I have something here, I don’t know if it will take us very far, but still it will make a good change. All these last few weeks the subject was always progress: how to progress, what hindered progress, how to use the supramental Force, etc. This is going on, I have a whole packet still! But we may change the subject for once.

Someone has asked me a question about death: what happens after death and how one takes a new body.

Needless to say, it is a subject which could fill volumes, no two cases are alike: practically everything is possible in the life after death as everything is possible on earth when one is in a physical body, and all statements when generalised become dogmatic. But still one may look at the problem in some detail, and sometimes one makes interesting discoveries.

The question is like this:

“When an especially developed soul leaves the body, does it take with it the subtle physical sheath? When it reincarnates, how does it introduce this into the new body?”

Even to answer this, as I have told you, it would be necessary to write volumes or to speak for hours. For, to tell the truth, no two cases are alike — there are similarities, classifications can be made, but they are purely arbitrary. What I wanted to do was to read to you the following, for it is quite amusing — oh, I don’t want to be... not serious! Let us say it is quite interesting:

“These questions are asked with reference to an old Indian tradition, the occult knowledge of the sage-king"
Pravanahana who is mentioned in the Upanishads (Chhandogya and Brihadaranyaka):

“It is said that after death, the soul of one who has done good deeds takes the path of the ancestors, ‘pitrivana’, it becomes smoke, night, etc., attains to the world of the fathers and finally to the lunar paradise. The Brahmasutra deduces from this that the soul takes with it all the elements, even those of the subtle physical, which will be needed in the next incarnation.”

So a question:

“Is this correct? Is the subtle physical sufficiently conscious in that case?”

We shall keep aside the questions; I am continuing:

“Then the Upanishads add: after having exhausted the store of good deeds, the soul leaves the lunar paradise, reaches the sky, then the air, then the clouds, taking on the nature of each of these things, precipitates on the earth as rain, enters the seeds, penetrates the body of the father in the form of food, and finally builds up the body of the child.”

This is really a rather complicated process, isn’t it? (Laughter) But I found it very amusing. And now the question (laughing):

“Is it necessary to follow this uncertain and hazardous process? Does not the soul directly animate the body with all the mental, vital and subtle physical elements organised around it and necessary for the next life? Does it take up the elements of the subtle physical world? If so, how do they harmonise with the hereditary
Questions and Answers

"characteristics? Above all, must it pass through the body of the father?"

There we are!

The only thing I can say is that it is possible things sometimes happen like that. Quite probably — at least I hope so — the person who described this may have observed a phenomenon of this kind; I hope it is not a mere mental construction of his occult imagination.... It raises a few practical problems! But still, of course, there is nothing impossible. Only, it is difficult to imagine the soul entering the rain, which enters the seed, which makes the plant sprout up, and then entering the father’s stomach in the form of food, more or less cooked (!) and finally proceeding to the conception of the child. I don’t say it is impossible, but it is very, very, very complicated!

I may say that I have been present at innumerable incarnations of evolved souls in beings either preparing to be born or already born. As I said, the cases are quite different; it depends more on psychological conditions than on material ones, but it also depends on material conditions. It depends on the state of development of the soul which wants to reincarnate — we take the word “soul” here in the sense of the psychic being, what we call the psychic being — it depends on its state of development, on the milieu in which it is going to incarnate, on the mission it has to fulfil — that makes many different conditions.... It depends very largely on the state of consciousness of the parents. For it goes without saying that there is a stupendous difference between conceiving a child deliberately, with a conscious aspiration, a call to the invisible world and a spiritual ardour, and conceiving a child by accident and without intending to have it, and sometimes even without wanting it at all. I don’t say that in the latter case there cannot also be an incarnation, but it usually takes place later, not at the conception.

For the formation of the child it makes a great difference.

If the incarnation takes place at the conception, the whole
formation of the child to be born is directed and governed by the consciousness which is going to incarnate: the choice of the elements, the attraction of the substance—a choice of the forces and even the substance of the matter which is assimilated. There is already a selection. And this naturally creates altogether special conditions for the formation of the body, which may already be fairly developed, evolved, harmonised before its birth. I must say that this is quite, quite exceptional; but still it does happen.

More frequently there are cases in which, just at the moment of its birth, that is to say, of its first gesture of independence, when the child begins to develop its lungs by crying as much as it can, at that moment, very often, this sort of call from life makes the descent easier and more effective.

Sometimes days and at times months pass, and the preparation is slow and the entry takes place very gradually, in quite a subtle and almost imperceptible way.

Sometimes it comes much later, when the child itself becomes a little conscious and feels a very subtle but very real relation with something from above, far above, which is like an influence pressing upon it; and then it can begin to feel the need of being in contact with this something which it does not know, does not understand, but which it can only feel; and this aspiration draws the psychic and makes it descend into the child.

I am giving you here a few fairly common instances; there are many others; this may happen in innumerable different ways. What I have described to you are the most frequent cases I have seen.

So, the soul which wants to incarnate stays at times in a domain of the higher mind, quite close to the earth, having chosen its future home; or else it can descend further, into the vital, and from there have a more direct action; or again it can enter the subtle physical and very closely govern the development of its future body.

Now the other question—the one about departure.
Questions and Answers

That too depends on the degree of development, the conditions of death — and above all on the unification of the being and its attitude at the time of leaving the body. The question here was about fully developed beings, that is, fully developed psychic beings — and I don’t know if it means a psychic being which has profited by its presence in a physical body to do yoga, for then the conditions are quite different. But in a more general way, I have often told you that, with regard to the external envelope of the being, everything depends on its attitude at the moment of death, and that attitude necessarily depends on its inner development and its unification.

If we take the best instance, of someone who has unified his being completely around the divine Presence within him, who is now only one will, one consciousness, this person will have grouped around his central psychic being a fully developed and organised mind, an absolutely surrendered and collaborating vital and an obedient, docile and supple physical being. This physical being, as it is fully developed, will have a subtle body — what Sri Aurobindo calls the “true physical” — which will infinitely surpass the limits of its body and have enough suppleness, plasticity, balance to be able to adhere to the inner parts of the being and follow the movement of the soul in its... I don’t want to say in its ascent, but in its peregrinations outside the body. What the soul will do, where it will go — it all depends on what it has decided before leaving the body. And this capacity to keep around itself the being that has been fully organised and unified in its physical life, will allow it to really choose what it wants to do. And this also represents a very different field of possibilities, from passing consciously from one body into another, directly — there are instances in which one of these fully conscious and fully developed beings has slowly prepared another being capable of receiving and assimilating it, and in order not to stop its material work when it leaves one body, it goes and joins another psychic being, merges with it, combines with it in another physical body; that is an extreme case, extremely
rare also, but one which forms part of an altogether traditional occult knowledge — to the instance at the other extreme, where the soul having finished its bodily experience, wants to assimilate it in repose and prepare for another physical existence later, sometimes much later. And so this is what happens, among many other possibilities: it leaves in each domain — in the subtle physical, in the vital, in the mental domain — the corresponding beings; it leaves them with a sort of link between them, but each one keeps its independent existence, and it itself goes into the zone, the reality, the world of the psychic proper, and enters into a blissful repose for assimilation, until it has assimilated (laughing), as described in this paper, all its good deeds, digested all its good deeds, and is ready to begin a new experience. And then, if its work has been well done and the parts or sheaths of its being which it has left in their different domains have acted as they should there, when it descends again, it will put on one after another all these parts which lived with it in a former life, and with this wealth of knowledge and experience it will prepare to enter a new body.... This may be after hundreds or thousands of years, for in those domains all that is organised is no longer necessarily subject to the decomposition which here we call “death”. As soon as a vital being is fully harmonised, it becomes immortal. What dissolves it and breaks it up are all the disorders within it and all the tendencies towards destruction and decomposition; but if it is fully harmonised and organised and, so to say, divinised, it becomes immortal. It is the same thing for the mind. And even in the subtle physical, beings who are fully developed and have been impregnated with spiritual forces do not necessarily dissolve after death. They may continue to act or may take a beneficial rest in certain elements of Nature like water — generally it is in some liquid, in water or the sap of trees — or it may be, as described here (laughing), in the clouds. But they may also remain active and continue to act on the more material elements of physical Nature.

I have given you here a certain number of examples; I tell
Questions and Answers

you, I could talk to you for hours and there would always be new examples to give! But this covers the subject broadly and opens the door to imagination.

There we are.