

THE WORLD WITHIN THE MIND

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1. Introduction

In the Prapanna Gita, (Verse 28) we find, the following verse.

Tvameva mātā cha pita tvameva

Tvameva bandhu sakhātvameva

Tvameva vidya dravinam tvameva

Tvameva sarvam mama deva deva.

You are my mother, you are my father, you are my friend and you are my comrade. You are my knowledge, you are my wealth. You are my all-in-all, the light of lights.

I first learned of this verse from Swami Sarvagatananda. Before he began his discourse on the Bhagavadgita on Friday afternoons back in 1978, he would chant this verse. I had often pondered over the ‘you’ being referred to in this verse. Who is my mother? Who is my father? Who is my friend? Is it God? Is it the Gita? As I pondered this over the years and came to understand the essence of Swami’s teaching, I realized that the verse really referred to one’s own Higher Mind.

All that we are, all that we were and all that we will become is dependent upon our own mind. Our mind is the gateway to higher possibilities. But are we different from our mind?

From this perspective, let us note the verse begins by saying that the mind is our mother. This is literally true. The mother raises the child, sings to the child, is ever awake to the needs of the child, cleans up after the child and tries to instill a higher view of life in the child. In the Prasna Upanishad, the emphasis is on *prāna*, the life force within every individual. This life force never sleeps. It is ever awake. It is the Divine Mother within. Like the mother, it takes care of us, literally cleaning up after us. It supplies the energies to the mind, something we all recognize as the central processing unit of this organism we call the human being. So let us begin with this inquiry. What is mind?

The word ‘mind’ is extremely vague. We can use it as a verb, as in ‘to mind something’ or ‘to pay attention to something’. Or we can use it as a noun, to signify that vague and rather undefined region of the human body that lies within the brain, the physical organ that encloses what we call “the mind.” It is interesting to note that there are actually a multitude of ways the single syllable ‘mind’ is used in the English language. We say, “Speak your mind.” This does not mean that now we want you to empty all the contents of your mind. That would be not only undesirable, though sometimes people try to do just that, but well nigh impossible, since there are so many stored impressions. When we say, “Speak your mind,” we usually mean, “Please give me your opinion, or your view on the matter.” It is actually very interesting and instructive to look this word up in the dictionary. When we look it up, we find the following: “Intellectual potentiality, soul, spirit, intellect, brain, consciousness, thought, mentality, intuition, perception, conception, intelligence, intellectuality, capacity, judgment, understanding, wisdom, genius, talent, reasoning, instinct, wit, mental faculties, intellectual faculties, creativity, ingenuity,

intellectual powers, gray matter, brain power, purpose, intention, inclination, determination.” This is under the heading of noun. Sometimes we say, “I would like to give you a piece of my mind!” But can we really afford to? Here the usage of word is meant to be an insult. Notice that this usage is not listed in the above dictionary definition. So we see further nuances of definition not encircled by the dictionary even under the definition of mind as a noun. Under the heading of ‘mind as a verb’, we find, “to obey, to heed, to give one’s attention to, to be cautious, to be concerned, to remember, to recall.” The list here is shorter. But it is interesting to note that mind is a complicated word. By contrast, the word ‘body’ is a lot simpler. We don’t use ‘body’ as a verb, though I suppose one can do so. But the usage is rare. Even when we use the word, we do so in a very clear cut way. We don’t clench our fists and say, “I would like to give you a piece of my body!” When someone insults us, we feel hurt. When someone scolds us by saying, “How mindless your work is,” we feel hurt, even though there was no bodily harm. That is because most of us identify with our minds. We all think we are mind.

What exactly is mind? Philosophers have pondered this question for ages. They are still pondering it today and no one has come up with a conclusive answer. The very fact that the dictionary definition encircles every aspect of human experience itself indicates that the problem is a complicated one. Most philosophical inquiries begin with the question, “Is there anything that I can be certain of?” Bertrand Russell’s famous book, “Problems of Philosophy” begins with this question. The famous French philosopher and mathematician, René Descartes is noted for his method of philosophic doubt. Through such a method of reasoning, Descartes concludes that he is not certain that matter exists. He is not certain even that the world ‘out there’ exists. For all intents and purposes, it could very well be a dream. His inquiry finally concludes that there is really nothing he can be certain apart from the sensations of his own mind. He has thoughts. He experiences them. He is certain of this. So we have his famous line, *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am.

With this Vedanta disagrees. It says that this is putting Descartes before the horse. (I am sorry for the pun!) The Vedantic inquiry reverses the conclusion and says, I am therefore I think. Even the thought process is to be questioned. Is it really there? The experience of the thought process is not any different from the experience of the so-called world out there. It is as real as the dream is real to the one having the dream. Vedanta asks what is that by which the dream is being perceived? It concludes by saying that it is the light of pure awareness.

These two positions, “I think, therefore I am,” and “I am, therefore I think,” represent two opposite views. The former is the basis of Western Philosophy and the latter, the basis for much of Eastern philosophy. This dialectic can be synthesised into a Vedantic unity. I will do this at the end of this discourse. However, before we proceed, we can ask the question of whether it is even necessary to answer this in order to understand the nature of the mind. Of course, part of the answer may give us some knowledge of the nature of the mind. From a more practical standpoint, we find that there are many things in life that we simply do not understand fully, and yet we manipulate them and go on with our life. Not everyone understands the workings of their car, but they go on happily driving it. If however, it breaks down, then some knowledge of its workings would help. Doctors

do not understand everything about the human body, and yet they go on administering to the needs of the people to the best of their abilities. Recently, I came across a scholarly work on the history of medicine. There the author says that ninety percent of the history of medicine is really the history of the placebo. The faith and trust of the patient in the shaman, doctor or witch doctor, somehow activated the healing power of the patient's mind, and thus the recovery would begin. The inner workings of the mind are still largely unknown, yet medical science is doing its best to unravel its mysteries. We may never know completely how the mind works. Nor can we afford to wait. We must prod along with partial knowledge. We can go on multiplying many more such examples. For instance, take mathematics. When Pythagoras said that everything is number, he was not wrong. In our modern digital world, who can deny this. Everything has been literally reduced to zeros and ones.

So let us take a more practical stance on the matter, or is it mind?

In the life of every individual, a lot is dependent on the condition of the mind. Wherever we go, we carry our minds with us. There is no way to escape from our own minds. We are wedded to our mind for life, whether we like it or not. Thus, we must learn to love, and understand our own mind. Our world consists of our own mind. In some sense, we create our own world. The famous poet, John Milton wrote that "The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven."

The title for this discourse was suggested by a verse in the Yoga Vasishtha:

Manomayam atho visvam yatrām pari vrsayate.

This universe which is seen all around is made up of the mind. The next verse says, "That which is the understanding of objects is called mind. There is no form for this mind. It is not separated from thought or imagination."

In Valmiki's Ramayana, there is a section called Yoga Vasishtha, consisting of 32,000 slokas or verses. It is the teaching given by the sage Vasishtha to Rama, before he was exiled to the forest. It is considered as one of the masterpieces of Advaita Vedanta. It is this teaching that gave the mental preparation for Sri Rama to cheerfully accept the banishment from the kingdom and live in the forest for twelve years.

In a single discourse, it is difficult to compress the teaching of the entire work. Thus, we must be selective and indicate only some of the highlights. For this purpose, scholars have written what is usually called, the *Laghu Yoga Vasishtha*, which is a condensed version of the larger work. This shorter work consists of 6,000 slokas or verses, and had been originally compiled by Jnananda Bharati.

2. We are made up of our thoughts

We are, in some sense, what our thoughts have made us. In essence, we are all the same, in that the background of our existence is the one and the same Pure Awareness from an absolute standpoint. However, from a relative standpoint, each of us is different on account of our thoughts and stored impressions with which we identify. It is knowledge and experience that distinguishes one individual from another. Each of us journeys through life and we gather a variety of experiences. From these experiences, we filter out knowledge.

A surgeon is one who has had many thoughts regarding the human physiology. This gives rise to knowledge as well as experience. A physicist is one who has had many thoughts concerning the atomic nature of matter. Thus, a physicist knows more about the atom than the human body and a surgeon knows more about the inner workings of the body than the inner workings of the atom. Thought builds our universe of experience.

In this context, words have power. The legacy of past knowledge is handed down from generation to generation through the printed word. What we read does change us. No one can deny the power of the word over the mind. Look at how Arjuna was transformed on the battlefield largely through the power of the word. Look at how the words in the Bible transformed the life of Saint Augustine. A relatively more recent example is that of Girish Chandra Ghosh, the Bengali playwright, who said that the words of Sri Ramakrishna had even saved his life on many occasions. So one cannot deny the influence of words on our mind, on our life.

There is the story of a man who comes home from work and finds his wife crying. He asks her why she is crying. She replies that she had just finished a book with a very sad ending. The husband responds by saying, "What is this book? I'll make sure not to read it." Then the wife says, "You have to read it. It is your checkbook!"

It is inevitable that whatever we perceive, we do so through the prism of our past knowledge and experience. All the impressions, feelings, thoughts and images have been stored up since our childhood and thus influence our experience. In his Inspired Talks, Swami Vivekananda writes, "We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care of what you think. Words are secondary. Thoughts live, they travel far. Each thought we think is tinged with our own character, so that for the pure and holy man, even his jests or abuse have the twist of his own love and purity and do good." (Vol. 7, p. 14)

The problem is that thinking or the thought process continues even though we may not be aware of it. There are subconscious currents of thought that operate within every individual and they are largely the momentum of past thinking. Thus, we tell ourselves many things subconsciously, and that affects our experience, our performance and our knowledge. If we are depressed, one reason could be that we have told ourselves negative things and thus have come to this plight. The solution therefore is to tell ourselves the opposite. When we fill our minds with all sorts of rubbish, it should not surprise us that our mind reproduces that. Sri Ramakrishna used to say in his own parochial way, "You belch what you eat."

The Yoga Vasishtha can be summarised by the following three teachings. First, we are what our thoughts have made us. Second, by changing our thoughts, we change our knowledge and experience. Third, by holding on to the thought of ultimate reality, we experience it. We become identified with it.

The Yoga Vasishtha opens with a salutation to the principle of Truth: *Satyātmāne namah*. The ancients had a profound idea of spiritual matters. For them, God was no corporeal being, but rather a principle that pervades everything. In one of his lectures, Swami Vivekananda indicates that even though we may have advanced technologically, we are still primitive when it comes to philosophical questions. If cows were philosophers, he

says, they would conceive God as a big cow governing the universe. For the ancient sages however, this duality did not exist. Their concepts of God or something that transcends the human being were deeper and in some sense more intimate to them. “Salutations to That which is all-pervading, that shines as the light of perception, illuminating the earth, the sky, the intervening space, my inner self and the outer world and who manifests as all that exists.” What a deep and profound awareness of the nature of things.

The next verses delineate the qualifications of the reader. “He must have the resolve, ‘I am now bound by various limitations. Let me be liberated.’ ” Notice here that there are at least two prerequisites. One of them is will, a keen desire to be liberated. The other is a knowledge of one’s limitations. Sometimes, a total disgust at our incompetence can act as strong motivation to rid ourselves of our limitations. We see this on a less profound level sometimes in daily life. Suppose something needs cleaning and we keep postponing it. Finally there comes a time, when we say to ourselves that this will not do. We roll up our sleeves and get to work cleaning up this mess. The temptation to stop or postpone must itself be postponed. We must have a firm resolve to complete the task.

Like all narratives, the sage Bharadvaja is asking Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, to describe how Rama came to be illumined. Valmiki begins by saying that mental impressions (*vāsanās*) are of two kinds: the impure ones that cause rebirth and the pure ones that lead to liberation. Rama, seemed dejected. Valmiki says that such dejection is beginning of the dawn of wisdom if it is erased by proper reasoning. Like Arjuna at the beginning of the Bhagavadgita, Rama reflects on life as being full of sorrow. Wealth does not lead to happiness, Rama observes. “Trees also live. So do animals and birds. He alone lives whose mind is alive by reflection. ... It is selfish desire alone that gives rise to mental grief. Selfish desire alone makes the best of men worthless as a straw in a minute, though they may have wisdom as high as Mount Meru.” He then asks Vaisishta, “Please teach me how the wise ones have attained the state of freedom.”

Just as in the Gita, this chapter describing the dejection of Rama is an important one. Experience is a great teacher. Rama has had many experiences in his life and he has also done a great deal of reflection, it is clear. But more importantly, the teaching cannot take place until the student is ready and humbly asks to be taught.

The teaching begins with the story of Suka, the son of Vyāsa, the author of the Mahābhārata. Vyasa taught his son the path to enlightenment and for some reason, Suka was not satisfied. The passage is illustrative of an important psychological fact. We often do not have much value for that which has been easily obtained. In addition, the passage also highlights the important idea that the parent-child relationship is different from the child-teacher relationship. So Vyasa had to send his son to King Janaka to be taught. There, Janaka says, “There is here but one Self who is of the nature of undivided consciousness. There is nothing else. One is bound by one’s own thoughts; free from thoughts, one is liberated. ... The thinning of past impressions is called liberation. Their firm hold of the mind is called bondage. Success arises by well-applied effort. Effort is said to be of two kinds: that which leads to liberation and that which does not. Likewise, your mental impressions are of two kinds: good and bad. By repeated effort, hold on to your good impressions and strengthen them. That will lead you to the final state.”

“Practice makes perfect,” as the English adage goes. Through steady practice, we can

make it happen. Thus, in these opening verses, we see several important features. First, the mind must see through the transience of worldly life and must be keen to learn about the path to liberation. This path lies totally in the realm of the mind. When the mind is free of all past impressions good and bad, it leads one to liberation. But the way to that state is by strengthening the good impressions through steady effort.

Vasishta continues, “The gateway to liberation has four gate keepers. They are tranquility, enquiry, contentment and association with the wise.” The mind must be peaceful. By humble inquiry, knowledge comes and out of that comes contentment. “The association with the wise” refers to the legacy of knowledge handed down from generation to generation through spiritual instruction. “By enquiry,” the sage instructs, “the intellect becomes sharp and then perceives the supreme state. Enquiry, or reflection is the great medicine for the prolonged disease of worldliness.” *Virya samsāra rogasya vichāro hi mahaushadam.*

But enquiry does not mean scientific enquiry into the nature of the external world. It refers to internal reflection. “Just as the sprout exists in the seed, so is the intelligent principle within this visible universe. This universe is projected out of the mind. That which is the understanding of objects is called the mind. There is no form for this mind. It is not separate from thought or imagination. When the web of thoughts has been dismantled, one’s own natural state is left behind. It is called the Sun which never sets, the light of light, the Supreme Self. For one who has realised this state, he is called liberated while living.”

Suddha vijñāna roopastvam dirgha svapna idam jagat. “Your essential nature is pure intelligence. This world is like a long dream. ... By one’s own imagination, one is deluded. But not the wise man. He reflects on Truth and discards untruth. Devoid of movement, the mind is not perceived anywhere indeed. Movement is the nature of the mind just as heat is the nature of fire. The mind attains to the state of pure intelligence by inquiry and reflection on pure intelligence and by the power of firm practice. One is bound by thinking otherwise. One is liberated by contemplating Brahman. ”

When Swami Vivekananda was lecturing at Harvard, someone asked him if this was a form of self-hypnosis. Swami Vivekananda gave an appropriate response. “We are hypnotised already. This is de-hypnosis.” It is now an acknowledged fact of psychoanalysis that there are many subconscious currents in our mind that keep repeating statements reinforcing our limitations. By asserting what is real, we undo years of wrong thinking. “By the firm mental resolve, ‘All is Brahman’ the mind is liberated. ... The inclination toward virtuous conduct is called reflection. ... The mind is bound by mental impressions and set free by the absence of mental impressions.” This is really the purpose of daily meditation. As Holy Mother instructs us, we must sit down every day at a fixed time and take stock of what we have done, what we have thought. Then only will we know if we are improving or not.

Recently, I was invited by a colleague to Alberta to deliver some lectures on mathematics. He invited me to his home and introduced me to his family. He had two adorable children. The younger one was playing all by herself in the corner and very happy with herself. My colleague remarked, “I don’t spend time with her enough, but probably I should. Still, I sit at my desk working and she is happy playing in the corner of the room. She seldom disturbs me.” Then I noted that that is already an important factor in her de-

velopment, having the awareness that you are there for her. In the same way, we realise that when we sit down to introspect, we become aware of a higher dimension of our own being. We may not have any direct or mystical communion, but we are aware that It is there nevertheless. We become aware of awareness. Until it becomes a natural state for the mind, we must practice this process of introspection and reflection on a daily basis.

In this connection, I personally have found it useful to ask myself “What have I done today?” as the beginning of my introspection. You will find it useful to answer this question by writing out the answer instead of hiding behind vague and nebulous thinking. One can fine tune this inquiry. “What have I done with my time? Did I waste it? Am I putting off tasks I should be doing? What will I do tomorrow?”

A man rushed into the police station and said to the officer that he wanted to report a theft. The constable asked him, what exactly was stolen. The man replied, “Well, my neighbour just stole two hours of my time!” “Come, come, ” said the police officer, we can’t arrest someone for that. If he stole money, or some physical property, maybe we can charge him with something, but not with something so ephemeral as time.” Then the man retorted, “I suppose you never heard that time is money!”

Anyway, each day we must inquire into how we spend our time. Bringing this awareness has value. We slowly begin to control our time, and through that, our mind as well. One should be bold and sincere and answer these questions. As we do so, we bring the power of awareness into our life. As we become aware of our shortcomings and develop the ability to confront them through our writing, the mind slowly gets disgusted with its inertia and begins to take steps to conquer it. After some success in this practical direction, the mind should be trained in the practice of tranquility. Here again, we should not confuse lethargy for tranquility, or dullness for contentment.

Thus, the first step in this process is to abandon all mental impressions which are of the nature of dullness, inertia and despondency. Having abandoned these, the mind should reflect on the nature of Pure Awareness and be fixed in that state. Our difficulty is that we are too distracted that we have even forgotten the experience of silence. Endless distraction now lies at our fingertips that we make no attempt to experience silence. When we sleep, we are unconscious and thus do not experience silence. In fact, for many sleep is also a tiring experience.

Commenting on this, Swami Vivekananda writes in his essay on “Meditation” that “Meditation means the mind is turned back upon itself. The mind stops all thought waves and the world stops. Your consciousness expands. Everytime you meditate, ... you do not feel the body or anything else. When you come out of it after the hour, you have had the most beautiful rest you ever had in your life. That is the only way you ever give rest to your system. Not even the deepest sleep will give you such rest as that. The mind goes on jumping even in deepest sleep. Just those few minutes in meditation and your brain has almost stopped. Just a little vitality is kept up. You forget the body. ... You feel such pleasure in it. You become so light. This perfect rest you will get in meditation.” (Vol. 4, p. 235)

In fact, it is concentration of mind that gives rest to the body. It is using energy properly that gives rest. Most of us know this, for example, when we exercise. After a good game of tennis, or even a more modest an example, after a good one hour walk, we

feel energized. The same is true with concentrated activity. Tiredness comes from mental dissipation, not mental concentration.

One of the essential points of the Yoga Vasishtha concerns the power of imagination. We continue the world through our imaginative faculty. If we think carefully, we find that we never can say we understand another human being. All we know is our opinion of that person. If we hold an opinion of a person, then everything that person does is seen through the mist of that opinion. Thus, if I hold a bad view of an individual, then even though that person does a good action, I will view that in a bad light. My reading of the external event is modified by my mental impressions. This is going on every moment of our waking life. Through introspection, we learn to stand apart from this mist. Awareness of this tendency of the mind does much to mitigate the influence of this tendency.

But this awareness has to be supplemented by inquiry and reflection. At the moment, we do not have the ability to stand apart and look at ourselves. That ability develops only through practice. Part of our difficulty is that we never make the effort in this direction. We make Herculean efforts in other directions. But somehow, when it comes to spiritual life, we do not make the effort. One of the ideas that comes to obstruct progress in this direction is the notion that somehow we cannot rise up to the great spiritual heights. This idea has to be eliminated. But how?

On closer analysis, we find much of the obstruction is rooted in our ego, or I sense. But as mentioned earlier, and as also taught by Sri Ramakrishna, there are two kinds of I sense. One is the ripe ego and the other is the unripe one. That ego which thinks itself superior to others, arrogant, and obstinate is the unripe ego. But that ego which considers itself as a child of God, a student ready to learn, a disciple of the great sages of the past, can rise above these feelings of limitation. This is really the meaning of the example concerning the thorn in the foot often given in Vedanta. A thorn is stuck in the foot, and so to remove it, we take another thorn and use it to remove the first one. After that, we throw both thorns away. At present, the thorn of worldliness, the unripe ego, is stuck to our mind. We bring in the thorn of Advaita Vedanta, the ripe ego, and use it to remove the unripe one. There comes a time when both the thorns are thrown away. That is, we transcend even the ripe ego. But that stage comes only when we discard the unripe ego.

This brings us to the important idea of attitude. There is such a thing as maintaining a spiritual attitude. For him whose mind is full of bliss, the world is full of bliss. "Smile and the whole world smiles with you," as the song says.

In the performance of any action, in doing anything, the main tool is of course the mind. So the mind must be prepared. This preparation is largely one of attitude. In theological terminology, one may call it faith. It is interesting to note that it is faith that is at the heart of anything. Even such a thing as science, which is far removed from religion in its outward forms, begins with a two-fold faith. The first is the faith that there is order and pattern in this universe. Second, it is the faith that we can find these patterns, that it is mentally possible to comprehend these patterns.

But faith must be combined with effort. The outcome of effort is called divine grace. Sri Ramakrishna tells the story of a man who became seriously ill. He was on the verge of death when the doctor said that according to some esoteric medical books, there is a

cure. However, it will take some effort to obtain it. “First, it must rain when the star Svāti is in the ascendant. Then some of that rain water must collect in a human skull. Then a frog must come there and a snake must chase it. As the frog is to be bitten by the snake, it must jump away and the poison of the snake must drop into the skull. You must then prepare a medicine from this poison and give it to the patient. Then he will live. The head of the family, after hearing this, consulted the almanac about the star and set out at the right moment. With great longing of heart, he began to search for the different ingredients. He prayed to God, ‘O Lord, I shall succeed only if You bring together all the ingredients. As he was roaming about he actually saw a skull lying on the ground. Presently there came a shower of rain. Then, the man said, ‘O gracious Lord, I have got the rain water under Svāti, and the skull too. What is more, some of the rain water has fallen into the skull. Now be kind enough to bring together the other ingredients. ’ He was reflecting with a yearning heart when he saw a poisonous snake approaching. His joy knew no bounds. ‘O God, ’ he prayed, ‘now the snake has come too. I have procured most of the ingredients. Please be gracious and give me the remaining ones.’ No sooner did he pray thus than a frog hopped up. The snake pursued it. As they came near the skull and the snake was about to bite the frog, the frog jumped over the skull and snake’s poison fell into it. The man began to dance, clapping his hands for joy. So I say that one gets everything through yearning.” (Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p., 647.)

But many times our efforts are mixed and often topsy-turvy. We do not even recognize when the Divine Mother is showering her blessings upon us. Our scientific rationalism dismisses many of these occurrences. There is another story, not so famous, that I heard in childhood which is rather amusing. A man was in need of money. He goes to many people, knocks on many doors, offers to work for it but cannot get a job. Tired and exhausted, he sits in a park and wonders what to do. The goddess of wealth, seeing his plight decides to place a pot of gold halfway along the sidewalk that he is about to walk along. Just then, the man gets the crazy idea of trying to walk with his eyes closed. He says to himself, “Let me see if I can walk from here to there with my eyes closed.” And he does so, bypassing the pot of gold! This is the way with all of us. We do not see the blessings that are being showered upon us.

Most of the time when problems come to us, we wish that they would go away. However, it is by rising to the problem, meeting the challenge and facing it, that we grow and become stronger. The problem itself may be a blessing. If we look at our own lives, we may thank those people that gave us a hard time, for through those challenges, we grew stronger. This also removes from our mind any vituperative animosities that lurk in the mind, unknown to us.

Thus a sincere, seeking attitude is a preparation for the mind. The mind must not entertain any negative thoughts or feelings. In this context, I am reminded of a man who goes to make the church to make some confessions. He seeks an audience with the minister. He hesitates to speak, so the minister says to him, “It is alright my son, have you been entertaining impure thoughts?” “No father, ” the man replies, “impure thoughts are entertaining me.” Most of the time, we give in. We let thoughts have their sway over us and forget that we are not the thoughts. As Swami Sarvagatananda has emphasized many times, thoughts come and go, but Pure Awareness is the background. That is our ultimate

reality. As we become more and more conscious of this background awareness, we find that the mesmeric hold of the thoughts over us slowly begins to weaken and eventually, we do find that we are not the thoughts. The mind then becomes established in Brahman.

In the chapter entitled, the manner and destruction of mental impressions, the Yoga Vasishtha teaches that two methods must be applied in dealing with the mind. In our familiar Vedantic terminology, these two methods are raja yoga and jnana yoga. In the topic of mental preparedness, we can say that is bhakti yoga. We must be devoted to the goal. We must eagerly want to improve ourselves and minimise the effect of our past impressions, especially those of a troubling kind, upon our daily experience. It is often asked, how many psychiatrists it takes to change a lightbulb. The answer is none. The lightbulb should first want to change itself. ... Similarly, we must have an eager desire to move forward and that is called bhakti. But once we have this, the two methods to be employed in the realm of the mind are raja yoga, dealing with restraint of the mental modifications and second, jnana yoga, giving us the method of inquiry. Part of this process involves the control of the vital energies, or the movement of prana, the life force. Vasishtha says, the movement of prana is controlled by means of study of the scriptures, association with the wise, absence of worldly desires and the practice of spiritual disciplines combined with the constant awareness of Pure Consciousness that is the background of everything. When the movement of prana is controlled, the mind also becomes controlled.

In this context, rhythmic breathing is of great help. We can observe that when we are angry, or our minds are disturbed, our breathing also becomes irregular. Thus, at such moments, if we can learn to sit and take some deep breaths in a measured way, we find that the mind is to a large extent pacified. Another effective method is to take a short, brisk walk for about ten minutes. This supplies new oxygen to the brain which makes it function better and we are able to see things in a clearer perspective.

This brings us to an important theme in Vedantic thought. Namely that between the physical body and the mind, there is a pranic body, or subtle body involving the nervous energies of the body and mind. The ancient sages recognized that the interface between the world of matter and the world of mind is the world of prana, manifesting in the human body as breath and the neurological impulses. Pranayama is the control of this through rhythmic breathing, the practice of tranquility and contentment.

To summarise then the main teaching of the Yoga Vasishtha, what is the mind, we need not know. However, we must know how it operates and how to diminish the influence of mental impressions, so that ultimately, we can experience Pure Awareness that is at the background of all phenomenon. To return to the dialectic of Cartesian dualism versus the Vedantic non-dualism, we can synthesise both views from the standpoint that what is perceived is energy, change, Shakti. But we know at the same time, there is the background of pure awareness, Shiva. Our experience, at every moment of our life is a mingling of matter and mind, of energy and consciousness, of Shakti and Shiva.

May we all make rapid strides towards the goal supreme. May we realise our identity with the Pure Awareness. This is my prayer.