

Old ideas of mind

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Focusing attention

In the Mahābhārata, there is a story about the focusing of mind. When the princes have been trained at arms, their teacher Droṇa puts them to a test. In the branches of a tree, he fixes a target, which has been crafted to represent a bird. Then he calls the princes, and says to them:

‘You will be called in turn. When called, take careful aim, to cut the head clean off the bird. I’ll tell you when to shoot.’

First is Yudhisṭhira, the eldest. As he stands aiming, with his bow drawn, Droṇa asks:

‘Do you see the bird, in the tree?’

‘Yes Sir, I do.’

‘Very well. Now, can you see the tree, or me, or your brothers and cousins here?’

‘Yes Sir, I see the tree, and you, and all the others here.’

‘Then step aside. You’ve had your turn.’

Duryodhana is next. The same thing happens again. Duryodhana takes aim, is questioned, and told to step aside. As the princes take their turns, the same thing keeps happening again. Finally, it is Arjuna’s turn.

Droṇa asks: ‘Do you see the bird?’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Well, can you see the tree? Or me? Or the others here?’

‘No Sir. I see the bird.’

‘Then describe it.’

‘Sorry Sir. I don’t see its body. Just the head.’

At last, Droṇa is satisfied: ‘Shoot!’ he says.

The arrow flies to its target, and the head falls to the ground.

Like many old stories, this one tells a moral tale. But it does something else, as well. It’s meant to show a truer picture, of how things are.

Nearly all the princes think that they see many things. They look around, and see a world outside. Most people picture their experience in this way.

In this picture, there is a knowing person at the centre, surrounded by a world that's somehow known. An illustration is shown in figure 1.

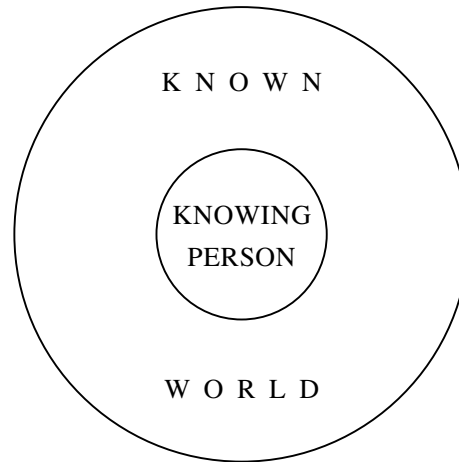
This is our usual picture of experience. As a matter of ingrained habit, we take it for granted that a person's mind is a sort of knowing island, in an outside world where we know many things. Our everyday lives are based on this habitual assumption. And many theories of psychology are also based on it. That includes most of the psychology which is taught in schools and universities today.

But there is something very wrong with this habitual picture of the mind, as a knowing island. When one sees one's own experience like this, it makes one's mind and body seem the centre of the world; and so it gives them an absurdly exaggerated sense of importance. Through spiritual disciplines like yoga, our experience is more carefully investigated, thus opening a fundamental questioning of our habitual assumptions. That leads to more sophisticated pictures of the mind, in more fundamental theories of psychology.

This deeper questioning is illustrated in the Mahābhārata story of Arjuna's concentration. As he stands aiming at the target, he has left behind our usual picture of a knowing mind surrounded by an outside world. In his moment of pure concentration, he sees no world that mixes many things. Instead, he is quite clear that what he sees is just one object which appears in mind. He does not see the world at large, nor the princes beside him, nor his teacher Droṇa, nor the tree in front of him, nor even the body of the bird he's aiming at. He cannot even describe the bird. For what he sees is just the head, as a single point on which his attention is focused.

Outside the single focus of attention, Arjuna sees nothing. All else is understood, at the background of experience. From that background, all of his experience is drawn forward, to focus on the object that appears. This gives us another picture of our subjective experience. It is shown in figure 2 (next page). Here, the mind is focused upon a limited object: by drawing attention from an underlying basis of understanding, at the background of experience. I would put it to you that this second picture is the

Figure 1



starting point of a spiritual psychology, like that of yoga.

In the Mahābhārata, the second picture is dramatized as an ideal of mental concentration, in the life of an epic hero. It's dramatized that way to make people take notice of it. But it is more than a prescribed ideal. It's also meant as a more accurate description of our subjective experience: as we know it actually, at each moment of time.

In fact, no one sees the whole world, all at once. Over a period of time, one may see many things; and then think of them together, in a single thought. Or one may see some single thing; and then analyse it into many things, in the course of further thoughts. In either case, it takes time for different things to show up in one's mind.

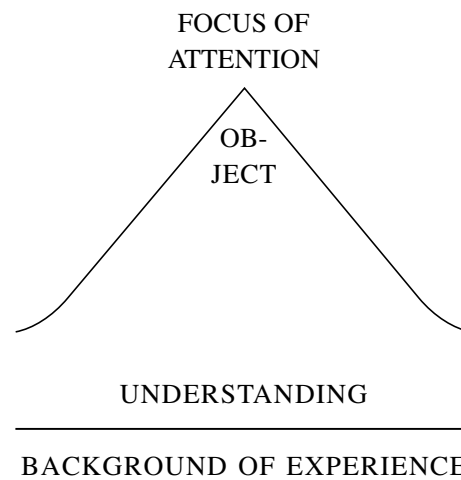
In the present moment, as it is immediately experienced, there is no time for different things to show or to be analysed. What appears is just one object, in the narrow focus of attention. The narrow focus makes the object limited. It excludes other objects, at the apparent surface of the mind. These other things that don't appear are understood below the surface, at the background of experience.

This does not only happen at rare moments of mental concentration. It happens everyday, all the time. The old ideal of concentration shows us how we see things everyday. It shows our common, everyday experience. That's what is described in the preceding figure 2.

To make things more concrete, let me give you an everyday example. Suppose that I am driving a car, and I notice that the engine is sounding a little odd. At this moment, sound appears, at the tip of my attention. But, in the attention that I give to the sound, many things are understood. I hear the sound; but in that hearing I understand how the car was sounding before, what other things have been happening to the car, who else drives the car, who needs it and for what, the sort of car it is, how it can be repaired, my previous experiences with cars and machines and mechanics, and so on. All these and other things are drawn upon, from the background of experience.

This background understanding is an inner basis, which supports the limited perceptions of our minds. At any time, what we see is limited,

Figure 2



excluding other things. But we understand it on a broader basis, which relates it to the rest of our experience. This broader basis is *subjective*. It is found by reflecting *inward*: to what we understand, beneath the objects that appear in mind.

At the surface of the mind, attention turns from one thing to another. So there's a stream of limited perceptions. It is a stream of changing show, rather like the moving pictures on a video screen. The question is: what's underneath this changing stream of mental show? What is there at the depth of mind, beneath its mental pictures?

Underlying consciousness

When we speak about the depth of our minds, we often use the words 'unconscious' or 'subconscious'. We are then thinking of the mind objectively, as a sort of computer. The surface show of mind is the computer screen. Beneath the surface, the mind stores data and makes complex calculations. The results are shown in changing pictures and appearances, seen at the surface of the mind. In this conception, the mind is a highly complex process of activity, which records information and makes use of it. Most of the mind's activity is hidden, but it produces the appearances we see. The hidden part is what we call 'subconscious' or 'unconscious'.

So, beneath the surface of our minds, there seems to be an inner depth that is both dark and mysterious. In the Upanishads, this dark-seeming depth is described as 'antar-hriday-ākāsha' or as an 'inner space within the heart'. And it is further pictured by the word 'guhā', which means a 'cave' or an 'inner recess', with all the sense of hidden mystery that this picturing suggests.

But the Upanishads don't stop there. They say that it is not enough to construct an objective picture of the mind, as we do in the science of psychology. All such picturing belongs to just the surface of the mind. And when the depth of mind is viewed thus superficially, from the pictured surface, this depth must of course seem hidden and dark. What's actually beneath the surface cannot in the end be found by any objective psychology or any mental picturing.

It's not enough to stay at the pictured surface and look down from there, to what seems hidden and thus dark beneath. Instead, one has to go down oneself, reflecting back into the depth of one's own experience. That subjective reflection is achieved through a relentless enquiry, which won't take anything for granted, but asks uncompromising questions about one's own pictures and the assumptions on which they are based.

In particular, the Upanishads question our habitual assumption that consciousness is an activity of mind. Our mental activities – of perception, thought and feeling – produce a changing stream of apparent objects that come and go in each person’s experience. At any given moment, the mind acts so as to make some seeming object appear. The Upanishads point out that this mental action can never amount to ‘prajnyāna’ or ‘consciousness’.

Without the illumination of consciousness, no object nor any action could appear. In the course of experience, objects and actions keep appearing and disappearing. They come and go; but every one of them is lit by consciousness. Thus, consciousness is always present, illuminating all appearances and disappearances. It is that principle of knowing light which is shared in common by all moments of experience, beneath all differences and changes of appearance.

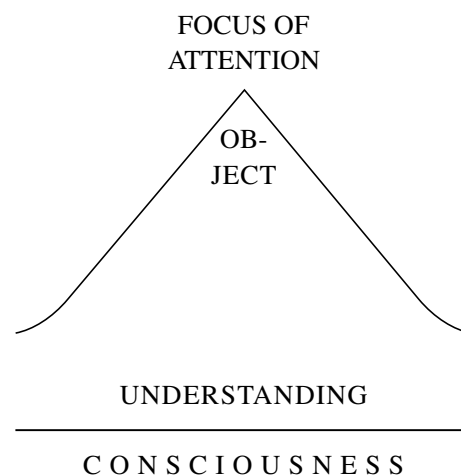
That’s what is meant by the word ‘consciousness’. ‘Conscious-’ means ‘knowing’. The suffix ‘-ness’ means a ‘common principle’. Putting the two together, we get the word ‘consciousness’. It thus implies a common principle that underlies all states of knowing.

In different states, different things are known. But nothing can be known without the light of consciousness. That light is common to all states that we experience. It underlies the changing stream of states that come and go.

That light is consciousness itself. It is not an object, nor an activity. Instead, it is what lights all objects and activities. And it is found beneath all changing states, of mind and understanding. In all these changing states, it is their common background: remaining always present, while they change and pass. This conception is illustrated in figure 3. It is much the same as the previous figure 2, except that the underlying background is now called ‘consciousness’.

But here, it must be understood that the word ‘consciousness’ is being used in a special way that has been clarified by philosophical reflection. The word no longer means a ‘knowing’ that is identified with our changing perceptions of apparent objects, nor with our

Figure 3



changing thoughts and feelings about such objects. Instead, it is a background knowing which lights the mind from deep within. Here knowledge carries on, as quiet understanding. This is a knowing which does not distract attention. Instead, it continues quietly, beneath the clamouring perceptions, thoughts and feelings that keep replacing one another at the surface of the mind. Through its quiet continuity, it enables us to take into account what our partial minds don't make appear. Thus, it is the source of all co-ordination and integrity.

In this conception, consciousness is treated as something fundamental. So there are different ways of looking at it. First, it is the knowing light which illuminates our minds. But it is not a superficial light, found at the changing surface of appearance. Instead, it's the unchanging background, found beneath all appearances that come and go. Thus, it is like a changeless screen, upon which changing pictures are drawn. It is an ever-present screen, behind our mental picturing.

But this screen is not an object that *transmits* or *reflects* light. Instead, as consciousness, it *is* light. In itself, it is just light, unmixed with anything else. But, in the pictures that we see, this light of consciousness gets mixed with changing qualities and objects.

Beneath the pictures in our minds, consciousness is their unpictured background, and their unmixed light as well. These are two ways of looking at it.

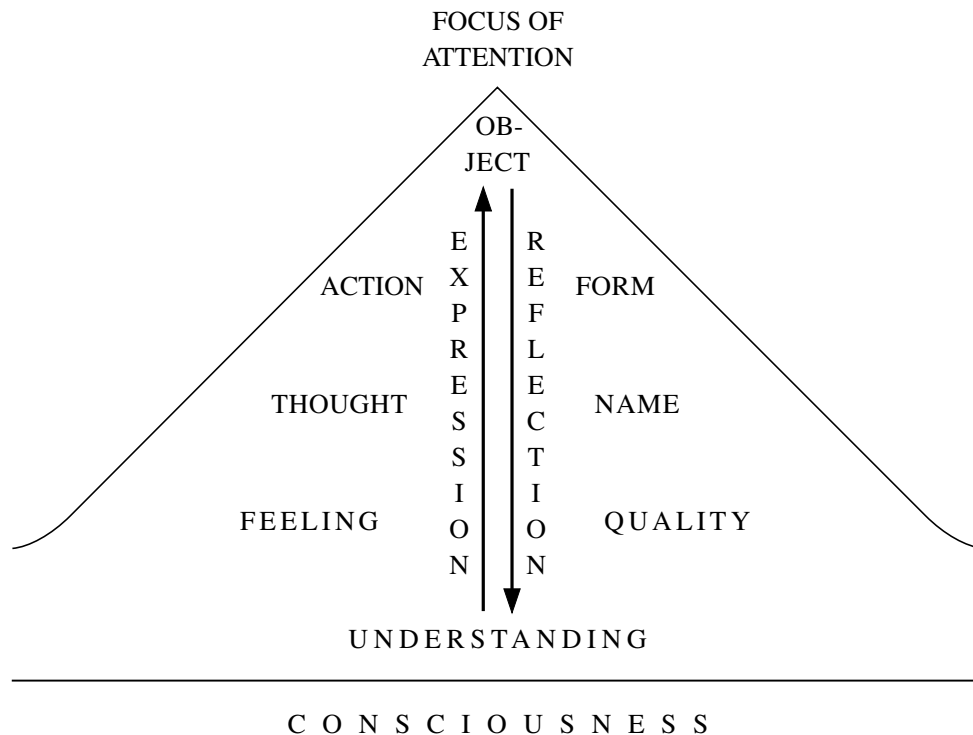
Living and learning

How are the pictures drawn, upon the screen of consciousness? How does its light get mixed, to form the pictures that we see? These questions are answered by the traditional idea of 'life' and 'living energy', or 'prāṇa' as it is called in Sanskrit.

In everyone's experience, though consciousness is not a changing action, it is a self-illuminating presence from which both light and inspiration come. By its mere presence, it illuminates appearances and thus it inspires the activities of mind and of all living faculties. Prāṇa is the energy of that living inspiration. It is not an energy that acts from one object to another. Instead, it comes from consciousness, which it expresses in all living actions.

That's what is meant by the word 'life'. It implies an expression of underlying consciousness, in what is found to be alive. This idea of living energy can be illustrated by adding to our previous diagram. The addition is a cycle of expression and reflection, as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4



From underlying consciousness, our understanding is expressed in what we feel and think and do. Thus our attention turns to objects that we see. Then, as each object is perceived, there's a reflection back. Through the object's form and name and quality, its perception is taken back into the depth of mind. There each perception is assimilated into understanding.

By thus assimilating our perceptions, we learn from experience. As each perception is absorbed, it brings about a further state of understanding. That is again expressed in further feelings, thoughts and actions: which turn attention towards further objects. Their perception is again absorbed, by a reflection back to underlying consciousness. From there, the cycle keeps repeating, thus enabling us to learn.

Levels of experience

If you look again at figure 4, you will notice that it shows five levels, in our experience of the world.

- At the top, there is a level of *objects*, where our limited attention gets focused.

- Next is a second level, of *action and form*. Here, action turns attention to various objects, and our experience is given shape.
- Third is a level of *thought and name*. Here, thoughts direct our actions, and names are used to describe the forms that we perceive.
- Fourth is a level of *feeling and quality*. Here, feelings motivate our thoughts and acts, through an intuitive judgement of qualities and values.
- And fifth, there is a level of understanding: which expresses knowledge and assimilates what has been learned.

In the Indian tradition, these five levels are conceived through the old five elements: ‘earth’, ‘water’, ‘fire’, ‘air’ and ‘ether’. Each element describes a level of appearance, in our experience of the world. And each level of appearance is perceived through a corresponding layer of personality. The layers are called ‘koshas’ or ‘coverings’, for each is a covering of something deeper to be found within. You will find this illustrated in figure 5.

Figure 5

<u>Traditional element</u>	<u>Appearance of reality</u>	<u>Perceiving instrument</u>	<u>Examining disciplines</u>
‘Earth’	Pieces of matter	Physical body	Physical sciences
‘Water’	Patterns of energy	Living organism	Biological sciences
‘Fire’	Meaningful information	Conceiving intellect	Cultural sciences
‘Air’	Conditioned character	Intuitive judgement	Psychological sciences
‘Ether’	Continuing existence	Assimilating comprehension	Philosophical enquiry

Unchanging consciousness

- The outermost layer is the material body, called the ‘annamaya kosha’ or the ‘covering of food’. This is the external body, made of matter, like other objects seen outside by our gross senses. Here, ‘matter’ is called ‘food’, thus conceiving it organically. It is what gets consumed, as the body takes it in and uses it, in processes of living functioning.

As the body functions in the world, it takes in perception, as a kind of food. And this intake of perception is in particular morsels or pieces, through limited and partial senses that see an outside world. Because their seeing is limited, the world they see is divided into *objects*, which are then *pieces of matter*. Each object seems made up from divided matter, like an earthen pot is made by shaping it and baking it from clay. This is the uppermost level, of material objects, corresponding to the old element called ‘earth’.

- Proceeding inwards, the second layer of personality is called the ‘prāṇamaya kosha’ or the ‘covering of living energy’. Here, the energy of prāṇa flows in resonating pathways of activity. In Sanskrit, these pathways are called ‘nāḍis’ or ‘channels’. But their energy is not channelled nor activated by matter. It is not an energy of artificial force, exerted by one object upon another. Instead, it is a living energy that rises naturally from underlying consciousness. Thus by its very nature it expresses consciousness, through an intelligibly ordered functioning, in fluid patterns of transforming activity.

As the energy of prāṇa flows through personality, its patterns resonate in sympathy with each other and with the world outside, in a complex reciprocation of subtle influences and effects. That sympathetic resonance enables our living faculties to observe and interact with the world.

Thus, we experience *action and form*, in flowing currents of activity and happening. And we observe dynamic *patterns of energy*, through the organic functioning of our living faculties. This is a second level, going down. It is associated with the old element called ‘water’. For this is the fluid and life-giving element, found at the level of dynamic flow, in changing patterns of energetic functioning.

- The third layer is called the ‘manomaya kosha’, or the ‘covering of mind’. Here, mind is the conceiving intellect, made up of thoughts which interpret the patterns of activity that our senses perceive. Thus interpreted, these patterns are conceived as meaningful information, telling us about an intelligible world.

At this level, we experience *thought and names or symbols*, whose meaning we interpret in our minds. Thus, as energy travels from place to place, its patterns are interpreted as *meaningful information*, which represents more distant things that we conceive through it. By its representative significance, information throws a particular light on what it shows us. Its meaning burns it up for us, in order to illuminate what's represented. Through that burning illumination of meaning, we interpret more of the world, beyond the narrowness of partial circumstances that our senses have perceived.

Thus interpreted, through conceiving intellect, information shines: with a meaningful illumination that energizes and projects our conceptions of the world. That energizing and projecting power of illumination is associated with the old element called 'fire'.

- The fourth layer is called the 'vijnyānamaya kosha' or the 'covering of discernment'. This is our discernment of qualities and values, which we compare and contrast in the information that we perceive and interpret and describe.

The discernment here is essentially intuitive, through an inner subtlety of *feeling and quality*. As information represents the world, it shows us different qualities that are contrasted and compared, through the discernment of our intuitive judgements. Thus we experience a *conditioned character* that is found different from place to place: as for example a map shows how some places are bigger or smaller, or higher or lower, or hotter or cooler than other places.

At this level, the world is shown conditioned by varying qualities and characteristics, in much the same way as the atmosphere is conditioned by climate. Hence there's a correspondence here with the old element called 'air'.

- The fifth layer is called the 'ānandamaya kosha' or the 'covering of happiness'. This is the co-ordinating layer of personality, with the word 'ānanda' or 'happiness' implying harmony and integration. The coordination takes place at the depth of *understanding*, as all our differing experiences keep getting absorbed into the quiet knowing that continues in the background. At that depth, we comprehend the continuity of underlying principles, beneath the contrasts of discerning judgement and the variety of superficial appearances.

In order to contrast and to compare the changing variation of particular appearances and their distinct characteristics, there has to be

some kind of *continuing existence*, which carries on through space and time. As our limited perceptions show us different things, in different parts of the world, there must also be connections and relationships, which our minds and our senses do not see, but which we can understand more deeply. That underlying continuity is associated with the old element called 'ether'.

In Sanskrit, the word for 'ether' is 'ākāsha', which means 'pervading space' and also 'clear shining'. This word describes the continuity of space and time, pervading through all experience of the physical and mental world. The continuity is both objective and subjective. Objectively, ākāsha continues as the background of external space and time, seen in the world outside. Subjectively, it continues through each individual's experience, as the knowing background which persists through differing appearances that come and go. It thus enables an understanding of common principles, in the differing phenomena that nature manifests.

Thus, ākāsha or 'ether' is conceived as the subtlest element, pervading everything, throughout the entire world and each perceiving personality.

But then, what underlies the continuity of 'ether', as it extends through space and time? What final ground of plain reality could underlie all different seeming things, seen by our partial faculties, throughout the entire universe? This is the question that Gārgī asks Yājnyavalkya, in the third chapter of the Brihadāranyaka Upanishad.

Yājnyavalkya says that when reality is seen completely, it is called 'akshara' or 'changeless'. It is the same in everything, no matter where nor when perceived. And then, to identify it in particular, he says: 'It is not known; it is the knower.' In other words, it is just that which knows. It is pure consciousness, unmixed with any kind of physical or mental thing. It is the inmost centre of everyone's experience. That is Yājnyavalkya's conclusion, in response to Gārgī's questioning.

But it must be admitted that this is not an easy conclusion. It identifies a sole reality which is at once subjective and impersonal. It is the reality of the entire world; and yet it's found by going back into one's own self. This contradicts some deeply ingrained beliefs which most of us take for granted: about the world and about ourselves. If this contradiction is taken seriously, it raises some very unsettling questions.

Such questions are the actual practice of enquiry. The concepts used

are *meant* to raise unsettling questions. It is the questioning that puts the concepts into actual practice, on the way to clearer understanding. However, this works only if one's own beliefs are opened up to genuine questioning. The attack must be upon one's own assumptions, not upon what someone else believes. The reflection back must go into one's own experience. Then it concerns the understanding on which one's attitudes and actions are based. That makes it practical, inherently. Otherwise it is just theory, or dogma, or polemics.