

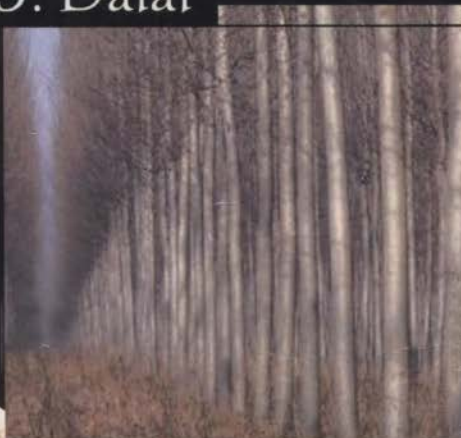


Eckhart Tolle & Sri Aurobindo

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON ENLIGHTENMENT



A.S. Dalal



Includes interview with ECKHART TOLLE on tour in India

Eckhart Tolle
&
Sri Aurobindo

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ON ENLIGHTENMENT

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&
Sri Aurobindo

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an imprint of
Stone Hill Foundation Publishing

EDITIONS INDIA®

An imprint of STONE HILL FOUNDATION PUBLISHING®

G-309 Panampilly Avenue, Panampilly Nagar

Cochin 682036, Kerala, India

editionsindia@asianetindia.com

Eckhart Tolle and Sri Aurobindo: Two Perspectives on Enlightenment

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First edition published 2008 in India as an Editions India original

ISBN 10: 81-89658-31-X

ISBN 13: 978-81-89658-31-1

Cover art direction by Girija Nair

Book design and composition by BookWorks STM, Cochin

Printed in India by Maptho Printings, Cochin

Printed on acid-free, partially recycled paper

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Preface

Originally this book was meant to share the thoughts of a seeker with those who, like him, feel drawn to the teachings of Eckhart Tolle. So, the first draft of the manuscript was written with a view to presenting Eckhart's teaching from the perspective of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, of which the writer has been a practitioner for over five decades. Eckhart, who graciously read the manuscript and expressed his appreciation for it, suggested that I make a comparison between his teaching and that of Sri Aurobindo. I had generally desisted from making such a comparison—even though part of me was inclined to do so—in view of what Eckhart has said in the Introduction to his book *The Power of Now*: “The mind always wants to categorize and compare, but this book will work better for you if you do not attempt to compare its terminology with that of other teachings; otherwise, you will probably become confused.” I have kept in mind these words of Eckhart while writing the present version of this book, in which I have tried to compare the teaching of Eckhart with that of Sri Aurobindo in a way that would not confuse the reader. The comparison is meant to help toward a better understanding of both Eckhart's teaching and that of Sri Aurobindo.

Eckhart's teaching, which beautifully combines elements from Zen Buddhism, Advaita (nondualist Vedanta), and Christianity, is relatively neutral. However, in its views of the nature of Reality and enlightenment, his teaching is predominantly Buddhist. It is a perspective that presents a sharp contrast to some of the dominant

Hindu views such as those contained in the *Bhagavad Gita*. I have attempted to bring together the two perspectives in the light of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga.

The differences between the two perspectives consist in certain paradoxes or apparent contradictions, and in certain divergent viewpoints that are actual contradictions. Paradoxes, such as the statement that the attainment of enlightenment takes a long time and the statement that enlightenment is an immediate experience, are less difficult to resolve because they are based on the same experience viewed from opposite angles. Divergences, on the other hand, are due to differences in the nature of the spiritual realizations on which they are based. For example, the Buddhist view that the Reality is Non-Being or Non-Existence or Nothingness (Asat) is based on a different spiritual experience from the one that is founded on the Vedantic view of the ultimate reality as Being, Existence, or the All (Sat, the Brahman). Similarly, the Hindu view that both the world and the notion of an individual soul are illusions, *Maya*, is based on a spiritual experience that is fundamentally different from the equally valid experience on which is based another Hindu view that regards the world as a divine play, *Lila*. Here, the eternal Supreme Being plays hide-and-seek with the eternal individual soul. In Eckhart's teaching, as in all spiritual teachings, there are certain paradoxes. There is also a fine combination of divergent views that he embraces without being troubled by the contradictory nature of their philosophical underpinnings. I hope that, in comparing Eckhart's teaching with Sri Aurobindo's integral perspective, this book will serve to resolve some of the paradoxes contained in Eckhart's teaching as well as reconcile some of the divergent viewpoints expressed by him.

The teachings of Eckhart are presented within the context of the story of a "seeker," and for this the author wishes to express an apology to him. For, Eckhart is one of those rare instances of a "finder" who had never been a seeker to start with. He therefore regards all seeking, including the quest for the spirit, as stemming from the illusory self, the little "me," out of which one must emerge in order to find one's true being. Eckhart's teachings start at the high level where one is ready to step out of the mode of all personal seeking. So does Sri Aurobindo's yoga, which, however, recognizes that, although we

human beings are initially always motivated by the egoic self even in doing yoga, all spiritual seeking is at heart a yearning of one's true self to discover itself through liberation from the bondage of the egoic self.

The author must also apologize to Eckhart for presenting his teachings from a certain "perspective." As Eckhart has repeatedly said, a perspective is a mental position and is therefore quite inadequate to understand spiritual truths that transcend the purview of the mind. However, at the present stage of the evolution of our consciousness, most human beings are at best mainly mental beings. Therefore, we cannot help beginning with a more or less mental approach even to things that lie beyond the mind. As a concession to this limitation of the human being, spiritual teachers have had to resort to mental concepts and ideas to communicate by verbal means truths that are essentially unformulable in thoughts and incommunicable in words, but realizable only through experience. Some of the teachers, like Eckhart, have used only minimal mental concepts to serve as "pointers" or "signposts" on the spiritual path. A few others, like Sri Aurobindo, have provided elaborate intellectual maps as guides on the inner journey. However, all teachers have relied on the power of the consciousness behind their words to awaken in the seeker something more than concepts and ideas expressed by the words, and have cautioned against the pitfall of mistaking the signpost for the destination, or the map for the territory.

The most valuable aspect of Eckhart's teachings thus lies not in the concepts and ideas he employs but in the energetic charge of the spiritual consciousness from which his teachings emanate and with which his words are powerfully impregnated. For this reason, Chapter 2 of the book, which is a verbatim transcription of the author's interview with Eckhart, is the most powerful conveyor of what Eckhart has to offer to the spiritual seeker. Similarly, the power of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother lie far more in their actual words quoted throughout the book than in the author's paraphrases and expositions.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Eckhart Tolle for granting me an interview that helped me towards a better understanding of his teachings. I am also grateful to him for suggesting that I make a comparison between his teaching and that of Sri Aurobindo. I would like to thank Mohan Nair, Publisher, Editions India. Without his persevering efforts and help, this book might have never seen the light of day. I am very grateful to Galadriel Nair for her invaluable help in transcribing the interview with Eckhart—a task that demanded much patience and endurance due to unexpected problems in recording the interview. I thank also Thomas Lilly who painstakingly transcribed long extracts from several of Eckhart's talks, including the questions and answers at Esalen. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Lynn Crawford for her esteemed help in preparing the manuscript of this book and in providing valuable constructive comments and suggestions about the contents of the book from the viewpoint of an informed and thoughtful reader. I express my grateful appreciation to the Sri Aurobindo Trust for its generous copyright permission to quote from the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. My deepest gratitude goes out to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to whom I owe the inspiration and the light that have made the writing of the book possible.

A. S. Dalal

Publisher's Note

We are greatly privileged to publish this book, which blends scholarship with true humility that is characteristic of a genuinely spiritual person, under the Editions India imprint of Stone Hill Foundation Publishing. Since we started working with the author, Dr. A. S. Dalal, on the manuscript of this book five years ago (then in a different form and with a different focus), we have been very impressed by his sincerity, scholarship, and equanimity. The first draft of this book had to be reframed after nearly three years of work partly as the author sought input on it from Eckhart, and mainly because of the need for minimizing verbatim quotes from his published works and recorded talks. A lesser person would have found this daunting, but Dr. Dalal accepted the task in a true spirit of surrender and wrote a new book in another year's time. Added to this has been delay from our side in publishing the book. During the whole process of transcribing the audiotapes of the interview with Eckhart and the preparation of the manuscript for publication, we have seen nothing but patience, kindness, and unfailing courtesy and appreciation from Dr. Dalal. This has been a very positive experience for us in working with an author. We have learned much from the experience, and for this we are grateful to Dr. Dalal.

We also acknowledge and appreciate the key role played by Lynn Crawford who, since the time the manuscript was first submitted to us, has very ably facilitated correspondence between us and Dr.

Dalal, and helped us in getting our queries answered and tying up loose ends throughout the publishing process.

Readers will find three levels of conventions in the treatment of Sanskrit terms in this book. A large volume of quoted text from the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother warranted that we follow in the text the same print style adopted by them in their original works. These consist of the Sanskrit terms transliterated into roman script starting with a capital letter (though the normal treatment of these would be lower-case italics), those starting with a lower-case letter, and, occasionally, lower-case letters with diacritical marks. The only departure from this convention has been a slightly different spelling adopted in the main text of the book for the transliteration of certain words such as Advaita (instead of “Adwaita” in the quoted text).

This book is being published simultaneously under two imprints of Stone Hill Foundation Publishing—Editions India for Asia and Arunachala Press for the rest of the world. It is also available in hard-bound and paperbound editions.

Mohan Nair

1

Eckhart Comes to Me

A few years ago, a friend, Dr. D.E. Mistry, sent me a copy of Eckhart's book, *The Power of Now*. The power of its words immediately gripped me. I intuitively felt that the words did not express some mental constructions based on theory but spiritual insights arising from Self-realization. Each time, to read the book was to enter a meditative state or what Eckhart would call the state of Presence. After several readings, the book still continues to exert the same influence on me.

In 2001 I had the good fortune to attend a talk given by Eckhart in Palo Alto, California, and a weekend retreat at Esalen in Big Sur. His spoken words and brief personal contacts at those events reinforced my impression of Eckhart as a mystic of a high order.

The following year Eckhart visited India and came to Pondicherry where he gave a public talk and very graciously granted me an interview, which forms part of this book.

It would perhaps be easier to understand Eckhart's impact on me in the context of the course of my seekings. It will also explain the reasons for some of the questions I asked Eckhart at Esalen and in the interview. Briefly, then, I will narrate here the story of my spiritual quest.

I do not know when my quest can be said to have begun, but I remember being keenly interested at the age of fifteen in questions pertaining to God, the origin of the universe, and the purpose of life. Around this time a new headmaster came to our school. It was most probably he who initially fostered and nourished my interest in philosophical subjects. In his classes he would almost invariably digress to talk about such subjects. I visited him frequently in his home and read books on abstract subjects from his library as well as public libraries. The headmaster regarded himself as an agnostic who neither believed nor disbelieved in God. Agnosticism came to be also my first outlook on the ultimate reality.

When I was about sixteen, a devout and learned missionary priest of the Bahai faith gave a talk at our school. Later I had an interview with him. Unable to convince me of the existence of God, he remarked about the futility of intellectual questions regarding God's existence: water, he said, will never yield butter, however hard one churns it.

Not long afterwards, imperceptibly, I came to have faith in the existence of God. I do not know how or why.

Between the ages of sixteen and eighteen I read voraciously books on religion, psychology, and philosophy. Though I was born in a conservative Muslim family, I was drawn to all religions and went to Christian, Hindu, as well as Muslim places of worship. I was not yet on any particular spiritual path.

Then, at the age of nineteen, I came in contact with Theosophy. In the teachings of H.P. Blavatsky, I found not only answers to all my intellectual questions but also a path of which I became an ardent follower and promulgator.

When I was about twenty-one, I became acquainted with a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother that I borrowed from him had a deep appeal. In particular, the Mother's *Prières et Méditations*¹ made a strong impression, and I was prompted to write to her.

¹ *Prayers and Meditations*, comprising extracts from a diary written by the Mother during years of intensive yogic discipline.

It was nearly three years later, in 1950, that I visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and had Sri Aurobindo's Darshan. That was a turning point in my spiritual quest. I became less and less interested in Theosophy and more and more drawn to Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Since 1951 I have been an avowed practitioner of Sri Aurobindo's yoga and, though I have found inspiration from several spiritual teachers after Sri Aurobindo, I have felt no strong inclination to study any spiritual teachings other than those of Sri Aurobindo's yoga until I came into contact with Eckhart.

The previously mentioned contacts I had with certain persons at different times, the books I came across, and the events and circumstances of my life—many of them seemingly chance incidents—have made me realize intimately the truth of the Mother's words about the role of one's inmost self—the soul or psychic being—in guiding one on the spiritual path. She has said:

If you have within you a psychic being sufficiently awake to watch over you, to prepare your path, it can draw towards you things which help you, draw people, books, circumstances, all sorts of little coincidences which come to you as though brought by some benevolent will and give you an indication, a help, a support to take decisions and turn you in the right direction. But once you have taken this decision, once you have decided to find the truth of your being, once you start sincerely on the road, then everything seems to conspire to help you to advance. ...²

It was only after a lapse of time that retrospectively I had some understanding of the meaning and significance of each of the previously mentioned landmark events and stages in my spiritual growth. I understood that the upsurge of my interest in religious and philosophical subjects at the age of fifteen marked the beginning of the manifest influence of my inner being on my surface being, because all aspiration for the higher things of life, says Sri Aurobindo, comes from the inner being. As he states,

² The Mother. *Questions and Answers '50-51. Collected Works of the Mother. Centenary Edition* (hereafter CWM), (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972-87), Vol. 4, p. 261.

Only a little of the inner being escapes through these centres [of consciousness³] into the outer life, but that little is the best part of ourselves and responsible for our art, poetry, philosophy, ideals, religious aspirations, efforts at knowledge and perfection.⁴

I understood the significance of the period of agnosticism through which I passed: it served to disencumber me of certain beliefs that I had acquired without reflection.

The inexplicable birth of faith⁵ in the existence of God has given me an insight into what the Mother has said about faith:

Faith is certainly a gift given to us by the Divine Grace. It is like a door suddenly opening upon an eternal truth, through which we can see it, almost touch it.

As in everything else in the ascent of humanity, there is the necessity—especially at the beginning—of personal effort. It is possible that in some exceptional circumstances, for reasons which completely elude our intelligence, faith may come almost accidentally, quite unexpectedly, almost without ever having been solicited, but most frequently it is an answer to a yearning, a need, an aspiration, something in the being that is seeking and longing, even though not in a very conscious and systematic way.⁶

Theosophy enabled me to understand the fundamental unity of all religions—something I had intuitively sensed earlier—thereby freeing me from the views I had been influenced by previously that tended to stress the differences rather than the similarities among the various religions. Theosophy also served to introduce me to certain fundamental doctrines of Eastern spiritual philosophy,

³ Called Chakras in Sanskrit.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (hereafter SABCL), (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970–75), Vol. 24, p. 1165.

⁵ "Faith in the spiritual sense is not a mental belief which can waver and change. It can wear that form in the mind, but that belief is not the faith itself, it is only its external form."—Sri Aurobindo

⁶ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '57-'58*, CWM, Vol. 9, p. 351.

such as *karma*, rebirth, and spiritual evolution—tenets that were quite alien to my early beliefs about the afterlife.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother seemed to have entered my life at a timely point when Theosophy was beginning to pall on me. Theosophical teachings had well satisfied my need for a philosophical understanding of questions pertaining to life, but for leading a spiritual life, all it offered was basically a path founded on the philosophical concept of the brotherhood of mankind and the ethical ideal of service to humanity. There was a yearning in me, as yet unformulated, for something deeper than the philosophical light and the ethical path I had found in Theosophy. What my inner being seemed to be asking for was a spiritual path leading to self-discovery and God-realization. It is such a path that I found in Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Most probably, the reason why the Mother's *Prayers and Meditations* made a special appeal to me was that the book speaks of the Divine as not only an impersonal Reality—as conceived in Theosophy—but also as the Lord of the universe and Master of one's being, with whom one can establish a relationship through prayer, devotion, self-offering, and self-consecration.⁷

The Theosophical view of a solely impersonal Reality no longer seemed to satisfy me. Initially, such a view had made a strong appeal to me because of my dissatisfaction with a too human conception of God with which I grew up. As the Mother remarks in answering the question "What does to seek after the Impersonal mean?":

Oh! It's very much in fashion in the West, my child. All those who are tired or disgusted with the God taught by the Chaldean religions, and especially the Christian religion—a single God, jealous, severe, despotic and so much in the image of man that one wonders if it is not a demiurge as Anatole France said—these people when they want to lead a spiritual life no longer want the personal God, because they are

⁷ "The Impersonal is Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, not a Person, but a state. The Person is the Existent, the Conscious, the Blissful; consciousness, existence, bliss taken as separate things are only states of his being. But in fact the two (personal being and eternal state) are inseparable and are one reality." (Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL. Vol. 22, p. 259.)

too frightened lest the personal God resemble the one they have been taught about; they want an impersonal Godhead, something that doesn't *at all* resemble—or as little as possible—the human being; that's what they want.

... but beyond the impersonal Divine there is the Divine who is the Person himself; and we must go through the Impersonal to reach the Supreme Divine who is beyond.⁸

The view of God as the Supreme Divine, who is beyond the personal and the impersonal, resonated with my deepest intuitions.

Eckhart speaks of God primarily as an impersonal Divine and, like Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, does not use the word “God” very often for similar reasons. He does, however, sometimes speak of Grace, which makes of God more than a purely impersonal Reality solely meting out the results of human actions under the inexorable law of karma.⁹ From Eckhart's viewpoint, the Divine can be spoken of equally well as He, She, or It.

My inner quest had begun, as it does to some extent with most seekers, with an intellectual need to understand myself, the nature of reality, and the purpose of life. This intellectual need had been well met by Theosophy. So, when I came in contact with Sri Aurobindo, it was his practical teachings on yoga rather than his philosophical writings to which I was particularly drawn. However, his philosophical writings, which I felt to be charged with the vibrations of a spiritual consciousness and which gave me an intuitive feeling that they were based on spiritual experience, made an impression that was deeper than that of Theosophy and gave me a greater understanding than what I had gained in Theosophy of the nature of the soul and its evolution, and of the laws of karma and reincarnation. I feel that the deep impact Sri Aurobindo's philosophical teaching tends to have is due to its not being a product of mental theorizing but having its source

⁸ The Mother. *Questions and Answers 1955*. CWM, Vol. 7. p. 244.

⁹ “It [Divine Grace] is a power that is superior to any rule, even to the Cosmic Law—for all spiritual seers have distinguished between the Law and the Grace. ... There are these three powers: (1) The Cosmic Law, of Karma or what else; (2) the Divine Compassion acting on as many as it can reach through the nets of the Law and giving them their chance; (3) the Divine Grace which acts more incalculably but also more irresistibly than the others.” (Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*. SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 609.)

in the state of silence beyond the mind. As Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1933: “Since 1908 when I got the silence, I never think with my head or brain—it is always in the wideness generally above the head that the thoughts occur.”¹⁰

It is certainly not because of any need for a greater philosophical understanding of things that I have been drawn to Eckhart in recent years. In the first place, that need had already been amply met by Theosophy and by Sri Aurobindo. Secondly, Eckhart does not offer a system of philosophy. As he states, a spiritual teaching is not a philosophy or a cosmology; it does not seek to explain the nature of the universe but to help one in accessing a state of consciousness beyond that of the mind. Many of Eckhart’s talks, in fact, typically open with a disclaimer that the talk does not purport to give new “information” or theory that may provide food for thought. The power of his words lies not so much in their informational content as in the “high-energy frequency of Presence which they carry.”¹¹

A word regarding the relevance of philosophy for the spiritual life from the viewpoint of Sri Aurobindo. He states:

It is only if there is a greater consciousness beyond Mind and that consciousness is accessible to us that we can know and enter into the ultimate Reality. Intellectual speculation and reasoning must fall necessarily into a very secondary place and even lose their reason for existence. *Philosophy, intellectual expression of the Truth may remain*, but mainly as a means of expressing this greater discovery and as much of its contents as can at all be expressed in mental terms to those who still live in the mental intelligence.¹² [Italics by the author.]

Sri Aurobindo is one of those few mystics who, having discovered the Truth through spiritual experience, have given an intellectual expression of the Truth “as a means of expressing this greater discovery and as much of its contents as can at all be expressed in mental terms to

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, SABCL, Vol. 26, p. 88.

¹¹ Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, Vancouver, B.C.: Namaste Publishing, 1999, p. 87.

¹² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 158.

those who still live in the mental intelligence.” More on the subject of the role of philosophy in relation to spiritual experience will be said in a subsequent chapter.

Meeting a world teacher such as Eckhart and being strongly drawn to his teachings cannot be a mere chance incident without significance. But I feel I have yet to understand fully the intent of the invisible Wisdom behind my coming into contact with Eckhart at the present stage of my spiritual journey. All I can do at this juncture is to state some of the aspects of Eckhart’s teaching that have made a special appeal to me, and which I have found helpful in my practice of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga.

Though Eckhart’s teachings do not deal with philosophical questions posed by the intellect, they contain a wealth of psychological insights that resonate with one’s inner experience and intuition. It is in fact the *thoroughly psychological*, experiential, nonmetaphysical, and dogma-free nature of his teachings that makes them most appealing.

The Egoic Self

Fear—Insecurity

One of the psychological insights of Eckhart’s teachings pertains to the nature of ego, which he describes as identification with the mind. To be identified with the mind, says Eckhart, is to be disconnected with one’s deeper self and one’s true power. Therefore, the mind-identified ego always feels vulnerable and insecure; it experiences constant threat and lives in perpetual fear. Thus, practically everyone lives in a state of fear that varies in degree from being ill at ease to experiencing acute anxiety.

It is after coming across Eckhart’s teaching about the ubiquitous nature of fear that I have come to realize more adequately the truth of the following statements of the Mother that I first read decades earlier:

The normal human condition is a state filled with apprehensions and fears; if you observe your mind deeply for ten minutes, you will find that for nine out of ten it is full of fears—it carries in it fear about many things, big and small, near and

far, seen and unseen, and though you do not usually take conscious notice of it, it is there all the same.¹³

Resistance—Complaining

Because of its feeling of constant threat, the ego sees life as an enemy and tends to meet events and circumstances with some form of negative reactivity and resistance, such as anger, complaint, criticism, or judgment. Thus, one tends to fight constantly with what *is* and continually to say “no” to the present moment, as if one has a perpetual issue with reality. In other words, one lives continuously at discord with the friendly universe and with the benevolent wisdom operating in the universe. Very few human beings are conscious of the fact that, in our normal or egoic consciousness, we are constantly at war with reality. Thus, for instance, very few people realize that, even complaining against bad weather, which is so common with most human beings, implies a resistance to what *is*. Eckhart’s teaching helps one become more conscious of the fact that, complaining, which always expresses a resistance, is a pervasive attitude of our normal egoic consciousness.

Eckhart’s description of the egoic resistance to reality gives one a deeper understanding of the ignorant nature of the personal will and the wisdom of the yogic teaching about learning to surrender the personal will to the divine Will. Surrender, says Eckhart, lies in accepting what *is*, relinquishing the insane resistance to the flow of life.

How to let go of inner resistance to life? Witness the resistance, says Eckhart; be present when it arises, thus making it conscious. By witnessing the unconscious resistance, one steps out of it. Thus, by *allowing* what *is*, one can come to feel something of inner freedom and peace.

Needing Ever More—Desire

Another chief characteristic of the egoic self that Eckhart speaks about is its incurable sense of lack, insufficiency, or incompleteness. From this arises insatiable desire for various things. The things one commonly desires in order to fill the hole and feel more complete

¹³ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, CWM, Vol. 3, p. 57.

are wealth and possessions, success, social status, and special relationships. As the ego never achieves a permanent sense of completeness, one always lives in a state of “craving, wanting, and needing.” Though such a state of inner restlessness is present all the time except for brief periods when a particular desire is satisfied, most people are not conscious of the constant restlessness except perhaps when the state becomes acutely painful.

Looking to the Next Moment—Waiting

A corollary of the state of constant wanting and needing is the tendency to live always in the future. One does not find joy or satisfaction in the present moment, and looks continually to the next moment or the future when one hopes to have the fulfillment of one’s desires. The present moment is regarded as only a means or a passage to the future. Because the future never arrives, one unconsciously lives in a *continual state of waiting*. Perhaps sensing the state of waiting in the audience before starting to speak, Eckhart has on several occasions opened his talk by commenting on the pervasive attitude of waiting, about which he says, “With every kind of waiting, you unconsciously create inner conflict between here and now, where you don’t want to be, and the projected future, where you want to be. This greatly reduces the quality of your life by making you lose the present.”¹⁴

Waiting, a subtle form of impatience, is more pervasive but less easily recognized than impatience. Eckhart is the first teacher I have come across who has spoken specifically about the unconscious and pervasive state of waiting that characterizes the normal consciousness and that mars the joy of being. This profound psychological insight has enabled me to appreciate Eckhart’s message, “Just be and enjoy being,” which is reminiscent of what the Mother has inspiringly said about the delight of being that is present in all things and creatures in the universe.

There comes a time when one begins to be almost ready, when one can feel in everything, every object, in every movement, in every vibration, in all the things around—not only

¹⁴ Eckhart Tolle. *The Power of Now*, p. 73.

people and conscious beings, but things, objects; not only trees and plants and living things, but simply any object one uses, the things around one—this delight, this delight of being, of being just as one is, simply being. And one sees that all this vibrates like that. One touches a thing and feels this delight.

... For this delight is everywhere. This delight is something very subtle. One moves in the midst of things and it is as though they were all singing to you their delight. There comes a time when it becomes very familiar in the life around you. Of course, I must admit that it is a little more difficult to feel it in human beings, because there are all their mental and vital formations which come into the field of perception and disturb it. There is too much of this kind of egoistic asperity which gets mixed with things, so it is more difficult to contact the Delight there. But even in animals one feels it; it is already a little more difficult than in plants. But in plants, in flowers, it is so wonderful! They speak all their joy, they express it. And as I said, in all familiar objects, the things around you, which you use, there is a state of consciousness in which each one is happy to be, just as it is. So at that moment one knows one has touched true Delight. And it is not conditioned. I mean ... it depends on nothing. It does not depend on outer circumstances, does not depend on a more or less favourable state, it does not depend on anything: it is a communion with the *raison d'être* of the universe.¹⁵

Self-Seeking

Another characteristic of the egoic consciousness, which spiritual aspirants are often unaware of, is a seeking for what is basically *personal* satisfaction or fulfillment. In ordinary life this takes the form of desire for different things. However, Eckhart points out that *all* seeking is part of the egoic consciousness, and so one must cease to be a seeker if one is to live a truly spiritual life. As the Mother said to an aspirant who asked her about yoga:

¹⁵ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '57-'58*, CWM, Vol. 9, pp. 22, 23.

What do you want the Yoga for? To get power? To attain to peace and calm? To serve humanity?

None of these motives is sufficient to show that you are meant for the Path.

The question you are to answer is this: Do you want the Yoga for the sake of the Divine? Is the Divine the supreme fact of your life, so much so that it is simply impossible for you to do without it? Do you feel your very *raison d'être* is the Divine and without it there is no meaning in your existence? If so, then only can it be said that you have a call for the Path.

That is the first thing necessary—aspiration for the Divine.¹⁶

Whereas desires arise from the egoic self, what the Mother calls aspiration is something that comes from the inmost self, the soul. So, putting together what Eckhart and the Mother are saying, it is evident that, in order to live a truly spiritual life, one must cease to be a self-seeker and aspire only for Presence—the Divine. In other words, true spirituality consists in *giving* oneself and in losing one's egoic self rather than in seeking something for oneself. For, the impetus behind the evolution of consciousness—of which both Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo speak—is towards the manifestation of the divine consciousness, which can take place only with the disappearance of the egoic self.

Mental Noise

One characteristic of the mind that Eckhart has spoken about more often than perhaps any other teacher is the chatter or mental noise that takes place in the head almost all the time, a broader aspect of what Sri Aurobindo calls “the buzz of the physical mind.”¹⁷ Eckhart

¹⁶ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, CWM, Vol. 3, p. 1.

¹⁷ Sri Aurobindo distinguishes three main parts of the ordinary mind: the *mind proper*, which is chiefly the thinking mind or intellect; the *vital mind*, which is a mind of dynamic will, action and desire; and the *physical mind*, which is concerned with physical things only and is limited to the physical view and experience of things. Closely connected with the physical mind is the *mechanical mind*, which goes on repeating whatever has happened.

compares this affliction of the mind to pressing the accelerator with the gear in neutral: one burns fuel without going anywhere. This description of mental noise as a drainer of energy has made a particularly strong impression on me.

The remedy spoken of below by the Mother, though most radical, is not of easy access:

The mind must learn to be silent—remain calm, attentive, without making a noise. If you try to silence your mind directly, it is a hard job, almost impossible; for the most material part of the mind never stops its activity—it goes on and on like a non-stop recording machine. It repeats all that it records and unless there is a switch to stop it, it continues and continues indefinitely. If, on the other hand, you manage to shift your consciousness into a higher domain, above the ordinary mind, this opening to the Light calms the mind, it does not stir any longer, and the mental silence so obtained can become constant. Once you enter into this domain, you may very well never come out of it—the external mind always remains calm.¹⁸

Eckhart teaches a remedy that is more readily accessible. It consists simply in being present, becoming a conscious witness of the mental activity instead of unconsciously identifying with the mind.

Perceiving through the Veil of Mind

This teaching about mental noise is to be found in various schools of discipline that deal with the quieting of the mind. What is new in Eckhart's teaching is his broader and deeper view of what constitutes "mental noise." It includes not only the constant stream of thought but also all mental activity in perceiving reality, including even the rudimentary activity of the mind involved in labeling whatever one perceives. For instance, perceiving a flower and recognizing it, say, as a rose, and mentally labeling it as a rose is, from Eckhart's viewpoint, mental noise. One does not see the being that is the rose but only the

¹⁸ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1950–51*, CWM, Vol. 4, p. 182.

superficial form of the rose through the veil of a label that is a mental abstraction. Thus all mental activity in the form of *labeling, judging, analyzing, comparing, classifying, interpreting, theorizing*, and the like constitutes mental noise, which prevents one from seeing the reality as it truly is. It is only through the stillness that lies beyond mind that one can perceive reality as it is, says Eckhart. This teaching gives one a jolting insight into the fact of how our contacts with the world are shot through and through with mental noise in Eckhart's deeper sense of the term. His inspiring message in this regard is: "To meet everything and everyone through stillness instead of mental noise is the greatest gift you can offer to the universe. I call it stillness, but it is a jewel with many facets: that stillness is also joy, and it is love."¹⁹

The deeper meaning Eckhart gives to mental noise has enabled me to understand better the distinction the Mother makes between a *mental phenomenon* (involving thought) and a *phenomenon of consciousness* (characterized by mental silence or absence of thoughts). As she says:

... you must learn to distinguish between a phenomenon of consciousness and a mental phenomenon. One can be *conscious* of an experience in such a way that this consciousness is not formulated into a thought or thoughts. This is very important if the mind is to remain absolutely quiet and silent.²⁰

In this regard, one of Eckhart's teachings that has appealed to me most is about cultivating what he calls "thoughtless awareness" or consciousness without thought.

The Witnessing Presence

Becoming the witnessing Presence is the one remedy Eckhart teaches not only for eliminating mental noise but also for liberating oneself from all other characteristics of the ordinary consciousness, such as fear, desire, and all forms of egoic resistance to life. If I recall

¹⁹ Eckhart Tolle, Hollyhock Retreat, Canada, September 2000.

²⁰ The Mother, *Words of the Mother*, CWM, Vol. 14, p. 371.

correctly, in the first letter I wrote to Eckhart several years ago, I stated two things: first, the encouraging message I found in his teaching that the witnessing Presence is not part of the old consciousness—it indicates the arising of the new consciousness; and, second, the discouraging feeling I had that, in spite of the practice of the witnessing Presence for quite a number of decades, I still felt almost as bound as ever to the ordinary consciousness. These ambivalent feelings of encouragement and discouragement about the power of the witnessing Presence led me to undertake a study of the witness consciousness in the light of Sri Aurobindo. The study forms Chapter 4 of this book. As a result of the study, I have come to understand that the witnessing Presence that Eckhart teaches can itself be regarded, from the Buddhist perspective, as a state of enlightenment. From this viewpoint, once the witnessing Presence has emerged, all one needs to do is to allow the power of Presence to deepen progressively the state of enlightenment. Therefore I continue to find encouragement in Eckhart's teaching that [the noticing of being in nonalignment with the present moment is not part of the nonalignment; it is stepping out of the nonalignment into Presence.] However, from the viewpoint of the Hindu tradition, which speaks of liberation as consisting in the dissolution of and freedom from bondage to ego, the witnessing consciousness is only the first step. Liberation from the ordinary egoic consciousness can come only after a long process of making the Witness not only a detached Watcher but also the Master of the being. This point has been elaborated in Chapter 4, "Sri Aurobindo and the Witness Consciousness."

No Problems in the Now

A revelatory teaching Eckhart often reiterates is that there are never any problems in the Now. This teaching, which is apt to be puzzling to many people, may be understood in the light of two different meanings of the Now. The one obvious meaning of the Now is the present moment. The egoic consciousness, which finds it extremely difficult to live in the present moment and anticipates, most of the time, the next moment or the future, tends to flee from the present moment all the more when something "goes wrong" and life presents a "problem." The mind instinctively projects what is perceived

as a problem into the future and imagines all sorts of catastrophic future eventualities. This trait of the human has been well described by the Mother:

... if an animal is suffering because of an accident or an illness, this suffering is reduced to a minimum by the fact that it does not observe it, does not project it in its consciousness and into the future, does not imagine things about its illness or its accident.

With man there has begun this perpetual worrying about what is going to happen, and this worry is the principal, if not the sole cause of his torment. With this objectivising consciousness there has begun anxiety, painful imaginations, worry, torment, anticipation of future catastrophes, with the result that most men—and not the least conscious, the most conscious—live in perpetual torment.²¹

When one lives in the Now instead of the future, all problems vanish, says Eckhart. Anything that “goes wrong” is seen simply as a challenge, and one takes appropriate action to meet it.

Another related meaning Eckhart gives to the Now is the state of *true* consciousness, the state of Presence. In such a state there are no problems. As the Mother remarks:

... if one attains the true consciousness, there is no longer any problem to solve. What you have to be, you become. What you have to know, you know. And what you have to do, you have the power to do. And it naturally follows that all those so-called difficulties immediately vanish.²²

Portals into Enlightenment

A unique aspect of Eckhart’s teaching that I have found to be particularly helpful pertains to what he calls “portals” for entering *directly and immediately* (without the usual recourse to the practice of certain

²¹ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '57-'58*, CWM, Vol. 9, p. 303.

²² The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1955*, CWM, Vol. 7, p. 400.

techniques²³) the consciousness beyond mind, and experiencing what he describes as a “taste of enlightenment” through connectedness with Being. Eckhart speaks of various such portals:

The *Now*, or Presence, he considers the foremost portal, constituting an aspect of every other portal. To step into the Now is to step out of one’s mind and its incessant stream of thought. *Surrender*—letting go of resistance to what *is*—is another portal. It gives one access to something within oneself that is unaffected by life circumstances.

Three unique portals pointed out by Eckhart are:

Silence—When one pays attention to silence in the external world, one creates stillness within. For, it is only inner stillness that can listen to outer silence.

Space—The space in which everything exists is formless. One’s true nature is formless consciousness. By becoming aware of space, one becomes, at the same time, aware of pure consciousness because only the formless within oneself can become aware of the empty space outside.

The inner body—By focusing one’s attention on the inner body, the invisible energy field that gives life to the physical body, one establishes connectedness with Being.

A portal that has come to me as a particular revelation lies in *creating gaps in the constant stream of thought*, especially with the aid of Nature. The doorway of nature, frequently mentioned by Eckhart, has impressed me as perhaps the least difficult means for creating gaps in the stream of thought and experiencing stillness within. To look at a flower or a tree and perceive its stillness is to become still oneself, says Eckhart.

I have found in Eckhart’s concept of the portals new and inspiring ways for stepping out of ordinary consciousness and experiencing

²³ An apt observation made by Eckhart is that techniques have one serious disadvantage: the practice of a technique involves time and therefore is apt to cause one to live in the future rather than in the present moment.

in daily life what Eckhart describes as connectedness with Being. I must admit though that I have not yet been able to enter the portals effectively enough to experience stillness within and aliveness of everything around, which, says Eckhart, characterize the state of enlightenment. As for the portal of the inner body, I find it almost out of reach. I cannot help feeling that one must follow a long path of inner growth before arriving even at the entrance to this portal.

The Pain-Body

Some of Eckhart's psychological insights that I have found to be of the most practical value pertain to what he calls the "pain-body." At first I found it somewhat difficult to understand very well the meaning of pain-body because I could not quite relate it to anything I had come across previously in the teachings of other Masters. But after a while I came to recognize readily the similarity between the pain-body and some aspects of what Sri Aurobindo calls the life-nature or the vital being, which is a distinct part of the human constitution as he describes it. Life energy is beautiful, says Eckhart, when it flows freely, but when it is trapped, it produces contraction and pain. The pain-body is life energy that has become temporarily lodged in one's inner space and is no longer flowing.

All forms of unhappiness, says Eckhart, are manifestations of the pain-body. Some forms of unhappiness, such as anxiety, fear, and depression, are readily felt by everybody as painful. However, many people do not realize that such things as jealousy, irritation, impatience, and anger are also forms of pain. It requires some psychological insight to see, for instance, that wherever there is anger, there is pain underneath. Therefore, the first step in dealing with the pain-body is to learn to recognize the signs of its manifestation—to become *conscious* of it whenever it arises.

Though the pain-body always exists as an invisible entity in everybody, it is not continually noticeable except in a deeply unhappy person. An insight of much practical value in Eckhart's teaching about the pain-body is that in most people the pain-body has two modes of being—dormant and active. It becomes periodically active when it needs to get replenishment through experiences that resonate with its own kind of energy, whether it is anger, anxiety, depression,

or some other form of the pain-body. During its active mode, the slightest occasion will trigger it. An insignificant event, an innocent remark, or even a mere thought can precipitate a pain-body attack. Therefore, when the pain-body is in the active mode, one needs to be all the more alert and vigilant in order not to identify oneself with the pain-body and consequently fall into unconsciousness.

Eckhart speaks of two ways in which the pain-body feeds itself. One way is to rise into the mind and control the thoughts. When an emotion associated with the pain-body flows into the mind, the pain becomes intensified. To watch the pain-body—by becoming present when it arises—is the beginning of freedom from it, for Presence prevents the pain-body from controlling the mind.

The second way in which the pain-body tries to feed itself is by eliciting emotional feedback from other people. The pain-body, says Eckhart, is extremely cunning in finding ways for eliciting emotional reactions from other people in order to feed itself. It knows how to press the right button. So, in human relationships, one needs to be watchful in order to recognize the pain-body when it arises in somebody we know. By remaining present, one can abstain from reacting and thereby providing feedback to the pain-body of the other person.

Watching the pain-body when it begins to arise in oneself may not dissolve the pain all at once. What one needs to do is simply to continue to watch the pain, *feel* it instead of trying to fight it, allow it to be, holding the state of Presence. Each time one meets the pain-body with Presence, the pain-body loses its energy charge, and the sense of Presence grows. The pain-body serves as a fuel for intensifying Presence. Thus, the pain-body, which starts out by being an obstacle to Presence, becomes, in course of time, a help by providing motivation for a most powerful practice.

Pain arises when one is not present and unconsciously identifies with the pain-body. “Unconsciousness creates it; consciousness transmutes it into itself.”²⁴ Watching it implies accepting it as part of what *is* at the present moment.

²⁴ Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, p. 32.

The Paradox of Enlightenment and Time

All spiritual teachings contain paradoxes because any mental formulation of a truth can convey only one perspective of the truth, the opposite perspective being also valid, thus leading to an apparent contradiction. As the Mother says:

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 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 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.²⁵

Eckhart has helped me understand one of the great paradoxes—the apparent contradiction between the Buddhist and Hindu perspectives of time in relation to spiritual realization. Expressing what is essentially a Buddhist perspective, Eckhart says that enlightenment is something that is to be found in the here and now, in the present moment; it is not something to be attained in the future. Therefore, time is not only *unnecessary* but also an *obstacle* to enlightenment. All negativity and suffering, which indicate a state of non-enlightenment, have their roots in time, says Eckhart.

Stating the Hindu perspective, a discourse in the *Mahabharata*, alluded to by Sri Aurobindo, speaks of Time as one of the four aids on the path leading to Self-realization:

Yoga-siddhi, the perfection that comes from the practice of Yoga, can be best attained by the combined working of four great instruments. There is, first, the knowledge of the truths, principles, powers and processes that govern the

²⁵ The Mother, *On Thoughts and Aphorisms*, CWM, Vol. 10, pp. 33, 34.

realisation—*śāstra*. Next comes a patient and persistent action on the lines laid down by the knowledge, the force of our personal effort—*utsāha*. There intervenes, third, uplifting our knowledge and effort into the domain of spiritual experience, the direct suggestion, example and influence of the Teacher—*guru*. Last comes the instrumentality of Time—*kāla*; for in all things there is a cycle of their action and a period of the divine movement.²⁶

Thus, in the Hindu spiritual traditions, Self-realization has been regarded as always a long process stretching over a long period of intense and sustained practice. Therefore, time is considered not only an aid but also a necessity. From this viewpoint, instances in which realization seems to have taken place suddenly, as in the case of Eckhart, are those in which there has necessarily been a long and sustained practice in a prior life. As Sri Aurobindo states:

A few great souls prepared by past lives or otherwise lifted beyond the ordinary spiritual capacity may attain realization more swiftly; some may have uplifting experiences at an early stage, but for most the *siddhi*²⁷ of the path, whatever it is, must be at the end of a long, difficult and persevering endeavour.²⁸

Chronological Time and Psychological Time

The explanation of the paradox that time is an aid as well as an obstacle lies in the distinction Eckhart makes between chronological time and psychological time. Chronological or clock time is, of course, needed, says Eckhart, in all practical tasks, such as learning a language, playing the piano, or even making a cup of tea. What Eckhart stresses is that, while using time is required in all such tasks—which may involve even planning for the future—it is necessary to return immediately to present-moment awareness when practical matters have been dealt with. Time becomes an obstacle if one loses

²⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 47.

²⁷ Perfection or fulfilment in Yoga.

²⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, pp. 1629, 1630.

present-moment awareness and lives in psychological time by continual projections into a future goal, thereby reducing the *now* to a mere means for the future.

Is clock time needed to be free from psychological time? Eckhart's answer to the question presents another paradox. For, on the one hand he says that time cannot free you from time. On the other hand he says that though in rare cases (such as Eckhart's own case) freedom from the time-bound consciousness comes suddenly, most people need to "work at it." Working at it naturally implies the need for clock time. The explanation of the paradox lies in the difference between the Buddhist and Hindu perspectives of enlightenment.

Enlightenment Distinguished from Liberation

From one viewpoint—prominent in Buddhism—enlightenment is essentially a state of living in present-moment awareness. No time is needed to enter such a state. From another perspective, found in Hindu thought, the enlightened state, usually referred to as Mukti or liberation, is one in which the time-bound illusory self of the ego has been abolished and replaced by the true and eternal Self, which is the Self of all beings and the one Reality of the universe. Whereas from the first viewpoint, enlightenment consists in *entering* the state of present-moment awareness, the second view regards enlightenment as *dwelling* continually and permanently in the consciousness of the eternal Now. To enter the state of present-moment awareness is to establish *connectedness* with the Source; to dwell in that state permanently is to have an indissoluble *union*—yoga means union—with the One Reality. In the state of connectedness with the Source, there is a partial and temporary *suspension* of the ego. In the state of union with the true Self, the ego is irrevocably *abolished* and replaced by the Self. One can *enter* the state of enlightenment whenever one chooses to become present. No time is needed for entering such a state of enlightenment. But from the Hindu point of view, such a state of enlightenment or Presence, as Eckhart calls it, which one enters by merely stepping out of the ego temporarily without permanently abolishing the ego, can never be constant; Presence is bound to be obscured by unconscious identification with the ego time and again.

Such partial and momentary states of enlightenment are most often not felt and recognized as states of enlightenment because they are not accompanied by the stillness, illumination, love, and joy that we usually associate with enlightenment. To live *abidingly* in the state of Presence, one needs to have dissolved the ego by discovering the true self. The Hindu sages who have attained such a state of liberation from the ego say that the freedom from ego requires a very long time extending over many lives of sustained pursuit of the spiritual goal. As Sri Aurobindo states, “even many yogis of a great spiritual attainment are not free from it [ego and desire].”²⁹

Sri Aurobindo, who speaks of not only liberation from ego but also an integral transformation of all parts of the being—physical, vital, mental—says that such a transformation of the whole being takes place in stages that extend over a long time. In a letter to a disciple he writes:

As I have constantly told you, you cannot expect all [parts of the being] to be enlightened at once. Even the greatest yogis can only proceed by stages and it is only at the end that the whole nature shares the true consciousness which they first establish in the heart or behind it or in the head or above it. It descends or expands slowly conquering each layer of the being one after the other, but each step takes time.³⁰

Eckhart, too, implicitly states that, becoming fully conscious, that is, overcoming completely the unconscious identification with the mind and making Presence a constant state, is a gradual process that takes place over a period of time. As he says, one first becomes aware of not living in the present moment except rarely. Then one chooses to be present but is able to stay in the Now only momentarily before losing it. One returns to the present moment more and more frequently and is able to live in it for longer and longer periods. Thus, one sways repeatedly between the conscious state of Presence and the time-bound state of unconsciousness until Presence becomes one’s predominant

²⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1374.

³⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1674.

state. It is only eventually that the unconscious state of mind identification is definitively replaced by the conscious state of Presence.

The need for chronological time becomes even more obvious when we view enlightenment as a state of complete inner silence in contrast to the normal mind-identified state, which is one of constant noise. According to Sri Aurobindo, silence is the culmination of a long process of establishing progressive states: *quiet, calm, peace, silence*. He defines these states as follows:

Quiet is a condition in which there is no restlessness or disturbance. ... Quiet is rather negative—it is the absence of disturbance. ... Quietness is when the mind or vital³¹ is not troubled, drawn about by or crowded with thoughts and feelings. Especially when either [mind or vital] is detached and looks at these things [thoughts and feelings] as a surface movement, we say that the mind or vital is quiet.

Calm is a still unmoved condition which no disturbance can affect—it is a less negative condition than quiet. ... Calm is a positive tranquillity which can exist in spite of superficial disturbances. ... Calm is a strong and positive quietude, firm and solid—ordinary quietude is mere negation, simply the absence of disturbance. ... When there is a clear or great or strong tranquillity which nothing troubles or can trouble, then we say that calm is established.

Peace is a still more positive condition; it carries with it a sense of settled and harmonious rest and deliverance. ... Peace is a calm deepened into something that is very positive amounting almost to a tranquil waveless Ananda.³² ... Peace is more positive than calm ... something positive bringing not merely a release as calm does but a certain happiness or Ananda of itself.

Silence is a state in which either there is no movement of the mind or vital or else a great stillness which no surface movement can pierce or alter. ... Silence is the absence of all motion of thought or other vibration of activity.³³

³¹ Life-nature governed by desire.

³² Bliss, Delight, Beatitude.

³³ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 642, 643.

Thus, there are degrees of the absence of mental noise and vital disturbance. What Eckhart refers to as stillness or “thoughtless awareness” is akin to what Sri Aurobindo describes as silence. Normally, for most people, it is only progressively over a very long period of time that total silence can be attained. Most yogis, says Sri Aurobindo, get silence “at the end of a long Yoga.”³⁴

We may note in passing that Eckhart generally describes as silence that which exists in the external world, and calls stillness that which is experienced within. Sri Aurobindo refers mostly to the silence within, though he has also spoken about the silence in the external world in terms similar to those of Eckhart. Thus he writes:

There is a silence behind life as well as within it and it is only in this more secret, sustaining silence that we can hear clearly the voice of God. In the noise of the world we hear only altered and disturbed echoes of it. ...³⁵

It is on the silence behind the cosmos that all the movement of the universe is supported. ...

In a more outward sense the word Silence is applied to the condition in which there is no movement of thought or feeling, etc., only a great stillness of the mind. But there can be an action in the Silence, undisturbed even as the universal action goes on in the cosmic Silence.³⁶

The Simplicity of Enlightenment

To return to the paradox that enlightenment is both an immediate experience as well as what comes at the end of a long path, it is necessary to understand the truth of both the opposite perspectives in order to resolve the paradox.

³⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, SABCL, Vol. 26, p. 78.

³⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Hour of God and Other Writings*, SABCL, Vol. 17, p. 174.

³⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 647.

The perspective that enlightenment is an immediate experience requiring no time—a view that I had found quite incomprehensible before I came in contact with Eckhart’s teachings—is beautifully illustrated by a parable I chanced on by “coincidence” while still writing this part of the book.

A disciple asked his Master: “How long does it take to get enlightenment?” The Master answered with the following story.

A lion came to drink water at a river. As it was drinking, a hunter arrived, killed the lion, skinned it, and went away. A *dhobi*,³⁷ who had been washing clothes at the river, saw all this. He approached the dead lion and found that it was highly pregnant. He took out the young one and brought it home. When the cub grew big, he used it for carrying clothes on its back like his donkeys. One day, when the *dhobi* was washing clothes at the river while his donkeys and the tame lion grazed peacefully, a wild lion came hunting for a prey. It was amazed to see a lion eating grass when its natural food was just near it. The wild lion leapt out of the bush into the midst of the herd. The herd, including the tame lion, panicked and scattered in all directions. The wild lion pursued and caught the tame lion. Seizing it at the neck, the wild lion said, “You are a lion. What are you doing here among the donkeys?”

“No, Sir, I am a donkey,” answered the tame lion. “Please let me go back to my herd.”

“You are a lion,” repeated the wild lion. “Look into the river at your reflection and mine.”

Looking into the river, the tame lion was astonished to see that the reflections of the two of them were alike.

“And now,” said the wild lion, “open your mouth and roar.”

The Master paused, and then said to the disciple, “Enlightenment is your real nature. You have to simply open your mouth and roar.”

³⁷ A professional washerman in India.

The Grace of the Guru

Another version of the story was narrated from a different perspective to Sri Ramakrishna by his guru, and subsequently by Sri Ramakrishna to his devotees.

A tigress once attacked a herd of goats. As she leapt to seize one of the goats, she gave birth to a cub and died. The cub tiger grew up among the goats. It ate grass and bleated like the goats and ran away like them when attacked by a fierce animal. One day a wild tiger attacked the herd. Amazed to see a tiger eating grass, the wild tiger seized it and dragged it to the water and said: "You are a tiger and you are eating grass! Look at your face in the water. It is exactly like mine." So saying, the wild tiger thrust some meat into its mouth.

At first the grass-eating tiger would not eat the meat. But as it got the taste of blood it gradually began to eat the meat. Then the wild tiger said: "So you see there is no difference between you and me. Now follow me into the forest."

Commenting on the story, Sri Ramakrishna said:

Eating grass is like enjoying "woman and gold."³⁸ To bleat and run away like a goat is to behave like an ordinary man. Going away with the new tiger is like taking shelter with the guru, who awakens one's spiritual consciousness, and recognizing him alone as one's relative. To see one's face rightly is to know one's real Self.³⁹

Sri Ramakrishna narrated the story to point out the power of the guru's grace for dispelling the ignorance about one's true nature. According to one of his sayings: "With the guru's grace all difficulties can disappear in a flash even as a long darkness does the moment you strike a match." Requested by a disciple to comment on this, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

³⁸ Sri Ramakrishna very often used this alliterative phrase in Bengali to signify lust and greed.

³⁹ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Vol. 1, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, p. 360.

I think this saying of Ramakrishna expresses a certain characteristic happening in sadhana⁴⁰ and cannot be interpreted in a general and absolute sense, for in that sense it is hard for it to be true. ... But what could be true is that the central difficulty may disappear by a certain touch between the Guru and the disciple. But what is meant by the *kṛpā*?⁴¹ If it is the general compassion and grace of the Guru, that, one would think, is always there on the disciple; his acceptance itself is an act of grace and the help is there for the disciple to receive. But the touch of grace, divine grace, coming directly or through the Guru is a special phenomenon having two sides to it—the grace of the Guru or the Divine, in fact both together, on the one side and a ‘state of grace’ in the disciple on the other. The ‘state of grace’ is often prepared by a long tapasya⁴² or purification in which nothing decisive seems to happen, only touches or glimpses or passing experiences at the most, and it comes suddenly without warning.⁴³

Reiterating what has just been said about the power of Grace and the need for tapasya, Sri Aurobindo writes in another context:

I have always seen that there has been really a long unobserved preparation before the Grace intervenes, and also, after it has intervened, one has still to put in a good deal of work to keep and develop what one has got—as it is in all other things until there is the complete siddhi.⁴⁴ Then of course labour finishes and one is in assured possession. So tapasya of one kind or another is not avoidable.⁴⁵

Sri Ramakrishna, too, speaks of the necessity for purification. A metaphor he often employs to stress the indispensable need for purification

40 Spiritual practice.

41 Grace.

42 Personal effort to control and change the ordinary consciousness.

43 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 620, 621.

44 Perfection or fulfilment in Yoga.

45 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 612, 613.

for Self-realization is that of a needle that is covered with mud—it cannot be attracted by the magnet, he says. In his story just narrated, it was only gradually that the grass-eating tiger gave up eating grass (desire for “woman and gold”) and acted according to its true nature. After being taught by the teacher about one’s real nature, the disciple needs to work on purifying the false nature that clouds the true nature before the intellectual learning received from the teacher can become a spiritual realization. (From Eckhart’s viewpoint, Presence is a direct way to enlightenment—there are no preliminary steps or stages.)

Enlightenment—Slow or Sudden?

Paradoxically, the change from the ordinary consciousness, in which one is identified with one’s illusory self, to the true consciousness of identification with one’s real Self—a “reversal of consciousness,” as the Mother describes it—is both a slow process and a sudden happening. This paradox has been well explained by the Mother using the metaphor of the incubation of an egg. She says:

This change of consciousness and its preparation have often been compared with the formation of the chicken in the egg: till the very last second the egg remains the same, there is no change, and it is only when the chicken is completely formed, absolutely alive, that it itself makes with its little beak a hole in the shell and comes out. Something similar takes place at the moment of the change of consciousness. For a long time you have the impression that nothing is happening, that your consciousness is the same as usual, and, if you have an intense aspiration, you even feel a resistance, as though you were knocking against a wall which does not yield. But when you are ready within, a last effort—the pecking in the shell of the being—and everything opens and you are projected into another consciousness.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '50-'51*, CWM, Vol. 4, pp. 18, 19.

Thus, from the viewpoint of the actual *happening* of the reversal of consciousness, enlightenment does not take any time: it is not a gradual process taking place over a period of time. As the Mother says:

It is not like a convalescence after an illness: you must change worlds. So long as your mind is real for you, your way of thinking something true for you, real, concrete, it proves that you are not there yet. You must first pass through to the other side.

... It is not true that one can understand little by little, it is not like that. This kind of progress is different. What is more true is that one is shut up in a shell, and inside it something is happening, like the chick in the egg. It is getting ready in there. It is in there. One doesn't see it. Something is happening in the shell, but outside one sees nothing. And it is only when all is ready that there comes the capacity to pierce the shell and to be born into the light of day.

... This may happen suddenly, spontaneously, quite unexpectedly.

I don't think one can go through gradually. I don't think it is something which slowly wears and wears away until one can see through it. I haven't had an instance of this so far. There is rather a kind of accumulation of power inside, an intensification of the need, and an endurance in the effort which becomes free from all fear, all anxiety, all calculation; a need so imperative that one no longer cares for the consequences.

One is like an explosive that nothing can resist, and one bursts out from one's prison in a blaze of light.⁴⁷

This view that a dimensional change of consciousness is a sudden happening rather than a gradual process seems to be consonant with Eckhart's view, for he has remarked on more than one occasion that one cannot accumulate credits towards liberation. I have been struck by the frequency with which Eckhart uses the terms "sudden" and "suddenly," both in his writings and especially in his talks when speaking about a shift of consciousness.

⁴⁷ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '57-'58*, CWM, Vol. 9, pp. 135, 136.

Enlightenment—Living in the Present Moment

On the spiritual path, such as that of yoga, which envisages a distant goal, one is apt to lose the focus on the present moment and become obsessed by the goal of a definitive enlightenment that lies in the remote future. What Eckhart tries to drive home is the psychological fact that preoccupation with the future, and lack of awareness of the present moment, are essential characteristics of the egoic consciousness that seeks fulfillment in the future rather than in the present moment. Because the future never arrives, one lives, whether one is conscious of it or not, in a state of constant dissatisfaction and inner restlessness, except for brief periods when a desire is satisfied. This teaching of Eckhart has made me more conscious than ever before how much one tends to live in the next moment or the future. The indispensable corrective for such a state is the perspective that looks upon enlightenment as a state of present-moment awareness. It is this message that Eckhart conveys powerfully and beautifully: “Your outer journey may contain a million steps, your inner journey has only one: the step you are taking right now.”⁴⁸

What seem to be Eckhart’s two most central messages are:

1. Dwell in the Now, for the Now is your true home. Not to dwell in the Now is to feel not-at-home, or homeless; it is to feel perpetually ill at ease; it is to be in a state of suffering.
2. Surrender to what *is*; say “yes” to it and allow what *is* to be. Surrender and Presence, says Eckhart, go together—the passive, gentle Presence that allows this moment to be, and the active, fierce Presence of alert attention that is thoughtless awareness, peace, and stillness.

Eckhart has well summed up these two messages in four mantric words: “now,” “is,” “yes,” “allow.”

⁴⁸ Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, p. 76.

Interview with Eckhart Pondicherry, India—February 2002

(Dr. D. E. Mistry was also present and participating. Eckhart's answers have been transcribed verbatim as far as possible, with minimum editing. Most of the questions have been summarized or otherwise edited.)

DALAL: *"Presence of mind" is an expression which the dictionary defines as the "ability to act calmly, quickly, and sensibly." Does this presence of mind denote anything related to what you call Presence?*

ECKHART: Very often with words or expressions, it is a question of how the word is used. Sometimes different people use the same expression or the same word but they mean different things by it. It is quite possible that sometimes what is conventionally called "presence of mind" refers to a state of consciousness that is *beyond* mind ... that is arising, that is a state of Presence which I would never call presence of mind because, in the terminology that I use in the teaching, Presence and mind are not synonymous at all. [chuckle]

So, in my terminology, “Presence of mind” is a contradiction because mind, in this teaching, means the absence of Presence. [chuckle] So, I have never used that expression nor would I ever use that expression. Now, when that expression is used conventionally, it may refer to something much more superficial than the actual state of Presence, or there may be a case when . . . because it can happen—in people who have never heard of Presence or liberation from mind—[that] almost accidentally a state of consciousness can be there, in certain situations, that is beyond thinking, and that can arise in a human being in a particular situation. And then later somebody talks about it or the person talks about it and refers to it as “Presence of mind” [being] there, and right action followed. So it is possible that, occasionally, [this] expression might be used in that deeper sense although I would never use it like that. There is mind and there is Presence. Presence is a state of consciousness that transcends thought, a state of intelligence, wakefulness, alertness, that goes beyond thought. So there are many expressions, words, concepts, where confusion arises because the question often is, how is that concept used? What does it mean to you? People have problems with words like “ego,” and so on, and they mean different things. They start discussing, sometimes, concepts, not realizing that they haven’t established yet what that word means to them. [chuckle]

So people tell me, for example, “Of course you need an ego to function in this world.” They say, “You can’t let go of ego because you’ll never be able to function.” So they give the word “ego” quite a different meaning. When I use the word “ego,” I mean identification with mind. [chuckle] When they use the word “ego,” they may mean to be able to function in this world as a form identity. And, of course, you don’t lose that when you are no longer identified with mind.

Sometimes you may find that a lot of wisdom can be contained in a word or an expression because sometimes a language itself contains wisdom. So, it is sometimes useful to be able to look at the origin of a word or expression—but

it can also be misleading. So, in a word, again, Presence of mind may sometimes simply refer to a reactive state, and at other times it *might* refer to a state of Presence. [chuckle] It depends on the context, the person who is using it.

DALAL: The mind does seem to have the power to observe things objectively as is done in scientific observation. Can the mind observe with detachment and become a witness?

ECKHART: If, in normal mind activity, there is even the slightest creative element to it, that means some Presence is filtering through, even though there may still be an almost complete identification with streams of thinking. And yet, at the moment of looking at a thing, it might be looking at a situation or a problem [as] when a scientist, for example, approaches a problem, there is a moment when he looks ... And in that looking at the problem (and I'm using it in a wider sense, not necessarily for the eyes), giving attention, in that act of giving attention, there is, no matter how brief, a moment of absolute stillness. It might only be a second or two, so he may never be aware of it, that this is actually there. But it is there. And then immediately thought rises up again. But the thought that arises after even the briefest interval of no-thought comes from a deeper level and now will be a new insight, a creative thought.

So, all creative people have that ability to look in a state of alert Presence and stillness. But the looking may be so brief they are not aware that this is how the creative process works. In any creative process that gap is there somewhere, and then thought arises out of that. In a noncreative person there is an absence of that ability to give total attention, the attention that transcends thought. In a noncreative person that ability is not there; the stream of thought is all-pervasive. It's dense. In a creative person the density may be there, but there are little openings in the density of the mind-stream. And that opening in the density of the mind-stream is the arising Presence. That simply is the ability to give total

attention to something—to a problem or to a situation—and then a realization follows, an insight follows, a new creative idea follows. So that’s how, in normal thought even in people who are not conscious of that, Presence can already be there, informing, inspiring thought.

Artists, scientists, psychiatrists, a counselor, a doctor ... people come with their problems, and so the question is, is this doctor, scientist, applying the acquired knowledge—and there’s nothing beyond that? He is simply referring to the stored-up knowledge in his mind and then says, “Okay, that is that condition” ... tick, tick, tick. A computer could almost do that—probably better. So, refer to acquired knowledge and then take action on the basis of that. And then there are others who are able to give total attention—and then speak or act. And so those are the ones who are truly effective. One could almost say they are effective despite a huge amount of baggage of acquired knowledge—and they still carry that. With psychologists, psychiatrists, it sometimes happened after many years of practicing [that] they came to be able to just give complete attention. And then suddenly they become very effective. Healing also happens with the giving of attention. It is not that just inspired thought arises out of it. Many other things arise out of that. It’s a source of healing also. Because it emanates ... that state, even if it’s brief, has a certain emanation.

So, we may have deviated from the original question, but it’s all connected. So it’s important to realize that, in conventional thought processes, if there is any element of creativity or newness about it, then there are gaps in the stream of thought. And out of these gaps [come] the inspiration and the insights, and the power—it might be a thought but it could be an empowered thought.

DALAL: So when one is observing one’s thoughts dispassionately in a state of detachment, there is Presence?

ECKHART: Yes, the ability to stand back, observe one’s own mind, the stream of thinking ... that means there is a

stillness—which is an aspect of Presence—which arises, and that stillness sees, knows—there is a knowing in that stillness. Through the stillness you know what is there, but there is no reactive relation to it. It's allowed. Stillness allows it to be there. That is the arising of Presence. To witness your own thoughts is already the arising of Presence. So, Presence can be there ... there is the stream of thinking ... there are little breaks in the stream of thinking. Presence can also be there—now we are using language and we have to be careful because language refers to the sense-perceived world, so we are using it only metaphorically. Presence can also arise, sometimes, from underneath the streams of thinking, which is the ability to watch the streams of thinking. [chuckle] For some people it comes through meditation. For some people it comes because the stream of thinking is too painful, and they are suddenly aware of it. For some people it comes through New Age practices, observing, and suddenly becoming aware of how negative your mind is, and then realizing that 80 percent of your thoughts are of a negative nature: condemning, judging, criticizing. Even then, there is some Presence arising, and only that can change your thought from negative to positive. Again, of course, there is some Presence there, but you are still mostly interested in the realm of thought. So the shift from negative to positive thinking is an intermediate step for many people. It already implies that there is some Presence somewhere; otherwise they wouldn't be even aware that there is negative thinking. The awareness that there is negative thinking is already Presence arising. So, when they shift to positive, they might then find that their life improves because their external circumstances and thought processes are linked to form. But then comes a time when they find that even though their life improves, they still experience highs and lows, ups and downs. And then the next step is stepping back from thought altogether, transcending the polarities of thought, no longer being trapped in the polarities, or thinking that through changing your thought processes you can arrive at a state of lasting peace. But this doesn't

work. [laughter] You can improve your life here and there, but you will not arrive at a state of lasting peace through positive thinking. [laughter]

DALAL: Regarding the meaning of “labeling”: When one observes one’s reaction and recognizes it as a reaction, say, of anger, depression, or fear, is that labeling?

ECKHART: There may be a label on the surface which is a thought. The thought may be, “There is anger.” That’s the surface thought. But underneath the surface thought there is the field of attention. And perhaps after the surface thought has said, “Here is anger,” there is simply the field of attention, the field of alertness, in which the anger happens. And then perhaps another thought arises that says, “Anger is still moving through my body and my mind.” The light of attention continues. And then a point may come when the mental label doesn’t arise any more that even calls it anger, and there is simply the attention that is given to that which no longer has a label. Now you could call it turbulence, but that’s another label. No label: there is simply attention to what is there internally. So there is that, and there is the attention. In the highest state of alertness there is simply the alert attention and that which happens, whether or not occasionally a mental label comes and calls that which is being observed “something.”

Sometimes people who read these things mistake the labeling for the alertness, the alert Presence, and then they’re telling themselves, “There’s anger, there’s anger, there’s anger, there’s anger.” And that covers up what really matters, which is the state of alert attention. But if it’s simply an occasional label that the mind comes up with, it doesn’t really interfere with the direct observation of it. So it’s relatively unimportant in the state of alert attention what the mind says. It’s like a little thing on the surface of it. It comes and goes. The label may be there or not there. It’s a beautiful thing when you no longer need to label that state. I don’t know whether

... I may have spoken about it [before]. There was a retreat in Canada by the sea, and the sea there is very cold. And I saw somebody go into the sea and swim. And then in the afternoon I asked her, "Was that you?" She said, "Yes." I said, "It must have been very cold!" And she said, "No, when the mind didn't label it ..."—that was her spiritual practice—"when the mind didn't label it, it wasn't even cold anymore. It felt intensely alive but there was no cold. There was simply that sensation. There was nothing negative to it, nothing positive to it." Really, she was totally in the observing Presence of it. It was neither good nor bad. It wasn't "cold" any more. There was complete stillness ... And I said, "This is so beautiful a teaching!"

DALAL: Regarding the meaning of "analyzing": After becoming aware of a reaction, and recognizing it as, say, anger or fear, if one then tries to understand how it came about, what produced it, is that analyzing?

ECKHART: When you look at the anger, the main thing is to look at it. Sometimes out of that state of looking—the witnessing consciousness, the Presence—out of that state, very often realizations come. And so, as you look at that emotional movement, which is all that is needed, sometimes suddenly you realize, for example, what unconscious reactive mind movement that emotion is associated with in yourself, and you suddenly say, "Oh, that's where it comes from, that mind movement." Or you may suddenly realize in some cases there may be an origin for that which you've forgotten, something that may have happened in childhood, and you suddenly say, "Oh, that's what it is." A woman may see that she's repeating some pattern to do with her father in childhood in her relationships with men. But what she saw—that's but one of many possible examples—is through the act of the witnessing consciousness. [What is] primary is to stay present with what is here, give attention to that. Secondary, is certain insights in the form of thoughts, realizations, which

may arise out of that primary state. That's secondary. So, that often is the case. So I wouldn't say that you put the emphasis on analyzing where it comes from that would take the focus away from what *is* and would move the focus into the past. The focus remains with what *is*, and then, as a secondary movement, realizations may come as by-products of that. And that's often the case.

DALAL: You have said in one of your talks that one cannot transform one's self. All one can do is to create a space for transformation to happen, open the doorway for the Grace to enter. What is the nature of the effort involved in opening the doorway?

ECKHART: Now, that is related to the question whether there is anything one can do [chuckle], or whether it's entirely Grace, in which case there is nothing you can do [chuckle], and any doing would obstruct the movement of Grace. Now, it's important to realize the limitations of thought—which is also language—as applied to that. Neither the statement “There is nothing you can do” nor the statement “It's all up to you” contains the entire truth. There are some teachings that entirely are one way: “No, there's no doer.” [chuckle] The teacher says, “Go home.” And then there's the other approach that says, “Unless you are so determined to be liberated—you are as determined as the drowning man who wants air—unless you have that degree of determination, you cannot become liberated. And here you have seemingly totally contradictory statements pointing to liberation: “No doing is possible” and “Yes, do!” It's only if you contain both—and I'll talk about that a little bit to see what that means [chuckle]. You need to embrace both and see that they both have some truth in them, but not a single one does it [says it all]. And this is the case with all thought and all language. Every thought ... this is why it's so hard to speak of these things, because it's the fragmentary nature of thought and the reductive nature of thought. Thought always implies that you have already taken a position. Thought is formed; you have

already tried to capture that which is vast, formless, in form ... you are trying to put it into some form and you have a position *here*; you are no longer everywhere. You are here. You have identified with the thought. So [also] in spiritual discourse ... and that's why very often spiritual teachings seem to contain contradictions. And that is a good thing because it is only through embracing seemingly opposite perspectives that you can get to the truth that lies beyond. Be always suspicious of teachings that are totally logical. That's very satisfying to the mind, to be totally consistent and logical, no internal contradictions whatsoever. Really, you are mistaking a nicely and neatly constructed edifice for the truth. Look at even the Buddha. I believe his last words are supposed to have been: "Work out your own salvation with diligence." And then you could say: Work out your own salvation! Who is going to work out his own salvation? Didn't he say the self is a delusion? So, is the delusion going to work out its own salvation? How can a delusion work out its own salvation? Is it not enough to recognize the nature of the delusion and to realize there's no salvation to work out—you're already saved? That's another viewpoint [laughter], and yet "Work out your own salvation" is also true. [laughter] So, first of all, we cannot really, through thought, reconcile these opposites, but I'll take you a little bit closer, through thought, to reconciling the opposites.

The question could also be rephrased as being about the nature or the need for seeking. Do we need to seek? And I often say that the last obstacle is that you are still a seeker, which implies that you are looking to the future for your sense of fullness and completion, and you're looking to add something to who you are, which is delusion. Another teaching says, "No, no, seek, seek!" And what I say to bring the two conflicting teachings together: continue to seek but bring your seeking into the now. I am now expanding on the meaning of seeking. In its conventional meaning, "seeking" implies that you're looking to the future for something. But if you bring the intensity that is behind seeking into the now,

then that intensity becomes attention that you give to this moment, to now. That which was seeking before brings the seeking into the now. Seek in the now instead of seeking in the future. And at first it doesn't seem to make sense. How can I seek in the now? Bring the intensity that is behind seeking into this moment. Let the seeking become alertness. Seek—ah!—as if you were listening, waiting, almost. That open alertness ... not waiting in the conventional sense, waiting in a state of alert Presence—so that intensity is needed. But even here we get trapped in thought and in the relative nature of thought. That intensity is there, or is not there. The Presence, arising Presence ... Presence arises when it wants to arise.

But I say that you have to choose Presence because it's a helpful perspective, not the truth, not the ultimate truth but a helpful perspective. If you feel that you are choosing Presence, you step out of mind into now. It's great you can do it! What's really happening is that Presence is choosing to emerge through this form. You think you are doing it. Why not? [chuckle] The paradox remains. There is no point in wanting to eliminate the paradox; stay with the paradox of there's nothing you can do, and there's everything you can do. Both are true. And look beyond the seemingly conflicting perspectives to the truth.

So, often I say *choose* because it is helpful. Presence says it. It comes out of Presence. So Presence says, "Choose." Within the totality, of course, there is not one entity who chooses. Everything is totally interconnected. The totality moves through you. And yet, from the perspective of this limited form ... from that perspective it's true that you can choose. [laughter] So it cannot be captured through thought. Allow the paradox to be there. And allow the contradictions to be there, and look beyond. They are all perspectives.

DALAL: Ramakrishna spoke about two attitudes on the spiritual path—the baby-cat attitude and the baby monkey attitude. The baby cat simply lies there on the ground and lets its mother

carry it wherever she wants. The baby monkey, on the other hand, clings onto its mother. Sri Aurobindo alludes to this in distinguishing between the path of surrender and the path of self-effort ...

ECKHART: Yes.

DALAL: *Sri Aurobindo says that there has to be a combination of the two ...*

ECKHART: Yes.

DALAL: *Initially, effort predominates ...*

ECKHART: Yes.

DALAL: *... and it's only progressively that effort gives place to surrender.*

ECKHART: Yes.

DALAL: *And then the Divine does everything.*

ECKHART: Yes, that's right, surrender ... You need to be ready for it. Not everyone can even listen to it. It would be a meaningless statement to say, for many people still, "Accept this moment as it is." Many people cannot hear that yet. And they don't come, so they don't hear it. And so a time comes suddenly when you realize the possibility of surrender or surrender happens spontaneously, usually through suffering or a combination of both. There is suffering, there is some degree of surrender. And then there's the spiritual teaching. And there's a deepening of surrender. So, again, self-effort, for quite a while ... self-effort implies wanting to get somewhere, to achieve a state, to become greater, more perfect, more pure, more holy, more enlightened—whatever it is, it's probably some kind of *more*. [chuckle] And then frustration comes after some time because no matter how

much more pure and holy, trying to live a pure and holy life is still trying to actualize a self-concept—and then suffering follows. Whenever you are trapped ... even the holy man who is trying to actualize a self-concept without knowing it, to become totally holy, is going to suffer because he is attached to mind. So, it's often through suffering that this then goes away. And then you become ... when there is no effort anymore that moves into the future ... then surrender happens. And all the effort that was [a] movement into the future—that enormous depleting mental energy stream—becomes intense Presence in the now.

It's important to realize that surrender is also a very dynamic state. It is passive and active in one. It's not one or the other. And this paradox—the *Tao Teh Ching* often speaks about this paradox—the sage no longer does anything, and in that not doing anything, everything gets done. [laughter] Also, Presence that is an intrinsic aspect of the surrendered state—surrendered state and Presence are one—that Presence also has seemingly contradictory, opposite qualities ... One quality of Presence is enormous gentleness ... embracing, vast gentleness. The other aspect of Presence is fierce, like a knife cutting through. Chhoo! And they both are one. [chuckle] They are both there as one. The opposites merge in Presence. In some teachers, one aspect of Presence predominates, but the other may occasionally come in, too. But the other is always there in the background. So some teachers are fierce. They cut through the ego. Sometimes they might even seem to attack the ego in order to crack it. So they are fierce like the Zen master. That's the fierce aspect, but underneath the fierceness there is gentleness. In very good pictures of Zen masters' drawings, you can see the external fierceness and the underlying gentleness. And then there are other teachers who predominantly embody the gentle aspect of Presence, but occasionally the fierceness can come through, and in the background it's still there and maybe occasionally—chhoo!—even cuts through the gentleness. [laughter]

DALAL: Regarding the teaching that one should not be concerned about the fruit of one's actions: In ordinary consciousness, one is almost always concerned about the fruit of one's action because almost all action is motivated by desire. [ECKHART: Yes.] In place of desire as the motivating force of action, the Gita teaches self-consecration, the offering of all actions to the Lord. In your teaching, what takes the place of desire as the motivating force?

ECKHART: Of course, it's no different from that in my teaching. It's just a different perspective on it. Desire is no longer the motivating force for action because desire means self-seeking through action. So you become dependent on the result, and your sense of self is attached to the result. Your self may get enhanced or diminished by the result. [chuckle] So desire and fear go together. Diminishment of self through the result is feared; the enhancement of self through the result is desired. So, it is self-seeking action, needing the future for self-completion and self-protection. So that's all in the realm of delusion, ultimately. So, as Presence arises, the motivating factor, one can say ... [Actually,] one can't speak of another motivating factor, but another way of putting it—perhaps that's a deeper perspective on it—is that there is no motivating factor. There simply arises spontaneous action in response to the requirement of this moment. But as that spontaneous action arises, the energy-field out of which it comes, which is the field of Presence, flows into that action. So that action, one could say—I don't like to use that word, but I'll use it—love flows into that action because it is totally honored. It's not reduced as a means to something else. Love flows in. Joy—subtle—is also an aspect of any action that is not a means to an end. It's beautiful! And you love what you are doing. It is not inferior to some desired future movement. So we can say a new motivating factor has come in—that is one expression you could use to describe it—and that's to say the motivating factor is joy and love.

Another perspective to describe it is mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The motivating factor is an offering to God. It's the same, just another way of looking at it. Or you can adopt another perspective and say—and that perhaps takes you even deeper—there is no motivating factor as such. It arises spontaneously.

For example, people have told me—people who come and listen a lot to the teaching—that there seem to be certain changes that come. There seems to be a kind of evolution of the teaching over the years. Changes come, and they say that “Today your talk was different from other talks. Why did you talk in such a way and such a way?” And I say I don't know; it's a response to the group, to that moment. There's never any prior intention behind what comes out, so it's without prior intention. One could say there is no motivating factor. It simply happens. But, again, we need always to bear in mind that thought is always no more than a perspective. So I still say there is a valid perspective that says that [as] the motivating factor changes, it becomes love. Or another way to look at it is to say there is no motivating factor. Different ways of looking, from here, from there, from there. [chuckle]

DALAL: You have said more than once that desire and fear are the two main sources of suffering. You teach surrender as the remedy for fear. What is the remedy for desire? Something other than surrender seems to be called for in dealing with desire.

ECKHART: Desire implies you are identified with mind. So, instead of trying to become free of desire, which is ... [well,] you haven't really gone to the root. One could say desire is the effect of that problem, it's not the root cause. Sometimes in spiritual practice people try to eliminate desire—it's almost impossible [chuckle]—without realizing that the cause of desire is identification with mind and the physical body. So, primarily [it is] identification with the mentally created sense of self, which is never complete, and is always wanting

and needing more. An enormous amount of desires arise out of that, in that self-seeking. So, unless you realize your identification with mind ...

Of course, there is another level of desire which is for physical gratification, which is identification with the physical vehicle. So, there may be desire—sexual, especially—that's the in-built, natural need of the organism. But that, in itself, is not all that problematic, but it flows into the mind-made image of self and then they go together. And so the psychological needs and the physical desires then merge into one, and a lot of suffering comes out of that. Not giving in to desire, thinking that I need to become free of desires—I never say that. Become free of *mind*, then desire is no longer a problem. And you become free of mind through stepping out of thought-streams. Surrender, again, *is* the answer because to step out of identification with thought-streams is to step out of seeking through the future. You only come to the end of desire when the false self has created enough suffering.

There are people who go into spiritual practice wanting to get rid of desire, not realizing that they have added one more desire to their desires, which is to become free of desire. Because they really want to become free of desire in order to become more of something—more spiritual, more holy, more perfect, more of this, which is another desire! [laughter] And then that may conflict with other desires that are still there. And they get into a worse state than before [laughter] because they may even *deny* the existence of other desires that no longer fit in with their predominant self-image of being spiritual. So you deny other desires in you that would not fit in with your self-image. And when you deny even to yourself the desires that you have, they become stronger. And suddenly they burst into your life and create havoc. And you don't know what's happening to you anymore. You [find that] you have done something dreadful! [chuckle] It often happens to spiritual people. Suddenly, they have enormous trauma in their lives that they have created. Again, trying to be free of desire, trying to be spiritual, doesn't work, so

don't give attention to eliminating desire. Get to the root of desire, which means the delusory sense of self that is mind-created. The desires of the body aren't really desires. They are feelings, they are sexual feelings. When a sexual feeling flows into the mind-made self, the sexual feeling becomes a sexual desire. The self now wants it. It actually amplifies that sense of self and makes it stronger. And that becomes problematic. A sexual feeling is not problematic. You can simply watch it and realize its nature. It doesn't move from feeling into a future of wanting. A man could see a woman and experience a sexual feeling without wanting it [chuckle] and simply acknowledge that this feeling is there; it's totally unproblematic. It's actually quite nice. It's quite a nice feeling. It's one of the many ways in which physical manifestations happen as that. So you sense that. There it is. The next movement doesn't happen, from the feeling to becoming desire, which is needing more. [chuckle] Then you can become comfortable with sexuality because it's actually fine. Needs no more. It is what it is. [chuckle]

DALAL: So one of the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha, which says that desire is the cause of all suffering, is a limited way of looking at things?

ECKHART: Any statement is a limited way of looking. There can be no statement that is not limited. And the danger of any signpost is that. You don't realize its limited nature and believe that it encapsulates the entire truth. It can't. It's always a perspective, no matter whose signpost it is—the Buddha, Krishna, whoever. It must be limited by its very nature.

DALAL: Regarding the way of dealing with a reaction, such as anger, you seem to recommend calling in Presence, but sometimes the reaction is very strong, taking the form of an impulse to express the anger either verbally or even physically. In such a case, one doesn't seem to have access to Presence, and one feels the need of using one's "will power," which is a power of the

mind. Does the mind have any role to play in dealing with negative reactions?

ECKHART: In the case of anger, it can be kept down for a while, but it cannot be kept down for very long. You may be able to keep it down on this occasion; you may be able to keep it down on the next occasion. And the next. But it's there. And then suddenly the lid blows off the boiling kettle. [chuckle] So will power sometimes seems to yield results, but they are never lasting. Usually, will power is associated with a need to actualize the self-image of a more perfect, more spiritual human being who is not angry anymore. [laughter] So bring Presence to it. If Presence is obscured, especially in the case of anger that has lived in you for many years (some people's pain-bodies are predominantly angry), anger can come up so suddenly that you are immediately overpowered and it takes hold over your mind. And then you "wake up" after it's all over and say, "There it was again. I was totally unconscious. Isn't that amazing!" [chuckle] What tends to happen as Presence arises [is that], the gap after it has happened, the gap of waking up becomes shorter after the pain-body attack. Sometimes it could be two hours afterwards when you suddenly realize what happened. Then the gap shortens as Presence arises to such an extent that suddenly you are aware of it; the moment it subsides, you wake up. Even when it's not quite subsided yet, you may suddenly say, "There it was again! Some of the energy is still there."

As Presence arises, you then experience the miracle of waking up in the middle of being identified with it. You suddenly know ... So there's the witnessing Presence in the middle of the movement of unconsciousness. *Suddenly* you wake up in the background somewhere, and you watch that, and you *know*. That knowing is the arising of Presence. You can't stop it but you know it. It is still acting out, and gradually Presence is sufficiently there as it comes up, and it is already met in the state of Presence. Anger arises, and you are fully there as the pain-body awakens. Then it cannot use

your mind anymore. And it won't stay for long because the pain-body knows there is no point, it can't feed anymore. So you are not suppressing it. You are simply bringing that intense alertness to it.

The pain-body, which has an intelligence of its own, knows it can't feed, so for a little while it is there, and then it's gone. That's not suppression. That's bringing intense alertness to it. And the pain-body doesn't like it, and it quickly withdraws. But what it does is wait for a better moment when you are not conscious. If it does not find a better moment, it will try again. It will come up, and again you meet it in the state of intense alertness. And it stays for a little while, then it subsides. But each time that happens, it loses some of its energy charge. It's not feeding anymore, and what's more, the transmutation already happens when you meet the emotion that's in the pain-body in the state of Presence. It dissolves it. Every time the emotion meets with Presence, it dissolves into Presence. It is not different.

Ultimately, one could say, consciousness is the highest vibrational frequency, and then there are other vibrational frequencies—consciousness appearing as something. So there is the frequency of a heavy emotion, and that—shoo!—becomes transmuted into Presence. This is why people with very heavy pain-bodies sometimes can awaken sooner than others because the very pain-body is fuel for Presence. Once this has happened, you can meet the pain-body in the state of Presence. The transmutation happens quickly. There is no self anymore in the emotion. And without self, which is the unconsciousness of identifying with it, without the delusion of self, it can't survive for long. The pain-body needs the delusion of self, pretending to be you [chuckle], to survive. So, again, without the mind-made self, the pain-body quickly dissolves. It needs that illusory entity to keep itself going. [laughter] It is part of that illusory entity: they are so linked.

DALAL: You have said that the dissolution of the pain-body takes time. Transformation also, you say, is a gradual process.

Creating gaps of no-mind also is a process by which the gaps gradually get longer and longer. [ECKHART: Yes.] So these things seem to imply that time is involved. [ECKHART: Yes.] What is it that doesn't require time?

ECKHART: There's often a seeming paradox when we speak of the timeless state of consciousness. Even when I say that this timeless state of consciousness deepens, it's true, but already there seems there to be a paradox because, if I say the timeless state of consciousness deepens, deepening must require time. [laughter] So, whenever we speak of it, we very soon find some paradox. I started one talk—I believe it's on a CD—where I said that the paradox is that we are now going to spend a whole day or a whole afternoon—we're going to spend four hours here—to go deeply into the timeless dimension. [laughter] So, to dwell in that state as a continuous state—before you can be in that state as a permanent state—time may be needed. But to *enter* that state, no time is needed. You can only enter that state now. Now maybe you can only stay in it for five seconds before you lose it again, but it's always the case that you can only enter that state of Presence *now*. For that, you don't need time. You don't need time because the primordial spiritual practice is to live in acceptance, inner surrender, to the *is*-ness of this moment. This is the primordial spiritual practice, total inner acceptance of whatever *is*. That does not require time.

Now, it may be that only once a week can you accept what *is*. [chuckle] Maybe for one minute every week you can totally accept the *is*-ness of this moment. And then next year for three minutes each week [chuckle] you can accept what *is*. And twenty years later, for one day—I am giving a funny example—for a day each week you can be in a state of complete alignment with what *is*. That requires time. [laughter] But each time it happens, you don't need time. For that spiritual practice, you don't need time to say “yes” to what *is*. What time would you need? [laughter] So you can see, [it seems to take] time before it becomes perhaps a permanent “yes,”

a continuous “yes,” in which case even *surrender*—the word *surrender*—disappears because, when *surrender* is your natural state, there’s no *surrender* anymore. *Surrender* implies a transition from resistance to nonresistance. The transition is *surrender*. That’s why I talk about it. Once *surrender* is your normal, natural state, *surrender* disappears. It is only from resistance to nonresistance that *surrender* applies. So, that’s the end of *surrender*, too. [laughter] That is one perspective on it. Or if you like different words, you can say that you live in a state of continuous *surrender*. It’s another perspective. It’s perhaps a deeper perspective. To see no more *surrender* is needed is true *surrender*. [chuckle]

DALAL: In one of your talks you have said: “One thing does not require time, and that is to know who you are.” [ECKHART: Yes.] In the East, to know one’s Self—that is, Self-realization—is said to take lifetimes. Is Self-realization different from what you call enlightenment?

ECKHART: No, but remember—I may have said it yesterday [in a public talk]—it takes time until you realize that it doesn’t take time. That statement contains a paradox. You can’t remove that paradox. It takes time until you realize that it takes no time. The realization of no time takes time. Humanity as a whole has come a long way, through eons and eons of time and vast suffering generated by the time-bound state of consciousness. So, certain statements that were made in the past, perhaps a long time ago, may not entirely apply any more because, as I said, you need time until you realize that you don’t need time anymore. Mankind has had a lot of time now. And mankind has had a lot of suffering now. You need that time until the realization comes that you don’t. This teaching perhaps is so vital now. It’s empowered because it replies to the immediate need of this situation on the planet, the spiritual need of the planet now. Statements that were made in the past are not false. It’s true that it requires time, up to a point. Self-realization is itself a

realization of the timeless in you. So you can see that all perspectives are true. And so it is no different. There is only one Self-realization.

DALAL: There is a striking similarity between what you and Sri Aurobindo say about one thing that few other teachers have spoken about, namely, the evolution of consciousness and the arising of a new consciousness on the planet. Sri Aurobindo says that consciousness has evolved from a state of Inconscience, emerging first as Matter, then Life, then Mind, and is now preparing to emerge into a consciousness that he calls Supermind, which is not a bigger mind but something beyond mind. [ECKHART: Yes.] What you say about the arising of a new consciousness, is it based on some similar vision or is it simply something that you see happening around you?

ECKHART: Yes, I see it happening, and it is the next evolutionary dimension, evolutionary leap, more than a gradual progression. There are sometimes leaps in evolution. This is the next stage in human evolution. I do see it like that, but the main reason why I say it is not so much based on a certain view of things. I can see it happening. It happened through this form, and I can see how many people are drawn to the teaching because they are ready for it. And it's continuous. It's not that the old consciousness, our mind-identified stage of evolution, has come to an end yet. It's reached its final phase, and sometimes in its final phase it could become even more mad before it finally gives way, either through violent upheavals or in a general way. Who knows? That probably depends on how many humans are open to the new consciousness that wants to arise. If a sufficient number of humans are open to the new consciousness, the need for violent upheavals lessens on the planet.

There could be violence produced by humans against other humans, humans against the planet. It could even be violence of nature, natural phenomena that are part of the destruction of all those structures that the old consciousness

has created, external structures. And then comes the destruction of those structures within, also. And, of course, in a gentle way, that is already happening through the teachings. So, for those who are open, the old structures simply give way to the new. Those who are not open may experience increasing confusion, disorientation, dreadful unhappiness, madness. We live in interesting times. [laughter]

DALAL: *You have said that inhabiting the body is always an essential aspect of staying present. Does this mean that if one doesn't have this feeling of inhabiting the body, one is not truly present?*

ECKHART: It is a very subtle thing. Presence is an intense aliveness—the state of Presence. And that intense aliveness is both within and without. And in a very subtle way, it pervades the entire body. It is like a very gentle energy movement. Energy, *aliveness*. So, yes, I would say if you cannot sense that, Presence is not yet very deep. [Addressing Dr. Mistry] You tell me you find it very hard.

DR. MISTRY: *Yes.*

ECKHART: I sometimes give people little hints: Can you sense your hand?

DR. MISTRY: *Yes.*

ECKHART: Yes, so you are in the body.

DALAL: *In the physical body?*

ECKHART: Physical body. At first, you sense the aliveness of the physical body, and then there is a deepening. There is just a generalized sense of aliveness. Not so much, any more, of feeling this is the body and then there's the rest of the world. It is simply one aspect of that total aliveness that you live in the state of Presence. [Eckhart talks in a low voice. Inaudible

words are indicated by elliptical dots.] The entire universe is alive ... Underlying it is the Unmanifested ... The distinction between the observer and the observed comes to an end. When you enter the body deeply, there is no longer the sense of “I am observing the inner body.” There is no longer the sense that “I am feeling the inner body.” The duality disappears ... You *are* present throughout the body, just as you are present throughout that which is beyond the body ... Whatever you perceive is yourself. And that recognition comes not through the mind but through Presence. So the quickest way to stepping out of mind is entering the body with your attention. And, at first, there is an observer and the observed body. If you then close your eyes and sink into the sense of the energy-field of body, become one with that, so you are no longer there in your head as the observer of this—you *are* this—that’s the cessation of thinking. You *are* the Presence that pervades the entire body. And then the mental image of the physical body disappears because your attention is entirely in that alive Presence, *is* that alive Presence, attention *is* that alive Presence. Then the image of me as a physical body that people still have even after they close their eyes—they still visualize the physical body—well, the image disappears. What is left is no longer an observer and the observed. There is no longer the image of a physical vehicle. There is simply a field of intense aliveness in which there is no duality, and so there is no body anymore. By going into the body, you have transcended the body. It becomes a little doorway into being, into the Unmanifested, because anything in form is only a temporary expression of the Unmanifested—anything in manifestation. But everything in manifestation, at its core, is still one with the Unmanifested. So, a beautiful meditation is to go deeply into the body until the body disappears, until all that is left is the field of intense aliveness ... no body. And that is stillness, and that is Presence.

Now to say that you are in the body is no longer true. It was only a temporary truth. [chuckle] The body was only the doorway, so you don’t linger in the doorway. And once you

realize yourself as *that*, the strange thing is that you can then open your eyes ... and that field of intense aliveness, Presence, is still there. But you can perceive ... the undercurrent of all sense-perception is there as that field of beautiful aliveness, stillness, Presence. Out of that or within that, perception arises. And what you now perceive—no longer through the labeling mind—is not being labeled. It's perceived within that field of enormous peace and aliveness. And it's all beautiful. And one could almost say that, *through* that, everything that you perceive is returning home ... And you know that field to be the essence of each form. Almost impossible to talk about this ... So the beauty of this is that the inner body can become a doorway into Self, into Being, into God.

DALAL: *Aren't there other doorways besides the inner body?*

ECKHART: Yes, there are other doorways, but you go through one doorway into God and, to some extent, all the other doorways are also there. So, sometimes I may not speak about the inner body even during a four-hour talk; I may not mention the inner body. I may only mention the state of surrender to what *is*. More recently, because of the way the teaching has evolved, surrender happens to be the doorway that is in the foreground at the moment. But no matter which [doorway] you go through, at some point you will realize that the other doorways are also there—but in the background.

Or I could focus entirely on the inner body and never mention the state of surrender, and it would happen also through that. [chuckle] When you live in the surrendered state, everything, including this physical form and the world around you, becomes more alive because, before, everything was deadened by conceptualization. So people may not even know that they feel their inner body. That's a strange thing. [chuckle] I have met people who have surrendered and I asked them, "Can you feel your body?" They said, "Body?" Then I talked a little bit more and said, "Well, what I really mean

...” And after a little while they said, “Oh, I know now what you mean. Yes. I feel that all the time!” [laughter] Another thing that happened to me—after this transformation of consciousness happened to me, which I did not understand, I just knew I was at peace—my mind, thought activity, had become reduced by maybe 80 percent. So that morning I woke up and I went for a walk and everything was so deeply peaceful and alive. It was only much, much later that I realized, “Oh, I’m not thinking anymore. That’s why!” [chuckle] But for a long, long time there was little thought activity. I didn’t know there was no more thought. I believe it came to me when I was listening to teachers or teachings. [I understood, when] I went to listen to a Buddhist monk teacher who talked about cessation of thought, “Oh, *that’s* what it is!” [laughter] So ... again, doorways are only a kind of way of approaching ...

DR. MISTRY: A doorway can close again? It happened to me.

ECKHART: Yes, until you are permanently established, a doorway may be open and some day ... it’s not so much that the doorway closes ... [Dr. Mistry makes an inaudible remark.] Yes, [chuckle] the doorway is always there. [laughter]

DALAL: *At Big Sur [Esalen retreat in California] I had asked you if there are different degrees of Presence, and you had said yes. Another similar question regarding Presence that has occurred to me is whether there are different types of Presence. Sankhya, one of the six systems of Indian philosophy, speaks of two aspects of Reality, namely, Purusha or the Conscious Being, and Prakriti or Nature. Three aspects of Nature are distinguished, namely, matter, life, and mind. Corresponding to these three aspects of Nature (Prakriti), three aspects of the Conscious Being (Purusha) are spoken of, namely, physical Conscious Being [Annamaya Purusha], the vital Conscious Being [Pranamaya Purusha], and the mental Conscious Being [Manomaya Purusha]. The Conscious Being or the Purusha is regarded as the Witness*

[Sakshi]. Are there different types of Presence corresponding to the three Purushas—physical, vital, and mental?

ECKHART: There are many ways of looking at these things. So, that is not a division that I use. [To] the question of whether there are different kinds of Presence, I would say no, but there is the witnessing Presence that arises. And that for many people is ... as Presence first arises, they realize they can be the witness; Presence is the witness. It's not yet very much awareness of *Presence*. There is a witnessing capacity that is there as Presence arises, with which comes a certain degree of detachment from whatever arises, mentally or externally, emotionally. So Presence arises as the witness, and then—I'm saying this now, I may never say it again ... It is very hard to talk about this. The danger is making it into a permanent system. I prefer to use a perspective or an approach on it once, twice, or a few times and then use other pointers. What people do with some teachers—and perhaps they did it with this teacher you just mentioned, of course—is to write down what he or she says. And the pointer becomes permanently established. There is a danger when a pointer becomes a permanent edifice. Pointers work better if they are used as temporary means, then to be discarded when no points are needed anymore, or to be replaced by another pointer that works for this situation at this moment for this person. The truth of this eludes language and is not to be permanently captured in form. The pointer or signpost permanently captured in form is no longer a help but a hindrance. So, a wise use of signposts is not to make them into a system of looking at states but only a temporary perspective, a temporary helpful perspective. That is important to realize; otherwise signposts become rigid, and instead of working, become self-serving.

So now let me say this: There is a witness that arises—and I am giving a signpost, so I am not going to say this is a permanent teaching. [chuckle] It's one of many possible ways of looking at it. There is the witness that is nonattachment

to the arising form, a certain ability to allow what is there to be there. Then deepening comes when that awareness, that Presence, knows itself—becomes self-aware. So, it's not so much anymore that you are interested in that which is being witnessed. You are now interested in—that's not the right word—you know yourself as the underlying field. Then that which is being witnessed is relatively unimportant. Before, when you were witnessing, you were still very much interested in that which was being witnessed, not knowing the field, the witness itself. [chuckle] So you can say there is a shift from witness to awareness of awareness. First there is identification with sense objects and thoughts—there is self-identification. Then there is the stepping back and there is the witnessing quality with reference to sense objects, thoughts, emotions. Then there is a stepping back, and there is an awareness of awareness itself. So, first, the delusional stage, then the beginning of the arising of Presence, and then Presence knowing itself, awareness knowing itself as awareness. Then the world of form becomes relatively unimportant to you because you are the formless, you know yourself as the formless.

DALAL: *At what stage do joy, love, and aliveness arise?*

ECKHART: Well, the witnessing means that you are no longer suffering that much. As the witness arises, it is the diminishment of suffering. The suffering entity is subsiding, so already there you may get a glimpse of joy and aliveness and love as the witness arises. And then you move deeper, and that's where it is. It is only by going beyond form that there can be joy and love. They are not of the form. Only if love is misunderstood, then it is love of a particular form. That is not [what can be called love].

DALAL: *That means that love is impersonal?*

ECKHART: Yes, it's completely impersonal. So, what I have just said—the three stages—now forget about it. [chuckle]

DALAL: *Thank you for your time and Presence.*

DR. MISTRY: *I have a question.*

ECKHART: Yes.

DR. MISTRY: *You have come to your present state of development in this particular incarnation. There must have been a being that was growing in previous incarnations until it flowered in the present incarnation as you. It could not be that the totality suddenly put forth Eckhart Tolle in this present life. You might be an incarnation of Meister Eckhart!¹ [Eckhart laughs] So, is there a unique individuality in each person that comes again and again in each incarnation until it flowers into full consciousness? Is there a being in each person that persists from life to life until it reaches full flowering?*

ECKHART: Well, there is the form as long as there is self—self-identification with form. That which persists is the illusion of form. The surviving entity is the illusion. At some point the illusion dissolves. And it is not always after accumulating many credits in many incarnations. It could suddenly dissolve even in an incarnation that has not had many credits ... simply extreme suffering. So, there is not a specially chosen form. It's never that the totality says, "I am choosing you to be that." The totality does not mind through which form it flowers. It only seeks the opening through which it can flower. So, it is not that the form is in any way special. The opposite would be true to say: it is through the realization of the nothingness of this form, of its no-thingness, of its non-specialness that, suddenly, where there was a form, there

¹ Interestingly, subsequent to this interview, in an article on "Living in the Now" (published in the July/August 2002 issue of *Body & Soul magazine*), Peter Occhio Grosso writes about Eckhart: "In a dream several years after his transformation, he says, 'Somebody called me "Eckhart" I saw books written by [Meister] Eckhart and I knew I had written them. I realized it was a sign, and that it was my name.'" Soon after, he discarded his given names of Ullrich Leonard and adopted the one he now uses.

comes a transparency. It's the destiny of the form to become transparent to that. And again, people ask me ... somebody wrote to me and said, "You say somewhere in the book that 'You are here to enable the divine purpose of the universe to unfold. This is how important you are.' Then somewhere else in the book you say that all forms are unimportant. So one of these statements must be wrong. You are contradicting yourself." Here we come to the same point. It is only through realizing your nothingness that suddenly something infinite, incredible, is there. It is only when the form realizes its nothingness, how unimportant it is ... It is just waiting for the opening to appear. God doesn't even know persons. God wants to move through the opening ... It is looking—that's just metaphorical language—it's like a light shining and seeing where's the hole that it can shine through. And, mostly, it can't find the holes because there is a density that covers up the potential holes. There are lots of potential holes, but they are all blocked. [laughter] And then occasionally there is a hole ... And then suddenly the blockage goes ... shooo! The hole realized its essential nature, its nothingness. So it happened. [chuckle]

Questions and Answers at Esalen

(Eckhart's responses to written questions from the author during a talk at the Esalen retreat, June 1 and 2, 2001. The responses have been paraphrased and abbreviated by the author.)

DALAL: Can the state of surrender in which one is able to say "yes" to whatever is, be attained so long as the sense of a separate "I" or ego persists?

ECKHART: Ego and surrender cannot, indeed, coexist. The ability to say "yes" to what *is* does not come from the ego. One who is strongly entrenched in the ego would not even understand the meaning of saying "yes" to what *is*. The fact that you are able to understand the meaning of saying "yes" to what *is* and can recognize its truth shows that the egoic structures have already loosened within you and a deeper consciousness is already emerging in you, although the egoic structures reassert themselves and you are not able to say "yes" all the time. The ego itself cannot say "yes."

DALAL: Are there degrees of Presence, as there are degrees of unconsciousness? The state of Presence in which one has the sense

of being a witness who is not identified with the forms seems relatively less difficult to attain and to sustain, but a state of Presence which is also a state of joy and love does not seem to be within easy reach. How can the state of Presence be deepened so as to be more than just being the state of a detached witness?

ECKHART: The state of Presence arises when one becomes aware of one's thoughts. For instance, when reading about positive and negative thinking in a New Age book, one becomes suddenly aware of one's negative thought patterns; it is due to the arising of Presence. Becoming the witness of one's mind and its inherited conditionings is the first stage of Presence. When one becomes a witness, one also realizes that one can exercise a choice and change one's thinking through various New Age methods such as affirmation and visualization. But one cannot attain a permanent state of happiness by mere affirmations. One realizes after a while that, though one can change things by changing one's thinking, one cannot get out of the polarities or the opposites of high and low in life as long as one does not go beyond mind. One can go beyond the opposite polarities only by transcending thought and rising into a level of consciousness beyond mind. In one's external form, one will still continue to experience the polarities of pleasure and pain, but the polarities will be more benign and less extreme. One has to *allow* the polarities as part of what *is*, for polarities cannot altogether be abolished as long as there is the universe.

Regarding the question of whether there are degrees of Presence, yes, there are degrees of Presence. We talked about the arising of Presence when one becomes the witness of one's mind structures. Listening to these talks is one way of deepening the Presence. Also, the more often one *chooses* Presence by remembering to step out of one's mind, out of mental noise into alertness and Presence, the more does Presence deepen. How long one can *stay* in the state of Presence is immaterial. What matters is how often one *returns* to the state of Presence. The true deepening comes when, from

becoming alert and aware of things, one becomes *aware of awareness* itself, the field of awareness which we call variously Stillness, Consciousness, or Presence. It is happening. One has only to *allow* it to happen.

DALAL: *Is not spiritual practice necessary for leading a spiritual life? Doesn't spiritual practice involve time? [Eckhart has said that time is the greatest obstacle in spiritual life.]*

ECKHART: It may be necessary for *you* to have a spiritual practice, but it is not absolutely necessary for everyone to go through spiritual practice in order to have a transformation. There are cases of persons having a transformation *without* any spiritual practice. Ramana Maharshi had liberation after a brief profound experience at the age of 16 or 17, and there was no prior spiritual practice. One might say that, in such cases, there must have been spiritual practice in previous lifetimes. That is possible. But the fact remains that, for some, spiritual practice may consist only in the suffering they go through. That was the case with me. Suffering was my teacher, but I was not consciously engaged in any spiritual practice. It is true that such cases of a sudden and definitive liberation are rare. In most cases, liberation involves a process of going through spiritual practice. But even in such cases the final step comes when one lets go of everything, including their spiritual practice. Liberation is not likely to happen as a direct result of spiritual practice; it is not like a graduated course that one goes through step by step until completion of the course. The Buddha went through practices of all sorts for many years. But he became enlightened only when he dropped everything, including time and future, and sat under a tree. So, spiritual practice may be appropriate, but it is neither indispensable for everyone nor sufficient in itself.

Regarding the time involved in spiritual practice, that is the danger and the drawback with many spiritual practices: They give you time to get better and better at it and work towards the future goal of *finding* yourself! However, there *are*

simple practices in which time and future are not involved. When you listen to the sound of the ocean and become aware of the awareness in which that sound happens, you could be said to be doing a spiritual practice. Looking at a plant in the state of stillness, saying “yes” to whatever arises, can be called spiritual practice. It is more than just spiritual practice. It is a way of living. It is the liberated way of living.

When one is not yet continuously dwelling in the liberated way of living, it emerges from time to time as a state of Presence. It becomes obscured again and again, and one chooses Presence again and again. One moves back and forth from unconsciousness to consciousness until consciousness becomes your normal state. Each time you choose Presence, you are doing a spiritual practice, and when Presence becomes your normal state, it brings an end to spiritual practice—or you could say that you are in continuous spiritual practice.

Sri Aurobindo on the Witness Consciousness

The *witness consciousness* is a state in which one stands back as an observer of one's thoughts and feelings. Such a state of consciousness is in contrast to the ordinary state in which one is more or less completely identified with one's mental and other inner movements. Speaking to students, the Mother observed:

Do not believe that it [observing one's mind] is such an easy thing, for to observe your thoughts, you must first of all separate yourself from them. In the ordinary state, the ordinary man does not distinguish himself from his thoughts. He does not even know what he thinks. He thinks by habit. And if he is asked all of a sudden, "What are you thinking of?" he knows nothing about it. That is to say, ninety-five times out of a hundred he will answer, "I do not know." There is a complete identification between the movement of thought and the consciousness of the being.¹

¹ The Mother, *Questions and Answers*, CWM, Vol. 3, p. 184.

Sri Aurobindo describes the state in which one is identified with the mind as a state of *involvement* of consciousness, and distinguishes it from the state of *detachment* or no identification.

It [consciousness] is not by its nature detached from the mental and other activities. It can be detached, it can be involved. In the human consciousness it is as a rule always involved, but it has developed the power of detaching itself—a thing which the lower creation seems unable to do. As the consciousness develops, this power of detachment also develops.²

The witness consciousness implies some degree of detachment from mental and other inner activities. All those in whom some growth of an inner life has taken place have developed to a smaller or greater extent the ability to detach oneself and to stand back as observer of one's thoughts and feelings. They are said to have a witness consciousness.

The concept of the witness consciousness has been perhaps most thoroughly developed by Sankhya, one of the six traditional systems of Indian philosophy.

It may be stated in passing that the six systems of Indian philosophy are called Darshanas—Darshan means “seeing”—because they are not products of the intellect but of spiritual realization.

Sankhya views Existence as made up of two principles—Purusha (Soul or Conscious Being) and Prakriti (Nature). Explaining these two principles of existence in terms of yogic experience, Sri Aurobindo states:

When we come to look in at our selves instead of out at the world and begin to analyze our subjective experience, we find that there are two parts of our being which can be, to all appearance, entirely separated from each other, one a consciousness which is still and passive and supports, and the other a consciousness which is busy and creative and is supported. The passive and fundamental consciousness

² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 686.

is the Soul, the Purusha, Witness or *sākṣī*, the active and superstructural consciousness is Nature, Prakriti, processive or creative energy of the *sākṣī*.³

The Purusha is the true being, but in the ordinary consciousness it is identified with Prakriti. Therefore, in the ordinary consciousness, one loses the sense of being the witness, Purusha, and thinks of oneself as the active Prakriti—the doer instead of the witness. The illusory sense of being the doer of all actions, which is one of the innate characteristics of the egoic consciousness, is due to the identification of the witness consciousness of the Purusha with the active consciousness of Prakriti. When the Purusha is identified with and covered up by Prakriti, it “remains behind as the unseen Witness supporting the play of the Ignorance. . . . When it emerges, you feel it as a consciousness behind, calm, central, unidentified with the play which depends upon it. It may be covered over; but it is always there.”⁴

Two well-known processes taught in the traditional Indian schools of yoga for achieving liberation by overcoming the identification of the true self with the ego are those of the Advaita (monistic Vedanta) and Sankhya. Explaining the two processes, Sri Aurobindo writes:

There is the Advaita process of the way of knowledge—one rejects from oneself the identification with the mind, vital, body, saying continually “I am not the mind”, “I am not the vital”, “I am not the body”, seeing these things as separate from one’s real self—and after a time one feels all the mental, vital, physical processes and the very sense of mind, vital, body becoming externalized, an outer action, while within and detached from them there grows the sense of a separate self-existent being which opens into the realization of the cosmic and transcendent spirit. There is also the method—a very powerful method—of the Sankhyas, the separation of

³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Hour of God and Other Writings*, SABCL, Vol. 17, p. 51.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1006.

the Purusha and the Prakriti. One enforces on the mind the position of the Witness—all action of mind, vital, physical becomes an outer play which is not myself or mine, but belongs to Nature and has been enforced on an outer me. I am the witness Purusha; I am silent, detached, not bound by any of these things. There grows up in consequence a division in the being; the sadhak⁵ feels within him the growth of a calm silent separate consciousness which feels itself quite apart from the surface play of the mind and the vital and physical Nature.⁶

Implied in the passage just quoted is the yogic psychological concept of two centers or parts of consciousness at each level of our being—physical, vital, mental. One part, the Purusha, is a witness; the other, Prakriti, is the active part. The separation of the witness consciousness of the Purusha from the active consciousness of Prakriti is more difficult with regard to the mind than it is in relation to the vital and physical parts of the being because the human being is most identified with the mind. As Sri Aurobindo states:

... man being primarily a creature of mental Prakriti identifies himself with the movements of his mind and cannot at once dissociate himself and stand free from the swirl and eddies of the mind whirlpool. It is comparatively easy for him to put a control on his body, at least on a certain part of its movements; it is less easy but still very possible after a struggle to put a mental control on his impulses and desires; but to sit like the Tantric yogi on the river, above the whirlpool of his thoughts, is less facile. Nevertheless, it can be done; all developed mental men, those who get beyond the average, have in one way or other or at least at certain times and for certain purposes to separate the two parts of the mind, the active part which is a factory of thoughts and the quiet

⁵ One who seeks realization by spiritual practice.

⁶ Sri Aurobindo. *Letters on Yoga*. SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1168.

masterful part which is at once a Witness and a Will, observing them, judging, rejecting, eliminating, accepting, ordering corrections and changes, the Master in the House of Mind, capable of self-empire ...⁷

When consciousness is relatively undeveloped in a human being, one is unable not only to separate the witness part from the active part of the consciousness but also to distinguish among different kinds of consciousness—physical, vital, mental, etc. All of consciousness is experienced simply as mental consciousness. In Sri Aurobindo's words:

For human beings who have not got deeper into themselves, mind and consciousness are synonymous. Only when one becomes more aware of oneself by a growing consciousness, then one can see different degrees, kinds, powers of consciousness, mental, vital, physical, psychic,⁸ spiritual.⁹

Separating the witness consciousness from the active consciousness is less difficult than distinguishing different kinds of consciousness. Therefore, even when one is yet unable to distinguish in oneself a difference between physical, vital, and mental consciousness, one can, with some practice, succeed in separating one's consciousness from one's thoughts and be their observer. As Sri Aurobindo states:

The Divine has been described as Being, Consciousness, Ananda, even as a Consciousness (Chaitanya), as putting out a force or energy, Shakti that creates world. The mind is a modified consciousness that puts forth a mental energy.

⁷ Sri Aurobindo adds: "The yogi goes still further; he is not only a master there, but even while in mind in a way, he gets out of it as it were, and stands above or quite back from it and free. For him the image of the factory of thoughts is no longer quite valid; for he sees that thoughts come from outside, from the universal Mind or universal Nature, sometimes formed and distinct, sometimes unformed and then they are given shape somewhere in us. The principal business of our mind is either a response of acceptance or a refusal to these thought-waves (as also vital waves, subtle physical energy waves) or this giving a personal-mental form to thought-stuff (or vital movements) from the environing Nature-Force." (Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, pp. 1257, 1258).

⁸ Pertaining to the psychic being or the soul.

⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 686.

But the Divine can stand back from his energy and observe it at its work, it can be the Witness Purusha watching the works of Prakriti. Even the mind can do that—a man can stand back in his mind-consciousness and watch the mental energy doing things, thinking, planning, etc.; all introspection is based upon the fact that one can so divide oneself into a consciousness that observes and an energy that acts. These are quite elementary things supposed to be known to everybody. Anybody can do that merely by a little practice; anybody who observes his own thoughts, feelings, actions, has begun doing it already. In yoga we make the division complete, that is all.¹⁰

The division, just spoken of, between the Witness Purusha and the active Prakriti takes place progressively with the growth of consciousness. Initially, in the state of total ignorance and bondage, Purusha, the Soul, is totally identified with Prakriti, the outer Nature. In this state

... the Purusha is passive and allows Nature to act, accepting all she imposes on him, giving a constant automatic sanction ... the soul in mind, life, body, the mental, vital, physical being in us, becomes subject to our nature, ruled by its formation, driven by its activities; that is the normal state of our ignorance.¹¹

This state in which the Purusha is driven by the modes of Prakriti, giving them an unconscious and therefore automatic sanction, is the state of bondage. The first step towards liberation of the Purusha from the bondage of Prakriti is the emergence of a consciousness in which the Purusha is no longer only a *silent* Witness *behind*, as it is ordinarily, but a *felt* Witness in the *front* of consciousness.

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 686.

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 348.

If the Purusha in us becomes aware of itself as the Witness and stands back from Nature, that is the first step to the soul's freedom; for it becomes detached, and it is possible then to know Nature and her processes and in all independence, since we are no longer involved in her works, to accept or not to accept, to make the sanction no longer automatic but free and effective; we can choose what she shall do or not do in us, or we can stand back altogether from her works and withdraw easily into the Self's spiritual silence, or we can reject her present formations and rise to a spiritual level of existence and from there re-create our existence. The Purusha can cease to be subject, *anīśa*,¹² and become lord of its nature, *īśvara*.¹³

The attitude of the witness consciousness within ... is a very necessary stage in the progress. It helps the liberation from the lower Prakriti—not getting involved in the ordinary nature movements; it helps the establishment of a perfect calm and peace within, for there is then one part of the being which remains detached and sees without being disturbed by the perturbations of the surface. ...¹⁴

Becoming the Witness, however, is only the first step to liberation. To be effectively liberated from bondage to the unconscious state of identification with the physical, vital, and mental nature of Prakriti, the Purusha must emerge as not only as Sakshi, the Witness, but also as Anumanta, the *conscious* Sanctioner. Thus Sri Aurobindo states:

The Purusha above is not only a Witness, he is the giver (or withholder) of the sanction; if he persistently refuses the sanction to a movement of Prakriti, keeping himself detached, then, even if it goes on for a time by its past momentum, it usually loses its hold after a time, becomes more

¹² Not-lord, subject.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vol. 18, pp. 348, 349.

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 1006, 1007.

feeble, less persistent, less concrete and in the end fades away. If you take the Purusha consciousness, it should be not only as the Witness but as the Anumanta, refusing sanction to the disturbing movements, sanctioning only peace, calm, purity and whatever else is part of the divine nature. This refusal of sanction need not mean a struggle with the lower Prakriti; it should be a quiet, persistent, detached refusal leaving unsupported, unassented to, without meaning or justification, the contrary action of the nature.¹⁵

It is only after the Purusha has emerged as both a Witness and a Sanctioner that the Soul, the Conscious Being, can progressively become the Master. Sri Aurobindo speaks of these three stages in the liberation of the Purusha from the Prakriti thus:

... the Conscious Being standing back detached from all the movements of Nature and observing them as witness and knower and finally as the giver (or refuser) of the sanction and at the highest stage of the development, the Ishwara, the pure will, master of the whole Nature.¹⁶

In summary, in the initial state of ignorance, Purusha the Soul is only a silent witness, giving an *automatic* sanction to the movements of physical, vital, and mental nature. The Soul is said to be Anisha (not-lord), subject; it is master only in theory. Much effort of austerity is needed by way of refusing sanction to the unconscious movements of Nature before the Soul can become, in truth, Ishwara, master and lord of Nature. In Sri Aurobindo's words:

The soul is the witness, upholder, experiencer, but it is master only in theory, in fact it is not-master, *anīśa*, so long as it consents to the Ignorance. For that is a general consent which implies that the Prakriti gambols about with the Purusha

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1009.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 673.

and does pretty well what she likes with him. When he wants to get back to his mastery, make the theoretical practical, he needs a lot of tapasya¹⁷ to do it.¹⁸

The process of the Purusha emerging as master of Nature is therefore necessarily a slow one. Explaining this in a letter to a disciple, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The emergence of the Purusha is the beginning of liberation. But it can also become slowly the Master—slowly because the whole habit of the ego and the play of the lower forces is against that. Still it can dictate what higher play is to replace the lower movement and then there is the process of that replacement. You say rightly that the offering to the Divine shortens the whole thing and is more effective, but usually it cannot be done completely at once owing to the past habit and the two methods¹⁹ continue together until the complete surrender is possible.²⁰

Sri Aurobindo's teachings on the witness consciousness previously stated differ in two respects from Eckhart Tolle's perspective. First, Eckhart regards mental consciousness as a state of unconsciousness. To be identified with mind is to be in a state of unconsciousness; therefore, if the witnessing Presence is to arise, one must step out of mind. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, distinguishes two dimensions of the mind—the ordinary mind that is part of Prakriti or Nature, which is an active and involved consciousness, and an inner mind that is part of Purusha, the inner being, which is a detached and observing or witness Consciousness. Secondly, Eckhart teaches that, for the transformation of the ordinary consciousness, one

¹⁷ Effort and concentration of the personal will and energy to change the physical, vital, and mental consciousness for a yogic purpose.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1111.

¹⁹ The method of the action of the Purusha for *replacing* the play of the lower forces by a higher play, and the method of *offering* the lower movements to the Divine so that they may be transformed by the divine Force.

²⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1006.

has simply to choose the witnessing Presence and allow Presence to transform the consciousness. There is no *doing*, but simply *allowing*. In Sri Aurobindo's teaching, on the other hand, becoming an impartial Witness is only the first step towards liberation. To change the ordinary consciousness, the Purusha must become not only a conscious Witness but also a Sanctioner who sanctions the right movements and refuses the wrong movements of the ordinary consciousness. This requires much Tapasya, personal effort, says Sri Aurobindo.

These points will be dealt with further in the next chapter.

The Teachings of Eckhart Tolle and Sri Aurobindo¹—Some Comparisons

Ego, Self, and Being

Eckhart Tolle alludes to a Zen Master who, when asked about Buddhism, summed up its essence in four words: “No self, no problems.” The self, Buddhism teaches, is an illusion and the cause of all suffering. Eckhart, too, regards the illusion of self as the “core error” of the ordinary consciousness and begins the majority of his talks with themes dealing with the nature of the ordinary consciousness and the problematic self. The Buddhist view of Reality as Non-Being or Void (Shunya), devoid of self, also is found in Eckhart who often refers to the Reality as No-thing. Like Sri Aurobindo, Eckhart more often speaks of Reality in terms of Being rather than Non-Being.² “Being is your deepest self,” says Eckhart; Being is “the ever-present *I am* that is

¹ For a statement of Sri Aurobindo’s teaching, see Appendix I: Sri Aurobindo’s Teaching and Method of Practice.

² Sri Aurobindo explains that Reality is Non-Being or Non-Self only in relation to the illusory egoic self.

beyond name and form.”³ The self with name and form—the ego—is a substitute for the true self that is “rooted in Being.”

Though Eckhart’s experience of Being is that of an impersonal Reality—as is the Buddhist concept of Non-Being—Eckhart, unlike Buddhism, speaks of the Reality as endowed with personal attributes such as Intelligence, Love, and Benevolence, and as the power that operates in the universe, and which has an impetus to manifest Itself by an evolution of consciousness. Such a concept of Being is quite close to Sri Aurobindo’s concept of the Divine, the Supreme Being. But whereas Eckhart speaks of Being as an impersonal Unmanifest, Sri Aurobindo’s experience of the Divine is that of the Supreme Being who is beyond both the personal and the impersonal. As he states: “beyond the *avyaktam* [the Unmanifest] ... is the Supreme, the Purushottama [Supreme divine Person] of the Gita, the Para Purusha [Supreme Person] of the Upanishads.”⁴ Speaking about “the personal truth and Presence” of the Purushottama of the *Gita*, Sri Aurobindo writes:

It is no abstract Absolute of the philosopher, no indifferent impersonal Presence or ineffable Silence intolerant of all relations. ... It is a Master of our works, a Friend and Lover of our soul, an intimate Spirit of our life, an indwelling and overdwelling Lord of all our personal and impersonal self and nature . . .⁵

In Eckhart’s view, the false egoic self is due to an identification of oneself with the mind. Though Eckhart speaks of the bodily and emotional aspects of the egoic self, he regards the ego as primarily the *mind*-identified self. What conceals the real self, he says, is the constant noise made by the mind with which we are identified. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, draws clear distinctions among the

³ Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*, p. 91.

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 64.

⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 522.

physical, vital,⁶ and mental aspects of the ego, and, as will be explained a little later in this chapter, views the egoic self of *most* human beings as primarily a vital rather than a mental ego. From Sri Aurobindo's viewpoint, the thickest veil that hides the true self in most human beings is the vital ego constituted by instinctual impulses, desires, and emotions.

Another significant difference between the perspectives of Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo lies in their views of the true self. Eckhart's view of the true self, that which is "rooted in Being," is similar to the Eastern concept of Atma, the Universal Self. Sri Aurobindo expresses the same view in somewhat different words. The Self, he says, is identical with Brahman, supreme Existence or Being; Self is the subjective aspect of Being. But besides Atma, the Universal Self, Sri Aurobindo speaks of the true *individual* self, the real "I," Jivatma, spoken of figuratively in the *Gita* as "an eternal portion of the Divine." He explains:

By Jivatma we mean the individual self. Essentially it is one self with all others, but in the multiplicity of the Divine⁷ it is the individual self, an individual centre of the universe—and it sees everything in itself or itself in everything or both together according to its state of consciousness and point of view.⁸

The self, Atman is in its nature either transcendent or universal (Paramatma, Atma). When it individualises and becomes a central being, it is then the Jivatman. The Jivatman feels his oneness with the universal but at the same time his central separateness as a portion of the Divine.⁹

⁶ Pertaining to the life-nature, which is made up of sensations, impulses, desires, and emotional feelings.

⁷ The concept of the multiplicity of the Divine pertaining to Vishishta Advaita (Qualified Monism), one of the three main schools of Vedānta, the other two schools being those of Advaita (Non-Dualism or Monism) and Dvaita (Dualism), all of which are embraced by Sri Aurobindo's integral view. Qualified Monism recognizes the eventual unity of the infinite universal Self and the finite individual Self, but it holds that there is nevertheless a distinction between the two and a certain limitation of the Oneness, and that this limitation is not temporary but eternal.

⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 267.

⁹ Ibid.

The individual soul is the spiritual being which is sometimes described as an eternal portion of the Divine, but can also be described as the Divine himself supporting his manifestation of the Many.”¹⁰

This persistent soul-existence is the real Individuality which stands behind the constant mutations of the thing we call our personality. It is not a limited ego but a thing in itself infinite; it is in truth the Infinite itself consenting from one plane of its being to reflect itself in a perpetual soul-experience. ... We are not a mere mass of changing mind-stuff, life-stuff, body-stuff taking different forms of mind and life and body from birth to birth, so that at no time is there any real self or conscious reason of existence behind all the flux or none except that Quiescent who cares for none of these things. There is a real and stable power of our being behind the constant mutation of our mental, vital and physical personality, and this we have to know and preserve in order that the Infinite may manifest Himself through it according to His will in whatever range and for whatever purpose of His eternal cosmic activity.”¹¹

The Jivatma is not born; it stands above personal evolution, and so does not change or evolve. What comes down into birth and grows in the evolution from life to life, supporting the physical, vital, and mental nature, is the psychic being (Gr. *psukhé*, soul), representative of Jivatma.

In Eckhart’s teaching, as in Buddhism, the notion of a *personal* self is completely illusory; there is nothing like a true self of the *individual*. The “innermost I” that Eckhart speaks of is not an individual self (Jivatma) but the one Universal Self (Atma). Therefore, someone familiar with the dominant Hindu thought, as found in the *Gita*, is apt to notice that Eckhart’s teaching does not include one of the prominent Hindu themes, namely, the growth of the individual self,

¹⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 46.

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 360.

the Jivatma, from life to life until its liberation through union (yoga) with the Universal Self.

Evolution of Consciousness

Sri Aurobindo and Eckhart are perhaps the only world-teachers who have adumbrated a leap in the evolution of consciousness and the consequent emergence of a new species of beings on the planet.

Describing the evolution of consciousness with reference to the human being in primarily psychological terms, Eckhart says that the world comes into manifestation when consciousness takes on the disguise of innumerable forms on land, and in the sea and air, until the forms reach such a complexity that consciousness loses itself by identifying itself with the forms. Thus, consciousness in the human being is at present completely identified with the disguise of form, and regards itself as the mind. The ordinary, mind-identified state of the human being is therefore one of spiritual unconsciousness. The illusory identification of consciousness with the mind inevitably leads to dysfunction and suffering. As a result of the pressure of suffering, consciousness is compelled to awake from the illusion, to disidentify itself from its form, and to regain self-consciousness. The evolution of consciousness consists in the process of the awakening of consciousness from its dream of form-identification.

Dealing in more metaphysical terms about the evolution of consciousness in the world, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The reality is the infinite and eternal Divine, infinite and eternal Being, Consciousness-Force and Bliss. This Divine by his power has created the world or rather manifested it in his own infinite Being. But here in the material world or at its basis he has hidden himself in what seem to be his opposites, Non-Being, Inconscience and Insentience. This is what we nowadays call the Inconscient which seems to have created the material universe by its inconscient Energy, but this is only an appearance, for we find in the end that all the dispositions of the world can only have been arranged by the working of a supreme secret Intelligence. The Being which

is hidden in what seems to be an inconscient void emerges in the world first in Matter, then in Life, then in Mind and finally as the Spirit. The apparently inconscient Energy which creates is in fact the Consciousness-Force of the Divine and its aspect of consciousness, secret in Matter, begins to emerge in Life, finds something more of itself in Mind and finds its true self in a spiritual consciousness and finally a supramental Consciousness through which we become aware of the Reality, enter into it and unite ourselves with it. This is what we call evolution which is an evolution of Consciousness and an evolution of the Spirit in things and only outwardly an evolution of species. Thus also, the delight of existence emerges from the original insentience, first in the contrary forms of pleasure and pain, and then has to find itself in the bliss of the Spirit or, as it is called in the Upanishads, the bliss of the Brahman.¹²

The concept of the evolution of consciousness in the teachings of Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo is at variance with the traditional Indian views that look upon the world either as Maya, an illusion, or Lila, a play. For, though Eckhart describes the forms taken by consciousness as illusory, he means by them something that has a *temporary reality*. By illusory he does not mean something that is a figment of pure imagination as is meant by Shankara's concept of Maya. Similarly, Sri Aurobindo, upholding the reality of the world in more explicit terms, states: "The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real."¹³

The lofty doctrine of Mayavada (Illusionism), says Sri Aurobindo, is founded on the experience of Brahman

... as a Void of everything that is here, a Void of unnameable peace and extinction of all ... 'That' of which nothing can be said; for the universe and all that is does not even exist in That, but appears to the mind as a dream more

¹² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*

unsubstantial than any dream ever seen or imagined, so that even the word dream seems too positive a thing to express its entire unreality.¹⁴

But Sri Aurobindo says to the reader:

Maya is one realisation, an important one which Shankara overstressed because it was most vivid to his own experience. For yourself leave the word [Maya] for subordinate use and fix rather on the idea of Lila, a deeper and more penetrating word than Maya. Lila includes the idea of Maya and exceeds it; nor has it that association of the vanity of all things, useless to you who have elected to remain and play with Sri Krishna. ...¹⁵

(The *Mahabharata* portrays Krishna as playing with the cowherd-esses, the Divine engaged in a play with human souls.)

Eckhart does see the aspect of Lila, a divine game, which God seems to be playing by creating millions of life-forms in the world and replicating each form millions of times. However, Eckhart regards it as a play that has a significance beyond the sheer joy of playing. As a result of the manifestation, an *evolution* of consciousness takes place, for when consciousness becomes again conscious of itself after having been lost in unconsciousness in the process of manifestation, the regaining of self-consciousness leads to a more evolved and deeper state of consciousness than what it was before it became lost in unconsciousness. Sri Aurobindo, likewise, says that the concept of Lila strikes into “the secret of delight at the core of things,” but he adds: “There is more here in the world than a play of secret delight; there is knowledge, there is power, there is a will and a mighty labour.”¹⁶

... the world is not either a creation of Maya or only a play, *līlā*, of the Divine, or a cycle of births in the ignorance from

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, pp. 350, 351.

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Supramental Manifestation and Other Writings*, SABCL, Vol. 16, pp. 428, 429.

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads*, SABCL, Vol. 12, p. 119.

which we have to escape, but a field of manifestation in which there is a progressive evolution of the soul and the nature in Matter and from Matter through Life and Mind to what is beyond Mind till it reaches the complete revelation of Sachchidananda in life.¹⁷

Mind and the Spiritual Life

There are similarities as well as differences in the perspectives of Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo regarding the role of mind in the spiritual life. To Eckhart, mind, from the spiritual viewpoint, is the absence of consciousness. To be identified with mind is to be unconscious; it is to be *not* present. The one aim of the spiritual life is to liberate oneself from the unconscious state of identification with mind. Eckhart does concede that mind is a form of intelligence or consciousness; it is only a tiny aspect of the vast Intelligence that operates in the universe. Mind, Eckhart says, is a wonderful tool for practical purposes, but in spiritual life it has no helpful role. On the contrary, it is the greatest hindrance to be overcome because one tends to identify with it and mistake it for the self. Therefore, Eckhart employs only a few mental concepts and regards the “information” in the form of concepts and ideas as the least important part of his teachings. The function of a spiritual teacher, he says, is to awaken Presence by contagion through words that are charged with Presence, and which have a dimension far greater than that of the mental content conveyed by the words. Spiritual teaching, says Eckhart, consists in a transmission of Presence rather than the imparting of ideas.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo similarly describes mind as an “*ignorance-consciousness*,” which he distinguishes from the *Truth-Consciousness*, or what he calls the Supermind. The Supermind is not, as the term may suggest, a magnified form of the ordinary mind but a reality that is *supramental*, that is, *beyond* mind, and *radically different* from it. However, mind, Sri Aurobindo says, is the highest level of

¹⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, pp. 69, 70.

¹⁸ For Sri Aurobindo’s views on the means of spiritual teaching, see Appendix II: The Three Instruments of the Teacher.

consciousness that has yet emerged in the process of evolution, and represents a higher level of consciousness than the levels below it, namely, the vital, the physical, the subconscious, and the inconscient. In all the millennia of the world's spiritual history up to the present, only a relatively very small number of individuals have evolved beyond mind. According to Sri Aurobindo, even mind itself has not yet, except in a small minority of humanity, fully emerged; most human beings are still governed by the vital consciousness that is characteristic of the animal stage of evolution. As he states:

Most people live in the vital. That means that they live in their desires, sensations, emotional feelings, vital imaginations and see and experience and judge everything from that point of view. It is the vital that moves them, the mind being at its service, not its master. ... It is only the minority of men who live in the mind or in the psychic¹⁹ or try to live in the spiritual plane.²⁰

... most men live in their physical mind²¹ and vital, except a few saints and a rather larger number of intellectuals. That is why, as it is now discovered, humanity has made little progress in the last three thousand years, except in information and material equipment.²²

Because mental consciousness represents a higher or more evolved level of consciousness than that of the vital, which human beings have still not fully outgrown, the mind is regarded in yoga as not only a useful but also, in some respects, an indispensable tool until it can be replaced by a higher or deeper consciousness. Thus, in

¹⁹ Soul, representative of the true individual Self; See pp. 78, 79.

²⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1297.

²¹ Sri Aurobindo speaks of three main parts of the ordinary mind: mind proper, which is chiefly the thinking mind or intellect; the vital or desire mind; and the physical mind. The physical mind is the part of the mind that is concerned with physical things only and is limited by the physical view and experience of things. Closely connected with it is the mechanical mind, which goes on repeating uselessly like a machine whatever has happened, creating what is generally called mental noise.

²² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1296.

various spiritual disciplines, mind has generally been used to serve two chief functions in the spiritual life. First, mind is utilized to acquire a mental understanding of the human makeup and of the processes and principles by which one's ordinary nature can be transformed so as to manifest a higher level of consciousness. The reader may recall the four aids on the spiritual path mentioned in the *Mahabharata* alluded to earlier (p. 20). The first of the four aids—Shastra—which consists of “the knowledge of the truths, principles, powers, and processes that govern the realization”—is usually the mental knowledge that one acquires from books and teachers. Almost all spiritual teaching starts with some mental concepts. Thus, the exposition of the *Gita* begins with the chapter on “Buddhi²³ Yoga,” the “Yoga of the Intelligent Will,” containing

... the first necessary rays of light on the path, directed not like that to the soul, but to the intellect. ... Not the Friend and Lover of man speaks first, but the Guide and Teacher who has to remove from him his ignorance of his true self and of the nature of the world and of the springs of his own action.²⁴

Sri Aurobindo's view regarding mental knowledge is that it is helpful, especially in the early stage, though not indispensable, for “there are two kinds of understanding—understanding by the intellect and understanding in the consciousness. It is good to have the former if it is accurate, but it is not indispensable.”²⁵

It is not enough to devote ourselves by the reading of Scriptures or by the stress of philosophic reasoning to an intellectual understanding of the Divine; for at the end of our long mental labour we might know all that has been said of the Eternal, possess all that can be thought about the Infinite and yet we might not know him at all. This intellectual preparation can indeed be the first stage in a powerful Yoga,

²³ Buddhi is the discriminating principle that is at once intelligence (thinking mind) and mental will.

²⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1251.

but it is not indispensable: it is not a step which all need or can be called upon to take. Yoga would be impossible, except for a very few, if the intellectual figure of knowledge arrived at by the speculative or meditative Reason were its indispensable condition or a binding preliminary.²⁶

Mental knowledge is of little use except sometimes as an introduction pointing towards the real knowledge which comes from a direct consciousness of things.²⁷

You have to learn by experience. Mental information (badly understood, as it always is without experience) might rather hamper than help. In fact there is no fixed mental knowledge about these things, which vary infinitely. You must learn to go beyond the hankering for mental information and open to the true way of knowledge.²⁸

What the sadhak²⁹ has to be specially warned against in the wrong processes of the intellect is, first, any mistaking of mental ideas and impressions or intellectual conclusions for realisation; secondly, the restless activity of the mere mind which disturbs the spontaneous accuracy of psychic³⁰ and spiritual experience and gives no room for the descent of the true illuminating knowledge or else deforms it as soon as it touches or even before it fully touches the human mental plane.³¹

Eckhart attaches little importance to mental knowledge in spiritual teaching, whereas Sri Aurobindo regards an intellectual preparation as a possible “first step in a powerful Yoga” in spiritual life. This is probably because Eckhart had a transformative experience

²⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 75.

²⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1261

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1253.

²⁹ Spiritual practitioner.

³⁰ Pertaining to the soul, the inmost being of the individual.

³¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1243.

without any prior acquisition of mental knowledge about spiritual life. The mental understanding of his experience, as he says, came to him considerably later when he read spiritual books and visited teachers. It was only after his experience that he came to understand it in terms of such concepts as “cessation of thought,” “Presence,” and “thoughtless awareness.”

There is indeed an advantage in having a spiritual experience without prior mental knowledge about it. As the Mother remarks:

Always the most interesting cases for me have been those of people who had read nothing but had a very ardent aspiration and came to me saying, “Something funny has happened to me, I had this extraordinary experience, what can it mean truly?” And then they describe a movement, a vibration, a force, a light, whatever it might be, it depends on each one, and they describe this, that it happened like that and came like that, and then this happened and then that, and what does it all mean, all this? Then here one is on the right side. One knows that it is not an imagined experience, that it is a sincere, spontaneous one, and this always has a power of transformation much greater than the experience that was brought about by a mental knowledge.³²

But there is also a disadvantage in experiencing something without previous mental understanding of it. As Sri Aurobindo writes:

The disadvantage of the one who does not know mentally is that he gets the experience without understanding it and this may be a hindrance or at least retardatory to development while he would not get so easily out of a mistake as one more mentally enlightened.³³

A mistake often made by spiritual seekers pertains to inner experiences. Sri Aurobindo regards the mind as a useful instrument in

³² The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1955*, CWM, Vol. 7, pp. 213, 214.

³³ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 901.

the spiritual life for discriminating between pseudo experiences and genuinely spiritual experiences. As Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple:

There are imitation higher experiences when the mind or vital catches hold of an idea or suggestion and turns it into a feeling, and while there is a rush of forces, a feeling of exultation and power etc. All sorts of “imperatives” come, visions, perhaps “voices”. There is nothing more dangerous than these voices—when I hear from somebody that he has a “voice”, I always feel uneasy, though there can be genuine and helpful voices, and feel inclined to say “No voices please—silence, silence and a clear discriminating brain”. I have hinted about this region of imitation experiences, false inspirations, false voices into which hundreds of yogins enter and some never get out of it in my letter about the intermediate zone.³⁴ If a man has a strong clear head and a certain kind of spiritual scepticism, he can go through and does—but people without discrimination like Y or Z get lost.³⁵

Thus, Sri Aurobindo points to the need for using one’s mind (“discriminating brain,” “clear head”) in order to not be misled by pseudo-spiritual experiences.

Another difference in the perspectives of the two teachers regarding the role of the mind in spiritual life stems from the fact that, whereas Eckhart regards what Sri Aurobindo calls the vital as part of the mind-identified self, Sri Aurobindo makes a clear distinction between the mind and the vital. Explaining the distinction, he writes:

... in the language of this yoga the words “mind” and “mental” are used to connote specially the part of the nature

³⁴ “I mean by it [the intermediate zone] that when the sadhak gets beyond the barriers of his own embodied personal mind he enters into a wide range of experiences which are not the limited solid physical truth of things and not yet either the spiritual truth of things. It is a zone of formations, mental, vital, subtle physical, and whatever one forms or is formed by the forces of these worlds in us becomes for the sadhak for a time the truth—unless he is guided and listens to his guide. Afterwards if he gets through he discovers what it was and passes on into the subtle truth of things.”—Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1053.

³⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 1061, 1062.

which has to do with cognition and intelligence, with ideas, with mental or thought perceptions. ... The vital has to be carefully distinguished from mind, even though it has a mind element transfused into it; the vital is the Life-nature made up of desires, sensations, feelings, passions, energies of action, will of desire, reactions of the desire-soul in man and of all that play of possessive and other related instincts, anger, fear, greed, lust, etc., that belong to this field of the nature. Mind and vital are mixed up on the surface of the consciousness, but they are quite separate forces in themselves and as soon as one gets behind the ordinary surface consciousness one sees them as separate, discovers their distinction and can with the aid of this knowledge analyse their surface mixtures.³⁶

Because mind is, as previously stated, from the evolutionary point of view, a higher level of consciousness in relation to the vital, Sri Aurobindo regards the mind as having a useful and indispensable function in growing out of the vital consciousness. For mind, according to yogic psychology, is endowed not only with intelligence but also with will power. Just as mental intelligence, despite its extreme limitations, is a useful tool for growth towards spiritual knowledge, so the mental will, despite its extremely limited power, serves an indispensable function in dealing with the vital not only in ordinary life but also in spiritual life. As Sri Aurobindo states:

The will is a part of the consciousness and ought to be in human beings the chief agent in controlling the activities of the nature.³⁷

Even apart from yoga, in ordinary life, only those are considered to have full manhood or are likely to succeed in their life, their ideals or their undertakings who take in hand this restless vital, concentrate and control it and subject it to discipline. It is by the use of the mental will that they

³⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, pp. 320, 321.

³⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1720.

discipline it, compelling it to do not what it wants but what the reason or the will sees to be right or desirable. In yoga one uses the inner will and compels the vital to submit itself to tapasya³⁸ so that it may become calm, strong, obedient—or else one calls down the calm from above obliging the vital to renounce desire and become quiet and receptive.³⁹

So long as there is not a constant action of the Force⁴⁰ from above or else of a deeper will from within, the mental will is necessary.⁴¹

Both Sri Aurobindo and Eckhart say that mental will cannot transform the desire nature; it can only exercise a certain control over impulses and desires. But whereas Sri Aurobindo regards such a control of the vital by exercise of the mental will or the will of the inner being as indispensable until one can call down the Divine Force, Eckhart's message is simply to bring Presence into whatever arises in one's nature. People who come to him, he says, seem to be ready for the arising of Presence.

In Sri Aurobindo's yoga, as in Eckhart's teaching, there is no mental code of conduct like the Yama–Niyama (do's and don'ts) of Patanjali or the Eightfold Path of Buddhism for the preparation and purification of the ordinary nature.

Mind and the Witness Consciousness

Perhaps a more significant difference in the perspectives of Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo regarding the role of mind in spiritual life pertains to the witness consciousness. As stated earlier in this chapter, in Eckhart's view, to be identified with the mind is to be in a state of unconsciousness; it is a state in which one is not present. Therefore, when one is identified with the mind, one does not have a

³⁸ Effort of the personal will.

³⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1293.

⁴⁰ The Divine Force.

⁴¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1717.

witness consciousness. However, as stated in the previous chapter, there is, according to Sri Aurobindo, a witness consciousness in the mind, also, for he distinguishes two parts of consciousness at each level—physical, vital, mental. One part of consciousness—called Prakriti or Nature—is the part that is active and involved, and is relatively unconscious. The other part—called Purusha, Person or Soul—is the part that stands back as a Witness. Thus there is a witness consciousness at each level—physical, vital, mental. As the Mother explains in answer to a question asked by a student regarding the meaning of “the mental witness” spoken of by Sri Aurobindo:

There are witnesses everywhere. It is a capacity of the being to detach itself, to stand back and look at what is happening, as when one looks at something happening in the street or when one looks at others playing and does not himself play, one remains seated, looking at the others moving but does not move. That’s how it is.

In all the parts of the being there is one side which can do this: put itself at the back, remain quiet and look, without participating. This is what is called the witness. One has many witnesses inside oneself, and often one is a witness without even being aware of it. And if you develop this, it always gives you the possibility of being quiet and not being affected by things. One detaches oneself from them, looks at them as at a dramatic scene, without participating in it.⁴²

In Sri Aurobindo’s psychological thought, the previously mentioned Sankhya distinction between Purusha and Prakriti is expressed in terms of the inner (or true) being and the outer or surface being. As Sri Aurobindo states:

There are always two different consciousnesses in the human being, one outward in which he ordinarily lives, the other inward and concealed of which he knows nothing.⁴³

⁴² The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1954*. CWM, Vol. 6, p. 426.

⁴³ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 307.

There are, we might say, two beings in us, one on the surface, our ordinary exterior mind, life, body consciousness, another behind the veil, an inner mind, an inner life, an inner physical consciousness constituting another or inner self.⁴⁴

It is the inner mind just mentioned—which is perhaps what some Zen Masters call “Zen mind” or the “deeper mind”—that is the witness in the mind. To requote Sri Aurobindo from the previous chapter (p. 72):

Even the mind can do that—a man can stand back in his mind-consciousness and watch the mental energy⁴⁵ doing things, thinking, planning, etc.; all introspection is based upon the fact that one can so divide oneself into a consciousness that observes and an energy that acts. These are quite elementary things supposed to be known to everybody. Anybody can do that merely by a little practice; anybody who observes his own thoughts, feelings, actions, has begun doing it already. In yoga we make the division complete, that is all.

It is the inner mind—the mental Purusha—that can stand back as a witness and observe the outer being, which, as previously stated, is chiefly ruled by the vital nature (desires and emotions), and thereby arrive at detachment, freedom, and joy. As Sri Aurobindo states:

... the mental Purusha has to separate himself from association and self-identification with this desire-mind. He has to say “I am not this thing that struggles and suffers, grieves and rejoices, loves and hates, hopes and is baffled, is angry and afraid and cheerful and depressed, a thing of vital moods and emotional passions. All these are merely workings and habits of Prakriti in the sensational and emotional mind.” The mind then draws back from its emotions and becomes

⁴⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 1020, 1021.

⁴⁵ From the viewpoint of yoga, Prakriti or Nature is Energy.

with these, as with the bodily movements and experiences, the observer or witness. There is again an inner cleavage. There is this emotional mind in which these moods and passions continue to occur according to the habit of the modes of Nature and there is the observing mind which sees them, studies and understands but is detached from them. It observes them as if in a sort of action and play on a mental stage of personages other than itself, at first with interest and a habit of relapse into identification, then with entire calm and detachment, and, finally, attaining not only to calm but to the pure delight of its own silent existence, with a smile at their unreality as at the imaginary joys and sorrows of a child who is playing and loses himself in the play.⁴⁶

Mind, Thought, and Stillness

The core of Eckhart's teachings is related to mind, thought, and stillness. The following statements, paraphrased from his writings and talks, encapsulate these central teachings:

The ordinary or normal state of the human being is, at the present stage of the evolution of consciousness, a state of identification with mind and thought. In other words, the human being has ordinarily a mind-based or thought-based sense of self. From the spiritual viewpoint, this is a state of unconsciousness; one is lost in thought and lives in continual mental noise.

Identification with the mind gives rise to a false self—the ego, a substitute for the true self. The true self is the essence of one's being and of all Being. It belongs to the realm of no-mind, a consciousness without thought. It is a realm of stillness and Presence. The next step in human evolution is that of rising above mind and transcending thought.

Sri Aurobindo, too, speaks of the next step in the evolution of consciousness as the emergence of a principle *beyond*, called by him the Supermind. In Eckhart's teachings, the mind refers always to the ordinary mind. Sri Aurobindo, however, makes these distinctions:

⁴⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, pp. 337, 338.

1. Different distinguishable parts of the ordinary mind
2. The ordinary outer mind and the inner or subliminal mind
3. Various levels of spiritual mind above the ordinary mind

Parts of the Ordinary Mind

The different parts of the ordinary mind (the thinking mind, the vital mind, and the physical mind) have been previously alluded to (Chapter 1, p. 12, fn. 17; and Chapter 5, p. 85, fn 21). Eckhart regards any and all activity of the mind as mental noise. One gets the impression that, according to Eckhart, when one rises to the realm of no-mind and stillness, the mind ceases to exist. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, describes as “buzz” the activity, particularly of the mechanical mind, that is closely connected with the physical mind. Silence, he says, has to be established in all parts of the ordinary mind so that the higher consciousness may manifest. However, he considers the mind to be as indispensable an instrument as the physical body for life on earth, every part of the ordinary mind having its own useful functions; these functions can be carried out in a state of silence, so the activity of the mind is not incompatible with silence.

The Outer (Ordinary) Mind and the Inner (Subliminal) Mind

The inner mind has also been previously alluded to (Chapter 5, pp. 91, 92) in connection with mind and the witness consciousness.

Levels of Spiritual Mind Above the Ordinary Mind

Sri Aurobindo speaks of various levels of mental existence above the ordinary mind. In an ascending order these are:

Higher Mind: A first plane of spiritual consciousness where one becomes constantly aware of the Self. Whereas the ordinary mind is a thought-mind, the Higher Mind is a “luminous thought-mind, a mind of Spirit-born conceptual knowledge.”⁴⁷

Illumined Mind: A mind no longer of higher thought but of spiritual light.

Intuition: A mind that gets the Truth in flashes, which it turns into intuitive ideas.

Overmind: The highest of the planes of mind below That which is beyond mind—the Supermind. Whereas the Supermind is the total Truth-Consciousness, the Overmind breaks up Truth into separated aspects, each of which it is possible to regard as the sole or chief Truth.

Giving a powerful description of these superconscious levels of mind, Sri Aurobindo says:

... we perceive a graduality of ascent, a communication with a more and more deep and immense light and power from above, a scale of intensities which can be regarded as so many stairs in the ascension of Mind or in a descent into Mind from That which is beyond it. We are aware of a sea-like downpour of masses of a spontaneous knowledge which assumes the nature of Thought but has a different character from the process of thought to which we are accustomed; for there is nothing here of seeking, no trace of mental construction, no labour of speculation or difficult discovery; it is an automatic and spontaneous knowledge from a Higher Mind that seems to be in possession of Truth and not in search of hidden and withheld realities. One observes that this Thought is much more capable than the mind of including at once a mass of knowledge in a single view; it has a cosmic character, not the stamp of an individual thinking. Beyond this Truth-Thought we can distinguish a greater illumination instinct with an increased power and intensity and driving force, a luminosity of the nature of Truth-Sight with thought formulation as a minor and dependent activity. If we accept the Vedic image of the Sun of Truth—an image which in this experience becomes a reality—we may compare the action of the Higher Mind to a composed and steady sunshine, the energy of the Illumined Mind beyond it

to an outpouring of massive lightnings of flaming sun-stuff. Still beyond can be met a yet greater power of the Truth-Force, an intimate and exact Truth-vision, Truth-thought, Truth-sense, Truth-feeling, Truth-action, to which we can give in a special sense the name of Intuition; for though we have applied that word for want of a better to any supra-intellectual direct way of knowing, yet what we actually know as intuition is only one special movement of self-existent knowledge. This new range is its origin; it imparts to our intuitions something of its own distinct character and is very clearly an intermediary of a greater Truth-Light with which our mind cannot directly communicate. At the source of this Intuition we discover a superconscient cosmic Mind in direct contact with the supramental Truth-Consciousness, an original intensity determinant of all movements below it and all mental energies—not Mind as we know it, but an Overmind that covers as with the wide wings of some creative Oversoul this whole lower hemisphere of Knowledge-Ignorance, links it with that greater Truth-Consciousness while yet at the same time with its brilliant golden Lid it veils the face of the greater Truth from our sight, intervening with its flood of infinite possibilities as at once an obstacle and a passage in our seeking of the spiritual law of our existence, its highest aim, its secret Reality.⁴⁸

Thus, whereas Eckhart regards the consciousness beyond the ordinary mind as a realm of no-mind and a consciousness without thought, Sri Aurobindo distinguishes various superconscient levels of spiritual mind above the ordinary mind and speaks of Higher Thought originating from these superconscient mental levels. It is when the ordinary mind falls silent that Higher Thought and Knowledge manifest from these higher mental levels that are beyond our normal awareness. Regarding the Higher Thought and Knowledge, Sri Aurobindo writes:

⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, SABCL Vol. 18, pp. 277, 278.

Afterwards [when the peace and silence have become massive and complete] knowledge begins to come from the higher planes—the Higher Mind to begin with, and this creates a new action of thought and perception which replaces the ordinary mental. It does that first in the thinking mind, but afterwards also in the vital mind and physical mind, so that all these begin to go through a transformation. This kind of thought is not random and restless, but precise and purposeful—it comes only when needed or called for and does not disturb the silence. Moreover the element of what we call thought there is secondary and what might be called a seeing perception (intuition) takes its place. But so long as the mind does not become capable of a complete silence, this higher knowledge, thought, perception either does not come down or, if partially it does, it is liable to get mixed up with or imitated by the lower, and that is a bother and a hindrance. So the silence is necessary.⁴⁹

As stated in the passage just quoted, the thought from the higher planes of mind does not disturb the silence. For, Sri Aurobindo distinguishes between *absolute* silence in which there is a complete absence of thought or any other movement, and a *fundamental* silence in which thought and other movements can take place without disturbing the silence. Sri Aurobindo explains the difference between these two states of silence in a letter to a disciple:

In the entirely silent mind there is usually the static sense of the Divine without any active movement. But there can come into it all the higher thought and aspiration and movements. There is then no absolute silence but one feels a fundamental silence behind which is not disturbed by any movement.⁵⁰

A passage previously quoted (p. 25) states how silence and action can exist and do coexist in the universe.

⁴⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, pp. 329, 330.

⁵⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 647.

It is on the Silence behind the cosmos that all the movement of the universe is supported. ...

In a more outward sense the word Silence is applied to the condition in which there is no movement of thought or feeling, etc., only a great stillness of the mind. But there can be an action in the Silence, undisturbed even as the universal action goes on in the cosmic Silence.⁵¹

Even intellectual thought, which is not based on the intellect but on supra-intellectual knowledge, can take place in a silent mind, says Sri Aurobindo who, after attaining silence in 1908, wrote everything, including his philosophical works, from a silent mind. Regarding the expression of supra-intellectual knowledge through intellectual ideas, Sri Aurobindo writes to a disciple:

... fundamentally, it is not an expression of ideas arrived at by speculative thinking. One has to arrive at spiritual knowledge through experience and a consciousness of things which arises directly out of that experience or else underlies or is involved in it. This kind of knowledge, then, is fundamentally a consciousness and not a thought or formulated idea. For instance, my first major experience⁵²—radical and overwhelming, though not, as it turned out, final and exhaustive—came after and by the exclusion and silencing of all thought—there was, first, what might be called a spiritually substantial or concrete consciousness of stillness and silence, then the awareness of some sole and supreme Reality in whose Presence things existed only as forms, but forms not at all substantial or real or concrete; but this was all apparent to a spiritual perception and essential and impersonal sense and there was not the least concept or idea of reality or unreality or any other notion, for all concept or idea was hushed or rather entirely absent in the absolute stillness. These things

⁵¹ Sri Aurobindo. *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 647.

⁵² For a more detailed description of Sri Aurobindo's first major spiritual experience, see Appendix III: Sri Aurobindo's First Major Experience.

were known directly through the pure consciousness and not through the mind, so there was no need of concepts or words or names. At the same time this fundamental character of spiritual experience is not absolutely limitative; it can do without thought, but it can do with thought also. Of course, the first idea of the mind would be that the resort to thought brings one back at once to the domain of the intellect—and at first and for a long time it may be so; but it is not my experience that this is unavoidable. It happens so when one tries to make an intellectual statement of what one has experienced; but there is another kind of thought that springs out as if it were a body or form of the experience or of the consciousness involved in it—or of a part of that consciousness—and this does not seem to me to be intellectual in its character. It has another light, another power in it, a sense within the sense. It is very clearly so with those thoughts that come without the need of words to embody them, thoughts that are of the nature of a direct seeing in the consciousness, even a kind of intimate sense or contact formulating itself into a precise expression of its awareness (I hope this is not too mystic or unintelligible); but it might be said that directly the thoughts turn into words they belong to the kingdom of intellect—for words are a coinage of the intellect. But is it so really or inevitably? It has always seemed to me that words came originally from somewhere else than the thinking mind, although the thinking mind secured hold of them, turned them to its use and coined them freely for its purposes.⁵³

Eckhart, too, says that thoughts can be there in the state of Presence, which is a state of stillness, but thoughts no longer have the compulsive quality they have in the normal state of consciousness; thoughts become a servant of a deeper, silent consciousness. Generally, however, Eckhart speaks of stillness as a state that is totally devoid of all mental activity, including the basic mental activity of

⁵³ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, pp. 176, 177.

interpreting and labeling in terms of concepts and ideas whatever one perceives. Such a state of absolute stillness seems to be what Sri Aurobindo refers to in describing his first major experience (mentioned in the passage cited a little earlier). It is what he describes as a vacant mind. Distinguishing between the *absolute* stillness of a vacant mind and a *fundamental* stillness of a calm mind, he says:

The difference between a vacant mind and a calm mind is this: that when the mind is vacant, there is no thought, no conception, no mental action of any kind, except an essential perception of things without the formed idea; but in the calm mind, it is the substance of the mental being that is still, so still that nothing disturbs it. If thoughts or activities come, they do not rise at all out of the mind, but they come from outside and cross the mind as a flight of birds crosses the sky in a windless air. It passes, disturbs nothing, leaving no trace. Even if a thousand images or the most violent events pass across it, the calm stillness remains as if the very texture of the mind were a substance of eternal and indestructible peace.⁵⁴

In the passage just quoted, Sri Aurobindo speaks of the substance of the mental being that continues to exist even when thoughts cease, for thoughts are simply the *activities* of the mental being, not part of its substance. As he explains to a disciple:

Thoughts are not the essence of mind-being, they are only an activity of mental nature; if that activity ceases, what appears then as a thought-free existence that manifests in its place is not a blank or void but something very real, substantial, concrete we may say—a mental being that extends itself widely and can be its own field of existence silent or active as well as the Witness, Knower, Master of that field and its action. ... an emptiness there is, but it is an emptiness of the ordinary activities, not a blank of existence.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 637, 638.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1022.

Regarding the nature of true knowledge that comes when the mind has become silent, Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo speak in very similar terms. Eckhart distinguishes between two kinds of knowing: knowing *about* something and knowing *of* the thing in itself. Mental knowledge, he says, is knowing *about* something as an object that is separate from oneself as the subject; it is a separative and superficial knowledge of a thing. On the other hand, knowing *of* a thing in itself is a unitive knowledge through consciousness, in which the knower and the thing known become one. In a similar way, Sri Aurobindo distinguishes four methods of knowledge:

1. Knowledge by identity: The knower and what is known are one; there is no division between the subject and object, between self and not-self.
2. Knowledge by *intimate direct* contact: There is an intimate and direct contact of consciousness with the thing that is known, but the contact falls short of full identification and complete self-oblivion.
3. Knowledge by *separative direct* contact: Here there is a separation between the self and the object of knowledge, but there is a direct contact of consciousness with the object.
4. Completely separative knowledge by indirect contact through the senses.

In Sri Aurobindo's own words:

Our surface cognition, our limited and restricted mental way of looking at our self, at our inner movements and at the world outside us and its objects and happenings, is so constituted that it derives in different degrees from a fourfold order of knowledge. The original and fundamental way of knowing, native to the occult self in things, is a knowledge by identity; the second, derivative, is a knowledge by direct contact associated at its roots with a secret knowledge by identity or starting from it, but actually separated from its source and therefore powerful but incomplete in its cognition; the

third is a knowledge by separation from the object of observation, but still with a direct contact as its support or even a partial identity; the fourth is a completely separative knowledge which relies on a machinery of indirect contact, a knowledge by acquisition which is yet, without being conscious of it, a rendering or bringing up of the contents of a pre-existent inner awareness and knowledge. A knowledge by identity, a knowledge by intimate direct contact, a knowledge by separative direct contact, a wholly separative knowledge by indirect contact are the four cognitive methods of Nature.⁵⁶

Personal Effort and Surrender

Enlightenment, says Eckhart, is not something that you can *make* happen; it is something that is almost the opposite—something you *allow* to happen. Therefore he regards the term “practice” as not quite right because practice implies effort to bring about something. The practice that Eckhart teaches may be summed up in these words:

Stay always present. Remain alert. Pay attention only to the present moment. Observe all that happens inside you as a detached witness of your thoughts and feelings. Become aware also of the consciousness that observes. Cultivate thoughtless awareness which does not label or analyze whatever you perceive inside you or outside. Accept all that you observe inside you. Allow all that happens in your external life. Give up resistance. Say “yes” to what *is*. Allow the power of Now to transform you.

Of the two attitudes in spiritual practice spoken of by Ramakrishna alluded to earlier (pp. 42, 43)—the baby-monkey attitude of reliance on personal effort, and the baby-cat attitude of surrender and reliance on the Divine Power—the latter is a more fitting description of the practice as taught by Eckhart. Not personal effort but Presence does it all, says Eckhart. The only personal effort is to *choose*

⁵⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vol. 18, pp. 524, 525.

and *allow* Presence. But even choosing Presence, says Eckhart, is only seemingly personal; what really happens is that Presence chooses to arise, though the one in whom Presence arises has the impression of doing a “spiritual practice” for Presence to arise. It is a helpful perspective to think that Presence arises because one chooses Presence, though from a deeper perspective, Presence arises because it chooses to arise. Expressing the truth of both perspectives, Sri Aurobindo states: “He who chooses the Infinite has been chosen by the Infinite.”⁵⁷

Some aspects of practice taught by Eckhart, such as attention to the present moment, may give the impression that it is akin to the practice as taught in Buddhism, which is preeminently a path of self-effort. Thus Eckhart narrates the story of a disciple who asks the Master, “Can you please write down something for me so that I can remember what Zen is all about?” The Master writes “Attention” on a piece of paper and gives it to the disciple. The disciple says, “Is that all? Can you please add a bit to elaborate it a little more?” The Master says, “All right.” The disciple gives him back the paper. The Master writes, “Attention. Attention.” The disciple says, “Is that all? Surely, there is more to Zen than that. Couldn’t you say a little more?” The Master writes, “Attention. Attention. Attention.” The disciple gets a little angry and says, “What is attention anyway? What does attention mean?” And the Master says, “Attention means attention.”

Attention, as ordinarily understood, is something done by the mind, using mental effort. But what Eckhart speaks about is not a “head” attention. It is attention with the “whole energy-field of Presence”; it is “alert stillness”; it is “thoughtless awareness.” One cannot understand attention with the mind, says Eckhart, because it pertains to a state of consciousness that is beyond mind. Attention spoken of by him does not depend on personal effort as it does in Buddhism, but on the arising of Presence.

Attention as viewed by Eckhart is deeper in another way than attention as ordinarily understood. He says that doing one thing at a time, which is how one Zen Master defined the essence of Zen, means “to be total in what you do, to give it your complete attention. This

57 Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 47.

is surrendered action. ...”⁵⁸ Action done with total attention, or surrendered action, says Eckhart, is the same as what the *Gita* teaches—performing action not as a means for something else but as an end in itself. (The *Gita*’s celebrated doctrine of “desireless action” teaches the performance of action without the desire for the fruit of action.)

In Sri Aurobindo’s yoga, attention is part of the state of remaining conscious and vigilant. As the Mother states:

One must be quite “awake”; one must be constantly in a very attentive state of observation. ...

To be in this state of attentive observation, you must have, so to say, antennae everywhere which are in constant contact with your true centre of consciousness. You register everything, you organise everything and, in this way, you cannot be taken unawares⁵⁹

Eckhart recognizes that teachers differ in their perspectives regarding the respective roles of personal effort and a higher power in spiritual practice. Whereas Eckhart attributes all practice to the action of a higher power—the power of Presence—in Sri Aurobindo’s view, personal effort is indispensable until the whole consciousness—physical, vital, mental—is ready and completely surrendered and receptive to the action of the Divine Force. As he explains in letters to disciples:

In the early part of the sadhana—and by early I do not mean a short part—effort is indispensable. Surrender of course, but surrender is not a thing that is done in a day. The mind has its ideas and it clings to them; the human vital resists surrender, for what it calls surrender in the early stages is a doubtful kind of self-giving with a demand in it; the physical consciousness is like a stone and what it calls surrender is often no more than inertia.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks*, Novato, CA: New World Library, 2003, p. 66.

⁵⁹ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '50-'51*, CWM Vol. 4, p. 35.

⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 588.

It is not possible to get rid of the stress on personal effort at once—and not always desirable; for personal effort is better than tamasic⁶¹ inertia.

The personal effort has to be transformed progressively into a movement of the Divine Force.⁶²

There are two possibilities, one of purification by personal effort, which takes a long time, another by a direct intervention of the Divine Grace which is usually rapid in its action. For the latter there must be a complete surrender and self-giving and for that again usually it is necessary to have a mind that can remain quite quiet and allow the Divine Force to act supporting it with its complete adhesion at every step, but otherwise remaining still and quiet. This last condition which resembles the baby-cat attitude spoken of by Rama-krishna, is difficult to have.⁶³

A complete surrender is not possible in so short a time—for a complete surrender means to cut the knot of the ego in each part of the being and offer it, free and whole, to the Divine. The mind, the vital, the physical consciousness (and even each part of these in all its movements) have one after the other to surrender separately, to give up their own way and to accept the way of the Divine.⁶⁴

If there is not a complete surrender, then it is not possible to adopt the baby-cat attitude—it becomes mere tamasic passivity calling itself surrender. If a complete surrender is not possible in the beginning, it follows that personal effort is necessary.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Pertaining to Tamas, one of the three Gunas or modes of Nature (Prakriti); Tamas is the quality of ignorance, obscurity, inaction, and inconstancy, and is inherent in the physical consciousness.

⁶² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 589.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 591.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 591, 592.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 593, 594.

To recall again the four aids spoken of in the *Mahabharata*, Shastra—the teaching—comes first; next to Shastra is Utsaha, zeal or force of personal effort. Regarding zeal in spiritual practice, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The development of the experience in its rapidity, its amplitude, the intensity and power of its results, depends primarily, in the beginning of the path and long after, on the aspiration and personal effort of the sadhaka. The process of Yoga is a turning of the human soul from the egoistic state of consciousness absorbed in the outward appearances and attractions of things to a higher state in which the Transcendent and Universal can pour itself into the individual mould and transform it. The first determining element of the siddhi is, therefore, the intensity of the turning, the force which directs the soul inward. The power of aspiration of the heart, the force of the will, the concentration of the mind, the perseverance and determination of the applied energy are the measure of that intensity. The ideal sadhaka should be able to say in the Biblical phrase, “My zeal for the Lord has eaten me up.” It is this zeal for the Lord, *utsāha*, the zeal of the whole nature for its divine results, *vyākulatā*, the heart’s eagerness for the attainment of the Divine—that devours the ego and breaks up the limitations of its petty and narrow mould for the full and wide reception of that which it seeks⁶⁶

The personal effort in Sri Aurobindo’s yoga is a triple labor of *aspiration*, *rejection*, and *surrender*. Aspiration is a call of the mind, the heart, and the physical being for Peace, Light, Force, and spiritual realization. Rejection is a refusal of the ignorant movements of one’s mental, vital, and physical nature that stand in the way of spiritual realization, being contrary to or incompatible with the truth of one’s being. It lies in

... rejection of the mind’s ideas, opinions, preferences, habits, constructions, so that the true knowledge may find free

⁶⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*. SABCL, Vol. 20, pp. 51, 52.

room in a silent mind—rejection of the vital nature’s desires, demands, cravings, sensations, passions, selfishness, pride, arrogance, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, hostility to the Truth, so that the true power and joy may pour from above into a calm, large, strong and consecrated vital being—rejection of the physical nature’s stupidity, doubt, disbelief, obscurity, obstinacy, pettiness, laziness, unwillingness to change, Tamas, so that the true stability of Light, Power, Ananda may establish itself in a body growing always more divine. ...⁶⁷

Surrender is giving oneself to the Divine, living for the Divine, and not for the ego; it means offering all one is and has to the Divine, consecrating all one’s actions to the Divine. The practice, highly prominent in Zen, of doing one thing at a time with total attention, is not explicitly spoken of as much in Eckhart’s teaching and still less in Sri Aurobindo’s, but it is an implicit part of practice in both teachings. Eckhart’s teaching about living in the present moment necessarily implies performing each act with exclusive attention (without thinking of the next thing or the future or getting lost in random thoughts.) Similarly, the practice of Sri Aurobindo’s yoga, which teaches the consecration of all one’s actions to the Divine, calls for the performance of every act with one-pointed concentration of the outer consciousness on the act and of the inner consciousness on the Divine. Concentrating on the present is particularly stressed in doing work for the Divine. As the Mother has remarked:

Your work can never be good if you go on thinking of the next thing. For work, it is the present that is most important. The past should not drag you behind, the future should not pull you forward. You must be fully concentrated on the present, on what you are doing. You must be so concentrated on what you are doing that it is as if the salvation of the whole world depended only upon your work.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Sri Aurobindo. *The Mother*. SABCL, Vol. 25, p. 7.

⁶⁸ The Mother. *Questions and Answers 1955*, CWM, Vol. 14, p. 339.

In Sri Aurobindo's yoga, the essential meaning of surrender is *self-giving*, the Hindu concept of *samarpana*, (inadequately rendered in English by "surrender"), which Sri Aurobindo describes as "the central secret" of the *Gita*. It means the consecration of everything in oneself to the Divine, not insisting on one's ideas and desires, but allowing the divine Truth to replace them by its knowledge and will. The *Gita* expresses this teaching about absolute self-giving in Krishna's words: "Whatever thou doest, whatever thou enjoyest, whatever thou sacrificest,⁶⁹ whatever thou givest, whatever energy of Tapasya,⁷⁰ of the soul's will or effort thou puttest forth, make it an offering unto me."

In Eckhart's teaching, surrender means relinquishing the resistance and the fighting mode of the egoic self towards the universe; it means yielding to the flow of life instead of opposing it; it means allowing what *is* to be, saying "yes" to what *is*, accepting the present moment and what the Buddha described as the "suchness" of this moment without reservation. This concept of surrender as acceptance of what the universe brings is akin to the Hindu concept of *nati*, resignation or submission to the will of God. In Sri Aurobindo's yoga, and in the *Gita*, surrender includes both the passive resignation and the active self-offering to the will of the Divine. As Sri Aurobindo states:

Resignation is the basis of a kind of religious equality, submission to the divine will, a patient bearing of the cross, a submissive forbearance. In the *Gita* this element takes the more ample form of an entire surrender of the whole being to God. It is not merely a passive submission, but an active self-giving; not only a seeing and an accepting of the divine Will in all things, but a giving up of one's own will to be the instrument of the Master of works. ...⁷¹

⁶⁹ "In the spiritual sense ... sacrifice ... does not so much indicate giving up what is held dear as an offering of oneself, one's being, one's mind, heart, will, body, life, actions to the Divine. It has the original sense of 'making sacred'"—Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 22, p. 488.

⁷⁰ "Tapasya is the concentration of the will to get the results of sadhana and to conquer the lower nature."—Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 541.

⁷¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 199.

Both relinquishing the will of the egoic self by acceptance of what *is*, and self-giving by offering one's will to the Divine, lead to the giving up of the ego. The difference between the attitudes of acceptance and self-giving is that whereas the attitude of acceptance may be based on the view of Reality as impersonal Being, self-giving calls for a faith in Reality that is described in the *Gita* as Purushottama, the Supreme divine Person (who is beyond the personal and the impersonal) to whom self-offering is to be made. Therefore, Krishna asks Arjuna "to see all things in the self *and then in 'Me'* the Ishwara, to renounce all action into the Self, Spirit, Brahman *and thence into the supreme Person, the Purushottama.*"⁷² [Italics by the author.] Regarding the Purushottama of the *Gita*, Sri Aurobindo writes:

An immutable impersonal self-existence is his first obvious spiritual self-presentation to the experience of our liberated knowledge, the first sign of his Presence, the first touch and impression of his substance. A universal and transcendent infinite Person or Purusha is the mysterious hidden secret of his very being, unthinkable in form of mind, *acintya-rūpa*, but very near and present to the powers of our consciousness, emotion, will and knowledge when they are lifted out of themselves, out of their blind and petty forms into a luminous spiritual, an immeasurable supramental Ananda and power and gnosis. It is He, ineffable Absolute but also Friend and Lord and Enlightener and Lover, who is the object of this most complete devotion and approach and this most intimate inner becoming and surrender.⁷³

Surrendering to a greater Power so as to let It do the work of transformation, and relying on personal effort to transform one's being, are often described as two opposite methods of spiritual practice. However, from Sri Aurobindo's viewpoint, "The process of surrender is itself a Tapasya."⁷⁴ In other words, surrender involves and is part of personal effort.

⁷² Sri Aurobindo. *Essays on the Gita*. SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 529.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

⁷⁴ Sri Aurobindo. *Letters on Yoga*. SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 595.

Personal effort, however, says Sri Aurobindo, is only one side of the power that works in leading towards realization. The other side, which in truth is the source of all power, including the power of personal effort, is the divine Force. As he states:

Always indeed it is the higher Power that acts. Our sense of personal effort and aspiration comes from the attempt of the egoistic mind to identify itself in a wrong and imperfect way with the workings of the divine Force. ... In the world we act with the sense of egoism; we claim the universal forces that work in us as our own; we claim as the effect of our personal will, wisdom, force, virtue the selective, formative, progressive action of the Transcendent in this frame of mind, life and body. Enlightenment brings to us the knowledge that the ego is only an instrument; we begin to perceive and feel that these things are our own in the sense that they belong to our supreme and integral Self, one with the Transcendent, not to the instrumental ego. Our limitations and distortions are our contribution to the working; the true power in it is the Divine's. When the human ego realises that its will is a tool, its wisdom ignorance and childishness, its power an infant's groping, its virtue a pretentious impurity, and learns to trust itself to that which transcends it, that is its salvation.⁷⁵

In the beginning, when one is more or less completely identified with the ego, one has necessarily to rely mainly on personal effort rather than on the divine Force for changing one's consciousness and opening it to the action of the divine Force.

There is a period, more or less prolonged, of internal effort and struggle in which the individual will has to reject the darkness and distortions of the lower nature and to put itself resolutely or vehemently on the side of the divine Light. The mental energies, the heart's emotions, the vital desires, the very physical being have to be compelled into the right

⁷⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*. SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 53.

attitude or trained to admit and answer to the right influences. It is only then, only when this has been truly done, that the surrender of the lower to the higher can be effected, because the sacrifice has become acceptable.⁷⁶

The ego person in us cannot transform itself by its own force or will or knowledge or by any virtue of its own into the nature of the Divine; all it can do is to fit itself for the transformation and make more and more its surrender to that which it seeks to become. As long as the ego is at work in us, our personal action is and must always be in its nature a part of the lower grades of existence; it is obscure or half-enlightened, limited in its field, very partially effective in its power. If a spiritual transformation, not a mere illumining modification of our nature, is to be done at all, we must call in the Divine Shakti to effect that miraculous work in the individual; for she alone has the needed force, decisive, all-wise and illimitable. But the entire substitution of the divine for the human personal action is not at once entirely possible. All interference from below that would falsify the truth of the superior action must first be inhibited or rendered impotent, and it must be done by our own free choice. A continual and always repeated refusal of the impulses and falsehoods of the lower nature is asked from us and an insistent support to the Truth as it grows in our parts; for the progressive settling into our nature and final perfection of the incoming informing Light, Purity and Power needs for its development and sustenance our free acceptance of it and our stubborn rejection of all that is contrary to it, inferior or incompatible.⁷⁷

Method of Spiritual Practice

As stated a little earlier, Eckhart does not consider the term “practice” to be quite appropriate in spiritual life because practice implies personal effort of some sort, whereas enlightenment is not something

⁷⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 54.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

that can be brought about by any egoic effort; it comes about as a result of the surrender of the ego and a cessation of the ego's seekings. Therefore, the question of method of spiritual practice is not quite relevant to Eckhart's teaching. What Eckhart teaches are portals for *entering* into the state of enlightenment rather than methods or techniques for *attaining* it. In Sri Aurobindo's yoga, too, there are no specific practices such as breathing techniques, postures, devotional chants, prescribed mantras, or methods of meditation and the like, which are found in most spiritual disciplines. However, in both Eckhart's teaching and Sri Aurobindo's yoga, there are certain *processes* or general methods of practice. The difference between the two teachings is that, in Eckhart's teaching, the processes are more or less only implicit, whereas in Sri Aurobindo's yoga one finds an explicit and elaborate formulation of the general methods in various spiritual disciplines.

From a psychological viewpoint, methods of spiritual practice may be seen as approaches that use as leverage one or more of the three basic functions of the human psyche—thinking, feeling, and willing—for the purposes of transforming ordinary consciousness into a higher or spiritual consciousness. From this point of view, spiritual disciplines may be broadly classified into three paths: the Path of Knowledge (Jnana Yoga), which uses thinking as the principal leverage; the Path of Devotion (Bhakti Yoga), which utilizes chiefly feeling or emotion; and the Path of Works or Action (Karma Yoga), which uses the will as the chief means of transformation. We will mention in some detail the methods of practice used in the three broad categories of paths just described so as to bring out the methods present—or not present—in Eckhart's teaching and to compare them with those of Sri Aurobindo's yoga.

The Path of Knowledge, which aims at the knowledge of the self and the world, selects the reason as its chosen instrument and makes it, by certain methods of purification and concentration, its means for realization. Thus, Sankhya Yoga, taught by the Indian sage Kapila, proceeds by the Buddhi, the discriminating intelligence, and arrives by reflective thought and right discrimination at the knowledge of the true nature of the Soul (Purusha) and of the imposition on it of the activities of the instrumental Nature (Prakriti) through

attachment and a false identification. Describing the “very powerful method” of the Sankhyas for the separation of Purusha and Prakriti, Sri Aurobindo says:

One enforces on the mind the position of the Witness—all action of mind, vital, physical becomes an outer play which is not myself or mine, but belongs to Nature and has been enforced on an outer me. I am the witness Purusha; I am silent, detached, not bound by any of these things. There grows up in consequence a division in the being; the sadhak⁷⁸ feels within him the growth of a calm silent separate consciousness which feels itself quite apart from the surface play of the mind and the vital and physical Nature.⁷⁹

Similarly, Jnana Yoga, based on the Advaita (nondualist) school of Vedanta, arrives by the same means at the right discrimination of the true nature of the Self and of the imposition on it of the mental illusion that leads to egoic identification and attachment. In the Advaita process of the way of knowledge

... one rejects from oneself the identification with the mind, vital, body, saying continually “I am not the mind”, “I am not the vital”, “I am not the body”, seeing these things as separate from one’s real self—and after a time one feels all the mental, vital, physical processes and the very sense of mind, vital, body becoming externalised, an outer action, while within and detached from them there grows the sense of a separate self-existent being which opens into the realisation of the cosmic and transcendent spirit.⁸⁰

Buddhism, another path of knowledge, lays stress on the impermanence and illusoriness of the self, which is viewed as an amalgam of the results of the cosmic energy (presented as Karma, just as in Sankhya it is presented as Prakriti), and it makes the recognition of

⁷⁸ Spiritual practitioner.

⁷⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1168.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

this impermanence and illusoriness by the discriminating mind its means of liberation.

The chief methods used in the various paths of knowledge consist of meditation, concentration, and processes of disidentification.

The Path of Devotion selects the feeling aspect of the devotee and turns it Godward, and in an intensity of seeking makes the emotions a means of union of one's being with the Divine Being. The chief methods of this path consist in prayer, adoration, and worship of the Divine, and offering of oneself to Him through love and devotion.

The Path of Works, selecting the will in action as its principal tool, makes all one's acts and works in life an offering to God, a means for arriving at the union of the soul with the Lord. Its chief methods are a purification of the personal will and its surrender to the Divine Will.⁸¹

Among the various methods pertaining to the three categories of paths, two methods stand out most prominently in Eckhart's teaching: The first is the Sankhya process of becoming the Witness Purusha—a method very similar to Eckhart's teaching about being the witnessing Presence. The second method, which pertains to the Path of Works and which is prominent in Eckhart's teaching, is that of surrender of the egoic will.

Whereas methods of practice pertaining to the Paths of Knowledge and of Works can be discerned in Eckhart's teaching, methods pertaining to the Path of Devotion are not present. This is consistent with Eckhart's view of the Reality. As he once made it clear in answering a question regarding prayer, his teaching is nondualist (Advaita). From the Advaita viewpoint, there is nothing but the One Reality; prayer (as ordinarily understood), worship, and adoration imply a duality, and are therefore inconsistent with the nondualist view.

Sri Aurobindo's yoga, which integrates the various spiritual paths, employs all their methods in essence, without regarding any method, whether pertaining to knowledge, devotion, or works, as indispensable.

⁸¹ As stated in the previous section of this chapter, the essential meaning of surrender in the Path of Works is self-offering, though it also includes submission or resignation. Therefore, through works the transformation of the egoic will into the divine will takes place through both the offering of the personal will by doing all works and actions for the Divine as well as through resignation to whatever the divine Will brings about in one's life.

Work, bhakti⁸² and meditation are the three supports of yoga. One can do with all three or two or one. There are people who can't meditate in the set way that one calls meditation, but they progress through work or through bhakti or through the two together. By work and bhakti one can develop a consciousness in which eventually a natural meditation and realisation becomes possible.⁸³

However, like the *Gita*, Sri Aurobindo's yoga gives Bhakti the highest place and regards it as the swiftest path.

The kinship between Eckhart's teaching about the witnessing Presence and the process of the Sankhya—a path of knowledge—may seem surprising in view of Eckhart's de-emphasis on the role of knowledge or “information” in a spiritual teaching. But the knowledge aimed at in the Path of Knowledge is not an intellectual understanding. The intellect does play an important role in the Path of Knowledge because, right thought consisting in correct notions about the self and the world, and right discrimination between the real and the unreal, are indispensable preliminaries for arriving at spiritual knowledge, which is supraintellectual. As Sri Aurobindo explains:

It is true that intellectual deliberation and right discrimination are an important part of the Yoga of knowledge; but their object is rather to remove a difficulty than to arrive at the final and positive result of this path. Our ordinary intellectual notions are a stumbling-block in the way of knowledge; for they are governed by the error of the senses and they found themselves on the notion that matter and body are the reality, that life and force are the reality, that passion and emotion, thought and sense are the reality; and with these things we identify ourselves, and because we identify ourselves with these things we cannot get back to the real self.⁸⁴

82 Devotion to the Divine.

83 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 536.

84 Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 288.

Eckhart's introductory talks generally address the preliminary task of removing the stumbling block spoken of in the extract just quoted and establishing right thought about our true identity. His talks thus typically begin with themes such as the illusory self, the "me" born of identification with the mind; the distinction between the temporary form—body, emotions, and mind, with which we identify ourselves in our normal consciousness—and the Formless, which is the essence of our true being and is the Being of the universe; the dysfunctional nature and insanity of the normal egoic consciousness, and the like. Such themes are based on the foremost principle of the Path of Knowledge, namely, Viveka, discernment between the real and the unreal. The conceptual superstructure in Eckhart's teaching, unlike that of the traditional Indian paths of knowledge, such as Advaita and Sankhya, is not an abstract cosmological and metaphysical system but consists of psychological truths that appeal more to one's inner experience and intuition rather than to the speculative intellect.

In Eckhart's teaching, to be present implies more than just becoming the observing witness. Presence, says Eckhart, is a state when attention is completely in the Now; to be fully present is to walk along the razor's edge of Now. This aspect of Presence brings out the kinship between Eckhart's teaching and that of the Zen view and method, Zen also being a path of knowledge that leads to the realization of the illusory and impermanent nature of the self and things in the world. The Zen view of meditation as a state of attention in the here and now, and living fully in the present act, is well illustrated by the following story:

A group of foreign travellers, keenly interested in spirituality, went to see the Zen Master Fudoshi during their visit to Japan. Deeply impressed by his wisdom and equanimity, one of the visitors asked him about the secret of his spiritual attainment.

Fudoshi answered: "When I sit, I sit; when I stand, I stand; when I walk, I walk; when I eat, I eat, and when I speak, I speak." The visitors were very much surprised by his answer. Their little minds could not understand that truth could be so simple and obvious. So they said to the Master,

“That’s all right, but what else do you do?” expecting a more profound reply.

Fudoshi again answered: “I do nothing else. When I sit, I sit; when I stand, I stand; when I walk, I walk; when I eat, I eat, and when I speak, I speak.”

Not satisfied with Fudoshi’s answer, the visitors impatiently retorted: “We are all doing the same thing, but we have not attained what you have attained.”

Then Fudoshi answered: “No, no, you are all doing things differently from what I said. When you sit, you are already thinking about going; when you go, you are as if running; while you are running, you are pushing a hot dog into your mouth, and while you are eating it, you are talking about what happened yesterday or what you will do tomorrow. You are not where you are. That is your only problem.”

Fudoshi then explained the meaning of meditation in everyday life as being present in the here and now in everything one does, whether it is sitting, standing, walking, eating, or speaking.

One method that is implicitly or explicitly practiced in all spiritual disciplines, and is most prominent in the Path of Knowledge, is that of concentration. The normal state of consciousness is the opposite of concentration—it is a state of dispersion. As the Mother observes:

One throws oneself out all the time; all the time one lives, as it were, outside oneself, in such a superficial sensation that it is almost as though one were outside oneself. As soon as one wants even to observe oneself a little, control oneself a little, simply know what is happening, one is always obliged to draw back or pull towards oneself, to pull inwards something which is constantly like that, on the surface. And it is this surface thing which meets all external contacts, puts you in touch with similar vibrations coming from others. That happens almost outside you.

That is the constant dispersal of the ordinary consciousness.⁸⁵

The state of dispersion is also a state of exteriorization in which consciousness is turned outwards instead of inwards. As the Mother says:

The ordinary human consciousness, even in the most developed, even in men of great talent and great realisation, is a movement turned outwards—all the energies are directed outwards, the whole consciousness is spread outwards; and if anything is turned inwards, it is very little, very rare, very fragmentary, it happens only under the pressure of very special circumstances, violent shocks, the shocks life gives precisely with the intention of slightly reversing this movement of exteriorisation of the consciousness.⁸⁶

To live a spiritual life is to open oneself to the inner world within the depths of one's being. It involves a reversal of the normal consciousness from its ordinary state of dispersion and exteriorization to one of concentration and interiorization. Therefore, Sri Aurobindo states, "Concentration is indeed the first condition of any Yoga."⁸⁷

Though concentration in the general sense of a self-gathered state just described is involved in all spiritual practice, it is used in a more specific sense in the Path of Knowledge as practiced in India. It connotes a way by which thought is removed from all distracting activities of the mind and fixed on the idea of the One Reality so as to rise out of the ordinary dispersed consciousness into the consciousness of the One. To this end, various specific methods of concentration are used as a "means by which one identifies oneself with and enters into any form, state or psychological self-manifestation (*bhāva*)⁸⁸ of the Self."⁸⁹

One of the processes of concentration emphasized in the Path of Knowledge—that of standing back as a witness and watching the

⁸⁵ The Mother, *Questions and Answers 1956*, CWM, Vol. 8, p. 193.

⁸⁶ The Mother, *Questions and Answers '57-58*, CWM, Vol. 9, p. 415.

⁸⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 72.

⁸⁸ Status of being.

⁸⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 306.

action of the mind until the mind falls into quietude—is akin to Eckhart’s teaching about observing the mind as the witnessing Presence in order to bring about eventually a cessation of thought and a state of stillness. However, unlike the Indian paths of knowledge, Eckhart does not teach this process as a specific method to be practiced at particular times but only as a general attitude to be maintained at all times. In Sri Aurobindo’s yoga where, too, there are no specific methods of practice, concentration is of prime importance. Speaking of his yoga, he says,

There is no method in this yoga except to concentrate, preferably in the heart, and call the presence and power of the Mother⁹⁰ to take up the being and by the workings of her force transform the consciousness; one can concentrate also in the head or between the eyebrows, but for many this is a too difficult opening. When the mind falls quiet and the concentration becomes strong and the aspiration intense, then there is a beginning of experience.⁹¹

In all spiritual disciplines, including Sri Aurobindo’s yoga, purification or cleansing, like concentration (in the sense of a self-gathered state), is regarded as an essential means towards liberation. As Sri Aurobindo puts it:

Śuddhi is the condition for *mukti*.⁹²

Purity and concentration are indeed two aspects, feminine and masculine, passive and active, of the same status of being; purity is the condition in which concentration becomes entire, rightly effective, omnipotent; by concentration purity does its works and without it would only lead to a state of peaceful quiescence and eternal repose.^{93,94}

⁹⁰ The Divine Force.

⁹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 605.

⁹² Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 21, p. 647.

⁹³ According to Sri Aurobindo, the state of peaceful quiescence and repose, which results from the liberation of the inner being, is not enough to bring about a transformation of the outer being.

⁹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 303.

Eckhart's method of dealing with what are regarded as impurities is the same as for dealing with anything that tends to obscure the Presence: It is to bring Presence into whatever arises at the moment, simply watching whatever may arise, even though one may not, at the outset, succeed in preventing oneself from losing the Presence, falling into unconsciousness, and acting out what obscures the Presence.⁹⁵

The methods of purification in Sri Aurobindo's yoga have been briefly touched upon in the previous section of this chapter in connection with the role of personal effort and will be presented more fully in the next section, which discusses the process of inner change.

One method of spiritual practice—surrender—stands out foremost in both Eckhart's teaching and Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Eckhart regards surrender—saying “yes” to whatever *is*—as the primordial portal for entering into Presence. Until one practices surrender, says Eckhart, one's life is run by the mind energy; it is through surrender that spiritual energy enters into one's life and transforms it. From the viewpoint of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, purification, concentration, detachment, and rejection of ego and desire are all useful aids for the discovery of one's inmost being, “but the strongest, most central way is to found all such or other methods on a self-offering and surrender of ourselves and of our parts of nature to the Divine Being. ...”⁹⁶

The Process of Inner Change

One of Eckhart's most appealing teachings is regarding the process of inner change. In its simplicity and beauty it is comparable to the “supreme secret” of the *Gita* revealed in its last chapter where Krishna says to the disciple:

Become My-minded, My lover and adorer, a sacrificer to Me, bow thyself to Me, to Me thou shalt come, this is My pledge and promise to thee, for dear art thou to me. Abandon all Dharmas⁹⁷ and take refuge in Me alone. I will deliver thee from all sin and evil, do not grieve.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Talk at the Intensive “The Awareness That *Is* Beyond Thought,” San Francisco, CA, November 18, 2000.

⁹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vol. 19, p. 907.

⁹⁷ Rules or laws of action.

⁹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL Vol. 13, p. 536.

Elaborating the *Gita*'s "secret of secrets," Sri Aurobindo writes:

All this personal effort and self-discipline will not in the end be needed, all following and limitation of rule and Dharma can at last be thrown away as hampering encumbrances if thou canst make a complete surrender to Me, depend alone on the Spirit and Godhead within thee and all things and trust to his sole guidance. Turn all thy mind to me and fill it with the thought of Me and My Presence. ... I am here with thee in thy chariot of battle revealed as the Master of existence within and without thee and I repeat the absolute assurance, the infallible promise that I will lead thee to Myself through and beyond all sorrow and evil. Whatever difficulties and perplexities arise, be sure of this that I am leading thee to a complete divine life in the universal and an immortal existence in the transcendent Spirit.⁹⁹

Eckhart conveys this supreme secret of the *Gita* in a form more accessible to the modern mind. How to transform the unconsciousness of the mind into the consciousness of Presence? One cannot transform one's unconsciousness by any kind of doing, says Eckhart. Presence is not something that one can make happen by personal effort. Presence is either there or not there. It is perhaps Grace. Presence *wants* to arise. All one has to do is to cooperate with it and open the doorway for the Grace to enter. Instead of trying to "fix" or "rewire" oneself, one has simply to give up resistance to the present moment and allow the Now to *be*. The Now is one's innermost being, which is covered up due to identification with the mind. One is all the time acting and reacting from the conditioning to which the mind has been subjected, and one is continually dragged along by the mind-stream of unending thoughts. All that is needed to free oneself is a "tiny witness in the background" that *sees* the workings of the mind-identified self. Once one becomes the witnessing Presence and sees the conditioning that operates in oneself, the unconscious activity of the mind-stream cannot sustain itself that much longer. Once Presence has arisen, it

⁹⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL Vol. 13, pp. 537, 538.

will not stop. It may be temporarily obscured, but it will re-emerge. One has only to allow Presence to go on emerging and transmuting the unconsciousness of the mind-identified self into the consciousness of Presence.

In a similar vein, as previously quoted, Sri Aurobindo states:

The ego person in us cannot transform itself by its own force or will or knowledge or by any virtue of its own into the nature of the Divine; all it can do is to fit itself for the transformation and make more and more its surrender to that which it seeks to become. As long as the ego is at work in us, our personal action is and must always be in its nature a part of the lower grades of existence; it is obscure or half-enlightened, limited in its field, very partially effective in its power. If a spiritual transformation, not a mere illumining modification of our nature, is to be done at all, we must call in the Divine Shakti¹⁰⁰ to effect that miraculous work in the individual; for she alone has the needed force, decisive, all-wise and illimitable.¹⁰¹

Commenting on the supreme secret of the *Gita*, Sri Aurobindo writes:

For a time comes in spiritual development when we become aware that all our effort and action are only our mental and vital reactions to the silent and secret insistence of a greater Presence in and around us. It is borne in on us that all our Yoga, our aspiration and our endeavour are imperfect or narrow forms, because disfigured or at least limited by the mind's associations, demands, prejudgments, predilections, mistranslations or half translations of a vaster truth. Our ideas and experiences and efforts are mental images only of greatest things which would be done more perfectly, directly, freely, largely, more in harmony with the universal and eternal will by that Power itself in us if we could only

¹⁰⁰ The Divine Force.

¹⁰¹ Sri Aurobindo. *The Synthesis of Yoga*. SABCL. Vol. 20, p. 80.

put ourselves passively as instruments in the hands of a supreme and absolute strength and wisdom. That Power is not separate from us; it is our own self one with the self of all others and at the same time a transcendent Being and an immanent Person. Our existence, our action taken up into this greatest Existence would be no longer, as it seems to us now, individually our own in a mental separation. It would be the vast movement of an Infinity and an intimate ineffable Presence; it would be the constant spontaneity of formation and expression in us of this deep universal self and this transcendent Spirit.¹⁰²

Thus, Eckhart and Sri Aurobindo have the same perspective in looking upon the egoic self as incapable of transforming itself and in regarding Presence or the Divine Force as the sole power that can bring about transformation.

However, Sri Aurobindo further states:

... the entire substitution of the divine for the human personal action is not at once entirely possible. All interference from below that would falsify the truth of the superior action must first be inhibited or rendered impotent, and it must be done by our own free choice. A continual and always repeated refusal of the impulsions and falsehoods of the lower nature is asked from us and an insistent support to the Truth as it grows in our parts; for the progressive settling into our nature and final perfection of the incoming informing Light, Purity and Power needs for its development and sustenance our free acceptance of it and our stubborn rejection of all that is contrary to it, inferior or incompatible.¹⁰³

Therefore, the practice of Sri Aurobindo's yoga entails a long and arduous preparation for arriving at complete surrender when the need for personal effort ceases and all work of transformation is taken up

¹⁰² Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, pp. 539, 540.

¹⁰³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 80.

by the Divine Power. Thus, Sri Aurobindo speaks of two somewhat overlapping periods, movements, or stages in yoga. In the first, which is one of the process of surrender, the individual prepares oneself for the reception of the divine action. In this first movement of preparation through personal effort, a continual rejection of all that interferes with and falsifies the divine action is called for. Rejection, which is the negative element in yoga, is necessitated as a transitional movement due to the resistance of the egoic self to the process of transformation and its opposition to the truth of one's being.

In the transitional stage between the first period and the second, our personal and necessarily ignorant effort more and more dwindles and a higher Nature acts; the eternal Shakti descends into this limited form of mortality and progressively possesses and transmutes it.¹⁰⁴

In the second period the greater movement wholly replaces the lesser, formerly indispensable first action; but this can be done only when our self-surrender is complete.¹⁰⁵

The initial step in the first period of self-preparation through personal effort is to become conscious of the movements of one's egoic self and to observe them as an impartial witness by detaching oneself from them instead of identifying with them and regarding them as part of one's real nature.

[The method of self-discipline prescribed by the Gita] is to stand back in oneself from the action of the modes¹⁰⁶ and observe this unsteady flux as the Witness seated above the surge of the forces of Nature. He is one who watches but is impartial and indifferent, aloof from them on their own level and in his native posture high above them. As they rise and fall in their waves, the Witness looks, observes, but neither accepts nor for the moment interferes with their course. First there

¹⁰⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 79.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 80.

¹⁰⁶ Qualities (Gunas) inherent in the ordinary physical, vital, and mental consciousness.

must be the freedom of the impersonal Witness; afterwards there can be the control of the Master, the Ishwara^{107, 108}.

To observe the movements as a witness without being discouraged or disturbed is the best way to effect the necessary detachment and separation.¹⁰⁹

The first principle is to detach oneself from them, not to identify, not to admit them any longer as part of one's real nature but to look on them as things imposed to which one says "This is not I or mine—this is a thing I reject altogether". One begins to feel a part of the being inside which is not identified, which remains firm and says "This may give trouble on the surface, but it shall not touch me". If this separate being within can be felt, then half the trouble is over—provided there is a will there not only to separate but to get rid of the imperfection from the surface nature also.¹¹⁰

The following points may be noted in the passages just quoted:

1. At first, one must become simply a Witness who observes but neither accepts nor, for the moment, interferes with the course of what one sees. This attitude is similar to what Eckhart describes as "allowing." In the light of the *Gita's* teaching, allowing would mean not interfering with what one sees and *not accepting it either*.
2. Feeling an inner being within (what Eckhart calls the "witnessing Presence") that is separate and detached from the egoic surface self is the first principle.
3. Observing the movements of the surface being as an impartial witness is the best way to bring about the separation between the surface being and one's true being within.

107 Lord, Master.

108 Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 226.

109 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1692.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 1693.

4. There must be a will not only to be detached and separate from the surface consciousness but also to reject its egoic movements. Without rejection one may arrive at the liberation of the inner being as a detached Witness, but one cannot become Master of one's whole being; one continues to experience reactions in one's surface consciousness although the inner being is free and unaffected by the reactions. Explaining the difference between the freedom that comes from detachment and the mastery that comes from rejection, Sri Aurobindo states:

Detachment is the beginning of mastery, but for complete mastery there should be no reactions at all. When there is something within undisturbed by the reactions that means the inner being is free and master of itself, but it is not yet master of the whole nature. When it is master, it allows no wrong reactions—if any come they are at once repelled and shaken off, and finally none come at all.¹¹¹

So, as Sri Aurobindo writes in a previously quoted letter:

The Purusha above is not only a Witness, he is the giver (or withholder) of the sanction; if he persistently refuses the sanction to a movement of Prakriti, keeping himself detached, then, even if it goes on for a time by its past momentum, it usually loses its hold after a time, becomes more feeble, less persistent, less concrete and in the end fades away. If you take the Purusha consciousness, it should be not only as the Witness but as the Anumanta,¹¹² refusing sanction to the disturbing movements, sanctioning only peace, calm, purity and whatever else is part of the divine nature. This refusal of sanction need not mean a struggle with the lower Prakriti; it should be a quiet, persistent, detached refusal leaving unsupported, unassented

¹¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1012.

¹¹² One of the *Gita's* descriptions of the Purusha, the inner being, is that of Anumanta, the giver of sanction.

to, without meaning or justification, the contrary action of the nature.¹¹³

In the same vein, Sri Aurobindo writes in another letter:

The witness attitude is not meant as a convenient means for disowning the responsibility of one's defects and thereby refusing to mend them. It is meant for self-knowledge and, in our yoga, as a convenient station (detached and uninvolved, therefore not subject to Prakriti) from which one can act on the wrong movements by refusal of assent and by substituting for them the action of the true consciousness from within or above.¹¹⁴

Therefore, as stated in the previous chapter (p. 73), the inner being (Purusha) must emerge not only as Sakshi, the Witness, but also as Anumanta, the giver or withholder of sanction. To reiterate what has been stated a little earlier about the method of self-discipline taught by the *Gita*: "First there must be the freedom of the impersonal Witness; afterwards there can be the control of the Master, the Ishwara." Mastery comes when one is no longer a mere Witness but also a Sanctioner.

Besides the method of standing back as a detached witness of the movements of the surface being, Sri Aurobindo's yoga teaches the method of offering one's egoic movements and surrendering them to the Divine, calling on the Divine for the taking up of one's egoic nature by a Higher Power for transformation. Explaining the compatibility of the method of self-offering or surrender with the method of the detached witness, Sri Aurobindo writes to a disciple:

As for the surrender it is not inconsistent with the witness attitude. On the contrary by liberating from the ordinary Prakriti,¹¹⁵ it makes easier the surrender to the higher or

113 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1009.

114 *Ibid.*, pp. 1010, 1011.

115 Nature-Force which governs the egoic consciousness.

divine Power. Very often when this witness attitude has not been taken but there is a successful calling in of the Force to act in one, one of the first things the Force does is to establish the witness attitude so as to be able to act with less interference or immixture from the movements of the lower Prakriti.¹¹⁶

Rejection taught in yoga is apt to be confused with what is called *repression* in psychoanalysis and, consequently, regarded as harmful and pathological. Rejection may also appear to be counter to Eckhart's teaching about "allowing" the unconsciousness to be there, letting the Presence transmute the unconsciousness instead of trying to get rid of it by personal effort.

Repression has to be distinguished from suppression and rejection. Repression of an impulse or desire is considered in psychoanalysis to operate at an *unconscious* level; its very operations lie outside of conscious awareness. For, repression is not done by the conscious mind but is brought about by certain more or less unconscious painful feelings such as fear, shame, or guilt. The repressed impulse is forced into the unconscious and remains outside of the person's conscious awareness. Suppression, called *Nigraha* in Indian psychology, is, on the other hand, a *conscious* process involving the exercise of the conscious mental will. It consists in restraining the *outer* expression of an impulse in speech or action. But inwardly one continues to feel the impulse and is conscious of it. What Sri Aurobindo calls *rejection* is spoken of as *Samyama* (self-control or self-mastery) in Indian psychology. Rejection, like suppression, is a conscious process, and is done either by the less effective mental will or the more powerful will of the inner being (soul or Purusha). Rejection consists essentially in self-dissociation and detachment from the inner impulse or desire, but also includes the restraint of its outer expression in speech or action. The following passages from Sri Aurobindo's letters to disciples serve to explicate the nature of rejection and distinguish it from suppression:

¹¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1007.

Nigraha means holding down the movement, but a movement merely held down is only suspended—it is better to reject and dismiss, detaching yourself from it.¹¹⁷

Not necessarily suppression, if the refusal ... [to a desire] is accompanied by detachment in the major part of the being. The difference between suppression (*nigraha*) and self-control (*samyama*) is that one says “I cannot help desiring but I will not satisfy my desire”, while the other says “I refuse the desire as well as the satisfaction of the desire”.¹¹⁸

The rejection of desire is essentially the rejection of the element of craving, putting that out from the consciousness itself as a foreign element not belonging to the true self and the inner nature. But refusal to indulge the suggestions of desire is also a part of the rejection; to abstain from the action suggested, if it is not the right action, must be included in the yogic discipline. It is only when this is done in the wrong way, by a mental ascetic principle or a hard moral rule, that it can be called suppression. The difference between suppression and an inward essential rejection is the difference between mental or moral control and a spiritual purification.¹¹⁹

It is true that the mere suppression or holding down of desire is not enough, not by itself truly effective, but that does not mean that desires are to be indulged; it means that desires have not merely to be suppressed, but to be rejected from the nature.¹²⁰

“I won’t desire” is quite the right thing to say, even if “I don’t desire” cannot yet be said by the vital. Still there is something in the being that can even say “I don’t desire” and refuse to recognise the vital desire as part of the true being.¹²¹

117 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1403.

118 *Ibid.*, pp. 1402, 1403.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 1398.

120 *Ibid.*, pp. 1401, 1402.

121 *Ibid.*, p. 1403.

No, it is not necessary to lose the mental control; it is best to replace it gradually by the psychic or spiritual.¹²²

Your theory is a mistaken one. The free expression of a passion may relieve the vital for a time, but at the same time it gives it a right to return always. It is not reduced at all. Suppression with inner indulgence in subtle forms is not a cure, but expression in outer indulgence is still less a cure. It is perfectly possible to go on without manifestation if one is resolute to arrive at a complete control, the control being not a mere suppression but an inner and outer rejection.¹²³

You do not seem to have a correct idea of the nature of vital desire. Vital desire grows by being indulged, it does not become satisfied. If your desire were indulged, it would begin to grow more and more and ask for more and more. That has been our constant experience with the sadhaks¹²⁴ and it confirms what has always been known about desire. Desire and envy have to be thrown out of the consciousness—there is no other way to deal with them.¹²⁵

It is a known psychological law that whatever is suppressed in the conscious mind remains in the subconscious being and recurs either in the waking state when the control is removed or else in sleep. Mental control by itself cannot eradicate anything entirely out of the being. ... In order to make a true and complete change, one has to make all these conscious, to see clearly what is still there and to reject them from one layer after another till they have been entirely thrown out from the personal existence. Even then, they may remain and come back on the being from the surrounding universal forces and it is only when no part of the consciousness makes any

¹²² Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1440.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1402.

¹²⁴ Practitioners of yoga.

¹²⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1402.

response to these forces of the lower plane that the victory and transformation are absolutely complete.¹²⁶

In the ordinary life people accept the vital movements, anger, desire, greed, sex, etc., as natural, allowable and legitimate things, part of the human nature. Only so far as society discourages them or insists to keep them within fixed limits or subject to a decent restraint or measure, people try to control them so as to conform to the social standard of morality or rule of conduct. Here, on the contrary, as in all spiritual life, the conquest and complete mastery of these things is demanded. That is why the struggle is more felt, not because these things rise more strongly in sadhaks than in ordinary men, but because of the intensity of the struggle between the spiritual mind which demands control and the vital movements which rebel and want to continue in the new as they did in the old life. As for the idea that the sadhana raises up things of the kind, the only truth in that is this that, first, there are many things in the ordinary man of which he is not conscious, because the vital hides them from the mind and gratifies them without the mind realising what is the force that is moving the action—thus things that are done under the plea of altruism, philanthropy, service, etc. are largely moved by ego which hides itself behind these justifications; in yoga the secret motive has to be pulled out from behind the veil, exposed and got rid of. Secondly, some things are suppressed in the ordinary life and remain lying in the nature, suppressed but not eliminated; they may rise up any day or they may express themselves in various nervous forms or other disorders of the mind or vital or body without it being evident what is their real cause. This has been recently discovered by European psychologists and much emphasised, even exaggerated in a new science called psycho-analysis. Here again, in sadhana one has to become conscious of these

¹²⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 898, 899.

suppressed impulses and eliminate them—this may be called rising up, but that does not mean that they have to be raised up into action but only raised up before the consciousness so as to be cleared out of the being.

... In sadhana the mental or moral control has to be replaced by the spiritual mastery—for that mental control is only partial and it controls but does not liberate; it is only the psychic and spiritual that can do that. That is the main difference in this respect between the ordinary and the spiritual life.¹²⁷

An important point to be noted is that truly effective rejection can be done only by exercising the will of the inner being (the soul or Purusha), but when one is not in touch with one's inner being due to an identification with the mind, one needs to exercise the mental will to reject what needs to be rejected. As Sri Aurobindo explains in these letters:

... in proportion as one succeeds in this, becomes detached, sees mind and its activities as not oneself, life and its activities as not oneself, the body and its activities as not oneself, one becomes aware of an inner Being within us—inner mental, inner vital, inner physical—silent, calm, unbound, unattached which reflects the true Self above and can be its direct representative; from this inner silent Being proceeds a rejection of all that is to be rejected, an acceptance only of what can be kept and transformed. ...¹²⁸

Detach yourself from this vital-physical¹²⁹—observe it as something not yourself; reject it, refuse your consent to its claims and impulses, but quietly as the witness Purusha whose refusal of sanction must ultimately prevail. ...

¹²⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, pp. 1297, 1298.

¹²⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 519.

¹²⁹ The life-nature, closely enmeshed in the reactions, desires, needs, and sensations of the physical body.

When you are not in this impersonality, still use your mental will and its power of assent or refusal—not with a painful struggle, but in the same way, quietly, denying the claims of Desire, till these claims by loss of sanction and assent lose their force of return and become more and more faint and external.¹³⁰

The *Gita* throws good light on the distinction between suppression (Nigraha) and self-mastery (Samyama). Commenting on certain verses in the *Gita*, Sri Aurobindo writes:

There is therefore a distinction to be made between what is essential in the nature, its native and inevitable action, which it avails not at all to repress, suppress, coerce, and what is accidental to it, its wanderings, confusions, perversions, over which we must certainly get control. There is a distinction implied too between coercion and suppression, *nigraha*, and control with right use and right guidance, *samyama*. The former is a violence done to the nature by the will, which in the end depresses the natural powers of the being, *ātmānam avasādayet*; the latter is the control of the lower by the higher self, which successfully gives to those powers their right action and their maximum efficiency,—*yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*.¹³¹ This nature of *samyama* is made very clear by the *Gita* in the opening of its sixth chapter, “By the self thou shouldst deliver the self, thou shouldst not depress and cast down the self (whether by self-indulgence or suppression); for the self is the friend of the self and the self is the enemy. To the man is his self a friend in whom the (lower) self has been conquered by the (higher) self, but to him who is not in possession of his (higher) self, the (lower) self is as if an enemy and it acts as an enemy.” When one has conquered one’s self and attained to the calm of a perfect self-mastery and self-possession, then is the supreme self in a man founded and poised even in his outwardly conscious human being,

130 Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1010.

131 Yoga is skill in works.

samāhita. In other words, to master the lower self by the higher, the natural self by the spiritual is the way of man's perfection and liberation.¹³²

The teaching of the *Gita* for mastering the natural self (normally governed by Prakriti or Nature) by the spiritual self (Purusha or soul) seems to explain from the viewpoint of yoga the role and significance of what Eckhart calls "allowing" whatever one witnesses in one's natural self, letting it *be* instead of trying to change it.

In terms of the *Gita*, the natural self in us is subject to the three modes or qualities (Gunas) of Prakriti or Nature through which Nature works in us: the quality of obscurity and inertia (Tamas), the quality of passion and desire (Rajas), and the quality of peace, poise, and light (Sattva). Tamas obscures and prevents the light of knowledge from penetrating the dark corners of our natural self, and takes away the energy and the will for change and progress. Rajas perverts knowledge and makes the reasoning mind an accomplice and abettor of movements that are contrary to our true nature but for which the mind gives specious rationalizations. Rajas disturbs the workings of the life-force and thereby upsets the balance and health of body and mind. An escape from these two inferior qualities is therefore indispensable if the natural self is to be transformed and made an instrument of the spiritual consciousness. "Tamas unenlightened and rajas unconverted, no divine change or divine life is possible."¹³³

It may seem that the solution lies in cultivating exclusively the quality of Sattva. But no single quality can by itself prevail against the other two. If Rajas, the quality of passion and desire, is subdued, the principle of activity is thereby dulled, and Tamas, the principle of inertia, rises. The peace that comes from Sattva becomes a tranquility of inaction; "the nature may become in its dynamic parts Sattva-tamasic, neutral, pale-tinted, uncreative or emptied of power."¹³⁴

Nor is a compromise between the three qualities, with Sattva leading and the other two subordinate to it, a solution. It leads to a milder action of the play of Nature but not to a spiritual freedom

¹³² Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 208.

¹³³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 225.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

from her enslaving modes. To arrive at freedom, all the three modes of Prakriti must be transcended so that Purusha, the soul, is no longer involved in their workings and subjected to their law. In order to transcend the three modes of Nature, the *Gita* prescribes a radically different method of self-discipline that enables one to draw back from the three modes and lifts one above them.

It is to stand back in oneself from the action of the modes and observe this unsteady flux as the Witness seated above the surge of the forces of Nature. He is one who watches but is impartial and indifferent, aloof from them on their own level and in his native posture high above them. As they rise and fall in their waves, the Witness looks, observes, but *neither accepts nor for the moment interferes with their course*. First there must be the freedom of the impersonal Witness; afterwards there be the control of the Master, the Ishwara.¹³⁵ [Italics by the author.]

When the sadhaka has once stood back from the action of Prakriti within him or upon him and, not interfering, not amending or inhibiting, not choosing or deciding, *allowed* its play and analysed and watched the process, he soon discovers that her modes are self-dependent and work as a machine once put in action works by its own structure and propelling forces.¹³⁶ [Italics by the author.]

This teaching of the *Gita* for arriving at freedom from the modes of Nature by standing back as their impartial Witness without accepting or interfering with them is quite similar to Eckhart's teaching about simply witnessing the unconscious patterns in one's normal self and *allowing* them to be there instead of trying to get rid of them by personal effort.

This first step of becoming an impartial witness, says the *Gita*, leads to Nistraigunya, the state of inner freedom in which one is free from the three Gunas or modes of Nature and *inwardly*

¹³⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 226.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

unaffected by them while they still continue to operate in one's outer surface nature.

The soul is inwardly separated and free from the lower Prakriti, not involved in its coils, indifferent and glad above it. Nature continues to act in the triple round of her ancient habits—desire, grief and joy attack the heart, the instruments fall into inaction and obscurity and weariness, light and peace come back into the heart and mind and body; but the soul stands unchanged and untouched by these changes. Observing and unmoved by the grief and desire of the lower members, smiling at their joys and their strainings, regarding and unoverpowered by the failing and the darkneses of the thought and the wildness or the weaknesses of the heart and nerves, uncompelled and unattached to the mind's illuminations and its relief and sense of ease or of power in the return of light and gladness, it throws itself into none of these things, but waits unmoved for the intimations of a higher Will and the intuitions of a greater luminous knowledge.¹³⁷

The state of detachment from and disidentification with Nature brings the profound realization that, as long as one is identified with one's surface being, the motive power and propulsion for all one's activities come from Nature.

Then he realises how mistaken was his impression that his mind was the doer of his works; his mind was only a small part of him and a creation and engine of Nature. Nature was acting all the while in her own modes moving the three general qualities about as a girl might play with her puppets. His ego was all along a tool and plaything; his character and intelligence, his moral qualities and mental powers, his creations and works and exploits, his anger and forbearance, his cruelty and mercy, his love and his hatred, his sin and his virtue, his light and his darkness, his passion of joy and his

¹³⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 227.

anguish of sorrow were the play of Nature to which the soul, attracted, won and subjected, lent its passive concurrence.¹³⁸

The teaching contained in the passage just quoted is what Eckhart has often said about the nonpersonal or collective nature of what we ignorantly tend to attribute all to our personal self—the mental and emotional characteristics of our nature and the patterns of our reactions. There is very little that is personal about it all, says Eckhart; what we see in us is not our own personal nature but mostly collective human nature. The *Gita* calls it Prakriti or universal Nature-Force.

This insight into the extraneous nature of the forces that operate in our surface being is a powerful tool in overcoming desire—the very first precondition laid down by the *Gita* for a spiritual birth. As Sri Aurobindo explains in his letters to disciples:

All the ordinary vital movements¹³⁹ are foreign to the true being and come from outside; they do not belong to the soul nor do they originate in it but are waves from the general Nature, Prakriti. The desires come from outside, enter the subconscious vital and rise to the surface. It is only when they rise to the surface and the mind becomes aware of them, that we become conscious of the desire. It seems to us to be our own because we feel it thus rising from the vital into the mind and do not know that it came from outside. What belongs to the vital, to the being, what makes it responsible is not the desire itself, but the habit of responding to the waves or the currents of suggestion that come into it from the universal Prakriti.¹⁴⁰

When one lives in the true consciousness one feels the desires outside oneself, entering from outside, from the universal lower Prakriti, into the mind and the vital parts. In the ordinary human condition this is not felt; men become aware of

¹³⁸ Sri Aurobindo. *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, p. 224.

¹³⁹ Movements of the vital being or life-nature, made up of instincts, passions, and desires.

¹⁴⁰ Sri Aurobindo. *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, pp. 1397, 1398.

the desire only when it is there, when it has come inside and found a lodging or a habitual harbourage and so they think it is their own and a part of themselves. The first condition for getting rid of desire is, therefore, to become conscious with the true consciousness; for then it becomes much easier to dismiss it than when one has to struggle with it as if it were a constituent part of oneself to be thrown out from the being. It is easier to cast off an accretion than to excise what is felt as a parcel of our substance.¹⁴¹

Desire takes a long time to get rid of entirely. But, if you can once get it out of the nature and realise it as a force coming from outside and putting its claws into the vital and physical,¹⁴² it will be easier to get rid of the invader. You are too accustomed to feel it as part of yourself or planted in you—that makes it more difficult for you to deal with its movements and dismiss its ancient control over you.¹⁴³

It may be noted in passing that thoughts, too, like desires, come from outside, says Sri Aurobindo, though in our ordinary consciousness we experience them as generated in our own mind. As Sri Aurobindo explains to disciples:

Our thoughts are not really created within ourselves independently in the small narrow thinking machine we call our mind; in fact, they come to us from a vast mental space or ether either as mind-waves or waves of mind-force that carry a significance which takes shape in our personal mind or as thought-formations ready-made which we adopt and call ours. Our outer mind is blind to this process of Nature; but by the awakening of the inner mind we can become aware of it.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1398.

¹⁴² The physical being made up of the physical consciousness and the body.

¹⁴³ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1399.

¹⁴⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, pp. 1021, 1022.

For him [the Yogi] the image of the factory of thoughts is no longer quite valid; for he sees that thoughts come from outside, from the universal Mind or universal Nature, sometimes formed and distinct, sometimes unformed and then they are given shape somewhere in us. The principal business of our mind is either a response of acceptance or a refusal to these thought-waves (as also vital waves, subtle physical energy waves) or this giving a personal-mental form to thought-stuff (or vital movements) from the enviroing Nature-Force.¹⁴⁵

... the real truth is that all these thoughts and activities are Nature's and come into us or pass through us as waves from the universal Nature. It is our egoism and our limitation in the body and individual physical mind which prevent us from feeling and experiencing this truth.¹⁴⁶

The error comes from thinking that your thoughts are your own and that you are their maker and if you do not create thoughts (i.e., think), there will be none. A little observation ought to show that you are not manufacturing your own thoughts, but rather thoughts occur in you. Thoughts are born, not made—like poets, according to the proverb. Of course, there is a sort of labour and effort when you try to produce or else to think on a certain subject, but that is a concentration for making thoughts come up, come in, come down, as the case may be, and fit themselves together. The idea that you are shaping the thoughts or fitting them together is an egoistic delusion. They are doing it themselves, or Nature is doing it for you, only under a certain compulsion; you have to beat her often in order to make her do it, and the beating is not always successful.¹⁴⁷

Sri Aurobindo discovered this truth about the extraneous source of our thoughts when he followed the instructions given to him by

¹⁴⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, pp. 1257, 1258.

¹⁴⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 1050.

¹⁴⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, pp. 1258, 1259.

Yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele for silencing the mind. Describing his experience, Sri Aurobindo writes:

It was my great debt to Lele that he showed me this. “Sit in meditation,” he said, “but do not think, look only at your mind; you will see thoughts coming into it; before they can enter throw these away from your mind till your mind is capable of entire silence.” I had never heard before of thoughts coming visibly into the mind from outside, but I did not think either of questioning the truth or the possibility, I simply sat down and did it. In a moment my mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside; I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the brain and in three days I was free. From that moment, in principle, the mental being in me became a free Intelligence, a universal Mind, not limited to the narrow circle of personal thought as a labourer in a thought factory, but a receiver of knowledge from all the hundred realms of being and free to choose what it willed in this vast sight-empire and thought-empire.¹⁴⁸

The description of the same experience in another context throws some more light on silencing the mind.

There are in fact several ways [of achieving silence]. My own way was by rejection of thought. “Sit down,” I was told, “look and you will see that your thoughts come into you from outside. Before they enter, fling them back.” I sat down and looked and saw to my astonishment that it was so; I saw and felt concretely the thought approaching as if to enter through or above the head and was able to push it back concretely before it came inside.

In three days—really in one—my mind became full of an eternal silence—it is still there. But that I don’t know how many people can do. One (not a disciple—I had no disciples

¹⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1258.

in those days) asked me how to do Yoga. I said: “Make your mind quiet first.” He did and his mind became quite silent and empty. Then he rushed to me saying: “My brain is empty of thoughts, I cannot think. I am becoming an idiot.” He did not pause to look and see where these thoughts he uttered were coming from! Nor did he realise that one who is already an idiot cannot become one. Anyhow I was not patient in those days and I dropped him and let him lose his miraculously achieved silence.

The usual way, the easiest if one can manage it at all, is to *call down* the silence from above you into the brain, mind and body.¹⁴⁹

It is interesting that Nisargadatta’s definition of meditation, which Eckhart alludes to more than once, seems to imply the same method of rejection of thoughts taught to Sri Aurobindo by Lele. Meditation, says Nisargadatta, as Eckhart quotes him, is “a radical refusal to harbor thoughts.” Eckhart remarks that Presence has to arise strongly if one is to be able to do this.

To return to the teaching of the *Gita* about liberating oneself from the three modes of Nature, it was stated a little earlier that the first step is to become an impartial Witness so as to arrive at the state of inner freedom from the modes or Gunas of Nature—the state of Nistraigunya. The next step, the *Gita* teaches, is to be free from the Gunas not only in one’s inner being—the freedom of the soul or Purusha—but also in one’s outer surface being—the freedom of Prakriti, the state of Trigunatita. To reiterate what has been stated previously: “First there must be the freedom of the impersonal Witness; afterwards there can be the control of the Master, the Ishwara.”

Freedom—the first step—consists in transcending the modes of Nature. Mastery—the decisive step—lies in *transforming* the three modes of the lower Nature (Apara Prakriti)—Tamas, Rajas, Sattva—into their equivalents of the divine Nature (Para Prakriti)—Shama, Tapas, Jyoti. Describing this transformation of the modes of Nature, Sri Aurobindo states:

¹⁴⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, SABCL, Vol. 26, pp. 82, 83.

Here the disharmonies of the triple mode of our inferior existence are overpassed and there begins a greater triple mode of a divine Nature. There is no obscurity of Tamas or inertia. Tamas is replaced by a divine peace and tranquil eternal repose¹⁵⁰ out of which is released from a supreme matrix of calm concentration the play of action and knowledge. There is no rajasic kinesis, no desire, no joyful and sorrowful striving of action, creation and possession, no fruitful chaos of troubled impulse. Rajas is replaced by a self-possessed power and illimitable act of force,¹⁵¹ that even in its most violent intensities does not shake the immovable poise of the soul or stain the vast and profound heavens and luminous abysses of its peace. There is no constructing light of mind casting about to seize and imprison the Truth, no insecure or inactive ease. Sattwa is replaced by an illumination¹⁵² and a spiritual bliss identical with the depth and infinite existence of the soul and instinct with a direct and authentic knowledge that springs straight from the veiled glories of the secret Omniscience. This is the greater consciousness into which our inferior consciousness has to be transformed, this nature of the Ignorance with its unquiet unbalanced activity of the three modes changed into this greater luminous supernature. At first we become free from the three gunas, detached, untroubled, *nistraigunya*; but this is the recovery of the native state of the soul, the self, the spirit free and watching in its motionless calm the motion of Prakriti in her force of the Ignorance. If on this basis the nature, the motion of Prakriti, is also to become free, it must be by a quiescence of action in a luminous peace and silence in which all necessary movements are done without any conscious reaction or participation or initiation of action by the mind or by the life-being, without any ripple of thought or eddy of the vital parts: it must be done under the impulsion, by the initiation, by the working of an impersonal

150 Shama.

151 Tapas.

152 Jyoti.

cosmic or a transcendent Force. ... there is a transference or transmutation into a superior spiritual status, *trigunātīta*,¹⁵³ in which we participate in a greater spiritual dynamisation; for the three lower unequal modes pass into an equal triune mode of eternal calm, light and force, the repose, kinesis, illumination of the divine Nature.¹⁵⁴

Eckhart's simple yet profound teaching, remarkably free from philosophical abstractions, does not make a distinction between liberation and transformation as Sri Aurobindo's yoga does. In Eckhart's teaching, the liberation from the mind-identified self is the same process as the transformation of consciousness. Similarly, Eckhart does not speak of mastery in the *Gita's* sense of the term, which implies, besides freedom of the Purusha, the inner being, the liberation of Prakriti, the outer being, also.

The Aim of Spiritual Practice

One view found both in Eckhart's teaching and Sri Aurobindo's yoga—a view that is a radical departure from that of Hinduism and Buddhism—pertains to the aim of life and the object of spiritual practice. All the various schools of Hinduism aim at liberation (Mukti or Moksha) from the bondage of the ego and the cycle of incarnation by the realization of the true Self. Cessation of birth in the world is thus viewed in Hinduism as the ultimate culmination of yoga. In Buddhism, too, the aim of spiritual practice is to bring about an extinction (Nirvana) of the illusory self in order to get oneself free from suffering (Dukha). Thus, in both Hinduism and Buddhism, the object of spiritual practice is individual liberation. In Eckhart's teaching, as in Buddhism, the egoic self is regarded as an illusory form and as the cause of all suffering. However, unlike Buddhism, Eckhart looks upon the illusory form as a temporary manifestation of Being, the Reality concealed by the illusory form. Spiritual practice liberates one from the illusion of the egoic self and from suffering that results from identification with the illusory form. But, in Eckhart's view, the

¹⁵³ Above or beyond the three Gunas.

¹⁵⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, pp. 229, 230.

true aim of spiritual practice is to make the form transparent so that Being may manifest through the form and become conscious of Itself. The regaining of self-consciousness is thus not for the liberation of the individual but for the manifestation of Being towards which the universe is evolving. “You are here,” says Eckhart, “to enable the divine purpose of the universe to unfold.”¹⁵⁵

This view is similar to the one expressed by Sri Aurobindo:

The yoga we practise is not for ourselves alone, but for the Divine; its aim is to work out the will of the Divine in the world, to effect a spiritual transformation and to bring down a divine nature and a divine life into the mental, vital and physical nature and life of humanity. Its object is not personal Mukti, although Mukti is a necessary condition of the yoga, but the liberation and transformation of the human being. It is not personal Ananda,¹⁵⁶ but the bringing down of the divine Ananda—Christ’s kingdom of heaven, our Satya-yuga¹⁵⁷—upon the earth. Of *mokṣa*¹⁵⁸ we have no personal need; for the soul is *nityamukta*¹⁵⁹ and bondage is an illusion. We play at being bound, we are not really bound.¹⁶⁰

The aim of this yoga is, first, to enter into the divine consciousness by merging into it the separative ego (incidentally, in doing so one finds one’s true individual self which is not the limited, vain and selfish human ego but a portion of the Divine) and, secondly, to bring down the supramental consciousness on earth to transform mind, life and body. All else can be only a result of these two aims, not the primary object of the yoga.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Eckhart Tolle, *Pura Vida Retreat*, Costa Rica, January 20–27, 2001.

¹⁵⁶ Bliss.

¹⁵⁷ The age of Truth, The Golden Age.

¹⁵⁸ Spiritual liberation.

¹⁵⁹ (One who is) perpetually in the state of liberation.

¹⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *The Supramental Manifestation and Other Writings*, SABCL, Vol. 16, p. 411.

¹⁶¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 503.

We regard the world not as an invention of the devil or a self-delusion of the soul, but as a manifestation of the Divine, although as yet a partial because a progressive and evolutionary manifestation. Therefore for us renunciation of life cannot be the goal of life nor rejection of the world the object for which the world was created. We seek to realise our unity with God, but for us that realisation involves a complete and absolute recognition of our unity with man and we cannot cut the two asunder. To use Christian language, the Son of God is also the Son of Man and both elements are necessary to the complete Christhood; or to use an Indian form of thought, the divine Narayana¹⁶² of whom the universe is only one ray is revealed and fulfilled in man; the complete man is Nara-Narayana¹⁶³ and in that completeness he symbolises the supreme mystery of existence.¹⁶⁴

Thus, in Sri Aurobindo's view, too, the object of yoga is not merely to attain individual liberation but to become an instrument for bringing down the Divine's kingdom on earth and establishing a divine life in the world by a transformation of mind, life, and body. Sri Aurobindo therefore makes a distinction between liberation and transformation. As he explains in a letter to a disciple:

What I mean by the spiritual transformation is something dynamic (not merely liberation of the Self or realisation of the One which can very well be attained without any descent). It is a putting on of the spiritual consciousness, dynamic as well as static, in every part of the being down to the subconscious. That cannot be done by the influence of the Self leaving the consciousness fundamentally as it is with only purification, enlightenment of the mind and heart and quiescence of the vital. It means a bringing down of the Divine Consciousness static and dynamic into all these parts and the entire

162 The Divine, usually taken as a name of Vishnu, Preserver and Lord of Love.

163 The human soul (Nara), eternal companion of the Divine (Narayana).

164 Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 20, pp. 313, 314.

replacement of the present consciousness by that. This we find unveiled and unmixed above mind, life and body. It is a matter of the undeniable experience of many that this can descend and it is my experience that nothing short of its full descent can thoroughly remove the veil and mixture and effect the full spiritual transformation.¹⁶⁵

In other words, liberation is a realization of the static Divine Consciousness by rising above the consciousness of mind, life, and body. This can be achieved by a certain degree of change of the ordinary consciousness without altering its fundamental nature. Transformation is the dynamic process of *bringing down* the Divine Consciousness into *all parts of the being* from top to bottom in order to effect a radical change of consciousness from its present ordinary state into a spiritual consciousness.

¹⁶⁵ Sri Aurobindo. *Letters on Yoga*. SABCL, Vol. 22, pp. 115, 116.

Postscript: Emerging Insights

In the opening chapter of this book I have stated that I have yet to understand fully the intent of the Wisdom of the universe in bringing me into contact with Eckhart at the present stage of my inner journey. During the months that have elapsed since beginning of writing this book, that intent has become gradually more and more discernible. This postscript is an attempt to formulate some of the insights gained during this slow process, which is still continuing.

In the first chapter I have mentioned some of the chief characteristics of the ordinary consciousness described by Eckhart, which have made a particularly powerful impression on me. From previous study and introspection, I already had some insights into most of these characteristics of the egoic self. What Eckhart's teachings have done is to give me a keener and deeper insight into some of these characteristics, making me more acutely aware of their pervasiveness than I have ever been before. Three things seem to have made for this increased awareness. First, Eckhart's descriptions of the characteristics of the ordinary consciousness in terms of everyday attitudes such as "complaining" and "waiting" have made these characteristics of the egoic self more readily recognizable. Secondly, Eckhart lends force and vividness to his descriptions by acting them out in sounds and gestures, enabling one to *feel* what he describes. Thirdly, and

above all, Eckhart's words—especially the spoken words—charged with Presence and the stillness from which they emanate, exercise a powerful influence and tend to intensify Presence in the reader or the hearer.

A revelational insight gained from Eckhart is about the role of the mind in concealing and distorting the reality of what we perceive. From Eckhart's descriptions of things, I have come to realize how someone who has gone beyond the mind perceives everything quite differently from the way things are perceived through the veil of the mind. What appears to the mind as inanimate is described by Eckhart as vibrant with incredible aliveness. Flowers and trees are described by him as expressions of incredible beauty, stillness, and sacredness. He sees animals living primarily in the joy of being rather than involved merely in a perpetual struggle for existence as they appear through the mental screen. A human being is perceived by him as a beautiful though unconscious form of the One Being in temporary disguise that is thick or thin, depending on the transparency of the human form. I do not know or do not recall if Eckhart has given a description of the One Reality—popularly called God—but I guess it would be as Sri Aurobindo has described the Divine—a Reality “not only as concrete but more concrete than anything sensed by ear or eye or touch in the world of Matter ... a certitude not of mental thought but of essential experience.”¹

In the story of my spiritual quest, narrated in the first chapter, it did not occur to me to mention what I now realize to have been a significant landmark in my inner journey. Around 1971 I came in contact with Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett of Shasta Abbey, a Zen monastery at Mt. Shasta, California, close to the city where I lived. I was strongly drawn to Rev. Jiyu-Kennett and, over a period of about ten years, visited the Shasta Abbey on numerous occasions and attended several retreats led by the reverend Master. Besides the light I saw in her, what impressed me was the relative rapidity with which the monks at the Abbey seemed to progress on the path. As I recall, the monks were generally able to complete their training successfully, as judged by the Master, in about five years so as to be ordained as

a Rōshi or teacher. One of the criteria for the successful completion of the training was to have had at least the first *kensho*² experience. Some of the monks experienced a *kensho* long before the completion of their training, and there I was, having been practicing yoga for nearly two decades, including about seven years of concentrated practice in an Ashram, without having had what is generally regarded as a spiritual experience. I tried several times to take up the practice of *zazen*,³ which I learned at the abbey, but was never able to persist with it for lack of zest. I could not understand the significance of present-moment awareness, which is the essence of *zazen*. I found the Zen view of enlightenment as just living in the present moment quite incomprehensible. I felt meditation in the form of breath awareness to be quite dry compared to concentrating on the Divine.

Eckhart's teaching that the Now *is* the Divine has come to me as a revelation, in the light of which I am beginning to see an integration of the Buddhist and yogic approaches to spiritual practice. I now see that the yogic practice of consecrating oneself to the Divine in every act in order to be one with the Divine's Will, and the Buddhist practice of living in the present moment, the Now, are essentially two aspects of the same practice. To do either, one has to rise above self-seeking, the central knot that ties us to ordinary consciousness.

On the path such as that of yoga, which envisages a distant goal that can be attained only in the more or less remote future, there are two common pitfalls, to which, unconsciously, one almost always succumbs. First, one is apt to compartmentalize one's daily life and to regard part of it, such as the routine acts and necessary chores of daily living, as belonging to one's outer or ordinary life, and meditation, consecrated work, and the like as constituting one's inner or spiritual life. Acts pertaining to the outer life are done with ordinary consciousness and are governed by physical, vital, and mental motives of ordinary consciousness. This defeats the yogic ideal, which is to regard *all* life as yoga and to perform all acts with yogic consciousness. Secondly, in striving to *attain* something in the *future* rather than to

² Literally, the term means "seeing into one's own nature"; *kensho* and *satori* are often used interchangeably, though *satori* implies a deeper experience of enlightenment.

³ Zen method of sitting meditation.

be at each moment, one unconsciously tends to introduce self-seeking through the back door. Life becomes a struggle and brings stress and tension, instead of the peace and joy that come from consecrating oneself to the Divine in each act and at every moment.

This insight has been brought to me by Eckhart's words: "If there is not joy, ease, or lightness in what you are doing, then time is covering up the present moment, and life is perceived as a burden or a struggle."⁴ Living in the present moment and regarding each act as an end in itself rather than as a means for attaining a distant goal provides the necessary corrective. It enables one to live for the Divine at each moment and to experience what in Buddhism is regarded as enlightenment—the state in which one lives only in the present moment, forgetful of the self—in the here and now. In other words, the teaching of yoga to consecrate oneself at all times to the Divine, and the Buddhist teaching to be attentive only to the present moment, have one essential thing in common—they both require self-forgetfulness. To consecrate oneself to the Divine, the Eternal, without at the same time living in the present moment—the eternal Now—is to cease to be self-consecrated and to slip into self-seeking. Eckhart teaches a profound way for eliminating the self from the seeking. He says: "If you bring the intensity that is behind seeking into the now, then that intensity becomes attention that you give to this moment, to now. That which was seeking before brings the seeking into the now. Seek in the now instead of in the future."⁵

Another insight I may mention pertains to the Buddhist teaching regarding self-acceptance, which I first came across when I came in contact with Zen in the 1970s. I always found the teaching difficult to comprehend because yoga does not speak about self-acceptance; rather, it teaches *disidentifying* from what in our ordinary consciousness is felt to be the self, and regarding it as *not a part of one's true self*. In thus looking upon one's normal self as a false self while one is still identified with it, one tends to experience inner conflict and disturbance. What Eckhart says about such a state of inner disturbance or non-peace has now enabled me to sense obscurely the truth of

⁴ Eckhart Tolle. *The Power of Now*, p. 57.

⁵ Eckhart Tolle and Sri Aurobindo. Chapter 2, Interview with Eckhart.

the Buddhist teaching about self-acceptance. He says: “Forgive yourself for not being at peace. The moment you *completely* accept your non-peace, non-peace becomes transmuted into peace. Anything you accept fully will get you there, will take you into peace. This is the miracle of surrender.”⁶ This teaching has given me an insight into self-acceptance as an aspect of surrender—surrender to the suchness of the present moment.

From a psychological viewpoint, one cannot be fully present in Eckhart’s sense of the term as long as one is still completely identified with the egoic self. In yogic language, one cannot be a fully detached Witness when one is so identified, for detachment and identification are mutually exclusive states. When one is partly identified and partly detached—as all seekers are in varying degrees—one is necessarily divided within oneself. This understanding has reinforced in me the need for acceptance of oneself as necessarily a divided self as long as one is a seeker.

Related to what I have just stated is the insight regarding the importance of being *liberated* from the egoic self by becoming a disidentified Witness prior to trying to be its Master. I have come to realize that, because of the emphasis in Sri Aurobindo’s yoga on mastery and transformation rather than mere liberation, I have tended to be somewhat oblivious of the indispensable need for liberation prior to hoping for mastery of the instrumental self. That led to my placing an excessive stress on rejection of the egoic movements rather than on disidentifying myself from them. Eckhart’s teaching has served to bring a corrective to this self-defeating attitude. I realize that, in dealing with the egoic self, one needs to go through the three stages spoken of by Sri Aurobindo: first and foremost, becoming *inwardly free* by being the impartial Witness of the movements in one’s outer egoic being; secondly, being the Sanctioner, consenting only to what accords with one’s true inner nature; thirdly, becoming the Master of all the movements of one’s body, vital, and mind.

Eckhart’s teaching has also helped me to understand that what is called rejection in yoga is not the right thing if it involves a painful struggle. Simply standing back as a calm witness, neither supporting

⁶ *The Power of Now*, p. 163.

nor resisting whatever arises in one's nature—as Eckhart teaches—achieves the same result that is intended by yogic rejection. As Sri Aurobindo says, “When the calmness is there, all sorts of things may rise on the surface—they have not to be accepted, but simply looked at. In time the calmness will be so developed as to quell the vital and outer mind also and in that complete quietude the true perceptions will come.”⁷

Yet another related insight—something that I have for long intellectually known but have not realized deeply enough—is the relative impotence of mental will in bringing about a change in ordinary consciousness. Mental will can exercise a *control* and prevent ordinary consciousness—which is largely unconscious—from slipping into a deeper unconsciousness, but to free ordinary consciousness from its conditioned reactions and limitations, a consciousness deeper or higher than that of the mind needs to be invoked. Eckhart calls it Presence. In Sri Aurobindo's yoga it is called the Divine Force or the Mother's Force. I realize more than ever before that, to invoke the Divine Force, it is not enough merely to detach oneself and stand back as a witness but to *offer* all the movements of one's ordinary consciousness to the Divine.

I have come to understand that what Eckhart calls Presence is not a mere mental witnessing and awareness but the witnessing and awareness of the inner being, the Purusha as it is called in Sankhya. Mental awareness can lead only to mental control. What Eckhart teaches is *allowing* rather than controlling, but allowing, he says, *always implies awareness*—a state that is the opposite of the normal state in which one is either totally identified with whatever arises in one's nature and consequently *acts it out*, or, if partly (that is, only mentally) disidentified with what arises, one tries to *control* it. Another possibility is that one may be mentally detached and so have a mental awareness of an ignorant movement, but the mind feels powerless in the face of the strong downward movement, so one gives in to it out of weakness. Yet another possibility—especially in the case of someone who has come across Eckhart's teaching about allowing everything that arises in oneself—is to justify and rationalize an ignorant

⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1255.

movement (with which one has not yet truly disidentified) by adopting the attitude that all movements that arise in oneself should be “allowed,” that is, acted out, not repressed. Sri Aurobindo has often remarked about the way in which the mind is thus used by the desire-nature for rationalizing the urges of the vital being. Regarding this aspect of the mind, which he calls the vital mind, he writes:

The vital started in its evolution with obedience to impulse and no reason—as for strategy, the only strategy it understands is some tactics by which it can compass its desires. It does not like the voice of knowledge and wisdom—but curiously enough by the necessity which has grown up in man of justifying action by reason, the *vital mind* has developed a strategy of its own which is to get the reason to find out reasons for justifying its own feelings and impulses.⁸

In conclusion, my summary statement of the central messages of Eckhart’s teachings has also undergone modification. I concluded the first chapter by stating what seemed to be Eckhart’s two central messages: dwell in the Now, and surrender to what *is*. I now see the two messages to be two aspects of a single message that brings together the Buddhist teaching about living in the present moment and the yogic teaching about surrendering to the Divine. Eckhart’s single message is: *live in alignment with the Now; allow the power of Now to act in and through you*. His corollary teaching is: *be present and still; step out of the mental noise of thought, and step into the stillness of thoughtless awareness*.

⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga*, SABCL, Vol. 24, p. 1329.

Appendix I

Sri Aurobindo's Teaching and Method of Practice

The teaching of Sri Aurobindo¹ starts from that of the ancient sages of India that behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that One Self and Spirit but divided by a certain separativity of consciousness, an ignorance of their true Self and Reality in the mind, life and body. It is possible by a certain psychological discipline to remove this veil of separative consciousness and become aware of the true Self, the Divinity within us and all.

Sri Aurobindo's teaching states that this One Being and Consciousness is involved here in Matter. Evolution is the method by which it liberates itself; consciousness appears in what seems to be inconscient, and once having appeared is self-impelled to grow higher and higher and at the same time to enlarge and develop towards a greater and greater perfection. Life is the first step of this release of consciousness; mind is the second; but the evolution does not finish with mind, it awaits a release into something greater, a consciousness

¹ Sri Aurobindo speaks of himself in the third person in this statement written for the booklet *The Teaching of Sri Aurobindo and Sri Aurobindo's Ashram*.

which is spiritual and supramental. The next step of the evolution must be towards the development of Supermind and Spirit as the dominant power in the conscious being. For only then will the involved Divinity in things release itself entirely and it become possible for life to manifest perfection.

But while the former steps in evolution were taken by Nature without a conscious will in the plant and animal life, in man Nature becomes able to evolve by a conscious will in the instrument. It is not, however, by the mental will in man that this can be wholly done, for the mind goes only to a certain point and after that can only move in a circle. A conversion has to be made, a turning of the consciousness by which mind has to change into the higher principle. This method is to be found through the ancient psychological discipline and practice of Yoga. In the past, it has been attempted by a drawing away from the world and a disappearance into the height of the Self or Spirit. Sri Aurobindo teaches that a descent of the higher principle is possible which will not merely release the spiritual Self out of the world, but release it in the world, replace the mind's ignorance or its very limited knowledge by a supramental Truth-Consciousness which will be a sufficient instrument of the inner Self and make it possible for the human being to find himself dynamically as well as inwardly and grow out of his still animal humanity into a diviner race. The psychological discipline of Yoga can be used to that end by opening all the parts of the being to a conversion of transformation through the descent and working of the higher still concealed supramental principle.

This, however, cannot be done at once or in a short time or by any rapid or miraculous transformation. Many steps have to be taken by the seeker before the supramental descent is possible. Man lives mostly in his surface mind, life and body, but there is an inner being within him with greater possibilities to which he has to awake—for it is only a very restricted influence from it that he receives now and that pushes him to a constant pursuit of a greater beauty, harmony, power and knowledge. The first process of Yoga is therefore to open the ranges of this inner being and to live from there outward, governing his outward life by an inner light and force. In doing so he discovers in himself his true soul which is not this outer mixture of mental, vital and physical elements but something of the Reality behind them,

a spark from the one Divine Fire. He has to learn to live in his soul and purify and orientate by its drive towards the Truth the rest of the nature. There can follow afterwards an opening upward and descent of a higher principle of the Being. But even then it is not at once the full supramental Light and Force. For there are several ranges of consciousness between the ordinary human mind and the supramental Truth-Consciousness. These intervening ranges have to be opened up and their power brought down into the mind, life and body. Only afterwards can the full power of the Truth-Consciousness work in the nature. The process of this self-discipline or Sadhana is therefore long and difficult, but even a little of it is so much gained because it makes the ultimate release and perfection more possible.

There are many things belonging to older systems that are necessary on the way—an opening of the mind to a greater wideness and to the sense of the Self and the Infinite, an emergence into what has been called the cosmic consciousness, mastery over the desires and passions; an outward asceticism is not essential, but the conquest of desire and attachment and a control over the body and its needs, greeds and instincts are indispensable. There is a combination of the principles of the old systems, the way of knowledge through the mind's discernment between Reality and the appearance, the heart's way of devotion, love and surrender and the way of works turning the will away from motives of self-interest to the Truth and the service of a greater Reality than the ego. For the whole being has to be trained so that it can respond and be transformed when it is possible for that greater Light and Force to work in the nature.

In this discipline, the inspiration of the Master, and in the difficult stages his control and his Presence are indispensable—for it would be impossible otherwise to go through it without much stumbling and error which would prevent all chance of success. The Master is one who has risen to a higher consciousness and being and he is often regarded as its manifestation or representative. He not only helps by his teaching and still more by his influence and example but by a power to communicate his own experience to others.

This is Sri Aurobindo's teaching and method of practice. It is not his object to develop any one religion or to amalgamate the older religions or to found any new religion—for any of these things would

lead away from his central purpose. The one aim of his Yoga is an inner self-development by which each one who follows it can in time discover the One Self in all and evolve a higher consciousness than the mental, a spiritual and supramental consciousness which will transform and divinize human nature.

Sri Aurobindo
(*On Himself*, SABCL Vol. 26, pp. 95–97)

Appendix II

The Three Instruments of the Teacher

Teaching, example, influence—these are the three instruments of the Guru. But the wise Teacher will not seek to impose himself or his opinions on the passive acceptance of the receptive mind; he will throw in only what is productive and sure as a seed which will grow under the divine fostering within. He will seek to awaken much more than to instruct; he will aim at the growth of the faculties and the experiences by a natural process and free expansion. He will give a method as an aid, as a utilisable device, not as an imperative formula or a fixed routine. And he will be on his guard against any turning of the means into a limitation, against the mechanising of process. His whole business is to awaken the divine light and set working the divine force of which he himself is only a means and an aid, a body or a channel.

The example is more powerful than the instruction; but it is not the example of the outward acts nor that of the personal character which is of most importance. These have their place and their utility; but what will most stimulate aspiration in others is the central fact of the divine realisation within him governing his whole life and inner state and all his activities. This is the universal and essential element; the rest belongs to individual person and circumstance. It is this dynamic realisation that the Sadhaka must feel and reproduce in

himself according to his own nature; he need not strive after an imitation from outside which may well be sterilising rather than productive of right and natural fruits.

Influence is more important than example. Influence is not the outward authority of the Teacher over his disciple, but the power of his contact, of his Presence, of the nearness of his soul to the soul of another, infusing into it, even though in silence, that which he himself is and possesses. This is the supreme sign of the Master. For the greatest Master is much less a Teacher than a Presence pouring the divine consciousness and its constituting light and power and purity and bliss into all who are receptive around him.

Sri Aurobindo

(The Synthesis of Yoga, SABCL, Vol. 20, pp. 60,61)

Appendix III

Sri Aurobindo's First Major Experience

Now to reach Nirvana was the first radical result of my own Yoga. It threw me suddenly into a condition above and without thought, unstained by any mental or vital movement; there was no ego, no real world—only when one looked through the immobile senses, something received or bore upon its sheer silence a world of empty forms, materialized shadows without true substance. There was no One or many even, only just absolutely That, featureless, relationless, sheer, indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely real and solely real. This was not mental realization nor something glimpsed somewhere above—no abstraction—it was positive, the only positive reality—although not a spatial physical world, pervading, occupying or rather flooding and drowning this semblance of a physical world, leaving no room or space for any reality but itself, allowing nothing else to seem actual, positive or substantial. I cannot say there was anything exhilarating or rapturous in the experience, as it then came to me—(the ineffable Ananda I had years afterwards)—but what it brought was an inexpressible Peace, a stupendous silence, an infinity of release and freedom. I lived in that Nirvana day and night before it began to admit other things into itself or modify itself at all, and the inner heart of experience, a constant memory of it and its power to return remained until in the end it began to disappear into a greater

Superconsciousness from above. But meanwhile realization added itself to realization and fused itself with this original experience. At an early stage the aspect of an illusory world gave place to one in which illusion¹ is only a small surface phenomenon with an immense Divine Reality behind it and a supreme Divine Reality above it and an intense Divine Reality in the heart of everything that had seemed at first only a cinematic shape or shadow. And this was no reimprisonment in the senses, no diminution or fall from supreme experience, it came rather as a constant heightening and widening of the Truth; it was the spirit that saw objects, not the senses, and the Peace, the Silence, the freedom in Infinity remained always with the world or all worlds only as a continuous incident in the timeless eternity of the Divine.

Sri Aurobindo

(On Himself, SABCL, Vol. 26, pp. 95–97)

¹ In fact it is not an illusion in the sense of an imposition of something baseless and unreal on the consciousness, but a misinterpretation by the conscious mind and sense and a falsifying misuse of manifested existence.

Note on Eckhart Tolle

Eckhart Tolle, recognized as one of the foremost contemporary spiritual teachers, was born in 1948 in Germany where he spent the first thirteen years of his life. He graduated from the University of London, after which he was a research scholar and supervisor in physics at Cambridge University.

Until his thirtieth year he lived in a state of almost continuous anxiety and depression, at times of a suicidal nature. One night, not long after his twenty-ninth birthday, he had a sudden and profound spiritual experience that radically transformed him and entirely changed the course of his life. Following this transformative experience, he devoted a few years to the study of spiritual texts and spending time with spiritual teachers in order to understand and integrate his spiritual experience. Then, for about ten years, he engaged himself in spiritual counseling and teaching, working with individuals and groups of spiritual seekers in Europe and North America. His epoch-making book, *The Power of Now* (1997), represents the essence of this work. He has since conducted numerous seminars and retreats throughout the world and has written three more books: *Practicing the Power of Now* (1997), *Stillness Speaks* (2003), and *A New Earth* (2005).

He now lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Note on Sri Aurobindo

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on August 15, 1872. At the age of seven he was taken to England for his education. There, he studied at St. Paul's School, London, and at King's College, Cambridge. Returning to India in 1893, he worked for the next thirteen years in the Princely State of Baroda in the service of the Maharaja and as a professor in the state's college.

In 1906, Sri Aurobindo quit his post in Baroda and went to Calcutta where he became one of the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement. As editor of the newspaper *Bande Mataram*, he boldly put forward the idea of complete independence from Britain. Arrested three times for sedition or treason, he was released each time for lack of evidence.

Sri Aurobindo began the practice of Yoga in 1905. Within a few years he achieved several fundamental spiritual realizations. In 1910 he withdrew from politics and went to Pondicherry in French India in order to concentrate on his inner life and work. During his forty years there, he developed a new spiritual path, the Integral Yoga, whose ultimate aim is the transformation of life by the power of a supramental consciousness. In 1926, with the help of the Mother, he founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. His vision of life is presented in numerous works of prose and poetry, among which the best known are *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and *Savitri*. Sri Aurobindo passed away on December 5, 1950.

Note on the Mother

The Mother was born Mirra Alfassa on February 21, 1878, in Paris. A student at the Academie Julian, she became an accomplished artist. Gifted from an early age with a capacity for spiritual and occult experience, she went to Tlemcen, Algeria, in 1906 and 1907 to study occultism with the adept Max Theon and his wife. Between 1911 and 1913 she gave a number of talks to various groups of seekers in Paris and began to record her deepening communion with the Divine in the diary later published as *Prayers and Meditations*.

In 1914 the Mother voyaged to Pondicherry, South India, to meet the Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo. After a stay of eleven months, she was obliged by the outbreak of the First World War to return to France. A year later she went to Japan, where she remained for four years. In 1920 the Mother rejoined Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry. Six years later, when the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was founded, Sri Aurobindo entrusted its material and spiritual charge to her, for he considered her not a disciple but his spiritual equal and collaborator. Under her guidance the Ashram grew into a large, many-faceted spiritual community. She also established a school, the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, in 1952, and an international township, Auroville, in 1968. Her teachings have been published in the *Collected Works of the Mother*, which to date comprise 17 volumes. The Mother passed away on November 17, 1973.

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Eckhart Tolle & Sri Aurobindo

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Described by Ken Wilber as "India's greatest modern philosopher-sage" and as "the greatest of all Vedantic philosophers," Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) is considered one of the foremost philosophers of the 20th-century, and was, as well, a political activist, mystic, spiritual leader, poet, and yogi. His unique contribution to the development of the human potential was realized through his integration of Eastern and Western cultures.



Dr. A.S. Dalal

As well as comparing aspects of Eckhart's teaching and Sri Aurobindo's yoga, Dr. A. S. Dalal relates these teachings to the story of his own spiritual quest.

A Moslem by birth, Dr. Dalal was born in Tanzania, moved to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for seven years, then worked in the U.S. as a psychologist for over two decades before returning to the ashram where he now lives. He has compiled ten books based on the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and has written two books integrating Sri Aurobindo's psychological thought with modern psychology. Various books of his, published in India and abroad, have been translated into French, Italian, German, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Lithuanian, Korean, and several Indian languages.



Editions
INDIA

Spirituality / Philosophy
Religion / Consciousness Studies

Rs. 300

ISBN 10: 81-89658-31-X

ISBN 13: 978-81-89658-31-1



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788189 658311