

## *Jnana (Knowledge)*

*It is no use reading books of guidance if one  
is not determined to live what they teach.*

*Blessings  
The Mother*

- 1 – **There are two allied powers in man: knowledge and Wisdom. Knowledge is so much of the truth, seen in a distorted medium, as the mind arrives at by groping; Wisdom what the eye of divine vision sees in the spirit.**

Someone has asked me, “Why are the powers allied?”

I suppose that we are so used to seeing all the elements in man quarrelling among themselves that the idea of their being “allied” causes astonishment. But these quarrels are only apparent. All the powers which come from the higher regions are in fact necessarily allied — they are united, they have agreed to fight the Ignorance. And Sri Aurobindo says clearly enough — for those who understand — that one of these powers belongs to the mind and that the other belongs to the Spirit. This is precisely the profound truth that Sri Aurobindo wants to reveal in his aphorism: if the mind tries to obtain the second power, it is unable to do so, since it is a power that belongs to the Spirit and arises in the human being together with the spiritual consciousness.

Knowledge is something that the mind can obtain through much effort, although this is not the true knowledge, but only a mental aspect of knowledge; whereas Wisdom does not at all belong to the mind, which is altogether incapable of obtaining it, because, in fact, it doesn’t even know what it is. I repeat, Wisdom is essentially a power of the Spirit and it can arise only with the spiritual consciousness.

It would have been interesting to ask what Sri Aurobindo

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means when he speaks of “the truth seen in a distorted medium”. First of all, what is this “distorted medium”, and what does the truth become in a “distorted medium”?

As always, what Sri Aurobindo says can have several levels of meaning — one is more specific, the other more general. In the most specific sense, the distorted medium is the mental medium which works in ignorance and which is therefore unable to express truth in its purity. But since life as a whole is lived in ignorance, the distorted medium is also the earth-atmosphere which, in its entirety, distorts the truth seeking to express itself through it.

And here lies the most subtle point of this aphorism. What can the mind arrive at by groping? We know that it is always groping, seeking to know, erring, returning upon its previous attempts and trying again... Its progress is very, very halting. But what can it grasp of the truth? Is it a fragment, a piece, something which is still the truth, but only partially, incompletely, or is it something which is no longer the truth? That is the interesting point.

We are used to being told — perhaps we have also repeated many times — that one can only have partial, incomplete, fragmentary knowledge which therefore cannot be true knowledge. This point of view is rather trite: one need only to have studied a little in life to be aware of it. However, what Sri Aurobindo means by “the truth seen in a distorted medium” is far more interesting than that.

Truth itself takes on another aspect; in this medium it is no longer the truth, but a distortion of the truth. Consequently, what can be seized of it is not a fragment which would be true, but an aspect, the false appearance of a truth which has itself melted away.

I am going to give you an image to try to make myself understood; it is nothing more than an image, do not take it literally.

If we compare the essential truth to a sphere of immaculate,

dazzling white light, we can say that in the mental medium, in the mental atmosphere, this integral white light is transformed into thousands and thousands of shades, each of which has its own distinct colour, because they are all separated from one another. The medium distorts the white light and makes it appear as innumerable different colours: red, green, yellow, blue, etc., which are sometimes very discordant. And the mind seizes, not a little fragment of the white light of the white sphere, but a larger or smaller number of little lights of various colours, with which it cannot even reconstitute the white light. Therefore it cannot reach the truth. It does not possess fragments of truth, but a truth that is broken up. It is a state of decomposition.

The truth is a whole and everything is necessary. The distorted medium through which you see, the mental atmosphere, is unsuited for the manifestation or the expression or even the perception of all the elements — and one can say that the better part is lost. So it can no longer be called the truth, but rather something which in essence is true, and yet no longer so at all in the mental atmosphere — it is an ignorance.

So, to summarise, I shall say that knowledge, as it can be grasped by the human mind, is necessarily knowledge in ignorance, one could almost say an ignorant knowledge.

Wisdom is the vision of truth in its essence and of its application in the manifestation.

*12 September 1958*

**2 – Inspiration is a slender river of brightness leaping from a vast and eternal knowledge; it exceeds reason more perfectly than reason exceeds the knowledge of the senses.**

A certain number of the questions you have asked are alike: “Why did Sri Aurobindo say it like this?” — one thing or another.

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I could reply, “He said it like this because he saw it like this.” But, to begin with, one thing should be understood; these are definitions given by Sri Aurobindo, definitions which he gives mostly in a paradoxical form to compel us to think.

There are dictionary definitions, which are the ordinary explanations of words as they are commonly understood. These do not make you think. What Sri Aurobindo says, however, is said in order to break up the usual conception, to bring you in touch with a deeper truth. In this way a whole lot of questions are eliminated.

The effort one must make is to try to find the deeper knowledge, the deeper truth that Sri Aurobindo has expressed in this way, which is not the usual way of defining a word.

I shall select some questions: the first one, which interested me because it comes from a thoughtful person, concerns the word “knowledge” and compares the way Sri Aurobindo has used the word in this aphorism with the way he used it in the aphorism we read last week.

When, in last week’s aphorism, Sri Aurobindo opposed — as one might say — “knowledge” to “Wisdom”, he was speaking of knowledge as it is lived in the average human consciousness, the knowledge which is obtained through effort and mental development, whereas here, on the contrary, the knowledge he speaks of is the essential Knowledge, the supramental divine Knowledge, Knowledge by identity. And this is why he describes it here as “vast and eternal”, which clearly indicates that it is not human knowledge as we normally understand it.

Many people have asked why Sri Aurobindo said that the river is “slender”. This is an expressive image which creates a striking contrast between the immensity of the divine, supramental Knowledge — the origin of this inspiration, which is infinite — and what a human mind can perceive of it and receive from it. Even when you are in contact with these domains, the portion, so to say, which you perceive, is minimal, slender. It is like a tiny little stream or a few falling drops and these drops are so pure,

so brilliant, so complete in themselves, that they give you the sense of a marvellous inspiration, the impression that you have reached infinite domains and risen very high above the ordinary human condition. And yet this is nothing in comparison with what is still to be perceived.

I have also been asked if the psychic being or psychic consciousness is the medium through which the inspiration is perceived.

Generally, yes. The first contact you have with higher regions is a psychic one. Certainly, before an inner psychic opening is achieved, it is difficult to have these inspirations. It can happen as an exception and under exceptional conditions as a grace, but the true contact comes through the psychic; because the psychic consciousness is certainly the medium with the greatest affinity with the divine Truth.

Later, when one has emerged from the mental consciousness into a higher consciousness beyond the mind, beyond even the higher mind, and when one opens oneself to the Overmind regions, and through the Overmind to the Supermind, one can receive inspirations directly. And naturally at that point they become more frequent, richer, if one may say so, more complete. There comes a time when inspiration can be obtained at will, but this obviously demands considerable inner development.

As we have just said, this inspiration from regions far above the mind surpasses in value and quality the highest achievements of the mind, such as reason. Reason is certainly at the apex of human mental activity. It can review and control the knowledge acquired with the help of the senses. It has often been said that the senses are altogether defective instruments of knowledge, that they are incapable of perceiving things as they are, that the information they supply is superficial and very often faulty. When it is fully developed, the human reason knows this and does not trust the knowledge of the senses. It is only if one is infrarational, if I may say so, that one believes that all one sees, hears, or touches is absolutely true. As soon as one is developed

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in the region of higher reason, one knows that all these notions are almost essentially false, and that one can in no way rely on them. But the knowledge one receives from this supramental or divine region surpasses all that can be conceived or understood by reason, at least to the same extent that reason surpasses the knowledge of the senses.

Several questions concern a practical point: “How to develop the capacity for inspiration?”; “What are the conditions needed to receive inspiration and is it possible to have it constantly?”

I have already replied to this. When one opens oneself to the supramental regions, one puts oneself in the right state for receiving constant inspirations. Until then, the best method is to silence the mind as much as possible, to turn it upwards and to remain in a state of silent and attentive receptivity. The more one is able to establish a silent, perfect calm in the mind, the more one becomes capable of receiving inspirations.

It was also asked whether inspirations are of different qualities.

In their origin, no. They always come down from the regions of pure Knowledge and penetrate whatever part of the human being is most receptive, best adapted to receive them — but these inspirations may apply to different domains of action. They can be inspirations of pure knowledge, they can also be inspirations that contribute to one’s effort to progress, and they can also be inspirations for action which help in the practical and outer realisation. But the question here is the use one makes of the inspiration, rather than of the quality of the inspiration — the inspiration is always like a drop of light and truth which succeeds in penetrating the human consciousness.

What the human consciousness does with this drop depends on the attitude, the need, the occasion, the circumstances; it does not alter the essential nature of the inspiration but it does alter the use one makes of it, its practical application.

Some of the other questions concern the difference between

inspiration and intuition. They are not the same thing; but I think that we will have the opportunity of returning to this subject in the course of our reading. When Sri Aurobindo tells us what he considers intuition to be, we shall come back to it.

In a general and almost absolute way, if you truly wish to profit from these readings, as from all of Sri Aurobindo's writings, the best method is this: having gathered your consciousness and focused your attention on what you are reading, you must establish a minimum of mental tranquillity — the best thing would be to obtain perfect silence — and achieve a state of immobility of the mind, immobility of the brain, I might say, so that the attention becomes as still and immobile as a mirror, like the surface of absolutely still water. Then what one has read passes through the surface and penetrates deep into the being where it is received with a minimum of distortion. Afterwards — sometimes long afterwards — it wells up again from the depths and manifests in the brain with its full power of comprehension, not as knowledge acquired from outside, but as a light one carried within.

In this way the faculty of understanding is at its highest, whereas if, while you read, the mind remains agitated and tries to understand at once what it is reading, you lose more than three-quarters of the force, the knowledge and the truth contained in the words. And if you are able to refrain from asking questions until this process of absorption and inner awakening is completed, well, then you will find that you have far fewer questions to ask because you will have a better understanding of what you have read.

*19 September 1958*

**3 – When I speak, the reason says, “This will I say”; but God takes the word out of my mouth and the lips say something else at which reason trembles.**

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When Sri Aurobindo says “I”, he speaks of himself and of his own experience. We would like to be able to say that what he says is symbolic and that it could apply to many people, but unfortunately this is not so at all.

This experience, of not saying what you had meant to say when you speak, but something else, is very common; but it is the opposite of what Sri Aurobindo speaks of here. That is to say, when you are sitting calmly at home using your reason to its full extent, you decide to say this or that, that this is the reasonable thing, but all too often, when you begin to speak, it is the lower impulses, the unreasonable emotions and the vital reactions which take hold of the tongue and make you say things which you should not say.

Here it is the same phenomenon, but, as I said, the other way round. Instead of infrarational impulses which make you speak with excitement and passion, it is, on the contrary, an inspiration coming from above, a light and a knowledge greater than those of the reason which take hold of the tongue and make you say things that you would have been incapable of saying even with the most enlightened reason.

Sri Aurobindo tells us that “the reason trembles” because these higher truths always appear in the human domain as paradoxes, revelations contrary to reason; not because reason is incapable of understanding what comes from the higher regions, but because these revelations are always ahead of, very much ahead of, that which reason has understood or accepted. What the human reason of today finds reasonable has been paradoxical and mad in the past; and probably — one may say, certainly — these unexpected, paradoxical, revolutionary revelations which are manifesting now and making the reason tremble, will in time to come be very reasonable knowledge, which in turn will tremble before new revelations.

It is this sense of something which is always moving, progressing, being transformed, that Sri Aurobindo is trying to give us with these compact phrases which for a time shake

our understanding of things. It is to push us forward, to give us the sense of the complete relativity of all that manifests in the world, and of this universe which is always in motion, ever moving towards a higher and greater Truth.

For us, right now, the supramental transformation is the expression of the highest truth, it is the revolution we must bring about on earth; and certainly this revolution must be felt as an absolute by the majority of human beings, otherwise they will not be able to bring it about. But Sri Aurobindo insists that we should not forget that this absolute is still relative and that any manifestation must always be relative with regard to an Absolute which is even more absolute — the Unmanifest that will manifest later.

26 September 1958

**4 – I am not a Jnani,<sup>1</sup> for I have no knowledge except what God gives me for His work. How am I to know whether what I see be reason or folly? Nay, it is neither; for the thing seen is simply true and neither folly nor reason.**

“I am not a Jnani...” The Jnani is one who follows the path of Knowledge, one who wants to realise Yoga exclusively through Knowledge, and who follows a purely intellectual path with the will to go beyond it and attain Knowledge, which is no longer intellectual, but spiritual. And Sri Aurobindo says: I am not a Jnani.... I do not seek knowledge. I have given myself to the Divine to accomplish His work and, by the divine Grace, at every moment I know what must be known in order to accomplish this work.

It is an admirable state; it is perfect peace of mind. There is no longer any need to accumulate acquired knowledge, received ideas which have to be memorised; it is no longer necessary

<sup>1</sup> One who follows the path of Knowledge (*jñāna*) as opposed to the path of Love (*bhakti*), or the path of Works (*karma*).

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to clutter one's brain with thousands and thousands of things in order to have at one's command, when the time comes, the knowledge that is needed to perform an action, to impart a teaching, to solve a problem. The mind is silent, the brain is still, everything is clear, quiet, calm; and at the right moment, by divine Grace a drop of light falls into the consciousness and what needs to be known is known. Why should one care to remember — why try to retain that knowledge? On the day or at the moment that it is needed one will have it again. At each second one is a blank page on which what must be known will be inscribed — in the peace, the repose, the silence of a perfect receptivity.

One knows what must be known, one sees what must be seen, and since what must be known and seen comes directly from the Supreme, it is Truth itself; and it completely eludes all notions of reason or folly. What is true is true — that is all. And one has to sink very low to wonder whether it is folly or reason.

Silence and a modest, humble, attentive receptivity; no concern for appearances or even any anxiety to be — one is quite modestly, quite humbly, quite simply the instrument which of itself is nothing and knows nothing, but is ready to receive everything and transmit everything.

The first condition is self-forgetfulness, a total self-giving, the absence of ego.

And the body says to the Supreme Lord: "What You want me to be, I shall be; what You want me to know, I shall know; what You want me to do, I shall do."

*3 October 1958*

**5 – If mankind only caught a glimpse of what infinite enjoyments, what perfect forces, what luminous reaches of spontaneous knowledge, what wide calms of our being lie waiting for us in the tracts which our animal evolution has not yet conquered, they would leave all**

**and never rest till they had gained these treasures. But the way is narrow, the doors are hard to force, and fear, distrust and scepticism are there, sentinels of Nature, to forbid the turning away of our feet from her ordinary pastures.**

What Sri Aurobindo has written, the words [“caught a glimpse”] which have been translated<sup>2</sup> as *entrevoiaient*, means to see something in its totality, but for a very brief moment. It is obvious that a constant vision of all these wonders would automatically compel you to set out on the path. It is also certain that a little fragmentary glimpse is not enough — it would not have enough weight to compel you to follow the path.

But if you had a total vision, however brief, you would not be able to resist the temptation of making the effort needed to realise it. But, in fact, the total vision is exceptional, and that is why Sri Aurobindo says to us: “If mankind only...”

To tell the truth, it very seldom happens that those who are ready, who are undoubtedly meant for realisation, do not have, at a certain moment in their lives, even if only for a few seconds, the experience of what this realisation is.

But even those whose destiny is certain have to struggle mightily, resolutely, against this “something” which one seems to take in with the very air one breathes: this fear, this dread of what may happen. And this is so stupid, because, in the final analysis, the destiny of each individual is the same: you are born, you live — more or less satisfactorily — and you die; then you wait for a certain length of time, and again you are born, you live — more or less satisfactorily — and again you die, and so on indefinitely, until you feel you have had enough of it.

Fear of what? Fear of coming out of the rut? Fear of being free? Fear of no longer being a prisoner?

And then, when you have enough courage to overcome this,

<sup>2</sup> In the French text of *Thoughts and Aphorisms* read by the Mother.

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when you say, “Come what may! After all, there’s not much to lose”, then you become wary, you wonder if it is reasonable, if it is true, if all that is not an illusion, if you are not just imagining things, if there is really any substance to it... And mind you, this mistrust seems stupid, but you encounter it even in the most intelligent, even in those who have repeatedly had conclusive experiences — it is something that you take in with the food you eat, the air you breathe, your contacts with others; and that is why you can speak of the “tentacles of Nature”,<sup>3</sup> everywhere, in all things, like an octopus stealing in and catching you and binding you.

Even when you have overcome these two obstacles, when the experiences are so strong that you can no longer doubt, that doubt becomes impossible — like doubting one’s own life — then there remains something awful, petty, dry, corrosive: scepticism. And this is founded on human pride, that is why it lasts so long. You want to think that you are above all these things, “Oh, I am not one to fall into those traps! I am a reasonable man, I see things from a practical point of view; I’m not so easily deceived.” It is awful!... It is sordid. But it is dangerous.

Even in moments of greatest enthusiasm, even when one is filled with an exceptional, marvellous experience — it rises from the lowest depths. It is ugly, slimy, disgusting. And yet it rises, and spoils everything.

To conquer it, one must be a mighty warrior. One must struggle against all the obscurities of Nature, against all her tricks, all her temptations.

Why does she do this? It is as if she were moving away from her own goal. But I have already explained this to you many times. Nature knows very well where she is going and what the outcome is. She wants it, but... in her own way. She does not feel that any time is being wasted. She has all eternity before her. She

<sup>3</sup> The translation the Mother had before her was based on a text which read “tentacles of Nature” instead of “sentinels of Nature”.

wants to follow her own way as she likes, meandering as much as she likes, going back on her tracks, straying from the straight path, starting the same thing all over again several times to see what will happen. And these enlightened cranks, who want to get there at once, as soon as possible, who thirst for truth, light, beauty, balance — they bother her, they urge her on, they tell her that she is wasting her time. Her time! She always replies, “But I have all eternity before me. Am I in a hurry? Why are you in such a hurry?” And again, with a smile: “Your haste is all too human; widen yourselves, become infinite, be eternal, and you will no longer be in a hurry.”

There is so much fun on the way, for her... but not for everyone.

This is what happens when one sees things from a great height, from a great distance, when one’s view is vast, almost infinite. Everything that upsets human beings and makes them suffer, disappears; so those who are very wise, who have abandoned life for the sake of higher wisdom tell you with a smile, “Why suffer? Come out of it and you will suffer no more.” That is all very well individually but, in fact, if you think about others you may wish this rather tragic comedy would come to an end sooner. And it is very justifiable to feel tired of living like a beast at pasture, of roaming from one patch of grass to another, of ruminating in a corner, of having such narrow horizons and of missing all the splendours of life.

Perhaps it amuses Nature that we should be like that, but we are tired of it, we want to be different.

And that is it. When you have truly had enough of it and want things to be different, then you have the courage, the strength, the capacity to conquer these three terrible enemies: fear, doubt and scepticism. But I repeat, it is not enough to sit down one fine day, watch yourself be, and struggle with these things inside you once and for all. You have to do it and do it again and again and continue in a way which seems almost endless, to be sure that you have got rid of it all. In

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reality, you are perhaps never truly rid of it, but there comes a time when inside yourself, you are so different that you can no longer be touched by these things. You can see them, but you see them with a smile, and at a simple gesture they go away, back to where they came from, perhaps a little changed, perhaps a little less strong, less obstinate, less aggressive — until the time when the Light is so strong that all darkness vanishes.

As for the marvels Sri Aurobindo tells us about, it is better not to describe them, because each individual feels them, undergoes them, experiences them in his own way — and for each person that is the best way. One must not adopt another's way, one must go one's own way, then the experience has its full value, its full inestimable value.

And finally, I wish that you may all have these experiences yourselves. And for that, faith, confidence, much humaneness and great goodwill are needed.

Open, aspire, and... wait. It will surely come, the Grace is there. It asks only to be able to work for everyone.

*10 October 1958*

**6 – Late, I learned that when reason died then Wisdom was born; before that liberation, I had only knowledge.**

Once again I must repeat that the form of these aphorisms is purposely paradoxical in order to give the mind a little shock and awaken it enough for it to make an effort to understand. One must not take this aphorism literally. Some people seem worried by the idea that reason must disappear for one to become wise. It is not that, it is not that at all.

Reason must no longer be the summit and the master.

For a very long time in life, until one possesses anything resembling Knowledge, it is indispensable that reason be the master, otherwise one is the plaything of one's impulses, one's

fancies, one's more or less disordered emotional imaginings, and one is in danger of being very far removed not merely from wisdom but even from the knowledge needed for conducting oneself acceptably. But when one has managed to control all the lower parts of the being with the help of reason, which is the apex of ordinary human intelligence, then if one wants to go beyond this point, if one wants to liberate oneself from ordinary life, from ordinary thought, from the ordinary vision of things, one must, if I may say so, stand upon the head of reason, not trampling it down disdainfully, but using it as a stepping stone to something higher, something beyond it, to attain to something which concerns itself very little with the decrees of reason; something which can allow itself to be irrational because it is a higher irrationality, with a higher light; something which is beyond ordinary knowledge and which receives its inspirations from above, from high above, from the divine Wisdom.

That is what this means.

As for the knowledge of which Sri Aurobindo speaks here, it is ordinary knowledge, it is not Knowledge by identity; it is knowledge that can be acquired by the intellect through thought, through ordinary means.

But once again — and in any case we shall have occasion to return to this when we study the next aphorism — do not be in a hurry to abandon reason in the conviction that you will immediately attain to Wisdom, because you must be ready for Wisdom; otherwise, by abandoning reason, you run a great risk of falling into unreason, which is rather dangerous.

Many times in his writings, particularly in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo warns us against the imaginings of those who believe they can do sadhana without rigorous self-control and who heed all sorts of inspirations, which lead them to a dangerous imbalance where all their repressed, hidden, secret desires come out into the open under the pretence of liberation from ordinary conventions and ordinary reason.

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One can be free only by soaring to the heights, high above human passions. Only when one has achieved a higher, selfless freedom and done away with all desires and impulses does one have the right to be free.

But neither should people who are very reasonable, very moral according to ordinary social laws, think themselves wise, for their wisdom is an illusion and holds no profound truth.

One who would break the law must be above the law. One who would ignore conventions must be above conventions. One who would despise all rules must be above all rules. And the motive of this liberation should never be a personal, egoistic one: the desire to satisfy an ambition, aggrandise one's personality, through a feeling of superiority, out of contempt for others, to set oneself above the herd and regard it with condescension. Be on your guard when you feel yourself superior and look down on others ironically, as if to say, "I'm no longer made of such stuff." That's when you go off the track and are in danger of falling into an abyss.

When one truly attains wisdom, the true wisdom, the wisdom Sri Aurobindo is speaking of here, there is no longer higher and lower; there is only a play of forces in which each thing has its place and its importance. And if there is a hierarchy it is a hierarchy of surrender to the Supreme. It is not a hierarchy of superiority with regard to what is below.

And with human understanding, human reason, human knowledge, one is unable to discern this hierarchy. Only the awakened soul can recognise another awakened soul, and then the sense of superiority disappears completely.

True wisdom comes only when the ego disappears, and the ego disappears only when you are ready to abandon yourself completely to the supreme Lord without any personal motive and without any expectation of profit — when you do it because you cannot do otherwise.

*17 October 1958*

**7 – What men call knowledge is the reasoned acceptance of false appearances. Wisdom looks behind the veil and sees. Reason divides, fixes details and contrasts them; Wisdom unifies, marries contrasts in a single harmony.**

All that Sri Aurobindo writes about knowledge, reason, Wisdom is said in order to bring us out of the rut of conventional thinking, and, if possible, make us perceive the reality behind the appearances.

As a general rule, with a few very rare exceptions, men are content to observe more or less accurately everything that happens around them, and sometimes within themselves, and to classify all these observations according to one superficial system of logic or another. And they call this organisation, these systems, “knowledge”. It has never occurred to them, they have not even begun to perceive that all the things they see, touch, feel, experience, are false appearances and not reality itself.

The constant, general argument is, “But I see it, I touch it, I feel it — consequently it is true.”

They should, on the contrary, tell themselves, “I see it, I touch it, I feel it — consequently it is false.” We are at opposite poles and there is no way of coming to an understanding.

For Sri Aurobindo, true knowledge is precisely Knowledge by identity, and wisdom is the state one achieves when one is in this true knowledge. He says it here: Wisdom looks behind the veil of false appearances and sees the reality behind it. And Sri Aurobindo emphasises that when one defines something with the superficial, outer knowledge, it is always in opposition to something else; it is always by means of a contrast that one explains what one sees, feels, touches — and does not understand.

Reason always sets one thing against another and compels you to make a choice. People whose thought and reason are clear see all the differences between things. It is rather remarkable that reason can only work through differences; it is because one perceives the difference between this and that, one act and

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another, one object and another, that one makes decisions and that reason works.

But it is precisely true Knowledge, Knowledge by identity and the wisdom which results from it that always see the point where all apparently contradictory things harmonise, complement each other, form a perfectly coherent, coordinated whole. And naturally that changes entirely the point of view, the perception, and the consequences in action.

The first absolutely indispensable step is not to repeat, more or less mechanically and without quite knowing what you are saying, that “appearances are false”. You say it because Sri Aurobindo has told us so — but without really understanding it. And yet, when you want to understand something, you continue to look, to observe, to touch, to taste and to feel, because you believe there are no other means of observation. It is only when you have had the experience of the “reversal of consciousness”, when you have gone behind these things, when you can feel, experience, in the most concrete manner, their illusory appearance, that you are able to understand. But, unless you have had the experience, you can read all the aphorisms, repeat and learn them, have faith in them and still not perceive: they have no reality for you. All these appearances remain the only way of coming into contact with the outer world and of becoming aware of what it is. And sometimes you can spend a whole lifetime learning how things are in their appearances and be considered very cultured, very intelligent, highly knowledgeable, when you have observed all this in detail and remembered all that you have observed or learnt...

Strictly speaking, you can, when you have worked hard, have some slight effect on these appearances, change them a little — this is how, through science, you learn to manipulate matter — but there is no true change and there is no true power. And when you are in that state, you are wholly convinced that there is nothing you can do to change your character. You feel trapped in a kind of fatalism that weighs you down, you know

neither whence nor how; you are born like this, in such and such a place, into such and such an environment, with such and such a character, and you get through life as best you can, adapting to things without having much influence on them, and trying to mitigate the drawbacks of your own character without having the power to transform it. You feel caught in a net, you are the slave of something of which you are unaware. You are the plaything of circumstances, of unknown forces, of a will you do not submit to, but which constrains you. Even the most rebellious are slaves, because the only thing that liberates you is precisely the act of passing behind the veil and discovering what lies beyond it. Once you have seen, you know who you are and once you have established your true identity, you have the key to the true transformation.

We read, we try to understand, we explain, we try to know. But a single minute of true experience teaches us more than millions of words and hundreds of explanations.

So the first question is: "How to have the experience?"

To go within yourself, that is the first step.

And then, once you have succeeded in going within yourself deeply enough to feel the reality of that which is within, to widen yourself progressively, systematically, to become as vast as the universe and lose the sense of limitation.

These are the first two preparatory movements.

And these two things must be done in the greatest possible calm, peace and tranquillity. This peace, this tranquillity brings about silence in the mind and stillness in the vital.

This effort, this attempt must be renewed very regularly, persistently. And after a certain lapse of time, which may be longer or shorter, you begin to perceive a reality that is different from the reality perceived in the ordinary, external consciousness.

Naturally, by the action of Grace, the veil may suddenly be rent from within, and at once you can enter the true truth; but even when that happens, in order to obtain the full value and full effect of the experience, you must maintain yourself in a

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state of inner receptivity, and to do that, it is indispensable for you to go within each day.

*24 October 1958*

**8 – Either do not give the name of knowledge to your beliefs only and of error, ignorance or charlatanism to the beliefs of others; or do not rail at the dogmas of the sects and their intolerance.**

The dogmas of sects and the intolerance of religions come from the fact that the sects and religions consider their beliefs alone to be knowledge, and the beliefs of others to be error, ignorance or charlatanism.

This simple movement causes them to set up what they believe to be true as dogma and to violently condemn what others believe to be true. To think that your knowledge is the only true one, that your belief is the only true one and that others' beliefs are not true, is to do precisely what is done by all sects and religions.

So, if you are doing exactly the same thing as the sects and religions, you have no right to mock them. You do the same thing without being aware of it because it seems quite natural to you. What Sri Aurobindo wants to make you understand is that when you say, "We are in possession of the truth and what is not this truth is an error" — though you may not dare say it in such a crude way — you are doing exactly the same thing as all the religions and all the sects.

If you objectify a little you will see that you have spontaneously, without realising it, established as knowledge everything you have learnt, everything you have thought, everything which has given you the impression of being particularly true and of major importance; and you are quite ready to contradict any different notion held by those who say, "No, no, it is like this, it is not like that."

If you watch yourself in action, you will understand the mechanism of this intolerance and you will immediately be able to put an end to all these useless discussions. This brings us back to what I have already told you once: the contact which you have had with the truth of things, your personal contact — a contact which is more or less clear, profound, vast, pure — may have given *you*, as an individual, an interesting, perhaps even a decisive experience; but although this contact may have given you an experience of decisive importance, you must not imagine that it is a universal experience and that the same contact would give others the same experience. And if you understand this, that it is something purely personal, individual, subjective, that it is not at all an absolute and general law, then you can no longer despise the knowledge of others, nor seek to impose your own point of view and experience upon them. This understanding obviates all mental quarrels, which are always totally useless.

Obviously, the first part of the aphorism can be taken as advice, but this is not what Sri Aurobindo meant when he wrote it; he wanted to make us conscious of the error we make ourselves but ridicule in others. This is a habit with us, not only in this particular case, but in all cases. It is rather remarkable that when we have a weakness — for example a ridiculous habit, a defect or an imperfection — since it is more or less part of our nature, we consider it to be very natural, it does not shock us. But as soon as we see this same weakness, this same imperfection, this same ridiculous habit in someone else, it seems quite shocking to us and we say, “What! He’s like that?” — without noticing that we ourselves are “like that”. And so to the weakness and imperfection we add the absurdity of not even noticing them.

There is a lesson to be drawn from this. When something in a person seems to you completely unacceptable or ridiculous — “What! He is like that, he behaves like that, he says things like that, he does things like that” — you should say to yourself, “Well, well, but perhaps I do the same thing without being aware of it. I would do better to look into myself first before criticising

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him, so as to make sure that I am not doing the very same thing in a slightly different way.” If you have the good sense and intelligence to do this each time you are shocked by another person’s behaviour, you will realise that in life your relations with others are like a mirror which is presented to you so that you can see more easily and clearly the weaknesses you carry within you.

In a general and almost absolute way anything that shocks you in other people is the very thing you carry in yourself in a more or less veiled, more or less hidden form, though perhaps in a slightly different guise which allows you to delude yourself. And what in yourself seems inoffensive enough, becomes monstrous as soon as you see it in others.

Try to experience this; it will greatly help you to change yourselves. At the same time it will bring a sunny tolerance to your relationships with others, the goodwill which comes from understanding, and it will very often put an end to these completely useless quarrels.

One can live without quarrelling. It seems strange to say this because as things are, it would seem, on the contrary, that life is made for quarrelling in the sense that the main occupation of people who are together is to quarrel, overtly or covertly. You do not always come to words, you do not always come to blows — fortunately — but you are in a state of perpetual irritation within because you do not find around you the perfection that you would yourself wish to realise, and which you find rather difficult to realise — but you find it entirely natural that others should realise it.

“How can they be like that?...” You forget how difficult you find it in yourself not to be “like that”!

Try, you will see.

Look upon everything with a benevolent smile. Take all the things which irritate you as a lesson for yourself and your life will be more peaceful and more effective as well, for a great percentage of your energy certainly goes to waste in the irritation

you feel when you do not find in others the perfection that you would like to realise in yourself.

You stop short at the perfection that others should realise and you are seldom conscious of the goal you should be pursuing yourself. If you are conscious of it, well then, begin with the work which is given to *you*, that is to say, realise what you have to do and do not concern yourself with what others do, because, after all, it is not your business. And the best way to the true attitude is simply to say, “All those around me, all the circumstances of my life, all the people near me, are a mirror held up to me by the Divine Consciousness to show me the progress I must make. Everything that shocks me in others means a work I have to do in myself.”

And perhaps if one carried true perfection in oneself, one would discover it more often in others.

*7 November 1958*

**9 – What the soul sees and has experienced, that it knows;  
the rest is appearance, prejudice and opinion.**

This amounts to saying that all knowledge which is not the result of the soul’s vision or experience is without true value.

But the question immediately arises — it was, in fact, put to me — “How do we know what the soul sees?”

Obviously there is only one solution: to become conscious of one’s soul. And this completes the aphorism: unless one is conscious of one’s soul one does not have true knowledge. Therefore the first effort must be to find the soul within, to unite with it and allow it to govern one’s life.

Some people ask, “How do we know whether this is the soul?” I have already answered this question several times. Those who ask this question, by the very fact of asking it, prove that they are not conscious of their souls, because as soon as you are conscious of your soul and identified with it, you have a

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positive knowledge of it and you no longer ask how you are to know. And that experience can neither be counterfeited nor imagined; you cannot pretend to be in contact with your soul — it is something which cannot be contrived or counterfeited. When the soul governs your life, you know it with absolute certainty and no longer ask any questions.

But the usefulness of the aphorism we have just read is to make you understand that everything you think you know, everything you have learnt, anything that has come to you in your life through personal observation, deduction, comparison — all that is a very relative knowledge on which you cannot found a durable and truly effective way of life.

How many times have we repeated this: all that comes from the mind is wholly relative. The more the mind is educated and has applied itself to various disciplines, the more it becomes capable of proving that what it puts forward or what it says is true. One can prove the truth of anything by reasoning, but that does not make it true. It remains an opinion, a prejudice, a knowledge based on appearances which are themselves more than dubious.

So there seems to be only one way out and that is to go in search of one's soul and to find it. It is there, it does not make a point of hiding itself, it does not play with you just to make things difficult; on the contrary, it makes great efforts to help you find it and to make itself heard. Only, between your soul and your active consciousness there are two characters who are in the habit of making a lot of noise, the mind and the vital. And because they make a lot of noise, while the soul does not, or, rather, makes as little as possible, their noise prevents you from hearing the voice of the soul.

When you want to know what your soul knows, you have to make an inner effort, to be very attentive; and indeed, if you are attentive, behind the outer noise of the mind and the vital, you can discern something very subtle, very quiet, very peaceful, which knows and says what it knows. But the insistence of the

others is so imperious, while *that* is so quiet, that you are very easily misled into listening to the one that makes the most noise; most often you become aware only afterwards that the other one was right. It does not impose itself, it does not compel you to listen, for it is without violence.

When you hesitate, when you wonder what to do in this or that circumstance, there come the desire, the preference both mental and vital, that press, insist, affirm and impose themselves, and, with the best reasons in the world, build up a whole case for themselves. And if you are not on the alert, if you don't have a firm discipline, if you don't have the habit of control, they finally convince you that they are right. And as I was saying a little while ago, they make so much noise that you do not even hear the tiny voice or the tiny, very quiet indication of the soul which says, "Don't do it."

This "Don't do it" comes often, but you discard it as something which has no power and follow your impulsive destiny. But if you are truly sincere in your will to find and live the truth, then you learn to listen better and better, you learn to discriminate more and more, and even if it costs you an effort, even if it causes you pain, you learn to obey. And even if you have obeyed only once, it is a powerful help, a considerable progress on the path towards the discrimination between what is and what is not the soul. With this discrimination and the necessary sincerity you are sure to reach the goal.

But you must not be in a hurry, you must not be impatient, you must be very persevering. You do the wrong thing ten times for every time that you do the right thing. But when you do the wrong thing you must not give up everything in despair, but tell yourself that the Grace will never abandon you and that next time it will be better.

So, in conclusion, we shall say that in order to know things as they are you must first unite with your soul and to unite with your soul you must want it with persistence and perseverance.

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Only the degree of concentration on the goal can shorten the way.

*14 November 1958*

**10 – My soul knows that it is immortal. But you take a dead body to pieces and cry triumphantly, “Where is your soul and where is your immortality?”**

It has often been repeated — but except in certain cases very rarely understood — that only like knows like. If this were understood, a great deal of ignorance would vanish.

Only the soul can know the soul, and on each level of being, only the equivalent level can recognise the other. Only the Divine can know the Divine, and because we carry the Divine in ourselves we are capable of seeing Him and recognising Him. But if we try to understand something of the inner life by using our senses and external methods, the result is sure to be total failure and we shall also deceive ourselves totally.

So when you imagine that you can know the secrets of Nature and still remain in a purely physical consciousness, you are entirely deceived. And this habit of demanding concrete, material proofs before accepting the reality of something, is one of the most glaring effects of ignorance. With that attitude any fool imagines that he can sit in judgment on the highest things and deny the most profound experiences.

It is certainly not by dissecting a body which is dead because the soul has departed from it that the soul can be found. Had the soul not departed, the body would not have been dead! It is to bring home to us the absurdity of this claim that Sri Aurobindo has written this aphorism.

It applies to all judgments of the critical mind and to all scientific methods when they would judge any but purely material phenomena.

The conclusion is always the same: the only true attitude

is one of humility, of silent respect before what one does not know, and of inner aspiration to come out of one's ignorance. One of the things which would make humanity progress most would be for it to respect what it does not know, to acknowledge willingly that it does not know and is therefore unable to judge. We constantly do just the opposite. We pass final judgments on things of which we have no knowledge whatsoever, and say in a peremptory manner, "This is possible. That is impossible", when we do not even know what it is we are speaking of. And we put on superior airs because we doubt things of which we have never had any knowledge.

Men believe that doubt is a sign of superiority, whereas it is really a sign of inferiority.

Scepticism and doubt are two of the greatest obstacles to progress; they add presumptuousness to ignorance.

*21 November 1958*

**11 – Immortality is not the survival of the mental personality after death, though that also is true, but the waking possession of the unborn and deathless Self of which body is only an instrument and a shadow.**

There are three statements here which have raised questions. First, "What is the mental personality?"

In each human being the body is animated by the vital being, and governed, or partially governed, by a mental being. This is a general rule, but the extent to which the mental being is formed and individualised varies greatly from one individual to the next. In the great mass of human beings the mind is something fluid which has no organisation of its own, and therefore it is not a personality. And as long as the mind is like that, fluid, unorganised, with no cohesive life of its own and without personality, it cannot survive. What made up the mental being dissolves in the mental region when the body, the

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substance which made up the body, dissolves in the physical substance.

But as soon as the mental being is formed, organised, individualised, and has become a personality, it does not depend, it no longer depends on the body for its existence, and it therefore survives the body. The earth's mental atmosphere is filled with beings, mental personalities which lead an entirely independent existence, even after the disappearance of the body; they can reincarnate in a new body when the soul, that is to say, the true Self, reincarnates, thus carrying with it the memory of its previous lives.

But this is not what Sri Aurobindo calls Immortality. Immortality is a life without beginning or end, without birth or death, which is altogether independent of the body. It is the life of the Self, the essential being of each individual, and it is not separate from the universal Self. And this essential being has a sense of oneness with the universal Self; it is in fact a personified, individualised expression of the universal Self and has neither beginning nor end, neither life nor death, it exists eternally and that is what is immortal. When we are fully conscious of this Self we participate in its eternal life, and we therefore become immortal.

But there is some misunderstanding about this word "Immortality" — and this is not something new; it is a misunderstanding which has recurred very frequently. When one speaks of immortality most people understand it as the indefinite survival of the body.

The body can survive indefinitely only if, in the first place, it becomes fully conscious of this immortal Self and unites with it, identifies with it to the extent of having the same capacity, the same faculty of constant transformation which would enable it to follow the universal movement. This is an absolutely indispensable condition if the body is to endure. Because the body is rigid, because it does not follow the movement, because it cannot transform itself rapidly enough to constantly identify itself with

the universal evolution, it decomposes and dies. Its fixity, its rigidity, its incapacity to transform itself, make its destruction necessary, so that its substance may return to the general realm of physical substance and so that the body may be remoulded into new forms in order to become capable of further progress. But usually, when one speaks of immortality, people think of physical immortality — it goes without saying that this has not yet been realised.

Sri Aurobindo says that it is possible and even that it will happen, but he lays down one condition: the body must be supramentalised, it must have some of the qualities of the supramental being, which are qualities of plasticity and constant transformation. And when Sri Aurobindo writes that the body is “only an instrument and a shadow”, he is speaking of the body as it is now and will probably continue to be for a long time to come. It is only the instrument of the Self, a very inadequate expression of this Self, and a shadow — a shadow, something vague and obscure in comparison with the light and precision of the eternal Self.

How this shadow, this instrument, can serve the development of the soul, and how by cultivating the instrument one can be of help to future lives, are questions which are not without interest.

Each time that the soul takes birth in a new body it comes with the intention of having a new experience which will help it to develop and to perfect its personality. This is how the psychic being is formed from life to life and becomes a completely conscious and independent personality which, once it has arrived at the summit of its development, is free to choose not only the time of its incarnation, but the place, the purpose and the work to be accomplished.

Its descent into the physical body is necessarily a descent into darkness, ignorance, unconsciousness; and for a very long time it must labour simply to bring a little consciousness into the material substance of the body, before it can make use

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of it for the experience it has come for. So, if we cultivate the body by a clear-sighted and rational method, at the same time we are helping the growth of the soul, its progress and enlightenment.

Physical culture is the process of infusing consciousness into the cells of the body. One may or may not know it, but it is a fact. When we concentrate to make our muscles move according to our will, when we endeavour to make our limbs more supple, to give them an agility, or a force, or a resistance, or a plasticity which they do not naturally possess, we infuse into the cells of the body a consciousness which was not there before, thus turning it into an increasingly homogeneous and receptive instrument, which progresses in and by its activities. This is the primary importance of physical culture. Of course, that is not the only thing that brings consciousness into the body, but it is something which acts in an overall way, and this is rare. I have already told you several times that the artist infuses a very great consciousness into his hands, as the intellectual does into his brain. But these are, as it were, local phenomena, whereas the action of physical culture is more general. And when one sees the absolutely marvellous results of this culture, when one observes the extent to which the body is capable of perfecting itself, one understands how useful this can be to the action of the psychic being which has entered into this material substance. For naturally, when it is in possession of an organised and harmonised instrument which is full of strength and suppleness and possibilities, its task is greatly facilitated.

I do not say that people who practise physical culture necessarily do it for this purpose, because very few are aware of this result. But whether they are aware of it or not, this is the result. Moreover, if you are at all sensitive, when you observe the moving body of a person who has practised physical culture in a methodical and rational way, you see a light, a consciousness, a life, which is not there in others.

There are always people with a wholly external view of things who say, “Workers, for example, who have to do hard physical labour and who are compelled by their work to learn to carry heavy weights — they too build up their muscles, and instead of spending their time like aristocrats doing exercises with no useful outward results, they at least produce something.” This is ignorance. Because there is an essential difference between the muscles developed through specialised, local and limited use and muscles which have been cultivated deliberately and harmoniously according to an integral programme which leaves no part of the body without work or exercise.

People like workers and peasants, who have a specialised occupation and develop only certain muscles, always end up with occupational deformities. And this in no way helps their psychic progress because, although the whole of life necessarily contributes to the psychic development, it does so in such an unconscious way and so slowly that the poor psychic being must come back again and again and again, indefinitely, to achieve its purpose. Therefore we can say without fear of being mistaken that physical culture is the sadhana of the body and that all sadhana necessarily helps to hasten the achievement of the goal. The more consciously you do it, the quicker and more general the result, but even if you do it blindly, if you can see no further than the tips of your fingers or your feet or your nose, you help the overall development.

Finally, one can say that any discipline that is followed rigorously, sincerely, deliberately, is a considerable help, for it enables life on earth to attain its goal more rapidly and prepares it to receive the new life. To discipline oneself is to hasten the arrival of this new life and the contact with the supramental reality.

As it is, the physical body is truly nothing but a very disfigured shadow of the eternal life of the Self. But this physical body is capable of progressive development; through each individual formation, the physical substance progresses, and one day it will

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be capable of building a bridge between physical life as we know it and the supramental life which is to manifest.

*28 November 1958*

**12 – They proved to me by convincing reasons that God did not exist, and I believed them. Afterwards I saw God, for He came and embraced me. And now which am I to believe, the reasonings of others or my own experience?**

Sri Aurobindo is not asking a question, but rather making an ironic comment. It is to bring out clearly the stupidity of the reasonings of the mind, which imagines it can speak of what it does not know. It is nothing else.

You can prove anything with the mind. When you know how to use it and have mastered reasoning and deduction, you can prove anything. As a matter of fact, this is an exercise that is given in universities to make the mind supple: you are given a thesis to prove and immediately afterwards, with equal conviction, you have to prove its antithesis — in the hope that if you rise a little above both, you will discover the synthesis.

Therefore, once it is conceded that anything can be proved, it follows that reasoning leads nowhere; because if you can prove something and in the next moment prove its opposite, this is the proof that your proofs are worthless.

There is experience. For a simple heart, a sincere and honest nature, a nature which knows that its experience is sincere, that it is not a falsification of desire or of mental ambition, but a spontaneous movement which comes from the soul — the experience is absolutely convincing. It loses its power of conviction when the desire to have an experience, or the ambition to think oneself very superior, becomes mixed with it. If you have that in you, then beware, because desires and ambitions falsify experience. The mind is a formative power, and if you have a very strong desire for something very important and very interesting to happen

to you, you can make it happen, at least in the eyes of those who see things superficially. But apart from these cases, if you are honest, sincere, spontaneous, and especially when experiences come to you without any effort on your part to have them, and as a spontaneous expression of your deeper aspiration, then these experiences carry with them the seal of an absolute authenticity; and even if the whole world tells you that they are nonsense and illusion, it does not change your personal convictions. But naturally, for this, you must not deceive yourself. You must be sincere and honest with a complete inner rectitude.

Someone has asked me, “How is it possible for God to reveal Himself to an unbeliever?” That’s very funny; because if it pleases God to reveal Himself to an unbeliever, I don’t see what would prevent Him from doing so!

On the contrary, He has a sense of humour — Sri Aurobindo has told us many times already that the Supreme has a sense of humour, that *we* are the ones who want to make Him into a grave and invariably serious character — and He may find it very amusing to come and embrace an unbeliever. Someone who has only the day before declared, “God does not exist. I do not believe in Him. All that is folly and ignorance....”, He gathers him into His arms, He presses him to His heart — and He laughs in his face.

Everything is possible, even things which to our small and limited intelligence seem absurd.

Indeed, it is only when we have come to the end of these aphorisms that we will be able to understand them; because with each one, Sri Aurobindo places us in an entirely different position with regard to the truth to be discovered. There are innumerable facets. There are innumerable points of view. One can say the most contradictory things without being inconsistent or contradicting oneself. Everything depends on the way in which you look at it. And even once we have seen everything, from all the points of view accessible to us, around the central Truth, we will still have had only a very small glimpse — the

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Truth will escape us on all sides at once. But what is remarkable is that once we have had the experience of a single contact with the Divine, a true, spontaneous and sincere experience, at that moment, in that experience, we will know everything, and even more. That is why it is so important to live the little you know in all sincerity in order to make yourself capable of having experiences, and of knowing by experience, not mentally, but because you live these things, because they become a part of your being and consciousness.

To put into practice the little you know is the best way to learn more; it is the most powerful means of advancing on the way — a little bit of really sincere practice. For example, not to do something that you know must not be done. When you have seen a weakness, a disability in your being, you must not allow it to happen again. When, if only for a moment, you have had the vision of what you must be, in an ardent aspiration, you must not — you must never forget to become that.

Some people are always complaining about their disabilities. But that doesn't lead you very far. If, once, you have truly seen your weaknesses and truly, sincerely understood, seen that you must not be like that — that's the end of complaining. Then there is the daily effort, the building up of the will, the vigilance of every moment — you must never allow a recognised mistake to renew itself. To err through ignorance, to err through unconsciousness, is obviously very unfortunate, but it can be put right. Whereas to go on making the same mistake, knowing that it must not be made, is an act of cowardice which we must not permit ourselves.

To say, "Oh, human nature is like this. Oh, we are in the inconstancy. Oh, we are in the ignorance" — all this is laziness and weakness. And behind this laziness and weakness there is a huge bad will. There!

I say this because many people have made this remark to me, many. And it is always a way of justifying oneself: "Oh, we are doing what we can." It is not true. Because if you are sincere,

once you have seen — as long as you have not seen, nothing can be said — but the moment you see is the moment when you receive the Grace, and once you have received the Grace, you no longer have the right to forget it.<sup>4</sup>

*5 December 1958*

<sup>4</sup> The “Friday Classes”, which took place in the Ashram Playground, end here, and with them the first section of the Mother’s commentaries.