The Ascending Unity

THE HUMAN mind loves a clear simplicity of view; the more trenchant a statement, the more violently it is caught by it and inclined to acceptance. This is not only natural to our first crudity of thinking, and the more attractive because it makes things delightfully easy to handle and saves an immense amount of worry of enquiry and labour of reflection, but, modified, it accompanies us to the higher levels of a more watchful mentality. Alexander’s method with the fateful knot is our natural and favourite dealing with the tangled web of things, the easy cut, the royal way, the facile philosophy of this and not this, that and not that, a strong yes and no, a simple division, a pair of robust opposites, a clean cut of classification. Our reason acts by divisions, even our ordinary illogical thought is a stumbling and bungling summary analysis and arrangement of the experience that offers itself to us with such unending complexity. But the cleanest and clearest division is that which sets us most at ease, because it impresses on our still childlike intelligence a sense of conclusive and luminous simplicity.

But the average mind enamoured of a straight and plain thinking, for which, for a famous instance, that great doctor Johnson thought with the royal force dear to all strong men when he destroyed Berkeley’s whole philosophy by simply kicking a stone and saying “There I prove the reality of matter,” is not alone affected by this turn towards simple solutions. Even the philosopher, though he inclines to an intricate reasoning by the way, is best delighted when he can get by it to some magnificently conclusive conclusion, some clean-cutting distinction between Brahman and non-Brahman, Reality and unreality or any of the host of mental oppositions on which so many “isms” have been founded. These royal roads of philosophy have the advantage that they are highly and grandly cut for the steps of
the metaphysical intellect and at the same time attract and over-
power the ordinary mind by the grandiose eminence of the peak
in which they end, some snow-white heaven-cutting Matterhorn
of sovereign formula. What a magnificent exterminating sweep
do we hear for instance in that old renowned sentence, *brahma
satya Çm jagan mithyÅa*, the Eternal alone is true, the universe is a
lie, and how these four victorious words seem to settle the whole
business of God and man and world and life at once and for ever
in their uncompromising antithesis of affirmation and negation.
But after all perhaps when we come to think more at large about
the matter, we may find that Nature and Existence are not of
the same mind as man in this respect, that there is here a great
complexity which we must follow with patience and that those
ways of thinking have most chance of a fruitful truth-yielding,
which like the inspired thinking of the Upanishads take in many
sides at once and reconcile many conflicting conclusions. One
can hew material for a hundred philosophies out of the Upa-
nishads as if from some bottomless Titans’ quarry and yet no
more exhaust it than one can exhaust the opulent bosom of our
mother Earth or the riches of our father Ether.

Man began this familiar process of simple cuttings by em-
phasising his sense of himself as man; he made of himself a being
separate, unique and peculiar in this world, for whom or round
whom everything else was supposed to be created, — and all the
rest, the subhuman existence, animal, plant, inanimate object,
everything to the original atom seemed to him a creation differ-
ent from himself, separate, of another nature; he condemned all
to be without a soul, he was the one ensouled being. He saw
life, defined it by certain characters that struck his mind, and
set apart all other existence as non-living, inanimate. He looked
at his earth, made it the centre of the universe, because the
one inhabited scene of embodied souls or living beings; but the
innumerable other heavenly bodies were only lights to illumine
earth’s day or to relieve her night. He perceived the insufficiency
of this one earthly life only to create another opposite definition
of a perfect heavenly existence and set it in the skies he saw
above him. He perceived his “I” or self and conceived of it as a
separate embodied ego, the centre of all his earthly and heavenly interests, and cut off all other being as the not-I which was there for him to make the best use he could out of it for this little absorbing entity. When he looked beyond these natural sense-governed divisions, he still followed the same logical policy. Conceiving of spirit, he cut it off sharply as a thing by itself, the opposite of all that was not spirit; an antinomy between spirit and matter became the base of his self-conception, or else more amply between spirit on the one side and on the other mind, life and body. Then conceiving of self as a pure entity, all else being not-self was separated from it as of quite another character. Incidentally, with the eye of his inveterate dividing mind, he saw it as his own separate self and, just as before he had made the satisfaction of ego his whole business on earth, so he made the soul's own individual salvation its one all-important spiritual and heavenly transaction. Or he saw the universal and denied the reality of the individual, refusing to them any living unity or coexistent reality, or saw a transcendent Absolute separate from individual and universe so that these became a figment of the unreal, Asat. Being and Becoming are to his clean-cutting confidently trenchant mind two opposite categories, of which one or the other must be denied, or made a temporary construction or a sum, or sickled over with the pale hue of illusion, and not Becoming accepted as an eternal display of Being. These conceptions of the sense-guided or the intellectual reason still pursue us, but a considering wisdom comes more and more to perceive that conclusive and satisfying as they may seem and helpful though they may be for action of life, action of mind, action of spirit, they are yet, as we now put them, constructions. There is a truth behind them, but a truth which does not really permit of these isolations. Our classifications set up too rigid walls; all borders are borders only and not impassable gulfs. The one infinitely variable Spirit in things carries over all of himself into each form of his omnipresence; the self, the Being is at once unique in each, common in our collectivities and one in all beings. God moves in many ways at once in his own indivisible unity.
The conception of man as a separate and quite peculiar being in the universe has been rudely shaken down by a patient and disinterested examination of the process of nature. He is without equal or peer and occupies a privileged position on earth, but is not solitary in his being; all the evolution is there to explain this seeker of spiritual greatness embodied in a fragile body and narrow life and bounded mind who in turn by his being and seeking explains to itself the evolution. The animal prepares and imperfectly prefigures man and is itself prepared in the plant, as that too is foreseen obscurely by all that precedes it in the terrestrial expansion. Man himself takes up the miraculous play of the electron and atom, draws up through the complex development of the protoplasm the chemical life of subvital things, perfects the original nervous system of the plant in the physiology of the completed animal being, consummates and repeats rapidly in his embryonic growth the past evolution of the animal form into the human perfection and, once born, rears himself from the earthward and downward animal prone-ness to the erect figure of the spirit who is already looking up to his farther heavenward evolution. All the terrestrial past of the world is there summarised in man, and not only has Nature given as it were the physical sign that she has formed in him an epitome of her universal forces, but psychologically also he is one in his subconsciente being with her obscurer subanimal life, contains in his mind and nature the animal and rises out of all this substratum into his conscious manhood.

Whatever soul there is in man is not a separate spiritual being which has no connection with all the rest of the terrestrial family, but seems to have grown out of it by a taking up of it all and an exceeding of its sense by a new power and meaning of the spirit. This is the universal nature of the type man on earth, and it is reasonable to suppose that whatever has been the past history of the individual soul, it must have followed the course of the universal nature and evolution. The separative pride which would break up the unity of Nature in order to make of ourselves another as well as a greater creation, has no physical warrant, but has been found on the contrary to be contradicted by all
the evidence; and there is no reason to suppose that it has any spiritual justification. The physical history of humankind is the growth out of the subvital and the animal life into the greater power of manhood; our inner history as indicated by our present nature, which is the animal plus something that exceeds it, must have been a simultaneous and companion growing on the same curve into the soul of humanity. The ancient Indian idea which refused to separate nature of man from the universal Nature or self of man from the one common self, accepted this consequence of its seeing. Thus the Tantra assigns eighty millions of plant and animal lives as the sum of the preparation for a human birth and, without binding ourselves to the figure, we can appreciate the force of its idea of the difficult soul evolution by which humanity has come or perhaps constantly comes into being. We can only get away from this necessity of an animal past by denying all soul to subhuman nature.

But this denial is only one of the blind, hasty and presumptuous isolations of the human mind which shut up in its own prison of separate self-perception refuses to see its kinship with the rest of natural being. Because soul or spirit works in the animal on a lower scale, we are not warranted in thinking that there is no soul in him, any more than a divine or superhuman being would be justified in regarding us as soulless bodies or soulless minds because of the grovelling downward drawn inferiority of our half-animal nature. The figure which we use when sometimes we say of one of our own kind that he has no soul, is only a figure; it means only that the animal type of soul predominates in him over the more developed soul type which we expect in the finer spiritual figure of humanity. But this animal element is present in every mother’s son of us; it is our legacy, our inheritance from the common earth-mother: and how spiritually do we get this element of our being or incur the burden of this inheritance, if it is not the earning of our own past, the power we have kept from a bygone formative experience? The spiritual law of Karma is that the nature of each being can be only the result of his past energies; to suppose a soul which assumes and continues a past karma that is not its
own, is to cut a line of dissociation across this law and bring in an unknown and unverified factor. But if we admit it, we must account for that factor, we must explain or discover by what law, by what connection, by what necessity, by what strange impulsion of choice a spirit pure of all animal nature assumes a body and nature of animality prepared for it by a lower order of being. If there is no affinity and no consequence of past identity or connection, this becomes an unnatural and impossible assumption. Then it is the most reasonable and concordant conclusion that man has the animal nature,—and indeed if we consider well his psychology, we find that he houses many kinds of animal souls or rather an amalgam of animal natures,—because the developing self in him like the developed body has had a past subhuman evolution. This conclusion preserves the unity of Nature and its developing order; and it concurs with the persistent evidence of an interaction and parallelism which we perceive between the inward and the outward, the physical and the mental phenomenon,—a correspondence and companionship which some would explain by making mind a result and notation of the act of nerve and body, but which can now be better accounted for by seeing in vital and physical phenomenon a consequence and minor notation of a soul-action which it at the same time hints and conceals from our sense-bound mentality. Finally, it makes of soul or spirit, no longer a miraculous accident or intervention in a material universe, but a constant presence in it and the secret of its order and its existence.

The concession of an animal soul existence and of its past subhuman births slowly and guardedly preparing the birth into humanity cannot stop short at this abrupt line in the natural gradation. For man epitomises in his being not only the animal existence below him, but the obscurer subanimal being. But if it is difficult for us to concede a soul to the despised animal form and mind, it is still more difficult to concede it to the brute subconsciousness of the subanimal nature. Ancient belief made this concession with the happiest ease, saw a soul, a living godhead everywhere in the animate and in the inanimate and nothing was
to its view void of a spiritual existence. The logical abstracting intellect with its passion for clean sections intermediately swept away these large beliefs as an imaginative superstition or a primitive animism and, mastered by its limiting and dividing definitions, it drove a trenchant sectional cleavage between man and animal, animal and plant, animate and inanimate being. But now to the eye of our enlarging reason this system of intolerant cleavages is in rapid course of disappearance. The human mind is a development from what is inchoate in the animal mentality; there is, even, in that inferior type a sort of suppressed reason, for that name may well be given to a power of instinctive and customary conclusion from experience, association, memory and nervous response, and man himself begins with these things though he develops out of this animal inheritance a free human self-detaching power of reflective will and intelligence. And it is now clear that the nervous life which is the basis of that physical mentality in man and animal, exists also in the plant with a fundamental identity; not only so, but it is akin to us by a sort of nervous psychology which amounts to the existence of a suppressed mind. A subconscient mind in the plant, it is now not unreasonable to suggest, — but is it not at the summits of plant experience only half subconscious? — becomes conscient in the animal body. When we go lower down, we find hints that there are involved in the subvital most brute material forms the rudiments of precisely the same energy of life and its responses. And the question then arises whether there is not an unbroken continuity in Nature, no scissions and sections, no unbridgeable gulfs or impassable borders, but a complete unity, matter instinct with a suppressed life, life instinct with a suppressed mind, mind instinct with a suppressed energy of a diviner intelligence, each new form or type of birth evolving a stage in the succession of suppressed powers, and there too the evolution not at an end, but this large and packed intelligence the means of liberating a greater and now suppressed self-power of the Spirit. A spiritual evolution thus meets our eye in the world which an inner force raises up a certain scale of gradations of its births in form by the unfolding of its own hidden powers to
the greatness of its complete and highest reality. The word of
the ancient Veda stands, — out of all the ocean of inconscience,
apraketāṁ salilāṁ sarvam idam, it is that one spiritual Existent
who is born by the greatness of his own energy, tapasas tan
mabhinā ajāyata ekam. Where in this evolution does the thing
we call soul make its first appearance? One is obliged to ask,
was it not there, must it not have been there from the first
beginnings, even though asleep or, as we may say, somnambulist
in matter? If man were only a superior animal with a greater
range of physical mind, we might conceivably say that there was
no soul or spirit, but only three successive powers of Energy in
a series of the forms of matter. But in this human intelligence
there does appear at its summit a greater power of spirit; we
rise up to a consciousness which is not limited by its physical
means and formulas. This highest thing is not, as it might first
appear, an unsubstantial sublimation of mind and mind a subtle
sublimation of living matter. This greatness turns out to have
been the very self-existent substance and power of our being;
all other things seem in comparison only its lesser forms of
itself which it uses for a progressive revelation; spirit in the end
proves itself the first and not only the last, Alpha as well as
Omega, and the whole secret of existence from its beginning.
We come to a fathomless conception of this all, sarvam idam,
in which we see that there is an obscure omnipresent life in
matter, activised by that life a secret sleeping mind, sheltered
in that sleep of mind an involved all-knowing all-originating
Spirit. But then soul is not to be conceived of as a growth or
birth of which we can fix a date of its coming or a stage in
the evolution which brings it to a first capacity of formation,
but rather all here is assumption of form by a secret soul which
becomes in the self-seeking of life increasingly manifest to a
growing self-conscious. All assumption of form is a constant
and yet progressive birth or becoming of the soul, sambhava,
sambhūti,—the dumb and blind and brute is that and not only
the finely, mentally conscious human or the animal existence.
All this infinite becoming is a birth of the Spirit into form. This
is the truth, obscure at first or vague to the intelligence, but very
luminous to an inner experience, on which the ancient Indian idea of rebirth took its station.

But the repeated birth of the same individual does not at first sight seem to be indispensable in this overpowering universal unity. To the logical intellect it might appear to be a contradiction, since all here is the one self, spirit, existence born into nature, assuming a multitude of forms, ascending many gradations of its stages of self-revelation. That summary cutting of existence into the I and the not-I which was the convenience of our egoistic notion of things, a turn of mind so powerful for action, would seem to be only a practical or a mechanical device of the one Spirit to support its separative phenomenon of birth and conscious variation of combined proceeding, a sorcerer’s trick of the universal intelligence; it is only apparent fact of being, not its truth,—there is no separation, only a universal unity, one spirit. But may not this again be a swinging away to the opposite extreme? As the ego was an excessive scission in the unity of being, so this idea of an ocean of unity in which our life would be only an inconstant momentary wave, may be a violent excision of something indispensable to the universal order. Individuality is as important a thing to the ways of the Spirit of existence as universality. The individual is that potent secret of its being upon which the universal stresses and leans and makes the knot of power of all its workings: as the individual grows in consciousness and sight and knowledge and all divine power and quality, increasingly he becomes aware of the universal in himself, but aware of himself too in the universality, of his own past not begun and ended in the single transient body, but opening to future consummations. If the aim of the universal in our birth is to become self-conscient and possess and enjoy its being, still it is done through the individual's flowering and perfection; if to escape from its own workings be the last end, still it is the individual that escapes while the universal seems content to continue its multitudinous births to all eternity. Therefore the individual would appear to be a real power of the Spirit and not a simple illusion or device, except in so far as the universal too may be, as some would have it, an immense illusion or
a grand imposed device. On this line of thinking we arrive at
the idea of some great spiritual existence of which universal
and individual are two companion powers, pole and pole of its
manifestation, indefinite circumference and multiple centre of
the activised realities of its being.

This is a way of seeing things, harmonious at least in its
complexity, supple and capable of a certain all-embracing scope,
which we can take as a basis for our ideas of rebirth,—an
ascending unity, a spirit involved in material existence which
scales wonderfully up many gradations through life to organised
mind and beyond mind to the evolution of its own complete
self-conscience, the individual following that gradation and the
power for its self-crowning. If human mind is the last word of its
possibility on earth, then rebirth must end in man and proceed
by some abrupt ceasing either to an existence on other planes
or to an annulment of its spiritual circle. But if there are higher
powers of the spirit which are attainable by birth, then the ascent
is not finished, greater assumptions may lie before the soul which
has now reached and is lifted to a perfecting of the high scale
of humanity. It may even be that this ascending rebirth is not
the long upward rocket shooting of a conscious being out of
matter or its whirling motion in mind destined to break up and
dissolve in some high air of calm nothingness or of silent timeless
infinity, but a progress to some great act and high display of the
Divinity which shall give a wise and glorious significance to his
persistent intention in an eternal creation. Or that at least may
be one power of the Eternal’s infinite potentiality.