Chapter XX

Death, Desire and Incapacity

In the beginning all was covered by Hunger that is Death; that made for itself Mind so that it might attain to possession of self.

*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad.* ¹

This is the Power discovered by the mortal that has the multitude of its desires so that it may sustain all things; it takes the taste of all foods and builds a house for the being.

*Rig Veda.* ²

In our last chapter we have considered Life from the point of view of the material existence and the appearance and working of the vital principle in Matter and we have reasoned from the data which this evolutionary terrestrial existence offers. But it is evident that wherever it may appear and however it may work, under whatsoever conditions, the general principle must be everywhere the same. Life is universal Force working so as to create, energise, maintain and modify, even to the extent of dissolving and reconstructing, substantial forms with mutual play and interchange of an overtly or secretly conscious energy as its fundamental character. In the material world we inhabit Mind is involved and subconscious in Life, just as Supermind is involved and subconscious in Mind, and this Life instinct with an involved subconscious Mind is again itself involved in Matter. Therefore Matter is here the basis and the apparent beginning; in the language of the Upanishads, Prithivi, the Earth-principle, is our foundation. The material universe starts from the formal atom surcharged with energy, instinct with the unformed stuff of a subconscious desire, will, intelligence. Out of this Matter apparent Life manifests and it delivers out of itself by means of

¹ I. 2. 1. ² V. 7. 6.
the living body the Mind it contains imprisoned within it; Mind also has still to deliver out of itself the Supermind concealed in its workings. But we can conceive a world otherwise constituted in which Mind is not involved at the start but consciously uses its innate energy to create original forms of substance and is not, as here, only subconscious in the beginning. Still though the working of such a world would be quite different from ours, the intermediate vehicle of operation of that energy would always be Life. The thing itself would be the same, even if the process were entirely reversed.

But then it appears immediately that as Mind is only a final operation of Supermind, so Life is only a final operation of the Consciousness-Force of which Real-Idea is the determinative form and creative agent. Consciousness that is Force is the nature of Being and this conscious Being manifested as a creative Knowledge-Will is the Real-Idea or Supermind. The supramental Knowledge-Will is Consciousness-Force rendered operative for the creation of forms of united being in an ordered harmony to which we give the name of world or universe; so also Mind and Life are the same Consciousness-Force, the same Knowledge-Will, but operating for the maintenance of distinctly individual forms in a sort of demarcation, opposition and interchange in which the soul in each form of being works out its own mind and life as if they were separate from the others, though in fact they are never separate but are the play of the one Soul, Mind, Life in different forms of its single reality. In other words, as Mind is the final individualising operation of the all-comprehending and all-apprehending Supermind, the process by which its consciousness works individualised in each form from the standpoint proper to it and with the cosmic relations which proceed from that standpoint, so Life is the final operation by which the Force of Conscious-Being acting through the all-possessing and all-creative Will of the universal Supermind maintains and energises, constitutes and reconstitutes individual forms and acts in them as the basis of all the activities of the soul thus embodied. Life is the energy of the Divine continually generating itself in forms as in a dynamo and not only playing
with the outgoing battery of its shocks on surrounding forms of things but receiving itself the incoming shocks of all life around as they pour in upon and penetrate the form from outside, from the environing universe.

In this view Life appears as a form of energy of consciousness intermediary and appropriate to the action of Mind on Matter; in a sense, it may be said to be an energy aspect of Mind when it creates and relates itself no longer only to ideas, but to motions of force and to forms of substance. But it must immediately be added that just as Mind is not a separate entity, but has all Supermind behind it and it is Supermind that creates with Mind only as its final individualising operation, so Life also is not a separate entity or movement, but has all Conscious-Force behind it in every one of its workings and it is that Conscious-Force alone which exists and acts in created things. Life is only its final operation intermediary between Mind and Body. All that we say of Life must therefore be subject to the qualifications arising from this dependence. We do not really know Life whether in its nature or its process unless and until we are aware and grow conscious of that Conscious-Force working in it of which it is only the external aspect and instrumentation. Then only can we perceive and execute with knowledge, as individual soul-forms and mental and bodily instruments of the Divine, the will of God in Life; then only can Life and Mind proceed in paths and movements of an ever-increasing straightness of the truth in ourselves and things by a constant diminishing of the crooked perversions of the Ignorance. Just as Mind has to unite itself consciously with the Supermind from which it is separated by the action of Avidya, so Life has to become aware of the Conscious-Force which operates in it for ends and with a meaning of which the life in us, because it is absorbed in the mere process of living as our mind is absorbed in the mere process of mentalising life and matter, is unconscious in its darkened action so that it serves them blindly and ignorantly and not, as it must and will in its liberation and fulfilment, luminously or with a self-fulfilling knowledge, power and bliss.

In fact, our Life, because it is subservient to the darkened
and dividing operation of Mind, is itself darkened and divided and undergoes all that subjection to death, limitation, weakness, suffering, ignorant functioning of which the bound and limited creature-Mind is the parent and cause. The original source of the perversion was, we have seen, the self-limitation of the individual soul bound to self-ignorance because it regards itself by an exclusive concentration as a separate self-existent individuality and regards all cosmic action only as it presents itself to its own individual consciousness, knowledge, will, force, enjoyment and limited being instead of seeing itself as a conscious form of the One and embracing all consciousness, all knowledge, all will, all force, all enjoyment and all being as one with its own. The universal life in us, obeying this direction of the soul imprisoned in mind, itself becomes imprisoned in an individual action. It exists and acts as a separate life with a limited insufficient capacity undergoing and not freely embracing the shock and pressure of all the cosmic life around it. Thrown into the constant cosmic interchange of Force in the universe as a poor, limited, individual existence, Life at first helplessly suffers and obeys the giant interplay with only a mechanical reaction upon all that attacks, devours, enjoys, uses, drives it. But as consciousness develops, as the light of its own being emerges from the inert darkness of the involutionary sleep, the individual existence becomes dimly aware of the power in it and seeks first nervously and then mentally to master, use and enjoy the play. This awakening to the Power in it is the gradual awakening to self. For Life is Force and Force is Power and Power is Will and Will is the working of the Master-consciousness. Life in the individual becomes more and more aware in its depths that it too is the Will-Force of Sachchidananda which is master of the universe and it aspires itself to be individually master of its own world. To realise its own power and to master as well as to know its world is therefore the increasing impulse of all individual life; that impulse is an essential feature of the growing self-manifestation of the Divine in cosmic existence.

But though Life is Power and the growth of individual life means the growth of the individual Power, still the mere fact of
its being a divided individualised life and force prevents it from really becoming master of its world. For that would mean to be master of the All-Force, and it is impossible for a divided and individualised consciousness with a divided, individualised and therefore limited power and will to be master of the All-Force; only the All-Will can be that and the individual only, if at all, by becoming again one with the All-Will and therefore with the All-Force. Otherwise, the individual life in the individual form must be always subject to the three badges of its limitation, Death, Desire and Incapacity.

Death is imposed on the individual life both by the conditions of its own existence and by its relations to the All-Force which manifests itself in the universe. For the individual life is a particular play of energy specialised to constitute, maintain, energise and finally to dissolve, when its utility is over, one of myriad forms which all serve, each in its own place, time and scope, the whole play of the universe. The energy of life in the body has to support the attack of the energies external to it in the universe; it has to draw them in and feed upon them and is itself being constantly devoured by them. All Matter according to the Upanishad is food, and this is the formula of the material world that “the eater eating is himself eaten”. The life organised in the body is constantly exposed to the possibility of being broken up by the attack of the life external to it or, its devouring capacity being insufficient or not properly served or there being no right balance between the capacity of devouring and the capacity or necessity of providing food for the life outside, it is unable to protect itself and is devoured or is unable to renew itself and therefore wasted away or broken; it has to go through the process of death for a new construction or renewal.

Not only so but, again in the language of the Upanishad, the life-force is the food of the body and the body the food of the life-force; in other words, the life-energy in us both supplies the material by which the form is built up and constantly maintained and renewed and is at the same time constantly using up the substantial form of itself which it thus creates and keeps in existence. If the balance between these two operations
is imperfect or is disturbed or if the ordered play of the different currents of life-force is thrown out of gear, then disease and decay intervene and commence the process of disintegration. And the very struggle for conscious mastery and even the growth of mind make the maintenance of the life more difficult. For there is an increasing demand of the life-energy on the form, a demand which is in excess of the original system of supply and disturbs the original balance of supply and demand, and before a new balance can be established, many disorders are introduced inimical to the harmony and to the length of maintenance of the life; in addition the attempt at mastery creates always a corresponding reaction in the environment which is full of forces that also desire fulfilment and are therefore intolerant of, revolt against and attack the existence which seeks to master them. There too a balance is disturbed, a more intense struggle is generated; however strong the mastering life, unless either it is unlimited or else succeeds in establishing a new harmony with its environment, it cannot always resist and triumph but must one day be overcome and disintegrated.

But, apart from all these necessities, there is the one fundamental necessity of the nature and object of embodied life itself, which is to seek infinite experience on a finite basis; and since the form, the basis by its very organisation limits the possibility of experience, this can only be done by dissolving it and seeking new forms. For the soul, having once limited itself by concentrating on the moment and the field, is driven to seek its infinity again by the principle of succession, by adding moment to moment and thus storing up a Time-experience which it calls its past; in that Time it moves through successive fields, successive experiences or lives, successive accumulations of knowledge, capacity, enjoyment, and all this it holds in subconscious or superconscious memory as its fund of past acquisition in Time. To this process change of form is essential, and for the soul involved in individual body change of form means dissolution of the body in subjection to the law and compulsion of the All-life in the material universe, to its law of supply of the material of form and demand on the material, to its principle of constant
intershock and the struggle of the embodied life to exist in a world of mutual devouring. And this is the law of Death.

This then is the necessity and justification of Death, not as a denial of Life, but as a process of Life; death is necessary because eternal change of form is the sole immortality to which the finite living substance can aspire and eternal change of experience the sole infinity to which the finite mind involved in living body can attain. This change of form cannot be allowed to remain merely a constant renewal of the same form-type such as constitutes our bodily life between birth and death; for unless the form-type is changed and the experiencing mind is thrown into new forms in new circumstances of time, place and environment, the necessary variation of experience which the very nature of existence in Time and Space demands, cannot be effectuated. And it is only the process of Death by dissolution and by the devouring of life by Life, it is only the absence of freedom, the compulsion, the struggle, the pain, the subjection to something that appears to be Not-Self which makes this necessary and salutary change appear terrible and undesirable to our mortal mentality. It is the sense of being devoured, broken up, destroyed or forced away which is the sting of Death and which even the belief in personal survival of death cannot wholly abrogate.

But this process is a necessity of that mutual devouring which we see to be the initial law of Life in Matter. Life, says the Upanishad, is Hunger which is Death, and by this Hunger which is Death, aśānāyā mṛtyuh, the material world has been created. For Life here assumes as its mould material substance, and material substance is Being infinitely divided and seeking infinitely to aggregate itself; between these two impulses of infinite division and infinite aggregation the material existence of the universe is constituted. The attempt of the individual, the living atom, to maintain and aggrandise itself is the whole sense of Desire; a physical, vital, moral, mental increase by a more and more all-embracing experience, a more and more all-embracing possession, absorption, assimilation, enjoyment is the inevitable, fundamental, ineradicable impulse of Existence, once divided and individualised, yet ever secretly conscious of its
all-embracing, all-possessing infinity. The impulse to realise that secret consciousness is the spur of the cosmic Divine, the lust of the embodied Self within every individual creature; and it is inevitable, just, salutary that it should seek to realise it first in the terms of life by an increasing growth and expansion. In the physical world this can only be done by feeding on the environment, by aggrandising oneself through the absorption of others or of what is possessed by others; and this necessity is the universal justification of Hunger in all its forms. Still what devours must also be devoured; for the law of interchange, of action and reaction, of limited capacity and therefore of a final exhaustion and succumbing governs all life in the physical world.

In the conscious mind that which was still only a vital hunger in subconscious life, transforms itself into higher forms; hunger in the vital parts becomes craving of Desire in the mentalised life, straining of Will in the intellectual or thinking life. This movement of desire must and ought to continue until the individual has grown sufficiently so that he can now at last become master of himself and by increasing union with the Infinite possessor of his universe. Desire is the lever by which the divine Life-principle effects its end of self-affirmation in the universe and the attempt to extinguish it in the interests of inertia is a denial of the divine Life-principle, a Will-not-to-be which is necessarily ignorance; for one cannot cease to be individually except by being infinitely. Desire too can only cease rightly by becoming the desire of the infinite and satisfying itself with a supernal fulfilment and an infinite satisfaction in the all-possessing bliss of the Infinite. Meanwhile it has to progress from the type of a mutually devouring hunger to the type of a mutual giving, of an increasingly joyful sacrifice of interchange; — the individual gives himself to other individuals and receives them back in exchange; the lower gives itself to the higher and the higher to the lower so that they may be fulfilled in each other; the human gives itself to the Divine and the Divine to the human; the All in the individual gives itself to the All in the universe and receives its realised universality as a divine recompense. Thus the law of Hunger must give place progressively to the law of Love, the law of Division to the law
of Unity, the law of Death to the law of Immortality. Such is the necessity, such the justification, such the culmination and self-fulfilment of the Desire that is at work in the universe.

As this mask of Death which Life assumes results from the movement of the finite seeking to affirm its immortality, so Desire is the impulse of the Force of Being individualised in Life to affirm progressively in the terms of succession in Time and of self-extension in Space, in the framework of the finite, its infinite Bliss, the Ananda of Sachchidananda. The mask of Desire which that impulse assumes comes directly from the third phenomenon of Life, its law of incapacity. Life is an infinite Force working in the terms of the finite; inevitably, throughout its overt individualised action in the finite its omnipotence must appear and act as a limited capacity and a partial impotence, although behind every act of the individual, however weak, however futile, however stumbling, there must be the whole superconscious and subconscious presence of infinite omnipotent Force; without that presence behind it no least single movement in the cosmos can happen; into its sum of universal action each single act and movement falls by the fiat of the omnipotent omniscience which works as the Supermind inherent in things. But the individualised life-force is to its own consciousness limited and full of incapacity; for it has to work not only against the mass of other environing individualised life-forces, but also subject to control and denial by the infinite Life itself with whose total will and trend its own will and trend may not immediately agree. Therefore limitation of force, phenomenon of incapacity is the third of the three characteristics of individualised and divided Life. On the other hand, the impulse of self-enlargement and all-possession remains and it does not and is not meant to measure or limit itself by the limit of its present force or capacity. Hence from the gulf between the impulse to possess and the force of possession desire arises; for if there were no such discrepancy, if the force could always take possession of its object, always attain securely its end, desire would not come into existence but only a calm and self-possessed Will without craving such as is the Will of the Divine.
If the individualised force were the energy of a mind free from ignorance, no such limitation, no such necessity of desire would intervene. For a mind not separated from supermind, a mind of divine knowledge would know the intention, scope and inevitable result of its every act and would not crave or struggle but put forth an assured force self-limited to the immediate object in view. It would, even in stretching beyond the present, even in undertaking movements not intended to succeed immediately, yet not be subject to desire or limitation. For the failures also of the Divine are acts of its omniscient omnipotence which knows the right time and circumstance for the incipience, the vicissitudes, the immediate and the final results of all its cosmic undertakings. The mind of knowledge, being in unison with the divine Supermind, would participate in this science and this all-determining power. But, as we have seen, individualised life-force here is an energy of individualising and ignorant Mind, Mind that has fallen from the knowledge of its own Supermind. Therefore incapacity is necessary to its relations in Life and inevitable in the nature of things; for the practical omnipotence of an ignorant force even in a limited sphere is unthinkable, since in that sphere such a force would set itself against the working of the divine and omniscient omnipotence and unfix the fixed purpose of things, — an impossible cosmic situation. The struggle of limited forces increasing their capacity by that struggle under the driving impetus of instinctive or conscious desire is therefore the first law of Life. As with desire, so with this strife; it must rise into a mutually helpful trial of strength, a conscious wrestling of brother forces in which the victor and vanquished or rather that which influences by action from above and that which influences by retort of action from below must equally gain and increase. And this again has eventually to become the happy shock of divine interchange, the strenuous clasp of Love replacing the convulsive clasp of strife. Still, strife is the necessary and salutary beginning. Death, Desire and Strife are the trinity of divided living, the triple mask of the divine Life-principle in its first essay of cosmic self-affirmation.