

6. SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE

If we have failed to understand, it is that we have thought of knowledge as a mass of theorems and an accumulation of propositions. But this is not a wisdom built up of theorems but one reality, not manifold detail reduced to a unity, but rather a unity working out into detail. The true Wisdom, then, is Real being, and Real Being is Wisdom. (Plotinus)

Knowledge is what defines the human being. For this reason the human species has been called *homo sapiens*. The thirst to know, to learn more and more, to understand, are at the heart of man. Cicero said: “Nature has planted in our minds an insatiable longing to see the truth.”

In other cultures, a different kind of knowledge was valued above all: that which refers to the famous words “Know thyself”. With the inward dimension of man being increasingly forgotten, the West has slowly turned towards an exclusively outer knowledge that does not ask itself *who* the subject of this knowledge is:

For several centuries Western civilization has operated under the assumption that we can understand the universe without understanding ourselves.

What is the “mental faculty” that could provide a knowledge superior to reason? In ancient philosophy—and this includes diverse countries, cultures and epochs—this mental function was defined as “intellect”. While reason operates step by step through time, using pairs of opposites, the knowledge given by the intellect is direct and immediate—with no mediation or intermediary—instantaneous, independent of all sensation or emotion, beyond all concept or representation, unitive and beyond the realm of doubt.

In the words of Plato:

There is an eye of the soul which [...] is far more precious than ten thousand bodily eyes, for by it alone is truth seen. [...] As being is to becoming, so is pure intellect to opinion. And as intellect is to opinion, so is science (*gnosis*) to belief, and understanding to the perception of shadows.

For his part, Plotinus speaks of “another intellect, different from that which reasons and is denominated rational”.

The intellect (*nous* in Greek, *intellectus* or *intellectus agens* in Latin, *buddhi* in Sanskrit, *aql qudsi* in Arabic, *lo* in Tibetan) is the faculty that permits us to discriminate, pay attention and be conscious of ourselves.

Other very well known examples are the intuitions that occur in the domain of science, which provide the solution for complex problems or the blazing of new frontiers. The solution to a problem often appears unexpectedly to the scientist; not when in the midst of deliberating upon it, but instead when involved in some other activity. Among well-known cases are those of Kekulé, who “understood” the cyclical chemical structure

of benzene while dreaming of the *ouroboros*, the mythical tail-eating serpent, and of Nicholas Tesla, who got the idea of the AC motor while reading Goethe's *Faust* out loud. D. S. Kothari relates:

The new theorems, unless trivial, are of course first "discovered" and then proved. Discovery is an inspired guess, a flash of insight. It is not a step by step process, but a sort of quantum jump of a well-prepared imagination. A rational account of a discovery, the proof, follows and not precedes the discovery.

Al-Ghazali, convinced that the writings of the Sufis reflected authentic experiences, abandoned his brilliant academic career in pursuit of the Sufi path. At the end of his life, in his *Niche of Lights*, he wrote, explaining to a friend what he had obtained from his own experience:

Know then! There is, truly, in the heart of man an eye that possesses this level of perfection. It is called now intellect (*aql*), now spirit (*rÊh*), now human soul (*nafs insÊnî*). [...] Have you then understood [...] that there are two kinds of eyes: one external and one internal. The external eye belongs to the sensible and visible world, the internal eye belongs to the other world, that of the celestial domain (*MalakÊt*). [...] Thus, there is a place situated beyond reason, where what is not manifested there is manifested. And this is perfectly conceivable, even for you who are attached to the rational world. It is no more difficult to admit than it would be to admit the fact that reason is beyond discernment and sensations, and that extraordinary, marvelous things could reveal themselves to it beyond the ken of discernment and sensation. [...] When the intellect frees itself of the veil of conjecture and imagination, which is very difficult, one cannot even consider that it errs.

For Saint Teresa, it is "a knowledge that is direct, tasted, in which something is known, not by any objective information, but by having lived it or suffered it in one's own being". "It is seen by experience, something altogether different than merely thinking and believing it."

Intellectual knowledge is not illogical—it could not be, for logic is a law of the world—rather it provides a vision that logic can only guess at, just like sight affords a more comprehensive vision of something than touch without contradicting it. Human intelligence cannot be reduced to reason. A complete intelligence has need of the following two faculties: intuition and analysis.

Saint Augustine of Hippo insisted that "our whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen."

At the end of his life during a matins mass Saint Thomas had a spiritual revelation. From that time on he refused to continue with his philosophical work (which was never completed), saying: "Such things have been revealed to me that now, all I have written appears to me as so much straw."

For diverse and complicated reasons, Europeans slowly turned their attention from the spiritual world to the physical one. And one sees only what one looks at. From the 14th century onwards, spiritual life in Europe was in decline: this is clear when we see

how the contemplative perspective as a source of knowledge gave way and became subordinate to the ultra-rationalizing viewpoint of theology. Later centuries would distance the “intellectuals” even more from a knowledge offered by the intellect and set them off on other, very different paths. Finally, Kant philosophically established the impossibility of knowing things as they are.

Thought and reason function on the basis of polarities: white or black, high or low, true or false, subject and object. Their very nature is to divide, classify, compare; they try to understand the world using categories and concepts. They cannot see unity, or reality as a whole, for their automatic operation is dissection and division. Spiritual vision is unitive: in its action it annuls the division between subject and object, as well as the other polarities, and reveals “things” that are inexpressible in logical terms (hence its common expression in poetic, mythological, or paradoxical language).

High level scientific knowledge is not at all accessible to everyone. It demands many years of study and practice, and the vast majority of the population—including scientists a different specialization—are unable to verify the validity of its theories, or even understand more than the most elementary aspect of it. Only after extensive study and constant practice would a scientist be able to participate in the common scientific venture. Nor would such arduous training guarantee that a student attain the rank of a great scientist; only a few become geniuses.

Intellectual intuition, or spiritual contemplation, is not something to which the great majority of people have easy access. A clear intellectual vision requires a process of prior purification, a long period of asceticism, observation and control over the mind.

Nicephorus the Hesychast sets forth the pre-requisites needed to devote oneself to the “method of holy attention”:

Before all else, it is necessary to keep three things in mind: first, do not nourish any kind of preoccupation; second, have a pure conscience that will not reproach you for anything; third, be completely detached, so that your senses will not be drawn to any seduction of this world.

The Buddha preached: “I have seen the truth, you too can see it. Come and see it.” And he exhorted people to treat his sermons in the same way as a jeweler, who only confirms that a piece is gold after testing it, heating it and rubbing it. “Oh monks, accept my words only after examining and verifying them, do not accept them simply out of respect for me”.

William Law:

You are under the power of no other enemy, are held in no other captivity, and want no other deliverance but from the power of your own earthly self. This is the one murderer of the divine life within you. It is your own Cain that murders your own Abel.

According to Al-Ghazali, the work of the Sufi is to purge from the heart all that is other than God. Saint Peter of Alcantara used to impatiently cry out: “Oh Lord, when will all that is contrary to Thee be dead in me?”

What happens depends on God, or, from another viewpoint, on our destiny. To worry about it will change nothing. Giving up all our worries to God, we abide in peace. According to Ramana Maharshi:

Knowing that the train carries all the weight, why indeed should we, the passengers travelling in it, carry our small individual articles of luggage on our laps to our great discomfort, instead of putting them aside and sitting at perfect ease?

Swami Sivananda:

If there are mangoes on the top of a big tree you do not jump all at once to pluck them. It is impossible. You gradually climb up the tree by catching hold of the different branches and so reach the top of the tree. Even so you cannot jump all at once to the summit of the spiritual ladder. You will have to place your feet with caution on each rug.

Ramakrishna went through a period of great anguish due to his vehement desire to have a vision of Kali, the divine Mother, and he anxiously asked her: “Art thou true, Mother, or is it all a fiction of the mind—mere poetry without any reality? If thou dost exist, why can I not see Thee? Is religion, then, a phantasy, a mere castle in the air?” Finally, he had the longed-for vision, which he himself told about in the following way:

Suddenly the blessed Mother revealed Herself to me, and I fell unconscious on the floor. What happened after that externally, or how that day or the next passed, I do not know, but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss, altogether new, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother. [...] The buildings [...], the temple and all vanished from my sight, leaving no trace whatsoever, and in their stead was a limitless, infinite, effulgent ocean of Consciousness or Spirit. As far as the eye could reach, its shining billows were madly rushing towards me, from all sides with a terrific noise, to swallow me up! In the twinkling of an eye they were on me and engulfed me completely.

R. M. Bucke, who researched this subject in depth after passing through a similar experience, describes experiences known as “cosmic consciousness”:

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe. Along with the consciousness of the cosmos there occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence—would make him almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness [...]. With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already.

Richard of Saint Victor thus explains what occurs in ecstasy:

For when the mind of man is carried beyond itself all the limits of human reasoning are overpassed. For the whole system of human reasoning succumbs to that which

the soul perceives of the divine light, when she is raised above herself and ravished in ecstasy. [...] Whosoever is taken outside of himself in ecstasy leaves as from a tent to the meeting with his approaching Lord, and sees him face to face, contemplating the luminary of the highest wisdom without any veil or shadow image; neither in a mirror nor by enigmas (I Cor. 13.12), but rather, as I have said, in its true essence. [...] For in ecstasy the mind is removed from its habitual ambience; immersed, so to speak, in dream, it moves about contemplating things divine, far from human preoccupations.

Swami Ramdas relates how one day the entire world became Rama (God) for him, and how this state later became permanent:

And it came one morning apocalyptically—when, lo, the entire landscape changed: All was Rama, nothing but Rama—wherever Ramdas looked! Everything was ensouled by Rama—vivid, marvellous, rapturous—the trees, the shrubs, the ants, the cows, the cats, the dogs—even inanimate things pulsated with the marvellous presence of the one Rama. And Ramdas danced in joy [...] and rushed at a tree in front, which he embraced because it was not a tree but Rama Himself! A man was passing by, Ramdas ran towards him and embraced him, calling out: “Rama, O Rama!” The man got scared and bolted. [...] The bliss and joy came to be permanent, like a torrent rushing downhill till it finds a placid level of limpid purling stream. This experience is called *sahaja samadhi*, in which you can never be cut off from the consciousness of being at one with the One who has become all, in which you feel you are one with all because you have perceived that all is He, the One-without-a-second.

Hildegarde von Bingen, in union with the immanent Spirit, exclaimed:

I am that supreme and fiery force that sends forth all the sparks of life. Death hath no part in me, yet do I allot it [...]. I am that living and fiery essence of the divine substance that flows in the beauty of the fields. I shine in the water, I burn in the sun and the moon and the stars. Mine is that mysterious force of the invisible wind. I sustain the breath of all living. I breathe in the verdure and in the flowers, and when the waters flow like living things, it is I. [...] I am the force which lies hid in the winds, from me they take their source, and as a man may move because he breathes, so does a fire burn by my blast. All these live because I am in them and am of their life. I am wisdom. Mine is the blast of the thundered word by which all things were made. I permeate all things that they may not die. I am life.

