Chapter Two

Inner Detachment and the Witness Attitude

Inner Detachment

It [the individual consciousness] is not by its nature detached from the mental and other activities. It can be detached, it can be involved. In the human consciousness it is as a rule always involved, but it has developed the power of detaching itself — a thing which the lower creation seems unable to do. As the consciousness develops, this power of detachment also develops.

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Detachment means standing back with part of the consciousness and observing what is being done without being involved in it. There is no “how” to that; you do it or try it until it succeeds.

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That sense of separate being and concentration behind the frontal consciousness is very good. It helps to liberate the inner being and make it stand back from the movements of the outer nature.

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That is the condition of progress,—if, whenever there is an attempt to cloud the consciousness, you can stand back, remain quiet and prevent the clouding. Do that always and the progress is sure.

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All that you have written here is perfectly correct. It is so, by standing back from these forces [in the surrounding world], neither attracted nor disturbed by them, that one gets freedom,
perceives their falsity or imperfection and is able to rise above and overcome them. The consciousness that comes forward may be either the psychic or the spiritualised mind — it is probably the former.

Well, but it [the need for detachment] is not individual to you. Everyone has to do that with his difficulties. Detach means that the Witness in oneself has to stand back and refuse to look on the movement as his own (the soul’s own) and look on it as a habit of past nature or an invasion of general Nature. Then to deal with it as such. It may seem difficult, but it comes perfectly well by trying persistently.

One must get the power to quiet the mental and vital, if not at first at all times, yet whenever one wills — for it is the mind and vital that cover up the psychic being as well as the self (Atman) and to get at either one must get in through their veil; but if they are always active and you are always identified with their activities, the veil will always be there. It is also possible to detach yourself and look at these activities as if they were not your own but a mechanical action of Nature which you observe as a disinterested witness. One can then become aware of an inner being which is separate, calm and uninvolved in Nature. This may be the inner mental or vital Purusha and not the psychic, but to get at the consciousness of the inner manomaya and prāṇamaya Purusha is always a step towards the unveiling of the psychic being.

The condition in which all movements become superficial and empty with no connection with the soul is a stage in the withdrawal from the surface consciousness to the inner consciousness. When one goes into the inner consciousness, it is felt as a calm, pure existence without any movement, but eternally tranquil, unmoved and separate from the outer nature. This
comes as a result of detaching oneself from the movements, standing back from them and is a very important movement of the sadhana. The first result of it is an entire quietude, but afterwards that quietude begins (without the quietude ceasing) to fill with the psychic and other inner movements which create a true inner and spiritual life behind the outer life and nature. It is then easier to govern and change the latter.

At present there are fluctuations in your consciousness because this inner state is not yet fully developed and established. When it is, there will still be fluctuations in the outer consciousness, but the inner quiet, force, love etc. will be constant and the superficial fluctuations will be watched by the inner being without its being shaken or troubled, until they are removed by the complete outer change.

As for X, it is best to let it pass and try to remain steady within and detached; one cannot separate from all contacts; one must become more and more superior to their customary reactions.

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Detachment is the beginning of mastery, but for complete mastery there should be no reactions at all. When there is something within undisturbed by the reactions that means the inner being is free and master of itself, but it is not yet master of the whole nature. When it is master, it allows no wrong reactions — if any come they are at once repelled and shaken off, and finally none come at all.

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The experience you have of a division in the being with the inner void and indifferent, udāśina, — not sorrowful, but neutral and indifferent, — is an experience which many pass through and is highly valued by the Sannyasis. For us it is a passage only to something larger and more positive. In it the old small human feelings fall away and a sort of calm neutral void is made for a higher nature to manifest. It must be fulfilled and replaced by a sense of large silence and freedom into which the Mother’s
consciousness can flow from above.

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In the ordinary consciousness one takes a personal interest in what is done, feels joy or feels sorrow. When one does sadhana, a condition may come in which the consciousness draws back from these reactions of joy and sorrow and does work and action impersonally as a thing that ought or has to be done but without desire or reactions. The Yogis value this condition of complete detachment very highly. In our Yoga it is a passage only, if it comes, through which one goes from the ordinary consciousness to a deeper one in which one acts out of a deep peace and union with the Divine or else of a self-existent Ananda not depending on anything but the presence of the Divine, in which all works are done not out of personal interest or satisfaction but for the sake of the Divine.

**The Witness Attitude**

A man with a very developed introspective mind often identifies himself with the witness part of his mind and observes his own thoughts and studies their nature. That is a beginning which makes it easy for the full detachment to come. For others it is less easy, but it can be done by all.

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There is a stage in the sadhana in which the inner being begins to awake. Often the first result is the condition made up of the following elements:

1. A sort of witness attitude, in which the inner consciousness looks at all that happens as a spectator or observer, observing things but taking no active interest or pleasure in them.

2. A state of neutral equanimity in which there is neither joy nor sorrow, only quietude.

3. A sense of being something separate from all that happens, observing it but not part of it.
(4) An absence of attachment to things, people or events.

It seems as if this condition were trying to come in you; but it is still imperfect. For instance in this condition (1) there should be no disgust or impatience or anger when people talk, only indifference and an inner peace and silence. Also (2) there should not be a mere neutral quiet and indifference, but a positive sense of calm, detachment and peace. Again (3) there should be no going out of the body so that you do not know what is happening or what you are doing. There may be a sense of not being the body but something else, — that is good; but there should be a perfect awareness of all that is going on in or around you.

Moreover this condition even when it is perfect is only a transitional stage — it is intended to bring a certain state of freedom and liberation. But in that peace there must come the feeling of the Divine Presence, the sense of the Mother's power working in you, the joy or Ananda.

If you can concentrate in the heart as well as in the head, then these things can more easily come.

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The mind can become quiet only when you detach yourself from it and see the thoughts as things that pass. Then you don’t think yourself but see thoughts passing through your mind. Afterwards you can stop attending to these passers-by and concentrate on the Mother.

Thoughts and feelings are passing from one human being to another all the time, only people don’t know or observe it. Especially if people live together the same life, as in the Asram, a sort of atmosphere is formed in which the same thoughts and feelings are moving about and constantly passing from one to another.

You have to become conscious — that is to say, there must be something in you which is not carried away by thoughts and feelings, but looks at them and observes how they work and how they affect you. The part that observes and knows is called the Witness sākṣi in man. It is always possible to develop this in oneself.
It is not by thinking and reading that consciousness comes. There are many who read and think a great deal but are not conscious, have not the witness developed in them. There are others who work all day like X, yet are very strongly conscious. When one has the power of stopping thinking altogether and only looking, then the Witness becomes very strong and conscious. This consciousness can come by practice, but it can also come by turning to the Mother and thinking of her always and offering to her everything. The being opens, the Mother's force begins to work and one becomes more and more conscious.

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It is indeed a great thing that you can keep this calm and this unaffected witness attitude. It is always the sign of a strong inner foundation in the consciousness and that even the physical being shares in this result of the realisation.

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As for the “spectator” and the coils of the dragon, it is the Chino-Japanese image for the world-force extending itself in the course of the universe and this expresses the attitude of the Witness seeing it all and observing in its unfolding the unrolling of the play of the Divine, Lila. It is this attitude that gives the greatest calm, peace, samata in face of the riddle of the cosmic workings. It is not meant that action and movement are not accepted but they are accepted as the Divine Working which is leading to ends which the mind may not always see at once, but the soul divines through all the supreme purpose and the hidden guidance.

Of course there is afterwards an experience in which the two sides of the Divine Whole, the Witness and the Player, blend together; but this poise of the spectator comes first and leads to that fuller experience. It gives the balance, the calm, the increasing understanding of soul and life and their deeper significances without which the full supramental experience cannot come.
The Witness Purusha or Witness Consciousness

By itself the Purusha is impersonal, but by mixing itself with the movements of Prakriti it makes for itself a surface ego or personality. When it appears in its own separate nature then it is seen to be detached and observing.

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The consciousness you speak of would be described in the Gita as the witness Purusha. The Purusha or basic consciousness is the true being or at least, on whatever plane it manifests, represents the true being. But in the ordinary nature of man it is covered up by the ego and the ignorant play of the Prakriti and remains veiled behind as the unseen Witness supporting the play of the Ignorance. When it emerges, you feel it as a consciousness behind, calm, central, unidentified with the play which depends upon it. It may be covered over, but it is always there. The emergence of the Purusha is the beginning of liberation. But it can also become slowly the Master — slowly because the whole habit of the ego and the play of the lower forces (which also you describe correctly here) is against that. Still it can dictate what higher play is to replace the lower movement and then there is the process of that replacement, the higher coming, the lower struggling to remain and push away the higher movement. You say rightly that the offering to the Divine shortens the whole thing and is more effective, but usually it cannot be done completely at once owing to the past habit and the two methods continue together until the complete surrender is possible.

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The attitude of the witness consciousness within — I do not think it necessarily involves an external seclusion, though one may do that also — is a very necessary stage in the progress. It helps the liberation from the lower prakriti — not getting involved in the ordinary nature movements; it helps the establishment of a perfect calm and peace within, for there is then one part of the being which remains detached and sees without
being disturbed the perturbations of the surface; it helps also the ascent into the higher consciousness and the descent of the higher consciousness, for it is through this calm, detached and liberated inner being that the ascent and descent can easily be done. Also, to have the same witness look on the movements of Prakriti in others, seeing, understanding but not perturbed by them in any way is a very great help towards both the liberation and the universalisation of the being. I could not therefore possibly object to this movement in a sadhak.

As for the surrender it is not inconsistent with the witness attitude. On the contrary by liberating from the ordinary Prakriti, it makes easier the surrender to the higher or divine Power. Very often when this witness attitude has not been taken but there is a successful calling in of the Force to act in one, one of the first things the Force does is to establish the witness attitude so as to be able to act with less interference or immixture from the movements of the lower Prakriti.

There remains the question of the avoidance of contact with others and there there is some difficulty or incertitude. Part of your nature has a strong turn towards contact with others, action on others, interchange, almost a need of it. This brings about some fluctuation between the turn to an inner isolation and the turn towards contact and action. There is the same double and fluctuating movement in others here like X. In such cases I generally do not stress upon either tendency but leave the consciousness to find its own poise, because I have seen that to press too much on the isolation tendency when the nature is not mainly contemplative does not succeed very well — unless of course the sadhak himself gets a strong and fixed determination that way. This may be the cause of what you felt. But the question between witness attitude and surrender does not arise, for the reason I have explained — one can very well aid or lead to the other as ours is a Yoga which joins these things together and does not keep them always separate.

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It is by a constant repetition and development of the experience
The witness consciousness can become constant. But the witness being does not always remain as a point. It becomes something extended supporting the rest.

**The Purusha and Change of the Prakriti**

That is the old Vedantic idea — to be free and detached within and leave the Prakriti to itself. When you die, the Purusha will go to glory and the Prakriti drop off — perhaps into Hell. This theory is a source of any amount of self-deception and wilful self-indulgence.

* The witness attitude is not meant as a convenient means for disowning the responsibility of one’s defects and thereby refusing to mend them. It is meant for self-knowledge and, in our Yoga, as a convenient station (detached and uninvolved, therefore not subject to Prakriti) from which one can act on the wrong movements by refusal of assent and by substituting for them the action of the true consciousness from within or above.

* You can certainly go on developing the consciousness of the Witness Purusha above, but if it is only a witness and the lower Prakriti is allowed to have its own way, there would be no reason why it [an unquiet and disturbed condition] should ever stop. Many take that attitude — that the Purusha has to liberate itself by standing apart, and the Prakriti can be allowed to go on till the end of the life doing its own business, — it is prārabdha karma; when the body falls away, the Prakriti will drop also and the Purusha go off into the featureless Brahman! This is a comfortable theory, but of more than doubtful truth; I don’t think liberation is so simple and facile a matter as that. In any case, the transformation which is the object of our Yoga would not take place.

The Purusha above is not only a Witness, he is the giver (or withholder) of the sanction; if he persistently refuses the sanction
to a movement of Prakriti, keeping himself detached, then, even if it goes on for a time by its past momentum, it usually loses its hold after a time, becomes more feeble, less persistent, less concrete and in the end fades away. If you take the Purusha consciousness, it should be not only as the Witness but as the Anumanta, refusing sanction to the disturbing movements, sanctioning only peace, calm, purity and whatever else is part of the divine nature. This refusal of sanction need not mean a struggle with the lower Prakriti; it should be a quiet, persistent, detached refusal leaving unsupported, unassented to, without meaning or justification the contrary action of the nature.