Chapter 1

The Way of Knowledge

Knowledge is one and indivisible.

In setting out on the spiritual journey, it is important to know that a choice presents itself even before we take our first step. Of course from a certain point of view the choice will have been made already by our destiny—by our temperament, by the time and place in which we live, and by other factors beyond our immediate control. It would be a mistake to suppose that the spiritual life is purely a matter of individual preference. As we shall see, there is nothing haphazard or arbitrary about our return to God. Nevertheless, within the framework of possibilities that he is given, a person is always free to select between real alternatives, and that selection will have eternal repercussions.

When I speak of choice, I mean that there is more than one way in the spiritual life. It is possible to distinguish three paths in particular: the way of good works, the way of devotion, and the way of knowledge. Every authentic tradition contains all three, though a given religion may emphasize one of them more than the others. In Hindu terms, the paths are *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, and *jnana yoga*. Each corresponds to a somewhat different temperament, for there are also three basic human types: the "passional," whose path is "primarily a penitential one," the "sentimental" or "emotional," in

whom "love and hope constitute the dominant and operative element," and the "intellectual" or "fundamentally contemplative" type, whose way is through discernment toward Truth. You will understand that we are speaking of tendencies, and not water-tight compartments. Each of us has a will for working, a soul for loving, and an intelligence for knowing. In order to be truly effective, the path which we take must bring all three elements into play at one level or another.

The path we shall be following here is that of knowledge or *gnosis*. A few words about this term are undoubtedly needed. I find that many people are tempted to dismiss or debunk an exposition of *gnosis* solely because of the word's historical associations with the dualistic mythologies of heretical gnosticism. It should be obvious, however, that "to claim that all *gnosis* is false because of gnosticism amounts to saying, by analogy, that all prophets are false because there are false prophets." Clearly there is nothing wrong with the word itself, which simply means *knowledge* in Greek. If it has been misappropriated by proponents of a false spirituality, whether past or present, we must simply resolve to be attentive to the contexts in which we find it. No idea is immune to misuse. The path I shall be describing is gnostic or jnanic. It is equally metaphysical and esoteric. But these descriptive terms are to be understood with strict reference to the definitions here supplied. "We wish to be held responsible solely for what we write ourselves."

Of course, quite apart from the distortions introduced by heterodox theological systems, the aim of making knowledge the key to one's relationship with God is itself going to be a puzzle for some. When they are told that "*gnosis* is our participation in the 'perspective' of the Divine Subject," or that "esoterism looks to the nature of things" and "views the Universe not from the human standpoint but 'from the standpoint of God,'" they are likely to object along one of two lines: either as religious believers of a devotional bent or as philosophical skeptics.

On the one hand, believers of a bhaktic type are frequently put off by the claims of *gnosis* on the grounds that knowledge is too cold and cerebral, that it puffs a man up, and that it is at cross purposes with the faith and humility which we should have before God. It is understandable, temperamentally speaking, that "*bhaktas* have a certain interest in depreciating the intelligence," and they are doubtless right to be wary of intellectual pride. But this pride, "or what is

believed to be such," is too often rejected "only to be replaced by an attitude of pride towards the Intellect," a pride woven of resentment and seeking to bring all things down to the lowest and least demanding level. If you stop to think about it, none of us can follow a spiritual way, let alone describe it to others, without using our minds to some extent, and that fact in this case results in considerable irony. What are we to make of the man who knows better than others that knowledge is of no importance?

The alleged incompatibility between mere knowledge and authentic or saving faith is sometimes expressed as an "irreducible opposition between intellection and grace." It is assumed that the wish to understand metaphysical principles or to discover esoteric truths fails to respect the Divine initiative, that it amounts to building a Tower of Babel. Man should instead wait patiently for the inspirations and assistance of God, who will provide all that we need in His own good time. This is to forget, however, that grace means gift, and that the whole of our existence, our minds included, is continuously being given at each moment by Heaven. "Intellection is also a grace, but it is a static and innate grace" unlike certain more obviously miraculous gifts upon which the devotional temperament characteristically bases its relationship with God. Furthermore, "there can be absolutely no reason why this kind of grace should not be a possibility and should never be manifested, seeing that by its very nature it cannot not be." What the theologians call special or supernatural revelation enters into a context already established by general or natural revelation, and this natural revelation is proportioned in turn to an intelligence with the capacity to recognize the revelation for what it is. The way of knowledge takes as its starting point this essential, fundamental capacity.

A second, very different sort of objection will come from the skeptic. Tell him that you have entered upon the way of spiritual knowledge, and he will begin at once to insist that such knowledge is impossible. Unlike the man of faith, he is not concerned to protect the Divine mystery from impiety and compromise. Having himself no fear of impiety, he would instead have you question whether such a mystery exists at all, whether it is anything more than a human invention, and whether—even if there is such a thing—our very limited minds could ever grasp it. Tell him that "human intelligence coincides in its essence with certainty of the Absolute" or that "the principle of knowledge does not of itself imply any limitation" since

"to know is to know all that is knowable," and he will think you are mad.

I am sure that you are familiar with this second response, for it is all but pervasive today, especially in certain academic quarters, where the only absolute is the claim that there are no absolutes. Man, we are told, is a relative, finite, conditioned being, whose awareness of the world is restricted to his empirical or physical environment and distorted by his individual or subjective viewpoint. Limitation, fragmentation, and partiality are therefore inevitable, and to admit this is to discard forever all pretensions to objective and metaphysical insight. An adequate exposition of the way of knowledge is obviously going to have to take account of such criticisms if it hopes to go anywhere. I cannot very well ask you to join me on this path without confronting these reservations head on. Even if you are of a type to be attracted by *gnosis*, the very fact that you live at the present moment of history means that to some extent you will have absorbed the skepticism of your environment, and we need to allow for this fact as we proceed.

Truth cannot be properly sought until one has first conclusively resisted the diabolical suggestion that there is no such thing, and I shall try to show how to do that in the pages which follow. If I do not at this point give the same amount of attention to the first objection, to the devotional or religious resistance to knowledge, it is for the simple reason that the *jnani* or gnostic readily agrees with the *bhakta*'s defense of faith, his emphasis on love, and his demand for humility. These are indeed essential to the spiritual life, as is the grace which grants them, and they are not to be neglected by those seeking to know. But the case of the skeptic is altogether different. Love and knowledge are compatible, indeed complementary, but doubt and knowledge are not. The metaphysician must therefore refuse to countenance even the slightest skepticism, for his way "is founded, not upon doubt, but upon analogy and, more profoundly, upon identity both intellectual and existential." We shall be examining this identity later, but before we can do so with any conviction or seriousness, the fallacy of doubt will need to be exposed.

In the meantime, you may simply be wondering about our choice of paths. I have admitted that others are possible. Why knowledge? The answer is contained in the aphorism at the head of this chapter. It may appear trivial, but I assure you that it is filled with meaning. "Knowledge is one and indivisible." This implies at least two things.

It means first that to know anything in fact is to know everything in principle. To know something as simple as 2 + 2 = 4—really to know it, and to know that you know it—is to know that the truth in question is absolute, and that no contingency can stand between you and this certainty. And yet to know that there is nothing between, no boundaries to pass and no gaps to fill in, is to realize that this same truth was within you already. It means seeing that "the mystery of certitude" results from the fact that "the truth is inscribed in the very substance of our spirit" and that "we are what we are able to know." I do not pretend that this point is obvious. If you are thinking that we ought to consider it further, I agree, and an opportunity will be provided shortly.

But allow me for the moment to sketch a second implication of the aphorism. It also means that knowledge is its own proof, its own guarantee or defense. Where good works and devotion are directed to something extrinsic, an object outside themselves, the object of knowledge is intrinsic to that knowledge. "One can love something false without love ceasing to be what it is; but one cannot 'know' falsehood in a similar way." The way of the gnostic or esoterist thus has a certain logical or methodological primacy when compared to the other paths, though I hasten to specify that this is not to make any claims about the capacity or worth of any given man of the intellectual type. The point is just that "knowledge cannot be under illusion as to its object without ceasing to be what it is; error always implies a privation of knowledge, whereas sin does not imply a privation of will."

It follows from all this that in an age such as ours, an age of agnosticism and cynicism at one extreme and spiritual confusion and credulity at the other, the way of knowledge offers certain important benefits which the serious seeker would do well to consider. Can one still approach God solely by obeying and loving Him? Of course. Would it be more appropriate for some people to proceed in those ways than to concern themselves with metaphysics? Yes, it would be. Is their choice second rate? Definitely not. I spell all this out very carefully, for esoterism sometimes appears to the misinformed as an elitist perspective. In fact, however, "the idea that non-esoterists by definition lack intelligence, or that esoterists are *de facto* necessarily possessed of it, does not in any case enter our mind."

And yet it remains true that while certain types of men may not be obliged to avail themselves of *gnosis* in their own particular jour-

neys, knowledge is very much needed for the defense of true spirituality in general, and now more than ever. Knowledge has a double advantage. It can help us distinguish the Truth from the poisonous claims of those who say falsely that they have it, and it can protect that Truth from the withering denunciations of those who say falsely that no one has it. Only esoterism can "restore the lost truth by referring to the total Truth," and it alone "can satisfy the imperious needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world."

I hope to help you see why as we proceed.