

Questioning back in

– some articles

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Collapsing uncertainty

PERSONAL AND INDIVIDUAL

Personality and self

Most people take it for granted that the word 'I' refers to a particular person: with a particular body, a particular set of senses and a particular mind. Even when one questions one's own identity, one is usually asking a personal question: about what sort of person one is. It is far less usual to ask the impersonal, philosophical question: 'Am I really a person at all?'

And yet, this philosophical question is built into the very word 'person'. The word comes from the Latin 'persona', which originally meant an actor's mask, and hence an actor's role. This implies that personality is only an outward mask, or an outward role, that is overlaid upon an inner self.

A person's body, senses and mind are only small parts of a much larger world. Why does one give this little personality so much importance, by identifying it as one's own self?

When personality is identified as self, experience is divided into two parts: a part that knows, and a part that is known. And it is implied that one's little personality is the part that knows.

In particular, when body is identified as self, then this body is taken to know the world. But, if one reflects that the body is only a physical object which carries knowing senses, then one's body is no longer identified as oneself.

Instead, one now identifies with the senses, which are taken to know a world of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings of touch. If one further reflects that the senses are only instruments which bring perceptions to a knowing mind, then one's identification shifts again, to the mind.

When one thus identifies with the mind, it seems to know a stream of perceptions, thoughts and feelings, which appear and disappear in mental experience. This identification with mind can be very confusing. In the changing flow of mental experience, there seems to be no stable reality at all.

The mind and its experiences keep changing all the time. Whenever mind stops changing and comes to rest, as in deep sleep, it simply disappears. And then it seems that there is no experience at all. At this point, it may seem that the enquiry has come to a fruitless end.

But one fundamental question remains. How do we know the changes and variations of our experience? In order to know what has changed or is different, something that knows must continue through the changes and variations that take place. In each person's experience, this continuing consciousness must be the real self, which knows all the changing perceptions, thoughts and feelings that come and go.

Like body and senses, the mind does not really know anything. It is only an instrument that forms changing appearances: of perception, thought and feeling. These changing appearances are known by the continuing consciousness of real self.

The real self is quite impersonal. Our personalities change from moment to moment and vary from person to person. The real self does not. It is not body, nor

senses, nor mind; but the underlying basis of consciousness from which their changes and variations are known. As such, it remains present through each changing moment of experience, and it is shared in common by different people. If this were not so, we could not know change; nor could anyone know the difference between other people's experiences and one's own.

Because we are not used to thinking of it, such an impersonal self may seem perplexingly mysterious and supernatural. But in fact, it is the plainest and most natural thing in everyone's experience. It is found simply by looking back from the changing appearances of personal perception, to the changeless background of consciousness from which all such appearances are known.

From here, one knows truth impersonally, quite free from the partialities and distortions of seeing things through a personally identified ego.

As it is put in the *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad* (2.15):

By the true nature
of the self, as by a lamp,
one who is joined with it
can see, right here,

impartial truth: complete,
unchanged, unfabricated
and uncompromised,
through all (apparent) truths.

Only knowledge can be free

When a racing car crosses the finishing line, who takes the credit for winning or losing? Who is it that has run the race? Is it the car or the driver?

The answer is obviously both, but in different senses. The car runs as the driver's instrument. It is the driver who makes the car run.

But in turn, what about the person who drives? What pushes this person to drive? Is it an aggressive ambition to get ahead, or the encouraging support of family and friends and an efficient back-up team, or the commercial sponsorship of a promoting company, or some combination of factors like these?

Whatever the details may be, it is clear that our personalities act as instruments, in an ongoing chain of cause and effect. Just as a car takes people from place to place, so too our little personalities take part themselves as instruments in much larger happenings, of which they have only a very partial view.

How then can these personalities have any freedom of will? How can they freely choose their actions, when they are themselves driven by happenings of which they see only a very small part?

This dilemma is neatly shown in the song made famous by Doris Day:

Que sera sera.
Whatever will be will be.
The future's not ours to see.
Que sera sera.

There is a telling mixture here of two very different things. On the one hand there is a simple acceptance of the future. On the other hand, there is the complication of not knowing what the future will bring.

This complication of ignorance is always needed to support any thought of free will. To the extent that we know why we do things, or what we shall do, our acts of will cannot seem free. Free will is only a seeming appearance, caused by the ignorance of our limited perceptions.

Why does this ill-founded appearance persist? Despite all the evident contradictions that should prevent our belief in this appearance, why do our acts of will still seem to be free?

There is a positive reason. Though our acts of will are not free in themselves, they do express a sense of freedom that comes from elsewhere: from underlying consciousness, which continues through our changing and differing experiences.

This underlying consciousness is not an instrument of any kind. As it carries on through experience, it only knows, without putting on any kind of changing act. Its knowledge is pure illumination, which lights up all experiences, without itself being changed or affected in any way.

It is thus always free, entirely independent of all the acts and experiences that it illuminates.

When a person is said to make a 'free' choice, this means that the choice comes up from consciousness within. First, there is a reflection back into underlying consciousness; and then the choice arises spontaneously from here, carrying a sense of freedom with it, into acts that are not themselves free.

It is only thus that any freedom can be expressed. To the extent that the performance and the results of an act are emphasized, the act can never be free. Performance and results are always bound by limiting conditions, in which each act takes place.

But where consciousness is understood, as the final ground of which each act is only a limited and dependent expression; there the expression gives itself up spontaneously, through its own nature, to this one free, illuminating ground.

As it is said in the Ashtāvakra Samhitā (1.4):

If, having separated out
this doing personality,
one goes beyond all effort
and thus comes to rest
in consciousness;

then, here and now,
one lives fulfilled, at peace,
quite free from any bonds.

Whose place is the entire world?

Each person feels a sense of ownership about particular things, which are then described by the word 'mine'. But, this sense of ownership is usually partial. It is centred around a restricted personality: consisting of a particular body, a particular set of senses and a particular mind. Thus, a person speaks of 'my' body, 'my' senses and 'my' mind.

From such a narrow personality, the sense of ownership goes out to claim other things, to which a person feels especially attached. Thus there are 'my' possessions, 'my' home, 'my' family, 'my' neighbourhood, 'my' community, 'my' country, and eventually 'my' world.

But when a person says 'my world', a curious contradiction is usually involved. As a matter of deeply ingrained habit, most of us feel that our bodies and minds belong particularly to us. They are felt to be particularly ours, while the rest of the world is somehow further away. So the word 'my' pulls in a different direction from the word 'world'. When these two words are put together, in the phrase 'my world', the meaning of each is diluted.

On the one hand, what I call 'my world' is not as much mine as the body and mind through which I see it. And on the other hand, by qualifying this world as mine, I imply that it isn't really the entire world. Instead, this world of mine is only some part of a larger universe, or it is some partial view which I have of a more complete reality.

This partiality is a very practical problem: which makes us personally biased, careless and irresponsible. Today, through the unbalanced growth of modern technology, our divergent partialities are making an increasing mess of the environment, to the extent that our survival is at stake.

How can we get past these partialities? How can anyone give up the narrowness of personal possessions, so as to live more fully in the world? The *Īsha Upanishad* (stanza 1) suggests a way.

This entire universe is
for the Lord to live in:
whatever changes
in this changing world.

By that renunciation
it may be enjoyed.
But it must not be coveted.

For whose
is any property?

Here, though the concept of 'God' is used, it is not treated as a matter of belief. There is no exhortation to believe, but just a plain description whose tone is rather factual. God is described as 'Īsha' or the 'Lord': the one who lives in the whole changing universe, just as we each live in our changing bodies and minds. In the same way that our minds and bodies are thought to be ours, so too the entire universe belongs to God.

As our minds and bodies act, they express some kind of life in us. Through this expression, we understand ourselves. So also God may be understood: as expressed in

all physical and mental happenings, throughout the universe. Such an understanding is suggested, in a very concise way, by the opening words of the *Īsha Upanishad*.

And it goes on to describe the understanding as a ‘renunciation’, which leads to a true enjoyment of the world. Personal possessiveness gets in the way. That’s what has to be renounced.

Here again, the renunciation is not treated as a matter of belief. Instead, the Upanishad goes off in just the opposite direction. In a thoroughly skeptical way, it asks: ‘For whose is any property?’

This question turns the questioning back on the questioner’s beliefs. When some object is claimed as ‘mine’, the claim means all too often that the object belongs to ‘my’ body and ‘my’ mind, as opposed to the bodies and minds of other people. Habitually, this kind of claiming rules our lives and governs what we do. But, when questioned, it turns out to be a false belief.

In fact, our minds and bodies are driven objects in the world. They do not act themselves, but are pushed to act by other things. As such, they can’t be owners, but are mere possessions. My mind cannot own other minds. My body can’t own other bodies. All minds and bodies are the property of something more fundamental, which lives in them.

Whose are these minds and bodies that we call ‘ours’? What is the life that they express? Who speaks through what they say and do? What are their feelings, thoughts and actions for?

These are some questions that the *Īsha Upanishad* raises, to help us find a way beyond our partialities.

There is only one individual

As modern communications bring the world together, and as they increase our interdependence on a more and more global scale, a rather curious thing has happened. These same modern communications have greatly increased our emphasis on the individual, and upon the freedom of individual experience.

There is a good reason for this. No matter how closely we communicate, each one of us always experiences the world as an individual: as a single, independent unit.

But what does it really mean, when someone is described as an 'individual'? The word comes from the Latin 'individualis', meaning 'indivisible'; and it thus implies a sense of inner unity. Each person's individuality is a single unit, which cannot be divided into parts, without losing sight of what it really is.

Because of this inner indivisibility, each individual is uniquely distinguished from the divided and dependent objects that are perceived in the outside world. Thus the word 'individual' carries also a sense of uniqueness and free independence.

Unfortunately, a paradox arises here, because most of us identify our individuality with our manifestly divisible and dependent personalities.

As the Buddha pointed out, these personalities are merely collections of physical and mental characteristics. They are only dependent parts of an interdependent world; and in their turn they can themselves be divided into smaller parts. Thus, *no personality can ever be truly individual*.

As its derivation from the Latin 'persona' implies, the word 'personality' refers to a mask, or an outward manifestation, of inner individuality.

The Indian word 'vyakti' is often translated as an 'individual'; but this is not strictly correct. A 'vyakti' is literally a 'manifestation', and it thus describes a manifest 'person'. The real individual beneath the manifestation is more accurately 'avyakta' or 'unmanifest'.

Each person's true individuality is what Aristotle called the 'unmoved mover'. In *De Anima* (408b), he describes it as an impersonal principle of 'soul', of which we cannot rightly say that it 'feels anger' or 'thinks' or 'weaves' or 'builds' or is thus engaged in any personal act:

Nor is it correct to say that the soul is itself moved, as in anger. It is even scarcely correct to speak of the soul as feeling anger. For this would be like saying that the soul weaves or builds. We should rather not say that the soul pities or learns or thinks, but that a person does so in virtue of the soul. And by this we would not mean that movement is ever *in* the soul. But rather, we should mean that movement is sometimes *from*, and sometimes *towards*, the soul.

All the apparent acts of personality express this unmoved principle of inner individuality. All personal acts are finally motivated by it: in the sense that they are all carried out for its sake. But in itself, it remains entirely independent and impersonal, quite unaffected by its personal expression in our changing acts.

Within each one of us, it is the single principle of underlying consciousness that is expressed in common by all our physical and mental acts, by all the perceptions, thoughts and feelings that come and go in our experience.

Because it is impersonal, there is no way of distinguishing it in different people. There is in truth only one individual, in all the apparent personalities that are perceived throughout the world.

Each person's individuality is thus a universal principle, which is shared in common with the entire world.

In a letter describing his own experience, Alfred Tennyson illustrates this paradox of looking back into one's individuality, and finding that all bounded personality dissolves there, in a clear but unconditioned certainty that is 'the only true life':

...a kind of waking trance, I have frequently had, quite up from my boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me through repeating my own name two or three times to myself, silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of consciousness of individuality, the *individuality* itself seemed to *dissolve* and fade away into boundless being; and this not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest, the weirdest of the weirdest, utterly beyond words, where death was an almost laughable impossibility, the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life...

ASKING QUESTIONS

Building up and coming down

Two ways of knowing

In the course of our lives, we seem to know things in two, rather different ways.

- At first it seems that we know things in pictures, which are made up from smaller pieces of perception. The problem here is that our senses and minds are partial. They see things only in bits and pieces. Our pictures put these bits and pieces together, so as to represent what has been seen.
- However, our pictures can be misleading. What they show us is sometimes proved wrong. Then it becomes evident that our pictures are not real knowledge, but only a superficial show. So we look for a second way of knowing things, beneath the show.

Of these two ways of knowledge, the first is habitual. It is our way of knowing as we *get on* with things and *get ahead* with our lives. For then we use our pictures of the world to show us how to get the things we want. These pictures get built up in the course of long habit, as we go after our various limited objectives. So the pictures get limited and biased, by the limitations and the bias of our chosen objectives.

While attention is turned towards *getting on* and *getting ahead*, we take for granted our underlying beliefs and assumptions. But it is on the basis of these beliefs and assumptions that our objectives are chosen and our pictures are built. In the course of long habit, our beliefs and assumptions get more and more ingrained; so we become more and more ignorant of the hidden role that they play in our pictures. We come to ignore the fact that our pictures are only a superficial show, built up for purposes of outward display, upon a basis of make-believe.

We thus confuse our surface pictures with real knowledge. The result of this confusion is the first, apparent way of knowing. The ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides, called it the 'way of belief'. The original Greek word for 'belief' is 'doxa'. From it come English words like 'doctrine', 'dogma', 'orthodox' and 'paradox'. As this derivation suggests, the first, apparent way of knowing includes all forms of constructed knowledge that are founded upon assumptions and beliefs. That would include all myth and ritual, all religion, art and science.

The second way of knowing requires an about turn: from building up to coming down. It is not concerned with *getting on* or *getting ahead* or with *getting things done*. Instead, it is what we seek when we try *getting to the bottom of things*.

Then we turn our attention back, to a thorough questioning of our beliefs and assumptions. And here we look for what is plainly and simply true, beneath all the complications that we build from make-believe. We are looking for a ground of pure knowledge, which does not depend upon any seeming picture or any assumed belief.

This second approach to knowing is reflective. It reflects back from surface appearances, towards the underlying ground. Parmenides called it the 'way of truth'. All

forms of constructed knowledge depend on it, whenever they question their foundations and come up with new pictures and ideas. And it is the essence of philosophical investigation, which questions all pictures and ideas.

Making holes

Our knowledge of the world is like a building with many floors. The top of the building is our superficial picture of the world. It is the apparent surface, where our usual life and our usual activities appear.

As we seem to live in this superficial picture, it obscures the building and the ground below. At the top of the building, as we look around us, we seem surrounded by the picture, and the appearances that it shows. So our perception is incomplete. We do not see what lies beneath the picture. We cannot tell what the picture is founded on; and we do not know quite what it means.

How can we look down, into the foundations of our constructed picture? Our usual way of trying this is to construct a little further. We build some further form of constructed knowledge, some further branch of religion or mysticism or art or science, which functions as an apparatus for digging or drilling down. And then we use this apparatus to make holes in the building of our constructed knowledge, so that we can look down into the lower floors and bring things up from below.

But making holes is a very limited way of examining the foundations of our picture. As we peep down through such holes, we see very little of what lies beneath. As we look deeper, the darker things seem. However deep we look, there seem to be deeper foundations, lost in obscurity.

We can of course use our digging or drilling apparatus to bring things up; but how much can we bring to the surface? As we bring up more and more from below, the picture on top gets more and more complicated, and more and more confused. There seems no end to the complication, as long as the foundations of knowledge are investigated in this way.

It thus seems that philosophy is an impossibly difficult subject, and that the foundations of knowledge must always remain shrouded in darkness and mystery.

But such darkness and mystery are only apparent problems, which make a show at the surface. They only appear when one remains at the surface, while trying to investigate what is below. When one makes holes but doesn't go down oneself, then all one can do is to bring things up from below. Looking down from above can do nothing more than bringing up some bits and pieces of previously hidden information. And all bringing up only changes the surface. It is only a reconstruction, while the foundations remain below. As long as one doesn't go down oneself, the foundations must seem dark and mysterious.

Asking down

How does one go down oneself, beneath one's picture of the world? For this to happen, one's own self-image must come into question, along with the rest of the apparent world. If this self-image is left out of the investigation, then one stays at the surface of the picture, and what one sees is only superficial.

As part of anyone's picture of the world, there is an image of the self that knows the picture. It is through this self-image that the pictured world is seen. For we do not see the world directly. We only see it through what we think we are, through the images that we have of ourselves.

When the picture is in question, so too are our self-images, which are contained in it. Through such questioning, we go down beneath our self-images and see beneath the picture. As we go down, we are returning towards our home ground, from which our self-images have been built up. It is only thus, by returning homewards, that we see what underlies our pictures of the world.

As one thus returns, towards home ground, there is no need to change one's picture of the world. The picture is simply left behind, at the surface, while deeper pictures appear and disappear, on the way down. Finally, at the ground itself, there is no picture at all, for all construction has been left above.

It is only our pictures that change from moment to moment, and vary from person to person. They change because they keep being built and rebuilt, in everyone's experience. They vary because they are differently constructed, in different cultures and in the differing experiences of different people.

But, beneath all this change and variation in our pictures of the world, the underlying ground is always the same: anywhere, any time, and for everyone.

It is our home ground: the real self beneath all our differing self-images. And it is all that's ever known: the ground of all reality, beneath all pictures and appearances.

Science and philosophy

Through all our doubts about the way the world is going, we do have one basic advantage that these very doubts reflect.

We are learning to think for ourselves. We do not just believe what we are told. Instead, we ask questions and find things out, independently of what we hear from any particular source. This open-minded approach is at the root of our modern successes, most obviously in science.

As modern science shows up its limitations, there is a temptation to feel that reason has somehow failed us: that we must now turn away from reason, back to older ways of mysticism and belief. But this temptation is based on a very narrow view of reason, as though it were the monopoly of modern physical science.

In fact, the open-minded enquiry of reason is very much older than physical science. It is science that was born of reason, not the other way round. We can see this clearly in philosophies like those of Socrates, or of the Upanishads and Shri Shankara. They developed a use of reason that went far beyond any physical science of their times.

What is the reasoned enquiry of philosophy, and how does it differ from that of physical science? Both kinds of enquiry use reasoned argument to arrive at their conclusions, and both test their arguments and their conclusions against common experience that different people share.

But physical science confines itself to the external world that we perceive through our bodily senses. This gives it two, essentially limiting characteristics.

- First, it is technological, in the sense that it depends on external instruments and techniques through which we perceive various objects and interact with them.
- And second, physical science necessarily divides itself into two parts: theory and practice. The theoretical part describes objects and predicts events. The practical part applies descriptions and tests predictions, by technological experiment.

By contrast, philosophy does not confine itself to any particular area of experience. It does not have to be technical, because it does not essentially depend on any external instruments or techniques. Nor does it have to set up separated areas of theory and practice.

It is essentially a reflective enquiry that questions the very basis of knowledge from which the questions arise. Here, in philosophy, the enquiry is itself an experiment. It digs up the ground from under its own feet, to see what clearer understanding might be found. And, as this new understanding is expressed in the course of ongoing experience, it too can be tested by further reflective questioning.

This cyclical process of reflective, philosophical enquiry is essential to science. Without it, scientists could not devise experiments to question old theories, nor come up with new theories to be tested and applied. And it is not restricted to physical science. In fact, it underlies all of our intelligent learning, in the course of continued experience.

So, to broaden our view from the narrowness of modern physical science, is it really necessary to give up on common, intelligent reason? Is it really necessary to chase mystical exotica, or to turn the clock back to a dependence on traditional faith and belief?

Instead, perhaps we could try what Socrates was put to death for in ancient Greece, and what the Upanishads were kept so secret for in traditional India: a little reflective questioning.

Back to basics?

For the last hundred and fifty years, India has been going through a revolutionary change: from a traditional to a modern way of looking at the world. This is just a more rapid version of essentially the same process of change that has been going on in Europe and the west, through five hundred and fifty years of social and cultural upheaval since the European renaissance.

We can think of this process as a sort of cultural ‘modernization’. Technologically, it starts with the use of printing and goes on through other media like radio, cinema, television, and most recently computers and the internet.

But the change is far more than just technological. More radically, it involves a kind of about turn in our way of learning things.

In traditional society, before the use of printing, knowledge was learned in a rather formal and authoritarian way, from parents and elders. The attitude was: ‘First do and think as you are told, in order to learn the traditional forms. Then in the course of time, through faith and obedience towards these hallowed forms, you will eventually come to understand what they are all about.’

In the modern world, such an attitude of unquestioning faith is no longer appropriate. We are no longer restricted to a few, hallowed forms of culture, handed down by parents and elders in small traditional communities. Instead, we have a far greater variety of choice: through books, newspapers, magazines, radio, movies, TV, and through meeting people who travel by car or bus or train or plane between different parts of the world.

Given this variety of modern choice, a person today needs a far more questioning and independent-minded attitude than was traditionally appropriate. And such independent questioning needs to start at a much earlier stage in the process of learning and education. Where the old approach had a tendency to tell people what to do and what to think, the emphasis has now shifted: towards doing things and thinking for oneself.

But what does it mean, to ‘think for oneself’? As a person’s mind thinks, it uses ideas that have been prescribed by some tradition or other. Quite inevitably, one’s mind thinks according to ideas that, in some way or another, it has been told to use. How then can one possibly learn to think for oneself?

There is only one way out. Instead of just parroting received ideas, one has to understand what they mean, in the light of one’s own, direct experience. As one learns to think for oneself, ideas have somehow to be used in a transparent way that throws them open to question. Only then can one get to the meaning of an idea, beneath the inevitably out-dated forms through which all ideas come down to us, whether from some ancient or some more recent tradition.

When it comes down to basics, the process of learning is essentially reflective. One does not learn much by looking at someone else’s ideas, so long as one keeps looking at them in that way: as belonging to someone else. One learns much more when one’s own thinking turns back to question itself, as one looks for the basis of direct experience upon which thought is built. It is only by returning to this inner basis, and by expressing thought from here, that one can think for oneself.

But going back to basics does not of course mean going back in time, to some old, out-dated forms of tradition. So it is obviously silly when a ‘traditionalist’ blindly re-

sists change, in an attempted retreat towards out-moded forms that are still believed to be fundamental. However, it is even sillier when so-called ‘liberals’ are blindly insensitive or even hostile to traditional sensibilities, through a new kind of belief that some currently fashionable, ‘liberal’ ideology has now become fundamental.

In truth, no forms, nor beliefs, nor ideas can themselves be fundamental. They can only *express* something fundamental: which differing forms and beliefs and ideas share in common, beneath their apparent differences. It is here, at this common, underlying basis, that stability can be found in times of change. It is from here that differences can be resolved, between opposing ideologies.

Hence Shrī Shankara’s traditional injunction (from *Bhaja Govinda*, 24-25):

In you, in me and in all else,
there’s only one reality....

It’s there in enemy, in friend,
in family and relatives.
Do not make trouble
taking sides, excluding ‘them’
and joining ‘us’.

In every one,
see your own self,
free everywhere from all
discriminating prejudice.

Traditional enquiry

In traditional times, learning was generally oral: with a teacher reciting, and the students listening and repeating. This oral learning took on a special significance for the Upanishads; because their teaching is centred upon a number of short and very concentrated statements.

A teacher would recite such a statement and explain what it meant. Since the statement was short and the disciples were trained in memorization, they wouldn't need to pay much attention to the business of recitation and remembering. Their attention was supposed to be focused on listening and understanding.

Later on, a disciple would keep repeating the statement and reflecting upon it. Mechanical repetition was no use. The reflection had to keep getting back at what the words might mean. Thus, questions would come and go. They would be thought and rethought, over and over again; until the disciple came to a thorough and independent understanding of the statement, in his or her own right.

This was clearly not rote learning, but a sustained process of reflective examination and enquiry. The statements of the Upanishads have two aspects:

- The first aspect is called '*mantra*', which literally means 'device' or 'design'. Here, the shape of sound in the chanted words has an effect upon mood, in much the same way that music does. As attention keeps being concentrated through these shapes of chanted sound, the mind is thrown into special states, called '*samādhis*': where intuitive powers and perceptions are supposed to get expanded to an extraordinary degree.
- The second aspect is called '*vicāra*', which means 'thought' or 'enquiry'. Here, the mind reflects back to its own basis of understanding; beneath all physical or mental shapes of sound. The physical and mental sounds are heard at the limited surface of the mind's attention. The questioning thought of *vicāra* is not concerned with the shape of spoken sounds, but with their meaning. Here, thought looks back into meaning, thus reasoning its way towards the underlying ground of understanding.

The *mantra* aspect is peripheral, for it is concerned with the personal development of mystical faculties. The *vicāra* aspect is central: as a philosophical enquiry of pure knowledge, into impersonal truth.

There is a pernicious stereotype of traditional India: as a mystical land, somehow opposed to the reason and individualism of the modern West. Unfortunately, it is a stereotype in which many Indians have shamefully acquiesced. But it is simply untrue. The fact is that reason and mysticism were developed side by side. And reason was at the philosophical core, to which meditative and mystical practice was only a peripheral approach.

In this respect, the Upanishads are very much like the Greek philosopher Socrates, who played a major part in the founding of Western reason. From what we are told of his life, he was something of a mystic, known for his trance-like states of mental absorption and for his extraordinary powers of endurance. From his childhood on, he was occasionally guided by an inner voice which he regarded as a divine sign or '*daimon*'. He was deeply religious; and he paid due respect to the Delphic oracle and to the rituals of his day. But all of this served only to reinforce his central interest:

which was to uncover knowledge, from all the pretensions that are heaped upon it. And here he used reason. As he said: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'

It is the same with the Upanishads. There was plenty of mysticism around them; and they took account of it, along with everything else. But their basic concern is to ask their way relentlessly to truth, beneath all personal compromise with mystery and make-believe.

In traditional times, this skeptical questioning was considered dangerous to a social order that was founded on religious faith. So it was hidden behind a halo of mystical esotericism which is now surely out of date. Our modern education equips us to make a far more direct use of open, reflective reasoning: in which we each ask questions for ourselves, instead of just doing things on the basis of what we have been told. This individual questioning has always been at the heart of traditional wisdom. At heart, such wisdom does not seek any personal development of mystical or other powers, but only the clear knowledge and pure truth that we ourselves individually are.

As it is put in the *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad*, 5.14:

It's grasped only by being it:
by coming just to what one is,
to one's own true reality.

It is called 'bodiless'; for it
is not attached or limited
to any body in the world.

It is the source of love, from which
all doing and undoing comes.

It is the principle of light,
from which creation issues forth.

Whoever knows it leaves behind
all petty personality.

Coming back home

Why is the world such a complicated place? The answer is obvious. The world seems complicated because we see so many things in it, including ourselves. From our many different perceptions, we build our complex pictures; and in these pictures, we see ourselves as persons, who are caught up in the complication.

Such fabricated pictures are not real knowledge. They are only the apparent super-structures of artificial learning, which we have constructed from names and forms and qualities. It is not knowledge that complicates things, but only the made-up structures that we build on it.

To know things truly and simply, one needs to go back home to basics. And one needs to stay grounded there: in the underlying basis of knowledge, from which our constructed pictures arise.

Such a simplifying return, to one's own home ground, is illustrated in a story from the *Chāndogya Upanishad*, chapter 6. A little paraphrased, the story starts like this:

Young Shvetaketu, twelve years old,
was sent away from home to learn
what custom said that he should know.

At twenty-four, his education
seemed complete and he came back,
proud of all that he had learned.

His father said: 'But have you learned
to question what you do not know?

'And have you ever asked yourself
how you may learn what has not been
already learned, how you may think
of something that is yet unthought;

'how we may know reality
beyond the bounds of seeming knowledge
that our partial minds conceive?'

Shvetaketu is taken aback by this questioning, and he has to admit:

'No, I have not been taught this way.
I do not know quite what you mean.
Just what could such a teaching be?'

from
6.1.1-3

The problem here is a familiar one. Shvetaketu has acquired a customary and formal education. He has been trained in the names and forms and qualities of conventional learning. But now he is being asked how he can know things for himself, beyond the mere conventions that he has learned so far. And here he is at a loss. He has not learned to question things directly, beyond his acquired learning. For he has never asked about knowledge itself, beneath the trappings of learning that he has so proudly acquired. He realizes that something is missing, and asks his father to teach him.

As the story goes on, Shvetaketu is taught through a number of illustrations. For one of these, he is taken to a large tree, whose fruits have fallen on the ground. He is

asked to pick up a fruit and break it open. It has tiny seeds in it. He is asked to break a seed and say what he finds here. He has to reply: ‘Nothing Sir, the seeds are far too small.’

So now his father says:

‘And yet, within each tiny seed,
there is a subtle something which
your eyes don’t see, something unseen
from which this spreading tree has grown
and now stands manifested here.

from
6.12.1-2

‘This subtle something is that
“this-itself-ness” which is all this world.

‘That is the truth. That is your self.
That is what you really are.’

from
6.12.3

In this illustration, the tree represents the entire universe. To be more accurate, it represents the big picture that we have of the whole universe, with all its vast size and mind-boggling complexity. Compared with this huge picture, our little personalities are very small and insignificant, like tiny little seeds. But there are some huge trees which grow from the unseen essence of life within a tiny seed. So also, our big pictures of the world all rise from knowledge. This knowledge is the unseen essence of our lives, in each of our little personalities. We cannot see it with our outward-looking eyes; but it is always present here, within each person’s body and mind.

When knowledge is seen like this, as our inner essence, it is called ‘consciousness’. It is the home truth which Shvetaketu’s father shows. ‘*That*’, he says, ‘*is what you really are.*’

A little later, he describes how this home truth is found, with the help of a teacher.

‘Suppose a man, blindfolded, finds
himself quite lost in a strange place;
and wanders, crying out for help.

from
6.14.1

‘Suppose that someone takes away
the blindfold from his eyes, and shows
him how to seek and find his way.

‘Then he can journey on, from place
to place, and get back home again.

‘So also, one who has a teacher
knows that he’s delayed
only so long as he is not
released from ignorance.

‘And when released, he knows
that he’s arrived,
entirely complete.’

from
6.14.2

SCIENTIFIC PICTURES

Nature's secret

Was Einstein a 'relativist'? Curiously enough, the answer is not quite yes.

He did of course show that space, time, matter and energy are not real in themselves. They are only *relative* observations, made *in relation* to our varying points of view.

But, from here, Einstein went on to ask: if all our observations of the world are relative, then what isn't? As we see things in different ways, what common reality is the same, no matter how some person may happen to be looking at it?

All Einstein's work was founded upon this search for an invariant truth, beneath the variations of relative appearance. What came to be called 'the theory of relativity', he originally preferred to call 'invariantentheorie' or 'the theory of invariance'.

To our usual way of thinking, the world seems made of various objects, which have somehow been differently placed in space. But this is only a momentary picture, which changes from one moment to the next.

To this momentary picture, of matter placed in three dimensional space, we add a fourth dimension, of time as a succession of moments. Thus we build a composite picture: of matter driven by energy, to move in space and time.

The theory of relativity does not see the world like this: as made by adding different things together. Instead of treating matter and energy as somehow *added* into space and time, they are all treated as showing a single totality. They are only differing manifestations: of a single continuity that extends through all events, throughout the past, the present and the future history of the universe.

This continuing totality of events is called 'the space-time continuum'. In the course of experience, as we seem to travel through space and time, we each get a very partial and changing view, of a few small localities. But mathematically, the continuum is described as a seamless whole; through a four dimensional geometry, with three dimensions for space and one for time.

In this 'space-time' perspective, each object travels along a path of events. And this path is *always* a straight line, in four dimensional space-time. However, near the places where matter appears, the continuum itself is curved and its geometry gets complicated: thus giving the appearance of movement that is accelerated by force.

Such seemingly 'forced' movement is just a misleading appearance, seen from the narrow perspective of visualizing only the three dimensions of space at each particular moment of time. When a single continuity is considered, extending through both space and time, then all movement can be understood as naturally straight, at its location within the continuity. Thus, the idea of 'force' is shown up as superficial.

The mathematical details can be horribly difficult, but Einstein's underlying approach is simple and clear. Reality is essentially invariant and definite; and the way to truth is basically a search for unity and certainty, beyond the disjointed and uncertain appearances produced by our limited perceptions of the world.

When quantum physics was in its infancy, he enthusiastically joined in, making some major contributions, for one of which he got the Nobel prize. But he always regarded quantum theories as provisional: as showing up the discontinuities and uncertainties of current perception, in order to look further, for a deeper principle of truth that would resolve them.

When quantum theory made discontinuity and uncertainty its fundamental principles, he was appalled. This was blaming nature for imperfections that belong to our petty and superficial perception of the world.

As he put it himself: 'Nature hides her secret because of her essential loftiness, but not by means of ruse.'

He thought it quite wrong that a theory should legislate on final barriers of uncertainty, which nature will not allow us to get past. After all, wherever we find uncertainty, that just shows up our ignorance, and ignorance shows unreality. No such ignorance or unreality can ever be final. To take it as such is to shut the door blindly on deeper knowledge.

Einstein refused to shut any such door. He recognized that quantum physics had shown up a difficult barrier to his further work: on a 'unified field theory' that would go on from gravitation to include other forces as well. He continued with this work for the rest of his life, cheerfully accepting that no great breakthrough was in sight. His real interest was not in spectacular or imposing theories, but in a dedication to underlying truth, which is its own reward.

In his later years, he said: 'One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science, measured against reality, is primitive and childlike – and yet it is the most precious thing we have.'

Uncertain perceptions

Does modern science give us a universal picture of the world? Actually, it does not; for a rather simple reason. As it looks for universality, science is obliged to question its own pictures, and to keep finding that there is something missing in each one of them. Though science is based on certain objective similarities in our differing points of view, these similarities remain open to question; and they never quite amount to the universality of our scientific ideals.

Most people have similarly constructed bodies, with similarly constructed senses, through which we see similar pictures of the world.

Suppose that a highly polished stone slab is seen by people of different personal and cultural backgrounds. They may call it by different names and have very different ideas about it, but through their senses of sight and touch they get a similar picture: of a smooth and solid piece of matter. So we usually take it for granted that this sensual picture is something real, beneath the differing names and ideas that we use to describe it.

Modern science tells us otherwise. When a smooth stone is viewed under a microscope, irregularities and holes appear in it, showing that the stone is not smooth and solid, as it appears to our unaided senses. Looking more closely, at greater magnification, the rock turns out to be made of molecules and atoms, continually vibrating in a microscopic way that our eyes do not see, but our skin feels as temperature.

And if we look even more closely, at what happens inside atoms, modern science produces a dramatically unfamiliar picture, called ‘quantum physics’, which seems very different from our sensual pictures of the world.

As we see the world through our ordinary senses, we usually take our perceptions for granted; and we ignore the part they play in producing our sensual pictures. In particular, when light comes to us from an object, we ignore the effect which that light has had on the object. In our usual pictures, this effect is negligible.

But in quantum physics, this effect cannot be ignored. Like other forms of energy, light is made up of small packets, called ‘quanta’. To our eyes, these quanta are so small that they cannot be directly seen; but in each atom they are quite big enough to have a major effect, as they go into the atom and come out from it.

As a result, when light or any other information comes to us from the world, it does not actually come from objects in themselves. Instead, all information comes from interactions that significantly disturb the atoms or the sub-atomic particles where these interactions occur. Each observation thus involves a disturbing interaction, which makes our observations inherently uncertain.

This is the ‘uncertainty principle’ of quantum physics. It arises from a simple fact: that our observations are part of the nature which they observe. They are interactions that disturb objects, provoking a disturbed reaction that brings some information to us.

In fact, we never see objects directly; we only see the results of their being disturbed. To this extent, our observation of each object is essentially uncertain.

But if an observed object is thus essentially uncertain, it cannot be a definite piece of matter, like a particle. Nor can it be a definite piece of energy, like a wave. We build pictures of the world by putting such pieces of information together, but these

are only pictures. They are only artificial constructions, built up from uncertain pieces of perception.

In quantum theory, there are two such pictures, or 'formulations' as they are called. In one formulation, the world is pictured as made up from particles. In the other formulation, the world is pictured as made up from waves. These two pictures seem very different, in the assumptions that they make. But when it comes to calculating what we can actually observe, the two pictures are the same. Through their different calculations, they arrive at the same results, telling us of the same events that we can observe.

So, which picture is real? Is reality made of particles, or is it made of waves? The answer is neither. No definite reality can be found in the uncertain pieces of observation that make up our pictures of the world. Whatever 'reality' may be, it cannot belong to any picture.

As in other kinds of constructed learning, it is the business of science to build meaningful pictures that accurately describe what we observe. But the question of 'reality' remains open. No picture ever answers it; but each one of us keeps on asking it, implicitly or explicitly, every time we question an existing picture and thus come to a new understanding.

Collapsing uncertainty

According to quantum physics, all things are in a state of some uncertainty. In our usual views of the world, we think of an object as something that has definite characteristics, like place and time and speed and energy. But, a little reflection will show that such physical characteristics are not in fact quite definite. Such things are not generally known with exact certainty. Instead, we estimate their probabilities, with a relative degree of accuracy.

For the many objects that we live with, we do not know quite exactly where they are, nor how fast they are moving, nor how big and heavy they are; but we do judge more or less where they are likely to be, how they are likely to be travelling, and how big and heavy they might be. It is on the basis of such relative, likely judgements that we lead our everyday lives.

This much is common sense. But the very purpose of science is to measure and judge more accurately, and hence to make our knowledge more certain and definite.

At the tiny scale of atoms and sub-atomic particles, modern physicists have come across a complication that limits the accuracy and certainty of scientific measurement. Here, at these tiny scales of size, energy occurs in noticeably discontinuous packets called ‘quanta’. When these discontinuous bits of energy are used to make measurements, they create a disturbance that cannot be reduced below the level of one quantum. All such measurements thus involve a minimum disturbance that brings in an extraordinary level of minimum uncertainty: far higher than we are used to at ordinary scales of size.

Because of this relatively high level of uncertainty, quantum theory highlights some things that we usually pass over and ignore, in the everyday world. In particular, it highlights the sudden collapse of uncertainty that occurs whenever a measurement is made.

Just before we make a measurement, we are not quite sure what the result is going to be. In quantum theory, this uncertainty is represented by a probability distribution, telling us the likelihood of various possible values that might result from making the measurement.

However, just after the measurement is made, the situation is quite different. A definite value for the measurement has just appeared; and the uncertainty has, for the moment, collapsed. In mathematical terms, the ‘fuzzy’, spread out mixture of many probable outcomes has collapsed, into the sharp singularity of a single, definite value.

What brings about this dramatic change, from uncertainty to definiteness, just at the moment of observation? There are two ways of answering this question, both leading to the same, eventual end.

The first way is subjective: to look directly back into the experience of observation. The essence of this experience is what we call ‘consciousness’. Whenever an observation is made, all previous observations are dissolved in consciousness, as attention turns to what is now observed. And the present observation arises from this same consciousness, expressing what has been learned and absorbed in the past. This same consciousness, which expressed past observations and took them in, is now doing the same thing with a new observation, which in its turn will pass away.

In this sense, it is consciousness that collapses our uncertainty about objects in the world. As observations come and go, they are only momentarily and partially certain,

only now in the present moment and here in the present place; only when and where they directly touch their underlying ground of consciousness: which they all express, through all their appearances and disappearances.

All certainty comes from consciousness, not from the uncertain and partial objects of the observed world. In the underlying ground of consciousness, where observations rise and are absorbed, all uncertainty collapses at once.

What then do we find in the objective world of observed phenomena? How does our science develop a more accurate and certain knowledge of the world? It is here that the second, objective approach is useful, in explaining how observation collapses uncertainty.

This objective approach points out that there is no real uncertainty. The appearance of uncertainty comes from the partiality and limitations of our perceptions: from our not seeing well enough. Thus observation reduces our apparent uncertainty by enabling us to see better and to understand more clearly. Such clarity of understanding is approached by looking at things as a whole, beyond the partiality of changing appearances, in search of an unchanging reality that underlies the changes of relative appearance.

It was this objective approach that Einstein preferred, through his conception of a fixed and definite space-time continuum, including all happenings that take place everywhere, throughout all past and present and future times. He thus conceived of a totality that exists 'all-at-once', beyond all possibility of change and uncertainty. In this conception, no change, nor uncertainty, nor any imperfection belongs to the totality itself; but only to our partial and changing views of it, as apparently imperfect observers travelling through space and time.

How could one possibly understand such a complete totality, beyond all our partial and limited views? For such an understanding, one has to fall back upon that same ground of consciousness from which all observations and conceptions rise. Here, at the underlying ground of consciousness, no personal views or faculties remain; for they all belong to the changing and variable surface of perceived appearances.

In itself, consciousness is not a perceived appearance; and so it cannot be anything personal. In everyone's experience, it is the continuing ground of all perceived appearances, remaining unchanged through all differences of appearance and personality. In each particular person's experience, this same individual consciousness that continues through differing moments is completely impersonal.

Here, beneath the surface of changing appearances, there is absolutely nothing that could enable consciousness to be distinguished in different personalities. One same impersonal consciousness is expressed in all our personalities; in all our varying observations of different things; in all the connections and relationships we see between different things; and in 'the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.'¹

Thus, consciousness is not only the ground of all perception, it is also the final ground of all reality. It is expressed not only in the acts of living creatures, but also in all the functioning of the world as a whole. It is the underlying source of the whole universe; for, from it arise all the happenings that we observe, in all of our experiences. In this sense, consciousness is the ultimate doer of all happenings.

But, when consciousness is being described in this way, as an ultimate 'doer', it must be understood that the word 'do' is being used in a very special way. It is being

used merely as a spontaneous arising, from an underlying source that is not moved or changed. When consciousness does anything, it is what Aristotle called the 'unmoved mover'. The actions of nature express consciousness, they are inspired by it and are done for its sake; but it does not change, nor does it move at all in the process.

We normally use the word 'do' in a personal or instrumental sense: where a person or an instrument gets moved and changed in the performance of an act. When a person or an instrument does something, this is not an original doing, but only an intermediate step in an ongoing chain of action and reaction. In a personal or instrumental act, the doer reacts to previous stimuli, which somehow influence the doer to become engaged in the performance of a changing act.

In this personal or instrumental sense, consciousness does not do anything at all. As it continues through the changes of experience, it just *is*: while all varying experiences get lit by it. And this illumination is not a changing act that adds anything to consciousness or affects it in any way. Instead, the knowing illumination of consciousness is its inherent nature, its very being. Knowing or illuminating is not an additional act that consciousness puts on; instead, it's just what consciousness inherently *is, in itself*. The very being of consciousness is to know. It is that one reality where knowing and being are one and the same thing. All appearances arise from it, and shine by its reflected light.

As all the world's appearances arise from consciousness, it remains completely unaffected. Just as knowing is not an act that adds on anything to consciousness, nor is the arising of happenings. As happenings arise, they are nothing but appearances, nothing apart from consciousness; and so they do not really add to consciousness, nor can they make any real difference here. The arising of all happenings, throughout the entire universe, is nothing else but the unaffected being of consciousness. Like knowing, all occurrences of happening are only consciousness, just as it is.

Wherever we speak of consciousness as an instrumental faculty that takes part in behaviour, or in perception or thought or feeling, we are not there talking of consciousness itself. Instead we are talking only about some changeable expression of consciousness, as portrayed in some person's picture of the world.

Consciousness itself can never be any changeable, portrayed element in any picture of the world. It can neither be an individual element of some separately pictured personality, nor can it be a universal element of the world pictured as a whole. More truly seen, it is the underlying ground from which all pictures rise, on which they all stand, and where they all dissolve as they are absorbed into understanding.

It is only in this ground of consciousness that uncertainty collapses. When an observation rises up from consciousness, it may express a sense of certainty that comes up from below; but this expression of certainty is at best partial and temporary. Each observation always leaves out a wider, longer term picture that remains uncertainly and imperfectly conceived.

The only true certainty is found in consciousness: which all observations and all pictures express, and where they all return, dissolved.

Changing pictures

Objects arranged in space

Through force of ingrained habit, most people see the world as made up of various objects, which have somehow been differently placed in space.

This can be a solid-seeming picture: of objects as definite pieces of matter, found distributed in space. But it is only an instant snapshot, a momentary picture of the world, seen at a particular moment of time.

As moments pass, time flows; and the world is not frozen in this flow of time. Instead, the distribution of matter changes; and so does the formation of objects in the world.

Our solid-seeming world of matter is in fact a changing picture that does not last even for a moment. Each moment that we look at it, what we have just seen keeps vanishing, transformed into something else.

The flow of happenings

If changing time is taken into account, a second, more fluid picture emerges. Instead of a snapshot world of frozen objects, there is now a moving picture: of flowing happenings, in the course of continued experience. Instead of picturing objects, as pieces of matter arranged in space, we now observe a flow of happening, passing through a continuity of events in space and time.

This continuity of events is called the 'space-time continuum'. If one considers it as a continuing whole, then all movement and change turn out to be relative.

Each event happens where and when it occurs. In the course of time, as events are observed, it is the observer who moves through space and time. All events remain where and when they happen; and the whole continuum of events remains unchanged. What changes is only the observer's perspective; thus giving rise to the moving pictures that we see, from our changing points of view.

Our changing universe, of moving things, is not quite real in itself. It is just a relative picture, which changes only in relation to our changing views. Movement and change are ideas that apply to our pictured observations; but they do not apply to any happening in itself.

Relative appearances

If our relative views are taken into account, a third, more reflective picture emerges. Instead of a changing universe that contains all moving things, there is now a multiple picture: of many different appearances, seen by differing observers. Instead of conceiving the universe as a single, big picture, there is now a recognition that things can be seen in different ways, through differently pictured appearances.

In any observed happening, there is an interaction with the observer. When an appearance forms in consciousness, it does not show just some happening outside the observer. What's shown in fact is a total happening that includes the whole interacting observation, of which an observer and something observed are just pictured parts. The division of observer and observed is never actually shown, by any appearance. This division is only an imagined picture.

Beneath our imagined pictures, there really is no differentiated observer, apart from an observed happening. We may picture ourselves in this way, as differentiated personalities that somehow observe changing and differing things; but these differentiated personalities are only pictured appearances, which cannot really observe anything.

Unpictured consciousness

If each observer and all observed things are just pictured appearances, then what is the consciousness in which these appearances form?

This consciousness is not a conditioned picture, nor any part of such a picture. It is not the pictured and conditioned experience of a pictured observer in a pictured world.

Unlike any conditioned picture that needs to be seen by a differentiated observer, consciousness illuminates itself. And it only illuminates the appearances that are seen in it. Thus, as we actually experience it, consciousness never illuminates any object that is different from itself. This objectless self-illumination is its very nature, no matter what pictured conditioning appears or disappears in it.

Beneath all seeming appearances, there is only unpictured consciousness, quite unconditioned by our various pictures of the world.

All the pictures we perceive, and everything that they contain, are nothing but consciousness. They are mere forms of consciousness, seen by its reflected light. It is all the meaning they express, all of the reality they ever show.

It's seen where sight turns back, from perceived pictures, to look where seeing comes from. Here, all picturing dissolves in its own essence of pure, unconditioned sight; and one comes to a self-evident truth that the *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad* calls 'bhāva-grāhyam'.

It can only be grasped ('grāhyam') by coming to it oneself ('bhāva'): as the plain, immediate reality of one's own self, which one already is. In other words, it is found by returning to one's own home truth, which each of us shares in common with all seeming else.

Different pictures

Distributed matter

Through force of ingrained habit, most people see the world as made of different objects. These objects, in their turn, are made of matter, which is distributed in space.

But this is only a frozen snapshot, or a momentary picture of the world, seen at a particular moment of time. As moments pass, time flows; and the world is not frozen in this flow of time. Instead, the distribution of matter changes: thus changing the formation of objects and their arrangement in the world.

The flow of happening

If the passage of time is taken into account, a second, more pragmatic picture emerges. Rather than a snapshot world of frozen objects, there is now a moving picture: of flowing happenings, in the course of continued experience. Instead of picturing matter, distributed at various points of space, we observe a flow of happening, passing through a continuity of events in space and time.

But where does one happening end and another begin? By its very continuing nature, each happening starts by flowing *from* others, and ends by flowing *into* others. Each happening is only a connection between other happenings. It is only a part of one great big flow of happening that we call the 'universe'.

At any particular moment of time, we each see only a very small part of this universe. We each have only an incomplete snapshot of one particular locality. Beyond each small locality, the universe goes on extending, through vast expanses of space and time.

In the course of time, as we travel through the flow of happening, each person's view changes; because the totality of happening gets seen from a changing perspective.

Totality, including everything

But does the entire totality change, just because we observe it from changing points of view? Suppose that there is a continuing wall, painted with a variety of colours and images, along ten miles of road. Would the wall itself be changing, just because we get a changing view of its colours and images, as we drive along the road?

Of course not. Though our partial perceptions produce an impression of change, the whole totality of happening does not itself get changed. Both time and change are seeming parts of this totality. Neither of them can apply to the totality as a whole.

Thus a third, more comprehensive picture emerges: of a timeless, unchanging totality, containing all time and space and all the happenings that are seen to take place.

Reality, beneath appearances

If change is a mere appearance, produced by partial perception, then what is shown by the flow of happenings? When all that we see is taken into account, this seeming flow does not show real change. Instead, it shows the *continuity* of all reality, when considered as a complete whole.

It shows that *what is real continues*, while *appearances seem to change*. In other words, complete reality remains the same, as we perceive it through our changing

views of different localities. Reality is not somehow different, in different localities. The same reality appears in its different-seeming parts.

Each seeming part or locality is not a just a piece of some put-together collection. More accurately, it is an appearance of underlying reality, seen from a particular point of view. The seeming divisions of time and space are not divisions of reality; they are merely differences of perception and appearance.

Such reasoning gives rise to a fourth, more reflective picture: of reality as an underlying ground, beneath a superstructure of manifesting appearances. Traditionally, this superstructure was sometimes conceived as a tree, of happenings that rise and branch out from a common, undifferentiated ground.

Unpictured consciousness

What is the ground of reality, beneath all the seeming pictures that our minds construct upon it? It is clearly the common basis from which all appearances arise, in everyone's experience.

But we also use the word 'consciousness' to describe just such a common basis. What then is the relationship between reality and consciousness?

They are both underlying principles, which are present throughout experience; beneath whatever pictures may be seen, beneath whatever appearances may arise. And both are always present together, at every moment that anyone experiences. So there is no way of actually distinguishing them. Though we may think of them as different, they are in truth identical.

In our pictures of the world, we think of consciousness as that which knows, and we think of reality as that which is known. But beneath all seeming pictures, consciousness and reality are always here, quite indistinguishable from each other. They are one and the same thing.

This is plain truth; uncompromised by any dubious picture that our feeble minds construct, as they create an imaginary divide between knowing and being.

As it is put in the *Aitareya Upanishad* (3.1.3):

The world is seen, and led,
by underlying consciousness.

Consciousness is the foundation.

Consciousness is all there is.

Consciousness in science

As a matter of ingrained habit, most people take it for granted that consciousness is a personal faculty, which belongs to living creatures and explains their behaviour in the world. In this habitual, unexamined sense, the word 'consciousness' refers only to an element of explanation, to a particular piece of some picture that we use to describe observed phenomena in the apparent world.

However, a little examination shows that the word 'consciousness' has another, more fundamental meaning. Here, as the suffix '-ness' implies, it refers to that which is common to all ways of knowing: to all conscious states and to all conscious acts. In this second, more profound sense, consciousness is not a personal faculty, but the common ground that underlies all knowing states and knowing faculties.

In everyone's experience, it is the common basis of knowing that continues through all the differing perceptions, thoughts and feelings that come and go. As changing moments of experience pass, they bring a variety of passing experiences, with different names, forms and qualities. But, beneath this changing surface of appearances, consciousness continues on; enabling knowledge to be passed on through time, through differing appearances of form, name and quality.

Without this continuing ground of consciousness, in every individual's experience, there could be no continuity of knowledge, and nothing could be learned over the course of time. But here, at the ground beneath appearances, there are no forms, no names, no qualities. Here, consciousness is entirely unconditioned and utterly impersonal. There is absolutely nothing here that could enable us to distinguish this consciousness as somehow different in different personalities.

This same, impersonal ground of consciousness is shared in common by different people, beneath their differing personalities. When one person understands another, it is by going back into the same basis of consciousness that both persons share in common. This same, impersonal consciousness is each person's *own*, individual consciousness: each person's own, indivisible unity. Without this common, subjective basis, there could be no communication between different people, no understanding of other minds or lives.

When consciousness is understood like this, as the subjective and impersonal basis of all experience, it cannot be any element in some picture that we use to describe observed phenomena. Instead, it is the underlying ground from which all such pictures rise. Accordingly, it can never be described directly by any science or art or myth or religion, nor by any such activity that builds analytical or metaphorical pictures of the world.

It can only be found reflectively: by reflecting back from one's current picture, towards the unpictured ground upon which the picture is built.

Such a reflection occurs, unnoticed, each time an observation takes place. Just before the observation, there is a momentary gap, when attention has passed from previous observations and is about to focus on the new one. In this gap, with no observation manifest, there is only unmanifest consciousness, from which the new observation rises. And when the observation is over, as it gets interpreted and understood, there is a reflection back to underlying consciousness, where the observation gets absorbed. Subsequently, from this same underlying consciousness, further observations rise, taking into account what has been learned and understood from the past.

In the course of our experience, there is thus a repeated process of reflection back and forth, between our manifest observations of the world and underlying consciousness. But this reflection usually passes unnoticed; until there comes an observation that does not fit in with our ideas, thus showing up something wrong with our current picture of the world. What follows now is a far more noticeable reflection back into the basis of knowledge, as habitually accepted beliefs and assumptions are thrown into question.

Thus reflecting back into the foundations through which it has arisen, attention returns to the unconditioned ground of consciousness, beneath all the beliefs and assumptions upon which our pictures of the world and our observations have been built. Then, from this unconditioned ground, new pictures rise: built upon new beliefs and new assumptions that somehow take account of the previously offending observation. In their turn, these new pictures are tested by using them to interpret further observations; and so the process of experience goes on.

All our science, all our creativity, all our analytical and metaphorical forms of knowledge depend upon this underlying consciousness, as they keep on reflecting back to it and keep on being recreated from it. Without it, there could be no science, no advance of knowledge, no testability, no correction of our mistakes.

Thus, though it cannot be *directly* described by any of our sciences, nor by any other forms of knowledge, they all depend on it; and in their various different ways they keep on expressing it, over and over again. In truth, what they *indirectly* describe, through their pictured and observed appearances, is never anything else but consciousness.

For no appearance can be anything apart from consciousness. If an appearance departs at all from consciousness, it ceases to exist at once. Thus, beneath all superimposition of names and forms and qualities, consciousness is the total reality of all appearances, the complete reality of the entire universe. It is at once the ground of all knowing and the ground of all being as well.

Whether we look back into individual experience, towards the subjective ground of knowledge, or whether we look outside, towards the encompassing universe, these are only different ways of looking at one and the same reality: beyond the partial appearances that we seem to see through our limited personalities.

NATURE'S LIFE

Each 'user' is only an instrument

We live in a world of spectacular technological success. Those who learn to use technology come out on top. Those who do not get left behind.

And yet, as our environment gets increasingly fouled by technological side-effects, there is a growing sense of unease that we are losing touch with nature.

The problem here is that technology is essentially partial and incomplete. It is just a stepping stone to something else. In addition to itself, it implies a user, who judges or misjudges its results. The user, in turn, is affected by the results, which are partly good and partly bad.

How does one manage this problem of partiality? As technology acts towards specialized objectives, how can someone who uses it stay grounded in a more complete understanding of common experience?

This more complete understanding is represented by the word 'nature'. Unlike technology, nature is essentially complete in itself. It is itself the source of all the actions that take place in it, of all the phenomena through which it manifests itself. It includes not only the environment, but also our personal and technological capabilities.

Why then do we keep thinking of our personalities and our technologies in opposition to nature, as though our actions could somehow go against the very nature that they manifest? According to the Bhagavad Gītā (3.27), the reason is a false image that people have of themselves: as personal, doing egos.

Everywhere, (all) acts
are done by nature's
constituting qualities.

Mistaking ego
for the self,
a person thinks:
'I am the doer.'

Each particular doer is inevitably limited, by particular faculties and capabilities of action. If one identifies oneself as a doer, one's perception becomes accordingly limited, and therefore partial. As the Gītā points out (in 3.33), this problem cannot be solved by technological sophistication, nor by personal restraint.

One acts according to
one's own nature.
The learned, knowledgeable
person is no exception.

Beings follow nature. What
will holding back achieve?

In fact, the problem of partiality cannot be solved by *doing* or *not doing* anything, by any action or restraint towards some limited object. Instead, the solution must lie at a deeper level of understanding, from which all personal and technological functioning is known objectively. Here is the Gītā's description (5.8-9).

As truth is known
one who joins into it
can understand:

'I don't do anything.

'Sight, hearing, touch, smell,
eating, going here and there,
sleeping, breathing, speaking,
holding on and letting go,
eyes opening and closing ...

'These are just faculties,
acting towards
their various objects.'

At this level of understanding, all physical, sensual and mental functioning is known as part of nature. Here, we do not relate to nature through any action or interaction between objects. Instead, our relationship turns out to be pure knowledge, without any intervening act to separate what knows from what is known.

As Kṛiṣṇa tells Arjuna, in the last chapter of the Gītā (18.20):

Pure knowledge is just that
by which a person sees
one changeless principle
of undivided nature,
in all divided things.

Testing our sciences

Modern computing and physical sciences are among the most successful disciplines taught at schools and universities today. Well taught, they provide a sound training of mind and great career prospects. Moreover, they achieve results and capabilities that would seem quite miraculous without them. It is this working of miracles that gives them their high status.

The miracles of science can of course be very useful, but they come at a price. Miracle working has always had a downside. It has harmful side effects: which can add up to overwhelm the benefits, when it is overdone. And miracles do have a tendency to make us overdo them; because they blind us to other ways of doing things. Sadly, when some approach achieves spectacular results, it all too often claims a monopoly on truth.

In modern physical science, ideas and theories are used in a particularly calculating way. They are used mathematically, to calculate external results, in a physically objective world. The results are tested and applied through physically fabricated instruments and engineered machines.

Is this the only way of using knowledge and testing truth? In actual practice, no. Calculation is a rather limited approach, insufficient in itself. What it achieves is narrow: like using a map to calculate instructions for a journey. ‘Go n miles in x direction, then m miles in y direction...’, and so on. Such an approach is only good for getting to some chosen place.

A map is not just a calculating instrument. It has a more basic use: through *education*. It represents an entire territory, including many places. So it enables one to look at the territory as a whole. That educates one’s understanding of where one is; and it helps develop the living ability through which one gets around and goes about one’s business.

Like a map, ideas and theories are used in two ways: through calculation and education. The calculating use is inherently narrow and specialized. It cannot take the whole environment into account. So it depends on living education, for an integrated understanding that put its narrow aims into perspective. In the modern world, as our computing and physical sciences achieve spectacular results, we clearly lack the broader education that is needed to use them sensibly.

However, when ideas and theories are used for living education, their testing and application is not confined to the restricted methods of our physical sciences. Such sciences restrict their field of study and application to a physical aspect of experience. Accordingly, they are tested and applied in a restricted way, through the material instruments and machines that they develop.

Modern physics is of course educational, but its educational effect is not a direct part of its testing and application. 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, it no less needs a careful reasoning and thorough testing against experience. In fact, more so, though of a different kind 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.

That would include older disciplines, like astrology and alchemy. Astrology, in particular, has been very carefully reasoned, over a long period of time, very often by the same people who made astonishingly accurate observations and calculations in ancient astronomy.

Yet, many modern physicists dismiss astrology: as a 'pseudo-science', not genuinely tested by experience. Sadly, the dismissal is made without seriously considering the basis of astrology. This basis is not physical. Instead, it is a mental and living correspondence: between the macrocosm of the outer universe and the microcosmic journey of individual life.

Such a correspondence does indeed make astrology a rather different kind of science, not to be considered on a par with modern physics. But does the difference warrant a summary dismissal, without a genuine study of the questions involved? Is that dismissal genuinely tested? It is no more than unexamined prejudice.

The prejudice is against the correspondence of outer macrocosm and inner microcosm. It seems unwarranted to assume that the objective world at large should correspond to an individual's life. Upon what reasonable ground can such an assumption be made?

The ground is simple and compelling, though it is not physical. All knowledge of the world is perceived through our living personalities. Such knowledge thus inherently assumes a correspondence between our microcosmic lives and the objective macrocosm.

In fact our knowledge of the world consists precisely in this living correspondence. All education is essentially a cultivation of this correspondence, through physical and mental instruments.

Like the rest of us, physicists fall back reflectively into subjective experience, to deepen their understanding of the outside world. Modern physics is founded upon the searching reflections of physicists like Newton and Einstein, who freely acknowledged the spiritual and philosophical foundations of their thought.

Newton was actively and openly interested in alchemy and theology, to which he devoted a great part of his prodigious energy and reasoning. His laws and principles of physics are deeply inspired and influenced by this.

Einstein saw a fundamental identity of spirit between physics and religion. He said that a physicist's 'religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law: which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, com-

pared with it, all the systematic thinking of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection’.

By thus reflecting back into their minds to understand the world outside, physicists implicitly acknowledge a living correspondence between our subjective microcosms and the objective universe. The correspondence is of course outside their field of study. But that does not make it any less essential to education.

So, in our living education, surely room is needed for older disciplines as well, alongside our newfangled physical sciences. Not just as a ‘soft option’ to ‘hard science’; but as a deeper, harder look at how things really are.

Energy and life

What is the old idea of life, described in India as ‘prāṇa’ or ‘living breath’? How does it relate to modern science?

Like many old ideas, this one is a little metaphorical. 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 *Kaṭha Upanishad* (6.2) describes it like this:

The universe of changing things –
whatever is created forth –
it is all made of living energy:
which moves and oscillates and shines.

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. That 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 cultivate the living judgement and ability through which one gets around and goes about one’s business.

Physics is restricted to external things, in its field of study and application. Traditional ideas are not. So they conceive a living energy, which we experience in our faculties. This energy is not just physical, but biological. It 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.

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 life that they express is not a personal possession of our bodies and our minds.

Yes, we often think as though we personally own the life in us; but that is wrong. And it is wrong to think of life as though it were restricted to bodies like ours, with faculties and minds like ours.

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.

Living energy

Modern physics tells us that material things, like rocks and trees, are not quite the separate pieces of matter that they seem to be. When such gross objects are inspected more closely, it turns out that they are made of a more subtle and fluid energy.

Each object is made of molecules and atoms, and in turn the atoms are made of sub-atomic particles which aren't quite particles. Instead, the sub-atomic 'particles' are quantum elements in dynamic patterns of vibrating and radiating energy. Thus, material objects are made up of complex energy patterns which are not really separate. These patterns, which we see as separate gross objects, are essentially interconnected, by the subtle vibrations and radiations of energy fluctuations that make up the patterns and the interaction between them.

Traditional conceptions have been saying something very similar, for thousands of years. In India, the concept of a particle has long been described by the Sanskrit word 'aṇu', which also means 'minute' or 'subtle'. This word 'aṇu' comes from the root 'añ', which means to 'resonate with sound' or to 'breathe'. And it is closely related to the word 'prāṇa', which means both 'breath' and 'energy'. Together, the two concepts of 'aṇu' and 'prāṇa' imply a subtly vibrating and propagating energy ('prāṇa') associated with a minute and subtle kind of particle ('aṇu').

The *Kaṭha Upanishad* (6.2) says quite explicitly that the entire universe is made of moving energy, whose fluctuations take the form of changing things.

The universe of changing things –
whatever may be issued forth –
it is all made of living energy,
which moves and oscillates and shines.

This is clearly similar to modern physics, but with one crucial difference. The energy of modern physics is rather crudely objective. It is measured through material instruments and described by mathematical calculations. Thus measured and described, it is controlled, again through material instruments, towards the achievement of external objectives. The trouble here is that a subtle energy is being measured and controlled by material instruments which are essentially cruder and more gross.

As quantum physics tells us, such crude material instruments interfere indelicately with what we know through them. So they only give us an uncertain and discontinuous knowledge of the world. Through them, we do not properly observe a more delicately definite order and continuity that they can only measure doubtfully and jerkily.

Such knowledge, through gross material instruments, is inevitably partial, no matter how sophisticated or how far automated the instruments may become. And partial knowledge means that one objective is gained at the expense of other objectives, all too often at the expense of the environment as a whole.

Traditional conceptions are more subtle. They think of energy as naturally manifesting life. The energy of prāṇa is alive. It is a living energy that cannot properly be known through material instruments: not through our material bodies, nor through any of their external instruments. This living energy can only be known reflectively, through one's own living faculties. Our faculties themselves are here conceived as organic patterns of living energy, co-ordinating and co-operating with a correspond-

ing energy seen in the world outside. Through that organic co-ordination and co-operation, our faculties perceive the world and interact with it.

The entire universe is thereby conceived as a living 'macrocosm', corresponding in some subtle way to each perceiving 'microcosm' of individual experience. In the end, each individual expresses nature's life; and that same life of nature is expressed throughout the world, in all its energy and happenings.

If energy is thus conceived as naturally alive, what then becomes of science? How then can science enable us to see and do things better? The answer is straightforward. More use must then be made of an inner component of science, whereby it cultivates and clarifies our living faculties, thus strengthening their natural co-operation with the world.

This inner component is essential to all sciences. But in modern physical sciences, its use is specially restricted. It is used only to imagine new ideas and to create new theories. Once the theories have been formulated, they are tested and applied externally, though an external technology of material instruments and machines.

Traditional sciences are quite different. They work more closely through the living faculties that they educate. Their ideas and theories are used to cultivate and clarify a practitioner's faculties; and it is only through these trained and clarified faculties that the science is tested and applied. This involves an essential component of inner education which is quite beyond the scope of any external approach that looks only from the outside.

For example, in the science of yoga, a living body is conceived as a pattern of energy currents (called 'nāḍīs'). Through physical and mental exercises (like breath control and meditation) a yogic practitioner is meant to harmonize the energy patterns and to develop expanded faculties, thus enabling a more complete and penetrating perception of how things are.

Or, in the science of Ayurvedic medicine, a person's state of health is conceived as a balance of three 'humours' ('doshas'). By reflecting on this conception, in the course of a sustained medical practice, an Ayurvedic doctor is meant to develop a seasoned medical judgement, enabling an effective diagnosis and treatment of disease.

Or, in the science of astrology, the course of a person's life (the 'sharīra-yātra') is conceived through configurations of stars and planets in the sky. Through the correspondence of individual microcosm and universal macrocosm, personal events and influences are seen represented in the abstract patterns of stellar and planetary movements and conjunctions. Through carefully accurate and systematic calculations of these patterns and by reflecting on their meaning, an astrologer is supposed to develop special capabilities of predicting events and interpreting a further significance in them.

Seen from the outside, such sciences can all too easily seem incomprehensible, and even silly. But the same is true of a modern science like quantum physics. In the end, a science must be understood and judged from the inside, by listening to its genuine practitioners.

Modern physical sciences are inclined towards specialization and fragmentation. They have greatly increased our technological ability to achieve particular objectives. But to make good use of this ability, we also need a broader and deeper education. In that, we are obviously lacking, with disastrous results for the environment. The old idea of living energy and the old sciences might help a little here, to deepen our edu-

cation, if only we can put aside our modern prejudices and listen reflectively to what the old ideas and sciences might have to say.

Incidentally, the old conceptions had a curious, rather metaphorical way of describing matter and energy. They described matter as the element 'earth' ('prithivī' in Sanskrit). It is the element of solidity, which is shaped into separate pieces, like a potter shapes earth into separate pots.

Energy was described as the element 'water' ('āpas' in Sanskrit). It is the element of moving flow, which takes the shapes of changing things. It is significant that water was chosen to represent this element, because water is a metaphor not only for fluid change but also for creative life.

'Earth' and 'water' are the first two of five traditional elements. What about the other three – 'fire', 'air' and 'ether'? Well, that's another story.

New science, old elements

In the *Star Wars* movies, as Luke Skywalker is being trained to become a Jedi knight, his teacher Obi-wan Kenobi tells him about the ‘force’:

The force is what gives the Jedi his power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.¹

This sounds great as a piece of science fiction. But how scientific is it, actually?

In modern physics, the idea of a ‘field’ is introduced by thinking of an object like a magnet. The magnet somehow influences the space around it, so as to attract or to repel other magnetic objects. This influence on space is described as a ‘field’, generated by the magnet. Similarly, our planet earth is said to create a gravitational field, which pulls us down onto the ground beneath our feet. So also, the nucleus of an atom creates an electrical field, which attracts electrons and keeps them circling around it.

However, this idea, that objects create fields, is only an introductory one. This is just an initial indication, made rather crudely at first, on the way to a more subtle and sophisticated understanding. As a student learns more physics, the idea is actually reversed. It isn’t objects that create fields, but the other way around. What our gross senses see as objects are only partial and inaccurate appearances. More accurately viewed, these seeming objects are made up from subtle fields that underlie them.

In quantum theory, all objects are conceived to be made of sub-atomic particles, which are not just little bits of matter. Instead, they are quantum elements in subtle fields that condition all space and time. Through some rather abstract mathematics, this subtle field conditioning is theoretically described. It cannot be seen directly by our gross senses and our material instruments. But it is everywhere. Like Obi-wan Kenobi says, it surrounds and penetrates all objects. Each of our material bodies and each object that they see is just a limited and crude appearance, created by this subtle field conditioning, as we observe it through our gross bodies and their material instruments.

The theory of relativity goes even further. Instead of describing subtle fields of force, it gives up the idea of ‘force’ altogether. It thus describes a four-dimensional continuum, with three dimensions for space and one for time. In this continuum, all movement is entirely unforced. Each line of travel is always the most natural. It is always a straight line, taking always the shortest path in a four-dimensional geometry that joins together the differing events of space and time.

That interconnecting geometry is curved, rather like the bumpy surface of our planet earth, with its mountains and valleys. The earth’s surface is of course only two-dimensional, with one dimension for latitude and the other for longitude. But where this two-dimensional surface is bumpy, as in a mountainous region, the shortest and straightest path often seems to twist and turn, in a forced and unnatural way; when it is seen from a one-dimensional perspective that looks at the path point by point, as one travels along it.

¹ The exact words of this quote are taken from the website <<http://exn.ca/starwars/taoism.cfm>>.

Something similar happens in the four-dimensional geometry of the space-time continuum. In our usual perspective, through our immediate senses, we see a world of three dimensions in space, changing from moment to moment. As the bumpy geometry of space-time is seen from this three-dimensional perspective, the four-dimensional bumpiness produces the appearance of separate material objects and the forced motions that they seem to inflict upon each other.

In our habitual perspective, we are material observers, travelling through a world of objects that are located in the three dimensions of space, at each point of time. The theory of relativity describes a more fundamental perspective, in which space and time are taken together, as an underlying continuum that subtly interconnects all different seeming things. This is, as Obi-wan Kenobi says, what ‘binds the galaxy together’.

But of course, modern physics does not cover everything that Obi-wan Kenobi says. He associates the ‘force’ with life and living things. It has some essential connection with an inner life that a Jedi can access subjectively, by reflecting back into an underlying depth of consciousness. This too has a basis in science, but in a very old kind of science that is often found expressed in a somewhat metaphorical way.

In particular, there is an old Indo-European metaphor of five traditional elements: called ‘prithivī’ or ‘earth’, ‘āpas’ or ‘water’, ‘tejas’ or ‘fire’, ‘vāyu’ or ‘air’, and ‘ākāsha’ or ‘ether’. These names must not be taken too literally; for they represent a progression of increasingly subtle levels, in our experience of the world.

- ‘Earth’ is the ‘solid’ element, found at the level of gross matter that is separated into different objects.
- ‘Water’ is the ‘fluid’ element, found at the level of dynamic energy that flows in organic patterns of changing activity.
- ‘Fire’ is the ‘illuminating’ element, found at the level of meaningful information that enables a further perception of represented things.
- ‘Air’ is the ‘qualitative’ element, found at the level of conditioned character that may be contrasted and compared in different and changing things.
- ‘Ether’ is the ‘pervading’ element, found at the level of underlying continuity that is implied by all difference and change.

These five levels are found in modern physics as well, but with a difference. The older sciences include a profound consideration of life and living process, as expressing an underlying consciousness. So, where modern physics is restricted to investigate the macrocosm of the external world, the older sciences go on to analyse the microcosm of individual experience.

Thus, corresponding to the ‘panca-mahābhūtas’, or the ‘five elements’ of the macrocosm, there are five ‘koshas’ or ‘coverings’ of personality. These coverings are layers or levels of experience. As they are penetrated, by reflecting inwardly, we go down towards the depth of consciousness. And here the traditional descriptions are more abstract, so their scientific character becomes a little clearer.

The outermost layer is the ‘annamaya-kosha’ or the ‘covering of food’. It is the external body, made of matter, like other objects seen outside by our gross senses. Here, matter is called ‘food’, thus conceiving it organically. It is what gets consumed, by natural processes that function to produce and to transform the different objects of the outside world.

Reflecting inwards, the second layer is the 'prāṇamaya kosha' or the 'covering of energy'. Here, energy is described as 'prāṇa', which also means 'living breath'. This is an energy that is inspired from within. It is not an energy of artificial force, exerted by one object upon another. Instead, it is a living energy that naturally expresses consciousness. In everyone's experience, this living energy arises quite spontaneously, from an inner ground of consciousness that we all share in common. We share that inner ground of life in common with each other, and with the whole universe. It is the ground of nature's life, in every person and in the world outside. In the world as a whole, the living energy of prāṇa is expressed impersonally, through the impartiality of nature's ordered functioning. In the limited bodies of living creatures, the same energy is expressed more personally, through our partial faculties of physical and sensual and mental activity.

Beneath the level of living energy, there is a third layer, called the 'manomaya-kosha' or the 'covering of mind'. This is the conceiving intellect, made up of thoughts which interpret the patterns of activity that our senses perceive. Thus interpreted, these patterns are conceived as meaningful information, telling us about an intelligible world. Here, as information is meaningfully represented, modern physics is confined to quantitative measurements and calculations of mathematical variables like distance, time, speed, mass, momentum and energy. But the older sciences go on to a broader and fuller investigation of language, thought and meaningful experience.

Next, beneath the level of information and its interpretation, there is a fourth layer, called the 'vijnyānamaya-kosha' or the 'covering of discernment'. This is our discernment of qualities and values, which we compare and contrast in the information that we perceive and interpret and describe. In modern physics, the comparison is strictly quantitative, ascribing a mathematical value to each point of space and time, and thus formally describing a mathematically abstracted 'field'. By contrast, the older sciences consider quality and value in a much fuller way, as a conditioning that we discern and judge intuitively, through our inner feelings. So, instead of being restricted to calculating theories that have to be applied by an external technology of material instruments, the older sciences are more essentially concerned with a systematic and reasoned clarification of our discerning faculties.

Further still, beneath the level of quality and its discernment, there is a fifth layer, called the 'ānandamaya-kosha' or the 'covering of happiness'. This is the co-ordinating layer of personality, with the word 'ānanda' or 'happiness' being used in the sense of 'harmony' and 'integration'. The co-ordination takes place through assimilated understanding. Through it we comprehend the continuity of underlying principles, beneath the change and the variety of superficial appearances.

Here, at the level of continuity and integration, the old sciences show up their subjective basis. When the concept of 'ākāsha' or 'ether' is rightly understood, it corresponds closely with the space-time continuum of modern physics. 'Ākāsha' means 'pervading space'. It is the continuity of space and time, pervading through all experience. But this same word, 'ākāsha', also implies a knowing light, which is subjective. The continuity of ākāsha includes both objective and subjective experience.

When it is considered subjectively, this continuity is called 'prajnyāna' or 'consciousness'. It is the knowing ground that lights up all appearances, no matter where, no matter when, no matter in whose experience. On that subjective ground, the old sciences are based.

But, if these sciences are founded in this way, on a subjective basis, that might seem to make them merely personal. How then can they be scientific? The answer is that they are meant to be based upon an impersonal subjectivity. They depend upon a ground of consciousness that is at once subjective and impersonal.

But is there such a consciousness, which is completely free of personal conditioning? That question, in the end, cannot be answered by any science, modern or traditional. For, all the technologies and theories of science are built from personal perceptions, thoughts and feelings, which are conditioned and made partial by our bodies and our minds. In order to be scientific, each science must be impersonal, in some essential sense. But, to find the basis of this impersonality, a scientist has to reflect beneath all theories and technologies. Where that is done, what is there left of science?

Seeds of action

In Sanskrit, 'karma' is a rather simple word. It just means 'action'. And it is used to make a penetrating analysis of where our actions come from. That can make things seem mysterious, when people talk of past and future lives which are remote from ordinary experience. But this isn't really what 'karma' is all about. When asking where actions come from, the idea isn't really to go back in time, but rather to go down into the basis of our present actions and experiences.

Traditionally, the way down has been described through an old metaphor, called the 'five elements'. Each element is a level of experience, through which we see and do things in the world.

First comes the element 'earth', which is an obvious metaphor for *matter*. This is the most obvious and crudest level of our experience, as bodies in the world. Here we see the world divided into separate objects that are made of matter, like bricks and pots are made from earth.

As objects act, they change and get transformed. The actions and the change show a dynamic *energy*, which is metaphorically described as the element 'water'. This is a deeper and subtler level of experience, at which we see dynamic patterns of activity. Material objects are now seen as crude appearances of these dynamic patterns, made up of energy that flows more subtly within them and in between.

For example, suppose that two persons are engaged in a conversation. The words spoken are not just material objects, like bullets fired from the speaker's mouth into the listener's ears. Instead, the words and phrases and sentences of speech are moving patterns of sound energy, which flows from speaker to listener, with changing shapes and forms that both can somehow recognize. Moreover, modern physics tells us that the speaking and listening bodies are made up of molecules and atoms which are not really bits of matter, but more accurately dynamic patterns that exchange quantum elements of fluctuating energy.

As patterns are recognized, they mean something to us, and thus we listen to what they have to say. This is inherent in our recognition of pattern, and it makes us think of energy as naturally alive. But we are then beyond the reach of modern physics, which confines itself to mathematically described patterns and does not go on to questions of living meaning. Traditional conceptions are not thus confined; and so they go on to conceive a living energy, both in our bodies and in the world outside. Our bodies are conceived as organic patterns of living energy, co-operating and corresponding with a similarly living energy that they perceive outside.

When meaning is interpreted in patterns of activity, they are then *information*, like the words and phrases and sentences of speech. This is a third level of experience, metaphorically described as the traditional element 'fire'. Here, changing forms of happening are seen to shine with meaning, thus throwing light on represented things. By interpreting the representation, perception is taken on to something further that is signified.

In particular, the world is always known perceived through individual information, which somehow represents the world, in everyone's experience. Our knowledge of the world implies a basic correspondence, between each microcosm of individual experience and the macrocosm of the universe. In some basic way, our inner activities of individuality are subtly and deeply interconnected with the external happenings of

world. Through that interconnection, our individual perceptions, thoughts and feelings are interpreted to know the outside world. And conversely, external happenings may be interpreted to help us look into our individual lives. That is the basis on which astrology and other such old sciences have been conceived.

As information represents things, it expresses a comparison of represented qualities. For example, a map shows some places closer together and other places further apart. Or it may show how some places are cooler or hotter, by comparative shades of colour, or by numbers that spell out the comparison in a more calculated way. Or, in our use of language, words like 'rough' and 'smooth' or 'deep' and 'shallow' are used to describe both physical and mental qualities, though subtle kinds of association and abstraction.

Thus, beneath the representations of information, there is a fourth level of experience, which is conditioned by relative qualities. This level of *conditioning* is metaphorically described as the element 'air'. Here, our experience is conditioned by qualitative influences that we take in through our actions in the world, somewhat like breathing in the air around us and being affected by its climatic conditions.

As we live in the world, our personalities are influenced by what we do and by what happens to us. In Sanskrit, the word 'samskāra' is used to describe this influence of action and happening on character. Literally, 'samskāra' means 'that which goes together with action'. ('Sam-' means 'together with', '-kāra' indicates action.) In particular, a 'samskāra' is a 'training' or a 'tendency' of character which comes from past actions and happenings. Accordingly, it is conceived that a person's character develops gradually, as an accumulation of such samskāras (or 'trainings') bringing influences from the past into the present.

For changing qualities to be compared, some common basis of comparison must carry on, though differences of space and time. For example, qualities of heat and cold depend upon a continuing experience of temperature, which carries on at different places and occasions, through varying degrees of warmth and coolness. Or, as a person's character develops, it shows a shared experience of the process of conditioning, which goes on in different people, through a variety of different things that happen in their lives.

Thus, beneath the changing qualities of relative conditioning, there is a fifth level of experience, at which a background continuity extends through different things that we perceive. This level of *continuity* is metaphorically described by the traditional element 'ether'. In Sanskrit, it is called 'ākāsha', which also means 'pervading space' or 'background sky'. Here, 'space' and 'sky' are metaphors for a background continuity that we experience in common, beneath the changing forefront of our differing perceptions.

How does the past continue, so as to influence the present and the future? In the old idea of karma, this continuity was described by thinking of samskāras (or tendencies of character) as 'seeds' that have been planted by previous happenings.

In everyone's experience, as each happening appears, it is perceived and taken into the continuing background, beneath the changing surface of appearance. Thus absorbed into the background, the happening continues as a potential aptitude for future action, like a seed that has been planted in the ground. Later, when the conditions are right, such an aptitude or samskāra gets manifested into further happenings, like a seed that sprouts and grows and blossoms into flowers and fruit.

As a description of living experience, this conception of karma is just common sense. If we consider the process of our lives, as each of us experiences the world, then it is only common sense that our actions and experiences result in personal tendencies and inclinations which go into the make-up of each person's character. As we go about our lives, our actions take us through a succession of experiences, which keep on passing by, appearing and disappearing at the surface of our minds.

But, though they disappear at the surface, our experiences get somehow absorbed into longer lasting attitudes and traits of character and stores of memory, which continue underneath. Thus, as our experiences pass by, they leave their effects behind, in a subtle assimilation of experience that continues unmanifest, beneath the surface of our minds. Through that underlying assimilation, we develop a psychological and human potential, which is expressed in further actions and takes us on to further experiences.

In short, the theory of karma is a description of living development. And the approach it takes is psychological. It says that living creatures develop through subtle inclinations which their actions leave behind. These subtle inclinations or *samskāras* are primarily mental. They are inclinations of intention, thought and feeling, which result from previous actions and experiences. In the course of our lives, as we pass through many different experiences, these subtle inclinations are assimilated at the depth of our minds, into a developed potential that manifests itself from there.

In this psychological description, our mental processes are not based on any brain or nervous system that manipulates information behind the scenes, like a computer making calculations behind a video screen. Nor are mental processes based finally on any language that uses particular symbols and symbolic structures to articulate ideas. Instead, all mental processes are based upon an underlying continuity that carries on through changing mental states. That continuity is a subjective ground, deep within our minds, beneath the changes of apparent objects that come and go at the surface. It's at this underlying ground that actions and experiences leave their effects behind. And it is from this ground that future actions and experiences arise, to carry on the process of experience.

What is this subjective ground? It is a common consciousness that carries on through everyone's experience, beneath all differences of time and place and personality. So it is both subjective and impersonal. As such, it is the ground of the entire universe, expressed in everything that anyone perceives, throughout all space and time. Our individual lives express it personally, through our personal egos. The universe expresses it impersonally, through the impersonality of nature as a whole.

Accordingly, it is conceived that the entire universe is driven by the same subtle energies and influences that we find within our minds. Just as subtle influences of intention, thought and feeling are found expressed in our living bodies and their actions, so too such subtle influences are expressed throughout the universe.

This isn't just a mythical or mystical conception, meant only for religious faith and poetry and mind-expanding exercise. It is also a carefully reasoned analysis, meant for a rigorously scientific investigation into knowledge. But the reasoning is essentially reflective, repeatedly reflecting back towards a common inner ground from which all birth and all experiences arise.

As Varuṇa tells his son Bhrigu, in a story from the *Taittirīya Upanishad* (3.1), true knowledge is attained by investigating back to that supporting origin.

Truly, that from which these beings are born,
that by which born beings live,
that into which those who depart dissolve,
that you must seek to know.
That is all reality.

WHAT FOR?

Happiness is not a passing state

We usually think of ‘happiness’ as a state of mind, which alternates with an opposite state called ‘unhappiness’. To be ‘unhappy’ is to feel at *odds* with the circumstances in which one finds oneself. To be ‘happy’ is to feel at *one* with ‘hap’, with the happenings that take place in one’s experience.

But does this mean that happiness is just a passing state? Is it just a warm, gooey feeling of sentimental pleasure; which must give way to the cold, hard facts of pain and hunger and want, suffered by our vulnerable and petty personalities, in an often hostile and alien world?

The very word ‘happiness’ suggests that there is something more to it than this. Quite literally, ‘happiness’ is that shared principle which is common to all ‘hap’, to all the happenings that take place in the physical and mental world.

In this literal sense, happiness is what Aristotle called ‘the unmoved mover’. It is the common principle of motivation that inspires all acts and happenings. It’s that for which all acts are done, for which all happenings take place, in everyone’s experience and in the entire world.

As it is put in the *Taittirīya Upanishad* (2.7):

It is just this
essential savour
that is spontaneous
and natural.

It’s only when one reaches
this essential savour
that one comes to happiness.

For what could be alive at all,
what could move with energy,
if there were not
this happiness
here at the background
of all space and time
pervading the entire world?

How can we reconcile these two views of happiness? How can it be, on the one hand, a passing state of sentimental mind, and on the other hand, the continuing ground of all motivation?

The answer is that passing states of happiness somehow *express* an underlying ground of value which does not pass away.

When an object is desired, the desiring mind is dissatisfied. It feels insufficient in itself; and seeks some object that is thought to be outside. This is the state of ‘duality’: where experience seems divided into two, by thinking that a knowing person is

different from some object that is known. This divided and dissatisfied state is what we call 'unhappiness'.

When a desired object is attained, the desiring mind comes temporarily to rest, so that its division and dissatisfaction are for the moment dissolved. This is a state of 'non-duality': where experience no longer seems divided, because the knower is at one with what is known. Here, where dissatisfied desire has given way to a non-dual state of fulfilment, we experience happiness.

In this non-dual state of happiness, there is only undivided consciousness, entirely self-contained, unmixed with any alien object that is known outside. The object that was previously desired has now been attained, and is at one with consciousness. The previously desiring mind is now at rest and has dissolved in consciousness.

What is the source of happiness that shines out in this non-dual state? It cannot be the desired object; for the mind soon gets fed up with this particular object, and starts agitating for something else. The moment that the mind thus rises up, the state of happiness has passed; so it cannot be from the risen mind that happiness appears.

All happiness must come from underlying consciousness: which continues at the background of experience, while the mind changes from one state of experience to another.

In this ground of consciousness, there are no alien objects, nor is there any kind of division. It is pure consciousness: non-dual and undivided, entirely self-contained. It is just this that shines spontaneously, in all our states of happiness. It is just this that seems obscured, in all our minds' unhappiness.

Whether we understand it correctly, or whether we do not, it is the ground of happiness from which all acts and happenings arise: the ground we cannot help but seek.

As it is put in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad* (4.3.32):

The fluctuating ocean (of
the many-seeming world)
turns out to be
one single see-er,
beyond duality....

This is one's final state.
This is one's final happiness.

(All) other things
that have but come to be
subsist upon
only a measure
of this happiness.

Waking, dream and sleep

What are the states of waking, dream and deep sleep? The *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* explains these three states, by interpreting the mantra ‘om’.

‘Om’ may be chanted slowly, divided into three elements of passing sound:

- The first element is the vowel ‘a’ (pronounced like ‘-er’ in ‘father’). This sound is voiced from deep within, at the back of the throat. It corresponds to the waking state. Here, knowledge rises from consciousness within and turns attention to a world of external objects. So experience is divided into an outside and an inside. An inner mind receives perceptions from a world outside.
- The second element is the vowel ‘u’ (pronounced like ‘u’ in put). Carrying on from the preceding ‘a’, this ‘u’ sound is voiced forward, towards narrowed lips. It corresponds to the dream state, where a world of perceptions is thought and felt within a conceiving mind. Here, knowledge passes on from the gross perceptions of our outward senses. There is thus a turning back within, as outward perceptions are interpreted by more subtle thoughts and feelings in the perceiving mind. So the external world gets taken back into mind. Experience now is all inside. It has an inside, but no outside.
- The third element is the sound ‘mmm...’. Continuing on from the preceding ‘u’, this ‘mmm...’ sound closes the lips and fades away into silence. It corresponds to the deep sleep state, where all appearances dissolve. Here knowledge passes on to quiet peace: as perceptions, thoughts and feelings are taken into settled understanding. So, in the deep sleep state, there is only pure experience (prajnyāna-ghana), unmixed with any physical or mental appearances.

Through these three elements of changing sound, the mantra ‘om’ points to a changeless principle: which underlies all passing states of waking, dream and sleep. That changeless principle is called the ‘fourth’ (‘caturtha’ or ‘turīya’). It is the true self (ātman): the subjective principle of consciousness, which shines unmixed in deep sleep.

To our waking and dreaming minds, the deep sleep state seems dark and blank and empty. But in itself, it is not so. True, no objects are seen in it. Nor are any perceptions, thoughts and feelings. In deep sleep, there’s nothing seen by sense or mind. But that does not make it dark or blank or empty, in its own right. For what remains is consciousness itself: shining all alone, by its own light that mind and sense cannot perceive.

Thus in deep sleep, when rightly seen, consciousness is shown beyond all changing qualities, in its true nature. Its own experience is non-dual: not divided into two. It has no inside, no outside.

That same consciousness continues beneath the waking and dream states. At the changing surface of our limited minds, objects, perceptions, thoughts and feelings come and go. But every one of them is lit by consciousness. It is always present: as the common principle of all changing and differing experiences. As experiences change at the limited surface of mental attention, consciousness continues at the background of experience: remaining utterly unchanged and unqualified.

All appearances are expressed from there, and come back there again. As consciousness expresses and takes back all differing appearances, it is their common real-

ity: which they all show. They come and go on that reality, but don't affect it in the least. In it, there's no duality of subject and object. It is at once the self that knows and the reality that's known.

As yogis cultivate the special states that are called 'samādhis' or 'absorptions', they seek absorption into the non-dual reality of consciousness. The name 'turīya' or the 'fourth' refers to that. But turīya must not be confused with any passing state of samādhi, no matter how high-flown or highly prized. Turīya is not a passing state. Instead, it is the changeless non-duality that all states show. That non-duality is represented by the whole word 'om'.

As the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* concludes:

The fourth is not
a transacted element.
In it, the seeming world
is brought to rest.
It is the unconditioned
happiness of non-duality.

'Om' is thus self alone.
One who knows that
joins back, through self,
into the truth of self.

Just who, or what, is free?

Do we make our own decisions? No, we do not, says Ramesh Balsekar, a retired bank manager who lives in Bombay. Every morning, to the visitors who crowd into his fourth floor flat, he points out that their bodies and minds are only programmed instruments. And he asks what choice they have in the programming. Does one have a choice in determining the genes with which one was born, or the environment in which one was brought up, or the circumstances that have shaped one's life and have led to one's present situation?

Clearly not. One's present body and mind have absolutely no say in deciding the past that has made them what they are now. Nor have they any say in deciding the events that have arisen from the past to confront them in the present. One's present body does not choose the physical happenings that have arisen before its senses. One's present mind does not choose the current perception, thought or feeling that has arisen in one's mental experience. All that body and mind can do is to react with their current conditioning, which has already taken place, to the events with which they are confronted.

Thus, body and mind can only react. They have no autonomous actions of their own, no actions of which they themselves are the motivating source. Whose then are these actions of body and mind? When a person talks of bodily and mental actions as 'mine', who is the 'I' that motivates them and makes them happen? What is the source from which their motivation comes?

Ramesh answers that in each of us, there is an impersonal sense of presence signified by the words 'I am.' Not 'I am thin' or 'I am fat'; not 'I am excited' or 'I am depressed'; not 'I am Malti' or 'I am John'; but just 'I am', impersonal and unqualified.

This purely subjective presence is the one source of everyone's experience. All experiences, all concepts arise from it and are thus its manifestations. It is not a mere concept of mind, which may be accepted by some persons and rejected by others. Instead, it is the one universal source – called 'God' or 'consciousness' or 'reality' or whatever – to which notions of acceptance and rejection do not apply, for they themselves are manifestations of it.

But then, how are we to understand our sense of individual freedom, which is so central to our lives?

One way, which Ramesh explicitly stresses, is to deny it completely. The idea of 'free will' is nothing but a false egotism: which mistakenly thinks that our limited personalities are the source of 'their' actions, when in fact the only true source is the unlimited, impersonal 'I am'. To correct this basic mistake, there must be a complete surrender of all personal involvement, to the unlimited source. Whatever happens must get to be fully and unreservedly accepted: as the 'impersonal functioning of (universal) consciousness' or, more simply, as the 'will of God'.

But there is another approach, which Ramesh tends to leave implicit. Instead of denying individual freedom, one can ask just what it is. The problem lies in the word 'individual'. What is the individuality that each of us calls 'I'? And how can it be free?

Since our bodies and minds are dependent parts of an interdependent world, it is evident that they cannot be quite free. Equally, since body and mind are objects in the world, they cannot quite be the knowing subject that a person calls 'I'. Their relation-

ship with this knowing 'I' is not one of identity, but of *expression*. What they somehow manage to do is to *express* its consciousness.

But, as a person's body and mind express knowledge, they inevitably limit it: by particular assumptions and prejudices which must then be questioned, in order to know better. This requires an essential detachment from one's physical and mental expressions of personality, as one returns towards the knowing 'I' that is expressed.

It is from such detachment that our sense of freedom comes. We are 'free' in the sense that our acts arise from an inner, knowing individuality which is independent of its physical and mental expressions in our bodies and minds. The expressions are of course never free, but they express a sense of freedom that comes from the truly individual 'I' in each of us.

When this free 'I' is found, all personal involvement is automatically surrendered, and no last notion can remain of any separated individuality. One is simply returned to what one has always been, to that reality from where all acts and appearances of world have always arisen.

Thus, where at first there seem to be two approaches – of loving surrender and sceptical enquiry – the two are not really opposed, but come together in the end. As it is put in a stanza from the Shankara tradition:

Among all ways of striving to be free,
it's love that is the best, one must agree.
To question one's own truth, to ask what's there:
that's just the love of those who ask with care.

From where does healing come?

What causes our many problems and dissatisfactions? Do we make a basic mistake that can somehow be corrected, so as to overcome all our troubles? Such a mistake is suggested in the *Munḍaka Upanishad* (3.1.1).

Two birds, in close companionship,
are perched upon a single tree.
Of these, one eats and tastes the fruit.
The other does not eat, but just looks on.

There is an obvious parallel here, with the biblical story of Adam and Eve. There is a tree of life, with fruit on it. And a question is implied, about eating the fruit. However, unlike the biblical story (as usually interpreted), this is not a religious myth about the fall of man, into temptation and sin. Instead, it is a philosophical analysis, of each person's current experience.

The two birds are *jīva*, the seeming ego, and *ātmā*, the real self.

- The seeming ego is a personal image that one has of oneself, as a body and a mind. Thus one views oneself as a person who acts in the world, caught up in various actions and their results. This view produces the appearance of a personal ego, which eats and tastes the fruits of various happenings, on the 'tree' of life.
- The real self is not an image, nor any appearance at all. It is only consciousness, which lights all images and appearances in our experience. This pure light is utterly impersonal, quite unaffected by all happenings and activities. It only witnesses them, in the sense that they are illuminated by its inherent shining. It is the underlying ground from which all illumination comes, from which all appearances arise.

According to this analysis, our basic mistake is to confuse our personal self-images with the underlying, impersonal self that each one of us really is.

Since our personalities act physically and mentally, as bodies and minds in the world, they are inevitably affected by the conflicts that take place between the world's differing things. So when we view ourselves as persons, we seem to suffer injury and illness, and we seem dispossessed of things that we desire. Then we feel impaired and unhappy.

But we have an essential sense of inner vitality, of something alive within: which enables our bodies and minds to heal, so that their well-being may be restored. Whatever physical or mental actions are used to promote such healing, they must express this inner vitality and depend upon it as their base.

What is this inner, living base that healing shows and rises from? It is the living principle in each of us. It must clearly be that same underlying ground of consciousness from which all illumination and all appearances arise.

In our physical and mental personalities, all healing and well-being are partial and short term. For there are always problems left unsolved. In the course of time, further conflicts will keep arising and thus keep affecting our bodies and minds, with further difficulties and dissatisfactions. In this sense, any physical or mental healing is not true healing at all. It only leads on to further trouble.

Could there be any true healing, which leaves nothing unresolved and thus leads to no further trouble? The *Muṇḍaka Upanishad* (3.1.2) goes on to suggest that there is. To find it, one has only to look beyond body and mind, into what one really is. For this is the one source: of all life, all light and all love.

Dissatisfaction and misery are just a result of the delusion that one is a personal ego: dispossessed of desired objects and helplessly caught in a world of changing acts. Happiness is freedom from this delusion, as one returns to one's home ground of underlying consciousness, beneath all seeming differences. Here, subject and object are realized at one with each other; so there can be no sense of dispossession at all.

On this same tree, a person gets
depressed and suffers grief: deluded
by a sense of seeming helplessness,
and feeling thus quite dispossessed.

But when one sees what's truly loved –
as one's own self, unlimited,
impersonal, beyond all else,
the source from where all help and
guidance comes, where everything belongs –
there one is freed from misery.

An affair of love

Most people think of philosophy as a theoretical subject, which must be applied by embarking on some transforming journey of intellectual or ethical or mystical development. This sadly misses the essence of the subject. The word ‘philosophy’ stands just for what it says. It stands, in essence, for ‘love of knowledge’ (from ‘philo-’ meaning ‘love’ and ‘sophia’ meaning ‘knowledge’). What’s described here is not any theoretical construction nor any transforming ‘trip’, but a simple love affair.

Most love affairs are complicated by wanting things that one does not already have, in order to achieve some change for the better. Someone who is lonely wants companionship; someone insecure wants support; someone bored wants excitement; someone who feels weak and inferior wants power and status. Such possessive wants for improvement bring in competition and conflict, thus complicating love with dominance and opposition.

But in philosophy, the search is reflective. It does not look for any unpossessed thing that needs to be acquired. Nor, essentially, does it look for any prescribed change, in personality or world. Instead, it only asks reflective questions: to find out what is really true, beneath the changing appearances that our bodies and minds perceive in the world.

When questions are asked about philosophical truth, the asking starts with preconceived ideas taken blindly for granted, and with egotistical desires for personal gain. But as the search proceeds, such prejudiced ideas and petty desires get thrown into question and burned away, in a deepening love for truth. Eventually, a depth of love is reached where all preconceived fancies have been given up and no trace of petty egotism remains.

This depth of love underlies all seeming knowledge. To know someone or something deeply, one has to be at one with what is known. That oneness is objectless love: not love for the sake of any object, but in Elizabeth Browning’s words ‘love ... for love’s sake only’. Unmixed with any changing objects, that pure love continues beneath all the seeming changes of experience, as objects appear and disappear. It is at once the underlying source that motivates all changing desires and the final goal that all desires seek.

Thus love, found always at the depth of knowledge, is itself the truth that philosophy seeks. The search is a very simple love affair: an affair with love itself. It does not seek any object or any change, but only its own truth: which underlies all experience, always unaltered and unchanged.

In the end, all technical or intellectual or emotional or mystical disciplines are only conditioned forms of practice, designed to engineer prescribed changes towards preconceived objectives and ideals. No such preconceived objective or ideal can amount to truth. Where the search for truth is genuine, no compromising preconception can remain; in an open enquiry of relentless reason that leaves no stone unturned. Only love itself can finally take the enquiry from dry technicalities and abstract ideas to living truth.

In the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad* (4.5), when Yājñyavalkya is leaving home, he offers his wife Maitreyī a settlement. She says she is not interested in a material settlement, since that will not lead to deathlessness. Instead, she asks him: ‘Teach me what you know.’ This search for ‘deathlessness’ may seem mystical to some, but his

answer makes it clear that he does not look at it like that. He only shows her how to reason back, towards the source of our common experience.

First, he tells her that he has always loved her, and what she asks him now makes her even dearer to him. Then he points out that what anyone loves in someone else can only be the inner core of knowing self. As he says (a little paraphrased from the original Sanskrit):

‘What does a wife love in her husband?
Is it just that he’s a husband?
If it’s that, it isn’t love.
All she can love in him is self.

‘And when a husband loves his wife,
is it love if she’s just a wife?
All he can love in her is self.

‘So also love of children, friends,
living creatures, places, objects,
love of power, love of knowledge.
All that’s loved is only self.’

from
4.5.6

But how is Maitreyī to realize the true nature of this essential self? How is she to find out what she really is? Yājñyavalkya does not tell her to meditate, nor to practise any techniques of character purification or mind development, nor to seek any mind-expanded state of mystical experience. Instead, he explains things to her a little, in a way that sets her thinking. And he finally leaves her with a single question, which he says will take her to deathlessness. The question is typically short and simple: ‘How can that which knows be known?’

KNOWING AND BEING

Knowing is not an act

Suppose that a mother comes home unexpectedly late, to find that her teenage son is laying the table for dinner. He has almost finished, and she notices that he has done it amazingly well, with just one or two things not quite right. So she joins in with him, tactfully correcting the odd mistakes and adding what has been left out.

But most of all, she is touched by what his action shows. He does not usually lay the table and has not been asked to on this occasion; but he has noticed that it's getting late and is trying to help. In doing so, what gets expressed is his thoughtful awareness of how the household runs and his sensitivity to those who live with him at home.

All our actions have these two aspects: of performance and expression.

- In the *performance* of an act, one's body and mind are used as instruments to achieve desired objectives: such as laying a table, so that knives, forks, spoons, dishes and food are properly placed on it.
- *Expression* is what the performance shows. As our actions are formed and proceed objectively towards their intended aims, they express a living sense of meaning and value: which arises from an inner, subjective knowing, found beneath the outward formality of our objective performances.

What is this subjective knowing that gets expressed in our lives, through the meaning and value of our physical and mental acts?

We habitually identify such knowing with our perceptions, thoughts and feelings; but a little examination will show that this is not enough. For each perception, each thought and each feeling is only an act. It is just a mental act, performed by our minds, in pursuit of their own objectives.

Each mental act – of perception, thought or feeling – expresses in its turn a living meaning and value that arises from an inner knowing: somehow continuing beneath the changing acts that take place in our minds. For example, when a boy notices that his mother is unexpectedly delayed and thinks of laying out dinner, this current perception and thought get their meaning and value from an underlying awareness which has continued through previous perceptions, thoughts and feelings, and which will continue similarly through future ones as well.

Such continued knowing, which carries on beneath our changing minds, is not really an act of any kind. An act is something put on by one's body or mind. It is something additional to one's own nature: something which one may do at some particular moment, and which one may not do at some other moment of time.

Knowing is not like that at all. It is not something that can be put on or put off. Without it, there is simply no experience, not at any moment of time. Whatever may appear or disappear, knowing is always there: as the common, continuing principle of all experience. It is always with each one of us, at every moment that we know. It is our very being, our essential nature; not an additional act that we may or may not do;

not a passing appearance that we may or may not see or think or feel; but just the one reality that each one of us always is.

In everyone's experience, all changing acts and all appearances express just that one same reality.

How can we know this one reality, which is knowing in itself? Or as Yājñavalkya asks in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*: 'How can that which knows be known?'

Clearly, this reality of knowing cannot be perceived as an object, through our bodies and minds. For all such objects appear when they are perceived and disappear when they are not; while knowing continues always present, through all appearances and disappearances. Knowing is that one unchanging and undifferentiated reality which is not an object at all, and which is not seen to appear or disappear.

There is therefore a temptation to make a great mystery of this reality; by imagining that it can only be known through special practices of meditation, in specially altered or 'mystical' states to which such practices lead. But this is pretentious nonsense. For all meditative practices are only acts of body and mind; and all that can be achieved through them are only passing powers and changing states of physical and mental development. All that such practices can produce – with all their mind-expanded powers and states – are expanded perceptions of body and mind. In this way, bigger and subtler seeming objects can be perceived; but that can never amount to a knowledge of knowing itself.

The reality of knowing can only be known as one's own self: by returning home from all outgoing perceptions of body and mind, to the knowing subject from which these perceptions start. This is one's true individuality, the unique and indivisible self that one always is.

It is found through a reflective, individual enquiry: which turns back in from physical and mental objects, so as to question all the preconceived assumptions that one's mind has smuggled into its perceptions of the world. Finally, when no stone is left unturned and no extraneous assumptions remain, the enquiry ceases to be an act and thus becomes complete. For it has then returned home, to one's own ground of knowledge and reality; where it turns out that there is never any difference between that which knows and that which is known.

As it is put in the *Kaṭha Upanishad*, 4.1:

The world that happens of itself
has excavated outward holes,
through which perception looks outside
and does not see the self within.

But someone brave, who longs for that
which does not die, turns sight back in
upon itself. And it is thus
that self is seen, returned to self,
to its own true reality.

Perception and experience

Suppose that a brightly coloured flower has bloomed on a roadside bush, attracting the attention of passers by. A little boy sees it as a target and idly takes a swipe at it, but fortunately it is out of reach. A little girl is taken by its beauty and sees it as a lovely decoration, but it is out of her reach as well.

A botanist would, of course, look at it with quite a different interest: identifying the species of plant that produced it, and reflecting on its organic function. A physicist might look at it as a piece of matter obeying Newton's laws, or as a configuration of quantized energy, or as a manifestation of the space-time continuum. Someone poetically inclined might dream, like William Blake, of 'a heaven in a wild flower'.

Each differing view captures something of what the flower is. That is how perception works. To 'perceive' means to 'take through' (from 'per-' meaning 'through' and '-ceive' meaning 'take'). When one perceives an object, one captures something of it through one's personal faculties: of sensation, thought and feeling.

A problem arises here. Personal faculties are dependent parts of a world that is perceived through them. As a result, they give rise to partial perceptions, limited by their conditioning. Our sense perceptions are limited by physically preconditioned sensations – of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch – produced by our bodily organs. Our mental perceptions are limited by preconceived ideas and prejudiced claims, produced in our thoughts and feelings. As an object is perceived through senses and mind, the result is only a partial appearance, captured through the limiting grasp of physical and mental predispositions.

When a perceived appearance is understood, there is a relaxation in the personally grasping element of perception. What's seen is no longer caught by attention-grabbing sensations, nor fitted into preconceived notions, nor claimed for the sake of prejudged beliefs. Instead, as an appearance is understood, what's known is immediately experienced in the very 'suchness' of the appearance; without any distraction by intervening sensations or thoughts or feelings that remain to be interpreted.

For example, when the perception of a flower is taken into understanding, there is no longer any intervening view of the flower: neither as a target to take a swipe at, nor as a decoration to be plucked, nor as a botanical specimen, nor as a piece of matter or energy or space-time field, nor as representing a heaven. Instead, as the flower is understood, there is an immediate experience of its 'suchness', inherent in however it may appear.

Moreover, at the actual moment when something is perceived, there too experience is immediate. In that particular moment, there is only pure experience, without any passage of time that might enable something else to be added or to intervene. It is only later on, when looking back at the perception through passed time, that one claims: 'I perceived that object.' The claim is then indirect, made through an assumed notion of time and memory; and it thus produces the mixed appearances of indirect experience. Then a seeming 'I' appears, mixed with personal faculties that intervene between the perceiving 'I' and a perceived object. And the object appears correspondingly mixed with the preconditionings, the preconceptions and prejudices of personal perception.

Thus, all our perceptions take part in a repeated cycle: whereby they each start out as immediate experience, later on get claimed as personal perceptions and then get

absorbed into understanding, where they return to immediate experience. In truth, even when a grasping claim is made – to have captured an object through personal perception – the actual, present experience is still immediate. The immediacy is still present, in the uncaptured ‘suchness’ of perceived appearance.

This uncapturable immediacy is described in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*, 2.4.12.

It is as if a lump of salt
thrown into water were
dissolved into mere water;

and what there is of it
can't be picked out,
but from wherever taken
is just salty.

So too... this infinite expanse
(of all experience) is
throughout nothing else but
unmixed consciousness....

'Unconscious' knowing

In order to get something done, our minds have to focus attention on the job in hand. That is how our minds work. They cannot know everything at once. Instead, they see only partial objects, which are little pieces of a much larger world.

As attention turns to particular objects, they appear at the surface of our minds. But we know more than this. As we see an apparent object, we somehow take other things into account, in our understanding of what is seen. So we do not just *see* things, at the front tip of the mind's attention. We also *understand* them, and thus take different things into account., at the background of experience.

What is this background knowledge, below the surface of the mind? It is, of course, the underlying basis from which our thoughts arise. Like the ground beneath our feet, it is usually taken for granted; and we are not used to thinking about it. But what happens if we turn our thoughts back upon themselves, to look at the underlying source from which they come?

At the surface of our minds, appearances come and go, as various objects are perceived and thought about and felt. When we look down into the depth of our minds, these changing appearances are left behind. Beneath the surface of mental appearance, no object, nor any perception, thought or feeling can appear at all. But the background knowledge of understanding is present here, enabling us to take into account what our minds do not make appear.

In psychology, this underlying basis of mind is often called 'the unconscious'. It is 'unconscious' in two, essential ways.

First, it cannot be known as any kind of apparent object. It can only be known by reflecting back from appearances, into the underlying depth of consciousness from which they rise.

And second, it is not conscious of any apparent object. At the surface of mental attention, objects appear perceived, and so consciousness seems mixed with apparent objects. But, at the background of experience, there are no appearances. There is only a quiet, unselfconscious knowing, quite detached from anything else.

Examined in this way, the 'unconscious' basis of our minds turns out to be pure consciousness, unmixed with any objects. It is not dark, nor mysterious, nor inaccessible, as it is sometimes thought to be. Instead, it is plain and simple, and immediately self-evident: as the illuminating basis of consciousness that is common to all our changing and differing experiences.

Here, at our common basis of unmixed consciousness, knowledge continues through time and is shared across differences. As our perceptions are understood, they return here, to this knowing background, where they are absorbed into continuing knowledge.

It is from here that all our creativity arises: as knowledge is expressed in new feelings, thoughts and actions, which take into account what we have learned from the past.

It is only here that differences and conflicts are resolved; only from here that we co-ordinate our activities and communicate across differences.

As we live and learn from experience, we keep going back and forth between consciousness and the world of perceived appearances. But our attention is claimed by

appearances. The consciousness that underlies them is habitually ignored. So much so that we often prefer to call it 'the unconscious'.

As it is put in the *Chāndogya Upanishad*, 8.3.2:

Those who do not know
the ground where treasure lies,
pass over it, time and again,
but don't discover it.

So also, all these creatures
go, day after day,
here to this place
where all completeness lies.

And yet they do not find it.
For they are kept distracted
by unreality.

Belief and truth

The way we see things depends upon assumptions and beliefs that we have come to take for granted. On the basis of our various personal and cultural beliefs, we build our different pictures of the world, which vary from person to person and from culture to culture.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides, said that there are ‘two ways of enquiry’.

- The first is the ‘way of belief’: which looks at things within our current picture of the world, on the basis of accepted belief.
- The second is the ‘way of truth’: which does not take anything for granted. Instead, it looks for a truth that does not depend upon any seeming picture or any assumed belief.

What then about modern science? Is it a new ‘way of truth’ that has finally done away with all the superstitions and dogmas of traditional belief?

Not quite. As some thoughtful scientists point out, modern physical science is not directly concerned with philosophical questions of reality and truth. Its direct concern is to describe observed phenomena, on the basis of theoretical assumptions (or ‘hypotheses’, as they are called).

In this sense, both modern science and traditional doctrine belong to the ‘way of belief’. They both build pictures of the world, from accepted assumptions and beliefs.

The only difference is that modern society encourages a public questioning of accepted assumptions, where traditional societies did not. Since traditional communities were organized on the basis of religion, any public questioning of religious belief was considered socially disruptive. Those who wished to question the foundations of faith had to do so privately: in some esoteric cult where such dangerously radical questioning was kept away from ordinary public view.

In either case, both in modern science and in traditional doctrine, all truly significant advances of knowledge come only when accepted belief gets thrown into question. They come only when some current picture shows up its limitations, and its foundations are then opened up to investigation. This calls for an about turn: from building believed pictures, to digging up their foundations, as one asks what is truly known.

In the usual course of our lives, we see and think and feel things within the confines of some believed picture that has been formed by long habit. But sometimes this picture is not quite enough. Something in our experience does not fit, and the picture no longer holds.

When our habitual beliefs and pictures fail, how do we know what is true? Beneath all our assumptions and the superstructures of learning that are built upon them, what underlying ground of truth do we fall back upon, to correct our mistakes and to take new experiences into account?

As Parmenides says, this underlying basis of truth is only one, always unchanging, and entirely certain and definite. All seeming differences, changes and uncertainties belong to perception and belief; not truly to knowledge and reality.

Beneath its seeming superstructures of perception and belief, true knowledge is not any kind of act that is put on by some separated being. Instead, it is pure consciousness, whose very being is to know.

This single principle of underlying consciousness is the common ground from which all appearances arise, in everyone's experience. Thus it is not only knowledge, but also all reality, where knowing and being are identical.

As Parmenides puts it (*On Nature*, fragment 8.34-40):

It is one and the same thing:
both to know and to be
that for whose sake
knowledge is.

For knowing never
can be found apart
from that which is.

There is not now,
nor ever shall there be
anything besides what is.

For of necessity, it is defined
as one and unchanging.

Hence, 'coming to be'
and 'passing away',
'presence' and 'absence',
'change of place' and
'alteration of bright colour':

all these are merely names
given by the dying,
who believe them to be true.

Seeing light

Is the mind like a computer? In a way, it is.

As attention turns from one thing to another, changing pictures come and go. This is a surface show of mind, a bit like a computer screen. Beneath the surface, our minds store data and process it for display, like a computer does. The results are shown in changing pictures and appearances, seen at the surface of each mind.

Thus we may think of mind as a complex process of activity: recording, organizing and displaying information. Most of the activity is hidden, but it produces the appearances we see. The hidden part is called ‘unconscious’.

This way of looking at the mind is actually quite ancient. Today’s computers are a recent offshoot, from a very much older approach to the question of intelligence. In India, that approach was much developed by Buddhist schools of thought. They point out that the mind is changing and impermanent. It is part of an objective world, whose objects change and pass away. This is an *objective* view. It is meant to cultivate detachment: from one’s mind and personality, and from their biased views of world.

But mind can also be approached *subjectively*. Instead of outwardly describing it, as an objective process in the world, we can enquire back into the consciousness that it expresses, in our direct experience.

In each picture or appearance, consciousness is present. Without its light, nothing can appear. The pictures come and go; but they are all illuminated by a consciousness that is in each of them. As they change and vary, it remains: as a persisting background that continues through the changes and variations of all picturing. In short, it is a screen on which all pictures must appear.

However, this is not a screen that *transmits* or *reflects* light. As consciousness, it *is* light. What kind of light is it? How can it be rightly known, beneath all pictures that we see?

These questions are investigated in what Ramana Maharshi calls ‘ātma-vicāra’ or ‘self-enquiry’. He points out that consciousness cannot be found by any theoretical arguments in the pictures that cover it. To know it rightly, one has to be oneself beneath the covering. There consciousness is one’s own self. It is known by *being* it, oneself. It is one’s real self, where knowing and being are the same.

That truth of self is known immediately: not through our minds and bodies, but beneath the pictures that they see. Seen indirectly, through physical and mental perception, it is obscured by false assumptions that are ingrained into our pictures of ourselves and of the world.

In particular, we habitually assume that consciousness is a personal activity which perceives objects, thinks thoughts and feels emotions. This is a changing activity, carried out by our bodies and our minds. It produces the changing pictures that come and go in our experience.

But consciousness is not this personal activity that fabricates our changing pictures. This activity can’t be experienced by itself. Nor can its made-up pictures. In order to appear, all activities and pictures must be lit by consciousness. It is the light that carries on, ever present through all pictures and activities.

Thus consciousness is not a picture, nor an object in our pictures, nor a physical or mental activity. Instead, it is what lights all pictures, objects and activities. It is pure

light, which knows all our experiences. It's that which knows, unmixed with changing things that come and go before its changeless light.

And yet, in the pictures that we see, the light of consciousness seems mixed, with changing qualities and names and forms. How does this happen? How are the changing pictures drawn, on the unchanging screen of consciousness that lights them up from underneath?

What draws the pictures is called 'life'. The screen of light beneath is not a lifeless object. It is the living source of all experience. As underlying consciousness, it is inherently expressed in all the pictures that we see. They are inspired by it, from within. That's what makes them come alive.

Thus, all our physical and mental pictures show nothing else but consciousness. It is the unformed light of which all forms are made. And it's the living meaning that is expressed by all names. It is both that which knows and the reality that's known.

Ramana Maharshi puts it very simply in *Forty Verses*, stanza 1.

Names and forms are picturing.
The one who sees, the light
and the pictured covering:
all of these are one reality,
and that alone.²

² Translation made from the Malayalam version (*Sad-darshanam*), composed by the Maharshi himself. The Malayalam is:

citramāmnāmarūpaṁ draṣṭā prakāśamcitra-
vastravumokkeyēkavastuvānavantannē

citramāmnāmarūpaṁ – Names (nāma) and forms (rūpaṁ) are (ām) citram (picturing).

draṣṭā prakāśamcitrastravum – The one who sees (draṣṭā), the light (prakāśam) and the pictured (citra) covering (vastravum):

okkeyēkavastuvām – all of these (okke) are (ām) one (ēka) reality (vastu),

avantannē – and that (avan) alone (tannē).