

Chapter One

The Problem of Suffering and Evil

The Riddle of This World

It is not to be denied, no spiritual experience will deny that this is an unideal and unsatisfactory world, strongly marked with the stamp of inadequacy, suffering, evil. Indeed this perception is in a way almost the starting-point of the spiritual urge — except for the few to whom the greater experience comes spontaneously without being forced to seek it by the strong or overwhelming, the afflicting and detaching sense of the Shadow overhanging the whole range of this manifested existence. But still the question remains whether this is indeed, as is contended, the essential character of all manifestation or so long at least as there is a physical world it must be of this nature, so that the desire of birth, the will to manifest or create has to be regarded as the original sin and withdrawal from birth or manifestation as the sole possible way of salvation. For those who perceive it so or with some kindred look — and these have been the majority — there are well-known ways of issue, a straight-cut to spiritual deliverance. But equally it may not be so but only seem so to our ignorance or to a partial knowledge — the imperfection, the evil, the suffering may be a besetting circumstance or a dolorous passage, but not the very condition of manifestation, not the very essence of birth in Nature. And if so, the highest wisdom will lie not in escape, but in the urge towards a victory here, in a consenting association with the Will behind the world, in a discovery of the spiritual gate to perfection which will be at the same time an opening for the entire descent of the Divine Light, Knowledge, Power, Beatitude.

All spiritual experience affirms that there is a Permanent above the transience of this manifested world we live in and this limited consciousness in whose narrow borders we grope and struggle, and that its characters are infinity, self-existence,

freedom, absolute Light, absolute Beatitude. Is there then an unbridgeable gulf between that which is beyond and that which is here or are they two perpetual opposites and only by leaving this adventure in Time behind, by overleaping the gulf can men reach the Eternal? That is what seems to be at the end of one line of experience which has been followed to its rigorous conclusion by Buddhism and a little less rigorously by a certain type of Monistic spirituality which admits some connection of the world with the Divine, but still opposes them in the last resort to each other as truth and illusion. But there is also this other and indubitable experience that the Divine is here in everything as well as above and behind everything, that all is in That and is That when we go back from its appearance to its Reality. It is a significant and illumining fact that the knower of Brahman even moving and acting in this world, even bearing all its shocks, can live in some absolute peace, light and beatitude of the Divine. There is then something here other than that mere trenchant opposition, — there is a mystery, a problem which one would think must admit of some less desperate solution. This spiritual possibility points beyond itself and brings a ray of hope into the darkness of our fallen existence.

And at once a first question arises — is this world an unchanging succession of the same phenomena always or is there in it an evolutionary urge, an evolutionary fact, a ladder of ascension somewhere from an original apparent Inconscience to a more and more developed consciousness, from each development still ascending, emerging on highest heights not yet within our normal reach? If so, what is the sense, the fundamental principle, the logical issue of that progression? Everything seems to point to such a progression as a fact — to a spiritual and not merely a physical evolution. Here too there is a justifying line of spiritual experience in which we discover that the Inconscience from which all starts is apparent only, for in it there is an involved Consciousness with endless possibilities, a consciousness not limited but cosmic and infinite, a concealed and self-imprisoned Divine, imprisoned in Matter but with every potentiality held in its secret depths. Out of this

apparent Inconscience each potentiality is revealed in its turn, first organised Matter concealing the indwelling Spirit, then Life emerging in the plant and associated in the animal with a growing Mind, then Mind itself evolved and organised in Man. This evolution, this spiritual progression — does it stop short here in the imperfect mental being called Man? Or is the secret of it simply a succession of rebirths whose only purpose or issue is to labour towards the point at which it can learn its own futility, renounce itself and take its leap into some original unborn Existence or Non-Existence? There is at least the possibility, there comes at a certain point the certitude that there is a far greater consciousness than what we call Mind, and that by ascending the ladder still farther we can find a point at which the hold of the material Inconscience, the vital and mental Ignorance ceases; a principle of consciousness becomes capable of manifestation which liberates not partially, not imperfectly, but radically and wholly this imprisoned Divine. In this vision each stage of evolution appears as due to the descent of a higher and higher Power of consciousness, raising the terrestrial level, creating a new stratum, but the highest yet remain to descend and it is by their descent that the riddle of terrestrial existence will receive its solution and not only the soul but Nature herself find her deliverance. This is the Truth which has been seen in flashes, in more and more entirety of its terms by the line of seers whom the Tantra would call the hero-seekers and the divine seekers and which may now be nearing the point of readiness for its full revelation and experience. Then whatever be the heavy weight of strife and suffering and darkness in the world, yet if there is this as its high result awaiting us, all that has gone before may not be counted too great a price by the strong and adventurous for the glory that is to come. At any rate the shadow lifts; there is a Divine Light that leans over the world and is not only a far-off incommunicable Lustre.

It is true that the problem still remains why all this that yet is should have been necessary — those crude beginnings, this long, dark and stormy passage — why should the heavy and tedious price be demanded, why should evil and suffering ever have been

there? For to the how of the fall into the Ignorance as opposed to the why, as to the effective cause, there is a substantial agreement in all spiritual experience. It is the division, the separation, the principle of isolation from the Permanent and One that brought it about; it is because the ego set up for itself in the world affirming its own desire and self-affirmation in preference to its unity with the Divine and its oneness with all; it is because instead of the one supreme Force, Wisdom, Light determining the harmony of all forces each Idea, Force, Form of things was allowed to work itself out as far as it could in the mass of infinite possibilities by its separate will and inevitably in the end by conflict with others. Division, ego, the imperfect consciousness and groping and struggle of a separate self-affirmation are the effective cause of the suffering and ignorance of this world. Once consciousnesses separated from the One Consciousness, they fell inevitably into ignorance and the last result of ignorance was Inconscience; from a dark immense Inconscient this material world arises and out of it a soul that by evolution is struggling into consciousness, attracted towards the hidden Light, ascending but still blindly towards the lost Divinity from which it came.

But why should this have happened at all? One common way of putting the question and answering it ought to be eliminated from the first, — the human way and its ethical revolt and reprobation, its emotional outcry. For it is not, as some religions suppose, a supra-cosmic, arbitrary, personal Deity himself altogether uninvolved in the fall who has imposed evil and suffering on creatures made capriciously by his fiat. The Divine we know is an Infinite Being in whose infinite manifestation these things have come — it is the Divine itself that is here, behind us, pervading the manifestation, supporting the world with its oneness; it is the Divine that is in us upholding itself the burden of the fall and its dark consequence. If above it stands for ever in its perfect Light, Bliss and Peace, it is also here; its Light, Bliss and Peace are secretly here supporting all; in ourselves there is a spirit, a central presence greater than the series of surface personalities which, like the supreme Divine itself, is not overborne by the

fate they endure. If we find out this Divine within us, if we know ourselves as this spirit which is of one essence and being with the Divine, that is our gate of deliverance and in it we can remain ourselves even in the midst of this world's disharmonies, luminous, blissful and free. That much is the age-old testimony of spiritual experience.

But still what is the purpose and origin of the disharmony — why came this division and ego, this world of a painful evolution? Why must this evil and sorrow enter into the divine Good, Bliss and Peace? It is hard to answer to the human intelligence on its own level, for the consciousness to which the origin of this phenomenon belongs and to which it stands as it were automatically justified in a supra-intellectual knowledge, is a cosmic and not an individualised human intelligence; it sees in larger spaces, it has another vision and cognition, other terms of consciousness than human reason and feeling. To the human mind one might answer that while in itself the Infinite might be free from those perturbations, yet once manifestation began infinite possibility also began and among the infinite possibilities which it is the function of the universal manifestation to work out, the negation, the apparent effective negation — with all its consequences — of the Power, Light, Peace, Bliss was very evidently one. If it is asked why even if possible it should have been accepted, the answer nearest to the Cosmic Truth which the human intelligence can make is that in the relations or in the transition of the Divine in the Oneness to the Divine in the Many, this ominous possible became at a certain point an inevitable. For once it appears it acquires for the Soul descending into evolutionary manifestation an irresistible attraction which creates the inevitability — an attraction which in human terms on the terrestrial level might be interpreted as the call of the unknown, the joy of danger and difficulty and adventure, the will to attempt the impossible, to work out the incalculable, the will to create the new and uncreated with one's own self and life as the material, the fascination of contradictories and their difficult harmonisation — these things translated into another supraphysical, superhuman consciousness, higher and wider than the mental, were the temptation that

led to the fall. For to the original being of light on the verge of the descent the one thing unknown was the depths of the abyss, the possibilities of the Divine in the Ignorance and Inconscience. On the other side from the Divine Oneness a vast acquiescence, compassionate, consenting, helpful, a supreme knowledge that this thing must be, that having appeared it must be worked out, that its appearance is in a certain sense part of an incalculable infinite wisdom, that if the plunge into Night was inevitable the emergence into a new unprecedented Day was also a certitude, and that only so could a certain manifestation of the Supreme Truth be effected — by a working out with its phenomenal opposites as the starting-point of the evolution, as the condition laid down for a transforming emergence. In this acquiescence was embraced too the will of the great Sacrifice, the descent of the Divine itself into the Inconscience to take up the burden of the Ignorance and its consequences, to intervene as the Avatar and the Vibhuti walking between the double sign of the Cross and the victory towards the fulfilment and deliverance. A too imaged rendering of the inexpressible Truth? but without images how to present to the intellect a mystery far beyond it? It is only when one has crossed the barrier of the limited intelligence and shared in the cosmic experience and the knowledge which sees things from identity that the supreme realities which lie behind these images — images corresponding to the terrestrial fact — assume their divine forms and are felt as simple, natural, implied in the essence of things. It is by entering into that greater consciousness alone that one can grasp the inevitability of its self-creation and its purpose.

This is indeed only the Truth of the manifestation as it presents itself to the consciousness when it stands on the border line between Eternity and the descent into Time where the relation between the One and the Many in the evolution is self-determined, a zone where all that is to be is implied but not yet in action. But the liberated consciousness can rise higher where the problem exists no longer and from there see it in the light of a supreme identity where all is predetermined in the automatic self-existent truth of things and self-justified to an absolute

consciousness and wisdom and absolute Delight which is behind all creation and non-creation and the affirmation and negation are both seen with the eyes of the ineffable Reality that delivers and reconciles them. But that knowledge is not expressible to the human mind; its language of light is too undecipherable, the light itself too bright for a consciousness accustomed to the stress and obscurity of the cosmic riddle and too entangled in it to follow the clue or to grasp the secret. In any case, it is only when we rise in the spirit beyond the zone of the darkness and the struggle that we enter into the full significance of it and there is a deliverance of the soul from its enigma. To rise to that height of liberation is the true way out and the only means of the indubitable knowledge.

But that liberation and transcendence need not necessarily impose a disappearance, a sheer dissolving cut from the manifestation; it can prepare a liberation into action of the highest Knowledge and an intensity of Power that can transform the world and fulfil the evolutionary urge. It is an ascent from which the return is no longer a fall but a winged or self-sustained descent of light, force and Ananda.

It is what is inherent in force of being that manifests as becoming; but what the manifestation shall be, its terms, its balance of energies, its arrangement of principles depends on the consciousness which acts in the creative force, on the power of consciousness which being delivers from itself for manifestation. It is in the nature of being to be able to grade and vary its powers of consciousness and determine according to the grade and variation its world or its degree and scope of self-revelation. The manifested creation is limited by the power to which it belongs and sees and lives according to it and can only see more, live more powerfully, change its world by opening or rising towards or making descend a greater power of consciousness that was above it. This is what is happening in the evolution of consciousness in our world, a world of inanimate matter producing under the stress of this necessity a power of life, a power of mind which bring into it new forms of creation and still labouring to produce, to make descend into it some

supramental power. It is farther an operation of creative force which moves between two poles of consciousness. On one side there is a secret consciousness within and above which contains in it all potentialities — there eternally manifest, here awaiting delivery — of light, peace, power and bliss. On the other side there is another outward on the surface and below that starts from the apparent opposite of unconsciousness, inertia, blind stress, possibility of suffering and grows by receiving into itself higher and higher powers which make it always recreate its manifestation in larger terms, each new-creation of this kind bringing out something of the inner potentiality, making it more and more possible to bring down the Perfection that waits above. At last the line will be crossed that will make possible the entire reversion and the manifestation in the terms of ensouled Matter of That which is above. As long as the outward personality we call ourselves is centred in the lower powers of consciousness, the riddle of its own existence, its purpose, its necessity is to it an insoluble enigma; if something of the truth is at all conveyed to this outward mental man, he but imperfectly grasps it and perhaps misinterprets and misuses and mislives it. His true staff of walking is made more of a fire of faith than any ascertained and indubitable light of knowledge. It is only by rising toward a higher consciousness beyond the line and therefore superconscient now to him that he can emerge from his inability and his ignorance. His full liberation and enlightenment will come when he crosses the line into the light of a new superconscient existence. That is the transcendence which was the object of aspiration of the mystics and the spiritual seekers.

But in itself this would change nothing in the creation here; the evasion of a liberated soul from the world makes to that world no difference. But this crossing of the line if turned not only to an ascending but to a descending purpose would mean the transformation of the line from what it now is, a lid, a barrier, into a passage for the higher powers of consciousness of the Being now above it. It would mean a new creation on earth, a bringing in of the ultimate powers which would reverse the conditions here, in as much as that would produce a creation

raised into the full flood of spiritual and supramental light in place of one emerging into a half-light of mind out of a darkness of material inconscience. It is only in such a full flood of the realised spirit that the embodied being could know, in the sense of all that was involved in it, the meaning and temporary necessity of his descent into the darkness and its conditions and at the same time dissolve them by a luminous transmutation into a manifestation here of the revealed and no longer of the veiled and disguised or apparently deformed Divine.

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I suppose you have not read my “Riddle of This World”,¹ but it is a similar solution I put there. X’s way of putting it is a trifle too “Vedantic-Theistic” — in my view it is a transaction between the One and the Many. In the beginning it was you (not the human you who is now complaining but the central being) which accepted or even invited the adventure of the Ignorance; sorrow and struggle are a necessary consequence of the plunge into the Inconscience and the evolutionary emergence out of it. The explanation is that it had an object, the eventual play of the Divine Consciousness and Ananda not in its original transcendence but under conditions for which the plunge into the Inconscience was necessary. It is fundamentally a cosmic problem and can be understood only from the cosmic consciousness. If you want a solution which will be agreeable to the human mind and feelings, I am afraid there is none. No doubt if human beings had made the universe, they would have done much better; but they were not there to be consulted when they were made. Only your central being was there and that was much nearer in its temerarious foolhardiness to Vivekananda’s or X’s than to the repining prudence of your murmuring and trembling human mentality of the present moment — otherwise it would never have come down into the adventure. Or perhaps it did not realise what it was in for? It is the same with the wallowers

¹ *The preceding letter was published under the heading “The Riddle of This World” in a book of the same name in 1933. — Ed.*

under their cross. Even now they wallow because something in them likes the wallowing and bears the cross because something in them chooses to suffer. So?

The Disharmonies of Earth

That brings me to your second question² about the missing Harmony and the actual disharmonies of earth, a dissonance out of which like most people you build a justification for a saving flight towards Nirvana, — although in the true theory of Mayavada harmony and disharmony are of equal value or rather equal non-value: for the glory of Heaven and the joy of the gods are as much an illusion and, if anything, a greater illusion than any ugliness of life or redundancy of human suffering. But I agree with you that disharmony is what is the matter with the world here and it is harmony that is the one thing desirable. Then the whole question is whether harmony is intended to be found or not or whether the very nature and condition and grain of life is a disharmony that, because the very root of life is ego and division, is incurable. The Mayavadin contends that it is; Buddha also decided that the only way out of suffering and disharmony was out of life into the permanence or perhaps the nothingness of Nirvana. But the question is whether what is now is the base of existence or only a temporary phase of existence here. Is life radically just an expression of ego and division? and is there nothing else, is there not behind it the unity of the Divine? and cannot it be brought out, — cannot we get rid in the end of the little things on the surface and express these greater things behind it? If, as spiritual experience shows us, the unity of the Divine is there at the very base and if as both ancient and modern knowledge declare, there has been a spiritual evolution from down upwards, — though the modern speaks only of an evolution of the body with the consciousness

² *The first question of the correspondent concerned “the results of the manifestation of a new supramental principle in the earth-consciousness”. See Sri Aurobindo’s letters beginning “There is not much profit” and “As I have said” on pages 280–84. — Ed.*

depending on it and the ancient, as in the Tantras, only of a spiritual evolution of the soul from vegetable life-form to the human mind-life, — then there is no reason why this spiritual evolution should not arrive beyond its present incomplete and therefore still disharmonious consciousness in man to its logical consummation, an expression of the Divine. There is not only no reason why it should not, but such an arrival is inevitably pointed to both by the logic of reason and the gaze of intuition. Not only so, but the first step towards solution has been taken by the Yogin's extension of consciousness beyond ego and division; spiritual experience has shown that the embodied soul can arrive beyond ego and division to consciousness governed by the unity of the one Self or the Divine; and the existence of the Jivanmukta proves that one can thus exceed ego and division and yet live and act, so that life in the Divine is not an imagination or a fable.

The ascension above ego and division is no doubt only a first step achieved in rare individuals, but in evolution it is the first step which counts and makes all the rest possible. Also, no doubt, to stand above an egoistic and divided world and act on it from the egoless heights of the spirit is not enough — a power is needed and a process, — the descent of a power that can bring harmony because in its nature it is at once superior, fundamental and comprehensive and a discovery of the process that fits the power. All achievement in embodied life has been made possible by the discovery of the necessary power and the effective process. It must so also be done in the achievement of harmony in a still discordant earth-nature.

Is there any conclusive reason for declaring such an achievement or spiritual evolution impossible? The only argument you advance amounts to this only that it has not been done yet and that shows that it cannot be done. That reasoning has not much value. It is the usual logic of the physical intellect which is bound by what is and believes that to be definitive. It has been used against all new or yet unaccomplished ideas or achievements and, when they have been accomplished, still urged against their successors. The physical mind always comes in with its fixed line

of the present and “No farther” and when the fixed line of the present is unfixed and overpassed, it again erects a new line and cries “No farther”. If an “elemental” who had attained to the physical mind had been present at the different stages of the earth-history he would have argued like that. When only matter was there and there was no life, if told that there would soon be life on earth embodied in matter, he would have cried out, “What is that? It is impossible, it cannot be done. Life is possible only in a subtle body. It has never been and never will be embodied in gross matter. What, this mass of electrons, gases, chemical elements, this heap of mud and water and stones and inert metals, how are you going to get life in that? Will the metal walk? can the stone live? will you take mud and water and make out of it a body that can move, feel, act, desire?” But life came in spite of the impossibility and living forms were developed — plant and tree and living bodies were built out of the protoplasm and molecule; some ingenious force or being evolved slowly out of that through millions of years with an amazing patience, using chemical and biological elements alike, gene and gland and heart and brain and nerve and cell and living tissue and the animal walked and bounded and man arose evolving through tens of thousands, perhaps millions of years in the body of an erect two-footed animal. There again the physical-minded elemental would have intervened and cried out, “What is this that is being attempted? No, no, impossible. Such a thing has never been done. Reflexes, memories, associations, instinctive combinations of life and action, these things of course are possible; but reason, intelligent will, conscious planning and creation, art, poetry, philosophy in this savage shambling creature? An animal cannot evolve powers and activities which have never been possessed except by the gods and the Asuras. How can this material animal organism ever be capable of such a [*incomplete*]