

## Chapter Three

# Imperfections and Periods of Arrest

### Imperfections and Progress towards Perfection

Human nature is always full of impurities and imperfections and of itself cannot reach the Divine. It is by the descent of the higher consciousness from above that all that can change; but you must not expect the change to take place in a few days.

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It is not my working, but your moods that are queer. You get something<sup>1</sup> no reasonable being would expect under the ordinary laws of Nature and then you fancy you haven't got it and wail because everything is not absolutely, continuously, faultlessly, increasingly, illimitably miraculous through and through and always and for ever. In no sadhana that I know of does absolute sustained perfection in everything come with a rush and stay celestially perfect for ever more. If it were so there would be no need for sadhana — one would only have to gaze at heaven a little and grow wings and fly into the spheres, a triumphant godhead.

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As I have a few minutes, I may comment on your today's letter so as to get that out of the way. I must say your arguments about X and Y made me smile. When on earth were politeness and good society manners considered as a part or a test of spiritual experience or true Yogic siddhi? It is no more a test than the capacity of dancing well or dressing nicely. Just as there are many very good and kind men who are boorish and rude in their manners, so there may be very spiritual men (I mean those who

<sup>1</sup> *Sri Aurobindo sent the disciple a spiritual force which enabled him to write a very good poem. — Ed.*

have deep spiritual experiences) who have no grasp over physical life or action (many intellectuals too are like that) and are not at all careful about their manners. I suppose I myself am accused of rude and arrogant behaviour because I refuse to see people, do not answer letters, and a host of other misdemeanours. I have heard of a famous recluse who threw stones at anybody coming to his retreat because he did not want disciples and found no other way of warding off the flood of candidates. I at least would hesitate to pronounce that such people had no spiritual life or experience. Certainly, I prefer that sadhaks should be reasonably considerate towards each other, but that is for the sake of collective life and harmony, not as a siddhi of the Yoga or an indispensable sign of inner experience.

As for the other matter how can the *écarts* of the sadhaks here, none of whom have reached perfection or anywhere near it, be a proof that spiritual experience is null or worthless? You write as if the moment one had any kind of spiritual experience or realisation, one must at once become a perfect person without defects or weaknesses. That is to make a demand which it is impossible to satisfy and it is to ignore the fact that spiritual life is a growth and not a sudden and inexplicable miracle. No sadhak can be judged as if he were already a siddha Yogi, least of all those who have only travelled a quarter or less of a very long path as is the case with most of us who are here. Even great Yogis do not claim perfection and you cannot say that because they are not absolutely perfect, therefore their spirituality is false or of no use to the world. There are besides all kinds of spiritual men, some who are content with spiritual experience and do not seek after an outward perfection or progress, some who are saints, others who do not seek after sainthood, others who are content to live in the cosmic consciousness in touch or union with the All but allowing all kinds of forces to play through them, e.g., as in the typical description of the Paramhansa. The ideal I put before our Yoga is one thing, but it does not bind all spiritual life and endeavour. The spiritual life is not a thing that can be formulated in a rigid definition or bound by a fixed mental rule; it is a vast field of evolution, an immense kingdom potentially larger

than the other kingdoms below it with a hundred provinces, a thousand types, stages, forms, paths, variations of the spiritual ideal, degrees of spiritual achievement. It is from the basis of this truth which I shall try to explain in subsequent letters that things regarding spirituality and its seekers must be judged, if they are to be judged with knowledge. Let me do that first and afterwards if I am able to give some idea of it, which is not easy, particular questions can be more soluble.

P.S. All these things I say, must not be applied to the personal cases you mention which are only an occasion for saying them. The one thing that applies to them is that they are sadhaks, not siddhas, raw still, not ripe.

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I am glad to have got your second letter in which the psychic being in you expresses itself with such fullness. It would have been impossible for me to go on with my explanations of the case for spirituality if the exposition of it, carrying as it must do many things contrary to your own mental views, were to upset or hurt you. I have no intention of doing that and have always avoided it except that sometimes I had to express an unpalatable view of things rather plainly in answer to your own insistence. If I write about these questions from the Yogic point of view, even though on a logical basis, there is bound to be much that is in conflict with your own settled and perhaps cherished opinions, e.g. about "miracles", persons, the limits of judgment by sense data etc. I have avoided as much as possible writing about these subjects because I would have to propound things that cannot be understood except by reference to other data than those of the physical senses or of reason founded on these alone. I might have to speak of laws and forces not recognised by physical reason or science. In my public writings and my writings to sadhaks I have not dwelt on these because they go out of the range of ordinary knowledge and the understanding founded on it. These things are known to some, but they do not usually speak about it, while the public views of such of them as are known are either credulous or incredulous, but in both cases without experience

or knowledge. So if the views founded on them are likely to upset, shock or bewilder, the better way is silence.

I should like, however, to clear up first some misunderstandings in your letter about what I had written:

(1) What I wrote about politeness had nothing to do with X or the quarrel with Y—I referred to that as an *écart* and I said that such lapses on the part of sadhaks who were far from being siddha Yogis could not be advanced as a disproof of spiritual experience or of its value. My remark was not at all meant as justification of loss of self-control in an argument and getting angry and excited if crossed in one's views. It was merely a refusal to accept that as an argument against spirituality in general—spiritual experience, as I said, does not immediately lead to perfection and you cannot expect it to do so. Equality and self-control are most necessary to Yoga, but also *most difficult*, one has to strive slowly after them; they are not, at least in their completeness, easily attainable. The whole being has to be pervaded by calm and peace; the nerves and cells of the body have to be full of calm and peace. Until then what one has to strive to attain is an inner calm in the inner being which remains even when the outer is disturbed by invasions of grief, unease or anger. The Yogi arrives first at a sort of division in his being in which the inner Purusha fixed and calm looks at the perturbations of the outer man as one looks at the passions of an unreasonable child; that once fixed, he can proceed afterwards to control the outer man also. Whether he can easily control the actions depends on the temperament of his outer man, whether it is vehement, emotional and passionate or comparatively sedate and quiet. But a complete control of the outer man needs a long and arduous tapasya. It cannot be expected and even the assured inner calm cannot be expected of those who are still in a very early stage of the journey, who are still sadhaks and not Yogis.

(2) I said that as regards both cases, Z and X, my remarks must be taken as limited to this proposition that you cannot expect from the raw what you can expect from the ripe, that is from the siddha Yogi.

(3) But even from the siddha Yogi you cannot always expect

a perfect perfection; there are many who do not even care for the perfection of the outer nature, yet they have spiritual experience, even spiritual realisation and the unperfected outer nature cannot be held as a disproof of their realisation or experience. If you so regard it, you have to rule out of court the greater number of Yogis of the past and the Rishis of the old time also.

(4) I said that the ideal of my Yoga is different, but I cannot bind by it other spiritual men and their achievements or discipline. My own ideal is transformation of the outer nature, perfection as perfect as it can be. But it is impossible to say that those who have not achieved it or did not care to achieve it had no spirituality or that their spirituality was of no value. Beautiful conduct — not politeness which is an outer thing, however valuable, — but beauty founded upon a spiritual realisation of unity and harmony projected into life, is certainly part of the perfect perfection. But all that I regard as the ideal, the thing to be attained in the fullness of the siddhi. I do not expect perfect perfection from those who are on the way and as yet far from the goal. If they have it, it is delightful; but if they do not have it, I cannot deduce from that that they have no spiritual experiences or that these experiences are of no value.

You yourself speak of the Baradi Brahmachari. Because of his habits of speech, it is surely impossible to deny greatness as a spiritual man to this remarkable ascetic admired by Ramakrishna and revered by Vivekananda. Even Ramakrishna himself had habits of speech about which Vivekananda in a letter to his gurubhais rates them for translating these portions as it would make a very bad impression on his English readers. But would these English readers have been justified in denouncing Ramakrishna on that account as an unspiritual man or spirituality as therefore without value?

This was my reasoning and, so stated in a clearer way, I hope, you will not find it either irrational or offensive. I wanted to clear this because, if you remain under the impression that I am saying outrageous things, it will be difficult to go farther.

I want to show that spiritual seeking and achievement are

not one limited thing that can be clearly defined in a single mental formula and reduced to a single rule or set of rules but a kingdom like the mental kingdom with all sorts of stages, lines, variations, provinces, types of spiritual men, and it is only by so understanding it that one can understand it truly, either in its past or in its future or put in their place the spiritual men of the past and the present or relate the different ideals, stages etc. thrown up in the spiritual evolution of the human being.

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I reply to your letter as Mother is still too much occupied to write.

What was in her view at the time was what is called in the psychology of Indian Yoga a “sattwic” perfection, perfection in the form of the qualities and actions such as would satisfy a mental idealism and be very visible and appreciable to others. This often generates a kind of pride and self-righteousness, a “sattwic” egoism, which makes the consciousness rigid and not flexible and plastic to the Divine Will. The true spiritual perfection is not so much of form; it is of the very substance of the consciousness and, as it consists at its base in an entire harmony with the Divine Consciousness and a free and plastic self-adaptation at each moment to the Divine Will, its forms and the forms of its action are not so easily visible or appreciable. The word “righteous” does not apply to its movements — they are simply right because they are in unison with the Divine.

Obviously real imperfections are not to be indulged — to take that as a principle would be dangerous; the “apparent” imperfections are those which might appear so to an outward view only. A “righteous” anger might easily be part of that self-righteousness which the Mother had in view, and to be identified with the movement of anger righteous or otherwise is spiritually undesirable. But a movement of the kind meant may seem to an outward view identical with the movements of imperfection in the nature, yet be quite the right one in the sense of rightness which I have indicated above. It is not a question of any particular action or attitude to be taken but of the consciousness

within giving a free and supple expression to the Divine Will acting through it.

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The existence of imperfections, even many and serious imperfections, cannot be a *permanent* bar to progress in the Yoga. (I do not speak of a recovery of the former opening, for, according to my experience, what comes after a period of obstruction or struggle is usually a new and wider opening, some larger consciousness and an advance on what had been gained before and seems — but only seems — to be lost for the moment.) The only bar that can be permanent — but need not be, for this too can change — is insincerity, and this does not exist in you. If imperfections were a bar, then no man could succeed in Yoga; for all are imperfect, and I am not sure, from what I have seen, that it is not those who have the greatest power for Yoga who have too, very often, or have had the greatest imperfections. You know, I suppose, the comment of Socrates on his own character; that could be said by many great Yogins of their own initial human nature. Also, self-expression in some form of art does not preclude serious imperfections and, of itself, does not cure them. Here again my experience is that men of this kind have great qualities, but also great faults and defects as a weight in the other balance. In Yoga the one thing that counts in the end is sincerity and with it the patience to persist in the path — many even without this patience go through, for — again I speak from personal experience, — in spite of revolt, impatience, depression, despondency, fatigue, temporary loss of faith, a force greater than one's outer self, the force of the Spirit, the drive of the soul's need, pushes them through the cloud and the mist to the goal before them. Imperfections can be stumbling blocks and give one a bad fall for the moment, but not a permanent bar. Obscurations due to some resistance in the nature can be more serious causes of delay, but they too do not last for ever.

The length of your period of dullness is also no sufficient reason for losing belief in your capacity or your spiritual destiny. I can look back to periods not of two but of many months of

blank suspension of all experience or progress. I believe that alternations of bright and dark periods are almost a universal experience of Yogins, and the exceptions are very rare. If one enquires into the reasons of this phenomenon, — very unpleasant to our impatient human nature, — it will be found, I think, that they are in the main two. The first is that the human consciousness either cannot bear a constant descent of the Light or Power or Ananda, or cannot at once receive and absorb it; it needs periods of assimilation, but this assimilation goes on behind the veil of the surface consciousness; the experience or the realisation that has descended retires behind that veil and leaves this outer or surface consciousness to lie fallow and become ready for a new descent. In the more developed stages of the Yoga these dark or dull periods become shorter, less trying as well as uplifted by the sense of the greater consciousness which, though not acting for immediate progress, yet remains and sustains the outer nature. The second cause is some resistance, something in the human nature that has not felt the former descents, is not ready, is perhaps unwilling to change, — often it is some strong habitual formation of the mind or the vital or some temporary inertia of the physical consciousness and not exactly a part of the nature — and this, whether showing or concealing itself, thrusts up the obstacle. If one can detect the cause in oneself, acknowledge it, see its workings and call down the Power for its removal, then the periods of obscurity can be greatly shortened and their acuity becomes less. But in any case the Divine Power is working always behind and one day, perhaps when one least expects it, the obstacle breaks, the clouds vanish and there is again the light and the sunshine. The best thing in these cases is, if one can manage it, not to fret, not to despond, but to insist quietly and keep oneself open, spread to the Light and waiting in faith for it to come: that, I have found, shortens these ordeals. Afterwards, when the obstacle disappears, one finds that a great progress has been made and that the consciousness is far more capable of receiving and retaining than before. There is a return for all the trials and ordeals of the spiritual life.

I write all this to show you that there is nothing peculiar to



you in this untoward experience, nothing that would warrant you in thinking yourself less called and fit than others for the Yoga, nothing that would justify you in taking the hand from the plough, even though you find long bits of hard soil that resist and need much labour. The opening you had is sufficient proof that you are meant for the Path; for it is a sure sign of the dawns that are to come hereafter.

### Periods of Difficulty and Arrest

These periods of difficulty inevitably come — none is without them, for the lower nature is there in all. What you have to do is to keep the firmness of which you speak and persevere till the Divine Power and your will together have dealt with what rises from below. Why do you regard what rises and shows itself (*hīnatā, kṣudratā, āsakti, lobha*) as if it were peculiar to yourself? They are part of the very substance of the lower vital of the human being and there is no one who is without them. So their presence does not at all mean that you cannot reach the Mother. When the mind and soul have chosen the goal, the rest is bound to follow; only as they are more obscure, the resistance there is more blind and obstinate. But even in your vital there is now fixed the will to attain, it is only a lower part there that has had the habit of responding to these things and therefore when a wave comes, it does not know how to avoid and is swallowed up for a time. It can be for a time only, because these things are no longer really yours, since the central being and the greater part of the nature no longer desire them. You have only to go on firmly and the time will come when the waves no longer rise.

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The real reason of the difficulty and the constant alternation is the struggle between the veiled true being within and the outer nature, especially the lower vital full of desires and the physical mind full of obscurity and ignorance. This struggle is inevitable in human nature and no sadhak escapes it; everyone has to deal with that obscurity and resistance and its obstinacy and constant

recurrence; for the lower nature is not only persistent in its repetitions and returns, but even when it is on the point of changing, the general Powers of that plane in universal Nature try to keep up the resistance by bringing back the old movements at each step in order to prevent the progress from being confirmed for good and made final. It is true therefore that a constant sadhana persistent and unceasing is necessary if one wants to go quickly — though even otherwise one will arrive if the soul within has the call, for the soul will persist and after each obscuration or stumble will bring back the light and drive one on on the path till it feels that it is at last secure of a smooth and easy march to the goal.

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A difficulty comes or an arrest in some movement which you have begun or have been carrying on for some time. How is it to be dealt with? — for such arrests are inevitably frequent enough, not only for you, but for everyone who is a seeker; one might almost say that every step forward is followed by an arrest — at least, that is a very common, if not a universal experience. It is to be dealt with by becoming always more quiet, more firm in the will to go through, by opening oneself more and more so that any obstructing non-receptivity in the nature may diminish or disappear, by an affirmation of faith even in the midst of the obscurity, faith in the presence of a Power that is working behind the cloud and the veil, in the guidance of the Guru, by an observation of oneself to find any cause of the arrest, not in a spirit of depression or discouragement but with the will to find out and remove it. This is the only right attitude and, if one is persistent in taking it, the periods of arrest are not abolished, — for that cannot be at this stage, — but greatly shortened and lightened in their incidence. Sometimes these arrests are periods, long or short, of assimilation or unseen preparation, their appearance of sterile immobility is deceptive: in that case, with the right attitude, one can after a time, by opening, by observation, by accumulated experience, begin to feel, to get some inkling of what is being prepared or done. Sometimes it is a period

of true obstruction in which the Power at work has to deal with the obstacles in the way, obstacles in oneself, obstacles of the opposing cosmic forces or any other or of all together, and this kind of arrest may be long or short according to the magnitude or obstinacy or complexity of the impediments that are met. But here too the right attitude can alleviate or shorten and, if persistently taken, help to a more radical removal of the difficulties and greatly diminish the necessity of complete arrests hereafter.

On the contrary, an attitude of depression or unfaith in the help or the guidance or in the certitude of the victory of the guiding Power, a shutting up of yourself in the sense of the difficulties impedes the recovery, prolongs the difficulties, helps the obstructions to recur with force instead of progressively diminishing in their incidence. It is an attitude whose persistence or recurrence you must resolutely throw aside if you want to get over the obstruction which you feel so much — which the depressed attitude only makes, while it lasts, more acute.

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You should realise that these periods of clouding are not due to any special incapacity or perversity in you — even the best sadhaks have them. It is the difficulty of the human nature in getting transformed. This difficulty sometimes takes the form of a bad will in the vital somewhere or a tendency in the physical to cling to old mistakes and old habits or to shrink from the trouble of transformation — but in these respects you have made a great progress. What is there, is the mechanical habit of the lower nature in general — mechanical, not voluntary — to repeat the old movements to which it has been or was quite recently accustomed when any strong wave of them comes in from the surrounding universal Nature. This creates a kind of recurrence of relapse into the states which the spiritual progress is pushing out and it is not easy to get rid of this recurrence altogether. The one thing when they come is not to get distressed or upset, to realise what it is and to remain very quiet calling for the Mother's Force to push it away. In this way the habit

of these recurrences diminishes, the strength and intensity also, and on the other side one is able to recall the true consciousness and the true force, the bright, happy, peaceful, open condition more and more easily and quicker. One can then proceed on an assured basis to a more and more positive progress.

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Do not allow these ideas [*of unfitness*] to gain on you or even to occupy your mind. It is not by their merit or their effort or the capacity they show that men advance in the spiritual path, but by their opening to the divine help and grace. For that you must have the confidence that whatever your own weakness, the grace will not fail you. Difficulties may come, dry and barren moments or even periods may come, but they will be passed over and overcome. It is this idea and feeling that you must cherish and encourage and make to grow in you. Then it will be easier for you to advance.

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I do not think there is any sadhak however advanced who has the full consciousness all the time. These changes come and one cannot help it because there is something of the ordinary consciousness that is still left and it comes up to be dealt with. One has to understand this and not get upset — for getting upset only delays the process. If the true consciousness were constant in its fullness, the sadhana would be finished and there would be the siddhi. That cannot come at once.