Chapter XVII

The Soul and Nature

This is the result of the integral knowledge taken in its mass; its work is to gather up the different strands of our being into the universal oneness. If we are to possess perfectly the world in our new divinised consciousness as the Divine himself possesses it, we have to know also each thing in its absoluteness, first by itself, secondly in its union with all that completes it; for so has the Divine imaged out and seen its being in the world. To see things as parts, as incomplete elements is a lower analytic knowledge. The Absolute is everywhere; it has to be seen and found everywhere. Every finite is an infinite and has to be known and sensed in its intrinsic infiniteness as well as in its surface finite appearance. But so to know the world, so to perceive and experience it, it is not enough to have an intellectual idea or imagination that so it is; a certain divine vision, divine sense, divine ecstasy is needed, an experience of union of ourselves with the objects of our consciousness. In that experience not only the Beyond but all here, not only the totality, the All in its mass, but each thing in the All becomes to us our self, God, the Absolute and Infinite, Sachchidananda. This is the secret of complete delight in God’s world, complete satisfaction of the mind and heart and will, complete liberation of the consciousness. It is the supreme experience at which art and poetry and all the various efforts of subjective and objective knowledge and all desire and effort to possess and enjoy objects are trying more or less obscurely to arrive; their attempt to seize the forms and properties and qualities of things is only a first movement which cannot give the deepest satisfaction unless by seizing them perfectly and absolutely they get the sense of the infinite reality of which these are the outer symbols. To the rational mind and the ordinary sense-experience this may well seem only a poetic fancy or a mystic hallucination; but the absolute satisfaction
and sense of illumination which it gives and alone can give is really a proof of its greater validity; we get by that a ray from the higher consciousness and the diviner sense into which our subjective being is intended eventually, if we will only allow it, to be transfigured.

We have seen that this applies to the highest principles of the Divine Being. Ordinarily, the discriminating mind tells us that only what is beyond all manifestation is absolute, only the formless Spirit is infinite, only the timeless, spaceless, immutable, immobile Self in its repose is absolutely real; and if we follow and are governed in our endeavour by this conception, that is the subjective experience at which we shall arrive, all else seeming to us false or only relatively true. But if we start from the larger conception, a completer truth and a wider experience open to us. We perceive that the immutability of the timeless, spaceless existence is an absolute and an infinite, but that also the conscious-force and the active delight of the divine Being in its all-blissful possession of the outpouring of its powers, qualities, self-creations is an absolute and an infinite,—and indeed the same absolute and infinite, so much the same that we can enjoy simultaneously, equally the divine timeless calm and peace and the divine time-possessing joy of activity, freely, infinitely, without bondage or the lapse into unrest and suffering. So too we can have the same experience of all the principles of this activity which in the Immutable are self-contained and in a sense drawn in and concealed, in the cosmic are expressed and realise their infinite quality and capacity.

The first of these principles in importance is the duality—which resolves itself into a unity—of Purusha and Prakriti of which we have had occasion to speak in the Yoga of Works, but which is of equal importance for the Yoga of Knowledge. This division was made most clearly by the old Indian philosophies; but it bases itself upon the eternal fact of practical duality in unity upon which the world-manifestation is founded. It is given different names according to our view of the universe. The Vedantins spoke of the Self and Maya, meaning according to their predilections by the Self the Immutable and by Maya
the power the Self has of imposing on itself the cosmic illusion, or by the Self the Divine Being and by Maya the nature of conscious-being and the conscious-force by which the Divine embodies himself in soul-forms and forms of things. Others spoke of Ishwara and Shakti, the Lord and His force, His cosmic power. The analytic philosophy of the Sankhyas affirmed their eternal duality without any possibility of oneness, accepting only relations of union and separation by which the cosmic action of Prakriti begins, proceeds or ceases for the Purusha; for the Purusha is an inactive conscious existence,—it is the Soul the same in itself and immutable forever,—Prakriti the active force of Nature which by its motion creates and maintains and by its sinking into rest dissolves the phenomenon of the cosmos. Leaving aside these philosophical distinctions, we come to the original psychological experience from which all really take their start, that there are two elements in the existence of living beings, of human beings at least if not of all cosmos,—a dual being, Nature and the soul.

This duality is self-evident. Without any philosophy at all, by the mere force of experience it is what we can all perceive, although we may not take the trouble to define. Even the most thoroughgoing materialism which denies the soul or resolves it into a more or less illusory result of natural phenomena acting upon some ill-explained phenomenon of the physical brain which we call consciousness or the mind, but which is really no more than a sort of complexity of nervous spasms, cannot get rid of the practical fact of this duality. It does not matter at all how it came about; the fact is not only there, it determines our whole existence, it is the one fact which is really important to us as human beings with a will and an intelligence and a subjective existence which makes all our happiness and our suffering. The whole problem of life resolves itself into this one question,—“What are we to do with this soul and nature set face to face with each other,—we who have as one side of our existence this Nature, this personal and cosmic activity, which tries to impress itself upon the soul, to possess, control, determine it, and as the other side this soul which feels that in some mysterious way it has
a freedom, a control over itself, a responsibility for what it is and
does, and tries therefore to turn upon Nature, its own and the
world’s, and to control, possess, enjoy, or even, it may be, reject
and escape from her?” In order to answer that question we have
to know, — to know what the soul can do, to know what it can
do with itself, to know too what it can do with Nature and the
world. The whole of human philosophy, religion, science is really
nothing but an attempt to get at the right data upon which it will
be possible to answer the question and solve, as satisfactorily as
our knowledge will allow, the problem of our existence.

The hope of a complete escape from our present strife with
and subjection to our lower and troubled nature and existence
arises when we perceive what religion and philosophy affirm,
but modern thought has tried to deny, that there are two poises
of our soul-existence, a lower, troubled and subjected, a higher,
supreme, untroubled and sovereign, one vibrant in Mind, the
other tranquil in Spirit. The hope not only of an escape, but
of a completely satisfying and victorious solution comes when
we perceive what some religions and philosophies affirm, but
others seem to deny, that there is also in the dual unity of soul
and nature a lower, an ordinary human status and a higher, a
divine; for it is in the divine alone that the conditions of the
duality stand reversed; there the soul becomes that which now
it only struggles and aspires to be, master of its nature, free and
by union with the Divine possessor also of the world-nature.
According to our idea of these possibilities will be the solution
we shall attempt to realise.

Involved in mind, possessed by the ordinary phenomenon
of mental thought, sensation, emotion, reception of the vital and
physical impacts of the world and mechanical reaction to them,
the soul is subject to Nature. Even its will and intelligence are
determined by its mental nature, determined even more largely
by the mental nature of its environment which acts upon, sub-
tly as well as overtly, and overcomes the individual mentality.
Thus its attempt to regulate, to control, to determine its own
experience and action is pursued by an element of illusion, since
when it thinks it is acting, it is really Nature that is acting and
determining all it thinks, wills and does. If there were not this constant knowledge in it that it is, that it exists in itself, is not the body or life but something other which at least receives and accepts the cosmic experience if it does not determine it, it would be compelled in the end to suppose that Nature is all and the soul an illusion. This is the conclusion modern Materialism affirms and to that nihilistic Buddhism arrived; the Sankhyas, perceiving the dilemma, solved it by saying that the soul in fact only mirrors Nature’s determinations and itself determines nothing, is not the lord, but can by refusing to mirror them fall back into eternal immobility and peace. There are too the other solutions which arrive at the same practical conclusion, but from the other end, the spiritual; for they affirm either that Nature is an illusion or that both the soul and Nature are impermanent and they point us to a state beyond in which their duality has no existence; either they cease by the extinction of both in something permanent and ineffable or their discordances end by the exclusion of the active principle altogether. Though they do not satisfy humanity’s larger hope and deep-seated impulse and aspiration, these are valid solutions so far as they go; for they arrive at an Absolute in itself or at the separate absolute of the soul, even if they reject the many rapturous infinities of the Absolute which the true possession of Nature by the soul in its divine existence offers to the eternal seeker in man.

Uplifted into the Spirit the soul is no longer subject to Nature; it is above this mental activity. It may be above it in detachment and aloofness, *udāsīna*, seated above and indifferent, or attracted by and lost in the absorbing peace or bliss of its undifferentiated, its concentrated spiritual experience of itself; we must then transcend by a complete renunciation of Nature and cosmic existence, not conquer by a divine and sovereign possession. But the Spirit, the Divine is not only above Nature; it is master of Nature and cosmos; the soul rising into its spiritual poise must at least be capable of the same mastery by its unity with the Divine. It must be capable of controlling its own nature not only in calm or by forcing it to repose, but with a sovereign control of its play and activity.
To arrive by an intense spirituality at the absolute of the soul is our possibility on one side of our dual existence; to enjoy the absolute of Nature and of everything in Nature is our possibility on the other side of this eternal duality. To unify these highest aspirations in a divine possession of God and ourselves and the world, should be our happy completeness. In the lower poise this is not possible because the soul acts through the mind and the mind can only act individually and fragmentarily in a contented obedience or a struggling subjection to that universal Nature through which the divine knowledge and the divine Will are worked out in the cosmos. But the Spirit is in possession of knowledge and will, of which it is the source and cause and not a subject; therefore in proportion as the soul assumes its divine or spiritual being, it assumes also control of the movements of its nature. It becomes, in the ancient language, Swarat, free and a self-ruler over the kingdom of its own life and being. But also it increases in control over its environment, its world.

This it can only do entirely by universalising itself; for it is the divine and universal will that it must express in its action upon the world. It must first extend its consciousness and see the universe in itself instead of being like the mind limited by the physical, vital, sensational, emotional, intellectual outlook of the little divided personality. It must accept the world-truths, the world-energies, the world-tendencies, the world-purposes as its own instead of clinging to its own intellectual ideas, desires and endeavours, preferences, objects, intentions, impulses; these, so far as they remain, must be harmonised with the universal. It must then submit its knowledge and will at their very source to the divine Knowledge and the divine Will and so arrive through submission at emergence, losing its personal light in the divine Light and its personal initiative in the divine initiative. To be first in tune with the Infinite, in harmony with the Divine, and then to be unified with the Infinite, taken into the Divine is its condition of perfect strength and mastery, and this is precisely the very nature of the spiritual life and the spiritual existence.

The distinction made in the Gita between the Purusha and the Prakriti gives us the clue to the various attitudes which the
soul can adopt towards Nature in its movement towards perfect freedom and rule. The Purusha is, says the Gita, witness, upholder, source of the sanction, knower, lord, enjoyer; Prakriti executes, it is the active principle and must have an operation corresponding to the attitude of the Purusha. The soul may assume, if it wishes, the poise of the pure witness, sākṣī; it may look on at the action of Nature as a thing from which it stands apart; it watches, but does not itself participate. We have seen the importance of this quietistic capacity; it is the basis of the movement of withdrawal by which we can say of everything, — body, life, mental action, thought, sensation, emotion, — “This is Prakriti working in the life, mind and body, it is not myself, it is not even mine,” and thus come to the soul’s separation from these things and to their quiescence. This may, therefore, be an attitude of renunciation or at least of non-participation, tamasic, with a resigned and inert endurance of the natural action so long as it lasts, rajasic, with a disgust, aversion and recoil from it, sattwic, with a luminous intelligence of the soul’s separateness and the peace and joy of aloofness and repose; but also it may be attended by an equal and impersonal delight as of a spectator at a show, joyous but unattached and ready to rise up at any moment and as joyfully depart. The attitude of the Witness at its highest is the absolute of unattachment and freedom from affection by the phenomena of the cosmic existence.

As the pure Witness, the soul refuses the function of upholder or sustainer of Nature. The upholder, bhartā, is another, God or Force or Maya, but not the soul, which only admits the reflection of the natural action upon its watching consciousness, but not any responsibility for maintaining or continuing it. It does not say “All this is in me and maintained by me, an activity of my being,” but at the most “This is imposed on me, but really external to myself.” Unless there is a clear and real duality in existence, this cannot be the whole truth of the matter; the soul is the upholder also, it supports in its being the energy which unrolls the spectacle of the cosmos and which conducts its energies. When the Purusha accepts this upholding, it may do it still passively and without attachment, feeling that
it contributes the energy, but not that it controls and determines it. The control is another, God or Force or the very nature of Maya; the soul only upholds indifferently so long as it must, so long perhaps as the force of its past sanction and interest in the energy continues and refuses to be exhausted. But if the attitude of the upholder is fully accepted, an important step forward has been taken towards identification with the active Brahman and his joy of cosmic being. For the Purusha has become the active giver of the sanction.

In the attitude of the Witness there is also a kind of sanction, but it is passive, inert and has no kind of absoluteness about it; but if he consents entirely to uphold, the sanction has become active, even though the soul may do no more than consent to reflect, support and thereby maintain in action all the energies of Prakriti. It may refuse to determine, to select, believing that it is God or Force itself or some Knowledge-Will that selects and determines, and the soul only a witness and upholder and thereby giver of the sanction, anumantā, but not the possessor and the director of the knowledge and the will, jñātā śvarah. Then there is a general sanction in the form of an active upholding of whatever is determined by God or universal Will, but there is not an active determination. But if the soul habitually selects and rejects in what is offered to it, it determines; the relatively passive has become an entirely active sanction and is on the way to be an active control.

This it becomes when the soul accepts its complete function as the knower, lord and enjoyer of Nature. As the knower the soul possesses the knowledge of the force that acts and determines, it sees the values of being which are realising themselves in cosmos, it is in the secret of Fate. For the force that acts is itself determined by the knowledge which is its origin and the source and standardiser of its valuations and effectuations of values. Therefore in proportion as the soul becomes again the knower, it gets the capacity of becoming also the controller of the action whether by spiritual force alone or by that force figuring itself in mental and physical activities. There may be in our soul life a perfect spiritual knowledge and understanding
not only of all our internal activities but of all the unrolling of things, events, human, animal, natural activities around us, the world-vision of the Rishi. This may not be attended by an active putting forth of power upon the world, though that is seldom entirely absent; for the Rishi is not uninterested in the world or in his fellow-creatures, but one with them by sympathy or by accepting all creatures as his own self in many minds and bodies. The old forest-dwelling anchorites even are described continually as busily engaged in doing good to all creatures. This can only be done in the spiritual realisation, not by an effort, for effort is a diminution of freedom, but by a spiritual influence or by a spiritual mastery over the minds of men and the workings of Nature, which reflects the divine effective immanence and the divine effective mastery.

Nor can it do this without becoming the active enjoyer, bhokta. In the lower being the enjoyment is of a twofold kind, positive and negative, which in the electricity of sensation translates itself into joy and suffering; but in the higher it is an actively equal enjoyment of the divine delight in self-manifestation. That enjoyment again may be limited to a silent spiritual delight or an integral divine joy possessing all things around us and all activities of all parts of our being.

There is no loss of freedom, no descent into an ignorant attachment. The man free in his soul is aware that the Divine is the lord of the action of Nature, that Maya is His Knowledge-Will determining and effecting all, that Force is the Will side of this double divine Power in which knowledge is always present and effectual. He is aware of himself also, even individually, as a centre of the divine existence, — a portion of the Lord, the Gita expresses it, — controlling so far the action of Nature which he views, upholds, sanctions, enjoys, knows and by the determinative power of knowledge controls. And when he universalises himself, his knowledge still reflects only the divine knowledge, his will effectuates only the divine will, he enjoys only the divine delight and not an ignorant personal satisfaction. Thus the Purusha preserves its freedom in its possession, renunciation of limited personality even in its representative enjoyment and
delight of cosmic being. It has taken up fully in the higher poise
the true relations of the soul and Nature.

Purusha and Prakriti in their union and duality arise from
the being of Sachchidananda. Self-conscious existence is the es-

tential nature of the Being; that is Sat or Purusha. The Power of
self-aware existence, whether drawn into itself or acting in the
works of its consciousness and force, its knowledge and its will,
Chit and Tapas, Chit and its Shakti, — that is Prakriti. Delight of
being, Ananda, is the eternal truth of the union of this conscious
being and its conscious force whether absorbed in itself or else
deployed in the inseparable duality of its two aspects. It unrolls
the worlds as Prakriti and views them as Purusha; acts in them
and upholds the action; executes works and gives the sanction
without which the force of Nature cannot act; executes and
controls the knowledge and the will and knows and controls the
determinations of the knowledge-force and will-force; ministers
to the enjoyment and enjoys; — all is the Soul possessor, ob-
server, knower, lord of Nature and Nature expressing the being,
executing the will, satisfying the self-knowledge, ministering to
the delight of being of the soul. There we have, founded on the
very nature of being, the supreme and the universal relation of
Prakriti with Purusha. The relation in its imperfect, perverted or
reverse terms is the world as we see it; but the perfect relation
brings the absolute joy of the soul in itself and, based upon
that, the absolute joy of the soul in Nature which is the divine
fulfilment of world-existence.