Chapter V

The Destiny of the Individual

By the Ignorance they cross beyond Death and by the Knowledge enjoy Immortality. . . . By the Non-Birth they cross beyond Death and by the Birth enjoy Immortality.

Isha Upanishad.¹

A N OMNIPRESENT Reality is the truth of all life and existence whether absolute or relative, whether corporeal or incorporeal, whether animate or inanimate, whether intelligent or unintelligent; and in all its infinitely varying and even constantly opposed self-expressions, from the contradictions nearest to our ordinary experience to those remotest antinomies which lose themselves on the verges of the Ineffable, the Reality is one and not a sum or concourse. From that all variations begin, in that all variations consist, to that all variations return. All affirmations are denied only to lead to a wider affirmation of the same Reality. All antinomies confront each other in order to recognise one Truth in their opposed aspects and embrace by the way of conflict their mutual Unity. Brahman is the Alpha and the Omega. Brahman is the One besides whom there is nothing else existent.

But this unity is in its nature indefinable. When we seek to envisage it by the mind we are compelled to proceed through an infinite series of conceptions and experiences. And yet in the end we are obliged to negate our largest conceptions, our most comprehensive experiences in order to affirm that the Reality exceeds all definitions. We arrive at the formula of the Indian sages, neti neti, “It is not this, It is not that”, there is no experience by which we can limit It, there is no conception by which It can be defined.

¹ Verses 11, 14.
The Destiny of the Individual

An Unknowable which appears to us in many states and attributes of being, in many forms of consciousness, in many activities of energy, this is what Mind can ultimately say about the existence which we ourselves are and which we see in all that is presented to our thought and senses. It is in and through those states, those forms, those activities that we have to approach and know the Unknowable. But if in our haste to arrive at a Unity that our mind can seize and hold, if in our insistence to confine the Infinite in our embrace we identify the Reality with any one definable state of being however pure and eternal, with any particular attribute however general and comprehensive, with any fixed formulation of consciousness however vast in its scope, with any energy or activity however boundless its application, and if we exclude all the rest, then our thoughts sin against Its unknowableness and arrive not at a true unity but at a division of the Indivisible.

So strongly was this truth perceived in the ancient times that the Vedantic Seers, even after they had arrived at the crowning idea, the convincing experience of Sachchidananda as the highest positive expression of the Reality to our consciousness, erected in their speculations or went on in their perceptions to an Asat, a Non-Being beyond, which is not the ultimate existence, the pure consciousness, the infinite bliss of which all our experiences are the expression or the deformation. If at all an existence, a consciousness, a bliss, it is beyond the highest and purest positive form of these things that here we can possess and other therefore than what here we know by these names. Buddhism, somewhat arbitrarily declared by the theologians to be an un-Vedic doctrine because it rejected the authority of the Scriptures, yet goes back to this essentially Vedantic conception. Only, the positive and synthetic teaching of the Upanishads beheld Sat and Asat not as opposites destructive of each other, but as the last antimony through which we look up to the Unknowable. And in the transactions of our positive consciousness, even Unity has to make its account with Multiplicity; for the Many also are Brahman. It is by Vidya, the Knowledge of the Oneness, that we know God; without it Avidya, the relative and multiple consciousness, is a
night of darkness and a disorder of Ignorance. Yet if we exclude
the field of that Ignorance, if we get rid of Avidya as if it were
a thing non-existent and unreal, then Knowledge itself becomes
a sort of obscurity and a source of imperfection. We become as
men blinded by a light so that we can no longer see the field
which that light illumines.

Such is the teaching, calm, wise and clear, of our most an-
cient sages. They had the patience and the strength to find and to
know; they had also the clarity and humility to admit the limita-
tion of our knowledge. They perceived the borders where it has
to pass into something beyond itself. It was a later impatience
of heart and mind, vehement attraction to an ultimate bliss or
high masterfulness of pure experience and trenchant intelligence
which sought the One to deny the Many and because it had
received the breath of the heights scorned or recoiled from the
secret of the depths. But the steady eye of the ancient wisdom
perceived that to know God really, it must know Him every-
where equally and without distinction, considering and valuing
but not mastered by the oppositions through which He shines.

We will put aside then the trenchant distinctions of a partial
logic which declares that because the One is the reality, the
Many are an illusion, and because the Absolute is Sat, the one
existence, the relative is Asat and non-existent. If in the Many
we pursue insistently the One, it is to return with the benediction
and the revelation of the One confirming itself in the Many.

We will guard ourselves also against the excessive impor-
tance that the mind attaches to particular points of view at
which it arrives in its more powerful expansions and transitions.
The perception of the spiritualised mind that the universe is an
unreal dream can have no more absolute a value to us than the
perception of the materialised mind that God and the Beyond
are an illusory idea. In the one case the mind, habituated only to
the evidence of the senses and associating reality with corporeal
fact, is either unaccustomed to use other means of knowledge
or unable to extend the notion of reality to a supraphysical
experience. In the other case the same mind, passing beyond to
the overwhelming experience of an incorporeal reality, simply
transfers the same inability and the same consequent sense of dream or hallucination to the experience of the senses. But we perceive also the truth that these two conceptions disfigure. It is true that for this world of form in which we are set for our self-realisation, nothing is entirely valid until it has possessed itself of our physical consciousness and manifested on the lowest levels in harmony with its manifestation on the highest summits. It is equally true that form and matter asserting themselves as a self-existent reality are an illusion of Ignorance. Form and matter can be valid only as shape and substance of manifestation for the incorporeal and immaterial. They are in their nature an act of divine consciousness, in their aim the representation of a status of the Spirit.

In other words, if Brahman has entered into form and represented Its being in material substance, it can only be to enjoy self-manifestation in the figures of relative and phenomenal consciousness. Brahman is in this world to represent Itself in the values of Life. Life exists in Brahman in order to discover Brahman in itself. Therefore man's importance in the world is that he gives to it that development of consciousness in which its transfiguration by a perfect self-discovery becomes possible. To fulfil God in life is man's manhood. He starts from the animal vitality and its activities, but a divine existence is his objective.

But as in Thought, so in Life, the true rule of self-realisation is a progressive comprehension. Brahman expresses Itself in many successive forms of consciousness, successive in their relation even if coexistent in being or coeval in Time, and Life in its self-unfolding must also rise to ever-new provinces of its own being. But if in passing from one domain to another we renounce what has already been given us from eagerness for our new attainment, if in reaching the mental life we cast away or belittle the physical life which is our basis, or if we reject the mental and physical in our attraction to the spiritual, we do not fulfil God integrally, nor satisfy the conditions of His self-manifestation. We do not become perfect, but only shift the field of our imperfection or at most attain a limited altitude. However high we may climb, even though it be to the Non-Being itself,
we climb ill if we forget our base. Not to abandon the lower to itself, but to transfigure it in the light of the higher to which we have attained, is true divinity of nature. Brahman is integral and unifies many states of consciousness at a time; we also, manifesting the nature of Brahman, should become integral and all-embracing.

Besides the recoil from the physical life, there is another exaggeration of the ascetic impulse which this ideal of an integral manifestation corrects. The nodus of Life is the relation between three general forms of consciousness, the individual, the universal and the transcendent or supracosmic. In the ordinary distribution of life’s activities the individual regards himself as a separate being included in the universe and both as dependent upon that which transcends alike the universe and the individual. It is to this Transcendence that we give currently the name of God, who thus becomes to our conceptions not so much supracosmic as extra-cosmic. The belittling and degradation of both the individual and the universe is a natural consequence of this division: the cessation of both cosmos and individual by the attainment of the Transcendence would be logically its supreme conclusion.

The integral view of the unity of Brahman avoids these consequences. Just as we need not give up the bodily life to attain to the mental and spiritual, so we can arrive at a point of view where the preservation of the individual activities is no longer inconsistent with our comprehension of the cosmic consciousness or our attainment to the transcendent and supracosmic. For the World-Transcendent embraces the universe, is one with it and does not exclude it, even as the universe embraces the individual, is one with him and does not exclude him. The individual is a centre of the whole universal consciousness; the universe is a form and definition which is occupied by the entire immanence of the Formless and Indefinable.

This is always the true relation, veiled from us by our ignorance or our wrong consciousness of things. When we attain to knowledge or right consciousness, nothing essential in the eternal relation is changed, but only the inview and the outview
from the individual centre is profoundly modified and conse-
quently also the spirit and effect of its activity. The individual is
still necessary to the action of the Transcendent in the universe
and that action in him does not cease to be possible by his
illumination. On the contrary, since the conscious manifestation
of the Transcendent in the individual is the means by which the
collective, the universal is also to become conscious of itself,
the continuation of the illumined individual in the action of the
world is an imperative need of the world-play. If his inexorable
removal through the very act of illumination is the law, then the
world is condemned to remain eternally the scene of unredeemed
darkness, death and suffering. And such a world can only be a
ruthless ordeal or a mechanical illusion.

It is so that ascetic philosophy tends to conceive it. But indi-
vidual salvation can have no real sense if existence in the cosmos
is itself an illusion. In the Monistic view the individual soul is one
with the Supreme, its sense of separateness an ignorance, escape
from the sense of separateness and identity with the Supreme its
salvation. But who then profits by this escape? Not the supreme
Self, for it is supposed to be always and inalienably free, still,
silent, pure. Not the world, for that remains constantly in the
bondage and is not freed by the escape of any individual soul
from the universal Illusion. It is the individual soul itself which
effects its supreme good by escaping from the sorrow and the
division into the peace and the bliss. There would seem then to
be some kind of reality of the individual soul as distinct from
the world and from the Supreme even in the event of freedom
and illumination. But for the Illusionist the individual soul is
an illusion and non-existent except in the inexplicable mystery
of Maya. Therefore we arrive at the escape of an illusory non-
existent soul from an illusory non-existent bondage in an illusory
non-existent world as the supreme good which that non-existent
soul has to pursue! For this is the last word of the Knowledge,
“There is none bound, none freed, none seeking to be free.”
Vidya turns out to be as much a part of the Phenomenal as
Avidya; Maya meets us even in our escape and laughs at the
triumphant logic which seemed to cut the knot of her mystery.
These things, it is said, cannot be explained; they are the initial and insoluble miracle. They are for us a practical fact and have to be accepted. We have to escape by a confusion out of a confusion. The individual soul can only cut the knot of ego by a supreme act of egoism, an exclusive attachment to its own individual salvation which amounts to an absolute assertion of its separate existence in Maya. We are led to regard other souls as if they were figments of our mind and their salvation unimportant, our soul alone as if it were entirely real and its salvation the one thing that matters. I come to regard my personal escape from bondage as real while other souls who are equally myself remain behind in the bondage!

It is only when we put aside all irreconcilable antinomy between Self and the world that things fall into their place by a less paradoxical logic. We must accept the many-sidedness of the manifestation even while we assert the unity of the Manifested. And is not this after all the truth that pursues us wherever we cast our eyes, unless seeing we choose not to see? Is not this after all the perfectly natural and simple mystery of Conscious Being that It is bound neither by Its unity nor by Its multiplicity? It is “absolute” in the sense of being entirely free to include and arrange in Its own way all possible terms of Its self-expression. There is none bound, none freed, none seeking to be free,—for always That is a perfect freedom. It is so free that It is not even bound by Its liberty. It can play at being bound without incurring a real bondage. Its chain is a self-imposed convention, Its limitation in the ego a transitional device that It uses in order to repeat Its transcendence and universality in the scheme of the individual Brahman.

The Transcendent, the Supracosmic is absolute and free in Itself beyond Time and Space and beyond the conceptual opposites of finite and infinite. But in cosmos It uses Its liberty of self-formation, Its Maya, to make a scheme of Itself in the complementary terms of unity and multiplicity, and this multiple unity It establishes in the three conditions of the subconscious, the conscient and the superconscient. For actually we see that the Many objectivised in form in our material universe start
with a subconscious unity which expresses itself openly enough in cosmic action and cosmic substance, but of which they are not themselves superficially aware. In the conscient the ego becomes the superficial point at which the awareness of unity can emerge; but it applies its perception of unity to the form and surface action and, failing to take account of all that operates behind, fails also to realise that it is not only one in itself but one with others. This limitation of the universal “I” in the divided ego-sense constitutes our imperfect individualised personality. But when the ego transcends the personal consciousness, it begins to include and be overpowered by that which is to us super-conscious; it becomes aware of the cosmic unity and enters into the Transcendent Self which here cosmos expresses by a multiple oneness.

The liberation of the individual soul is therefore the keynote of the definitive divine action; it is the primary divine necessity and the pivot on which all else turns. It is the point of Light at which the intended complete self-manifestation in the Many begins to emerge. But the liberated soul extends its perception of unity horizontally as well as vertically. Its unity with the transcendent One is incomplete without its unity with the cosmic Many. And that lateral unity translates itself by a multiplication, a reproduction of its own liberated state at other points in the Multiplicity. The divine soul reproduces itself in similar liberated souls as the animal reproduces itself in similar bodies. Therefore, whenever even a single soul is liberated, there is a tendency to an extension and even to an outburst of the same divine self-consciousness in other individual souls of our terrestrial humanity and,—who knows?—perhaps even beyond the terrestrial consciousness. Where shall we fix the limit of that extension? Is it altogether a legend which says of the Buddha that as he stood on the threshold of Nirvana, of the Non-Being, his soul turned back and took the vow never to make the irrevocable crossing so long as there was a single being upon earth undelivered from the knot of the suffering, from the bondage of the ego?

But we can attain to the highest without blotting ourselves
out from the cosmic extension. Brahman preserves always Its
two terms of liberty within and of formation without, of expres-
sion and of freedom from the expression. We also, being That,
can attain to the same divine self-possession. The harmony of
the two tendencies is the condition of all life that aims at being
really divine. Liberty pursued by exclusion of the thing exceeded
leads along the path of negation to the refusal of that which God
has accepted. Activity pursued by absorption in the act and the
energy leads to an inferior affirmation and the denial of the
Highest. But what God combines and synthetises, wherefore
should man insist on divorcing? To be perfect as He is perfect is
the condition of His integral attainment.

Through Avidya, the Multiplicity, lies our path out of the
transitional egoistic self-expression in which death and suffering
predominate; through Vidya consenting with Avidya by the per-
fected sense of oneness even in that multiplicity, we enjoy integrally
the immortality and the beatitude. By attaining to the Unborn
beyond all becoming we are liberated from this lower birth and
death; by accepting the Becoming freely as the Divine, we invade
mortality with the immortal beatitude and become luminous
centres of its conscious self-expression in humanity.