

## Preface to the Second Issue

Ulrich Mohrhoff

*Managing Editor, AntiMatters*

The release date of the last yearly issue of *AntiMatters* — the second issue in the case of this first volume — is November 24th. On this day in 1926, Sri Aurobindo arrived at a turning point in his yoga.<sup>1</sup> According to Sri Aurobindo, there is a highest mental plane, to which he gave the name “overmind.” The Isha Upanishad refers to it as a “brilliant golden lid” obstructing the passage from mind to supermind.<sup>2</sup> For years Sri Aurobindo had striven to negotiate this passage. Success came on that day in 1926, when the light and power of the overmind descended into his physical being. Subsequently Sri Aurobindo withdrew from outer contacts to concentrate on the more difficult task of enabling the supermind to descend, take possession of his body, and for the first time act on matter directly, rather than through mental intermediaries. Here is part of a conversation of the Mother with Satprem<sup>3</sup> (*Mother’s Agenda* ♣, August 2, 1961):

*Satprem*: I wanted to ask you what this realization of 1926 was.

*The Mother*: It was this: Krishna consented to descend into Sri Aurobindo’s body<sup>4</sup> — to be FIXED there; there is a great difference, you understand, between incarnating, being fixed in a body, and simply acting as an influence that comes and goes and moves about. The gods are always moving about, and it’s plain that we ourselves, in our inner beings,

No longer.

- 
- ~~1 Reminder: *AntiMatters* is published by the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (Pondicherry, India).~~
  - 2 Verse 15: “The face of Truth is covered with a brilliant golden lid; that do thou remove, O Fosterer, for the law of the Truth, for sight.” Sri Aurobindo (1981, p. 67) explains: “In the inner sense of the Veda Surya, the Sun-God, represents the divine Illumination of the Kavi [Seer-Poet] which exceeds mind and forms the pure self-luminous Truth of things. His principal power is self-revelatory knowledge, termed in the Veda, “Sight”. . . He is the Fosterer or Increaser, for he enlarges and opens man’s dark and limited being into a luminous and infinite consciousness. . . His rays are the thoughts that proceed luminously from the Truth, the Vast, but become deflected and distorted, broken up and disordered in the reflecting and dividing principle, Mind. They form there the golden lid which covers the face of the Truth. The Seer prays to Surya to cast them into right order and relation and then draw them together into the unity of revealed truth. The result of this inner process is the perception of the oneness of all beings in the divine Soul of the Universe.”
  - 3 See Satprem (2007). *The Secret of the Veda*. *AntiMatters* 1 (2) — this issue.
  - 4 Sri Aurobindo (1972, p. 405) explains: “Krishna is not the supramental Light. The descent of Krishna would mean the descent of the Overmind Godhead preparing, though not itself actually, the descent of Supermind and Ananda. Krishna is the Anandamaya; he supports the evolution through the Overmind leading it towards the Ananda.” (The Anandamaya is the aspect of bliss, *ānanda*, of the supreme and ultimate reality described in the Upanishads as a trinity of being, consciousness, and bliss.)

come and go and act in a hundred or a thousand places at once. There is a difference between just coming occasionally and accepting to be permanently tied to a body — between a permanent influence and a permanent presence. These things have to be experienced.

*Satprem*: But in what sense did this realization mark a turning point in Sri Aurobindo's sadhana [practice of yoga]?

*The Mother*: No, the phenomenon was important FOR THE CREATION; he himself was rather indifferent to it. But I did tell him about it. It was at that time that he decided to stop dealing with people and retire to his room. So he called everyone together for one last meeting. Before then, he used to go out on the verandah every day to meet and talk with all who came to see him [. . .] I was living in the inner rooms and seeing no one; he was going out onto the verandah, seeing everyone, receiving people, speaking, discussing — I saw him only when he came back inside.

After a while, I too began having meditations with people. I had begun a sort of “overmental creation,” to make each god descend into a being — there was an extraordinary upward curve!<sup>5</sup> Well, I was in contact with these beings and I told Krishna (because I was always seeing him around Sri Aurobindo), “This is all very fine, but what I want now is a creation on earth — you must incarnate.” He said “Yes.” Then I saw him — I saw him with my own eyes (inner eyes, of course), join himself to Sri Aurobindo. Then I went into Sri Aurobindo's room and told him, “Here's what I have seen.”

“Yes, I know!” he replied (Mother laughs) “That's fine; I have decided to retire to my room, and you will take charge of the people. You take charge.” (There were about thirty people at the time.) Then he called everyone together for one last meeting. He sat down, had me sit next to him, and said, “I called you here to tell you that, as of today, I am withdrawing for purposes of sadhana, and Mother<sup>6</sup> will now take charge of everyone; you should address yourselves to her; she will represent me and she will do all the work.” He

---

5 Satprem (1974, pp. 270–271) recounts: “The few disciples — there were about fifteen of them — all remember that very special, highly concentrated atmosphere prevailing during this phase. They had dazzling experiences almost at will; divine manifestations were common, and the natural laws seemed to begin to yield. The veil between the physical world and the other planes of consciousness was growing thinner, and the beings we call gods, or the forces of the overmind, were able to manifest, bend the laws, and produce so-called miracles. Had this trend continued, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother would have been well on their way to founding a new religion, and Pondicherry to becoming one of the “holy places” where spiritual fragrances mask the more common odors. But one day, as the Mother was describing one of the latest extraordinary occurrences to Sri Aurobindo, he remarked humorously: *Yes, it is very interesting, you will work miracles that will make us famous the world over; you will be able to turn earthly events topsy-turvy; indeed* (Sri Aurobindo smiled), *it will be a grand success.* Then he added: *But this is an overmental creation, not the highest truth. It is not the success we want; we want to establish the supermind on earth, create a new world.* Half an hour later, narrates the Mother, *everything had stopped. I did not say anything to anyone, not a word, but in half an hour I had torn down everything, severed the connection between the gods and the disciples, demolished everything. For I knew that as long as this was going on, it was so alluring (one saw astounding things all the time) that we would have been tempted to continue. . . I tore down everything. From then on, we started over on a different footing.*”

6 It was then that Sri Aurobindo officially introduced his spiritual collaborator Mirra Alfassa to the disciples as “Mother”; previously he had often called her “Mirra.”

hadn't mentioned this to me! (Mother bursts into laughter)

These people had always been very intimate with Sri Aurobindo, so they asked: "Why, why, Why?" He replied, "It will be explained to you." I had no intention of explaining anything, and I left the room with him, but Datta began speaking [. . .] She said she felt Sri Aurobindo speaking through her and she explained everything: that Krishna had incarnated and that Sri Aurobindo was now going to do an intensive sadhana for the descent of the Supermind; that it meant Krishna's adherence to the Supramental Descent upon earth and that, as Sri Aurobindo would now be too occupied to deal with people, he had put me in charge and I would be doing all the work.

So what's in this issue? Cognitive scientist **Donald D. Hoffman** starts off with an article that has previously been published only in German translation. In it he argues that advances in cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary biology cannot license deductively valid arguments either for or against theism. As research in the cognitive and neural sciences has made clear, our visual systems are not simply passive recorders of objective reality: "What we see with each glance is not the world as it is objectively and as it would be even if there were no observers. Instead what we see is entirely our own construction." Philosophers studying perception distinguish two senses of perceiving: phenomenal and relational. The phenomenal sense refers to our visual experience; the relational sense refers to the objective reality that we interact with in an act of perception. What can we say about this reality? The adaptationist argument only leads to the conclusion that our cognitive and perceptual apparatuses enable us to survive long enough to reproduce. Natural selection secures survival to reproduction, not cognitive or perceptual truth:

It is a certain anthropocentrism that would lead us to assert otherwise, the same anthropocentrism that led us to assert that the earth is the center of the universe, about which all else revolves. . . Evolution is not done yet. There is no reason to believe that we have arrived at the set of rules of construction that give deep insight into the nature of objective reality. . . What this does make clear is that the ability of science to understand objective reality is limited by the perceptual and cognitive endowments of our species. . . So the story [according to] which science is systematically uncovering all the secrets of nature, and leaving less and less room for God to hide, is not only immodest, but a complete misunderstanding of the scientific enterprise.

What about recent brain imaging and transcranial-magnetic-stimulation studies of mystical experiences? Every one of our perceptions, Hoffman contends, not just our perceptions of God, can be correlated with neural activity.

Surely it is a mistake to take none of our perceptions seriously. To do so would lead to quick and certain death. We must be careful, then, in sorting through which perceptions to take seriously and which not. And the neural facts don't a priori tell us which way to treat God. If there were no God, and God was simply a figment of our imagination, then we might expect to find the neural correlates of God perception that we do. On the other hand, if there were a God, and God wanted us to perceive God, then one might equally expect to find the neural correlates of God perception that we do. The neural facts are indifferent to the conclusion we should draw here.

The second item is a compilation from two major works by **Sri Aurobindo** of pas-

sages concerning the subliminal regions of our consciousness. It begins with biographical sketches of Sri Aurobindo and of F. W. H. Myers, who coined the term “subliminal consciousness” and introduced the subject into scientific psychology. In *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*,<sup>7</sup> Kelly et al. (2006) have argued cogently that the subliminal parts of our consciousness hold the key to all or most of the phenomena we tend to label as “paranormal.” According to Sri Aurobindo — an intrepid explorer and meticulous cartographer of the subliminal — they also hold the key to all or most of the phenomena studied by “ordinary” psychology. Through the subliminal we can enter non-physical planes of existence, whose *raison d’être* he explains.

The next two items (by Yours Truly) present the gists of two articles of considerable consequence, one by philosopher **Jerry Fodor** and one by mathematician **Granville Sewell**.

In his paper, to appear in the January 2008 issue of *Mind and Language*, Fodor argues that explanations of phenotypes in terms of their selection histories are not nomological and “don’t claim or even aspire to be”: adaptationist explanations are species of historical narratives. What is more, even if adaptationist explanations were true causal explanations, nothing would warrant the transition from a functional theory that explains behavior in terms of its function to a psychological theory that explains behavior in terms of intentions. In other words, *evolutionary psychology is a nonstarter*. The reduction to selection of evolutionary psychology in general and of intentionality in particular won’t work.

Sewell, for his part, argues that *evolution violates the second law of thermodynamics in a spectacular way*. Specifically, he notes that if an increase in order is extremely improbable when a system is closed, it is still extremely improbable when the system is open, unless something is entering which makes it much less improbable. The Darwinist’s argument of “compensation” is logically flawed: an extremely improbable event is not rendered less improbable by the occurrence of other events that are more probable. Order can increase in an open system, not because the laws of probability are suspended when the door is open, but because order may walk in through the door. If we found evidence that DNA, auto parts, computer chips, and books entered through the Earth’s atmosphere at some time in the past, then perhaps the appearance of humans, cars, computers, and encyclopedias on a previously barren planet could be explained without postulating a violation of the second law here — it would have been violated somewhere else.

Fodor concludes with the words: “I discover (why am I not surprised?) that if you really want to annoy your friends and relations, you should write a paper attacking evolutionary adaptationism.” Sewell concludes with the words:

The development of life may have only violated one law of science, but that was the one Sir Arthur Eddington called the “supreme” law of Nature, and it has violated that in a most spectacular way. At least that is my opinion, but perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps it

7 For a summary and review of this outstanding volume, see *AntiMatters* 1 (1), 2007, 161–191 ↗

only seems extremely improbable, but really isn't, that, under the right conditions, the influx of stellar energy into a planet could cause atoms to rearrange themselves into nuclear power plants and spaceships and computers. But one would think that at least this would be considered an open question, and those who argue that it really *is* extremely improbable, and thus contrary to the basic principle underlying the second law, would be given a measure of respect, and taken seriously by their colleagues, but [they] aren't.

Whence this sorry state of affairs? In a recent opinion piece in the *New York Times* ("Diet and Fat: A Severe Case of Mistaken Consensus," October 9, 2007), John Tierney puts his finger not on the complete answer but on an important aspect of it:

We like to think that people improve their judgment by putting their minds together, and sometimes they do. The studio audience at "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" usually votes for the right answer. But suppose, instead of the audience members voting silently in unison, they voted out loud one after another. And suppose the first person gets it wrong. If the second person isn't sure of the answer, he's liable to go along with the first person's guess. By then, even if the third person suspects another answer is right, she's more liable to go along just because she assumes the first two together know more than she does. Thus begins an "informational cascade" as one person after another assumes that the rest can't all be wrong.

Subsequently the informational cascade morphes into what the economist Timur Kuran calls a "reputational cascade," in which dissent becomes a career risk. For the vast majority of academics, being a nonmaterialist is a serious career risk. This may explain why in experimental biology the word "evolution" often occurs as a sort of coda to academic papers. To find out whether the term is integral or superfluous to the substance of these papers, Philip S. Skell, Emeritus Evan Pugh Professor at Pennsylvania State University and a member of the National Academy of Sciences, substituted for "evolution" some other word — "Buddhism," "Aztec cosmology," or even "creationism," and found that the substitution never touched the paper's core.

Certainly, my own research with antibiotics during World War II received no guidance from insights provided by Darwinian evolution. Nor did Alexander Fleming's discovery of bacterial inhibition by penicillin. I recently asked more than 70 eminent researchers if they would have done their work differently if they had thought Darwin's theory was wrong. The responses were all the same: No.

I also examined the outstanding biodiscoveries of the past century: the discovery of the double helix; the characterization of the ribosome; the mapping of genomes; research on medications and drug reactions; improvements in food production and sanitation; the development of new surgeries; and others. I even queried biologists working in areas where one would expect the Darwinian paradigm to have most benefited research, such as the emergence of resistance to antibiotics and pesticides. Here, as elsewhere, I found that Darwin's theory had provided no discernible guidance, but was brought in, after the breakthroughs, as an interesting narrative gloss.

When I recently suggested this disconnect publicly, I was vigorously challenged. One person recalled my use of Wilkins and charged me with quote mining.<sup>8</sup> The proof, sup-

---

8 A. S. Wilkins, editor of *BioEssays*, had written that "Evolution would appear to be the indis-

posedly, was in Wilkins's subsequent paragraph:

"Yet, the marginality of evolutionary biology may be changing. More and more issues in biology, from diverse questions about human nature to the vulnerability of ecosystems, are increasingly seen as reflecting evolutionary events. A spate of popular books on evolution testifies to the development. . ."

In reality, however, this passage illustrates my point. The efforts mentioned there are not experimental biology; they are attempts to explain already authenticated phenomena in Darwinian terms. (Skell, 2005)

In the same article Skell points out that Darwinian explanations are too supple:

Natural selection makes humans self-centered and aggressive — except when it makes them altruistic and peaceable. Or natural selection produces virile men who eagerly spread their seed — except when it prefers men who are faithful protectors and providers. When an explanation is so supple that it can explain any behavior, it is difficult to test it experimentally, much less use it as a catalyst for scientific discovery.

When an explanation is so supple that it can explain anything, it really explains nothing.

In "What Does Mysticism Have To Teach Us About Consciousness?," **Robert K. C. Forman** reminds us that a key strategy for understanding a complex phenomenon is to look at its simplest manifestations. The gene structure of *E. coli*, for example, has contributed significantly to our understanding of gene functioning in more complex organisms. Mystical experiences, Forman suggests, represent the simplest or purest form of human consciousness. Hence, by the same token, they may provide valuable insights into the nature of human consciousness. First-person reports, it is true, especially those about unusual experiences, are notoriously unreliable. When an epileptic says that "the table seemed wavy," we interpret it as information not about the world but about his or her condition. But first-person reports can obviously be veridical as well. If we were Woodward and Bernstein listening to the Watergate informant "Deep Throat," how would we decide?

We might ask, does Deep Throat, or the mystics in our case, *seem* unconnected or delusional? I believe most of us would say no. In fact many regard Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, the authors of the Upanishads, and others who tell us of such experiences as unusually wise. Certainly they do not seem utterly unhinged, physically ill, etc. Secondly, we might ask, do others in a situation similar to Deep Throat's describe things similarly? In our case, assuming reasonable cultural differences in language and detail, do mystics from around the world describe things largely similarly? Here again the answer is yes. . . In sum, it makes sense to regard the mystics' unusual reports about the world as more like those of a Deep Throat than those of an epileptic.

**Satprem** next introduces us to "The Secret of the Veda." When Sri Aurobindo first read the Vedic scriptures in translation, they appeared to him as an important historical document but seemed of scant value for a living spiritual experience. Fifteen years later, he read them in the original Sanskrit and found there "a constant vein of the

---

pensable unifying idea and, at the same time, a highly superfluous one."

richest gold of thought and spiritual experience.” Meanwhile, he had had experiences for which he had found “no sufficient explanation either in European psychology or in the teachings of Yoga or of Vedanta,” but which “the mantras of the Veda illuminated with a clear and exact light.” It was through these experiences that Sri Aurobindo came to re-discover the true meaning of the Vedas, the gist of which Satprem presents in his piece.

In 1945, an extensive anthology of the sayings of Jesus was found preserved in the dry sands of a tomb near Nag Hamadi, Egypt. Going back to a Greek text dating about 100 CE, this Coptic text begins with a prologue that attributes its recording to the apostle Thomas. Applying the psychological approach by which Sri Aurobindo re-discovered the esoteric meaning of the Vedas, **Medhananda** elucidates the inner meaning of the Gospel according to St. Thomas.

It is well-known that the early Christians had a symbol by which they recognized one another, and with which they decorated their meeting places and tombs, and when they were not persecuted even their houses. In the four canonical gospels, there is no explanation as to how a single fish became the hallmark of a Christian.

A lot of learned nonsense has been written about the significance of the fish. We are told that the Greek word for fish is *ichthys* (in Greek capital letters, ΙΧΘΥΣ), and that this is an acronym for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ — Jesus Christ, son of God, saviour. Obviously the acronym was invented later, and replaced the meaning of the fish after its true significance had already been forgotten. . . It is in this Gospel according to Thomas, and only here, that we find this fish and an explanation for it.

*The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a fine large fish. He threw all the small fish back into the sea and took the large one without regret.*

How to disregard the net of our sense perception full of small fishes and keep the single one, is a programme for mystics and yogis only. The early church tried hard to keep the single fish, and painted it on the walls of their pagan surroundings to proclaim that a fisherman had passed who kept the large one without regret. But later theologians threw the big one away and kept the multiplicity of small fry.

Our next item is a compilation of passages from two books by **Peter Kingsley**: *In the Dark Places of Wisdom and Reality*. Kingsley is internationally recognized for his groundbreaking work on the origins of western spirituality, philosophy and culture. In the space of only a few years, his books have exerted a profound and far-reaching influence outside as well as inside academia. He has worked together with many of the most prominent figures in the fields of classics and anthropology, philosophy and religious studies, ancient civilizations and the history of both healing and science. The recipient of many academic awards, he has been made an honorary Professor both at Simon Fraser University in Canada and at the University of New Mexico.

Nowadays Parmenides is famous as the founder of western rationalism. Ever since the time of Plato and Aristotle his role in the seeding of western culture has been considered essential. Yet Parmenides’ teaching was far from reasonable; Kingsley makes

this abundantly clear. He was a priest of Apollo who specialized in the mastery of other states of consciousness. For him, our familiar world was an illusion that he could leave behind and re-enter at will. He also was a healer, who worked through ecstasy, through the inspired interpretation of dreams, through immersing himself and others for extended periods of time in utter stillness. As for the “logic” that he introduced to the western world, this was nothing less than a gift from the gods which when understood right, and applied in our daily life, has the mysterious power of taking us back to the gods.

Empedocles, too, is famous for the fundamental role he played in the development of the western world. Just like Parmenides he wrote his teachings in the form of poetry; and this poetry of his exerted a crucial role in creating what were soon to become known as the separate fields of philosophy, rhetoric, medicine, chemistry, biology, astronomy, cosmology and psychology. But essentially he was a sorcerer whose words had a magic power that, for over two thousand years, has bewitched and confused even the brightest of minds. Through his poetry he recorded techniques, which are as powerful now as they ever have been, for leading people to the direct experience of their own divine nature. As for his amazingly intricate teachings about the details of the world around us: their real purpose was to free us from the illusions that bind us and bring us to an immediate awareness of our own immortal soul.

Between them, Parmenides and Empedocles laid the most basic foundations for the world and culture we now live in. But with the passing of time we have forgotten who they were. The truth about the real nature of their work has been neglected, distorted, ignored — transformed into just another of those empty illusions that they themselves tried to set us free from. There is nothing accidental about the fact that western societies are starved for some real sense of meaning and crying out for something that we are no longer even able to name. Kingsley warns that unless we touch our roots and make contact again with the essence of our past, we can have no future.

What we refer to nowadays as logic is like a baby girl shuffling around self-importantly in her mother’s shoes. With our endless learned debates over the last two thousand years about religion and reason, logic and science, we have lost any grip on reality and been behaving like little children. It’s time we started growing up.

Kingsley’s work deserves broad exposure. *AntiMatters* therefore republishes the two interviews he gave to *Black Zinnias* and *Parabola*, as well as a piece adapted from his presentation at the 2003 Conference on Language and Spirituality in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Finally we again have two book reviews — of *The Spiritual Brain* by Mario Beauregard and Denyse O’Leary (Harper One, September 2007) and of *Science as a Spiritual Practice* by Imants Barušs (Imprint Academic, March 2007) — and two book excerpts. The first excerpt is Chapter Eight of *Visual Intelligence: How We Create What We See* by cognitive scientist Donald D. Hoffman (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998/2000), the second is a compilation from Part One (“The Mystic Fact”) of *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* by Evelyn Underhill.

First published in 1911, *Mysticism* remains the classic in its field. While the author is justly considered responsible for bringing *Christian* mysticism into the spotlight of scholarship, it will be evident to anyone familiar with the mystical traditions that originated in India that her reflections and observations apply to the universal phenomenon of mysticism. I am struck, too, by how many of the topics addressed in this issue of *AntiMatters* were anticipated in that pioneering study. Thus Underhill stressed that mysticism and the

physical peculiarities which accompany the mystical temperament need to be removed both from the sphere of marvel and from that of disease — into which enthusiastic friends and foes force them by turn — to the sphere of pure psychology; and there studied dispassionately with the attention which we so willingly bestow on the less interesting eccentricities of degeneracy and vice. (p. 60 in the original print edition)

This is why Beuregard and O’Leary wrote *The Spiritual Brain*. Whereas Underhill notes that the “fully developed and completely conscious human soul can open as an anemone does, and *know* the ocean in which she is bathed” (p. 51, original emphasis), Forman reflects on the “oceanic feeling” that accompany certain states of mystical awareness. We meet the “silent watcher” (p. 55) again in the respective pieces by Forman and Kingsley as well as in Barušs’ book (particularly the part devoted to Merrell-Wolff). What else is not new?

The reports of the mystics. . . should claim from us the same attention that we give to other explorers of countries in which we are not competent to adventure ourselves; for the mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world, and we have no right to deny validity to their discoveries, merely because we lack the opportunity or the courage necessary to those who would prosecute such explorations for themselves. (p. 4)

[T]his superficial self — this Ego of which each of us is aware — hardly counts in comparison with the deeps of being which it hides. (p. 51)

So Sri Aurobindo says (see “Sri Aurobindo on the Subliminal”).

[T]his sense-world, this seemingly real external universe. . . cannot be *the* external world, but only the Self’s projected picture of it. It is *a work of art*. . . Did some mischievous Demiurge choose to tickle our sensory apparatus in a new way, we should receive by this act a new universe.” (pp. 6–7, second emphasis added)

Owing to advances in computing technology and virtual reality, Hoffman is in a position to make this point more forcefully, as he does in “Dismissing God” and “Peeking Behind the Icons.”

[T]he varied aspects under which the universe appears to the perceiving consciousness hint at a final reality. . . which shall be, not any one, yet all of its manifestations; transcending yet including the innumerable fragmentary worlds of individual conception. (p. 11)

This observation reverberates throughout the present issue, particularly the pieces by Forman, Satprem, Medhananda, and Kingsley, as well as the two books reviewed.

It remains a paradox of the mystics that the passivity at which they appear to aim is really a state of the most intense activity: more, that where it is wholly absent no great

creative action can take place. In it, the superficial self compels itself to be still, in order that it may liberate another more deep-seated power which is, in the ecstasy of the contemplative genius, raised to the highest pitch of efficiency. (50)

To my mind, Kingsley is a living example of this paradox.

[I]t is thanks to the existence within him of *this immortal spark from the central fire*, that man is implicitly a “child of the infinite.” The mystic way must therefore be a life, a discipline, which will so alter the constituents of his mental life as to include this spark within the conscious field; bring it out of the hiddenness, from those deep levels where it sustains and guides his normal existence, and make it the dominant element round which his personality is arranged. (p. 55, emphasis added)

This is the fire of which Jesus said “I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I guard it until the world is afire” (Medhananda, “Buried in the Sands of Time”). It is *Agni*, the Mystic Fire at the core of the Vedic mysteries, the innate aspiration drawing us towards the heights, the spark of the great primordial Fire that will never be satisfied until it has recovered its solar totality (Satprem, “The Secret of the Veda”). It is the psychic entity, building up within us a soul-personality armed with an intrinsic spiritual perception of the truth of things (“Sri Aurobindo on the Subliminal”). And this innate aspiration drawing us towards the heights is “the crucial thing we need for breaking free” (Kingsley, “The Spiritual Tradition at the Roots of Western Civilization”):

[Y]ou can see it with people who love the divine, or God — who miss what doesn’t even exist for anyone else. With people who want this or that, there’s always the risk that their wanting will be fulfilled. But when you want what’s so much greater than yourself there’s never a chance of being finally fulfilled. And yet something very strange happens. When you want that and refuse to settle for anything else, it comes to you. People who love the divine go around with holes in their hearts, and inside the hole is the universe.

Always we want to learn from outside, from absorbing other people’s knowledge. It’s safer that way. The trouble is that it’s always other people’s knowledge. We already have everything we need to know, in the darkness inside ourselves. The longing is what turns us inside out until we find the sun and the moon and stars inside.

Of course we all have our moments of beauty and wonder and joy; but it’s no pessimism to say these passing moments are nothing but the fragmented reflection, viewed in a distorting mirror, of a reality that’s far richer and vaster. All our longing is secretly focused on that vastness, waiting for it, expecting it, breathing for something that’s already available to us but so unobtainable because we keep reaching out for other things instead — always settling for the little things, for second best.

What is encouraging is that a recognition of what is most needed and most missing begins to crop up in the most unlikely places. What follows is part of an edited transcript of a talk given (I won’t say just yet by whom) at a conference (I won’t say just yet on what) in Washington D.C. on September 28th, 2007.

First, let me describe the general phenomenon I’m referring to. Here’s what happens, in the generic case: a person, in whatever culture he finds himself, begins to notice that life is difficult. He observes that even in the best of times — no one close to him has died, he’s healthy, there are no hostile armies massing in the distance, the fridge is stocked with

beer, the weather is just so — even when things are as good as they can be, he notices that at the level of his moment to moment experience, at the level of his attention, he is perpetually on the move, seeking happiness and finding only temporary relief from his search.

We've all noticed this. We seek pleasant sights, and sounds, and tastes, and sensations, and attitudes. We satisfy our intellectual curiosities, and our desire for friendship and romance. We become connoisseurs of art and music and film — but our pleasures are, by their very nature, fleeting. And we can do nothing more than merely reiterate them as often as we are able.

If we enjoy some great professional success, our feelings of accomplishment remain vivid and intoxicating for about an hour, or maybe a day, but then people will begin to ask us “So, what are you going to do next? Don't you have anything else in the pipeline?” Steve Jobs releases the iPhone, and I'm sure it wasn't twenty minutes before someone asked, “when are you going to make this thing smaller?” Notice that very few people at this juncture, no matter what they've accomplished, say, “I'm done. I've met all my goals. Now I'm just going to stay here eat ice cream until I die in front of you.”

Even when everything has gone as well as it can go, the search for happiness continues, the effort required to keep doubt and dissatisfaction and boredom at bay continues, moment to moment. If nothing else, the reality of death and the experience of losing loved ones punctures even the most gratifying and well-ordered life.

In this context, certain people have traditionally wondered whether a deeper form of well-being exists. Is there, in other words, a form of happiness that is not contingent upon our merely reiterating our pleasures and successes and avoiding our pains. Is there a form of happiness that is not dependent upon having one's favorite food always available to be placed on one's tongue or having all one's friends and loved ones within arm's reach, or having good books to read, or having something to look forward to on the weekend? Is it possible to be utterly happy before anything happens, before one's desires get gratified, in spite of life's inevitable difficulties, in the very midst of physical pain, old age, disease, and death?

This question, I think, lies at the periphery of everyone's consciousness. We are all, in some sense, living our answer to it — and many of us are living as though the answer is “no.” No, there is nothing more profound than repeating one's pleasures and avoiding one's pains; there is nothing more profound than seeking satisfaction, both sensory and intellectual. Many of us seem to think that all we can do is just keep our foot on the gas until we run out of road.

But certain people, for whatever reason, are led to suspect that there is more to human experience than this. In fact, many of them are led to suspect this by religion — by the claims of people like the Buddha or Jesus or some other celebrated religious figures. And such a person may begin to practice various disciplines of attention — often called “meditation” or “contemplation” — as a means of examining his moment to moment experience closely enough to see if a deeper basis of well-being is there to be found.

Such a person might even hole himself up in a cave, or in a monastery, for months or years at a time to facilitate this process. Why would somebody do this? Well, it amounts to a very simple experiment. Here's the logic of it: if there is a form of psychological well-being that isn't contingent upon merely repeating one's pleasures, then this happiness

should be available even when all the obvious sources of pleasure and satisfaction have been removed. If it exists at all, this happiness should be available to a person who has renounced all her material possessions, and declined to marry her high school sweetheart, and gone off to a cave or to some other spot that would seem profoundly uncongenial to the satisfaction of ordinary desires and aspirations.

One clue as to how daunting most people would find such a project is the fact that solitary confinement — which is essentially what we are talking about — is considered a punishment even inside a prison. Even when cooped up with homicidal maniacs and rapists, most people still prefer the company of others to spending any significant amount of time alone in a box.

And yet, for thousands of years, contemplatives have claimed to find extraordinary depths of psychological well-being while spending vast stretches of time in total isolation. It seems to me that, as rational people, . . . we have a choice to make in how we view this whole enterprise. Either the contemplative literature is a mere catalogue of religious delusion, deliberate fraud, and psychopathology, or people have been having interesting and even normative experiences under the name of “spirituality” and “mysticism” for millennia. . . [W]hat contemplatives and mystics over the millennia claim to have discovered is that there is an alternative to merely living at the mercy of the next neurotic thought that comes careening into consciousness. There is an alternative to being continuously spellbound by the conversation we are having with ourselves.

Most of us think that if a person is walking down the street talking to himself — that is, not able to censor himself in front of other people — he’s probably mentally ill. But if we talk to ourselves all day long silently — thinking, thinking, thinking, rehearsing prior conversations, thinking about what we said, what we didn’t say, what we should have said, jabbering on to ourselves about what we hope is going to happen, what just happened, what almost happened, what should have happened, what may yet happen — but we just know enough to just keep this conversation private, this is perfectly normal. This is perfectly compatible with sanity. Well, this is not what the experience of millions of contemplatives suggests.

Of course, I am by no means denying the importance of thinking. . . From the point of view of our contemplative traditions, however — to boil them all down to a cartoon version, that ignores the rather esoteric disputes among them — our habitual identification with discursive thought, our failure moment to moment to recognize thoughts as thoughts, is a primary source of human suffering. And when a person breaks this spell, an extraordinary kind of relief is available.

But the problem with a contemplative claim of this sort is that you can’t borrow someone else’s contemplative tools to test it. The problem is that to test such a claim — indeed, to even appreciate how distracted we tend to be in the first place, we have to build our own contemplative tools. Imagine where astronomy would be if everyone had to build his own telescope before he could even begin to see if astronomy was a legitimate enterprise. It wouldn’t make the sky any less worthy of investigation, but it would make it immensely more difficult for us to establish astronomy as a science.

To judge the empirical claims of contemplatives, you have to build your own telescope. Judging their metaphysical claims is another matter: many of these can be dismissed as bad science or bad philosophy by merely thinking about them. But to judge whether certain experiences are possible — and if possible, desirable — we have to be able to use our

attention in the requisite ways. We have to be able to break our identification with discursive thought, if only for a few moments. This can take a tremendous amount of work. And it is not work that our culture knows much about. . .

As someone who has made his own modest efforts in this area, let me assure you, that when a person goes into solitude and trains himself in meditation for 15 or 18 hours a day, for months or years at a time, in silence, doing nothing else — not talking, not reading, not writing — just making a sustained moment to moment effort to merely observe the contents of consciousness and to not get lost in thought, he experiences things that most scientists and artists are not likely to have experienced, unless they have made precisely the same efforts at introspection. And these experiences have a lot to say about the plasticity of the human mind and about the possibilities of human happiness.

This was Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, speaking at an Atheist Alliance conference,<sup>9</sup> and pointing out that

[o]ne problem with atheism as a category of thought, is that it seems more or less synonymous with not being interested in what someone like the Buddha or Jesus may have actually experienced. In fact, many atheists reject such experiences out of hand, as either impossible, or if possible, not worth wanting. Another common mistake is to imagine that such experiences are necessarily equivalent to states of mind with which many of us are already familiar — the feeling of scientific awe, or ordinary states of aesthetic appreciation, artistic inspiration, etc.

So, apart from just commending these phenomena to your attention, I'd like to point out that, as atheists, our neglect of this area of human experience puts us at a rhetorical disadvantage. Because millions of people have had these experiences, and many millions more have had glimmers of them, and we, as atheists, ignore such phenomena, almost in principle, because of their religious associations — and yet these experiences often constitute the most important and transformative moments in a person's life. Not recognizing that such experiences are possible or important can make us appear less wise even than our craziest religious opponents.

## References

- Satprem (1974). *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Skell, P S (2005). Why Do We Invoke Darwin? *The Scientist* 19 (16), 10–11.
- Sri Aurobindo (1972). *On Himself*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Sri Aurobindo (1981). *The Upanishads: Texts, Translations, and Commentaries*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

---

9 “The Problem with Atheism,” [newsweek.washingtonpost.com](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com) ↗.