

Chapter Two

Asceticism and the Integral Yoga

Not an Ascetic Path

It is not indispensable to be an ascetic—it is enough if one can learn to live within in the inner being instead of on the surface, discover the soul or true individuality which is veiled by the surface mind and life forces and open the being to the superconscious Reality. But in this one cannot succeed unless one is wholly sincere and one-pointed in the effort.

As to the second question, participation in Sri Aurobindo's¹ mission depends on capacity to do a difficult Yoga or on a call to devote oneself to that ideal without thought of the claims of the ego or the vital desires. Otherwise it is better not to think of it.

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It is good that you have decided to concentrate on the true object of your coming here, but while absorption in mental work and social contacts is not favourable for Yoga, excessive seclusion has also its spiritual disadvantage. An inner concentration supported by a limitation of external contacts is sufficient. Some kind of activity and service to the Divine is also a very necessary element in the integral spiritual life.

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To be by oneself very much needs a certain force of inner life. It may be better to vary solitude with some sort of its opposite. But each has its advantages and disadvantages and it is only by being vigilant and keeping an inner poise that one can avoid the latter.

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¹ *In this letter to an enquirer living outside the Ashram, Sri Aurobindo refers to himself in the third person. —Ed.*

I think there is still a misunderstanding in your mind about the demands of the Yoga. The Divine does *not* demand a complete solitude, aloof and lonely — it is only a few whose nature needs such concentration within to find themselves who have to do that and even for them a complete segregation is not likely to be helpful except perhaps for a time. All that is necessary is a total turning of the life to the Divine and it can be done by degrees without too much forcing of the nature. Literature, poetry, music can be as much a part of Yoga as anything else.

One can meet the Divine in speaking as well as in silence, in action as well as in physical solitude and quietude. An entire retirement can only be a personal case — and as a condition for an inward or outward work, but it is no general rule indispensable for the sadhana. In many cases, most indeed, it would do more harm than good as has been seen in many cases where it has been unduly attempted. A cheerful and sunny life is as good an atmosphere for Yoga as any the Himalayas can give.

Why then this depression and despair?

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I may say that I am not responsible for your loss of zest in the vital. This vairagya, or loss of zest, as you have yourself said, began before you came here. I have indeed laid some stress on the conquest of sex, for obvious reasons; but I have hardly laid a compulsory stress on anything else. Certainly, I have not encouraged you to lose joy in vital creativeness; I have only held up the ideal of turning it towards the Divine and away from the ego. To keep the vital full of life and energy and to trust mainly to the inner growth and the descent of a higher consciousness for a change, using the will too but for self-mastery, not for suppression, but for subordination of the lower to the higher, has been my teaching. The turn to vairagya, to tapasya of an ascetic kind was the impulse of something in your own nature; it insisted on its necessity just as a part of the vital insisted on its opposite: even it condemned my suggestion of something less grim and strenuous as an easy-going absence of aspiration etc. I do not say that vairagya and tapasya are not ways to reach

the Divine, but done like that they are painful ways and long; if one takes them, one must be determined and go through. For one part to push all zest out of the vital and for the other to regret and say, why did I ever do it, will never do. And it is in this kind of tapasya that perfection or at least perfect purification is demanded before there can be any realisation. I have never said that for my Yoga; the only thing I insist upon is some faith, inner surrender and opening of oneself to receive, — not absolute, but just sufficient. Experience has to begin long before perfect purification and from experience to experience one comes to realisation and through realisation to more and more perfection; anything that can be called real perfection can only come at the end. But there is something in you that is impatient of gradualness, of small mercies; its motto seems to be all or nothing.

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I am rather aghast as I stare at the detailed proposals made by you! Fastings? I don't believe in them, though I have done them myself. You would only eat like an ogre afterwards. Shaved head! Great heavens! have you realised the consequences? I pass over the aesthetic shock to myself from which I might not recover — but the row that would arise from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas! You would be famous in a new way which would cast all your previous Glories into the shade. And just when you are turning away from fame and all the things of the ego! No, no — too dangerous by half. Sleep without the mosquito net? That would mean no sleep which is as bad as no eating. Not only your eyes would become weak, but yourself also — and to boot gloomy, grey and gruesome, more gruesome than the Supramental of your worst apprehensions. No and no again. As for the rest, I placed some of them before the Mother and she eyed them without favour.

After all real asceticism is hardly possible except in a hut or on the Himalayas. The heart of asceticism, besides, is having no desires or attachment, being indifferent, able to do without things, satisfied with whatever comes. If you asceticise outwardly

it becomes a rule of life and you keep it up because it is a rule, for the principle of the thing or for the *kudos* of it or as a point of honour. But I have noticed about the ascetics by rule that when you remove the curb they become just like others — with a few exceptions, of course, — which proves that the transformation was not real. A more subtle method used by some is to give up for a time, then try the object of desire again and so go on till you have thoroughly tested yourself! E.g. you give up your potatoes and eat only Asram food for a time — if a call comes for the potatoes or from them, then you are not cured; if no call comes, still you cannot be sure till you have tried the potatoes again and seen whether the desire, attachment or sense of need revives. If it does not and the potatoes fall away from you of themselves, then there is some hope that the thing is done!

However, all this will make you think that I am hardly fit to be a guru in the path of asceticism and you will probably be right. You see, I have such a strong penchant for the inner working and am so persuaded that if you give the psychic a chance, it will get rid of the vital bonds without all this sternness and trouble.

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Rules like these [*not reading newspapers, eating a fixed diet, keeping only a few things*] are intended to help the vital and physical to come under the discipline of sadhana and not get dispersed in fancies, impulses, self-indulgences; but they must be done simply, not with any sense of superiority or ascetic pride, but as a mere matter of course. It is true also that they can be made the occasion of a too great mental rigidity — as if they were things of supreme importance *in themselves* and not only a means. Put in their right place and done in the right spirit, they can be very helpful for their purpose.

Asceticism and Detachment

This is a feeling (the unimportance of things in Time) that the ascetic discipline sometimes uses in order to get rid of attachment

to the world — but it is not good for any positive or dynamic spiritual purpose.

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Sannyasa does not take away attachment — it amounts only to running away from the object of attachment which may help but cannot by itself alone be the radical cure.

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After realisation whatever the Higher Will demands is the best — but first detachment is the rule. To reach the Freedom without the discipline and detachment is given to few.

Two Methods of Living in the Supreme

There are always two methods of living in the Supreme. One is to draw away the participation of the consciousness from things altogether and go so much inwards as to be separated from existence and live in contact with that which is beyond it. The other is to get to that which is the true Essence of all things, not allowing oneself to be absorbed and entangled by the external forms. Desire, attachment, slavery to the attractions of the external sense are the chief obstacles to this movement — so in either way they have to be got rid of. But it is quite possible to see the Supreme before the attraction of external sense is gone — only one cannot live securely in It if there is desire and external attachment because that is always taking one away from the inner poise.

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This Yoga does not mean a rejection of the powers of Life, but an inner transformation and a change of the spirit in the life and the use of the powers. These powers are now used in an egoistic spirit and for undivine ends; they have to be used in a spirit of surrender to the Divine and for the purposes of the divine Work. That is what is meant by conquering them back for the Mother. If anyone feels himself too weak to resist the clutch of the egoistic money-force he need not make the endeavour.

The Human Approach to the Divine

I send you the promised letter today;² you will see that it is less a reply to the exact terms of your letter than a “Defence of the gospel of divinisation of life” against the strictures and the incomprehensions of the mentality (or more often the vitality) that either misunderstands or shrinks from it — or perhaps misunderstands because it shrinks, and shrinks too because it misunderstands both my method and my object. It is not a complete defence, but only raises or answers a main point here and there. The rest will come hereafter.

But all language is open to misunderstanding; so I had better in sending on the letter make or try to make certain things clear.

1. Although I have laid stress on things divine in answer to an excessive (because contrary) insistence on things human, it must not be understood that I reject everything human, — human love or worship or any helpful form of human approach as part of the Yoga. I have never done so, otherwise the Asram could not be in existence. The sadhaks who enter the Yoga are human beings, and if they were not allowed a human approach at the beginning and long after, they would not be able to start the Yoga or would not be able to continue it. The discussion arises only because the word “human” is used in practice, not only as identical with the human vital (and the outward mind), but with certain forms of the human vital ego-nature. But the human vital has many other things in it and is full of excellent material. All that is asked by the Yoga is that this material should be utilised in the right way and with the right spiritual attitude and, also, that the human approach to the Divine should not be constantly turned into a human revolt and reproach against it. And that too we ask only for the sake of the success of the approach itself and of the human being who is making it.

2. Divinisation itself does not mean the destruction of the human elements; it means taking them up, showing them the way to their own perfection, raising them by purification and

² See the letter beginning “*Even if things*” on pages 475–83. — Ed.

perfection to their full power and Ananda. And that means the raising of the whole of earthly life to its full power and Ananda.

3. If there were not a resistance in vital human nature, a pressure of forces adverse to the change, forces which delight in imperfection and even in perversion, this change would effect itself without difficulty by a natural and painless flowering — as, for example, your own powers of poetry and music have flowered out here with rapidity and ease under the light and rain of a spiritual and psychic influence — because everything in you desired that change and your vital was willing to recognise imperfections, to throw away any wrong attitude — e.g., the desire for mere fame — and to be dedicated and perfect. Divinisation of life means, in fact, a greater art of life; for the present art of life produced by ego and ignorance is something comparatively mean, crude and imperfect (like the lower forms of art, music and literature which are yet more attractive to the ordinary human mind and vital), and it is by a spiritual and psychic opening and refinement that it has to reach its true perfection. This can only be done by its being steeped in the divine Light and Flame in which its material will be stripped of all heavy dross and turned into the true metal.

4. Unfortunately, there *is* the resistance, a very obscure and obstinate resistance. That necessitates a “negative” element in the Yoga, an element of rejection of things that stand in the way and of pressure upon those forms that are crude and useless to disappear, on those that are useful but imperfect or have been perverted to attain or to recover their true movement. To the vital this pressure is very painful, first, because it is obscure and does not understand and, secondly, because there are parts of it that want to be left to their crude motions and not to change. That is why the intervention of a psychic attitude is so helpful. For the psychic has the happy confidence, the ready understanding and response, the spontaneous surrender; it knows that the touch of the Guru is meant to help and not to hurt, or, like Radha in the poem, that whatever the Beloved does is meant to lead to the Divine Rapture.

5. At the same time, it is not from the negative part of the

movement that you have to judge the Yoga, but from its positive side; for the negative part is temporary and transitional and will disappear, the positive alone counts for the ideal and for the future. If you take conditions which belong to the negative side and to a transitional movement as the law of the future and the indication of the character of the Yoga, you will commit a serious misjudgment, a grave mistake. This Yoga is not a rejection of life or of closeness and intimacy between the Divine and the sadhaks. Its ideal aims at the greatest closeness and unity on the physical as well as the other planes, at the most divine largeness and fullness and joy of life.

Vairagya

Vairagya means a positive detachment from things of this life — but it does not *immediately* carry with it a luminous aspiration except for a few fortunate people. For the positive detachment is often a pulling away by the soul while the vital clings and is gloomy and reluctant.

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Vairagya is certainly one way of progressing towards the goal — the traditional way and a drastic if painful one. To lose the desire for human vital enjoyments, to lose the passion for literary or other success, praise, fame, to lose even the insistence on spiritual success, the inner bhoga of Yoga, have always been recognised as steps towards the goal — provided one keeps the one insistence on the Divine. I prefer myself the calmer way of equality, the way pointed out by Krishna, than the more painful one of Vairagya. But if the compulsion in one's nature — or the compulsion of one's inner being forcing its way by that means through the difficulties of the nature — is on that line, it must be recognised as a valid line. What has to be got rid of in that case is the note of despair in the vital which responds to the cry you speak of — that it will never gain the Divine because it has not yet got the Divine or that there has been no progress. There has certainly been a progress, the greater push of the psychic, this

very detachment itself always growing somewhere in you. The thing is to hold on, not to cut the cord which is pulling you up because it hurts the hands. To keep the one insistence if all the others fall away from you.

It is evident that something in you, perhaps continuing the unfinished curve of a past life, is pushing you on this path of vairagya and the more stormy way of bhakti — in spite of our preference for a less painful one and yours also — something that is determined to be drastic with the outer nature so as to make itself free to fulfil its secret aspiration. But do not listen to these suggestions of the voice that says, “You shall not succeed and it is no use trying.” That is a thing that need never be said in the Way of the Spirit, however difficult it may seem at the moment to be. Keep through all the aspiration which you express so beautifully in your poem; for it is certainly there and comes out from the depths, and if it is the cause of suffering — as great aspirations usually are in a world and nature where there is so much to oppose them — it is also the promise and surety of emergence and victory in the future.

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I quite acknowledge the utility of a temporary state of vairagya as an antidote to the too strong pull of the vital. But vairagya always tends to a turning away from life and a tamasic element in vairagya, despair, depression etc., often dilapidates the force of the being and may even lead in some cases to falling between two stools so that one loses earth and misses heaven. I therefore prefer to replace vairagya by a firm and quiet rejection of what has to be rejected, sex, vanity, ego-centrism, attachment, etc. etc.; but that does not include rejection of the activities and powers that can be made instruments of the sadhana and the divine work, such as art, music, poetry etc. — Yoga can be done without the rejection of life, without killing or impairing the life-joy and the vital force.

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I have objected in the past to vairagya of the ascetic kind and the

tamasic kind — and by the tamasic kind I mean that spirit which comes defeated from life, not because it is really disgusted with life but because it could not cope with it or conquer its prizes; for it comes to Yoga as a kind of asylum for the maimed or weak and to the Divine as a consolation prize for the failed boys in the world-class. The vairagya of one who has tasted the world's gifts or prizes but found them insufficient or, finally, tasteless and turns away towards a higher and more beautiful ideal or the vairagya of one who has done his part in life's battles but seen that something greater is demanded of the soul, is perfectly helpful and a good gate to the Yoga. Also the sattwic vairagya which has learned what life is and turns to what is above and behind life. By the ascetic vairagya I mean that which denies life and world altogether and wants to disappear into the Indefinite — and I object to it for those who come to this Yoga because it is incompatible with my aim which is to bring the Divine into life. But if one is satisfied with life as it is, then there is no reason to seek to bring the Divine into life, — so vairagya in the sense of dissatisfaction with life as it is is perfectly admissible and even in a certain sense indispensable for my Yoga.

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There is the sattwic vairagya — but many people have the rajasic or tamasic kind. The rajasic is carried by a revolt against the conditions of one's own life, the tamasic arises from dissatisfaction, disappointment, a feeling of inability to succeed or face life, a crushing under the grips and pains of life. These bring a sense of the vanity of existence, a desire to seek something less miserable, more sure and happy or else to seek a liberation from existence here, but they do not bring immediately a luminous aspiration or pure aspiration with peace and joy for the spiritual attainment.

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No, I didn't say that you chose the rajasic or tamasic vairagya. I only explained how it came, of itself, as a result of a movement of the vital in place of the sattwic vairagya which is supposed to precede and cause or accompany or result from a turning away

from the world to seek the Divine. The tamasic vairagya comes from the recoil of the vital when it feels that it has to give up the joy of life and becomes listless and joyless; the rajasic comes when the vital begins to lose the joy of life but complains that it is getting nothing in its place. Nobody chooses such movements; they come independently of the mind as habitual reactions of the human nature. To replace these things by detachment, an increasing quiet aspiration, a pure bhakti, an ardent surrender to the Divine, was what I suggested as the true forward movement.