

26 April 1971

READING 1

THE 5TH STEP OF YOGA – ‘ABBREVIATION’

PART 1

In trying to link the ancient teaching derived from direct experience of Self-realization (through Yoga and Meditation) with modern knowledge derived from the newer experimental sciences which attempt to study the ‘physical basis of mind’, we cannot do better than begin this term by adopting the advice of the present Shankaracharya. He has, more than once, recommended us to start with this passage from the *Mandukya Upanishad* (one of the oldest writings basic to his Tradition). Here is a paraphrase which brings the usual translation closer to the language we use today:

The personal Self – the sense of individuality or feeling of ‘I’ – has four degrees.

First comes the physical condition – common to all – perception turned outward; agents of perception, and agencies of action, and chemical transmission (‘pranas’), wherein the individual enjoys the ‘material world’. This is known as the ‘daytime state’.

The *second* is the ‘dreaming condition’ – perception turned inward; drawing from past experiences of the same agents of perception, of action and of chemical transmission stored in the memory; wherein the individual enjoys more subtle matter, experienced as fantasy pictures, thoughts, dreams, desires (ordinarily regarded as ‘immaterial’).

In ‘deep sleep’, man feels no desire, remembers no dream. This deepest sleep is the *third* condition.

So far, there looks to be fairly close agreement between this oldest of teachings derived from direct experience, and the evidence currently derived from electrographic records of the brain. But ask the question ‘Where does our consciousness (which includes our feeling of ‘I’) *come from?*’ You’ll see that this is the chief point that current science has to omit. By this omission Western *psychology* (for example) is falsifying the evidence, ‘like the producer who presents *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark’, as one scientist has recently put it. For it doesn’t require much self-observation to realise that this changing consciousness of ours is only a reflection of some pure and unconditioned Source of Consciousness, just as the changing scene we see during the day is only a reflection of the light of the Sun. Both reflections (the physical and the psychological) are therefore not permanently real, being conditioned by what the light happens to fall upon, and also by what is coming between the observer and the Source of Light.

Thus the *Upanishad* continues:

That Self is the Lord of all; inhabitant of the hearts of all; the Source of all; Creator and dissolver of beings. There is nothing that Pure Consciousness does not know.

That Self is not knowable by perception whether turned inward or outward nor by both combined. That is neither what is known, nor not known, nor is That the sum of all that might be known. That cannot be seen, grasped or bargained with; indefinable, unthinkable, indescribable.

The only proof of the existence of That, is union with it. That is the peaceful, the good, the One without a second. That is the *fourth* degree of Self – the worthiest of all.

There need, of course, be no conflict between experience gained through valid methods of Self-realization, and the 'research front' of today's sciences. Both kinds of work are necessary; but our work begins where experimental science has, by its own terms of reference, to leave off.

[Pause for discussion]

PART 2

The question 'What is coming between the observer and the Source of Light or Consciousness?' leads at once to one of the chief contributions of the original Shri Shankara twenty-five centuries ago. By whatever route one travels towards that 'fourth degree of Self' described by the *Upanishad*, one must penetrate through 'five veils of illusion' which stand between the observer and the 'Universal Self' or Param-Atman; and (if you are interested) we can proceed to the study of these this term.

The existence of these five veils explains the necessity for the eight steps of the classical System of Yoga which were outlined at our recent meeting of meditators. But, fortunately, our System of Meditation is a short-cut which begins at the 5th Step, by means of which the dispersed mind of the daytime state can be brought to a single focus. Not only is this precisely what is most needed for sanity in the Western world today; but, if achieved, it will gradually look after the first four steps of Yoga and also enable an individual to proceed to the last three.

It is (and always has been) a very common fallacy among all who try to realize their inherent possibilities, to suppose that higher states of Consciousness are merely an extension of the ordinary daytime state. In fact, it lies precisely in the reverse direction, for the 'waking state' on the physical level is 'deep sleep' on the Spiritual level. One cannot hear the 'Voice of the silence' in all the noise that is going on.

This fifth Step is called Pratyahara, of which the root is 'Hr' and means simply 'to take away or abbreviate'. It is a process opposite to that dispersion of the mind which is our chief obstacle today, both in the Spiritual world and in the efficient conduct of life. We can get at its meaning more by examples than by definitions.

1st example: Mr. Ouspensky was noted for the economy and terseness of his speech, which caused his words to enter and remain in the memory of his hearers. He never used an unnecessary word if he could help it; but perhaps some of you don't know how hard he worked at this both as a writer and as a speaker. Endlessly he would train himself by taking some sentence like:

I hope you will all be able to come tomorrow and hear further answers to your questions.

then he would proceed to strike out each unnecessary word in turn until only the two necessary words 'come tomorrow' remained!

2nd example: The first stage in our meditation consists in 'taking away' everything else; withdrawing from everything until only one thing remains. As our interpreter (Jaiswal) has just explained to me by letter, this consists in 'withdrawing a lot into the little, and making the coarse into the subtle'. Only then the 6th Step of Yoga, Dharana or 'one-pointed attention' (as in the story of the 'arrow-maker'), becomes possible. But we won't get far with the two half-hours unless we find ways of practising this at other times.

3rd example: The unrelenting pursuit of any creative art has taught the greatest artists the value of this principle of abbreviation.

Take painting: the beginner or amateur who sets out to copy nature soon discovers (if he is truthful) that this is quite futile – for the subtle and changing play of light on solid objects cannot truly be represented by coarse materials like paints, paper or canvas. The ordinary professional painter earns his living by finding a way of painting what will sell; and he usually adopts a convention by which he gets known to his admirers. But the dedicated painter of genius, having spent many years in achieving complete mastery of his medium of expression, may reach Self-realization by exactly this ‘withdrawal of the coarse into the subtle’. You see this in the later work of many artists (like Velasquez, Rembrandt, Turner, Monet), but the clearest verbal expression comes (strangely enough) from the usually inarticulate Cézanne in an off-the-record talk with his friend Gasquet:

Cézanne: I have my motif (he joins his hands). A motif you see, is this... (he repeats the gesture, draws his hands apart, fingers spread out, and brings them together again, slowly, slowly, then joins them, presses them together and contracts them, making them interlace).

There you have it; that’s what one must attain. If I pass too high or too low, all is ruined. There mustn’t be a single link too loose, not a crevice through which may escape the emotion, the light, the truth. I advance, you understand, all of my canvas at one time – together. I bring together in the same spirit, the same faith, all that is scattered. All that we see disperses, vanishes; is it not so? Nature is always the same, but nothing remains of it, nothing of what comes to our sight. Our art ought to give the shimmer of its duration with the elements, the appearance of all its changes. It ought to make us taste it eternally.

What is underneath? Nothing, perhaps. Perhaps everything. You understand? Thus I join these straying hands. I take them from the left, from right, here, there, everywhere, tones, colours, shades. I fix them, I bring them together. They make lines. They become objects, rocks, trees, without my thinking about it. They take on volume. They acquire value. If these volumes, these values, correspond on my canvas, in my feeling, to the planes and patches of colour which are there before my eyes, very good! My canvas joins hands. It doesn’t vacillate. It does not pass too high or too low. It is true, it is full. But if I feel the least distraction, the least weakness, above all, if I interpret too much one day, if today I am carried away by a theory which is contrary to that of the day before, if I *think* while painting, if I *intervene*, why then everything is gone.

(from *Cézanne’s Compositions* by Earle Loran.)

Perhaps you will each find your own way of understanding and practising this 5th Step, ‘Abbreviation’, both in your meditation and in the practise of something you are good at, and enjoy doing. But do begin by abbreviating your discussions!

* * *

