Chapter XXII

The Necessity of the Spiritual Transformation

OUR NORMAL conduct of life, whether the individual or the social, is actually governed by the balance between two complementary powers,—first, an implicit will central to the life and inherent in the main power of its action and, secondly, whatever modifying will can come in from the Idea in mind,—for man is a mental being,—and operate through our as yet imperfect mental instruments to give this life force a conscious orientation and a conscious method. Life normally finds its own centre in our vital and physical being, in its cravings and its needs, in its demand for persistence, growth, expansion, enjoyment, in its reachings after all kinds of power and possession and activity and splendour and largeness. The first self-direction of this Life-Force, its first orderings of method are instinctive and either entirely or very largely subconscient and magnificently automatic: the ease, spontaneity, fine normality, beauty, self-satisfaction, abundant vital energy and power of the subhuman life of Nature up to the animal is due to its entire obedience to this instinctive and automatic urge. It is a vague sense of this truth and of the very different and in this respect inferior character of human life that makes the thinker, when dissatisfied with our present conditions, speak of a life according to Nature as the remedy for all our ills. An attempt to find such a rule in the essential nature of man has inspired many revolutionary conceptions of ethics and society and individual self-development down to the latest of the kind, the strangely inspired vitalistic philosophy of Nietzsche. The common defect of these conceptions is to miss the true character of man and the true law of his being, his Dharma.

Nietzsche’s idea that to develop the superman out of our
present very unsatisfactory manhood is our real business, is in itself an absolutely sound teaching. His formulation of our aim, “to become ourselves”, “to exceed ourselves”, implying, as it does, that man has not yet found all his true self, his true nature by which he can successfully and spontaneously live, could not be bettered. But then the question of questions is there, what is our self, and what is our real nature? What is that which is growing in us, but into which we have not yet grown? It is something divine, is the answer, a divinity Olympian, Apollo-nian, Dionysiac, which the reasoning and consciously willing animal, man, is labouring more or less obscurely to become. Certainly, it is all that; but in what shall we find the seed of that divinity and what is the poise in which the superman, once self-found, can abide and be secure from lapse into this lower and imperfect manhood? Is it the intellect and will, the double-aspected buddhi of the Indian psychological system? But this is at present a thing so perplexed, so divided against itself, so uncertain of everything it gains, up to a certain point indeed magically creative and efficient but, when all has been said and done, in the end so splendidly futile, so at war with and yet so dependent upon and subservient to our lower nature, that even if in it there lies concealed some seed of the entire divinity, it can hardly itself be the seed and at any rate gives us no such secure and divine poise as we are seeking. Therefore we say, not the intellect and will, but that supreme thing in us yet higher than the Reason, the spirit, here concealed behind the coatings of our lower nature, is the secret seed of the divinity and will be, when discovered and delivered, luminous above the mind, the wide ground upon which a divine life of the human being can be with security founded.

When we speak of the superman, we speak evidently of something abnormal or supernormal to our present nature, so much so that the very idea of it becomes easily alarming and repugnant to our normal humanity. The normal human does not desire to be called out from its constant mechanical round to scale what may seem to it impossible heights and it loves still less the prospect of being exceeded, left behind and dominated,
— although the object of a true supermanhood is not exceeding and domination for its own sake but precisely the opening of our normal humanity to something now beyond itself that is yet its own destined perfection. But mark that this thing which we have called normal humanity, is itself something abnormal in Nature, something the like and parity of which we look around in vain to discover; it is a rapid freak, a sudden miracle. Abnormality in Nature is no objection, no necessary sign of imperfection, but may well be an effort at a much greater perfection. But this perfection is not found until the abnormal can find its own secure normality, the right organisation of its life in its own kind and power and on its own level. Man is an abnormal who has not found his own normality, — he may imagine he has, he may appear to be normal in his own kind, but that normality is only a sort of provisional order; therefore, though man is infinitely greater than the plant or the animal, he is not perfect in his own nature like the plant and the animal. This imperfection is not a thing to be at all deplored, but rather a privilege and a promise, for it opens out to us an immense vista of self-development and self-exceeding. Man at his highest is a half-god who has risen up out of the animal Nature and is splendidly abnormal in it, but the thing which he has started out to be, the whole god, is something so much greater than what he is that it seems to him as abnormal to himself as he is to the animal. This means a great and arduous labour of growth before him, but also a splendid crown of his race and his victory. A kingdom is offered to him beside which his present triumphs in the realms of mind or over external Nature will appear only as a rough hint and a poor beginning.

What precisely is the defect from which all his imperfection springs? We have already indicated it, — that has indeed been the general aim of the preceding chapters, — but it is necessary to state it now more succinctly and precisely. We see that at first sight man seems to be a double nature, an animal nature of the vital and physical being which lives according to its instincts, impulses, desires, its automatic orientation and method, and with that a half-divine nature of the self-conscious intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, intelligently emotional, intelligently dynamic

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*The Human Cycle*
being who is capable of finding and understanding the law of his own action and consciously using and bettering it, a reflecting mind that understands Nature, a will that uses, elevates, perfects Nature, a sense that intelligently enjoys Nature. The aim of the animal part of us is to increase vital possession and enjoyment; the aim of the semi-divine part of us is also to grow, possess and enjoy, but first to possess and enjoy intelligently, aesthetically, ethically, by the powers of the mind much more than by the powers of the life and body, and, secondly, to possess and enjoy, not so much the vital and physical except in so far as that is necessary as a foundation and starting-point, a preliminary necessity or condition, a standing-ground and basis, but things intellectual, ethical and aesthetic, and to grow not so much in the outward life, except in so far as that is necessary to the security, ease and dignity of our human existence, but in the true, the good and the beautiful. This is the manhood of man, his unique distinction and abnormality in the norm of this inconscient material Nature.

This means that man has developed a new power of being, — let us call it a new soul-power, with the premiss that we regard the life and the body also as a soul-power, — and the being who has done that is under an inherent obligation not only to look at the world and revalue all in it from this new elevation, but to compel his whole nature to obey this power and in a way reshape itself in its mould, and even to reshape, so far as he can, his environmental life into some image of this greater truth and law. In doing this lies his svadharma, his true rule and way of being, the way of his perfection and his real happiness. Failing in this, he fails in the aim of his nature and his being, and has to begin again until he finds the right path and arrives at a successful turning-point, a decisive crisis of transformation. Now this is precisely what man has failed to do. He has effected something, he has passed a certain stage of his journey. He has laid some yoke of the intellectual, ethical, aesthetic rule on his vital and physical parts and made it impossible for himself to be content with or really to be the mere human animal. But more he has not been able to do successfully. The transformation of his life into the image of the true, the good and the beautiful seems
as far off as ever; if ever he comes near to some imperfect form of it, — and even then it is only done by a class or by a number of individuals with some reflex action on the life of the mass, — he slides back from it in a general decay of his life, or else stumbles on from it into some bewildering upheaval out of which he comes with new gains indeed but also with serious losses. He has never arrived at any great turning-point, any decisive crisis of transformation.

The main failure, the root of the whole failure indeed, is that he has not been able to shift upward what we have called the implicit will central to his life, the force and assured faith inherent in its main power of action. His central will of life is still situated in his vital and physical being, its drift is towards vital and physical enjoyment, enlightened indeed and checked to a certain extent in its impulses by the higher powers, but enlightened only and very partially, not transformed, — checked, not dominated and uplifted to a higher plane. The higher life is still only a thing superimposed on the lower, a permanent intruder upon our normal existence. The intruder interferes constantly with the normal life, scolds, encourages, discourages, lectures, manipulates, readjusts, lifts up only to let fall, but has no power to transform, alchemise, re-create. Indeed it does not seem itself quite to know where all this effort and uneasy struggle is meant to lead us, — sometimes it thinks, to a quite tolerable human life on earth, the norm of which it can never successfully fix, and sometimes it imagines our journey is to another world whither by a religious life or else an edifying death it will escape out of all this pother and trouble of mortal being. Therefore these two elements live together in a continual, a mutual perplexity, made perpetually uneasy, uncomfortable and ineffectual by each other, somewhat like an ill-assorted wife and husband, always at odds and yet half in love with or at least necessary to each other, unable to beat out a harmony, yet condemned to be joined in an unhappy leash until death separates them. All the uneasiness, dissatisfaction, disillusionment, weariness, melancholy, pessimism of the human mind comes from man’s practical failure to solve the riddle and the difficulty of his double nature.
We have said that this failure is due to the fact that this higher power is only a mediator, and that thoroughly to transform the vital and physical life in its image is perhaps not possible, but at any rate not the intention of Nature in us. It may be urged perhaps that after all individuals have succeeded in effecting some figure of transformation, have led entirely ethical or artistic or intellectual lives, even shaped their life by some ideal of the true, the good and the beautiful, and whatever the individual has done, the race too may and should eventually succeed in doing; for the exceptional individual is the future type, the forerunner. But to how much did their success really amount? Either they impoverished the vital and physical life in them in order to give play to one element of their being, lived a one-sided and limited existence, or else they arrived at a compromise by which, while the higher life was given great prominence, the lower was still allowed to graze in its own field under the eye more or less strict or the curb more or less indulgent of the higher power or powers: in itself, in its own instincts and demands it remained unchanged. There was a dominance, but not a transformation.

Life cannot be entirely rational, cannot conform entirely to the ethical or the aesthetic or the scientific and philosophic mentality; mind is not the destined archangel of the transformation. All appearances to the contrary are always a trompe l’oeil, an intellectual, aesthetic or ethical illusion. Dominated, repressed life may be, but it reserves its right; and though individuals or a class may establish this domination for a time and impose some simulacrum of it upon the society, Life in the end circumvents the intelligence; it gets strong elements in it — for always there are traitor elements at work — to come over to its side and reestablishes its instincts, recovers its field; or if it fails in this, it has its revenge in its own decay which brings about the decay of the society, the disappointment of the perennial hope. So much so, that there are times when mankind perceives this fact and, renouncing the attempt to dominate the life-instinct, determines to use the intelligence for its service and to give it light in its own field instead of enslaving it to a higher but chimerical ideal.
Such a period was the recent materialistic age, when the intellect of man seemed decided to study thoroughly Life and Matter, to admit only that, to recognise mind only as an instrument of Life and Matter, and to devote all its knowledge to a tremendous expansion of the vital and physical life, its practicality, its efficiency, its comfort and the splendid ordering of its instincts of production, possession and enjoyment. That was the character of the materialistic, commercial, economic age of mankind, a period in which the ethical mind persisted painfully, but with decreasing self-confidence, an increasing self-questioning and a tendency to yield up the fortress of the moral law to the life-instinct, the aesthetic instinct and intelligence flourished as a rather glaring exotic ornament, a sort of rare orchid in the button-hole of the vital man, and reason became the magnificent servant of Life and Matter. The titanic development of the vital Life which followed, is ending as the Titans always end; it lit its own funeral pyre in the conflagration of a world-war, its natural upshot, a struggle between the most “efficient” and “civilised” nations for the possession and enjoyment of the world, of its wealth, its markets, its available spaces, an inflated and plethoric commercial expansion, largeness of imperial size and rule. For that is what the great war signified and was in its real origin, because that was the secret or the open intention of all pre-war diplomacy and international politics; and if a nobler idea was awakened at least for a time, it was only under the scourge of Death and before the terrifying spectre of a gigantic mutual destruction. Even so the awakening was by no means complete, nor everywhere quite sincere, but it was there and it was struggling towards birth even in Germany, once the great protagonist of the vitalistic philosophy of life. In that awakening lay some hope of better things. But for the moment at least the vitalistic aim has once more raised its head in a new form and the hope has dimmed in a darkness and welter in which only the eye of faith can see chaos preparing a new cosmos.

The first result of this imperfect awakening seemed likely to be a return to an older ideal, with a will to use the reason and the ethical mind better and more largely in the ordering
of individual, of national and of international life. But such an attempt, though well enough as a first step, cannot be the real and final solution; if our effort ends there, we shall not arrive. The solution lies, we have said, in an awakening to our real, because our highest self and nature,—that hidden self which we are not yet, but have to become and which is not the strong and enlightened vital Will hymned by Nietzsche, but a spiritual self and spiritual nature that will use the mental being which we already are, but the mental being spiritualised, and transform by a spiritual ideality the aim and action of our vital and physical nature. For this is the formula of man in his highest potentiality, and safety lies in tending towards our highest and not in resting content with an inferior potentiality. To follow after the highest in us may seem to be to live dangerously, to use again one of Nietzsche’s inspired expressions, but by that danger comes victory and security. To rest in or follow after an inferior potentiality may seem safe, rational, comfortable, easy, but it ends badly, in some futility or in a mere circling, down the abyss or in a stagnant morass. Our right and natural road is towards the summits.

We have then to return to the pursuit of an ancient secret which man, as a race, has seen only obscurely and followed after lamely, has indeed understood only with his surface mind and not in its heart of meaning,—and yet in following it lies his social no less than his individual salvation,—the ideal of the kingdom of God, the secret of the reign of the Spirit over mind and life and body. It is because they have never quite lost hold of this secret, never disowned it in impatience for a lesser victory, that the older Asiatic nations have survived so persistently and can now, as if immortal, raise their faces towards a new dawn; for they have fallen asleep, but they have not perished. It is true that they have for a time failed in life, where the European nations who trusted to the flesh and the intellect have succeeded; but that success, speciously complete but only for a time, has always turned into a catastrophe. Still Asia had failed in life, she had fallen in the dust, and even if the dust in which she was lying was sacred, as the modern poet of Asia has declared,—
though the sacredness may be doubted, — still the dust is not the proper place for man, nor is to lie prostrate in it his right human attitude. Asia temporarily failed not because she followed after things spiritual, as some console themselves by saying, — as if the spirit could be at all a thing of weakness or a cause of weakness, — but because she did not follow after the spirit sufficiently, did not learn how entirely to make it the master of life. Her mind either made a gulf and a division between life and the Spirit or else rested in a compromise between them and accepted as final socio-religious systems founded upon that compromise. So to rest is perilous; for the call of the Spirit more than any other demands that we shall follow it always to the end, and the end is neither a divorce and departure nor a compromise, but a conquest of all by the spirit and that reign of the seekers after perfection which, in the Hindu religious symbol, the last Avatar comes to accomplish.

This truth it is important to note, for mistakes made on the path are often even more instructive than the mistakes made by a turning aside from the path. As it is possible to superimpose the intellectual, ethical or aesthetic life or the sum of their motives upon the vital and physical nature, to be satisfied with a partial domination or a compromise, so it is possible to superimpose the spiritual life or some figure of strength or ascendancy of spiritual ideas and motives on the mental, vital and physical nature and either to impoverish the latter, to impoverish the vital and physical existence and even to depress the mental as well in order to give the spiritual an easier domination, or else to make a compromise and leave the lower being to its pasture on condition of its doing frequent homage to the spiritual existence, admitting to a certain extent, greater or less, its influence and formally acknowledging it as the last state and the finality of the human being. This is the most that human society has ever done in the past, and though necessarily that must be a stage of the journey, to rest there is to miss the heart of the matter, the one thing needful. Not a humanity leading its ordinary life, what is now its normal round, touched by spiritual influences, but a humanity aspiring whole-heartedly to a law that is now abnormal
to it until its whole life has been elevated into spirituality, is the steep way that lies before man towards his perfection and the transformation that it has to achieve.

The secret of the transformation lies in the transference of our centre of living to a higher consciousness and in a change of our main power of living. This will be a leap or an ascent even more momentous than that which Nature must at one time have made from the vital mind of the animal to the thinking mind still imperfect in our human intelligence. The central will implicit in life must be no longer the vital will in the life and the body, but the spiritual will of which we have now only rare and dim intimations and glimpses. For now it comes to us hardly disclosed, weakened, disguised in the mental Idea; but it is in its own nature supramental and it is its supramental power and truth that we have somehow to discover. The main power of our living must be no longer the inferior vital urge of Nature which is already accomplished in us and can only whirl upon its rounds about the ego-centre, but that spiritual force of which we sometimes hear and speak but have not yet its inmost secret. For that is still retired in our depths and waits for our transcendence of the ego and the discovery of the true individual in whose universality we shall be united with all others. To transfer from the vital being, the instrumental reality in us, to the spirit, the central reality, to elevate to that height our will to be and our power of living is the secret which our nature is seeking to discover. All that we have done hitherto is some half-successful effort to transfer this will and power to the mental plane; our highest endeavour and labour has been to become the mental being and to live in the strength of the idea. But the mental idea in us is always intermediary and instrumental; always it depends on something other than it for its ground of action and therefore although it can follow for a time after its own separate satisfaction, it cannot rest for ever satisfied with that alone. It must either gravitate downwards and outwards towards the vital and physical life or it must elevate itself inwards and upwards towards the spirit.

And that must be why in thought, in art, in conduct, in life
we are always divided between two tendencies, one idealistic, the other realistic. The latter very easily seems to us more real, more solidly founded, more in touch with actualities because it relies upon a reality which is patent, sensible and already accomplished; the idealistic easily seems to us something unreal, fantastic, unsubstantial, nebulous, a thing more of thoughts and words than of live actualities, because it is trying to embody a reality not yet accomplished. To a certain extent we are perhaps right; for the ideal, a stranger among the actualities of our physical existence, is in fact a thing unreal until it has either in some way reconciled itself to the imperfections of our outer life or else has found the greater and purer reality for which it is seeking and imposed it on our outer activities; till then it hangs between two worlds and has conquered neither the upper light nor the nether darkness. Submission to the actual by a compromise is easy; discovery of the spiritual truth and the transformation of our actual way of living is difficult: but it is precisely this difficult thing that has to be done, if man is to find and fulfil his true nature. Our idealism is always the most rightly human thing in us, but as a mental idealism it is a thing ineffective. To be effective it has to convert itself into a spiritual realism which shall lay its hands on the higher reality of the spirit and take up for it this lower reality of our sensational, vital and physical nature.

This upward transference of our will to be and our power of life we have, then, to make the very principle of our perfection. That will, that power must choose between the domination of the vital part in us and the domination of the spirit. Nature can rest in the round of vital being, can produce there a sort of perfection, but that is the perfection of an arrested development satisfied with its own limits. This she can manage in the plant and the animal, because the life and the body are there at once the instrument and the aim; they do not look beyond themselves. She cannot do it in man because here she has shot up beyond her physical and vital basis; she has developed in him the mind which is an outflowering of the life towards the light of the Spirit, and the life and the body are now instrumental and no longer
their own aim. Therefore the perfection of man cannot consist in pursuing the unillumined round of the physical life. Neither can it be found in the wider rounds of the mental being; for that also is instrumental and tends towards something else beyond it, something whose power indeed works in it, but whose larger truth is superconscient to its present intelligence, supramental. The perfection of man lies in the unfolding of the ever-perfect Spirit.

The lower perfection of Nature in the plant and the animal comes from an instinctive, an automatic, a subconscious obedience in each to the vital truth of its own being. The higher perfection of the spiritual life will come by a spontaneous obedience of spiritualised man to the truth of his own realised being, when he has become himself, when he has found his own real nature. For this spontaneity will not be instinctive and subconscious, it will be intuitive and fully, integrally conscious. It will be a glad obedience to a spontaneous principle of spiritual light, to the force of a unified and integralised highest truth, largest beauty, good, power, joy, love, oneness. The object of this force acting in life will and must be as in all life growth, possession, enjoyment, but a growth which is a divine manifestation, a possession and enjoyment spiritual and of the spirit in things, — an enjoyment that will use, but will not depend on the mental, vital and physical symbols of our living. Therefore this will not be a limited perfection of arrested development dependent on the repetition of the same forms and the same round of actions, any departure from which becomes a peril and a disturbance. It will be an illimitable perfection capable of endless variation in its forms, — for the ways of the Spirit are countless and endless, — but securely the same in all variations, one but multitudinously infinite.

Therefore, too, this perfection cannot come by the mental idea dealing with the Spirit as it deals with life. The idea in mind seizing upon the central will in Spirit and trying to give this higher force a conscious orientation and method in accordance with the ideas of the intellect is too limited, too darkened, too poor a force to work this miracle. Still less can it come if we chain
the spirit to some fixed mental idea or system of religious cult, intellectual truth, aesthetic norm, ethical rule, practical action, way of vital and physical life, to a particular arrangement of forms and actions and declare all departure from that a peril and a disturbance or a deviation from spiritual living. That was the mistake made in Asia and the cause of its arrested development and decline; for this is to subject the higher to the lower principle and to bind down the self-disclosing Spirit to a provisional and imperfect compromise with mind and the vital nature. Man’s true freedom and perfection will come when the spirit within bursts through the forms of mind and life and, winging above to its own gnostic fiery height of ether, turns upon them from that light and flame to seize them and transform into its own image.

In fact, as we have seen, the mind and the intellect are not the key-power of our existence. For they can only trace out a round of half-truths and uncertainties and revolve in that unsatisfying circle. But concealed in the mind and life, in all the action of the intellectual, the aesthetic, the ethical, the dynamic and practical, the emotional, sensational, vital and physical being, there is a power that sees by identity and intuition and gives to all these things such truth and such certainty and stability as they are able to compass. Obscurely we are now beginning to see something of this behind all our science and philosophy and all our other activities. But so long as this power has to work for the mind and life and not for itself, to work in their forms and not by its own spontaneous light, we cannot make any great use of this discovery, cannot get the native benefit of this inner Daemon. Man’s road to spiritual supermanhood will be open when he declares boldly that all he has yet developed, including the intellect of which he is so rightly and yet so vainly proud, are now no longer sufficient for him, and that to uncase, discover, set free this greater Light within shall be henceforward his pervading preoccupation. Then will his philosophy, art, science, ethics, social existence, vital pursuits be no longer an exercise of mind and life, done for themselves, carried in a circle, but a means for the discovery of a greater Truth behind mind and life and for
the bringing of its power into our human existence. We shall be on the right road to become ourselves, to find our true law of perfection, to live our true satisfied existence in our real being and divine nature.