What is the difference between Japanese art and the art of other countries, like those of Europe, for example?

The art of Japan is a kind of directly mental expression in physical life. The Japanese use the vital world very little. Their art is extremely mentalised; their life is extremely mentalised. It expresses in detail quite precise mental formations. Only, in the physical, they have spontaneously the sense of beauty. For example, a thing one sees very rarely in Europe but constantly, daily in Japan: very simple people, men of the working class or even peasants go for rest or enjoyment to a place where they can see a beautiful landscape. This gives them a much greater joy than going to play cards or indulging in all sorts of distractions as they do in the countries of Europe. They are seen in groups at times, going on the roads or sometimes taking a train or a tram up to a certain point, then walking to a place from where one gets a beautiful view. Then at this place there is a small house which fits very well into the landscape, there is a kind of small platform on which one can sit: one takes a cup of tea and at the same time sees the landscape. For them, this is the supreme enjoyment; they know nothing more pleasant. One can understand this among artists, educated people, quite learned people, but I am speaking of people of the most ordinary class, poor people who like this better than resting or relaxing at home. This is for them the greatest joy.

And in that country, for each season there are known sites. For instance, in autumn leaves become red; they have large numbers of maple-trees (the leaves of the maple turn into all the shades of the most vivid red in autumn, it is absolutely marvellous), so they arrange a place near a temple, for instance, on the top of a hill, and the entire hill is covered with maples.
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is a stairway which climbs straight up, almost like a ladder, from the base to the top, and it is so steep that one cannot see what is at the top, one gets the feeling of a ladder rising to the skies — a stone stairway, very well made, rising steeply and seeming to lose itself in the sky — clouds pass, and both the sides of the hill are covered with maples, and these maples have the most magnificent colours you could ever imagine. Well, an artist who goes there will experience an emotion of absolutely exceptional, marvellous beauty. But one sees very small children, families even, with a baby on the shoulder, going there in groups. In autumn they will go there. In springtime they will go elsewhere.

There is a garden quite close to Tokyo where irises are grown, a garden with very tiny rivulets, and along the rivulets, irises — irises of all possible colours — and it is arranged according to colour, organised in such a way that on entering one is dazzled, there is a blaze of colour from all these flowers standing upright; and there are heaps and heaps of them, as far as the eye can reach. At another time, just at the beginning of spring (it is a slightly early spring there), there are the first cherry-trees. These cherry-trees never give fruit, they are grown only for the flowers. They range from white to pink, to a rather vivid pink. There are long avenues all bordered with cherry-trees, all pink; they are huge trees which have turned all pink. There are entire mountains covered with these cherry-trees, and on the little rivulets bridges have been built which too are all red: you see these bridges of red lacquer among all these pink flowers and, below, a great river flowing and a mountain which seems to scale the sky, and they go to this place in springtime.... For each season there are flowers and for each flower there are gardens.

And people travel by train as easily as one goes from house to house; they have a small packet like this which they carry; in it they have a change of clothes, that’s quite enough for them; on their feet they wear rope or fibre sandals; when these get worn out they throw them away and take others, for they cost nothing at all. All their life is like that. They have paper handkerchiefs,
when they have used them they get rid of them, and so on —
they don’t burden themselves with anything. When they go by
train, at the stations small meals are sold in boxes (it is quite
clean, quite neat), small meals in boxes of white wood with little
chop-sticks for eating; then, as all this has no value, when one
has finished, one puts them aside, doesn’t bother about them or
encumber oneself. They live like that. When they have a garden
or a park, they plant trees, and they plant them just at the place
where when the tree has grown it will create a landscape, will fit
into a landscape. And as they want the tree to have a particular
shape, they trim it, cut it, they manage to give it all the shapes
they want. You have trees with fantastic forms; they have cut
off the unnecessary branches, fostered others, contrived things
as they liked. Then you come to a place and you see a house
which seems to be altogether a part of the landscape; it has
exactly the right colour, it is made of the right materials; it is
not like a blow in your face, as are all those European buildings
which spoil the whole landscape. It is just there where it should
be, hidden under the trees; then you see a creeper and suddenly
a wonderful tree: it is there at the right place, it has the right
form. I had everything to learn in Japan. For four years, from
an artistic point of view, I lived from wonder to wonder.

And in the cities, a city like Tokyo, for example, which is the
biggest city in the world, bigger than London, and which extends
far, far (now the houses are modernised, the whole centre of the
city is very unpleasant, but when I was there, it was still good),
in the outlying parts of the city, those which are not business
quarters, every house has at the most two storeys and a garden
— there is always a garden, there are always one or two trees
which are quite lovely. And then, if you go for a walk... it is very
difficult to find your way in Tokyo; there are no straight streets
with houses on either side according to the number, and you
lose your way easily. Then you go wandering around — always
one wanders at random in that country — you go wandering
and all of a sudden you turn the corner of a street and come
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to a kind of paradise: there are magnificent trees, a temple as truly beautiful, you see nothing of the city any longer, no more traffic, no tramways; a corner, a corner of trees with magnificent colours, and it is beautiful, truly beautiful. You do not know how you have reached there, you seem to have come by luck. And then you turn, you seek your way, you wander off again and go elsewhere. And some days later you want to come back to this very place, but it is impossible, it is as though it had disappeared. And this is so frequent, this is so true that such stories are often told in Japan. Their literature is full of enchantment. They tell you a story in which the hero comes suddenly to a magic place: he sees fairies, he sees marvellous beings, he spends exquisite hours among flowers, music; all is splendid. The next day he is obliged to leave; it is the law of the place, he goes away. He tries to come back, but never does. He can no longer find the place: it was there, it has disappeared!... And everything in this city, in this country, from beginning to end, gives you the impression of impermanence, of the unexpected, the exceptional. You always come to things you did not expect; you want to find them again and they are lost — they have made something else which is equally charming. From the artistic point of view, the point of view of beauty, I don't think there is a country as beautiful as that.

Now, I ought to say, to complete my picture, that the four years I was there I found a dearth of spirituality as entire as could be. These people have a wonderful morality, live according to quite strict moral rules, they have a mental construction even in the least detail of life: one must eat in a certain way and not another, one must bow in a certain way and not another, one must say certain words but not all; when addressing certain people one must express oneself in a certain way; when speaking with others, one must express oneself in another. If you go to buy something in a shop, you must say a particular sentence; if you don't say it, you are not served: they look at you quizzically and do not move! But if you say the word, they wait upon you
with full attention and bring, if necessary, a cushion for you to sit upon and a cup of tea to drink. And everything is like that. However, not once do you have the feeling that you are in contact with something other than a marvellously organised mental-physical domain. And what energy they have! Their whole vital being is turned into energy. They have an extraordinary endurance but no direct aspiration: one must obey the rule, one is obliged. If one does not submit oneself to rules there, one may live as Europeans do, who are considered barbarians and looked upon altogether as intruders, but if you want to live a Japanese life among the Japanese you must do as they do, otherwise you make them so unhappy that you can’t even have any relation with them. In their house you must live in a particular way, when you meet them you must greet them in a particular way.... I think I have already told you the story of that Japanese who was an intimate friend of ours, and whom I helped to come into contact with his soul — and who ran away. He was in the countryside with us and I had put him in touch with his psychic being; he had the experience, a revelation, the contact, the dazzling inner contact. And the next morning, he was no longer there, he had taken flight! Later, when I saw him again in town after the holidays, I asked him, “But what happened to you, why did you go away?” — “Oh! You understand, I discovered my soul and saw that my soul was more powerful than my faith in the country and the Mikado; I would have had to obey my soul and I would no longer have been a faithful subject of my emperor. I had to go away.” There you are! All this is authentically true.

Why are great artists born at the same time in the same country?

That depends on the person to whom you put the question. The explanation will be different accordingly. From the point of view of evolution, I think Sri Aurobindo has explained this very clearly in The Human Cycle. Evolution, that is to say, culture
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and civilisation, describes a more or less regular spiral movement around the earth, and the results of one civilisation, it may be said, slowly go to form another; then, when the total development is harmonious, this creates simultaneously the field of action and the actors, in the sense that at the time of the great artistic periods all the conditions were favourable to the development of art, and naturally, the fact that all the circumstances were favourable, attracted the men who could use them. There have been concrete movements like that, great ages like that of the Italian Renaissance or the similar period in France, almost at the same time, when artists from all countries were gathered at the same place because the conditions were favourable to the development of their art. This is one of the reasons — a so-to-say external reason — for the formation of civilisations.

There is another, this is that from an occult point of view it is almost always the same forces and same beings which incarnate during all the ages of artistic beauty upon earth and that, according to occultists, there are cycles of rebirth: beings return, group themselves through affinity at the time of birth; so it happens that regularly, almost all come together for a similar action. Some occultists have studied this question and given very precise numbers based upon the actual facts of the development of the earth: they have said that once in a hundred years, once in a thousand years, once in five thousand years, etc., certain cycles were repeated; that certain great civilisations appeared every five thousand years, and that it was (according to their special knowledge) the same people who came back. This is not quite exact, that is why I am not going into details, but in a sense this is true: it is the same forces which are at work. It is the same forces and they are grouped according to their affinities and, for a reason which may be quite material or for a mental or cyclic reason, they reunite at a certain place, and in this place there is a new civilisation or a special progress in a civilisation or a kind of effervescence, blossoming, flowering of beauty, as in the great ages in Greece, Egypt, India, Italy, Spain.... Everywhere,
in all the countries of the world, there have been more or less beautiful periods.

If you put the question to astrologers, they will explain this to you by the position of the stars; they will say that certain positions of the stars have a certain effect on the earth. But, as I have told you, all these things are “languages”, a way of expression, of making oneself understood; the truth is deeper, it is more complex, more complete.

Is the average Indian more advanced spiritually than the average man in other countries, like those of Europe, for instance?

There is an essential difference, but generally if he has not been contaminated by European materialism, when someone speaks to him about spiritual things, he has an opening, he understands. In the countries of the West, if you are in touch with the average man and speak to him of spiritual things, he is absolutely closed up and, moreover, if you speak to him of a possibility of relation with higher states of consciousness, he looks at you as though you were mad! If someone renounces the ordinary life to live an ascetic life, they think he is out of his senses!

There is a small minority among those who have kept the religious traditions, which understands, but understands only under the religious form. That is to say, if someone enters a monastery, they understand him more or less. But for the average man (I am not speaking of cultured people), if someone wants to lead a spiritual life independent of all religion, simply setting out in the personal quest of a higher truth, then surely he is ready to be put in a lunatic asylum! It would be better not to speak of it. There are those who have read a little, who are educated, who may think you a little eccentric, but still they understand what it means; but the ordinary man, no. I am speaking of fifty years ago, of course; now, after the Second [World] War, I don’t know, I can’t say if this has begun to change. But evidently,
the educated classes of Europe are now in search of something higher because their life has been so tragic that they need to lean upon something else; and perhaps their effort is contagious, in a sense, and there are more people than one thinks who are seeking — it is possible. But fifty years ago it was not like that. While here, ordinary people, people of the “lower” classes don’t perhaps have any discernment, perhaps they cannot distinguish between the imposter and the sincere man, but it is understood that if somebody comes along in the yellow robe and with the beggar’s bowl, he will be given something, he won’t be kicked out. If a man did that in Europe (naturally there is no question of the yellow robe), but if he came in sordid clothes, he would be immediately taken to the first police station and arrested for indigence. It is understood that in the so-called civilised countries, if you don’t have the minimum money in your pocket, you are a vagabond, and the vagabond has no right to be on the streets, he is put into prison for vagabondage. That is the difference.

Do certain arts express more truth than others?

This is more or less a mental gymnastic!

There are people who say that certain arts are physical. If you frequent artists, painters, they will tell you that sculpture, oh! it is laborious, because sculptors work with the very matter, and painting may be considered not much of an intellectual art by a musician. The truth is that in all arts everything depends upon the artist, and what he does depends upon the state of consciousness in which he is. A sculptor may be an extremely spiritual man and his production extremely spiritual also, if he knows how to express his experience. And a poet can be quite a commonplace materialist if he does not receive his inspiration from a higher state. It is the mind which makes little categories (this is more convenient for it), but that does not resemble the truth very much.
You have said that Wagner had an intuition of the occult and that to have spiritual power one must conquer sexuality. In fact, Wagner had the intuition of this victory to be achieved, for in “The Ring of the Niebelungen” there is a treasure hidden at the bottom of a river. Three nymphs guard the treasure and to take it one must renounce all desire for love and woman.

This is an old tradition in Nordic countries. But in his story it ends badly: the one who had to renounce the love of woman is drowned and it ends with the twilight of the gods.