Chapter XIX

The Planes of Our Existence

If the Purusha in us has thus to become by union with its highest self, the Divine Purusha, the knower, lord, free enjoyer of its Prakriti, it cannot be done, evidently, by dwelling on the present plane of our being; for that is the material plane in which the reign of Prakriti is complete; there the divine Purusha is entirely hidden in the blinding surge of her activities, in the gross pomp of her workings, and the individual soul emerging from her involution of spirit in matter, subject in all its activities to its entangling in the material and vital instruments is unable to experience the divine freedom. What it calls its freedom and mastery, is only the subtle subjection of mind to Prakriti which is lighter indeed, nearer to the possibility of liberty and rule than the gross subjection of vital and material things like the animal, plant and metal, but is still not real freedom and mastery. Therefore we have had to speak of different planes of our consciousness and of the spiritual planes of the mental being; for if these did not exist, the liberation of the embodied being would have been impossible here on earth. He would have had to wait and at most to prepare himself for seeking it in other worlds and in a different kind of physical or spiritual embodiment less obstinately sealed in its shell of material experience.

In the ordinary Yoga of knowledge it is only necessary to recognise two planes of our consciousness, the spiritual and the materialised mental; the pure reason standing between these two views them both, cuts through the illusions of the phenomenal world, exceeds the materialised mental plane, sees the reality of the spiritual; and then the will of the individual Purusha unifying itself with this poise of knowledge rejects the lower and draws back to the supreme plane, dwells there, loses mind and body, sheds life from it and merges itself in the supreme Purusha, is delivered from individual existence. It knows that
this is not the whole truth of our existence, which is much more complex; it knows there are many planes, but it disregards them or pays little attention to them because they are not essential to this liberation. They indeed rather hamper it, because to live on them brings new attractive psychical experiences, psychical enjoyments, psychical powers, a new world of phenomenal knowledge the pursuit of which creates stumbling-blocks in the way of its one object, immersgence in Brahman, and brings a succession of innumerable way-side snares on the road which leads to God. But since we accept world-existence, and for us all world-existence is Brahman and full of the presence of God, these things can have no terrors for us; whatever dangers of distraction there may be, we have to face and overcome them. If the world and our own existence are so complex, we must know and embrace their complexities in order that our self-knowledge and our knowledge of the dealings of Purusha with its Prakriti may be complete. If there are many planes, we have to possess them all for the Divine, even as we seek to possess spiritually and transform our ordinary poise of mind, life and body.

The ancient knowledge in all countries was full of the search after the hidden truths of our being and it created that large field of practice and inquiry which goes in Europe by the name of occultism, — we do not use any corresponding word in the East, because these things do not seem to us so remote, mysterious and abnormal as to the occidental mentality; they are nearer to us and the veil between our normal material life and this larger life is much thinner. In India, Egypt, Chaldea, China, Greece, the Celtic countries they have formed part of various Yogic systems and disciplines which had once a great hold everywhere, but to the modern mind have seemed mere superstition and mysticism, although the facts and experiences on which they are founded are quite as real in their own field and as much governed by intelligible laws of their own as the facts and experiences of the material world. It is not our intention here to plunge into this

\[1\] For example, the Tantric in India.
vast and difficult field of psychical knowledge. But it becomes necessary now to deal with certain broad facts and principles which form its framework, for without them our Yoga of knowledge cannot be complete. We find that in the various systems the facts dealt with are always the same, but there are considerable differences of theoretic and practical arrangement, as is natural and inevitable in dealing with a subject so large and difficult. Certain things are here omitted, there made all-important, here understressed, there over-emphasised; certain fields of experience which are in one system held to be merely subordinate provinces, are in others treated as separate kingdoms. But I shall follow here consistently the Vedic and Vedantic arrangement of which we find the great lines in the Upanishads, first because it seems to me at once the simplest and most philosophical and more especially because it was from the beginning envisaged from the point of view of the utility of these various planes to the supreme object of our liberation. It takes as its basis the three principles of our ordinary being, mind, life and matter, the triune spiritual principle of Sachchidananda and the link principle of vijnāna, supermind, the free or spiritual intelligence, and thus arranges all the large possible poises of our being in a tier of seven planes, — sometimes regarded as five only, because, only the lower five are wholly accessible to us, — through which the developing being can rise to its perfection.

But first we must understand what we mean by planes of consciousness, planes of existence. We mean a general settled poise or world of relations between Purusha and Prakriti, between the Soul and Nature. For anything that we can call world is and can be nothing else than the working out of a general relation which a universal existence has created or established between itself, or let us say its eternal fact or potentiality and the powers of its becoming. That existence in its relations with and its experience of the becoming is what we call soul or Purusha,

2 We hope to deal with it hereafter; but our first concern in the Arya must be with spiritual and philosophical truths; it is only when these have been grasped that the approach to the psychical becomes safe and clear.
individual soul in the individual, universal soul in the cosmos; the principle and the powers of the becoming are what we call Nature or Prakriti. But since Being, conscious force and delight of being are always the three constituent terms of existence, the nature of a world is really determined by the way in which Prakriti is set to deal with these three primary things and the forms which it is allowed to give to them. For existence itself is and must always be the stuff of its own becoming; it must be shaped into the substance with which Force has to deal. Force again must be the power which works out that substance and works with it to whatever ends; Force is that which we ordinarily call Nature. Again the end, the object with which the worlds are created must be worked out by the consciousness inherent in all existence and all force and all their workings, and the object must be the possession of itself and of its delight of existence in the world. To that all the circumstances and aims of any world-existence must reduce themselves; it is existence developing its terms of being, its power of being, its conscious delight of being; if these are involved, their evolution; if they are veiled, their self-revelation.

Here the soul lives in a material universe; of that alone it is immediately conscious; the realisation of its potentialities in that is the problem with which it is concerned. But matter means the involution of the conscious delight of existence in self-oblivious force and in a self-dividing, infinitesimally disaggregated form of substance. Therefore the whole principle and effort of a material world must be the evolution of what is involved and the development of what is undeveloped. Here everything is shut up from the first in the violently working inconscient sleep of material force; therefore the whole aim of any material becoming must be the waking of consciousness out of the inconscient; the whole consummation of a material becoming must be the removal of the veil of matter and the luminous revelation of the entirely self-conscient Being to its own imprisoned soul in the becoming. Since Man is such an imprisoned soul, this luminous liberation and coming to self-knowledge must be his highest object and the condition of his perfection.
But the limitations of a material universe seem to be hostile to the proper accomplishment of this object which is yet so inevitably the highest aim of a mental being born into a physical body. First existence has formed itself here, fundamentally, as Matter; it has been objectivised, made sensible and concrete to its own self-experiencing conscious-force in the form of self-dividing material substance, and by the aggregation of this matter there has been built up for man a physical body separate, divided from others and subject to the fixed habits of process or, as we call them, the laws of inconscient material Nature. His force of being too is nature or Force working in matter, which has waked slowly out of inconscience to life and is always limited by form, always dependent on the body, always separated by it from the rest of Life and from other living beings, always hampered in its development, persistence, self-perfectioning by the laws of the Inconscience and the limitations of bodily living. Equally, his consciousness is a mentality emerging in a body and in a sharply individualised life; it is therefore limited in its workings and capacities and dependent on bodily organs of no great competence and on a very restricted vital force; it is separated from the rest of cosmic mind and shut out from the thoughts of other mental beings whose inner workings are a sealed book to man’s physical mind except in so far as he can read them by the analogy of his own mentality and by their insufficient bodily signs and self-expressions. His consciousness is always falling back towards the inconscience in which a large part of it is always involved, his life towards death, his physical being towards disaggregation. His delight of being depends on the relations of this imperfect consciousness with its environment based upon physical sensations and the sense-mind, in other words on a limited mind trying to lay hold on a world external and foreign to it by means of a limited body, limited vital force, limited organs. Therefore its power for possession is limited, its force for delight is limited, and every touch of the world which exceeds its force, which that force cannot bear, cannot seize on, cannot assimilate and possess must turn to something else than delight, to pain, discomfort or grief. Or else it must
be met by non-reception, insensibility, or, if received, put away by indifference. Moreover such delight of being as it possesses, is not possessed naturally and eternally like the self-delight of Sachchidananda, but by experience and acquisition in Time, and can therefore only be maintained and prolonged by repetition of experience and is in its nature precarious and transient.

All this means that the natural relations of Purusha to Prakriti in the material universe are the complete absorption of conscious being in the force of its workings, therefore the complete self-oblivion and self-ignorance of the Purusha, the complete domination of Prakriti and subjection of the soul to Nature. The soul does not know itself, it only knows, if anything, the workings of Prakriti. The emergence of the individual self-conscious soul in Man does not of itself abrogate these primary relations of ignorance and subjection. For this soul is living on a material plane of existence, a poise of Prakriti in which matter is still the chief determinant of its relations to Nature, and its consciousness being limited by Matter cannot be an entirely self-possessing consciousness. Even the universal soul, if limited by the material formula, could not be in entire possession of itself; much less can the individual soul to which the rest of existence becomes by bodily, vital and mental limitation and separation something external to it on which it is yet dependent for its life and its delight and its knowledge. These limitations of his power, knowledge, life, delight of existence are the whole cause of man’s dissatisfaction with himself and the universe. And if the material universe were all and the material plane the only plane of his being, then man the individual Purusha could never arrive at perfection and self-fulfilment or indeed to any other life than that of the animals. There must be either worlds in which he is liberated from these incomplete and unsatisfactory relations of Purusha with Prakriti, or planes of his own being by ascending to which he can transcend them, or at the very least planes, worlds and higher beings from which he can receive or be helped to knowledge, powers, joys, a growth of his being otherwise impossible. All these things, the ancient knowledge asserts, exist,—other worlds, higher planes, the possibility of
communication, of ascension, of growth by contact with and influence from that which is above him in the present scale of his realised being.

As there is a poise of the relations of Purusha with Prakriti in which Matter is the first determinant, a world of material existence, so there is another just above it in which Matter is not supreme, but rather Life-force takes its place as the first determinant. In this world forms do not determine the conditions of the life, but it is life which determines the form, and therefore forms are there much more free, fluid, largely and to our conceptions strangely variable than in the material world. This life-force is not inconscient material force, not even, except in its lowest movements, an elemental subconscient energy, but a conscious force of being which makes for formation, but much more essentially for enjoyment, possession, satisfaction of its own dynamic impulse. Desire and the satisfaction of impulse are therefore the first law of this world of sheer vital existence, this poise of relations between the soul and its nature in which the life-power plays with so much greater a freedom and capacity than in our physical living; it may be called the desire-world, for that is its principal characteristic. Moreover, it is not fixed in one hardly variable formula as physical life seems to be, but is capable of many variations of its poise, admits many sub-planes ranging from those which touch material existence and, as it were, melt into that, to those which touch at the height of the life-power the planes of pure mental and psychic existence and melt into them. For in Nature in the infinite scale of being there are no wide gulfs, no abrupt chasms to be overleaped, but a melting of one thing into another, a subtle continuity; out of that her power of distinctive experience creates the orderings, the definite ranges, the distinct gradations by which the soul variously knows and possesses its possibilities of world-existence. Again, enjoyment of one kind or another being the whole object of desire, that must be the trend of the desire-world; but since wherever the soul is not free,—and it cannot be free when subject to desire,—there must be the negative as well as the positive of all its experience, this world contains not only the possibility of large or intense
or continuous enjoyments almost inconceivable to the limited physical mind, but also the possibility of equally enormous sufferings. It is here therefore that there are situated the lowest heavens and all the hells with the tradition and imagination of which the human mind has lured and terrified itself since the earliest ages. All human imaginations indeed correspond to some reality or real possibility, though they may in themselves be a quite inaccurate representation or couched in too physical images and therefore inapt to express the truth of supraphysical realities.

Nature being a complex unity and not a collection of unrelated phenomena, there can be no unbridgeable gulf between the material existence and this vital or desire world. On the contrary, they may be said in a sense to exist in each other and are at least interdependent to a certain extent. In fact, the material world is really a sort of projection from the vital, a thing which it has thrown out and separated from itself in order to embody and fulfil some of its desires under conditions other than its own, which are yet the logical result of its own most material longings. Life on earth may be said to be the result of the pressure of this life-world on the material, inconscient existence of the physical universe. Our own manifest vital being is also only a surface result of a larger and profounder vital being which has its proper seat on the life-plane and through which we are connected with the life-world. Moreover, the life-world is constantly acting upon us and behind everything in material existence there stand appropriate powers of the life-world; even the most crude and elemental have behind them elemental life-powers, elemental beings by which or by whom they are supported. The influences of the life-world are always pouring out on the material existence and producing there their powers and results which return again upon the life-world to modify it. From that the life-part of us, the desire-part is being always touched and influenced; there too are beneficent and malefic powers of good desire and evil desire which concern themselves with us even when we are ignorant of and unconcerned with them. Nor are these powers merely tendencies, inconscient forces, nor, except on the verges
of Matter, subconscious, but conscious powers, beings, living influences. As we awaken to the higher planes of our existence, we become aware of them as friends or enemies, powers which seek to possess or which we can master, overcome, pass beyond and leave behind. It is this possible relation of the human being with the powers of the life-world which occupied to so large an extent European occultism, especially in the Middle Ages, as well as certain forms of Eastern magic and spiritualism. The “superstitions” of the past — much superstition there was, that is to say, much ignorant and distorted belief, false explanations and obscure and clumsy dealing with the laws of the beyond, — had yet behind them truths which a future Science, delivered from its sole preoccupation with the material world, may rediscover. For the supra-material is as much a reality as the existence of mental beings in the material universe.

But why then are we not normally aware of so much that is behind us and always pressing upon us? For the same reason that we are not aware of the inner life of our neighbour, although it exists as much as our own and is constantly exercising an occult influence upon us, — for a great part of our thoughts and feelings come into us from outside, from our fellow-men, both from individuals and from the collective mind of humanity; and for the same reason that we are not aware of the greater part of our own being which is subconscious or subliminal to our waking mind and is always influencing and in an occult manner determining our surface existence. It is because we use, normally, only our corporeal senses and live almost wholly in the body and the physical vitality and the physical mind, and it is not directly through these that the life-world enters into relations with us. That is done through other sheaths of our being, — so they are termed in the Upanishads, — other bodies, as they are called in a later terminology, the mental sheath or subtle body in which our true mental being lives and the life sheath or vital body which is more closely connected with the physical or food-sheath and forms with it the gross body of our complex existence. These possess powers, senses, capacities which are always secretly acting in us, are connected with and impinge upon our physical
organs and the plexuses of our physical life and mentality. By self-development we can become aware of them, possess our life in them, get through them into conscious relation with the life-world and other worlds and use them also for a more subtle experience and more intimate knowledge of the truths, facts and happenings of even the material world itself. We can by this self-development live more or less fully on planes of our existence other than the material which is now all in all to us.

What has been said of the life-world applies with the necessary differences to still higher planes of the cosmic existence. For beyond that is a mental plane, a world of mental existence in which neither life, nor matter, but mind is the first determinant. Mind there is not determined by material conditions or by the life-force, but itself determines and uses them for its own satisfaction. There mind, that is to say, the psychical and the intellectual being, is free in a certain sense, free at least to satisfy and fulfil itself in a way hardly conceivable to our body-bound and life-bound mentality; for the Purusha there is the pure mental being and his relations with Prakriti are determined by that purer mentality, Nature there is mental rather than vital and physical. Both the life-world and indirectly the material are a projection from that, the result of certain tendencies of the mental Being which have sought a field, conditions, an arrangement of harmonies proper to themselves; and the phenomena of mind in this world may be said to be a result of the pressure of that plane first on the life-world and then on life in the material existence. By its modification in the life-world it creates in us the desire-mind; in its own right it awakes in us the purer powers of our psychical and intellectual existence. But our surface mentality is only a secondary result of a larger subliminal mentality whose proper seat is the mental plane. This world of mental existence also is constantly acting upon us and our world, has its powers and its beings, is related to us through our mental body. There we find the psychical and mental heavens to which the Purusha can ascend when it drops this physical body and can there sojourn till the impulse to terrestrial existence again draws it downward. Here too are many planes, the lowest
converging upon and melting into the worlds below, the highest at the heights of the mind-power into the worlds of a more spiritual existence.

These highest worlds are therefore supramental; they belong to the principle of supermind, the free, spiritual or divine intelligence\(^3\) or gnosis and to the triple spiritual principle of Sachchidananda. From them the lower worlds derive by a sort of fall of the Purusha into certain specific or narrow conditions of the play of the soul with its nature. But these also are divided from us by no unbridgeable gulf; they affect us through what are called the knowledge-sheath and the bliss-sheath, through the causal or spiritual body, and less directly through the mental body, nor are their secret powers absent from the workings of the vital and material existence. Our conscious spiritual being and our intuitive mind awaken in us as a result of the pressure of these highest worlds on the mental being in life and body. But this causal body is, as we may say, little developed in the majority of men and to live in it or to ascend to the supramental planes, as distinguished from corresponding sub-planes in the mental being, or still more to dwell consciously upon them is the most difficult thing of all for the human being. It can be done in the trance of Samadhi, but otherwise only by a new evolution of the capacities of the individual Purusha of which few are even willing to conceive. Yet is that the condition of the perfect self-consciousness by which alone the Purusha can possess the full conscious control of Prakriti; for there not even the mind determines, but the Spirit freely uses the lower differentiating principles as minor terms of its existence governed by the higher and reaching by them their own perfect capacity. That alone would be the perfect evolution of the involved and development of the undeveloped for which the Purusha has sought in the material universe, as if in a wager with itself, the conditions of the greatest difficulty.

\(^3\) Called the \textit{vijñāna} or \textit{buddhi}, a word which may lead to some misunderstanding as it is also applied to the mental intelligence which is only a lower derivation from the divine gnosis.