

5. CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN THOUGHT

In very few places apart from India has Supreme Reality been spoken of in terms of consciousness. A long line of philosophers and yogis have spent their lives dedicated to using introspection as a means to resolve the mystery of the mind and consciousness.

What was the main focus of all their enquiries, investigations, meditations and teachings? Consciousness. They investigated and studied almost every aspect of consciousness—the empirical, the linguistic, the immanent and other aspects. This became a living tradition of intellectual life in India. For more than two thousand years the subject of consciousness was the passion of the Indian mind. And a vast amount of information on consciousness, especially transcendental consciousness, came to be stored in various books such as the *Upanishads*, the *Yoga-sutras*, etc.

One of the basic differences between Indian and western thought with regard to this subject is that the former has articulated a radical separation between the mind and consciousness. Whilst in Europe, especially following Descartes, it was thought that man is composed of body and mind (also called spirit), in India—as in all traditional thought—the division is threefold: body, mind and consciousness. However, the main separation is not between the body and the mind, but between these two parts and consciousness.

In Indian thought, the body is made of matter; the mind, for its part is also “material”, though composed of a much more subtle matter. Indeed, all that pertains to the reign of multiplicity and change belongs to nature (*prakriti*) and is composed of parts that for lack of a better term could be called material. The mind makes up part of the subtle or psychic world, much more complex than the physical one, yet like the latter it is, in the last analysis, unconscious. The mind, unconscious? The mind, made up of thoughts, sensations and sentiments, is only visible by virtue of the existence of consciousness which, like the sun, illuminates everything under it in this world. Consciousness is not material nor can it be observed objectively; it is witness to the mind and to everything else. The human being is therefore a physical-mental complex vivified by consciousness. By contrast, the West has been ruled in the past few centuries by Descartes’ concept: *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am”, identifying thought with man’s ultimate being.

Indian thought makes a sharp division between *consciousness* and the *contents of consciousness*. All that we perceive and know belongs to the contents of consciousness: exterior objects, our thoughts, feelings, emotions and sentiments, even our sense of individuality. What then remains outside the field? The knower of the field, the witness of all, the light that illuminates all that is perceived and makes it possible to be known. This observer, this “primordial I”, is before everything else; without it, no experience is possible.

One usually refers to the physical body when one speaks of ‘I’, but a little reflection will reveal that the ‘I’ cannot be the physical body. The body itself cannot say ‘I’, for it is inert. One says, “this is *my* coat, this is *my* hair, this is *my* body”. What is ‘mine’ belongs to me. ‘My’ is a personal possessive pronoun implying ownership. What

belongs to me is not me. I am separate from it; I possess it. Whatever I possess, I can dispense with, and still remain who I am. On a deeper level, when one says ‘I’, one is referring to the faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing. Yet the same analysis applies. These are *my* thoughts, *my* feelings, *my* emotions—they come and go. I know them. I am the knower, and they are the known. No one says, “I am this shirt” or “I am this house”. Likewise, it is a mistake to superimpose one’s body, one’s thoughts, and one’s feelings, upon the ‘I’.

At first sight, our “I” has no unity, but appears to be composed of innumerable partial and separate identities: “I am a man”, “my name is such and such”, “I am good looking”, “I am short-sighted”, “I am a professor”, “I am the father of my children”, “I have done such and such”, “I think...”, “I want that”... These multiple identities are constantly changing. My present body has practically nothing in common with what it was when it was one or two years old, nor does what I thought about and the image I had of myself at that time have anything in common with what I think and believe I am when I am twenty, fifty, eighty years old... And nevertheless... we all have the sensation that behind the whirlwind of thoughts, emotions and desires, behind the constant changes in all that we think we are—our body and our mind—there is something unchangeable: our deepest being is motionless and immutable.

This “feeling” of always being the same is the sole thing that provides continuity to the shifting states of the mind and body; without this, there would be no unity at all. We would be nothing more than a whirlwind of independent mental movements, a confused gibberish that would never be able to possess even the frail unity of each person.

Buddhism refuses to define the *Atman*, or universal underlying intelligence, in positive terminology, for any definition or explanation would necessarily end by being false. Yet, at the same time as he negated the *atman*, Buddha said:

There is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed. If there were not this Unborn, this Unoriginated, this Uncreated, this Unformed, escape from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed would not be possible. But since there is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, therefore is escape possible from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed.

The traditions of India insist that our ultimate being, pure consciousness, remains unaffected by all that happens, because it does not form part of “Nature” (*prak,ti*), of “becoming”. Although it is at the heart of the universe, the *Atman* nevertheless transcends it. Ramana Maharshi explains this by means of a simple example:

On the screen, you sometimes see a huge ocean with endless waves; that disappears. Another time, you see fire spreading all around; that too disappears. The screen is there on both occasions. Did the screen get wet with water or did it get burned by the fire? Nothing affected the screen. In the same way, the things that happen during the waking, dreaming, and sleep states do not affect you at all; you remain forever your own Self.

According to the *Tripura Rahasya*:

Time and space are the limits of the manifested world. Space delimits form, and time, action. But if both are produced by consciousness, how can they limit it? Tell me, in what place or time is consciousness not present? Without consciousness, what time or space can exist? Existence is but consciousness. Indeed, the existence of all things is nothing other than their illumination by consciousness. Illumination and consciousness are the same. [...] Inert objects are not self-luminous, for they depend on the consciousness that illuminates them. Only consciousness shines of itself without support from an external source. All else depends upon it to shine. [...] Can you indicate to me any place or time when consciousness was not present? For the absence of consciousness would imply an absence of that time or place. [...] If, at a given moment, consciousness were absent, how could there be awareness of that moment? How would the absence of consciousness be known? [...] It is moreover impossible to experience the inexistence of anything without the presence of consciousness.

For E. F. Schumacher,

most of us, most of the time, behave and act mechanically, like machines. The specifically human power of self-awareness is asleep, and the human being, like an animal, acts—more or less intelligently—solely in response to various influences. [...] To ask whether the human being *has* freedom is like asking whether man *is* a millionaire. He is not, but can become, a millionaire. He can make it his aim to become rich; similarly, he can make it his aim to become free. In his “inner space” he can develop a center of strength so that the power of his freedom exceeds that of his necessity.

Long before Freud, Indian thinkers already knew that the mind contained a large amount of unconscious processes. The way in which the mind works, as well as the decision to take certain measures above others, is determined by the *samskaras*. These *samskaras*, invisible to our consciousness, are like the “footprints”, the “subconscious latencies”, the “mental furrows” caused by repeated experiences; they are what shape our tendencies and the guiding lines of our character.

This pattern [of *samskara* creation] is seen in something we all know well: habit-formation. When we do something enjoyable, like drinking tea or eating sweets, it affects our bodies and minds in certain, mostly pleasurable, ways. These experiences create and/or reinforce specific neural pathways in the brain and body which conduce to their being used again, just as rain water erodes away the earth, attracting yet further rain water until, with time and repetition, a constant stream may develop.

The *samskaras* are what make up the way we are; and they are what cause certain thoughts or “mental modifications” (*vriddhi*) to arise in preference to others. We do not have conscious control over the thoughts that arise in our mind.

For a Buddhist, true spiritual transformation means a change in the stream of consciousness. Just as we can pollute a river’s water by throwing waste into it, or else purify it by filtering, so we can make our consciousness continuum clearer or darker during our lives.

the reception by the West of meditative techniques has also often meant their

deformation and distortion. Once separated from all religious or spiritual connotations and devoid of any renunciation, detachment or sacrifice, what was originally a sacred method of transcendence has become to a large degree a way to offset stress and to increase our mental capacity for mundane ends. The practice of “meditation” is in fashion as a technique to help us triumph in the competitive modern world.

By making no sharp dichotomy between natural and supernatural, Indian psychology makes it possible for scientists to study in a naturalistic way extraordinary human abilities, which are considered anomalies in Western psychological tradition. Similarly, by including the transcendental aspects of our experience in its coverage, Indian psychology blunts the distinction between science and spirituality and renders a meaningful dialogue between science and religion possible.