Chapter V

Renunciation

If discipline of all the members of our being by purification and concentration may be described as the right arm of the body of Yoga, renunciation is its left arm. By discipline or positive practice we confirm in ourselves the truth of things, truth of being, truth of knowledge, truth of love, truth of works and replace with these the falsehoods that have overgrown and perverted our nature; by renunciation we seize upon the falsehoods, pluck up their roots and cast them out of our way so that they shall no longer hamper by their persistence, their resistance or their recurrence the happy and harmonious growth of our divine living. Renunciation is an indispensable instrument of our perfection.

How far shall this renunciation go? what shall be its nature? and in what way shall it be applied? There is an established tradition long favoured by great religious teachings and by men of profound spiritual experience that renunciation must not only be complete as a discipline but definite and final as an end and that it shall fall nothing short of the renunciation of life itself and of our mundane existence. Many causes have contributed to the growth of this pure, lofty and august tradition. There is first the profounder cause of the radical opposition between the sullied and imperfect nature of life in the world as it now is in the present stage of our human evolution and the nature of spiritual living; and this opposition has led to the entire rejection of world-existence as a lie, an insanity of the soul, a troubled and unhappy dream or at best a flawed, specious and almost worthless good or to its characterisation as a kingdom of the world, the flesh and the devil, and therefore for the divinely led and divinely attracted soul only a place of ordeal and preparation or at best a play of the All-existence, a game of cross-purposes which He tires of and abandons. A second cause is the soul’s
hunger for personal salvation, for escape into some farther or farthest height of unalloyed bliss and peace untroubled by the labour and the struggle; or else it is its unwillingness to return from the ecstasy of the divine embrace into the lower field of work and service. But there are other slighter causes incident to spiritual experience,—strong feeling and practical proof of the great difficulty, which we willingly exaggerate into an impossibility, of combining the life of works and action with spiritual peace and the life of realisation; or else the joy which the mind comes to take in the mere act and state of renunciation,—as it comes indeed to take joy in anything that it has attained or to which it has inured itself,—and the sense of peace and deliverance which is gained by indifference to the world and to the objects of man’s desire. Lowest causes of all are the weakness that shrinks from the struggle, the disgust and disappointment of the soul baffled by the great cosmic labour, the selfishness that cares not what becomes of those left behind us so long as we personally can be free from the monstrous ever-circling wheel of death and rebirth, the indifference to the cry that rises up from a labouring humanity.

For the sadhaka of an integral Yoga none of these reasons are valid. With weakness and selfishness, however spiritual in their guise or trend, he can have no dealings; a divine strength and courage and a divine compassion and helpfulness are the very stuff of that which he would be, they are that very nature of the Divine which he would take upon himself as a robe of spiritual light and beauty. The revolvings of the great wheel bring to him no sense of terror or giddiness; he rises above it in his soul and knows from above their divine law and their divine purpose. The difficulty of harmonising the divine life with human living, of being in God and yet living in man is the very difficulty that he is set here to solve and not to shun. He has learned that the joy, the peace and the deliverance are an imperfect crown and no real possession if they do not form a state secure in itself, inalienable to the soul, not dependent on aloofness and inaction but firm in the storm and the race and the battle, unsullied whether by the joy of the world or by its suffering. The ecstasy of the divine
embrace will not abandon him because he obeys the impulse of
divine love for God in humanity; or if it seems to draw back
from him for a while, he knows by experience that it is to try
and test him still farther so that some imperfection in his own
way of meeting it may fall away from him. Personal salvation he
does not seek except as a necessity for the human fulfilment and
because he who is himself in bonds cannot easily free others,—
though to God nothing is impossible; for a heaven of personal
joys he has no hankerings even as a hell of personal sufferings
has for him no terrors. If there is an opposition between the
spiritual life and that of the world, it is that gulf which he is
here to bridge, that opposition which he is here to change into
a harmony. If the world is ruled by the flesh and the devil, all
the more reason that the children of Immortality should be here
to conquer it for God and the Spirit. If life is an insanity, then
there are so many million souls to whom there must be brought
the light of divine reason; if a dream, yet is it real within itself to
so many dreamers who must be brought either to dream nobler
dreams or to awaken; or if a lie, then the truth has to be given to
the deluded. Nor, if it be said that only by the luminous example
of escape from the world can we help the world, shall we accept
that dogma, since the contrary example of great Avataras is there
to show that not only by rejecting the life of the world as it is can
we help, but also and more by accepting and uplifting it. And
if it is a play of the All-Existence, then we may well consent to
play out our part in it with grace and courage, well take delight
in the game along with our divine Playmate.

But, most of all, the view we have taken of the world forbids
the renunciation of world-existence so long as we can be any-
thing to God and man in their working-out of its purposes.
We regard the world not as an invention of the devil or a
self-delusion of the soul, but as a manifestation of the Divine,
although as yet a partial because a progressive and evolutionary
manifestation. Therefore for us renunciation of life cannot be the
goal of life nor rejection of the world the object for which the
world was created. We seek to realise our unity with God, but for
us that realisation involves a complete and absolute recognition
of our unity with man and we cannot cut the two asunder. To use Christian language, the Son of God is also the Son of Man and both elements are necessary to the complete Christhood; or to use an Indian form of thought, the divine Narayana of whom the universe is only one ray is revealed and fulfilled in man; the complete man is Nara-Narayana and in that completeness he symbolises the supreme mystery of existence.

Therefore renunciation must be for us merely an instrument and not an object; nor can it be the only or the chief instrument since our object is the fulfilment of the Divine in the human being, a positive aim which cannot be reached by negative means. The negative means can only be for the removal of that which stands in the way of the positive fulfilment. It must be a renunciation, a complete renunciation of all that is other than and opposed to the divine self-fulfilment and a progressive renunciation of all that is a lesser or only a partial achievement. We shall have no attachment to our life in the world; if that attachment exists, we must renounce it and renounce utterly; but neither shall we have any attachment to the escape from the world, to salvation, to the great self-annihilation; if that attachment exists, that also we must renounce and renounce it utterly.

Again our renunciation must obviously be an inward renunciation; especially and above all, a renunciation of attachment and the craving of desire in the senses and the heart, of self-will in the thought and action and of egoism in the centre of the consciousness. For these things are the three knots by which we are bound to our lower nature and if we can renounce these utterly, there is nothing else that can bind us. Therefore attachment and desire must be utterly cast out; there is nothing in the world to which we must be attached, not wealth nor poverty, nor joy nor suffering, nor life nor death, nor greatness nor littleness, nor vice nor virtue, nor friend, nor wife, nor children, nor country, nor our work and mission, nor heaven nor earth, nor all that is within them or beyond them. And this does not mean that there is nothing at all that we shall love, nothing in which we shall take delight; for attachment is egoism in love and not love
itself, desire is limitation and insecurity in a hunger for pleasure and satisfaction and not the seeking after the divine delight in things. A universal love we must have, calm and yet eternally intense beyond the brief vehemence of the most violent passion; a delight in things rooted in a delight in God that does not adhere to their forms but to that which they conceal in themselves and that embraces the universe without being caught in its meshes.¹

Self-will in thought and action has, we have already seen, to be quite renounced if we would be perfect in the way of divine works; it has equally to be renounced if we are to be perfect in divine knowledge. This self-will means an egoism in the mind which attaches itself to its preferences, its habits, its past or present formations of thought and view and will because it regards them as itself or its own, weaves around them the delicate threads of “I-ness” and “my-ness” and lives in them like a spider in its web. It hates to be disturbed, as a spider hates attack on its web, and feels foreign and unhappy if transplanted to fresh view-points and formations as a spider feels foreign in another web than its own. This attachment must be entirely excised from the mind. Not only must we give up the ordinary attitude to the world and life to which the unawakened mind clings as its natural element; but we must not remain bound in any mental construction of our own or in any intellectual thought-system or arrangement of religious dogmas or logical conclusions; we must not only cut asunder the snare of the mind and the senses, but flee also beyond the snare of the thinker, the snare of the theologian and the church-builder, the meshes of the Word and the bondage of the Idea. All these are within us waiting to wall in the spirit with forms; but we must always go beyond, always renounce the lesser for the greater, the finite for the Infinite; we must be prepared to proceed from illumination to illumination, from experience to experience, from soul-state to soul-state so as to reach the utmost transcendence of the Divine and its utmost universality. Nor must we attach ourselves even

¹ Nirlipta. The divine Ananda in things is niṣkāma and nirlipta, free from desire and therefore not attached.
to the truths we hold most securely, for they are but forms and expressions of the Ineffable who refuses to limit himself to any form or expression; always we must keep ourselves open to the higher Word from above that does not confine itself to its own sense and the light of the Thought that carries in it its own opposites.

But the centre of all resistance is egoism and this we must pursue into every covert and disguise and drag it out and slay it; for its disguises are endless and it will cling to every shred of possible self-concealment. Altruism and indifference are often its most effective disguises; so draped, it will riot boldly in the very face of the divine spies who are missioned to hunt it out. Here the formula of the supreme knowledge comes to our help; we have nothing to do in our essential standpoint with these distinctions, for there is no I nor thou, but only one divine Self equal in all embodiments, equal in the individual and the group, and to realise that, to express that, to serve that, to fulfil that is all that matters. Self-satisfaction and altruism, enjoyment and indifference are not the essential thing. If the realisation, fulfilment, service of the one Self demands from us an action that seems to others self-service or self-assertion in the egoistic sense or seems egoistic enjoyment and self-indulgence, that action we must do; we must be governed by the guide within rather than by the opinions of men. The influence of the environment works often with great subtlety; we prefer and put on almost unconsciously the garb which will look best in the eye that regards us from outside and we allow a veil to drop over the eye within; we are impelled to drape ourselves in the vow of poverty, or in the garb of service, or in outward proofs of indifference and renunciation and a spotless sainthood because that is what tradition and opinion demand of us and so we can make best an impression on our environment. But all this is vanity and delusion. We may be called upon to assume these things, for that may be the uniform of our service; but equally it may not. The eye of man outside matters nothing; the eye within is all.

We see in the teaching of the Gita how subtle a thing is the freedom from egoism which is demanded. Arjuna is driven to
fight by the egoism of strength, the egoism of the Kshatriya; he is turned from the battle by the contrary egoism of weakness, the shrinking, the spirit of disgust, the false pity that overcomes the mind, the nervous being and the senses, — not that divine compassion which strengthens the arm and clarifies the knowledge. But this weakness comes garbed as renunciation, as virtue: “Better the life of the beggar than to taste these blood-stained enjoyments; I desire not the rule of all the earth, no, nor the kingdom of the gods.” How foolish of the Teacher, we might say, not to confirm this mood, to lose this sublime chance of adding one more great soul to the army of Sannyasins, one more shining example before the world of a holy renunciation. But the Guide sees otherwise, the Guide who is not to be deceived by words; “This is weakness and delusion and egoism that speak in thee. Behold the Self, open thy eyes to the knowledge, purify thy soul of egoism.” And afterwards? “Fight, conquer, enjoy a wealthy kingdom.” Or to take another example from ancient Indian tradition. It was egoism, it would seem, that drove Rama, the Avatara, to raise an army and destroy a nation in order to recover his wife from the King of Lanka. But would it have been a lesser egoism to drape himself in indifference and misusing the formal terms of the knowledge to say, “I have no wife, no enemy, no desire; these are illusions of the senses; let me cultivate the Brahman-knowledge and let Ravana do what he will with the daughter of Janaka”?

The criterion is within, as the Gita insists. It is to have the soul free from craving and attachment, but free from the attachment to inaction as well as from the egoistic impulse to action, free from attachment to the forms of virtue as well as from the attraction to sin. It is to be rid of “I-ness” and “my-ness” so as to live in the one Self and act in the one Self; to reject the egoism of refusing to work through the individual centre of the universal Being as well as the egoism of serving the individual mind and life and body to the exclusion of others. To live in the Self is not to dwell for oneself alone in the Infinite immersed and oblivious of all things in that ocean of impersonal self-delight; but it is to live as the Self and in the Self equal in this
embodiment and all embodiments and beyond all embodiments. 
This is the integral knowledge.

It will be seen that the scope we give to the idea of renunciation is different from the meaning currently attached to it. Currently its meaning is self-denial, inhibition of pleasure, rejection of the objects of pleasure. Self-denial is a necessary discipline for the soul of man, because his heart is ignorantly attached; inhibition of pleasure is necessary because his sense is caught and clogged in the mud-honey of sensuous satisfactions; rejection of the objects of pleasure is imposed because the mind fixes on the object and will not leave it to go beyond it and within itself. If the mind of man were not thus ignorant, attached, bound even in its restless inconstancy, deluded by the forms of things, renunciation would not have been needed; the soul could have travelled on the path of delight, from the lesser to the greater, from joy to diviner joy. At present that is not practicable. It must give up from within everything to which it is attached in order that it may gain that which they are in their reality. The external renunciation is not the essential, but even that is necessary for a time, indispensable in many things and sometimes useful in all; we may even say that a complete external renunciation is a stage through which the soul must pass at some period of its progress, — though always it should be without those self-willed violences and fierce self-torturings which are an offence to the Divine seated within us. But in the end this renunciation or self-denial is always an instrument and the period for its use passes. The rejection of the object ceases to be necessary when the object can no longer ensnare us because what the soul enjoys is no longer the object as an object but the Divine which it expresses; the inhibition of pleasure is no longer needed when the soul no longer seeks pleasure but possesses the delight of the Divine in all things equally without the need of a personal or physical possession of the thing itself; self-denial loses its field when the soul no longer claims anything, but obeys consciously the will of the one Self in all beings. It is then that we are freed from the Law and released into the liberty of the Spirit.

We must be prepared to leave behind on the path not only
that which we stigmatise as evil, but that which seems to us to be good, yet is not the one good. There are things which were beneficial, helpful, which seemed perhaps at one time the one thing desirable, and yet once their work is done, once they are attained, they become obstacles and even hostile forces when we are called to advance beyond them. There are desirable states of the soul which it is dangerous to rest in after they have been mastered, because then we do not march on to the wider kingdoms of God beyond. Even divine realisations must not be clung to, if they are not the divine realisation in its utter essentiality and completeness. We must rest at nothing less than the All, nothing short of the utter transcendence. And if we can thus be free in the spirit, we shall find out all the wonder of God’s workings; we shall find that in inwardly renouncing everything we have lost nothing. “By all this abandoned thou shalt come to enjoy the All.” For everything is kept for us and restored to us but with a wonderful change and transfiguration into the All-Good and the All-Beautiful, the All-Light and the All-Delight of Him who is for ever pure and infinite and the mystery and the miracle that ceases not through the ages.