What is knowledge?
A reflection based on the work of Sri Aurobindo[1]

author: Matthijs Cornelissen
last revision: September 2017

Introduction

The scientific and technological developments of the twentieth century have expanded our understanding of the workings of the nervous system beyond anything previous generations would have thought possible, but at the same time the concentration on the biological correlates of mental processes seems to have led us away from a deeper understanding of the amazing miracle that is human knowledge as a subjective phenomenon. While an enormous collective effort has gone into the refinement of physical and mathematical instruments with which we can measure the outer physical reality, there is no comparable systematic collective effort to improve our own inner instruments of knowledge. This is true even for research on meditation. With relatively few exceptions, such researches either focus on the physiological states and processes that take place in those who meditate, or on psychological variables that can be measured conveniently by standard objective methodologies (Murphy & Donovan, 1997; Sedlmeier, 2018). As such they are more often than not about physiological and psychological side-effects of meditation, ignoring the aims and objectives of meditation in the culture of origin.[2] Even in research which ostensibly deals with the subjective side of life, the type of experience addressed tends to be limited to what naïve subjects can report about themselves, and in much of modern psychology it is not experience itself but statistically processed reports about experience that are taken as the actual data. As these reports are almost always based on unsophisticated self-observations by representative members of larger populations, all such studies can provide is a kind of social demography of surface mental self-perceptions. Though this has its uses, it is not sufficient for the development of deeper insight in human nature. What is strikingly missing in contemporary psychology is a systematic effort to hone and perfect our inner perception, our sensitivity to what is going on deep within ourselves. Any science that wants to make cumulative progress must look below surface appearances. We have done this with astounding results in the objective domain, but as a civilization, we have neglected the inner side of the equation. Cataloguing and correlating phenomena that are either visible right on the surface (behaviour) or directly below it (through surveys based on naïve introspection) is not enough to develop a really meaningful and effective psychology.

Limitations of the explicit representational mode of knowing

The demand for objectivity has gone hand in hand with a tendency to think of explicit representational knowledge of the outer world as the only type of knowledge that can be

cultivated systematically, reliably, and profitably. This tendency seems to have been reinforced by the ease with which such representational knowledge can be rendered symbolically, stored, manipulated and redistributed digitally. But in the end, it lights up only a tiny corner of the wonder that is human knowledge.

Popular accounts of the history of psychology generally assert that the rise of behaviourism was due to the failure of introspectionism. The two main introspectionist schools failed to come to an agreement on some of the basic issues they had tried to research, and within the philosophical and methodological environment of the times, there was no indisputable way in which anyone could decide who was right. The problem was no doubt a genuine one. Introspection is indeed a more complicated issue than its early protagonists realised, and the Euro-American civilization of the time lacked the philosophical sophistication and practical know-how needed to turn introspection into a reliable tool of investigation. In itself, it is thus not surprising that the early European and American psychologists encountered difficulties with introspection, these difficulties are real. The tragedy is, however, that they did not look beyond the confines of Euro-American thought to solve them. As a result, they fell headlong into the abyss of behaviourism, from which mainstream psychology, in spite of all subsequently added sophistication, has still not fully recovered.

An inclusive approach: the Indian perspective

The Indian tradition has developed a very different and, I think, in several respects more sophisticated and effective approach to arrive at reliable psychological knowledge than modern science. It appears to me that there is a significant qualitative gap between the way contemporary psychology is trying to research and conceptualise human nature and the marvellous internal coherence, comprehensiveness, subtlety and intricacy with which the Indian tradition has done the same. Seen from an Indian standpoint, the core of the difficulty with mainstream modern science is that it has uncritically accepted the ordinary waking consciousness as its universal standard: even where mainstream science has tried to study other types of consciousness, it has never seriously doubted the validity and applicability of the ordinary waking consciousness on the side of the observing, analysing and describing scientist.[3] Confronted with areas where the defectiveness and self-contradictory nature of the ordinary waking consciousness are too glaring to be ignored, it has simply celebrated agnosticism as if it were a virtue. As a result we are stuck in terms of theory with "anomalous" phenomena in parapsychology, an inability to arrive at a universally accepted interpretation of quantum-mechanics, an unexplained, and in all likelihood unexplainable "emergence" of consciousness out of the complexity of unconscious processes in the brain, and the imbroglio that arises when social constructionism and other reductionist epistemologies are applied to themselves. And as far as the application of psychology goes, we have an official science of human nature that is third-person and thus intrinsically manipulative, that has the greatest difficulty dealing effectively and respectfully with experiences and inner realities that for the majority of mankind are of the greatest importance, that in spite of over 100 years of research has not managed to come to any consensus or definite conclusion on what it actually is that works in psychotherapy (Bruce E. Wampold, 2001), and that has spawned an educational system whose simplistic assumptions about the nature of human motivation and knowledge have a far from optimal influence on society.

The Indian tradition, on the other hand, has realised from very early on, that the ordinary waking consciousness is just one type of consciousness amongst many others, that some of these other types of conscious are far more perceptive, effective and harmonious than the ordinary waking state, and that with sufficient effort we human beings can learn to partake in these higher, more coherent and sensible types of consciousness. I don't think it is exaggerated to say that compared to Indian psychology, Western psychology is still where

astronomy was before the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo: Just as Ptolemy took the little patch of the physical earth on which we stand as the centre around which the whole physical universe is turning, so contemporary science takes our ordinary waking consciousness as the measure of all things.[4] The Indian tradition on the other hand has taken full cognizance of the degree to which the consciousness of the observer determines the kind of world he can see and interact with, and has tried to perfect knowledge by improving the subjective side of the relationship between subject and object. As I'll discuss later in more detail, it has done this by following two, interconnected, but clearly distinct pathways. The first is the re-location of the centre of the observing (and participating) consciousness from the ego to the Self. The second is the perfecting of the *antaḥkaraṇa*, the human instrument of knowledge which operates between that Self and the manifest world. In the *Upaniṣads* the stress is squarely on the former, on what one might call the essential aspect. The *Kena Upaniṣad*, for example, which may well be one of the oldest texts devoted entirely to epistemology and cognition, begins straight with the core-question, "who is it that knows in our knowing, lives in our life, speaks in our speech, sees in our seeing, and hears in our hearing?" In our technology driven society, we are fascinated by processes and scared of essences, so I'll start with the instrumental part, the purification of the instruments of knowledge. Before we get there, however, it is necessary to realise that there are several, quite different ways of knowing.

Diverse ways of knowing

For many of us, the most important and memorable experiences in life are those that connect us to deep, inner realities. They need not necessarily be of a spiritual or religious type. Such experiences occur even in the midst of a completely ordinary life—there is something extremely beautiful and deeply intriguing in simple things like our ability to hear a song in the distance, to see a tree swaying in the wind, to feel the warmth of the first sun rays on our skin in the morning, to look into the eyes of a child. These are cognitive events, but not of the ordinary representative type. How do we study these subtler moments of knowledge? How do we explore the utter miracle that is our subjective experience of ourselves and the world? These may seem questions suitable only for poets and dreamers, best left for Sundays, and unfit for practical men, but they may actually be crucial to our survival—psychology will fail the coming generations if it does not help us to develop a deeper insight into the more subtle aspects of human nature and the love and oneness that sustain us. Way back, in 1915, Sri Aurobindo wrote about this:

> The safety of Europe has to be sought in the recognition of the spiritual aim of human existence, otherwise she will be crushed by the weight of her own unillumined knowledge and soulless organisation.

In his next sentence he stressed the need for balance. There he said:

> The safety of Asia lies in the recognition of the material mould and mental conditions in which that aim has to be worked out, otherwise she will sink deeper into the slough of despond of a mental and physical incompetence to deal with the facts of life and the shocks of a rapidly changing movement.

Now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Asia is clearly waking up, but the danger of insufficient respect for the spirit is still real, and this time that danger looms not only in Europe.

It is in this area of subtle, subjective enquiry that the Indian tradition has perhaps made its greatest contribution to our collective understanding, and the rest of this chapter will be

mainly about the type of inner knowledge that the Indian civilization has cultivated over thousands of years—why it must be there, how it can be found, and how it can be made more accurate and reliable. For my interpretation of the Indian tradition I base myself on the work of Sri Aurobindo (Arvind A. Ghose, 1872–1950) who made a comprehensive synthesis of the Indian tradition in order 'to feel out for the thought of the future, to help in shaping its foundations and to link it to the best and most vital thought of the past' (1998, p. 103). His unique combination of spiritual depth, intellectual rigour and clarity of exposition, combined with the astounding detail and precision with which he describes the psychological processes that help or mar our individual and collective evolution, make his writings an exceptionally rich store-house of insights in human nature and its development.

1. Four types of knowledge in the ordinary waking state

Sri Aurobindo locates the secret of human knowledge in depths of our being that may not be directly available to all of us, but there are links between the depths and the surface and at one place in his main philosophical work, *The Life Divine,* Sri Aurobindo distinguishes four types of knowledge that all occur within our ordinary surface awareness: knowledge by identity, knowledge by intimate direct contact, knowledge by separative direct contact, and separative knowledge by indirect contact (Aurobindo, 1990, pp. 524–532). The first of these, knowledge by identity, or *vijñāna*, plays a central role in the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*, but is almost entirely ignored in contemporary science; aspects of the other three are known, respectively, as experiential knowledge, introspection, and the ordinary, sense-based knowledge of the outside physical world. Sri Aurobindo lists them, in harmony with the *Vedic* tradition, from the inside out: he starts with the knowledge of the Self, and ends with the knowledge of the outside world. I'll discuss them here in the modern sequence, starting with the outer world, and moving from there, slowly towards the deeper, inner realities.

1. Separative knowledge by indirect contact is the ordinary, sense-based knowledge that we have of the physical world around us. Sri Aurobindo calls it *separative* because it goes with a clear sense of separation between the observer and the observed. He calls it *indirect*, because it is dependent on the physical senses. A tremendous collective effort goes at present into the development of this type of knowledge, and as it is the bedrock of science and technology, it plays an ever-increasing role in our society. It is this type of knowledge that makes the continuous stream of ever more fancy gadgets possible, and perhaps as a result of this, there is an increasing tendency to think that this is the only type of knowledge that really works and is worth cultivating.

2. Knowledge by separative direct contact has a much lower status both in contemporary science and society. When applied to ourselves, it is known as introspection, the knowledge we acquire when we try to look pseudo-objectively at what is going on inside ourselves. In this type of knowledge, the usual sense-organs are not needed and in that sense it is *direct*, but it is still *separative* because we try to look at what is going on inside ourselves 'objectively', that is, as if were looking at ourselves from the outside. Psychology cannot do very well without introspection, as it is the simplest, and in some areas the only way to find out what is going on inside someone's mind, but it is notoriously difficult to make reliable. Classical behaviourism tried for many years to avoid it entirely, but at present psychology is making an extensive use of self-reports based on introspection. We will see later how the Indian tradition tackles the difficulties inherent in introspection and we will discuss some of the methods it uses to enhance introspection's reliability. I am inclined to think that these Indian methods are not only logically impeccable, but also indispensable if we want to take psychology forward.

3. Knowledge by intimate direct contact is the implicit knowledge we have of things in which we are directly involved. When applied to ourselves it is known as experiential knowledge. Sri Aurobindo calls it again *direct* because the sense organs are not required, and *by intimate contact* because one knows the processes that are taking place not by looking at them from the outside, but by being directly with them. When I'm very happy, for example, I need not observe myself to find out whether I am happy or not. If I would look at myself in a (pseudo-) objective manner, through introspection, I would say something like 'Hey, I'm happy', and this would imply a certain distance from the happiness. But I can also stay directly with the happiness, and exclaim, in full identification with my feelings, 'What a great day it is!' If I do the latter, I also know the state I am in, but not in a representative, objective manner. I know then what I am as if from within, through a direct intimacy with the inner state or process.[5] It might appear as if the introspective mode of knowing oneself goes more with the mind, while experiential knowledge, knowledge 'by being with', goes more with one's feelings and body-sense, but this is not always the case: When one fully identifies with one's thoughts, for example, there is a mixture: the thought itself belongs most likely to the realm of 'separative knowledge', while the implicit, pre-reflective selfawareness of 'being busy thinking' belongs to the realm of 'knowledge by intimate direct contact'. Knowledge by intimate direct contact is used in many forms of therapy and all kind of psychological training programmes, but till now it does not seem to have received the theoretical attention it deserves.

4. Knowledge by identity is for Sri Aurobindo the first and most important of these four types of knowledge. In the ordinary waking state it is, however, hardly developed. The only thing we normally know entirely by identity is the sheer fact of our own existence. According to Sri Aurobindo it does play, however, a crucial role in all other types of knowing. In experiential knowledge (type 3) this is clear enough, as here we tend to identify with our experience. In introspection (type 2) it is less immediately apparent, as we do not fully identify with what we see, but try to observe what goes on inside ourselves, in as detached and 'objective' a manner as we can muster. Still, in introspection we recognize that what we look at is happening within our own being. In sensebased knowledge (type 1) the involvement of knowledge by identity is the least obvious, but even here knowledge by identity does play a role in at least two distinct ways: The first is that even though we normally feel a certain distance between ourselves and the things we observe 'outside' of us, we still see them as part of 'our world', we feel some inner, existential connection between ourselves and what we see. The degree of this sense of connectedness may, of course, differ. On one extreme, there are the mystics who feel in a very concrete sense 'one with the world'; on the other extreme, there are forms of schizophrenia, in which hardly any connection is felt between one's self and the world; the ordinary consciousness wavers somewhere between these extremes.[6] The second manner by which knowledge by identity supports all other forms of knowledge is not through this existential sense of connectedness, but through the structural core of their cognitive content. According to Sri Aurobindo, the information the senses provide is far too incomplete and disjointed to create the wonderfully precise and coherent image that we make of the world. He holds that there must be some inner knowledge, some basic 'idea' about how the world should hang together, that helps to create meaning out of the raw impressions, which our senses provide. According to the Indian tradition knowledge by identity can provide this as it is the core-element of all forms of intuition,[7] and, as such, the source of the deep theories about reality that guide our perception, the fundamental rules of logical thinking, a large part of mathematics, the ability to discriminate between what is true and false, real and unreal, and perhaps even the essential core of many of the new insights about the physical reality that have flooded the human knowledge-space in recent years. Once fully developed and purified, Sri Aurobindo considers it the only type of knowledge that can be made completely reliable. Within Indian philosophy it is known by different names that each highlight one aspect of it. One typical example is the fascinating quaternity of *saṃjñāna*,

ājñāna, *vijñāna*, *prajñāna* which we will have a closer look at in the next chapter. Another is *ātmavidyā*, the knowledge of the Self which contains the largely subconscious link that exists between our individual consciousness and the cosmic consciousness that sustains the manifestation as a whole.

1. Separative knowledge by indirect contact Sense-based, constructed knowledge of the outer world. *Scientific knowledge*
2. Knowledge by separative direct contact Looking at one's own mental processes, 'as if from outside'. *Introspection*
3. Knowledge by intimate direct contact Awareness of one's own inner states 'by being with them'. *Experiential knowledge*
4. Knowledge by identity Awareness of the simple fact of one's own existence (details of self-concept provided by other three types). *Knowledge inherent in one's existence*

Table 16.1. Four types of knowledge in the ordinary waking state.

Mixed patterns

Before we can have a closer look at the possibility of developing true intuitive knowledge, we have to consider a few caveats which Sri Aurobindo himself mentions about this division of four distinct types of knowledge. The first one is that these four types of knowing are not entirely separate or exclusive of each other. There are smooth transitions between them, and in daily life they often occur mixed up together. When I am angry, for example, something in me stands apart and still knows that I am what I am, that the world is what it is, and that deep, deep within, in spite of anything that happens, all is well (type 4, knowledge by identity). And yet, I am also directly involved in getting angry. In fact, to some extent I become the anger (type 3, experiential knowledge). At the same time,[8] part of me watches what is going on in myself semi-objectively. I observe that I do not think clearly, that I have a cramp in my stomach and that there is a nagging fear in me that things are going wrong (type 2, introspection). While all this is going on, I notice that I cannot speak very clearly, that my hands tremble and that the person I am talking to looks nonplussed about what I am so worked-up about (type 1, sense-based knowledge).

Not all knowledge is representational and intentional

A second issue is that of these four modes of knowing, only the first two are representational and intentional in the sense of being 'about something'.[9] To realize that there are types of knowledge that are not representational, one need not rise to any extraordinary state of *samādhi* or to some otherwise non-egoic consciousness. Even in perfectly ordinary states, when we feel happy to be alive, when we love the world, or just one special person in it, we know the state we are in, but the knowledge of this state is not representative, it is a knowledge embedded in our very being. We can subsequently take distance from that direct experience, look at it introspectively, and then describe what we then see in a third person, 'objective' format – the result is then representative knowledge of the introspective type, which is indeed intentional – but the original knowledge was not about something at all, it was simply itself.

Not all knowledge is constructed

A third thing to note is that underlying the four types of knowledge there are three, closely related gradients. The first is the gradient from the surface aspects of the outer world to our own inmost essence. The second is the gradient from gross matter, via mind, to pure spirit. The third is the gradient from knowledge which is constructed with difficulty out of diverse elements, to knowledge which comes directly, spontaneously, simply because it *is*. I will discuss the first two gradients in some more detail in the other sections, but the third gradient deals directly with the very essence of what knowledge actually is, and it needs to be taken up at least tentatively before we can move on.

According to the cognitive sciences, what we know in our ordinary consciousness about our environment is the result of a fantastically complex mental labour combining new sense-impressions with earlier findings. This complexity is supposed to be there equally in the way the individual makes sense of his own life in the world and in the way science builds up our collective knowledge base. But if Sri Aurobindo and the Indian tradition are right, then not all knowledge is 'constructed' in this complicated manner and there is a second type of knowledge that comes to us in the form of ready-made intuitions. This direct, intuitive apprehension of reality is part of what Sri Aurobindo calls knowledge by identity, and he holds that it plays a far greater role in our individual and collective life than we realize. There is fascinating evidence of the amazing extent to which perception is guided by expectations,[10] and according to Sri Aurobindo these expectations are not only informed by past experience and present circumstances but also by a deep intuitive knowledge of how the world should be by its own inherent logic, a logic of which we are aware, however dimly, because in our deepest essence we are one with it. In this chapter I will try to show that this idea is not as far-fetched as it may seem to those who have been brought up with the idea that all knowledge comes from without.

According to the *Vedic* tradition, such inner knowledge can exist because it is a conscious energy *(cit-śakti*) that gives reality its shape and dynamism. Interestingly one can find implicit hints of similar ideas even in the informal language used by scientists. 'Applied' and 'pure' scientists have in their daily practice very different attitudes towards knowledge. Technical people, who work in the field of applied knowledge, typically see themselves as *inventing* new ways to use knowledge; pure scientists do not claim to invent, they claim to *discover* laws that have always been there. The technical man creates a new application; the pure scientist discovers a pre-existing truth and then tries to formulate it in the most elegant and useful manner. The difference between the two is, of course, not absolute, and if we look closely we see that in almost all our cognitive processes, there are elements of both. All formulated knowledge is partly discovery, partly construction. But the core question remains: Where did the knowledge hide before the scientists 'discovered' it? Did it exist only implicitly in the movements and patterns of nature from where the scientist abstracted it while formulating his laws and theoretical models?

The physicalist bias of mainstream Western science makes it hard for it to comprehend the intuitive component of knowledge. Hard-core physicalists like Daniel C. Dennett, for example, presume that this world is built entirely through dumbly mechanical or chance-driven processes (1994)[11] and argue that complex entities can be reduced without losing anything significant to their constituting components ('you are your neurons'). Within such a philosophical framework knowledge is ultimately based on sense-perceptions ('facts'), and there is no place for intuitive knowledge (except for the subconscious pseudo-variety). The Indian tradition, on the other hand, has no real problem with the existence of intuitive knowledge. In fact, the possibility of achieving a direct perception of the knowledge underlying reality is not only one of the ends aimed at by *yoga*, but also its historical and philosophical starting point: All authoritative texts on *yoga*, whether ancient or modern, are supposed to have been received through such a direct perception of truths behind reality, whether through direct vision of truth, *dṛṣṭi*, revelation; or through direct hearing of truth, *śruti*, inspiration. Given the present predominance of Dennett's worldview, it becomes useful to consider how one might move from the narrower materialist's view to the much more comprehensive, and, I would say, more coherent, Indian one.

The knowledge in things

When we say that science has discovered a certain law of physics, the phrase we use implies that the law existed beforehand, but if that is so, where was it before discovery, and what form did it have? It is clear that it cannot have had the same linguistic or mathematical form as it now has in the human mind, but the fabulous beauty, order and lawfulness of nature does suggest that there must be in matter at least some kind of built-in order, which we could look at as a kind of subconscious know-how, not dissimilar to the implicit know-how humans have of complex skills like cycling. To recognize the inner structure of matter as a form of know-how, one might look at the knowledge-constituent of matter as a subconscious habit of form, a tendency to act in harmony with the basic *dharma*[12] of the physical entity in question: an electron 'knows' how to behave like an electron, a hydrogen molecule how to behave like a hydrogen molecule, a rock like a rock, and a river like a river.

Interestingly, the information content needed to do so is not as small as it may appear at first sight. As matter makes no mistakes,every part of it needs to have the 'know-how' required to act perfectly according to the laws that guide its movement. As the laws of physics are supposed to be interrelated and derivable from each other, this might well mean that in some extremely involved way, it has to be aware of all the laws that keep our universe together. What is more, as matter's movements are influenced, to whatever small degree, by everything else that occurs in the universe, each part has to be perfectly aware, in however implicit a manner, of everything else that is going on. Together this amounts to a rather staggering kind of 'subconscient omniscience' which in a fully automatic fashion self-limits itself to the very simple set of dumb but perfect actions that are proper to each little part of reality. One could of course argue that even if this complete knowledge has to be there in every part, it is still far too implicit, far too 'involved' to be extracted. In practice this may be true, at least for the moment, but it does not change the basic principle, and thus the potential.

In the *Vedic* ontology the universe is a manifestation of consciousness, and it holds, like many ancient philosophical systems, that the knowledge that is implicitly embedded in the physical reality, is a reflection from realms of pure knowledge that exist permanently and inalienably, parallel to and in a sense 'far above'[13] the physical world. More interesting for psychology, it holds that since our individual consciousness is in its essence still one with the consciousness that engenders the universe, there arises the possibility of aligning our own individual consciousness to the knowledge that is built-in in the very structure of the universe. In other words there is a possibility of genuine, spontaneous, and perfect intuitive

knowledge and action, which can arise in us because the world and all that is in it is in its essence one with the essence of our own being.[14]

As discussed earlier in our discussion of knowledge by identity, the constructed representational knowledge science consists of is in this context seen as a mixture of knowledge and ignorance, an attempt instigated and aided but also limited and distorted by our senses, that in this complex manner can arrive at a progressively more accurate reflection inside our brain-based individual mind-stuff of the basic knowledge structures that underlie the actual workings of the manifestation. Indications of such mixtures of sense-based and direct intuitive knowledge can be found in all fields of human endeavour: in mathematics and logic, in the sudden insights that lead to a new revolution in technology, and in lines of poetry that haunt the reader because of their unearthly perfection, their 'inevitability' as Sri Aurobindo calls it.[15] One could perhaps even find traces of direct, intuitive knowledge in less momentous but highly satisfactory moments of 'right action', when one simply knows from within what is to be done at a given moment.

But before we can proceed to discuss how our access to this intuitive knowledge can be cultivated, we need to get clear on one more essential distinction. This is the distinction between ordinary introspection, in which one looks with one part of one's mind at all the other activities that take place inside one's nature, and the perception that occurs through a pure witness consciousness, *sākṣī*.

Of birds and balconies

There is a common notion, equally widespread, for example, in contemporary consciousness studies as in classical *pramāṇa*-based Buddhist and Indian epistemology, that one cannot at the same time observe the world, and be aware of oneself observing it. The standard logical argument against doing both at the same time is that this would lead to infinite regress: one observes that one observes that one observes, and so on, and on, and on. The simpler, but perhaps even more convincing, symbolical image is that one cannot stand at the same time on a balcony and walk in the street. So it is argued – and in ordinary introspection one can actually observe this – that one switches very quickly between looking at the outside world and looking at the memory of how one looked at the outside world just a moment earlier. One possible reason for the mutual exclusiveness of perception and self-awareness in our ordinary waking consciousness might be that they function through the same inner instrumentation: In the Indian terminology, it is the same *manas*, or sense-mind, which in our ordinary consciousness either looks at the outside world through the outer senses, or at the inner world through the inner senses. The *manas* may simply not be able to do both at the same time.

There is, however, a second way of observing oneself that actually can take place at the same time as any outer or inner action. This second type of self-observation can easily be confused with ordinary introspection, but it has an entirely different character. The main difference is that it is not based on an activity by the mind, but on a direct apprehension of reality by a pure witness consciousness (*sākṣī*). This second type of self-observation is depicted in the ancient Indian image of two birds, good friends, beautiful of feather, who sit in the same tree: one eats the fruit while the other watches (*Ṛg Veda* I. 164. 2). Here what watches is not the separative, ego-centric, and sense-mediated surface mind, but a deep, silent, nonegoic, all-inclusive, pure consciousness that allows the egoic actions (and even the egoic observations) to continue somewhere in its own infinitude without being perturbed by them. As there is no egoic centre and no boundaries to this background awareness, the question of recursion does not arise. The core issue here is that the consciousness that watches must be 'pure' and utterly silent. If for some reason the 'running commentary', which is so typical of the surface mind, intrudes and one notices, 'Hey, look,

I'm watching what is going on from my deep silent inner self!', one obviously has lost it, and gone back to the ordinary, ego-based introspection.

Introspection	Pure witness consciousness
looking with one part of the mind at other parts of the mind (and at the rest of one's nature)	observing the workings of one's nature (mind, vital, body; outer, inner) from the position of a pure, silent witness
intrinsically prejudiced	equal to all that comes up
running commentary; value judgements; reactivity	silently watching, perfect equanimity
dim, foggy	hyper-clear daylight (as in the mountains, or after a good rain)
limited to the ordinary waking consciousness	able to penetrate deeper layers of consciousness and being

Table 16.2. Introspection versus pure witness consciousness.

In practice, these two different types of inner apprehension are not entirely exclusive of each other, and there is a certain gradient between them. As one becomes only gradually more settled in the deeper, inner silence, it is possible to arrive first at an in-between status of consciousness from which one introspectively observes what one is doing (type 2), and yet retains some intimate contact (of type 3) with a deep inner vastness of silent awareness (of type 4). In this state one is aware of the presence of pure consciousness as a kind of background for the superficial mental activity in which one is involved, but one identifies more with the mental activity on the surface than with the wider consciousness in the background. Only when one goes still deeper within, one begins to centre in that vastness itself. Then one sees, supports and sanctions from deep within the activities of the surface mind without losing in any way one's real 'identity' (if that term still applies) as the all-including vastness. One is then a borderless infinitude in which one is aware through knowledge by identity (type 4) of the entire stream of events, including birds and people, streets and balconies, which peacefully continue to exist somewhere on the surface of one's being. It is this second way of watching in an absolute inner silence, which is claimed to produce knowledge by identity, not only of one's own innermost self, but, potentially, of anything in existence.

It may be noted that in spite of its 3D imagery, the street and balcony simile presumes a 'flat' concept of consciousness in which exclusivity reigns—one can either observe oneself *or*

the world, one is either the observing subject *or* the observed world, and so on. The image of the two birds, on the other hand, is based on a totally different multidimensional concept of consciousness and reality. Here the dichotomies that perplex our mind are easily resolved in a higher-order unity.

In our interpretation of this ancient image, the tree inhabited by two birds represents the relation between the world and two major aspects or portions of our self. The tree-world of the first bird called *nara* (man) belongs to the ordinary waking consciousness and is exclusive, enmeshed in time and causality. This bird 'eats the fruits': he is fully engrossed in life and suffers the consequences of his actions. The world of the second bird, Nārāyaṇa (the Supreme), is part of an all-inclusive consciousness, containing all time and all opposites within itself. Nārāyaṇa watches in the Vedāntic, non-dual sense of the *sākṣī*, and remains unaffected by *karma*. Interestingly, and typical of the ancient, even-handed love for man and God, the birds are mentioned as good friends, and both as 'beautiful of feather'.[16]

If there is any truth in the distinctions and possibilities mentioned so far, then the next question is, how do we move from the superficial and often erratic knowledge provided by the observation of outer behaviour and ordinary introspection, to a more penetrating and reliable insight in the deeper layers of the mind.

2. Perfecting the inner instruments of knowledge

Sources of error

Over the long history of India's thinking about these issues, many different descriptions of the mind's difficulties have been given and many different solutions have been proposed to overcome them. Ego and desire are probably most frequently mentioned as factors leading to unhappiness, ignorance and distorted knowledge. The factor most commonly indicated as leading to bliss and unbiased knowledge is perfect detachment.

A slightly different perspective is offered by Sri Aurobindo in two interesting passages of *The Synthesis of Yoga*. He describes here the basic defects of the ordinary human mind as essentially of two kinds, *immixture* and *improper functioning* (1999, pp. 298, 618). Both can best be understood in the context of Sri Aurobindo's vision of an ongoing evolution of consciousness.[17] Within this framework of a gradually evolving consciousness, he sees these two basic defects of the mind as essentially due to the stickiness of our evolutionary past.

Immixture. Immixture happens when an earlier and more primitive form of consciousness interferes in a higher or later form. A typical example occurs when two people discuss a theoretical question. Their minds are genuinely interested in finding out what is true, because the quest for truth is part of the basic *dharma* of the mind. But when the vital part of their natures interferes, things go haywire. The vital part of human nature is not concerned with truth. The natural tendency of the life-force, which we have inherited from the animal stage of evolution, is survival, self-assertion, possession. So when the vital part of the nature enters into the debate, the stress is no longer on finding out what is true, but on who will win the argument. If the vital part of our nature is sufficiently purified, it will obey the mind and enjoy whatever it offers—a pure vital nature will be happy if the truth has been found irrespective of who has won the argument. But if an unregenerate part of the vital nature dominates over the mind, it will insist on winning, even to the extent of tempting the mind to bring in false arguments.

Improper functioning. In harmony with the idealistic nature of his *Vedic* philosophy, Sri Aurobindo holds that for each part of our nature there are 'ideal' or proper ways of functioning, as well as improper ways. For the vital nature the proper functioning includes an equal, glad enjoyment of whatever happens. The mixture of happiness, pain and indifference, of desires and fears from which the ordinary waking state suffers, is the result of the gradual and as of now only partially completed evolution of the vital nature out of the totally involved nescience of matter. Similarly the ideal function of the mind is to receive in a complete passivity the knowledge that sustains the world and to express it in the physical life-form it inhabits. What the unregenerate mind does instead, again due to remnants of its slow emergence out of the stupor of matter and the ignorance of the life in which it grows up, is to strive after knowledge, construct it in an ever more complicated, but never fully satisfactory confusion.

One could summarize these two defects of the mind as the 'noisiness' of the ordinary mind. Just as perfect joy can only be received in a heart that is wide, calm, and completely free of desire and attachment, so also true knowledge can only be received in a wide and calm mind that is completely free of mental preferences and distortions. The deeper one tries to enter into the recesses of one's inner nature, the more imperative becomes the need for a complete silence of the observing consciousness. Just as fine physical measurements demand a vibration-free room, so also in psychology, to reach the deepest layers of one's being, a silent mind is essential. To silence the mind is of such importance that Patañjali describes it as nothing less than the central objective of *yoga* and Sri Aurobindo describes it sometimes as an essential step for deeper knowledge and sometimes as the ultimate essence itself.[18] If this is so, then how is it done, how do we purify and ultimately silence the mind?

The purification of the mind

Most people who try to silence their mind soon realize that they have little control over their thoughts and that thoughts seem to come and go on their own. When one looks more closely, one sees that the vast majority of these mechanical thoughts that go on ruminating in one's mind are triggered by sense-impressions, and that they draw their energy from often trivial physical and social needs and desires. The latter issue we have already discussed: an absolute prior condition for silencing the mind is to avoid what Sri Aurobindo calls immixture of the unregenerate vital in the mind's workings. The necessity to overcome desires is mentioned in practically all spiritual traditions and is directly related to the two defects of immixture and improper functioning we mentioned earlier. As we discussed there, desire is itself a deformation of the vital's true nature, and its interference in the mind's workings is the main obstacle to direct and unbiased insight. The most obvious way to achieve silence in the mind is thus either to isolate the mind from the vital part of the nature, or, for a more lasting result, to quieten and purify the vital nature itself. Freeing the mind from negative vital influences is, however, not sufficient as the mind itself has its own defects. Sri Aurobindo mentions three conditions that need to be met if we want to arrive at deeper and more reliable inner knowledge:

Freedom from the senses. The first defect of the ordinary mind is that it is too dependent on the senses, and that it gets triggered too easily by their input. To keep the mind detached from the senses is common enough in ordinary concentration (when you read a book, you do not hear the street noise), but more difficult when there is no obvious focus of attention to keep the mind engaged. Yet, this is needed to create the space for more subtle perceptions to enter our consciousness.

Freedom from the past and future. The second defect of the mind is that it is too anxious. This form of improper functioning is in essence the same as the main defect in the vital. The

vital part of our nature is too anxious to be happy, and as a consequence it loses its inherent peace and joy and gets instead lost in a jumble of desires and fears. When the mind is too anxious it first grabs intuitions (or even sense-impressions) too eagerly, then builds all kind of unwarranted extrapolations on them, and finally it sticks too tenaciously to the little it has found. To continue to grow in knowledge, one should always remain quiet, accept what comes, and yet remain open to what comes next (Aurobindo, 1999, pp. 315–316). The solution is thus the same as for the immixture and the clinging to the senses: one should retain a perfect equanimity, detachment and a vast inner calm.

Silencing the mind. Sri Aurobindo describes several methods to silence the mind (e.g. 1999, p. 324). The easiest, most commonly advocated but perhaps not the fastest method, is to let the mind run its own course but to withdraw one's interest and sanction. If one manages to consistently refuse engagement in the thoughts that pass through one's mind, they slowly die out. The stress, however, is on the 'if', and on the 'slowly'. The second method is to enter with the centre of one's consciousness into a realm of silence that pre-exists in an inner space deep within the heart or well above the mind.[19] The third is to call this same preexistent silence down into one's mind, heart and even body. The fourth is probably the most efficient, but also the most strenuous method. Here one distances oneself again completely from what goes on in one's mind, and then one stays on guard and systematically throws out every thought as soon as it enters into one's awareness. This is effective but it requires the ability to centre oneself in one's mental *puruṣa*, one's real, innermost Self on the level of the mind, and yet remain active. There are many other methods, but the core of most, if not all, is to distance oneself from the activities of the mind and vital and to watch whatever goes on inside one's nature as an absolutely disinterested outsider. This is not an ultimate truth or a stance that can remain: in due time one finds that everything, even outer things, are actually part of oneself, but it is an effective means to get rid of the partial, ego-based identifications. The feelings of 'I'm me and not you', 'I like this and not that', 'I believe this and not that' are the effective cause both of our suffering and of our inability to see reality as it is.

3. Inner and higher knowledge

If one would like to give a label to the ontology that underlies the theory of knowledge that I've tried to present here, then one could call it a strong form of *realistic idealism*. In philosophical texts there is a tendency to view idealism and realism as opposites, but Sri Aurobindo sees no inherent conflict between the two. He writes in *The Life Divine*, 'The world is real precisely because it exists only in consciousness; for it is a Conscious Energy one with Being that creates it' (1940/90, p. 22). In line with the *Vedic* tradition he holds that it is a conscious energy that manifests the world, and thus that knowledge is present throughout creation, even if largely implicitly embedded in the 'habit of form' of material objects. Just as in a rock it is consciousness that gives that rock its particular form and qualities, there is also in man a very close link between our consciousness and the form and functioning of our body—the ordinary human consciousness identifies itself with its material substrate. Seen from this angle, the only difference between the rock and the human is that in case of the human being, the substrate includes an immensely complex nervous system capable of (re)presenting to itself a small stretch of the physical and social world around it. As a result our consciousness tends to identify with the centre of that representation, and especially with our individual memories, body-sense, feelings, desires, ideas, social roles, etc. But, interestingly, in man consciousness need not remain entangled in the workings of the body and the nervous system. It appears that once our little chunk of biologically embedded consciousness is sufficiently individualised and self-aware, it can learn to free itself from its physical encasement.

The Indian tradition has found that once the consciousness emancipates sufficiently from the body, several forms of inner knowledge open up to it, that can be grouped under the last two of the four types of knowledge I discussed in the beginning of this chapter, knowledge by intimate direct contact and knowledge by identity. As discussed earlier, these two are closely related: there is a gradient of intermediate forms of knowing in between them, and an increasing proficiency in one often, though certainly not always, leads to a more frequent occurrence of the other.[20] Still, for the sake of mental clarity it is good to distinguish them, if only because they belong to two entirely different epistemic realms: knowledge by intimate direct contact is still, just as sense-based knowledge and introspection, the result of a contact, however direct and subtle, between the self and something considered not oneself. As a consequence it is, in the radical language of the *Vedic* tradition, still considered to be a form of *avidyā*, no-knowledge or ignorance. Knowledge by identity, on the other hand, is the pure faculty of knowledge, *vidyā*, that is inherent in all being. In humans, it is to be found in its pure form only in the *puruṣa*, our silent, innermost Self. The aspect of knowledge by identity we will discuss in this section is the possibility to know as if from within things that ordinarily are not considered to be part of one's own individual self. According to the Indian tradition this is possible because in its very essence everything is one, is *Brahman*. The condition however is, and this is a difficult condition, that we must have disentangled our consciousness completely from the little chunk of nature we ordinarily identify with, our ego. From that absolute freedom it is considered possible to know everyone, everything, every event, with a total perfection, 'in the way God knows it'.

Two forms of knowledge by identity

I will discuss here two varieties of knowledge by identity. Within the inner realms of our psychological nature, one can distinguish an intriguing system of two intersecting dimensions, one reaching from the surface ego inwards to the soul, and one rising upwards from the subconscient below, via the physical, the vital and the mind in between, to the superconscient spirit and the Self above.[21] Along both dimensions one can find entry-points to the realms of direct inner knowledge, and, interestingly, they lead to different aspects of this knowledge, some primarily personal, others in the first instance impersonal. Before we go into more detail about these two dimensions, it may be useful to come back once more to the difference between constructed and direct knowledge.

Direct and constructed knowledge revisited

There are plenty of indications in ordinary life that direct, intuitive knowledge indeed does exist. A mathematician typically first 'sees' the solution to a problem, and only then works out the logical steps that 'prove' he is right. It is presumed that he has followed, unconsciously, the same steps of the proof to arrive at his first insight, but this is just a conjecture, which is far from certain. Similarly, an inventor, writer, composer typically first 'gets' an idea and only then works it out. According to contemporary cognitive sciences, the idea is actually constructed and only seems to pop-up in one's consciousness as a ready-made product because almost all the processing remains unconscious. But if one learns to quieten one's mind and to attain to a state of sufficient clarity within, one can actually *see* how ideas arise. One discovers then that new insights sometimes do arise in the way modern psychology describes—Sri Aurobindo calls this 'pseudo-intuition' because it imitates the real thing—but occasionally, and especially when the mind is silent, the real thing itself also happens. At such moments, one can observe how an unformed idea drifts into one's mind as if from another realm, and only subsequently gets clad, dressed-up as it were, in words and images that seem to be provided by the individual's outer mind, perhaps from a brain-based stock of material. It even happens sometimes that ideas 'pop-

up' completely formed, in 'inevitable' words or images. It appears then as if all knowledge consists of a core of direct, intuitive material, clad in an outer casing provided by the senses, with a gradient in the percentage of direct and constructed knowledge. St. John of the Cross gives a vivid description of the fine distinctions between those different 'degrees' of inspiration and of some possible causes of the variance between the proportion of descending and constructed material (Steele, 1994). He also describes how the descending idea may come direct from the highest and purest layers of consciousness one has access to, or how it may come from intermediary layers or even from active agents that can have distorted the expression to suit their own agenda.

In the surface consciousness that provides the experiential ground for most modern philosophical speculation, it may look as if reality is divided by an absolute, Cartesian dichotomy in gross, inconscient matter on one side, and our thoughts on the other (with, for those who believe in it, an extra-cosmic Divinity beyond both). But inner experience supports rather the idea that there is a smooth gradient between matter and pure spirit. Inner experience confirms the idea, which the *Vedic* tradition has in common with virtually all other spirituality-based schools of thought, that there actually is a whole range of worlds connecting the Absolute with the manifest world we all know. The *Vedic* tradition holds that the physical world is ultimately a condensation of consciousness, and it has worked out the transitions from the subtle to gross levels in great detail, for example in its description of the different worlds (or 'births'), and the various sheets of consciousness. These inner realities and their interconnections are extremely complex, and it is not easy to recognize the underlying structure and even more difficult to place different experiences correctly into the whole. As a result many different ways to bring some order into it all have been suggested, but for our present enquiry in the nature of knowledge, the simple distinction mentioned earlier between an inward horizontal, and an upward vertical dimension is particularly useful, both from a theoretical and from a practical viewpoint.

Knowledge from within

A first approach to inner knowledge is by an inward movement from the surface consciousness that characterizes the ordinary waking state, through the subliminal intermediate layers of our inner nature, to our innermost, true being, the *puruṣa*. Though ultimately there is only one Being, one Consciousness, one Self, the *paramātman* forever one with Brahman, transcending, supporting and inhabiting the manifestation in its entirety, the *Vedic* tradition recognizes not only that every individual being also has its own Self, but that even within the complexity of each individual being, there exist different Selves on each of the various planes (*koṣas*) of consciousness on which it exists. On each plane the *puruṣa* is our true Self, the silent witness, the support, and ultimately the master of our nature. Though the *puruṣa* is pure consciousness, and not affected by the *guṇas* (the various qualities that characterize manifest nature) still the characteristic experience of the *puruṣa* differs according to the plane on which it is found. Though everywhere silent, vast, unaffected, on the mental plane it is the aspect of the witness that dominates, in the higher vital that of love and compassion, in the lower vital planes that of joy and strength, and so on. There are two forms or 'instances' of the Self that stand out, one that stays eternally, immutably above the individual manifestation, also called the *jīvātman*, and another, the innermost self that sustains and inhabits the incarnate being as a whole, the *caitya puruṣa*, or *antarātman*. The former I will discuss further in the next section on 'Knowledge from above', about the latter I will discuss a few points here.

The *caitya puruṣa* is found behind the heart *cakra,*[22] where, if one goes deep enough, one finds what has been called the inner oracle, the guide within, one's deepest, innermost soul, *antarātman* or *caitya puruṣa*. Sri Aurobindo calls it the *psychic being*. In its own realm, in the depths of its own being, the psychic being is felt as a centre of true, self-luminous

perfection; it is the source in us of our deepest aspirations, of true love, goodwill, compassion and a deep inner joy and gratitude. Sri Aurobindo describes it as a direct expression of the very being of the Divine immanent within us. It is the one part of us that can manage simultaneously to remain perfectly faithful to its own essential nature (*svabhāva*) and yet be in a perfect, dynamic harmony with the manifestation as it unfolds from moment to moment in and around it.

In terms of knowledge, the psychic being is the one part in us that is completely one with truth, and yet, as long as one lives in the surface personality, the guidance which the surface mind receives from the psychic being cannot always be perfect, for it reaches the surface consciousness through the intermediaries of one's heart and mind, and they can easily distort its messages. In terms of force also, deep inside the psychic being has the perfection of power inherent in its truth, but on the surface its strength cannot manifest easily or openly because there it is bound by the limitations of one's instrumental nature. Only to the extent that the inner channels are clear and open, can its guidance be reliable and its action effective. Though it knows whatever one needs to know at any given moment, it is only when one's inner instruments of knowledge are pure enough that its gentle voice can be trusted to give the immediate and perfect guidance for the best possible action.

Knowledge from above

The other entry-point to direct knowledge is reached not by an inward movement, but by a movement of the centre of one's consciousness upwards, through the *sahasrāra*, the highest of the seven *cakras*, the seven centres of consciousness in one's subtle being. Through this *cakra* one opens up into the higher planes of consciousness and being, which, like a ladder, climb up into ranges that are felt as leading to the very origin of creation. These realms of higher knowledge are by their very nature impersonal. According to Sri Aurobindo, for most people the route through the heart is the most easy and natural, but for some people this ascent is the easiest way to move out of the individual mind into the cosmic vastness.

An interesting difference between the inner and higher knowledge is that the knowledge that comes by going inside tends to be situational: it typically gives an indication for 'right action', for what to do or what to say in the here and now. The knowledge one reaches by moving upward, on the other hand, tends to be more abstract and generic. Immediately above the mind there is, for example, a realm where one participates in comprehensive, global patterns of thought. If one concentrates on a philosophical issue while in that world[23] one immediately sees how a wide variety of related ideas hang together. To use a school-child's image, it is a bit as if one reads the pages at the end of a dream-quality schoolbook where all the answers are kept together in a perfectly contextualized manner: one sees not only the perfect answer to the question raised, but even the answers to a wide variety of related questions. Sri Aurobindo calls this world the Higher Mind. As it gives such an impression of impersonal, all-comprehensive perfection, it can easily be mistaken for the Gnostic or 'unitary' consciousness, but it is still very far below it: what one experiences here is not the Gnostic consciousness itself but only a more or less luminous shadow of it within the realm of the mind. Immediately above the Higher Mind there are realms where the relations between things and processes are not known in words or thoughts, but seen or felt as luminous images and presences. The higher one goes, the more the sense of perfection, unity and truth increases, but the more difficult it becomes to express what one experiences in words, because our ordinary language consists of words indicating dualities that are far surpassed in those higher realms.

There are two quite different ways in which one can make this upward movement. The first approach is a kind of jump, or at least a very quick climb, by which one moves more or less directly from one's ordinary consciousness to the Absolute by a systematic rejection of all

thoughts and feelings that might arise in between. If one manages to do so, this is a very effective process and it can produce dramatic results in an amazingly short time. But the disadvantage is that this procedure leaves a gap between the consciousness in one's ordinary state and the higher state. One reaches the Absolute in some kind of trance or *samādhi* and one cannot carry a detailed memory of either the Supreme Reality or the intermediate layers back to one's ordinary state. What such experiences do leave behind, however, is the certainty of having reached a Truth and Bliss so absolute that compared to it, all the imperfections and sufferings of the ordinary world lose their relevance. The power and felicity of this experience may be one of the reasons why so many great saints and sages, in the West as well as in the East, have looked at the manifestation as a lesser aspect of the Divine or even as an unreal farce that needs to be surpassed and left behind if one wants to reach the Divine in His/Her/Its absolute essence. Given how infinitely (literally!) more perfect the Absolute seems to be than anything in between, it is understandable that many great mystics have advised to forget about all lower experience and concentrate directly and exclusively on the highest.

Sri Aurobindo, however, takes the dynamic unfolding of the world as an aspect of the Divine that has as much importance as the static, absolute essence. He looks at our imperfect world simply as a 'work in progress'. Sri Aurobindo's stress on the value of life in the world is related to his vision of an ongoing evolution of consciousness of which he sees the next stage as the physical embodiment of *vijñāna*[24], the Gnostic, supra-mental plane of truth-consciousness that according to him must be the ultimate origin of the manifest world. It may be clear that an organic embodiment of such an absolute truth-consciousness would require an extremely drastic transformation of human nature. To get a handle on the details of this process of transformation, a comprehensive understanding of all the intermediate layers of consciousness is required, which can only come through a second approach to the higher ranges of consciousness for which Sri Aurobindo found many references in the *Vedas*. In this approach one climbs slowly and meticulously, step by step, a kind of inner stairs that rises from below right up to the highest planes, delivering the detailed knowledge as one goes.[25]

Though this goes beyond the immediate topic of this chapter, it is interesting to note that Sri Aurobindo insists for this approach to knowledge on a double movement. The first one climbs from the ordinary mind, through all the intermediate layers of higher mind, illumined mind, intuition up to the overmind. The second one, which in later times seems to have been forgotten except in some lesser known *Tantric* schools, descends and brings these higher capacities and powers back into oneself. One finds this double movement mentioned for example in the very first verse of the *Ṛg Veda* as the request to Agni to call on Indra to come down and 'increase' in the person on whose behalf the *Vedic* sacrifice is made. If the *Vedic* gods are taken in their esoteric sense as the higher powers of the human mind, then it becomes clear how closely the *Vedic* image of a material sacrifice matches what Sri Aurobindo describes as a psychological process of ascent and integration: one has first to reach, connect with, and 'realize' the higher faculties of *Agni* (the will and aspiration), *Indra* (the illumined mind), the *Vāyus* (the barrier breakers), and many others, and then make them an integral part of one's nature.

Where Sri Aurobindo differs from the tradition is that he seems to expand the range over which this process of ascent and integration can be made to work. At the high end, some of the *Upaniṣads* and later Vedāntic texts seem to jump directly from the Overmental plane where there are still fights between gods and *asuras* , to the plane of *ānanda*, the plane of perfect bliss and oneness, while Sri Aurobindo focuses on the *vijñāna*, the supra-mental link plane between the lower and higher hemispheres where there is a simultaneous existence of perfect oneness and variety. At the low end, Sri Aurobindo tries to anchor this Gnostic

plane in the physical reality, and to make it an organic part of our evolutionary, biological nature.

4. Yoga as research tool

If there is indeed, as the Indian tradition claims, a knowledge that can be apprehended directly from within without the necessity of mediation by the senses, then this has major consequences for the choice of the optimum methodology in psychological research. There where such direct inner knowledge refers to phenomena in the external world, one can indeed decide on the accuracy of the inner knowledge 'objectively' by comparing the symbolic rendering of that inner knowledge with the symbolic rendering of sense information about the external events. But where the inner knowledge refers to inner states or processes, this may not be the appropriate way of verifying such knowledge. What we need there is not objectivity, but reliable subjectivity.

In our study of the outer world, progress is to a large extent made by using better and better instruments. What 'better' means here depends to some extent on the field: in astronomy 'better' might mean for example higher resolution, higher and more specific sensitivity combined with less noise and distortion. Wherever possible, the results are then corroborated with findings from others with different but equally reliable instruments. Where the quality of the findings cannot be ascertained through comparison with findings made by different observers, instruments and experimental pathways, the inherent logic of the instrument's construction plays a major role in our assessments of their reliability. I suggest that we can apply the same ideas to the inner domain. In the inner domain the instrument of choice is self-observation, which includes knowledge by intimate direct contact, knowledge by identity, and the pure witness consciousness (*sākṣī*). Just as in the physical domain, the quality of the results in the inner domain can be ascertained on the one hand through corroboration by equally or better qualified observers, and on the other hand by the intrinsic quality of the instrument. The latter can in its turn be ascertained to some extent, though never fully, by what that specific instrument delivers in comparatively better known fields of enquiry. The only difference is that in the inner domain, the instrument is not some physical instrument, but the inner instrument of knowledge, the *antaḥkaraṇa*, of the *yogi*-researcher. The quality of this instrument depends on things like the amount of immixture and improper functioning; its freedom from ego, vital desires, mental preferences and physical limitations; its sensitivity, flexibility, and ability to move at will through different inner worlds and centres of consciousness; etc. In other words, *yoga*, in its widest sense of spiritual discipline, is the method of choice to perfect the inner instrument of knowledge. It leads to a more comprehensive, impartial and harmony enhancing understanding of reality not only through the purification of the inner instrument, but also by raising the observing consciousness above its ordinary, corrupting and limiting involvement in the processes and entities that psychology is supposed to study. That it can indeed deliver is attested to by the incredibly rich Indian heritage in the psychological field.

In short, for the outer periphery of psychology, objective population surveys and behavioural studies may be appropriate, but for the inner core-territory, the legitimate heartland of psychology that consists of the deep movements of consciousness, what we need are reliable subjective methods. For those subjective methods, self-reports are *not* the original data: they are at most part of the reporting. Even introspection, as defined in the beginning of this article, is in itself not the right research method to reach the deeper layers. The actual research consists of the processes that take place in the inner worlds themselves. They can only be ascertained by a silent witness consciousness in a deep inner self-observation. Subsequently this inner knowledge can be brought to the surface and shared with others, as long as we acknowledge that its veracity can only be ascertained by those

who have access to the same inner worlds with the help of inner instruments of knowledge that are similar or better in quality. One could, perhaps, look at this as a reprehensible form of occult elitism, but it need not be. The situation might be close to that in physics where one cannot expect results unless one has a good grasp of mathematical and instrumental methods. I'm inclined to think that *yoga* has a very similar role to play in the advancement of Psychology, as mathematics and physical instrumentation have in physics. It can improve the quality of the inner instrument of knowledge and make us more open to sources of direct knowledge. Which of the many entirely different methods and techniques of *yoga* are the most suitable for incorporation into Psychology, is one of the major tasks for Indian Psychology to take up in the coming years.

5. Evaluation and conclusion

When a little girl looks up to us, it is up to us whether we want to see that her dress is untidy, that her English needs correction, or that the heavens from which we all come are visible just behind the surface of these wide, wondering eyes. Even if we consider it our duty to tinker with the details of the outer manifestation of this subtle wonder, it still helps to remain aware of the deeper inner realities, however deeply buried in the background of our consciousness. At the very least, that inner connectedness will help us to avoid the worst forms of cruel insanity to which our human race is so amazingly prone. At its best, it may help to bring about a more harmonious world for future generations to enjoy.

If Sri Aurobindo and the *Vedic* tradition on which he builds are right, then direct, intuitive knowledge by identity forms the essential core of all our knowledge, and especially of our basic sense of truth, beauty, meaning, love, self, and reality. We may doubt whether we as individuals can ever hope to develop intuitive knowledge to the level of detailed perfection that Sri Aurobindo and the *Vedic* tradition assert to be possible. But even if there were only a remote chance that such a type of knowledge actually exists and that it can be cultivated, it would still be worthwhile to give it, both individually and collectively, much more attention than we presently do. The least the methods of *yoga*, especially *jñāna yoga*, can contribute to Psychology are well-developed methods for the study of the subjective side of our psychological nature, methods that work through a systematic removal of the imperfections of introspection, and through a rigorous refinement of the inner instrument of knowledge (*antaḥkaraṇa*) so that it can penetrate the deeper layers of consciousness that are described throughout the Indian tradition but that are not accessible in our ordinary mental states.

There is, however, another, and perhaps more important reason to pursue the systematic development of knowledge by identity and that is simply, that *if* it exists, it is the type of knowledge humanity needs most at the moment. All major human problems are problems of harmony (Aurobindo, 1990, p. 2), and the kind of direct, intuitive knowledge we've discussed in this chapter may well be one of the most direct ways to find that harmony back. After all, the core of the intuitive knowledge Sri Aurobindo speaks about is nothing else than the ancient *ātmavidyā*, the knowledge of the self[26] at a level where the individual self is consciously one with the cosmic Self, and through that, with the individual selves of all others. As such, it is the knowledge that reconnects us to our common source and that supports our communality as well as our essential individuality. As a result, the pursuit of knowledge by identity can provide answers to our deepest need for love and harmony, and it can give humanity the wisdom and power it so desperately needs to heal the many wounds and distortions that now mar both our individual human natures and our collective existence. So even if the chances of finding this knowledge were exceedingly small, the gamble would still be worth it. But, fortunately, the chance of finding this knowledge is not small at all.

Though mainstream science ignores and in her more dogmatic moments even denies its existence, intuitive knowledge has played a major role in all known civilizations. It is true that some cultures have held it to be something of a gift that cannot be cultivated, but there are many other cultures that have worked out methods to develop it, and in India, where spirituality has been the very foundation of the mainstream culture right from the beginning of known history, there are several highly sophisticated and intellectually rigorous systems of ideas on how it can be developed. So actually, collectively, we not only know that this knowledge is there, but we even know how to develop it.

At the end of his wonderfully detailed history of spiritual movements in the U.S.A., Eugene Taylor comes to the conclusion that we can expect over the coming years a growing influence of Indian ideas on the developing global civilization, and especially a major shift in its basic epistemological assumptions, away from materialism and in the direction of Indian spirituality (1999, pp. 289–296). Taylor considers it an open question whether this growing reliance on spiritual knowledge will develop as part of science, or as an independent, parallel knowledge system that will gradually gain in prominence, as people begin to realize how much it can contribute to our understanding of human nature (ibid. p. 285). To what extent spirituality and science can and should merge or collaborate is a complicated issue, but there seems very little inherent reason why they should not join hands at least in some key areas. The almost complete separation of the knowledge systems of spirituality and science that we see at present seems to be little more than a highly unfortunate outcome of the peculiarities of European history. In individuals, the independent co-existence of incompatible knowledge systems is a sign of schizophrenia, and it is hard to conceive how this could be different for society at large. Even if a true integration[27] of spirituality with the presently dominant knowledge system of science will be hard to achieve, the least we should strive for is some form of active cooperation. What form this cooperation should take is again difficult to say. In all likelihood psychology will see for a long time the co-existence of several competing knowledge systems rooted in a wide gamut of ideas and methods, that perhaps could be mapped in a three-dimensional space indicating their relative stress on physiological, social and spiritual factors. In the long run I expect, however, that there will be an increasing awareness of the value of spiritual knowledge, and of the interdependence between psychological insight and spiritual practice. If this is true and if we will indeed see an increasingly widespread recognition that *yoga*, and spiritual practice in general, leads to valid and reliable psychological knowledge of a quality that cannot be obtained otherwise, then we can foresee a time when *yoga* will be considered equally essential for the psychologist as mathematical proficiency for the physicist.

Within the field of psychology, but potentially elsewhere as well, science and spirituality are complementary quests for knowledge in need of each other. Science is by its very nature down-to-earth, progressive and self-critical, and without these three qualities, spirituality tends to become too otherworldly, it gets stifled in the encrustations of religion, or it floats off in some new-age vagueness. On the other hand, science also needs spirituality to complement itself. Till now science has occupied itself mainly with the objective, outer half of reality, but this outer half has no independent existence. Reality-as-we-know-it is a relationship: a relationship between what we see as ourselves and what we see as the world in which we live. To fully understand what happens in this relationship, we need to know both sides of it, the inside as well as the outside. If we concentrate too exclusively on the outside we lose out on the deeper meaning of life, on the treasures of the spirit, and if we concentrate too much inside we get an otherworldly spirituality that doesn't do justice to the love that sustains this beautiful creation. Only when we pay equal attention to both sides of the equation can we develop a knowledge and mastery that are fully in harmony with the marvel of the evolving manifestation. Only then may it finally be said of humanity that its tread shall 'justify the light on Nature's face' (Aurobindo, 1994, p. 344).

Acknowledgement

In this chapter I have tried to give a faithful impression of Sri Aurobindo's ideas on knowledge in a language that is understandable and relevant for those who are engaged with contemporary psychology. In this attempt I have tried to stick as closely as possible to my own experience, and to be explicit about my philosophical presumptions and predilections. I am aware that these different objectives are not fully compatible. The language of modern psychology is not really suitable to deal with the type of experiences on which Sri Aurobindo bases his ideas, and the limited nature of my own experience enables me to see and understand only a small corner of his work. Still, I hope the result will be intriguing enough for the reader to give a serious thought to the ideas expressed in this chapter and to turn for further clarification to Sri Aurobindo's own writings. The reader can safely presume that whatever is true in this paper is Sri Aurobindo's, and that whatever is not must be mine.[28]

Endnotes

1. The first draft of this article was based on a talk given at the 2006 AUM conference at Townsend (WA, USA). Part of this text appeared as chapter 16 in R. M. Matthijs Cornelissen, Girishwar Misra & Suneet Varma (eds.) (2015). *Foundations and Applications of Indian Psychology* , pp. 98–118. New Delhi: Pearson.
2. There are exceptions, but they are few and far between. For an overview see Walsh and Shapiro, 2006.
3. There are a few notable exceptions. One may think for example of the work on State Specific Sciences by Charles Tart (1972), or the article by Petitmengin-Peugot (1999)
4. See Cornelissen, 2007.
5. There is also a dynamic aspect to this type of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo doesn't mention it in this context, but logically the dynamic side of this type of knowledge should include skills, the 'know-how' to do things.
6. A short article on the different ways in which people distinguish between inner and outer can be found here.
7. In contemporary psychology it is widely held that intuition is constructed subconsciously and only appears to pop-up ready-made. Sri Aurobindo calls this pseudointuition. Intuition is used here in the original sense of true knowledge that is not constructed, but that comes to us at least partially 'ready-made' from some inner or subtle source. Much of this article can be seen as an attempt to show that such direct knowledge actually exists and is worth cultivating systematically.
8. 'At the same time' may not be taken too literally. See the subsection entitled 'Of balconies and birds'.
9. In a state of pure consciousness there is evidently no distinction between subject and object, but not everybody agrees that such states are possible (Steven Katz, 1978, pp. 62–63). Even Jung, who is for many an early hero of the transpersonal movement in psychology, seriously thought that a state without ego, and thus without a clear distinction between subject and object, would intrinsically be an unconscious state. This seems to betray a somewhat surprising lack of understanding of the Indian tradition. For a brilliant discussion of Jung's position vis-à-vis Eastern thought, see Coward (1985).
10. In one famous experiment a video-clip is shown of two teams of six players, one team dressed in white, the other in black, who pass two balls on to each other in what looks like

informal volleyball training. The observers are asked to count how often a white player manages to pass on a ball to another white player without a black player intercepting it. In the middle of the clip an actor dressed up as a black gorilla enters the scene, stands still in the middle, waves his two hands at the audience, and then moves out from the other side. Even when one shows this video clip to large audiences, there is hardly ever someone who sees the gorilla. If at the end, one tells the audience to relax and watch the video once more without counting anything, just for the sake of seeing if there is anything special they missed during the first viewing, nobody misses the gorilla, and most people have a hard time believing it is the same movie (see Simons & Chabris, 1999).

11. For a refutal of one of Dennett's main arguments, see Cornelissen (2008).

12. The Sanskrit word *dharma* is difficult to translate. It denotes truth in the realm of agency. As such it is often translated as (moral, social) duty and even as religion, but especially the latter is not satisfactory, as *dharma* has a strong connotation of something that is part of one's essential nature and that as such goes beyond social conventions.

13. Inwardly, subjectively, there is an interesting vertical dimension to our awareness of different types of consciousness: we tend to visualise the heavens above and the dark, subconscious realms below. We will come back to this later.

14. Sri Aurobindo claims that it is actually possible to cultivate intuitive knowledge to such an extent that it can take over all ordinary mental functions and become one's normal way of knowing reality. We know from the diary Sri Aurobindo maintained during a few years of intense *yogic* practice, that he made this amazing claim not on the basis of literary exegesis or philosophical speculation, but on the basis of meticulously carried out experiments, of which he maintained a detailed day-to-day record. The 'laboratory notes' in this *Record of Yoga* (2003) are full of examples of detailed knowledge even about trivial events in the outer, material world, that would be extremely difficult to explain as constructed on the basis of sense-impressions and memories alone. For an interesting study of yogic powers and parapsychology, see Braud (2008).

15. 'Inevitable' is the highest 'grade' in Sri Aurobindo's appraisal of lines of poetry in terms of their level of inspiration.

16. This is significant as the *Vedas*, from where this simile hails, are extremely terse; they are like mathematical formulas of the spirit, and there is never a word too many. Each word covers a world of meanings.

17. Sri Aurobindo looks at the Darwinian evolution as gradual emancipation of consciousness. He holds that just as life has developed in matter, and mind has developed in embodied life, still higher forms of consciousness are bound to develop in embodied mind. Sri Aurobindo looks at *yoga* as a concentrated attempt in the individual to achieve in a short period what Nature itself is working out in her own speed on larger scale.

18. At the end of a passage where he describes several ways to silence the mind, Sri Aurobindo says, 'In a complete silence only is the Silence heard; in a pure peace only is its Being revealed. Therefore to us the name of That is the Silence and the Peace.'

19. The dimensionality of the 'inner' or subtle experience of consciousness is an intriguing phenomenon that one finds mentioned throughout spiritual literature, and that consistently returns in experience. In the 'inner' experience, one can actually centre one's consciousness at different vertical levels, and more or less deeply 'inside'. I will come back to this in the next section.

20. I'm not aware of hard statistical data on this issue, but both tradition and personal experience tell that 'enlightenment', which is closely related to one's capacity for knowledge

by identity, tends to bring with it some degree of telepathic capacity, even though clairvoyants are certainly not always enlightened.

21. For more details see Sri Aurobindo's *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *The Life Divine*. A short summary of the system can be found in Cornelissen (2005) and a more detailed account in Dalal (2001).

22. *Cakras*, Sanskrit—centres of different types of consciousness arranged one above the other in the subtle body. Though the idea that different types of conscious activity take place at different locations in the body has been worked out in much more detail in the Indian tradition, traces of it occur even in the English language, for example, 'use your head' means 'think better'; 'open your heart' means 'feel more compassion'; 'follow your gut-feelings' means 'follow your basic life instincts'. In an interesting example, Matt Frei (2008) wrote for BBC News, '[I]f America votes with its heart, it will elect Obama. If it votes with its gut, it will go for McCain.'

23. I could have written 'in that state' but at the risk of being accused of occultism, I have chosen consciously for 'in that world' as the latter appears more accurate. In many contexts, 'state' and 'world' are interchangeable, but they do not have the same connotations. 'State' stresses that what one describes happens inside the mind of an individual and is dependent on its condition. 'World' stresses the complexity and internal coherence of what one experiences, and it implies some kind of objective existence, though the latter can be apparent only (as in, 'a dream world'). I am inclined to think that what I describe here are indeed worlds, not just states. They seem to pre-exist independent of the human mind, though what one actually experiences is indeed dependent on one's inner condition. According to Sri Aurobindo this is equally true for all worlds, even for the ordinary physical world: all worlds come about in an interaction between *purusha* and *prakriti*, self and nature, conscious being as subject and the same conscious being as object. They differ from each other in the type of consciousness on the subject and on the object side.

24. *Vijñana* is here used in its older sense of the Gnostic link-plane between the upper and lower hemispheres, equivalent to the *Vedic mahas*. In later times the same word was used in the much-diluted sense of intellect. In both cases *vijñana* is the plane above the *manas*. In the *Vedic* sense which Sri Aurobindo uses, it is the plane entirely above the mind as a whole, in the later sense it is used for a plane above the sense-mind, but still within the mind in its more general sense.

25. Sri Aurobindo describes these higher planes of consciousness with an exemplary and, one must add, rather rare intellectual discipline and 'rectitude'. From his diaries and the autobiographical poetry he wrote during the same periods as his published writings, we know that he carefully avoided quoting the sometimes strong claims of classical Sanskrit texts if he had not on the one hand fully understood their implications, and on the other seen them supported by his own experience. This, together with the detailed studies he made of our ordinary human nature as seen from the higher planes of consciousness with an eye on its transformation, make his work so exceedingly interesting for Psychology.

26. With 'self' I mean here the eternal centre of one's consciousness, the *ātman*, or the *puruṣa* of the Indian tradition, not the western 'self-concept', which corresponds in the Indian tradition more closely with the *ahaṁkāra*, the constructed, socially determined egoic centre in the outer nature, with which the real self erroneously identifies.

27. It may be noted that integration is not the same as amalgamation. In amalgamation, the original substances lose their own qualities and get merged into a new, essentially amorphous substance. In integration, the differences of the various parts are carefully maintained and uplifted into a new, and more complex unity (like the various parts of a car,

that find the fulfilment of their existence in their cooperation in the workings of the larger unit of which they are the constituents.) True integration is above all not constructed with the mind, but an offering, a taking up in the pre-existing higher oneness of the conscious existence of the Divine.

28. This may sound a bit too sugary, but it is almost certainly true. Over the years, whenever I thought I had found some error or lacunae in Sri Aurobindo's descriptions of life and yoga, either I was led soon after to an unmistakeable experience showing that he was right or I found that he had described somewhere in a few lines what had taken me months to discover. The more I understand of what he has done in the area of yoga and psychology, the more my admiration grows.

References

Aurobindo, Sri (2003). A system of national education: Some preliminary ideas. In *Early cultural writings*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department. (Original text published 1910).

Aurobindo, Sri (1998). Our ideal. In *Essays in philosophy and yoga*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department. (Original text published 1915).

Aurobindo, Sri (1990). *The life divine*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department. (Original text published 1914–1920. Extensively revised 1939–1940).

Aurobindo, Sri (1994). *Savitri*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department. (Original text published 1950).

Aurobindo, Sri (1999). *The synthesis of yoga*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department. (Original text published 1914–1920. Extensively revised 1949).

Aurobindo, Sri (2003). *The record of yoga*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department. (Original text written 1910–1927).

Braud, W. (2008). Patanjali yoga and siddhis: Their relevance to parapsychological theory and research. In K. Ramakrishna Rao & al. (Eds.), *Handbook of Indian psychology* (pp. 217–243). Delhi: Foundation Books.

Cornelissen, M. (2005). Self and personality in Sri Aurobindo's yoga: An overview of his terminology. In K. Ramakrishna Rao & Sonali Bhatt Marwaha (Eds.), *Towards a spiritual psychology* (pp. 157–168). Delhi: Samvad India Foundation.

Cornelissen, M. (2007). In defence of rigorous subjectivity. In *Transpersonal psychology review*, *11*(1), 8–18.

Cornelissen, M. (2008). Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary ontology of consciousness. In Helmut Wautischer (Ed.), *Ontology of consciousness: Percipient action* (pp. 399–427). Boston: The MIT Press.

Coward, H. (1985). *Jung and Eastern thought*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Dalal, A. S. (2001). *A greater psychology*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher and Putnam. Dennett, Daniel C. (1994). *Darwin's dangerous idea*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Frei, M. (2008). Obama now has a mountain to climb. Washington: BBC News, 4 June 2008. Retrieved on 4 June, 2008 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7434740.stm

Guzeldere, G. (1995). Consciousness, what it is, how to study it, what to learn from its history. *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 2*(1), 30–51.

Katz, Steven T. (1978). Language, epistemology and mysticism. In Steven T. Katz (Ed.), *Mysticism and philosophical analysis*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Murphy, M., & Donovan, S. (1997). *The physical and psychological effects of meditation*. Sausalito, CA: Institute of Noetic Sciences.

Petitmengin-Peugot, C. (1999). The intuitive experience. *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 6*(2/3), 43–77.

Sedlmeier, P. (2018) Meditation and Altered States of Consciousness. In *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 25*, (11–12), 73–101

Sheldrake, R. (2005). The sense of being stared at. In *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 12*(6), 10–49.

Simons, D. J., & Chabris, C. F. (1999). Gorillas in our midst: Sustained inattentional blindness for dynamic events. *Perception*, *28*, 1059–1074.

Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. New York: Macmillan.

Steele, S. (1994). The multistate paradigm and the spiritual path of John of the Cross. In *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, *26*(1), 55-80.

Taylor, E. (1999). *Shadow culture, psychology and spirituality in America*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint.

Tart, C. (1972). States of consciousness and state-specific sciences. *Science*, *176*, 1203–1210.

Tolman, E. C. (1938). The determiners of behavior at a choice point. *Psychological Review, 45,* 1–41.

Walsh, R., & Shapiro, S. (2006). The meeting of meditative disciplines and western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue. *American Psychologist*, *61*(3), pp. 227–239.

Wampold, Bruce E. (2001). *The great psychotherapy debate: Models, methods and findings.* Mahwah, NJ & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Watson, John B. (1929). *Behaviorism*. New York: W.W. Norton.