

To Know for Oneself

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HOW do we know what we think we know? Can we really know anything truly? This depends upon what we mean by knowing: being just acquainted with or really understanding a subject? We have a number of words to express how deep-rooted is our knowing in our consciousness. To think: the beginning of the process. To feel: having an emotional conviction. To believe: accepting without personal experience. To experience: taking part in events personally. To apprehend: grasping an idea by sensual or intellectual experience. To comprehend: grasping the idea as a whole with mental understanding. To understand: comprehending the full meaning and full explanation.

From ancient times philosophers have questioned the nature of knowledge and its relation to truth, and the relation of the knower, the knowing and the known.

Philosophy, including metaphysics, is unlike other fields of investigation in that it is not limited in scope but takes the world or Nature as a whole, and sets out to find answers on the nature of knowledge itself, on truth, error, being and experience. The aim of philosophy is

for completeness, pressing all questions to the ultimate end.

Experience includes both subjective and objective, but it is not concerned with the unknowable. Thus one can say that knowledge with experience is concerned with the content and implications of our conscious experience.

The method of metaphysics developed by philosophers over the last four hundred years is of interest with regard to levels of knowing. Descartes used the dogmatic approach, beginning with an affirmation about which there can be no possible doubt. This implied assuming the truth of something known. Locke pursued this method to analyse the content of the mind itself, the psychological approach beginning 'I think' and then bringing out what is contained in individual consciousness. Kant's critical approach was to examine the methods and grounds of knowledge itself, epistemology, with emphasis on the distinction between objective and subjective. He asked: Is this assumed distinction valid? What does our *experience* of the world imply with regard to our *knowledge* of the world?

Thus philosophic thought moved

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towards a broader view of the nature of knowledge in relation to the universe as a whole. This links up with the Theosophical theme of the Oneness of all things, that I am one with the world outside and therefore I can stretch my consciousness to embrace the world, taking what is objective into my subjective consciousness; then I can really know the world and that does not mean just the physical material world.

On this point H. P. Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy* says:

Ancient Theosophists claimed, and so do the modern, that the infinite cannot be known by the finite — i.e. sensed by the finite self — but that the divine essence could be communicated to the higher Spiritual Self in a state of ecstasy. Truth can be experienced 'by making oneself as pure as the incorporeal beings'.

That surely is a high level of knowing.

Let us then examine how we experience and know the world about us, both the objective and the subjective worlds.

We all live in a number of, what philosophy calls, 'universes'. A universe in this sense is the area of conscious activity in which an individual is operating at a given time. The term is used especially in logic as meaning the field of reference. Examples of such fields are: one's habit of feeling, one's mode and standard of behaviour, one's emotional temperament, one's business life, one's family.

We are consciously active in all these universes, with special concentration at

different times, sometimes limited to one, at other times to several. According to Theosophy we also have a plurality of vehicles of consciousness: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and these act each in its own group of universes.

Other universes recognized by philosophy are: scientific, ethical, aesthetic, religious, speculative. Our reaction to what we hear, read, think about or experience depends upon which universe we are in at the time. Are we making the judgement with our scientific or ethical or aesthetic or religious attitude of consciousness? Such approaches result in *varieties* of knowing.

Taking the vehicles or *levels* of consciousness in the traditional Theosophical form we react to the outside world in a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual manner, our judgement being prejudiced according to which principle or principles are dominant at the time.

So how do we know what we claim to know? The physical body knows by practical experience and experiment. Material Science is based on the observation of physical phenomena, either natural as in the observation of plants, animals, astronomical objects, etc., or by planned experiments.

Our higher vehicles of consciousness are more subtle. It is not easy to disentangle the mind from the emotions. And what of the spiritual? There is one factor linking all our vehicles of consciousness (levels) and our personal universes (varieties). We may call it the personal equation. I know that I am. I am aware of

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myself. I am aware of personal continuity, that although conditions may have changed I am still the same person who went to school so many years ago, who lived through two world wars. I shall be the same tomorrow — I hope.

But what I really want to know is how I know anything. What is the mechanism, the instrument, the vehicle for knowing and then how do I judge the value of what I know, or think I know? When I say 'I know who I am', that 'I' is a very complex entity.

During the early stages of evolution the 'I' is concerned with its own existence, its continued existence, and this is more or less achieved by animal instinct: the search for food, self-protection and the future existence of the race, the species. Gradually new qualities appear, not only the activity of a larger brain, but the calling forth of what we now call the soul or spirit. Mankind rather suddenly broke through to a higher plane of existence, a wider universe, and so the 'I', the self became aware of being able to know, not only the objective world outside, not only the objective world of its own body, but also of the subjective world felt to be somewhere within, undefined and vague, but definitely there.

This experience is located in the mind. To quote Descartes, 'I think, therefore I am.' One might expand that, 'I think, therefore I know that I am.' But 'know' requires an object: I know what? We can only know those things which can be absorbed into our *personal* consciousness, into the little inner world of myself.

Brain, Mind, Intelligence

Science has tried to explain this subjective experience of the objective world by trying to prove that it is all in the electro-chemical activity of the brain, that the mind *is* the brain.

A word with a broader meaning than mind is intelligence. The mind is defined by psychologists as the seat of consciousness, thought and feeling. Using Theosophical language, this is the vehicle of conscious thought and feeling, *manas*. Intelligence is the faculty of knowing and reasoning. It is a quality rather than an instrument or vehicle. In this sense intelligence bears the same relation to the mind as the state of being bears to the individual. I, the individual, am. The mind, acting intelligently, knows and reasons.

The above may be defining the terms arbitrarily but it may help us to understand that faculty, or rather quality, of intelligence that is beyond the brain, that pre-existed the brain and will outlive it. It may be that the Sanskrit term *Chit* expresses what I have tried to convey. According to several glossaries *Chit* is 'usually rendered as intelligence, but also consciousness and pure thought' (Bendit). *Chitta* is said 'to correspond to the mind of modern psychology but with a more comprehensive import and field of functioning' (Taimni).

For this reason I have chosen the English word 'intelligence', comparing it with be-ness as used by H. P. Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy*, where she says of the Absolute, 'IT does not think because it is Absolute Thought itself. Nor does it

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exist . . . as it is absolute existence, and Be-ness, not a Being.’ So I am using intelligence as meaning absolute thought. In support of this, in the same book, HPB says that Sinnett should have called his book *Esoteric Buddhism* with one ‘d’, meaning ‘wisdomism (*Bodha, bodhi, intelligence, wisdom*)’.

The Theosophical view is that intelligence is primal and not the end-product of the evolutionary process as Science would have us believe. There are however quite a number of modern scientists who do accept that mind and intelligence are not limited to the physical brain (See *Intelligence, Human and Cosmic* by Dr E. Lester Smith FRS, and *Roots of Coincidence* by Arthur Koestler). This gives us another way of grading our levels of knowing: the brain at the physical level, the mind as the non-physical vehicle and intelligence the all-pervading essence.

Manas and Mahat

Coming more specifically to the Theosophical approach the levels of knowing may be regarded as higher and lower *manas* with *antahkarana* or middle *manas* as the bridge. Linking this with what has been said about primal intelligence there is another Sanskrit word *Mahat* that literally means great but in the Brahmanical system and in *The Secret Doctrine* it is taken as the Father-Mother of *manas*. It is described figuratively as the ‘mother’ of the *Mānasa-putra-s*, the Sons of Mind, those semi-divine beings (entities) who helped our humanity in the third Root Race of this Round, to

give us ‘intellectual light’. The *mānasa-putra-s* are also said to be our higher natures: they are above us, outside us, yet we share their life. They quickened and enlightened in us the *Manas-manas* of our *manas* septenary.

Mahat, then, is universal mind, mind-as-such (Bendit), pure mind, that which I have called intelligence, the highest level of knowing.

From that level we receive our individual mind *manas-manas*, sometimes called *buddhi-manas* or rather loosely *higher manas*. *Buddhi-manas* is preferred, interpreting *buddhi* as illumination, and therefore *buddhi-manas* as the illumined mind. This has been elaborated in elementary Theosophical literature as that thinking principle which can deal with abstract ideas or concepts. By contrast the lower *manas* or lower mind is considered to be able to deal only with concrete ideas.

The higher *manas* (mind) is that which continues after death as an essence in the spiritual Monad. It is also called the reincarnating Ego. We shall not fully develop this until the end of the next (5th) Round, but in this 5th Race we rehearse its use. At this level, if we can disentangle it from the lower *manas* with its psychical and etherico-physical shrouds, then we may really know in the sense of contacting reality.

The lower *manas*, also called *kāma-manas*, is the personal, animal or desire mind of HPB’s writings. It works on the perceptions received through the senses from the outside and therefore deals with

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the objective world. This limits its functioning to concrete things and clear-cut ideas. At this level all thinking is influenced by feelings and emotions, and by the attraction of material things.

It may be useful to think of two minds and of its septenary nature, but there is in fact only one mind which is the central pivot of human consciousness. This may be thought of as middle *manas* or *antahkarana*. The latter word means literally 'between cause or effect'. One might say the 'go-between'. It is used particularly for the bridge between the Divine Ego and the personal soul of man, and this bridge is at middle *manas*, between higher and lower mind.

More generally it is the bridge between any two of the monadic centres in the septenary constitution of man. Applying the monadic idea to the four levels of knowing, *mahat*, higher *manas*, middle *manas* and lower *manas*, one realizes that these levels merge into another by the influence of the Divine Monad, the one ultimate source of all that we as individuals are. From that source flow intelligence and life to form foci of consciousness within each human being and at each level.

I have surveyed a wide field of philosophy, psychology and some Theosophical ideas on the constitution of man to indicate what a complex organization of consciousness we have or are. This means that to know anything for oneself, one needs to acquire an attitude of great open-mindedness. Whatever knowledge we acquire through our senses, our study, our imagination, our intuition, it will be

influenced by the level or variety of mental activity we apply to that acquisition. This applies to all inquiry and research whether in the realm of physical Science or the field of metaphysics, including Theosophy.

The important point is to know what factors are likely to be prejudicing one's judgement. The reception of ideas is modified by the universe in which the mind is behaving at the time, scientific, ethical, etc., and as these vary from time to time, so there are natural inconsistencies in our thinking, even on the same subject. Also our vehicles of consciousness change in their dominance so that knowing is not limited to the mental level. We also have the limitation put on the mind and intelligence by the limitations of the physical brain. Finally there is the more specifically mental approach in the Theosophical idea of the three levels of thinking, higher, middle and lower mind (*manas*) that are manifestations of the Universal Mind or intelligence (*Mahat*), with the Monad as an integrating influence to embrace all levels of thought into one whole Being, the microcosm as an embodiment of the macrocosm.

Such a complex nature! Is it any wonder that we find it difficult to know just what we know when we think we know anything? Theosophical literature has emphasized the need for each individual to establish his own fund of useful knowledge, or at least to be able to say what he knows for himself and what he has merely accepted because other people have told him.

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This idea of knowing for oneself is particularly important with regard to our knowledge of the real things of life, those that are the particular concern of religion: the ancient wisdom, the perennial philosophy, Theosophy.

From the Unreal to the Real

There is a method of raising the consciousness to such a high level that one is able to examine the contents of the mind freed from any *particular* universe of mental behaviour or level of consciousness: this is the way of meditation. It works by objectivizing one's subjective experiences so that they are examined as from outside oneself. By a paradox this may be making the examination impersonal, but it also makes the result more personal in the sense that the result is knowledge for oneself rather than the negative result of accepting other people's ideas without personal confirmation.

Every real student uses this method whether he calls it meditation or not. He first fixes his mind on the subject. He has to concentrate without distraction from the senses. Then he ponders on it, thinks around it, relates the idea with his background knowledge, considering the subject in all its many aspects and relationships. As the subject unfolds before his mind's eye all biased opinions thereon merge into one comprehensive experience of understanding.

It is usual to refer to the above as a dual process of concentration and meditation: in Sanskrit terms *dhāraṇa* and *dhyāna*. Concentration contracts the mind

and focuses it on the subject. Meditation expands the mind around the subject, enlarging the field of consciousness. Such meditation is creative and opens the mind to a deeper understanding.

It is more usual to think of meditation being used to acquire a personal experience of the nature of reality, truth in an abstract sense, and a means of attaining so-called liberation and spiritual enlightenment. But many scientists use the method in the field of orthodox research, although they may not call it meditation. All scientific research has to be conducted in such a manner that the results are ultimately independent of first impressions and unbiased by previous mental conditioning.

A good example of this is to be seen in the progress of ideas on the nature of matter. To the layman matter was, and for everyday practical purposes still is, a continuum. By that I mean that solids have surfaces that are continuous whether smooth, rough or soft. Liquids and gases are fluid but there is still to the senses a continuity throughout a mass of the fluid. Physical matter can be broken up into smaller and smaller particles and until 1896 Science regarded matter as composed of small indivisible particles called atoms. The kinetic theory of gases was based on the idea that these atoms were elastic balls bouncing against one another. This was the first step beyond what can be experienced and known by the senses.

The next step was to discover that each atom has a complicated structure, a complex nucleus of protons and neutrons

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at a centre surrounded by electrons at relatively long distances from that centre. Although the senses could not see or feel the atom, the mind produced models that could be visualized, first the Bohr-Rutherford planetary model and then the Lewis-Langmuir one with the electrons at the corners of an imaginary cube. By both models, solid matter was now seen to consist of almost infinitely small specks of matter separated by such relatively large distances as to appear to be just empty space.

But even those three-dimensional models, beyond the five senses, had to be abandoned for a *mathematical formula* still more remote from the world of everyday things. The specks of matter now became waves behaving as particles, but not accepted as particles, waves of energy, for it is the energy rather than the structure with which physicists are now concerned. Such an atom cannot even be visualized by the mind. It is as if the nearer Science approaches to reality the more remote does our knowledge get from the physical objective world of our senses — first to the mind beyond the senses and then beyond the mind. The wave theory of matter is a mental concept but it opens the way to transcend the mind.

This example of how Science has dematerialized matter has been given to show that modern methods of Science can raise consciousness to transcend the mind. Hence my earlier statement that the way of meditation is used by scientists, and this becomes more obvious as they try to grasp the nature of reality.

Returning to the specific practice of meditation as a way of knowing something of reality for oneself, the term *dhyāna* signifies that the mind and the heart are bathed in pure knowledge and enlightenment, free from the attractions of the outer world, free from the attractions of the lower self.

The next stage is *samādhi*, contemplation. HPB called it ecstasy. It can follow deep meditation when the lower consciousness is united with the higher consciousness. It is as if one takes the lower principles up into the world of Spirit, transmuting them into a wholeness, a union between higher and lower, and between the One and the many.

In speaking of mental levels I have indicated that we should not be too clear-cut in dividing higher from lower. It is useful to analyse one's ways of thinking, concrete and abstract, etc., but one should then rise above the barriers between the different ways. Similarly with meditation, the three stages concentration, meditation and contemplation can be separate and distinct, but it is better to let them merge one into the other. Then the threefold process is *samyama*, literally a 'holding together'. Ernest Wood translated it as poise.

When we say 'we know', there are so many ways of knowing from the sensual experience of the objective world to the subjective experience of *samādhi*, from the acceptance of someone else's theories to one's own personal experience. What we do know is that there is no absolute knowing. All knowledge is relative.

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The nearest we get to reality as individuals is when we are mentally relaxed, free from bias or tension of any kind. That is the aim of meditation and Yoga, taking those practices in their broadest terms, whether used unconsciously by a scientist in orthodox research or consciously by a yogi in his striving for self-realization. Both are concerned with the 'whole of reality'. This concept refers to the higher activities of man and implies that the external world is a manifestation of an ultimate reality, a 'thing' in itself, an absolute. Meditation or study on this can result in a personal glimpse of that absolute, sufficient to bring about a state of perfect equilibrium of one's whole being.

The scientific approach to all knowledge is to hold ideas lightly, recognizing

that at any time some new discovery will change former fixed ideas. So one needs to listen tolerantly to all other ideas, not reacting automatically for or against them. This applies equally to the ancient wisdom, Theosophy, as to any other field of knowledge. What do we really know of the eternal Truths of life and the universe, and do we know them just because we have been told? Although Theosophy has been expounded by generations of thinkers and sages throughout the ages, and in our Society for very many years, each member must eventually establish his own personal approach to Truth, and have the satisfaction that what he accepts, he knows for himself. And when he has found it he must accept that he is still far from knowing the whole of what he has found. ✧

When the superior scholar hears of Tao, he diligently practises it. When the average scholar hears of Tao, he sometimes retains it, sometimes loses it. When the inferior scholar hears of Tao, he loudly laughs at it. Were it not thus ridiculed, it would not be worthy of the name of Tao . . .

If we had sufficient knowledge to walk in the Great Way, what we should most fear would be boastful display.

Tao Te King