CHAPTER IV

EPISTEMOLOGY OF SRI AUROBINDO

(1) The basic presuppositions

The whole epistemology of Sri Aurobindo is based upon three basic presuppositions. They are:

(i) All experiences are real and worthy of philosophical interpretation;
(ii) all possible knowledge is knowledge within the power of humanity; and
(iii) knowledge must be integral.

Let me analyse these basic presuppositions.

(i) All experiences are real and worthy of philosophical interpretation

According to Sri Aurobindo, in our search for knowledge, our experience must be extended to all the realms of experience. Unlike empiricists and positivists, our experience, he holds, should not be limited only to objective experience. Empiricists and positivists are dogmatic and skeptical regarding subjective realm of
experience since they are unverified and hence, there may be possibilities for errors to occur. Sri Aurobindo vehemently opposes this view. He says:

It is reasoned that to depart from the physical standard and the principle of personal or universal verification will lead to gross delusions and the admission of unverified truth and subjective phantasy into the realm of knowledge... The probability of error is no reason for refusing to attempt discovery and subjective discovery must be pursued by a subjective method of enquiry... To refuse to enquire upon any general ground preconceived and a priori is an obscurantism... (and) prejudicial to the extension of knowledge.

For Sri Aurobindo, the subjective realm of experience is as important as objective realm of experience and, in fact, it is more important. In emphasizing the subjective realm of experience Sri Aurobindo thus asserts:

An inner range of spiritual experience is one very great domain of human consciousness, it has to be entered into up to its depths and its vastest riches. The supraphysical is as real as the physical; to know it is part of a complete knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo holds the view that all ranges of experiences, viz., the physical, the mental, and the supramental are real. But it does not mean that Sri Aurobindo wants us to accept any and every experience blindly. He aptly says:

Firmness without dogmatism in our system, toleration without weakness of all other systems should be our intellectual out-look.
(ii) **All possible knowledge is knowledge within the power of humanity**

According to Sri Aurobindo, there cannot be any knowledge which is beyond human reach. "All knowledge is knowledge within the power of humanity." This view of Sri Aurobindo makes us clear that there is no reason for either skepticism or agnosticism in his thought. Sri Aurobindo comments:

> The unknown is not unknowable, it need not remain the unknown for us, unless we choose ignorance or persist in our first limitations. For to all things that are not unknowable, all things in the universe, there corresponds in that universe faculties which can take cognizance of them, and in man, the microcosm, these faculties are always existent and at a certain stage capable of development. We may choose not to develop them, where they are partially developed, we may discourage and impose on them a kind of atrophy. But fundamentally, all possible knowledge is knowledge within the power of humanity.

(iii) **Knowledge must be integral**

In accordance with his conception of reality which is multi-dimensional in nature, Sri Aurobindo speaks of experience which is multi-dimensional in nature. He says that our knowledge which consists of experiences must be integral taking into account all the terms of Being. He is of the view that it is only when we have seen both ourself and our nature as a whole, in depth as well as in surface, that we acquire a true basis of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo
points out that "an integral knowledge demands an exploration and unveiling of all possible domains of consciousness and experience." \(^5\)

2. **The object and status of knowledge**

   In accordance with the Upaniṣadic thought, Sri Aurobindo speaks of two kinds of knowledge, lower and higher. The lower knowledge tries to understand the apparent phenomenon of existence externally by making use of the sense and the intellect. The higher knowledge aims at the knowledge of the truths of the existence in its source and reality. Hence the approach is from within unlike the former. Though such a sharp distinction is made between these two forms of knowledge, they are, says Sri Aurobindo, two sides of one seeking. He further says that it is wrong to think that, when we attain the knowledge of God, then the knowledge of the world is of no concern to us. Mankind first has to obtain the lower knowledge because, until our knowledge of the world is sufficiently developed, spiritual knowledge is not really possible. Our spiritual knowledge becomes richer and fuller depending upon the development of our knowledge of the world. Science, art, philosophy, ethics, psychology, and knowledge of man, act as means by which we arrive at the knowledge of working of God through nature. Sri Aurobindo says: \(^6\)
The lower knowledge has been the step from which he has risen to the higher; the higher illumines for his the lower and makes it part of itself, even if only its lower fringe and most external radiation.

The *Isa Upaniṣad* says:  

Those who worship avidyā enter into blinding darkness; but into greater darkness than that enter they who are engaged in vidyā.

Further, it says that both vidyā and avidyā are essential for attaining life's goal. In the words of the *Upaniṣad*:  

He who knows these two, vidyā and avidyā together, attains immortality through vidyā, by crossing over death through avidyā.

Similarly, says Sri Aurobindo, both lower knowledge and higher knowledge are essential to have a total knowledge.

But at the same time Sri Aurobindo is not unaware of the Upanisadic statement, "What is that knowing which everything else is known?" Ultimately, the highest object of knowledge, for Sri Aurobindo, is that something eternal, infinite and absolute. In the previous chapter it has been stated that, for Sri Aurobindo, reality is integral in nature of which the one and the many, the finite and the infinite, the silence and the dynamism, and the being and the becoming are different poises. Integral reality, logically and necessarily, requires an integral knowledge to have the complete knowledge of the reality. But what does
Sri Aurobindo mean by integral knowledge? By integral knowledge he means: 10

An integral knowledge then must be a knowledge of the truth of all sides of existence both separately and in relation each to all to the truth of the spirit.

It also demands "an exploration and unveiling of all possible domains of consciousness and experience." He also says that the fundamental real must include all truths of existence viz., the truth of the individual, the truth of the universe, and the truth of all that is beyond the universe. It connects the highest to the lowest through all the mediating terms and achieves the indivisible whole. At the highest summit of things it opens to the reality and realizes the absolute by self-awareness. It recognizes both superconscient and inconscient by perceiving self-involvement of the absolute. This is the higher knowledge.

In criticizing the absolutistic view of reality, Sri Aurobindo says that this view of reality, consciousness, and knowledge is based upon understanding only one side of the earliest Vedāntic thought. It has not taken the whole view of the earliest Vedāntic thought. In the Upaniṣads we do find the affirmation of the absolute, the experience of the utter and ineffable transcendence. Again, not in contradiction but as its corollary, we do come across the
affirmation of the cosmic Divinity, an experience-concept of the cosmic self and becoming of Brahman in the universe. At the same time, we too find affirmation of the divine reality in the individual which is again an experience-concept. He further says that ignorance too is a half-veiled form of knowledge and world-knowledge, a part of self-knowledge. He substantiates his standpoint by referring to the Ṭa Upanişad which does not confine truth to any one aspect. Sri Aurobindo observes:  

To live in a cosmic Ignorance is a blindness, but to confine oneself in an exclusive absolutism of Knowledge is also a blindness: to know Brahman as at once and together the Knowledge and Ignorance, to attain to the supreme status at once by the Becoming and Non-Becoming, to relate together realisation of the transcendent and the cosmic self, to achieve foundation in the supramundane and self-aware manifestation in the mundane, is the integral knowledge.

But can we acquire integral knowledge? For Sri Aurobindo, integral knowledge cannot be acquired or invented, but it has to be discovered or uncovered since it is in a concealed form in our deeper self. It has to be realized. It can be revealed to a spiritual aspirant. To quote Sri Aurobindo:  

The integral Knowledge is something that is already there in the integral Reality: it is not a new or still non-existent thing that has to be created, acquired, learned, invented or built-up by the mind; it must rather be discovered or uncovered, it is a Truth that is self-revealed to a spiritual endeavour: for it is there veiled in our deeper and greater self; it is the very stuff of our own spiritual consciousness.... There is an
integral self-knowledge that we have to recover and, because the world-self also is our self, an integral world knowledge.

For Sri Aurobindo, knowledge does not mean a kind of sense experience or an intellectual conception. Knowledge gained through the above sources is knowledge only by courtesy, but not knowledge in its essential nature, though they form only a part of our integral knowledge. Sri Aurobindo holds that an information attains the status of knowledge only when it is realized. Knowledge is essentially and truly a kind of realization. It can be said that the knowledge of the supreme reality, which is the object of higher knowledge, is truly justified only when it is realized. It is only the yogic knowledge, which is justified to have the status of knowledge. Ordinarily, what we mean by knowledge is only an intellectual appreciation of the facts of life, mind and matter and laws that govern them. It is only founded upon our sense-perception and upon our reasoning. Yogic knowledge has its source in a greater consciousness which is different from mental consciousness in kind and in essence. It is this higher consciousness alone which knows truly all the metaphysical truths and also the world in its real nature. Knowledge through senses and reasoning is only the knowledge of the appearances. When the knowledge of the self is seized, then all other things can be known in their true nature. The intellect cannot be the source of the
knowledge of the supersensuous truths. The intellect by following certain rigorous analysis can arrive only at the intellectual conception and conviction of the self, but still it is not knowledge. At the most, this intellectual analysis helps in arranging clear conceptions. It is not itself an "effective knowledge". Intellectual information is only an understanding, which attains the status of knowledge, when it is followed by realization. According to Sri Aurobindo, this realization consists of three successive movements viz., (a) internal vision, (b) complete internal experience, and (c) identity.

(a) Internal vision:

It is the internal vision which makes a man a rṣi or kavi and not a thinker. The ancient sages named this internal vision as dṛṣṭi. This is a form of light in the soul by which supersensuous things which remain unseen become evident and real to the soul. To make it more clear, Sri Aurobindo draws an analogy. He says that in the physical world we have two forms of knowledge, the direct (pratyakṣa) which is present to the eyes and the indirect (parokṣa) which is remote and beyond our vision. The idea of the indirect is arrived at by inference, imagination, analogy or some verbal testimony. Knowledge gained through all these processes more or less gives only an adequate idea
of the thing, but we do not realize it. It is only a conceptual representation of the reality. But once we have seen it with the eyes, we realize it or possess it. It is the same with the psychical things and of the self. We have information about these things through inference, analogy or testimony, but still it does not form knowledge in its essential nature as we have not seen it and hence, not realized it. It is only by inward vision (drsti) that we realize the self.

(b) Complete internal experience:

The inner vision is only an opening to the self which gives forth to one form of psychological experience, but does not give us complete internal experience. Our internal vision of the self must lead us to have complete internal experience of it; and this is possible only when we have all-embracing knowledge pervading the whole being of ours, i.e., the mind, the heart, and the body.

(c) Identity:

Our vision and experience remain incomplete unless they culminate in identity. Sri Aurobindo says: "We must not only see God and embrace Him, but become that Reality." We must live in all our being the supreme Vedantic knowledge: "He am I". Sri Aurobindo further says
that it may appear to the modern mind that it is impossible to have more than intellectual conception of the self or God but a shadow of realization of the self is suggested by Wordsworth's poetic expression "A slumber did my spirit seal" regarding realization of Nature.

3 Fourfold cognitive methods

According to Sri Aurobindo, man becomes aware of himself and also of subjective and objective orders of existence because of mind's fourfold cognition. They are: (i) knowledge by identity, (ii) knowledge by intimate direct contact, (iii) knowledge by separative direct contact, and (iv) wholly separative knowledge by indirect contact.

(i) Knowledge by identity:

A human being is able to be aware of himself by knowledge by identity. He has an indubitable knowledge of his existence. This form of knowledge is the purest form of knowledge by identity. While our knowledge of the world is subject to doubt, our knowledge regarding our existence enjoys the status of apodictic certainty. Sometimes some element of knowledge by identity is given to us in our mental states. For example, when we are in deep love, our
whole being is permeated by love; and it seems to us that for a moment we have become one with that mental state. Similar is the case with other emotional states like anger, grief, joy, where total consciousness of ours is occupied by these passions. In the case of thought also, sometimes the thinker becomes one with the thought; and thinker-thought dualism disappears. So, many a time the subject loses his control over emotions and passions.

Sri Aurobindo's cognitive method can be made clear by analysing the process of our mental experience. There are, according to Sri Aurobindo, four elements in all our mental functionings. They are: (i) the object of mental consciousness, (ii) the act of mental consciousness, (iii) the occasion, and (iv) the subject. In the case of subjective experience, the object may be of any cognitive, affective or conative state of our psycho-physical organism. The act is, according to Sri Aurobindo, where the subject may either simply become a movement, not at all standing back from that activity, not reflecting or observing himself, not controlling the feeling or accompanying action or he may observe what he becomes and reflect on it. In the former case we have the illustration of knowledge by identity in which the subject or mental person, the act of conscious self-experience, and the object of mental state are identified into one wave of conscious force in movement.
According to Sri Aurobindo, the total subjective existence is not exhausted in the ever changing mental states. There is something called the pure self or the pure subject which is above and over the changing conscious experience. But we remain unaware of our self or pure subject as long as we identify ourselves with these mental states. Knowledge by identity in its purest form is experienced only when one identifies oneself with the self which is the pure subject, a witness to all our mental states. But this total identification with the self is possible only when one goes beyond, the ordinary regions of consciousness viz., the subconscious, the submental, the subliminal and reaches the superconscious, the highest region of consciousness. The superconscious regions are based upon the spiritual consciousness which is free and luminous. Here we can trace the original power of knowledge. In the supreme timeless existence, existence and consciousness are one. It is simply and purely the self-awareness which is inherent in existence. Here there is no need of knowledge nor any operation of knowledge. Being is self-evident to itself. It does not need to look at itself in order to know itself. It is also intrinsically all-conscious since all is itself. This is the essential awareness by identity. Sri Aurobindo says:  

At the base of all spiritual knowledge is this consciousness of identity and by identity, which
knows or simply aware of all as itself. Translated into our way of consciousness this becomes the triple knowledge thus formulated in the Upaniṣad, "He who sees all existence in the Self"—"He who sees the self in all existence", "He in whom the self has become all existence,..."

Even the three great declarations of the Upaniṣads, "I am He," "Thou art That, O Svetaketu," and "All this is the Brahman," are illustrations of knowledge by identity in its purest form.

(ii) Knowledge by intimate direct contact:

While, in the case of knowledge by identity, the subject or the mental person, the act of conscious self-experience and the objective mental state are identified into one wave of conscious-force in movement, in the case knowledge by intimate direct contact, the act or the process of self-experience partly detaches itself from the object. Sri Aurobindo observes: 15

Thus by this act of partial detachment, we are able not only to experience ourselves dynamically in the becoming, in the process of movement of conscious-force itself but to stand back, perceive and observe ourselves and, if the detachment is sufficient to control our feeling and action, control to some extent our becoming.

Very often, says Sri Aurobindo, the whole of our personality does not get involved in our passing mental states. Many a
time there is a double movement where a portion of ourselves becomes the thought or the passion, and another part of us remains as an observer of our passions or thoughts. Here there is no entire self-oblivion in the movement. This kind of cognition is termed by Sri Aurobindo as knowledge by intimate direct contact. In the former case, that is, in the case of knowledge by identity, the total personality, of the individual is eclipsed for the moment by a state of passion or emotion, but in the latter case (knowledge by intimate direct contact) the individual has the capacity to control his passions or emotions or to some extent, his becoming.

There is a kind of partial detachment of the act from the object found in the act of self-observation. But of course, says Sri Aurobindo, the mental person or the subject is not separated or partially detached from the mental act or the process. The mental person or the subject and the mental act or the process are rolled up in each other. In a similar way, the mental person is not sufficiently detached or separated from the emotional becoming. So, in the case of the knowledge by intimate direct contact, there is neither the total detachment of the subject from the object, nor of the subject from the mental act.
Sri Aurobindo observes:

I am aware of myself in an angry becoming of my conscious stuff of being, and in a thought perception of this becoming, but all thought-perception also is a becoming and not myself, and this I do not yet sufficiently realise; I am identified with my mental activities and involved in them, and not free and separate. I do not yet directly become aware of myself - apart from my becomings and perception of them, apart from the forms of active consciousness which I assume is the waves of the sea of the conscious force which is the stuff of my mental and life nature.

We are able to have this kind of identification and also simultaneous separation and partial identification, according to Sri Aurobindo, because these things are becomings of our being, determinations of our mind stuff and mind energy, of our life stuff and life energy. But because these becomings are only a small part of us, we are not bound to remain identified and occupied. We can detach ourselves and separate the being from its temporary becomings. If we want, we can observe it, control it, sanction or prevent its manifestation.

(iii) Knowledge by separative direct contact:

Here, the mental person detaches himself completely from the mental states. He remains as a mere spectator or witness to inner states. According to Sri Aurobindo, when we detach our mental person from the act of
self-experience, we are fully aware at the first instance the sheer ego and at the end, the witness self, which remains as a constant factor, aware of an unlimited succession of conscious movements. The knowledge of our inner movements, says Sri Aurobindo, is of a double nature, separation and direct contact because, even when we detach ourselves, the contact is maintained where there is a kind of intimacy, immediacy and directness. The more separative attitude is seen in our method of reasoning in observing and knowing the inner movements. And, the more intimate is the method of the dynamic part of mind associating itself with our sensations, feelings and desires. But in this association also, the thinking mind can intervene and exercise a separative, disassociated observation and control over both the dynamic self-associating part of mind and the vital or physical movements.

(iv) Wholly separative knowledge by indirect contact:

With regard to our knowledge of the external world, we do not identify ourselves with the objects. The subject and object remain apart. Here our knowledge has an entirely separative basis; its whole machinery and process are of the nature of an indirect perception. One cannot know the external objects and also their movements with directness, immediateness, and intimacy since we cannot
enter into their existence as we can enter with regard to our subjective states in the case of knowledge by identity. Our knowledge of the external objects not only lacks identification, but also lacks direct contact; hence, this knowledge is aptly termed by Sri Aurobindo as wholly separative knowledge by indirect contact. The only apparent direct contact with the objects or direct evidence which we have of them is through the senses which give us some kind of direct intimacy with the objects of knowledge. But this is not a real directness or real intimacy in strict sense of the term, but direct knowledge by courtesy; for, what we get by our senses is not the inner or intimate touch of the thing itself, but an image of it, or a vibration or nerve message in ourselves, through which we learn to know it. Our knowledge could have been so little and even nothing if our sense-object contact is the whole machinery in our knowledge enterprise. Our knowledge remains meaningful because:

There intervenes a sense-mind intuition which seizes the suggestions of the image or vibration and it equates with the object, a vital intuition which seizes the energy or figure of power of the object through another kind of vibration created by the sense contact, and an intuition of the perceptive mind which at once forms a right idea of the object from all this evidence. Whatever is deficient in the interpretation of the image thus constructed is filled up by the intervention of the reason or the total understanding intelligence.
But, says Sri Aurobindo, if the first composite intuition were the outcome of a direct contact, then there would be no need for the intervention of the reason except as a discoverer or organiser of knowledge not conveyed by the senses and its suggestion. On the other hand, intuition is working upon an indirect evidence; and hence, our intuitional interpretative construction of the object is open to question or at least likely to be incomplete.

4. Sources of knowledge

It has been pointed out earlier that Sri Aurobindo aims at integral knowledge which demands an exploration and unveiling of all the possible domains of consciousness and experience. Sri Aurobindo "tries to explore and interpret and integrate all such data". He takes experience in the widest possible sense and hence, takes into account all the levels of experience which help in obtaining knowledge. Each level of experience reveals the knowledge of one specific aspect of the reality which is multidimensional and integral in nature.

According to Sri Aurobindo, most empiricists limit their philosophical investigations to ordinary waking experience and hold that all knowledge can be traced back to sense object contact. For him, this normal waking experience is really the middle part of our existence which
has a "subconscient" sphere below and "superconscient" one above.

Along the lines of the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad-gītā, Sri Aurobindo accepts five external senses (indriyas), lower mind (manas), and intellect (buddhi) as preliminary organs of human knowledge in a rising scale. He also discovers "supermind" as the highest organ of knowledge which is beyond the ordinary instruments of knowledge. Also, between the mind and supermind, he discovers intermediary instruments of knowledge like the higher mind, the illumined mind, the intuitive mind and the overmind, which are in an ascending hierarchy. Corresponding to these different instruments of knowledge, Sri Aurobindo recognizes different means of knowledge depending upon the object of knowledge which it aims at. No means of knowledge is devalued in comprehending the nature of that integral reality. The various means of knowledge, according to Sri Aurobindo, are: (a) sense experience (b) reason (c) intuition, and (d) gnostic or supramental consciousness.

(a) Sense experience:

Sri Aurobindo recognizes sense experience as a valid source of knowledge in acquiring knowledge of the world and its phenomena. Like Kant, Sri Aurobindo believes
that our sense-organs furnish us only with raw-materials of knowledge. He says that the sense experience has no meaning unless "it is translated into terms of the sense-mind". That is why "manas", says Sri Aurobindo, has been regarded by Indian philosophers as the sixth sense. It can even be said that it is the only sense and that other sense-organs of vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste are merely specialization of the sense-mind. Although the sense-mind normally uses the sense-organs for the basis of its experience, yet it goes beyond them and is capable of a direct experience "proper to its own inherent action". In a sense, all our experiences are psychological in nature. Thus, it is evident that the sense experience in itself is inadequate to give us knowledge unless reason corrects and modifies our perceptions. Sri Aurobindo greatly appreciates this function of reason and says that the power of correcting the errors of the sense-mind by the use of reason is uniquely possessed by man alone, and thus marks his superiority over the terrestrial beings. If human knowledge were to depend on sense experience alone, then it could know little or nothing about the object. The senses alone do not give any definite idea of the object of experience. Sri Aurobindo observes:\(^{18}\)

But there intervenes, a sense-mind intuition which seizes the suggestion of the image or vibration and equates it with the object, vital intuition
which seizes them energy of figure of power of the object through another kind of vibration created by the sense-contacts, and an intuition of the perceptive mind which at once forms a right idea of the object from all this evidence.

Thus, the raw materials which are provided by the senses are arranged and synthesised by the sense-mind, the vital-mind, perceptive-mind, and reason in order to have a definite and vivid knowledge of the object. As Sri Aurobindo puts it:

Our world-knowledge is therefore a difficult structure made up of the imperfect documentation of the sense-image, an intuitional interpretation of it by the perceptive-mind, life-mind, sense-mind, and a supplementary filling up, correction, addition of supplementary knowledge, co-ordination by the reason.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the sense-mind possesses double action: (i) mixed or dependent and (ii) pure or sovereign.

(i) Mixed or dependent action:

To depend on the sense-organs for becoming aware of the external object is the mixed action of the mind. But in reality, all our experiences in their secret nature are knowledge by identity. Our true character is hidden because we have separated ourselves from the rest of the world by means of a dichotomy between ourselves and the rest of the world, by regarding ourselves as the subject and the
rest of the world as object. And this kind of distinction compels us to develop processes and organs by which we may again enter into communion with all that we have excluded. We have to replace direct knowledge through conscious identity by an indirect knowledge which seems to be caused by physical contact and mental sympathy. The limitation which is brought forth by the subject-object distinction is basically a creation of the ego which, in turn, covers the true truth of things.

But these existing limitations are not necessarily inevitable. They are the result of an evolution in which mind has accustomed itself to depend upon certain psychological functionings and their reactions as its normal means of entering into relation with the material universe. Hence, although it is a rule that, in order to have the knowledge of the world and men, we have to approach indirectly, i.e., through the senses and the mind, yet we can have direct cognition of the world without the aid of the senses since this rule is merely the regularity of dominant habit. Sri Aurobindo aptly says: 20

It is possible for the mind, - and it would be natural for it, if it would be persuaded to liberate itself from its consent to the domination of matter, - to take direct cognisance of the objects of sense without the aid of the sense-organs.

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(ii) Sovereign or independent action:

Sense-mind in its pure action becomes aware of itself, the subject. Here, the sense-mind acts in itself and is aware of things directly by a sort of identity with them. Sometimes our experiences of deep love, anger, etc. are the result of knowledge by identity where we become one with our subjective states. Truly speaking, all our knowledge is fundamentally knowledge by identity, but its true character is hidden. While in sovereign action of the sense-mind, the knowledge by identity is apparent, in its mixed action knowledge by identity is hidden. In the experiments of hypnosis and cognate psychological phenomena, direct cognition of the object is given without the mediation of the sense-organs. Since our waking consciousness is determined and limited by the balance between mind and matter, worked out by life in its evolution, the direct cognisance between the subject and object is impossible. But in the case of hypnosis, direct cognisance is brought about by throwing the waking mind into a state of sleep which liberates the true or subliminal mind. Here, the mind becomes single and all-sufficient sense and gets to know the object directly. But this kind of extension of faculty is not really impossible.

Sri Aurobindo is of the view that the sovereign action of the sense-mind can be used to develop other senses
besides the five which we already have. With the developed senses one can accurately weigh an object which we hold in our hands without any physical means. Here the sense-object contact is used only as a starting point just as the data of sense experience are used by the reason as the raw materials. The mind has its independent perception of the object. Even the direct knowledge of the subjective states of other human beings may be possible without taking the help from the utterances, gestures, action or facial expressions, which many a time mislead us.

But, says Sri Aurobindo, how much we may perfect our senses and sense-mind, they fail when we begin to tread the regions of knowledge which can be studied only by the help of reason. The Bhagavad-gītā also talks of such subject matter of knowledge. It states that there are some truths which are "beyond the perception of the senses but seizable by the perception of reason," (buddhi-grahyamātIndriyam). This brings us to the discussion of the second way of acquiring knowledge, viz., reason or buddhi.

(b) Knowledge through reason:

Sri Aurobindo, has analysed the function of reason into two parts: (i) mixed or dependent and (ii) pure or sovereign.
(i) Mixed or dependent action:

Reason can be said to be in its mixed action when it confines itself to the sense experiences by admitting its law as the final truth. Hence, it deals with only the phenomenal world or appearances of things. The mixed action of reason is incapable of knowing the essential nature of things or thing-in-itself. On the other hand, it can survey only the field of becoming, but not the depth of being. Scientific laws are derived by mixed reason.

(ii) Pure or sovereign action:

Reason in its mixed or dependent action cannot know the reality behind the appearances of becoming. The reality behind the appearances can be known conceptually when reason is in its pure or sovereign action. Here the reason makes use of sense experience only as a starting point. The complete use of pure reason takes us finally from the physical to the metaphysical level. Sri Aurobindo feels that this kind of movement is legitimate and indispensable because:

Our normal experience not only covers only a small part of universal fact, but even in the limits of its own field uses instruments that are defective and gives us false weights and measures. It must be exceeded, put away to a distance and its insistence often denied if we are to arrive at a
more adequate conceptions of the truth of things. To correct the errors of the sense-mind by the use of reason is one of the most valuable powers developed by man and the chief cause of his superiority among terrestrial beings.

Sri Aurobindo holds that the concepts of metaphysical knowledge do not in themselves satisfy the demand of our integral being, though they are entirely satisfactory to the pure reason itself, since they are the stuff of its own existence. Sri Aurobindo holds the view that ideas are mere promises if they are not fulfilled or experienced. Sri Aurobindo aptly says: 22

But our nature sees things through two eyes always, for it views them doubly as idea and as fact and therefore every concept is incomplete for us and to a part of our nature almost unreal until it becomes an experience.

Ideas about sensuous objects formed by reason through inference are not fully accepted until they are verified by perception. Similarly, the non-sensuous ideas about the ultimate reality formed by pure reason are not fully accepted without some non-sensuous experience. But is such experience possible? Sri Aurobindo maintains that direct and non-sensuous experience about reality is not only possible, but is actually present in us in an obscure way. It can be developed by yogic culture.
A critique of sense experience and reason

According to Sri Aurobindo, materialists affirm the existence of the world of matter on the ground that it is given to the experience of physical senses, but they deny the supersensible as they are not given to our sense experience. But, says Sri Aurobindo, the physical senses are incapable of judging validity in the realm of philosophical reasoning. He thus comments: 23

This vulgar or rustic error of our corporeal organ does not gain in validity by being promoted into the domains of philosophical reasoning.

Even in the world of matter, there are certain things which go beyond the capacity of the physical senses and yet some deny the supersensible as illusion, which is really ridiculous. Sri Aurobindo further remarks: 24

The denial of the supersensible as necessarily as illusion or a hallucination depends on this constant sensuous association of the real with the materially perceptible which is itself a hallucination. Assuming throughout what it seeks to establish, it has a vice of argument in a circle and can have no validity for an impartial reasoning.

Sri Aurobindo also holds that there are not only suprasensible entities, but also senses which are supra-physical (sūkṣma indriya), existing in the subtle body (sūkṣma deha), which are means for subtle vision and experience (sūkṣma drṣṭi), which can bring us into contact
with supraphysical realities. At the emergence of new scientific progress, the truths relating to supraphysical realities and also subtle instruments do not remain in the level of belief any more. For example, the telepathic knowledge which is discovered is able to give us a glimpse with reference to the existence of suprasensible realities and suprasensible organs of knowledge. But, of course, says Sri Aurobindo, the glimpse of supraphysical realities acquired by methodical research has been, to some extent, imperfect and is ill-affirmed; for, the methods used are still crude and dejective. But these rediscovered subtle senses have at least been found to be true witness to physical facts beyond the range of the corporeal organs. Hence, there cannot be any justification for scouting them as false witness when they testify to supraphysical facts beyond the domain of the material organization of consciousness.

Sri Aurobindo further remarks that, though the materialists' denial seems to be more successful and more facile in its appeal to the generality of the mankind, it is ultimately less enduring than the refusal of the ascetic for it carries within itself its own cure. Its most powerful element is agnosticism. It admits the unknowable behind all manifestation and then extends the limits of the unknowable until it comprehends all that is merely unknown. Its basic
premise is that our physical senses are our sole means of knowledge; and it also holds that reason must confine itself within the boundaries of the sense experience. This premise, holds Sri Aurobindo, is an arbitrary pronouncement. The materialistic view can be held only at the expense of ignoring all the vast field of evidence and experience, which contradicts it and denying noble useful faculties which are latent in all human beings. When we begin to investigate the operations of the supermind, we realize that we have the capacity to come in to contact with a mass of phenomena, which remains unapproachable by the limited faculties recognized by the materialists. And the moment we realize this, we conclude that there are in the universe knowable realities which are beyond our sense experience; and here the premise of the materialistic agnosticism disappears. Though Sri Aurobindo is well aware of the limitations of materialism, he does recognize the important role played by it when men with unchastened minds and unpurified sensibilities attempt to rise into the higher domains of spiritual experience, but still he recognizes the reason to be rash and premature. It is, therefore, necessary that advancing knowledge should base itself on a clear, pure and disciplined intellect. It is also necessary that it should correct its errors sometimes by a return to the restraint of sensible fact, the concrete realities of
the physical world. The supraphysical can really be maintained and mastered in its fullness when we keep our feet firmly on the physical. To support his view Sri Aurobindo refers to the Mundaka Upanishad which states, that "earth is his footing". It is certainly the fact that the wider and surer becomes our knowledge of the world, the wider and surer becomes our foundation for the higher knowledge and even for the highest, i.e., the Brahma vidya. He acknowledges the great service rendered by agnosticism in preparing the illimitable increase of knowledge. Our error acts as a hand-maid and path finder of truth since error is really half-truth that stumbles because of its limitations. Often it is truth that wears a disguise.

Sri Aurobindo further says that in order to arrive at valid knowledge of supraphysical realities, the evidence of the testimony of the subtle organs has to be controlled, scrutinised, and arranged by the reason. At the same time he emphatically affirms the validity of the supraphysical and supra-mental experiences. Sri Aurobindo says that the truth of great ranges of experience whose objects exist in a more subtle substance are perceived by more subtle instruments than those of gross physical matter. The knowledge claims of the supraphysical in the end achieves the same validity as the truth of the material universe. Sri Aurobindo observes:25
The worlds beyond exist: they have their universal rhythm, their grand lines and formations, their self-existent laws and mighty energies, their just and luminous means of knowledge.

Though Sri Aurobindo recognizes the important role played by reason, he has not failed in understanding the limitations of reason in obtaining complete knowledge of the world, ourself and also of the reality which is both immanent and transcendent in its nature. The human mind makes use of various intellectual faculties like imagination, speculation, reflection, impartial weighing, and inference in order to obtain more complete and satisfactory knowledge of the world, but even then it fails in its endeavour. Sri Aurobindo says that even after so much of efforts, our knowledge still remains "half certain", "half dubious", indirect, "a mass of significant images", ideative representations. Our knowledge still remains as hypotheses, theories and generalizations. Not only our knowledge of the external world acquired by reason remains imperfect but also about the self and our subjective existence. We are not aware of our true self and true meaning of our existence, but only aware of our surface existence. Here again our knowledge is meagre and pitiful. Sri Aurobindo aptly observes:

It is quite evident that we know ourselves with only a superficial knowledge -- the sources of our consciousness and thoughts are a mystery; the true nature of our mind, emotions, sensations is a
mystery; the cause of being and our end of being, the significance of our life and its activities are a mystery; this could not be if we had a real self-knowledge and a real world-knowledge.

But why is it that mind is not able to have complete knowledge either of the individual, or of the world, or of the reality? First and foremost, basically and essentially mind is neither a faculty of knowledge nor an instrument of omniscience. It is an instrument for the seeking of knowledge for expressing as much as it can gain of it in certain forms of a relative thought and towards certain capacities of action. Even when it finds, it does not possess; it only keeps certain fund of current coin of truth and not the truth itself. Sri Aurobindo holds the view that mind basically is that which does not know; though it tries to know, it never knows "except as in a glass darkly". He further observes that mind is only a reflective mirror which receives presentation or images of a pre-existent truth or fact which is external to it or vaster than itself. It also possesses the faculty of constructing in itself possible images than those of the actual facts presented to it.

Hence, so long we work only through the mind, which is governed by the appearances, it can never know directly the reality which is behind the appearances and which is again both immanent and transcendent, but we can
only infer it. Reason is only a messenger, a representative or a shadow of a greater consciousness.

In reality, thought is only a pioneer; it can guide, but it cannot command or effectuate. Since, thought is not the highest and strongest part of nature and not even the sole or deepest index to truth, the conclusive satisfaction of thought cannot be considered as the criterion for attainment of the supreme knowledge. It can only act as a guide up to certain point. In bringing out the incapability of reason in understanding the complex reality which is infinite, Sri Aurobindo writes: 27

An exclusive path of abstract thought would be justified only if the object of the supreme will in the universe has been nothing more than a descent into the activity of the ignorance operated by the mind as binding instrument and jailor through false idea and sensation and an ascent into the quiescence of knowledge equally operated by the mind through correct thought an enlightening instrument and saviour. But chances are that there is an aim in the world less absurd and aimless, an impulse towards the Absolute less dry and abstract, a truth of the world more large and complex, a more richly infinite height of the Infinite.

An abstract logic of the narrow and incompetent human mind is not likely to be the key to divine super human knowledge. Sri Aurobindo beautifully puts it in his Savitri: 28

....not by Reason was creation made and not by Reason can truth be seen.

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Reason cannot comprehend the Truth because:

In her high works of pure intelligence,
In her withdrawal from the senses' trap,
There comes not breaking of the walls of the mind,
There leaps no rending flash of absolute power,
There dawns no light of heavenly certitude.

Sri Aurobindo also feels that reason can never arrive at any
certain truths because:

It reasons from the half-known to the unknown,
Ever constructing its frail house of thought,
Ever undoing the web that it has spun.

Sri Aurobindo is emphatic about the incapability of the mind
to comprehend the higher truths. He aptly says:

If mind is all, renounces the hope of Truth.
For Mind can never touch the body of Truth
And Mind can never see the soul of God.

In expressing incapability of the mind in grasping the
higher truths Sri Aurobindo writes:

On the ocean surface of vast consciousness
Small thoughts in shoals are fished up into net
But the great truths escape her narrow cast.

Sri Aurobindo further says that mind by its very nature is a
dividing principle; it cuts whole into parts and recognizes
these parts as independent. Again, even when it knows that
they are not things in themselves, it sees them as if they
were things-in-themselves. To put it in his own words:
Mind in its essence is a consciousness which measures, limits, cuts out forms of things from the indivisible whole and contains them as if each were a separate integer. Even with what exists only as obvious parts and fractions, Mind establishes this fictions of its ordinary commerce that they are things with which it can deal separately and not merely as aspects of a whole. For even it knows that they are not things in themselves, it is obliged to deal with them as if they were things in themselves, otherwise it could not subject them to its own characteristic activity. It is this altogether but than it exceeds all relations essential characteristics of Mind which conditions the workings of all operative powers, whether conceptions, perceptions, or sensations or the dealings of creative thought..... Mind may divide, multiply, add, subtract, but it cannot go beyond the limits of this mathematics.

So, it is clear that our so-called mental knowledge, although considered to be knowledge by courtesy is a kind of ignorance since it is limited, imperfect, and inadequate.

But, why is it that our mental knowledge with regard to ourselves, the world and the reality is so narrow? It is because ordinarily our mental consciousness remains on the surface level. This kind of self-concentration of divine consciousness force, on the surface level, makes the individual enjoy its ego-centric individuality which in turn enables the individual to have subject-object differentiation, and myself-otherself dualism. But the unique property of self-consciousness is possessed by man alone. It is the ego which is the underlying principle at the root of all the human experience. It synthesises all
human experiences into a coherent whole. To put it in his own words: 34

Mind-sense is the basis, memory the thread on which experiences are strung by the self-experiencing mind; but it is the coordinating faculty of mind which, relating together all the material that memory provides and all its linkings of past, present, and future, relates them also to an 'I' who is the same in all the moments of Time and in spite of all the changes of experience and personality.

The egosense which enables the man to have self-consciousness makes him proceed towards the realization of his real self and existence.

But in mental level because of sevenfold ignorance, man suffers from egosense and which, in turn, makes man suffer from limitation of knowledge. Man, in order to get rid of his separative ego sense which is a stumbling block in his way to complete knowledge, must get rid of these sevenfold ignorance and must inturn lead to sevenfold knowledge.

Sevenfold ignorance

(1) Original ignorance: The Absolute is the source of all being and becoming. But we consider some partial aspects of being and some temporal relations of becoming as the whole truth of existence. This is, according to Sri Aurobindo, the original ignorance.
(2) **Cosmic ignorance:** The cosmic ignorance consists in our being ignorant of the true nature of the immobile, spaceless, timeless, and impersonal self and considering the phenomenal or the cosmic becoming in time and space as the whole truth of existence.

(3) **Egoistic ignorance:** It consists of our being ignorant of our universal self, the cosmic existence, the cosmic consciousness and considering ourself the phenomenal egoistic being possessed of a limited mentality, vitality and corporeality.

(4) **Temporal ignorance:** The temporal ignorance is due to our being helplessly identified with this body, with this life and being ignorant and forgetful of our past lives and of our eternal becoming in time.

(5) **Psychological ignorance:** When we are aware of only our surface consciousness and we are ignorant of our large and complex being which consists of superconscient, subconscient and subliminal spheres of consciousness.

(6) **Constitutional ignorance:** This consists in regarding the mind, life and body as the essential truths of our being and losing sight of that which constitutes them.
(7) **Practical ignorance:** On account of manifold ignorance, we fail to live in harmony and thus lose the true enjoyment of life and this is practical ignorance.

According to Sri Aurobindo, man is not bound to be within the iron chain of ignorance for ever. Our true individuality is not represented by the ego. Deep within ourselves lies the true individual, the psychic entity. Man can realize his true and essential being which is within himself by transcending the limitations of his ego. Hence, our ego is not something inescapable. It is apt to quote Radhakrishnan: 35

Avidyā is not inevitable though quite natural. If it were inevitable, there is no point in asking us to get rid of it. We cannot strive against the inevitable. We cannot know what cannot be known. It is possible for us to check the course of avidyā, and it shows that we are really greater than our habits.

Sri Aurobindo's approach with regard to avidyā is quite novel. According to him, avidyā is not an essential and integral part of human consciousness. It is merely a passing phase of human life. For him, avidyā is not non-knowledge, but only partial knowledge.

As long as man remains in the level of ignorance, mind has to rely on various mental and intellectual faculties and specially on memory for gaining knowledge of the individual and the external world. It is because of
memory that mind is able to be aware of the past and link with the present in this life. But, says Sri Aurobindo:

Memory is a poverty-stricken substitute for an integral direct abiding consciousness of self and direct integral or global perception of things.

But the human being requires memory in order to obtain a coherent knowledge as long as he confines himself within the limits of egosense. When he goes beyond the boundaries of mental and egosense, the limitations of ego-sense, its various mental faculties are shaken off and it is replaced by supramental consciousness which, in turn, enables him to have the knowledge by identity of his own essential existence, and realize his identity with the whole of the cosmos. This supramental consciousness which gives rise to integral knowledge is possessed only by the supermind which is the highest faculty of knowledge according to Sri Aurobindo. Mind has the innate capacity to raise itself to the level of supermind which, according to Sri Aurobindo, is nothing but the self-concentration and self-manifestation of the supermind. It can become one with it by the process of self-expansion during the course of evolution. Between the mind and supermind Sri Aurobindo recognizes different grades of mind representing different levels of consciousness in an hierarchy. In fact, they function as different instruments of knowledge leading to integral knowledge. They are: (i)
The higher mind, (ii) The illumined mind, (iii) The intuitive mind, and (iv) The overmind.

(i) The higher mind

The first ascent of our ordinary mentality takes us into the higher mind which is the first plane of spiritual mind-consciousness. For the first time automatic and spontaneous knowledge takes place in the higher mind. According to Sri Aurobindo, the higher mind is "a luminous thought-mind, a mind of spirit-born conceptual knowledge". Here the activities of consciousness are dominated by thought. But the thought process of the higher mind is qualitatively different from the ordinary mind.

Ordinarily, our normal mind depends on sense experience, inference and other sources of knowledge for acquiring knowledge, but the higher mind does not rely on such sources for acquiring knowledge. In the higher mind there is no "self-critical ratiocination", no logical motion in order to derive a conclusion. There is no deductive procedure, implicit or explicit. On the other hand, it can express itself in a single idea. It sees the totality of truth at a single view. The relation of idea with idea, and truth with truth, are not established by logic, "but pre-exist and emerge already self-seen in the integral whole."37 The higher mind does not give us knowledge which is a system
of conclusion from premises. Here, thought is a self-revelation of eternal wisdom. It is not an acquired knowledge, but knowledge which is inherent. Sri Aurobindo observes:

But here in this greater Thought there is no need of a seeking and self-critical ratiocination, no logical motion step by step towards a conclusion, no mechanism of express or implied deductions and inferences, no building or deliberate concrete notion of idea in order to arrive at a ordered sum or outcome of knowledge.....This higher consciousness is a knowledge formulating itself on a basis of self-existent all-awareness....It can freely express itself in single ideas, but its most characteristic movement is a mass ideation, a system or totality of truth-seeing at a single view; the relation of idea with idea, of truth with truth are not established by logic but are pre-existent and emerge already self-seen in the integral whole.....The thought is a self-revelation of eternal wisdom, not an acquired knowledge.

But the higher mind cannot give knowledge which is totally free from ignorance. Its knowledge is distorted and diminished by the mind. But it has all the potentiality to raise itself to higher states of knowledge. Sri Aurobindo observes:

The power of the spiritual Higher Mind and its idea-force, modified and diminished as it must be by its entrance into our mentality, is not sufficient to sweep out all these obstacles and create the gnostic being, but it can make a first change, a modification that will capacitate a higher ascent and a more powerful descent and further prepare an integration of the being in a greater force of consciousness and knowledge.
(ii) The illumined mind

In the level of illumined mind there is a possibility of greater knowledge since here mind ascends to a higher level of consciousness. It is a mind of "truth-sight". It basically works by spiritual vision and not by thought. Here, thought plays only a secondary role in the spiritual order; thought is not an indispensable process. Thought in itself in its origin on the higher level of consciousness is a form of perception and a cognitive seizing of the object or some truth of things, but it is a secondary result of spiritual vision. It creates a representative image of truth, but the true truth of things exactly caught and held in the "sun light of a deeper spiritual light". Sri Aurobindo further says that, though thought is powerful for communication of knowledge, it is not indispensable for reception of possession of knowledge. In illumined mind we find the consciousness of the seer. The consciousness that proceeds by sight is a greater power for knowledge than the consciousness of the thinker. The perceptual power of the inner sight is greater and more direct than the perceptual power of thought. Sri Aurobindo further says:

... it is a spiritual sense that seizes something of the substance of Truth and not only her figure; but it outlines the figure also and at the same time catches the significance of the figure,
and it can embody her with a finer and bolder revealing outline and a larger comprehension and power of totality than thought - conception can manage.

In bringing out the nature of illumined mind, Sri Aurobindo beautifully writes in his *Savitri*:

There are vasts of vision and eternal suns, oceans of an immortal illuminousness, Flame-hills assaulting heaven with their peaks, There dwelling all becomes a blaze of sight, A burning head of vision leads the mind, Thought trails behind it its long come tail, The heart glows, an illuminate and seer, And sense is kindled into identity.

(iii) The intuitive mind

According to Sri Aurobindo, intuition is a power of consciousness which is nearer and more intimate to the original knowledge by identity since it is a direct outcome of a concealed identity. Intuition takes place when the consciousness of the subject meets with the consciousness of the objects by penetrating, seeing and feeling the truth of what it contacts. To quote Sri Aurobindo:

It is when the consciousness of the subject meets with the consciousness in the object, penetrates it and sees, feels or vibrates with the truth of what it contacts, that the intuition leaps out like a spark or lightning-flash from the shock of the meeting....
Sri Aurobindo speaks of two other ways by which intuition has its origin. When the consciousness, even without having any meeting between the subject and object, looks into itself, it can feel directly and intimately the truth that is hidden behind the appearances. Very often, observes Sri Aurobindo, the human mind fails to experience intuition in their pure and unadulterated state. For him, "a pure intuition is a rare occurrence in our mental activity." Very often, our intuitive knowledge gets modified by our mental categories and hence loses its purity. Sri Aurobindo holds the view that, in our mental level, reason must make a thorough scrutiny of intuitions since intuition may come from both higher and lower levels of consciousness. But when the mind passes through both higher and illumined mind, it becomes fit enough to receive directly the pure spiritual truths descending from spiritual plane.

Sri Aurobindo speaks of fourfold power of intuition, viz., a power of revelatory or truth-seeing, a power of inspiration or truth-hearing, a power of truth-touch or immediate seizing of significance, and a power of true and automatic discrimination of the orderly and exact relation of truth to truth.

Sri Aurobindo sees intuition as a communication to the mind from above. According to him, "Intuition brings to man those brilliant messages from the unknown which are the
beginning of his higher knowledge". He further calls it "a projection of the characteristic action of these higher grades into the mind of ignorance". In Sri Aurobindo's thought, intuition, as it is ordinarily understood, cannot be the highest form of consciousness since, in human mind, its action is largely hidden by the intervention of our normal intelligence; a pure intuition is a rare occurrence in our mental activity. According to Sri Aurobindo.\(^\text{43}\)

Very often the flash of intuition is quickly replaced or intercepted, before it has a chance of manifesting itself by a imitative mental movement, insight or quick perception or some swift -- leaping process of thought.

Intuition, thus, being overlaid with mental stuff and its flow being frequently disturbed by imitative mental movement, is not in a position to give us that integral experience which alone reveals the ultimate truth. Sri Aurobindo makes a difference between gnosis and intuitive mentality. For him, intuitive mentality is still mind and not gnosis. It is indeed a light from the supermind, but modified and diminished by the stuff of mind in which it works. Sri Aurobindo, therefore, makes a distinction between intuitive reason and pure intuition and this pure intuition is technically termed by Sri Aurobindo as gnosis or vijnāna.
(iv) The overmind

According to Sri Aurobindo, overmind in its nature and law is a delegate of the supermind to the ignorance. It is the first parent of ignorance. Overmind does not possess the integral unity of the supermind, but it is the opening into the cosmic consciousness by having direct contact with the supramental truth consciousness. Intuition draws its light from this overmind. But at the same time it has the tendency towards separation and this enables the one to express itself as many maintaining the fundamental principle of unity in the background. The inherent defect of the overmind is that it cannot serve the essential condition of the supreme truth consciousness, viz., the full integrality. In describing the nature of the overmind, Sri Aurobindo writes:

It covers as with the wide wings of some creative over soul 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 at once an obstacle and passage in our seeking of the spiritual law of our existence, its highest aim, its secret Reality.

The supermind: (Gnostic consciousness as a source of knowledge)

It is aptly pointed out by S.K. Maitra that the conception of the supermind is the pivot round which the
whole philosophy of Sri Aurobindo moves. One cannot really
discuss either the metaphysics or the epistemology of Sri
Aurobindo without discussing in detail his concept of
supermind. The absolute, according to Sri Aurobindo,
manifests the world through the supermind. We have
discussed earlier that the absolute manifests the world
through its conscious force. The supermind is nothing else
but the conscious force working according to some fixed
truth, some definite principle or law. In this context, it
is apt to quote Sri Aurobindo: 45

Infinite consciousness in its infinite action can
produce only infinite results; to settle upon a
fixed Truth or order of truths and build a world
in conformity with that which is fixed, demands a
selective faculty of knowledge commissioned to
shape finite appearance out of the infinite
Reality.

This selective faculty of knowledge is called by Sri
Aurobindo supermind. The supermind, for Sri Aurobindo, is
the link between the absolute and the finite world. Unlike
mind, it is fully aware of the indivisible, unitary and
self-concentrated consciousness of sat-cit-ánanda in which
there is no separate distinctions. It also contains the
essential truth of the world and creates the world of
multiplicity out of the indivisible unitary and self-
concentrated being of sat-cit-ánanda. So, above the
supermind we have the pure being of sat-cit-ánanda and below

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it, the analytic consciousness of mind which knows only by division and separation and has only an indirect and secondary apprehension of unity and infinity. The supermind succeeds where mind fails.

Supermind is neither the mind raised to the highest degree of consciousness nor it includes the absolute in itself. It is radically different from mind. Though it manifests mind, yet it is quite different from it in nature. The supermind belongs to the higher hemisphere and shines in perfect knowledge and supreme light. In order to give a precise meaning to the term "supermind", Sri Aurobindo calls it the "Truth-consciousness". Sri Aurobindo has borrowed this significant term from the Rg-veda. The Truth-consciousness is present everywhere in the universe as an ordering self-knowledge and manifests the cosmos in the light of its own law. It has the full awareness of each thing in its potentiality and actuality. It has full perfect knowledge of the "what" and "how" of things.

The principle of supermind is not completely foreign to the human mind though it is far above the plane of human consciousness and is radically different from it. The supramental consciousness is accessible to the human consciousness provided it has broken through all the barriers of ignorance, limitation and division. This
conception of supermind is not totally a novel contribution of Sri Aurobindo. He himself says that the gospel of the divine and immortal supermind is contained in the cryptic verses of the Veda. To quote Sri Aurobindo: 46

The Vedic seers conceived this supermind as a vastness beyond the ordinary firmaments of our consciousness in which truth of being is luminously one with all that expresses it and assures inevitably truth of vision formulation, arrangement, word, act and movement and therefore truth also of result of movement result of action and expression, infallible ordinance or law.

The triple status of supermind

Sri Aurobindo speaks of three poises of supermind, namely, (i) comprehending consciousness (ii) apprehending consciousness, and (iii) projecting consciousness.

(i) Comprehending consciousness:

In this primary and fundamental status of the supermind, there is no individualisation. In this poise there is an equal self-extension of consciousness. The multiplicity is there, but all the multiple forms are the form of the Divine Being and are not in any degree separate existence. The supermind in this status will know the whole world of multiplicity as itself since the one has become all without losing its oneness. When the reflection of this supreme status of all comprehensive and self-extended unity
falls on our stilled and purified self, we lose all sense of individuality. The consciousness of individuality and separate existence is merged altogether in an all-embracing and all-unifying vision of unity. There is no difference between subject and object. The divine soul will have no sense of otherness. The consciousness in this poise is called by Sri Aurobindo the comprehending consciousness.

The supermind, in this poise, is not distributed or divided. It is everywhere the single and equal Brahman, "Samam Brahman". There is an equal concentration of this consciousness in the smallest things as well as greatest things. This all-comprehensive poise of the supermind is best expressed by the characteristic formula, "All this, indeed, is Brahman."

(ii) Apprehending consciousness:

The second poise of the supermind is called the apprehending consciousness or prajñā. Here, for the first time, a division between the Divine consciousness and its Force or between puruṣa and prakṛti appears. Though indivisible, it seem to distribute itself in the forms of nature. And, hence, we for the first time come across the fundamental distinction between subject and object but they do not appear as contradictory entities. The subject and
object are fundamentally one as we find in the first status. The difference is only practical difference, but no essential difference. The object is nothing but a manifestation of subject. Sri Aurobindo observes:

The working of the indivisible All, active and formative, as a process and object of creative knowledge before the consciousness of the same All, originative and cognisant as the processor and witness of its own working, - some what as a poet views the creation of his own consciousness placed before him in it as if they were things other than the creator and his creative force, yet all the time they are really no more than the play of self-formation of his own being in itself and are indivisible there from their creator.

Here, the divine consciousness would view all the objects as essentially the forms of itself. In this poise the concentration of the divine consciousness is within the framework of space and time. Here, a distinction between the individual Divine or Jīvātman and the universal divine appears. While, by the comprehending consciousness, the individual divine would be able to realize its unity with the one and with all the other soul forms, by the apprehending consciousness it would realise itself different from the One and from the other soul forms. Thus, it is capable of enjoying its individual movement as well as its Oneness with One and with all other soul-form. In this poise, we find the relation of identity-in-difference between the one and the many. The same 'One' manifests as the many and the many are essentially conscious of their
fundamental oneness. Here, the difference is only practical, but not essential: the relationship is that of unity in multiplicity. A practical difference between the known, knower and knowledge is created.

(iii) Projecting consciousness:

Here, the consciousness soul projects itself into the movements and identifies itself with each form of itself. The puruṣa identifies himself with each soul-form and views other soul-forms as different from itself. Though it is true that there is no essential difference, yet there is still the consciousness of the duality predominant in this status. But here also the individual divine soul does not lapse into ignorance. It only affirms the truth of the differentiating movement along with the truth of the stable unity regarding them as the upper and lower poles of the same truth.

In supramental plane, the soul is aware of the unity maintaining the diversity and constituting essence. But in the empirical world the soul is unaware of the unity. In supramental level it is the gnosis or vijñāna which acts as a source of knowledge.

Vijñāna or gnosis for Sri Aurobindo is not only truth but truth power. It is the divine knowledge which man
possesses in supramental level. In order to describe it more accurately Sri Aurobindo distinguishes vijnana from two kinds of buddhi, viz., lower buddhi (intellectual knowledge), and higher buddhi (intuitive reason). He further distinguishes it from caitanyaghana (consciousness of the infinite which is free from all ideations).

The nature of the gnosis can be explained to the intellectualists to some extent by contrasting it with the nature of the intellect. However, one can grasp the total meaning of gnosis or vijnana only by experience since it is always the knowledge of the suprarational. The fundamental difference between these two is that, while the mental reason proceeds with labour from ignorance to truth, the gnosis has in itself the direct contact, the immediate vision of the truth, and in fact has the constant possession of the truth; hence, it need not have to go from ignorance to truth. The reason starts with appearances in order to arrive at the truth behind them. It shows the truth in the light of the appearances. In contrast to reason, the gnosis starts from the truth and shows the appearances in the light of the truth. Reason proceeds by inference, while gnosis proceeds by identity or vision. "It is, sees and knows." It sees and grasps truth of the objects as directly or even more than the physical vision. Reason considers sense-experience alone as direct knowledge (pratyaksa) and the
rest is taken as indirect; but to viṣṇāna, all its truth is only direct knowledge. While knowledge acquired by the intellect has a shadow of doubt, it is incomplete half-knowledge and hence, subject to alteration; but the knowledge of the gnosis is free from doubt, self-evident, self-existent, irrefragable, and absolute.

Reasoning proceeds from experience to indirect knowledge by the logical process of deductions, induction, analysis-synthesis, comparison and analogy by resting itself upon memory. But gnosis does not use any other methods. It does not seek knowledge, but possesses knowledge. It reveals and it illumines. When our consciousness is transmuted from intelligence to gnosis, there will be a radical change in our knowledge process. To quote Sri Aurobindo: 48

In a consciousness transmuted from intelligence to gnosis, imagination would be replaced by truth-inspiration, mental judgment would give place to a self-luminous discerning. The slow and stumbling logical process from reasoning to conclusion would be pushed by a swift intuitive proceeding; the conclusion or fact would be seen at once in its own right, by its own self-sufficient witness, and all th evidence by which we arrive at it would be seen too at once, along with it, in the same comprehensive figure, not as its evidence but as its intimate conditions, connections and relations, its constituent parts or its wings of circumstance. Mental and sense-observation would be changed into an inner vision using the instruments as channels but not dependent on them.... Our uncertain memory would fall away and there would come in its place a luminous possession of knowledge, the divine memory that is
not a storehouse of acquisition, but holds all things always contained in the consciousness, a memory at once of past, present and future.

Again, while the reason, being under the domination of time, gains and loses knowledge repeatedly, gnosis, on the other hand, dominates time, in one view and it also links the past, present and future. The gnosis starts from the totality of which it has immediate possession. It sees parts only in relation to the totality while reason is incapable of seeing things in totality. The reason cannot see things in itself, but gnosis sees things in itself. It starts from unity and sees diversity through unity. While reason treats each as a separate existence, gnosis does not treat things separately. It does not recognize any real division; while reason deals only with the finite and is incapable of penetrating into the infinite, gnosis is the infinite, sees the infinite and lives in the infinite. It knows finite things only in relation to the infinite.

So, even the purest reason, the rational intellectuality which is luminous, is not the gnosis. It is clear that gnosis cannot be compared to lower buddhi (lower reason). It is an error to do that. It is dependent for its action on the percepts of the sense mind and on the concepts of the mental intelligence. It is not like the gnosis, self-luminous, authentic, making the subject one with the object.
Gnosis is distinguished from higher buddhi (intuitive reason) also. Sri Aurobindo does say that as long as it is a pure intuition and not subject to any mixture of sense-error or intellectual ideation, it is never contradicted by experience. Of course, the intuition may be verified by the reason or sense-perception afterwards, but at the same time its truth does not depend on that verification. It is guaranteed by automatic self-evidence. Even then, intuitive reason is not the gnosis since it is only an edge of the light of the supermind. Sri Aurobindo says: 49

At the best... the intuition gives us only a limited, though an intensive light; at the worst, through our misuse of it or false limitation of it, it may lead us into perplexities and confusions which the less ambitious intellectual reason avoids by remaining satisfied with its own safe and plodding method, - safe for the inferior purposes of the reason, though never a satisfying guide to the inner truth of things.

Sometimes the mystic identifies gnosis with the consciousness of the infinite free from all ideations. This is the caitanyaghana of the Upaniṣads. But, says Sri Aurobindo, it is only one thread of the many-aspected movement of the gnosis. Vijnana is not only concentrated consciousness of the infinite essence; it is an infinite knowledge of the myriad play of the Infinite as well. It contains all ideations (supramental). It exceeds all ideative movements.
The Vedic seers always sought this faculty of constant awakening and growing perceptive vision, which they termed ketu. The true knowledge or essential knowledge is not merely intellectual conception of the truth but also is a realization. In the complete sense of the term, it is knowledge by absolute identity, tādātmyajñāna. It is knowledge of the self, by the self and in the self, ātmānā tātmānam ātmanā. The highest state of cognition is attained only in the level of supramental consciousness. This alone gives us integral knowledge which, in turn, reveals to us this integral reality. Truly speaking, supramental consciousness, integral reality and integral knowledge are not three different things in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. In supramental level there is no distinction between jñānam (knowledge) jñeya (object of knowledge) and jñāta (knower). In accordance with the Vedāntic thought, Sri Aurobindo holds that it is the self alone which reveals true truth of the things being the source of highest cognition. This view of Sri Aurobindo is beautifully expressed in his epic work, Savitri.

All this she saw and inly felt and knew
Not by some thought of mind but by the self.
A light not born of sun or moon nor fire,
A light that dwelt within and saw within
Shedding an intimate visibility,
Made secrecy more revealing than the word:
Our sight and senses are a fallible gaze and touch
And only the spirit's vision is wholly true.