called the ‘manomaya kosha’ or the ‘covering of mind’. It is the conceiving intellect, made up of thoughts and descriptions. Through the interpretations of thought, it conceives an intelligible world of meaningful information.
- The fourth layer is called the ‘vijnyānamaya kosha’, or the ‘covering of discernment’. Here, quality and value are discerned. The discernment is made up of our intuitive judgements and our inner feelings. They carry out the contrasts and comparisons that show a qualitative world of motivating value.
- The fifth layer is called the ‘ānandamaya kosha’ or the ‘covering of happiness’. Here, the word ‘happiness’ refers to harmony and integration. This is the coordinating layer of personality. It is made up of assimilated understanding. Through it, we comprehend the continuity of common principles, beneath the change and the variety of superficial appearances.

Within these five coverings, there is an inmost self, called ‘ātman’. In it, there is no trace of body, nor of mind. There are no objects, actions, thoughts, feelings, or states of understanding. All change and difference belong to the coverings of personality.

The self within is consciousness, unmixed with any coverings. It is the unconditioned ground, beneath all change and difference.

Five elements

At this point, you may well ask how these ideas are relevant, to people living in the world. What is the point of looking back like this, into the coverings of personality?

Well, according to the old ideas, each covering of personality is also a level of experience. It is a level that we experience in our persons and in the world as well. After all, the world is experienced through our personalities and their five layers. So, through each layer of personality, we experience a corresponding level of the world.

The world has thus five levels. These are the traditional five elements. They are the elements of which the world is made, according to an old conception found not only in India, but also in Europe and elsewhere.

This conception is described in a story from the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad. A lady called Gārgī points out that the entire world of earthly things is actually made of the element ‘water’, just as a cloth is woven from thread. What then, she asks, about the element ‘water’? If all things of ‘earth’ turn out to be made of ‘water’, then what is ‘water’ made of?

She is questioning Yājnyavalkya, who replies that ‘water’ is made of the underlying element ‘fire’. And what about ‘fire’? In its turn, ‘fire’ is reduced to the underlying element ‘air’. Similarly, ‘air’ is reduced to underlying ‘ether’.

Like many ancient conceptions, this one is metaphorical. It uses the metaphor of certain physical substances, to suggest a broader analysis of our experience. The metaphorical expression is designed for traditional exercises of contemplation, in disciplines of meditation and religion. Through contemplating the five elements, there is meant to be a progression of increasing subtlety. The metaphor expresses that progression: starting with the gross particularity of earthly things, and going on to the ethereal pervasiveness of space and light throughout the universe.

But what does the metaphor mean? How might it be interpreted: in more modern terms? It must of course have many different interpretations: suited to the many different people who have used it, and who use it still. This kind of metaphor is meant for free interpretation. You will see that, as I now go on to describe one possible interpretation, which relates to modern physics. It is summarized in figure 5.

As we look out through our material bodies, we see material objects. Each such object is particular. It is a piece of matter, divided from other objects by boundaries in space and time. Thus, as we look outside, we see a world of matter, divided into particular things. This divisible *matter* corresponds fairly obviously to the traditional element ‘earth’. In a classical Indian metaphor, the particular objects of the world are conceived to be formed from the element ‘earth’: as pots are formed from clay.

At first, the world of particular objects seems solid. But, upon further investigation, it is not so. As objects interact, they are caught in a constant process of formation and transformation. When changing time is taken into account, our solid-seeming world is shown to be only an instant snapshot: a momentary picture taken at a particular instant of time. As time flows, the objects of the world keep changing. Each moment that we look, what we have seen keeps vanishing, transformed into something else.

Through this examination, the seeming solidity of objects gives way to a fluidity of changing forms. It is then clear that matter is not the only element in our experience of the world. In addition to the concrete particularity of matter, we experience a

Figure 5

<i>Traditional element</i>	<i>A modern interpretation</i>	<i>Level of modern physics</i>
‘Earth’	Matter	Material objects
‘Water’	Energy	Changing configurations
‘Fire’	Information	Relative observations
‘Air’	Conditioning	Conditioned fields
‘Ether’	Continuity	Space-time continuum

second, more fundamental element: which may be called ‘energy’. This second element, of *energy*, is manifested in moving activity; and it thus produces the changing forms of objects in the world. It is associated with the fluidity of change, which makes it correspond to the traditional element called ‘water’.

Through the changing flow of energetic activity, information travels from place to place. This enables us to observe the world. Each observer receives information that represents other things. These represented things are then illuminated by observing them, from a particular point of view.

So, beyond matter and energy, *information* is a third element of our experience. By representing other things, it throws a particular light on them; and it thus corresponds to the traditional element called ‘fire’.

We do not directly observe the matter and energy in the world outside our bodies and our measuring instruments. External matter and energy are only observed through the representations of information that our instruments have received. In this sense, information is more fundamental than matter and energy.

In its turn, information depends on something further still. In order to represent anything, information depends upon a comparison of represented qualities. For example, a map shows some places closer together and other places further apart. Or it may show how various places are cooler or hotter: by comparative shades of colour, or by numbers that spell out the comparison in a more calculated way.

Thus, beneath the information through which the world appears to us, there is a fourth element: of relative *conditioning*. It shows the world as conditioned by varying characteristics and qualities, in much the same way that the atmosphere is conditioned by climate. So there is another correspondence here, with the traditional element called ‘air’.

In order to compare the differing characteristics of different places, there has to be an underlying continuity, which extends through space and time. This continuity is understood in a way that is rather different from our perceptions of matter. Where matter is perceived, space and time are distances that *separate* particular objects and events. Where continuity is understood, space and time are not what separates, but what *connects*. Here, distance is not separation, but a connection in between. It is the intervening connection between parts of a world that has been made to seem divided, by our limited and narrow perceptions.

Thus, beneath the differentiated conditioning of the world, there is a fifth element, of pervading *continuity*. This evidently corresponds to the traditional element called ‘ether’. It is described as the subtlest element, pervading the entire world.

In this kind of way, the ‘five elements’ can be interpreted as different levels, which get mixed up, in our experience of the world. These same five levels can be seen in modern physics.

At the first level, we have Newtonian physics, where the world is described as made up from pieces of matter, which act upon one another through force.

At the second level, physical objects are described as configurations of energy. Here, we have Einstein’s principle that matter is only a concentrated form of energy. And we have quantum systems: as configurations of co-ordinated activity, which get disturbed by observation and other actions from outside.

At the third level, mass, energy, time and space are seen as relative measurements that depend upon the observer. They are not absolute things in themselves. Instead, they are interdependent components, in the process by which an observer receives and

interprets information. Here, matter and energy are not considered by themselves, as independent things. They are only considered as observed phenomena, in relation to measurement and information.

At the fourth level, there are various theories of fields. In physics, the word 'field' refers to a 'conditioned space'. The conditioning is described by attributing a mathematical value to each point of space and time. The idea is to explain phenomena, and to predict occurrences, on the basis of such mathematical descriptions of field conditioning. Relativity and quantum theory have gone a long way in this direction. They use field calculations to describe physical phenomena, in a far more accurate and systematic way than our common sense ideas. And, in building these more accurate descriptions, modern physicists have shown that our common sense assumptions are often wrong. In particular, our notions of separated matter are only approximations, and misleading ones at that. For many everyday purposes, our habitual assumptions work well enough to make us think that they are right. But, upon closer examination, they break down. Then they have to be replaced by rather different ideas, which look deeper into our experience of the world.

At the fifth level of modern physics, there is the space-time continuum. At the end of the nineteenth century, physicists had a somewhat degraded notion of the traditional element 'ether'. They were puzzled as to how electromagnetic waves, like light, could travel through empty space. So they thought of the 'ether' as a special kind of material substance, which invisibly filled all space. Electromagnetic waves were supposed to be carried by material vibrations in this invisible substance, like sound waves travel through vibrations in physical air.

But, as a material substance, the 'ether' was rather mystifying. To account for the tremendous speed of light, it had to vibrate extremely fast, like a very hard solid. On the other hand, it was like a very thin fluid, which penetrates through everything. To enable the passage of light, the 'ether' had to permeate the vast emptiness of outer space, between the earth and the stars. Similarly, the 'ether' had to be present in the empty space of a vacuum tube; and it had to permeate air and water and other substances in which light travels and electromagnetic phenomena take place.

Moreover, as our planet earth moves around the sun, it must move through the 'ether', like a ball moves through physical air. Thus, on planet earth, there must be an 'ether wind'; and this must affect the speed of light, depending on whether the light travels with the wind or against it or across it. But the Michelson-Morley experiment showed that there was no such wind. So something was badly wrong.

Albert Einstein took a rather different approach. He did not think of light and electromagnetism as the result of any material substance that is somehow *added on* to space. Instead, he saw that the transmission of light is an essential property of space itself. Light and electromagnetism are not transmitted through any material substance, but through the essential continuity that relates together the different points of space and time. Thus, in place of a material 'ether', Einstein developed the conception of a 'space-time continuum'.

In Einstein's conception, the mechanics of matter is replaced by a geometry of space and time. The world is no longer pictured through material objects and substances, mechanically acting upon each other in three dimensional space. Instead, the world is conceived through events: which are related to each other by geometry, in four dimensional space and time. The geometry connects events, into a space-time

continuum. All occurrences and happenings are partial manifestations of this continuum, as it is seen differently by the different observers who travel through it.

This space-time continuum is much truer to the ancient concept of ‘ether’. In India, the word for ‘ether’ is ‘ākāsha’. It is an old Sanskrit word, which means ‘pervading space’. On the one hand, it is commonly used for the overarching space of sky, beyond the atmosphere. And on the other hand, it is philosophically used for the pervasion of space and time within particular objects and locations: as for example when talking of the ‘ākāsha’ within a pot, or within a person’s body and mind.

Energy and life

However, modern physics doesn’t work in quite the same way as traditional conceptions of the world.

- In modern physics, the field of study is restricted to a physical aspect of experience. This physical aspect is described through mathematical calculations, aimed at objectives in the world outside. The description is tested and applied through external technologies, which fabricate instruments and machines for use by our physical bodies.
- Traditional conceptions are broader and more comprehensive. Their field of study includes both physical and mental aspects. Their description is not restricted to mathematical calculation. Their testing and application does not have to be through physical instruments and machines. It is often more concerned with the cultivation and education of living faculties, which may go out towards the world or be reflected back within.

There is an essential difference here: between external calculation and living education. The theories of modern physics are restricted to the calculation of external results. But this is not the only way that theories work. They also work by educating human beings. Such education requires a living component that is beyond the direct application of modern physics.

Of course modern physics is highly educational, in its own ways. But it is not directly tested and applied through its educational effects. Its direct application is through outside instruments, achieving physical results. It is material instruments that test physics directly; not the developed minds and faculties of physicists. Those minds and faculties must go through standardized material instruments, to test the ideas and theories of physics.

What about other disciplines: like philosophy, psychology, biology, even astrology and alchemy? In their field of study and application, they include aspects of mind and life, in a way that merely physical sciences do not. Accordingly, where physics is applied by the material instruments that it develops, other disciplines are applied more directly through the living faculties they cultivate in those who use them.

For example, philosophy is tested and applied through its clarification of understanding, psychology through its cultivation of mental insight and therapy, biology through living management and health. Must these other disciplines be somehow less reasoned, less rigorously tested? Must their living application make them less scientific? Not really, though it does put them outside the jurisdiction of modern physics and its material instruments.

A map may be digitized and fed into a computer for the purpose of guiding a missile to its target. That is one kind of map, with one kind of truth and accuracy. But it

does not diminish the need for a different kind of truth and accuracy, in a map that is educational. When truth is educational like this, there's no less need for it to be carefully reasoned and tested against experience. In fact, it needs a more delicate reasoning, and a more sensitive testing, than truth that is merely technical.

Then surely, modern physics is not the only discipline that may be called a 'science'. Other disciplines may also be considered 'sciences', though of a different kind.

This applies, in general, to many traditional disciplines and conceptions. They may well be considered scientific, but in a broader way than modern physics. A broader and more delicate consideration is needed, because their field of study includes an essential component of life and mind. In particular, it includes living faculties that are cultivated as a direct part of testing and application.

In everyone's experience, the world is always known perceived through a living personality, whose faculties produce an inner microcosm of functioning activity. All our experience of the world at large comes through this living microcosm that each of us finds made of personal activity. Whatever anyone perceives outside, in the macrocosm of the world at large, depends upon a corresponding activity that takes place in the microcosm of individual experience. And, for every one of us, this microcosm is alive and individual. It is one's own experience: as a knowing subject, with a living individuality. Accordingly, all knowledge of the world depends upon a basic correspondence: between an individual microcosm of living functioning inside a particular personality, and a universal macrocosm of external happenings in the world at large. Without this correspondence, no outside world could be conceived and known.

In modern physical science, the field of study is restricted to an objective world that has been separated out from the living perceptions of our personalities. So here, within the narrowly objective field of a modern physical science, there can be no explicit consideration of the living correspondence between our perceiving microcosms and their containing macrocosm.

But the same cannot be said of traditional disciplines. They very definitely do describe a microcosm-macrocosm correspondence: as an examined and explicit fact on which they can rely. And in particular, they rely on it to develop and educate our living faculties, which are both part of what is studied and also instruments through which the study is applied. This inherently involves a biological approach, with an organic way of looking at the world.

The biological approach is shown in the old idea of energy, which in Sanskrit is called 'prāṇa' or 'living breath'. Such an idea is central to traditional descriptions of the physical and mental world. But when the word 'prāṇa' is translated as 'living breath', it must not be taken too literally. Prāṇa is not the physical flow of air that is breathed in and out of our lungs. Instead, the physical flow of breath is taken to represent a much more subtle flow of moving and vibrating energy. That subtle flow takes place in organic patterns throughout our bodies and the universe outside.

The Kāṭha Upanishad describes it like this:

The universe of changing things –
 whatever is created forth –
 it is all found in living energy, whereby
 it moves and oscillates and shines.

from 6.2

One implication here is similar to modern physics. The whole material world is only a crude appearance: seen through the coarse perceptions of our outward senses. When

examined more accurately, it's found to be made up of subtle energy: whose fluctuating patterns are very crudely seen as gross material things.

In relativity and quantum theory, such fluctuating patterns are mathematically described. That enables physicists to calculate results, which are then tested and applied through fabricated instruments and engineered machines. Thus, modern physics works essentially through *calculation*. It is like using a map to calculate a journey to some chosen destination. This use of a map can tell in which direction to proceed, how far to go, where to turn, how long the journey will take, and so on.

Traditional ideas and disciplines are not so calculating. They work more directly through *education*. This is like using a map to understand the layout of a city that one lives in. That helps to clarify and cultivate the living judgement and ability through which one gets around and goes about one's business.

Such living capability involves an energy that isn't merely physical. It has a more essential basis, which is biological. The energy of *prāṇa* does not act just from one object to another. Instead, it acts organically, from underlying life. In its patterns of activity, it expresses living functions, purposes and meanings which we find in our own lives. And the expression comes essentially from underneath. It does not arise as an action from some driven object or objective instrument. Instead, it arises as an inspiration from underlying consciousness: which is the unaffected ground of life, beneath all driven change.

An illustration can be seen in the previous figure 4, on page 5. The energy of *prāṇa* is there represented by the upward and downward arrows, of expression and reflection. *Prāṇa* is the energy of inspiration that arises from consciousness, expressed through feelings, thoughts, and actions. And having thus arisen, it is reflected back from perceived objects – through their forms, names and qualities – to be absorbed in unaffected consciousness again.

According to the old ideas, our bodies and our faculties are resonating patterns of organic energy. They can resonate in sympathy with each other and the world outside. That is how our faculties perceive the world. Their perception is a sympathetic resonance between the living energy in them and the energy that's seen outside.

To see things better, we can fall back into our living faculties, so as to cultivate their resonance with what they see. By working on that resonance – through meditation, reasoning and devotion – traditional disciplines are meant to enable a more accurate and fuller examination of the world. Just as modern physics is applied by developing a material instrumentation, so also the old disciplines are put to test and put into effect by educating living faculties.

But what can be achieved by such an education, falling back into our faculties? How can it help to know the world? The old ideas point out that what matters here is life. Our faculties express it; but they have no monopoly on it. The expression is personal, for it is made through our conditioned faculties of limited and changing personality. But these conditioned faculties express a life that comes from underlying consciousness, beneath all personality. The life that they express is not a personal possession. It does not properly belong to our bodies and our minds, but rather to a consciousness that lives unchanged in each of them.

Our personalities and all their acts are only limited expressions of that underlying consciousness, which is their real source of life. That is the life which they all show, the motivating source of all their living energies. They belong to it, not it to them.

Yes, we often think that our lives are personally owned by us. But, according to the old ideas, there's something very wrong in thinking like this. In our attitude to life, the sense of personal possessiveness is a mistake. Life is not a personal possession. It is not restricted to bodies like ours, with sense organs and minds like ours. The life we find expressed in us is found expressed elsewhere as well.

In fact, wherever we look, we may see life or we may not. It depends on *how* we look.

Suppose I am looking at a face. If I see it only superficially – as a formal arrangement of eyes, nose, mouth, chin – then it is just an objective picture, in which no life is seen. But if I see that it expresses thought and feeling, then I look beneath the picture; and I see the life in it. I do this by reflecting back, subjectively, into the life that my own thoughts and feelings express.

It is the same with a rock. I can picture it objectively, either as an external shape or as a structure made of grains and molecules. There, no life is seen. But I can also look beneath the picture, wondering how it expresses nature's functioning. Then I am listening to what it has to say. And so it comes alive, evoking basic intuitions of natural order and meaning and harmony. Then I see nature's life, there in the rock, reflecting back to that same life expressed in my experience.

Reflecting back to nature's life, the old ideas identify a living kinship that is shared by all of us and all the world. From there, all energy is found alive.

Asking for truth

But then, what underlies the world of nature? What kinship could we share with it?

For an old account of these questions, we can go back to the story of Gārgī and Yājnyavalkya, where she asks him about the five elements. That isn't quite enough for her. She wants to know what underlies the fifth element, 'ether'. Yes, she agrees, 'ether' is the continuity of space and time. It's what connects all different things together. But what does this connection show?

In reply, Yājnyavalkya says:

Those who investigate reality
describe it as the 'changeless'.

from 3.8.8

In other words, different things are connected because each shows the same reality.

It's a bit like looking at a table. From different angles, the table looks different. Each angle shows some different thing about the table. Moreover, if one looks selectively, at just one table leg, something different is shown again. If one inspects a small part of the leg with a microscope, more things appear. But, through all these different views, one sees the same table. Its reality is what remains unchanged, no matter how one looks at it, nor what one sees in it.

Yājnyavalkya is talking of a reality that's shown by the entire world. It's shown by every object, every person, all events and happenings. That reality remains the same, no matter how we look, nor what appears, any time or anywhere. And he points out that this reality must be entirely unqualified, impersonal and unlimited. It is beneath the changing qualities we see, in limited persons and things. As he goes on to say:

It is not coarse, not yet refined;
it is not long or short.

No flame of passion colours it;
 no fond affection is involved.
 In it, no shadow brings obscurity;
 there's no obstruction to be cleared.

It is not 'air', nor 'ether'.
 Connection and relationship
 do not apply to it. Nor do
 any qualities, like taste and smell.

It has no eyes, no ears, no speech,
 no mind; it is not sharp, nor has it
 vital energy, nor any face, nor measure.

Nor does it consume, nor is consumed.
 It has no outside, no inside.

from 3.8.8

However, there is an obvious problem here, with such a concept of underlying reality. It is a vast generalization. It isn't limited to any particular thing, nor even to any class of things. Its scope extends beyond all the limits that narrow down our perceptions and ideas. How then can we focus attention on it, to find exactly what it is?

So Yājnyavalkya goes on to a specific description. Having described reality in general, he finally goes on to how it may be found in particular. Here is what he says:

This same changeless principle
 is not the seen. It is the see-er.
 It is not heard; it is the hearer.
 It is not thought; it is the thinker.
 It is not known; it is the knower.

Apart from it, there is no see-er.
 Apart from it, there is no hearer.
 Apart from it, there is no thinker.
 Apart from it, there is no knower.

In just this unchanging principle,
 the [all-pervading] 'ether'
 is woven, warp and woof.

3.8.11

Thus, underlying the entire world, Yājnyavalkya identifies a knowing principle of pure subjectivity. He says that it is not what's seen, or heard, or thought, or known. In particular: 'It is not known; it is the knower.' In other words, it is pure consciousness, unmixed with any kind of physical or mental object.

And, he goes on to say: 'Apart from it, there is no knower.' So it's the source of all knowing. It is a consciousness that's shared in common, by each person's experience and by the whole world. In everyone's experience, it's found by a reflection back, beneath one's faculties, into their final knowing ground. According to Yājnyavalkya, that knowing ground is the reality of all experience, throughout the universe.

Figure 6

<i>Traditional element</i>	<i>Appearance of reality</i>	<i>Perceiving instrument</i>	<i>Examining disciplines</i>
'Earth'	Pieces of matter	Physical body	Physical sciences
'Water'	Patterns of energy	Living organism	Biological sciences
'Fire'	Meaningful information	Conceiving intellect	Cultural sciences
'Air'	Conditioned character	Intuitive judgement	Psychological sciences
'Ether'	Continuing existence	Reflective reason	Philosophical enquiry

Unchanging consciousness

This conclusion is illustrated in figure 6. The traditional elements are shown in the first two columns, as levels of the world's appearance. The layers of personality are shown in column three. And the fourth column shows the sciences, which use our layers of personality to examine corresponding levels of world. Underlying all these levels is unchanging consciousness: the one, impersonal reality of all experience.

But it must be admitted that this is not an easy conclusion. It identifies a sole reality which is at once subjective and impersonal. It's the reality of the entire world; and yet it's found by going back into one's own self. This contradicts some deeply ingrained beliefs which most of us take for granted: about the world and about ourselves. If this contradiction is taken seriously, it raises some very unsettling questions.

Such questions are the actual practice of enquiry. The concepts used are *meant* to raise unsettling questions. It is the questioning that puts the concepts into actual practice, on the way to clearer understanding. However, this works only if one's own beliefs are opened up to genuine questioning. The attack must be upon one's own assumptions, not upon what someone else believes. The reflection back must go into one's own experience. Then it concerns the understanding on which one's attitudes and actions are based. That makes it practical, inherently. Otherwise it is just theory, or dogma, or polemics.

The old ideas are often accused of being too dogmatic. It's said that they discourage questioning, and so prevent a thorough testing by experience. This is a very superficial and distorted view.

In the old system of education, the manner of expression was authoritarian. It started out by making bare statements, which had to be learned by heart. That's how

students had to learn, when information was not mechanized, before the use of printing. That old method was laborious, and it did discourage questioning at first. But it was meant to be an initial preparation, leading on to an eventual questioning that was all the more thorough for having been so hard and long prepared.

The authoritarian manner still clings on, though it is out of date. It thus obscures the questioning and testing for which the old ideas are meant. It is the questioning that's relevant, as the old ideas are tested against living experience. For that kind of test, they speak about a questioning that is both rigorous and deeply reasoned. Far more so than most academic theories and disciplines today.