What is the greatest obstacle in ourselves to our consecration to impersonal work?

Regarded from the most general point of view, this obstacle is indistinguishable from the very reason for the work to be accomplished: it is the present state of imperfection of physical Matter.

Since we are made up of an imperfect substance, we cannot but share in this imperfection.

Therefore, whatever degree of perfection, consciousness or knowledge is possible to our inmost being, the very fact that it incarnates in a physical body gives rise to obstacles to the purity of its manifestation; and on the other hand, the aim of its incarnation is victory over these obstacles, the transformation of Matter. We must therefore not be surprised or saddened if we encounter obstacles within ourselves, for every single being on earth has difficulties to overcome.

The cause of this imperfection may become apparent to us from two points of view, one general, the other individual.

From the general point of view, the imperfection of Matter comes from its lack of receptivity to the more subtle forces which are to be manifested through it. But this lack of receptivity itself has many causes, and to explain them would lead us too far away from the heart of our subject. Besides, I think that, in the last analysis, all difficulties lie in the illusion of personality, that is, the illusion that one thing can be distinct from the whole.

To avoid speculating on the necessity of this illusion for the very existence of the universe as we know it, I shall consider the question solely from the terrestrial and human angle.

This illusion of a self separate from the whole brings about two tendencies within ourselves.
Words of Long Ago

The first comes from an unconscious need for identification with the whole. But by the very fact of the illusion of personality, each one conceives this identification only as an absorption into himself and seeks more or less to be the centre of this whole. As a result, in proportion to his intellectual or physical strength, each one attempts to draw to himself everything he is conscious of in order to continually increase his personality.

This is the outcome of a desire which is justified in essence — to become conscious of everything — but ignorant in expression, for if a way to become conscious of everything does exist, it certainly does not lie in trying to draw everything to oneself, which is absurd and unrealizable, but in identifying one's consciousness with the consciousness of the whole, which demands the very opposite action and attitude.

The second tendency, which is in fact a normal consequence of the first, is an excessively conservative spirit, a fixity of the whole nature — intellectual, moral and physical — which makes it impossible for us to transform ourselves as rapidly as we should in order to be always in harmony with the law of universal progress.

It is as if the individual were afraid of not being different enough from others if he encouraged too free and large an exchange with the whole.

Moreover, this fixity comes from the desire to appropriate and the error of believing that we can own something in the universe. We think that the elements we are made of are our own. Consciously or unconsciously, we want to hold on to them for ourselves while at the same time we are quite ready to add to them by drawing other elements to ourselves; but we forget that since there is no real separation, we can receive nothing if we do not give.

We must be a link in the chain: the link does not grow bigger at the expense of its neighbours. But when it faithfully transmits the current it has received, it will receive another, and the more complete and swift its transmission, the more it will
be brought into contact with a great number of forces or things for it to use or manifest. And so, little by little, by taking and keeping nothing for itself, it can become aware of everything by communing with everything.

Foreseeing the objections which could be raised, I shall add this:

When I speak of the illusion of personality, I am not denying that each one has a special mode of manifestation. Differentiation does not mean division.

Why should there be so many countless links in the chain if each one did not have its own function?

And here another comparison is needed to complete the first, for any comparison is necessarily incomplete.

If we consider ourselves as cells of an immense living organism, we shall immediately understand that a cell, which is dependent for its own life on the life of the whole and can separate itself from it only at the risk of destruction, does in fact have its own special part to play in the whole.

But this role is precisely what is most profoundly spontaneous in our being; no egoistic assertion of our personality is needed to discover it. On the contrary, the more fully we give ourselves to an impersonal action, the more this role will gain in strength and clarity within us. But this role is precisely what constitutes our true individuality, since it is our own special way of manifesting the Divine Essence, which is one in everything and in all.