Chapter III

The Threefold Life

NATURE, then, is an evolution or progressive self-manifestation of an eternal and secret existence, with three successive forms as her three steps of ascent. And we have consequently as the condition of all our activities these three mutually interdependent possibilities, the bodily life, the mental existence and the veiled spiritual being which is in the involution the cause of the others and in the evolution their result. Preserving and perfecting the physical, fulfilling the mental, it is Nature’s aim and it should be ours to unveil in the perfected body and mind the transcendent activities of the Spirit. As the mental life does not abrogate but works for the elevation and better utilisation of the bodily existence, so too the spiritual should not abrogate but transfigure our intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and vital activities.

For man, the head of terrestrial Nature, the sole earthly frame in which her full evolution is possible, is a triple birth. He has been given a living frame in which the body is the vessel and life the dynamic means of a divine manifestation. His activity is centred in a progressive mind which aims at perfecting itself as well as the house in which it dwells and the means of life that it uses, and is capable of awaking by a progressive self-realisation to its own true nature as a form of the Spirit. He culminates in what he always really was, the illumined and beatific spirit which is intended at last to irradiate life and mind with its now concealed splendours.

Since this is the plan of the divine Energy in humanity, the whole method and aim of our existence must work by the interaction of these three elements in the being. As a result of their separate formulation in Nature, man has open to him a choice between three kinds of life, the ordinary material existence, a life of mental activity and progress and the unchanging spiritual
beatitude. But he can, as he progresses, combine these three forms, resolve their discords into a harmonious rhythm and so create in himself the whole godhead, the perfect Man.

In ordinary Nature they have each their own characteristic and governing impulse.

The characteristic energy of bodily Life is not so much in progress as in persistence, not so much in individual self-enlargement as in self-repetition. There is, indeed, in physical Nature a progression from type to type, from the vegetable to the animal, from the animal to man; for even in inanimate Matter Mind is at work. But once a type is marked off physically, the chief immediate preoccupation of the terrestrial Mother seems to be to keep it in being by a constant reproduction. For Life always seeks immortality; but since individual form is impermanent and only the idea of a form is permanent in the consciousness that creates the universe,—for there it does not perish,—such constant reproduction is the only possible material immortality. Self-preservation, self-repetition, self-multiplication are necessarily, then, the predominant instincts of all material existence. Material life seems ever to move in a fixed cycle.

The characteristic energy of pure Mind is change, and the more our mentality acquires elevation and organisation, the more this law of Mind assumes the aspect of a continual enlargement, improvement and better arrangement of its gains and so of a continual passage from a smaller and simpler to a larger and more complex perfection. For Mind, unlike bodily life, is infinite in its field, elastic in its expansion, easily variable in its formations. Change, then, self-enlargement and self-improvement are its proper instincts. Mind too moves in cycles, but these are ever-enlarging spirals. Its faith is perfectibility, its watchword is progress.

The characteristic law of Spirit is self-existent perfection and immutable infinity. It possesses always and in its own right the immortality which is the aim of Life and the perfection which is the goal of Mind. The attainment of the eternal and the realisation of that which is the same in all things and beyond all things, equally blissful in universe and outside it, untouched by
The Conditions of the Synthesis

the imperfections and limitations of the forms and activities in which it dwells, are the glory of the spiritual life.

In each of these forms Nature acts both individually and collectively; for the Eternal affirms Himself equally in the single form and in the group-existence, whether family, clan and nation or groupings dependent on less physical principles or the supreme group of all, our collective humanity. Man also may seek his own individual good from any or all of these spheres of activity, or identify himself in them with the collectivity and live for it, or, rising to a truer perception of this complex universe, harmonise the individual realisation with the collective aim. For as it is the right relation of the soul with the Supreme, while it is in the universe, neither to assert egoistically its separate being nor to blot itself out in the Indefinable, but to realise its unity with the Divine and the world and unite them in the individual, so the right relation of the individual with the collectivity is neither to pursue egoistically his own material or mental progress or spiritual salvation without regard to his fellows, nor for the sake of the community to suppress or maim his proper development, but to sum up in himself all its best and completest possibilities and pour them out by thought, action and all other means on his surroundings so that the whole race may approach nearer to the attainment of its supreme personalities.

It follows that the object of the material life must be to fulfil, above all things, the vital aim of Nature. The whole aim of the material man is to live, to pass from birth to death with as much comfort or enjoyment as may be on the way, but anyhow to live. He can subordinate this aim, but only to physical Nature’s other instincts, the reproduction of the individual and the conservation of the type in the family, class or community. Self, domesticity, the accustomed order of the society and of the nation are the constituents of the material existence. Its immense importance in the economy of Nature is self-evident, and commensurate is the importance of the human type which represents it. He assures her of the safety of the framework she has made and of the orderly continuance and conservation of her past gains.

But by that very utility such men and the life they lead are
condemned to be limited, irrationally conservative and earth-bound. The customary routine, the customary institutions, the inherited or habitual forms of thought, — these things are the life-breath of their nostrils. They admit and jealously defend the changes compelled by the progressive mind in the past, but combat with equal zeal the changes that are being made by it in the present. For to the material man the living progressive thinker is an ideologue, dreamer or madman. The old Semites who stoned the living prophets and adored their memories when dead, were the very incarnation of this instinctive and unintelligent principle in Nature. In the ancient Indian distinction between the once born and the twice born, it is to this material man that the former description can be applied. He does Nature’s inferior works; he assures the basis for her higher activities; but not to him easily are opened the glories of her second birth.

Yet he admits so much of spirituality as has been enforced on his customary ideas by the great religious outbursts of the past and he makes in his scheme of society a place, venerable though not often effective, for the priest or the learned theologian who can be trusted to provide him with a safe and ordinary spiritual pabulum. But to the man who would assert for himself the liberty of spiritual experience and the spiritual life, he assigns, if he admits him at all, not the vestment of the priest but the robe of the Sannyasin. Outside society let him exercise his dangerous freedom. So he may even serve as a human lightning-rod receiving the electricity of the Spirit and turning it away from the social edifice.

Nevertheless it is possible to make the material man and his life moderately progressive by imprinting on the material mind the custom of progress, the habit of conscious change, the fixed idea of progression as a law of life. The creation by this means of progressive societies in Europe is one of the greatest triumphs of Mind over Matter. But the physical nature has its revenge; for the progress made tends to be of the grosser and more outward kind and its attempts at a higher or a more rapid movement bring about great wearinesses, swift exhaustions, startling recoils.
It is possible also to give the material man and his life a moderate spirituality by accustoming him to regard in a religious spirit all the institutions of life and its customary activities. The creation of such spiritualised communities in the East has been one of the greatest triumphs of Spirit over Matter. Yet here, too, there is a defect; for this often tends only to the creation of a religious temperament, the most outward form of spirituality. Its higher manifestations, even the most splendid and puissant, either merely increase the number of souls drawn out of social life and so impoverish it or disturb the society for a while by a momentary elevation. The truth is that neither the mental effort nor the spiritual impulse can suffice, divorced from each other, to overcome the immense resistance of material Nature. She demands their alliance in a complete effort before she will suffer a complete change in humanity. But, usually, these two great agents are unwilling to make to each other the necessary concessions.

The mental life concentrates on the aesthetic, the ethical and the intellectual activities. Essential mentality is idealistic and a seeker after perfection. The subtle self, the brilliant Atman, is ever a dreamer. A dream of perfect beauty, perfect conduct, perfect Truth, whether seeking new forms of the Eternal or revitalising the old, is the very soul of pure mentality. But it knows not how to deal with the resistance of Matter. There it is hampered and inefficient, works by bungling experiments and has either to withdraw from the struggle or submit to the grey actuality. Or else, by studying the material life and accepting the conditions of the contest, it may succeed, but only in imposing temporarily some artificial system which infinite Nature either rends and casts aside or disfigures out of recognition or by withdrawing her assent leaves as the corpse of a dead ideal. Few and far between have been those realisations of the dreamer in Man which the world has gladly accepted, looks back to with a fond memory and seeks, in its elements, to cherish.

1 Who dwells in Dream, the inly conscious, the enjoyer of abstractions, the Brilliant. Mandukya Upanishad 4.
When the gulf between actual life and the temperament of the thinker is too great, we see as the result a sort of withdrawing of the Mind from life in order to act with a greater freedom in its own sphere. The poet living among his brilliant visions, the artist absorbed in his art, the philosopher thinking out the problems of the intellect in his solitary chamber, the scientist, the scholar caring only for their studies and their experiments, were often in former days, are even now not unoften the Sannyasins of the intellect. To the work they have done for humanity, all its past bears record.

But such seclusion is justified only by some special activity. Mind finds fully its force and action only when it casts itself upon life and accepts equally its possibilities and its resistances as the means of a greater self-perfection. In the struggle with the difficulties of the material world the ethical development of the individual is firmly shaped and the great schools of conduct are formed; by contact with the facts of life Art attains to vitality, Thought assures its abstractions, the generalisations of the philosopher base themselves on a stable foundation of science and experience.

This mixing with life may, however, be pursued for the sake of the individual mind and with an entire indifference to the forms of the material existence or the uplifting of the race. This indifference is seen at its highest in the Epicurean discipline and is not entirely absent from the Stoic; and even altruism does the works of compassion more often for its own sake than for the sake of the world it helps. But this too is a limited fulfilment. The progressive mind is seen at its noblest when it strives to elevate the whole race to its own level whether by sowing broadcast the image of its own thought and fulfilment or by changing the material life of the race into fresh forms, religious, intellectual, social or political, intended to represent more nearly that ideal of truth, beauty, justice, righteousness with which the man’s own soul is illumined. Failure in such a field matters little; for the mere attempt is dynamic and creative. The struggle of Mind to elevate life is the promise and condition of the conquest of life by that which is higher even than Mind.
That highest thing, the spiritual existence, is concerned with what is eternal but not therefore entirely aloof from the transient. For the spiritual man the mind’s dream of perfect beauty is realised in an eternal love, beauty and delight that has no dependence and is equal behind all objective appearances; its dream of perfect Truth in the supreme, self-existent, self-apparent and eternal Verity which never varies, but explains and is the secret of all variations and the goal of all progress; its dream of perfect action in the omnipotent and self-guiding Law that is inherent for ever in all things and translates itself here in the rhythm of the worlds. What is fugitive vision or constant effort of creation in the brilliant Self is an eternally existing Reality in the Self that knows\(^2\) and is the Lord.

But if it is often difficult for the mental life to accommodate itself to the dully resistant material activity, how much more difficult must it seem for the spiritual existence to live on in a world that appears full not of the Truth but of every lie and illusion, not of Love and Beauty but of an encompassing discord and ugliness, not of the Law of Truth but of victorious selfishness and sin? Therefore the spiritual life tends easily in the saint and Sannyasin to withdraw from the material existence and reject it either wholly and physically or in the spirit. It sees this world as the kingdom of evil or of ignorance and the eternal and divine either in a far-off heaven or beyond where there is no world and no life. It separates itself inwardly, if not also physically, from the world’s impurities; it asserts the spiritual reality in a spotless isolation. This withdrawal renders an invaluable service to the material life itself by forcing it to regard and even to bow down to something that is the direct negation of its own petty ideals, sordid cares and egoistic self-content.

But the work in the world of so supreme a power as spiritual force cannot be thus limited. The spiritual life also can return upon the material and use it as a means of its own greater

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\(^2\) The Unified, in whom conscious thought is concentrated, who is all delight and enjoyer of delight, the Wise. . . . He is the Lord of all, the Omniscient, the inner Guide. Mandukya Upanishad 5, 6.
fullness. Refusing to be blinded by the dualities, the appearances, it can seek in all appearances whatsoever the vision of the same Lord, the same eternal Truth, Beauty, Love, Delight. The Vedantic formula of the Self in all things, all things in the Self and all things as becomings of the Self is the key to this richer and all-embracing Yoga.

But the spiritual life, like the mental, may thus make use of this outward existence for the benefit of the individual with a perfect indifference to any collective uplifting of the merely symbolic world which it uses. Since the Eternal is for ever the same in all things and all things the same to the Eternal, since the exact mode of action and the result are of no importance compared with the working out in oneself of the one great realisation, this spiritual indifference accepts no matter what environment, no matter what action, dispassionately, prepared to retire as soon as its own supreme end is realised. It is so that many have understood the ideal of the Gita. Or else the inner love and bliss may pour itself out on the world in good deeds, in service, in compassion, the inner Truth in the giving of knowledge, without therefore attempting the transformation of a world which must by its inalienable nature remain a battlefield of the dualities, of sin and virtue, of truth and error, of joy and suffering.

But if Progress also is one of the chief terms of world-existence and a progressive manifestation of the Divine the true sense of Nature, this limitation also is invalid. It is possible for the spiritual life in the world, and it is its real mission, to change the material life into its own image, the image of the Divine. Therefore, besides the great solitaries who have sought and attained their self-liberation, we have the great spiritual teachers who have also liberated others and, supreme of all, the great dynamic souls who, feeling themselves stronger in the might of the Spirit than all the forces of the material life banded together, have thrown themselves upon the world, grappled with it in a loving wrestle and striven to compel its consent to its own transfiguration. Ordinarily, the effort is concentrated on a mental and moral change in humanity, but it may extend itself
also to the alteration of the forms of our life and its institutions so that they too may be a better mould for the inpourings of the Spirit. These attempts have been the supreme landmarks in the progressive development of human ideals and the divine preparation of the race. Every one of them, whatever its outward results, has left Earth more capable of Heaven and quickened in its tardy movements the evolutionary Yoga of Nature.

In India, for the last thousand years and more, the spiritual life and the material have existed side by side to the exclusion of the progressive mind. Spirituality has made terms for itself with Matter by renouncing the attempt at general progress. It has obtained from society the right of free spiritual development for all who assume some distinctive symbol, such as the garb of the Sannyasin, the recognition of that life as man’s goal and those who live it as worthy of an absolute reverence, and the casting of society itself into such a religious mould that its most customary acts should be accompanied by a formal reminder of the spiritual symbolism of life and its ultimate destination. On the other hand, there was conceded to society the right of inertia and immobile self-conservation. The concession destroyed much of the value of the terms. The religious mould being fixed, the formal reminder tended to become a routine and to lose its living sense. The constant attempts to change the mould by new sects and religions ended only in a new routine or a modification of the old; for the saving element of the free and active mind had been exiled. The material life, handed over to the Ignorance, the purposeless and endless duality, became a leaden and dolorous yoke from which flight was the only escape.

The schools of Indian Yoga lent themselves to the compromise. Individual perfection or liberation was made the aim, seclusion of some kind from the ordinary activities the condition, the renunciation of life the culmination. The teacher gave his knowledge only to a small circle of disciples. Or if a wider movement was attempted, it was still the release of the individual soul that remained the aim. The pact with an immobile society was, for the most part, observed.

The utility of the compromise in the then actual state of the
world cannot be doubted. It secured in India a society which lent itself to the preservation and the worship of spirituality, a country apart in which as in a fortress the highest spiritual ideal could maintain itself in its most absolute purity unoverpowered by the siege of the forces around it. But it was a compromise, not an absolute victory. The material life lost the divine impulse to growth, the spiritual preserved by isolation its height and purity, but sacrificed its full power and serviceableness to the world. Therefore, in the divine Providence the country of the Yogins and the Sannyasins has been forced into a strict and imperative contact with the very element it had rejected, the element of the progressive Mind, so that it might recover what was now wanting to it.

We have to recognise once more that the individual exists not in himself alone but in the collectivity and that individual perfection and liberation are not the whole sense of God’s intention in the world. The free use of our liberty includes also the liberation of others and of mankind; the perfect utility of our perfection is, having realised in ourselves the divine symbol, to reproduce, multiply and ultimately universalise it in others.

Therefore from a concrete view of human life in its threefold potentialities we come to the same conclusion that we had drawn from an observation of Nature in her general workings and the three steps of her evolution. And we begin to perceive a complete aim for our synthesis of Yoga.

Spirit is the crown of universal existence; Matter is its basis; Mind is the link between the two. Spirit is that which is eternal; Mind and Matter are its workings. Spirit is that which is concealed and has to be revealed; mind and body are the means by which it seeks to reveal itself. Spirit is the image of the Lord of the Yoga; mind and body are the means He has provided for reproducing that image in phenomenal existence. All Nature is an attempt at a progressive revelation of the concealed Truth, a more and more successful reproduction of the divine image.

But what Nature aims at for the mass in a slow evolution, Yoga effects for the individual by a rapid revolution. It works by a quickening of all her energies, a sublimation of all her
faculties. While she develops the spiritual life with difficulty and has constantly to fall back from it for the sake of her lower realisations, the sublimated force, the concentrated method of Yoga can attain directly and carry with it the perfection of the mind and even, if she will, the perfection of the body. Nature seeks the Divine in her own symbols: Yoga goes beyond Nature to the Lord of Nature, beyond universe to the Transcendent and can return with the transcendent light and power, with the fiat of the Omnipotent.

But their aim is one in the end. The generalisation of Yoga in humanity must be the last victory of Nature over her own delays and concealments. Even as now by the progressive mind in Science she seeks to make all mankind fit for the full development of the mental life, so by Yoga must she inevitably seek to make all mankind fit for the higher evolution, the second birth, the spiritual existence. And as the mental life uses and perfects the material, so will the spiritual use and perfect the material and the mental existence as the instruments of a divine self-expression. The ages when that is accomplished, are the legendary Satya or Krita\(^3\) Yugas, the ages of the Truth manifested in the symbol, of the great work done when Nature in mankind, illumined, satisfied and blissful, rests in the culmination of her endeavour.

It is for man to know her meaning, no longer misunderstanding, vilifying or misuse the universal Mother, and to aspire always by her mightiest means to her highest ideal.

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\(^3\) Satya means Truth; Krita, effected or completed.