

# Invocation

*Savitri*

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B H A V A N

*Study notes No. 53*

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SAVITRI BHAVAN in Auroville.  
All correspondence may be addressed to:*

**SAVITRI BHAVAN  
AUROVILLE 605101, TN  
INDIA**

*Telephone: 0413-2622922  
e-mail: savitribhavan@auroville.org.in  
www.savitribhavan.org*

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*The Mother in Kobé, Japan – 1920*  
*shortly before her return to India*



# The Thought-created Worlds

*Explanation of a phrase from Savitri*

by Dr. Alok Pandey

**Immutable in rhythmic calm and joy  
He saw, sovereignly free in limitless light,  
The unfallen planes, the thought-created worlds  
Where Knowledge is the leader of the act  
And Matter is of thinking substance made,  
Feeling, a heaven-bird poised on dreaming wings,  
Answers Truth's call as to a parent's voice,  
Form luminous leaps from the all-shaping beam  
And Will is a conscious chariot of the Gods,  
And Life, a splendour stream of musing Force,  
Carries the voices of the mystic Suns.<sup>1</sup>**

These lines appearing in Canto Eleven of Book Two of *Savitri*, “*The Kingdoms and Godheads of the Greater Mind*”, describe the worlds climbing from the limits of human mind (the triple layers of physical, vital and thinking mind) to the Overmind regions. It is the world proper to Thought, which is free to act there without any hindrance. In those worlds it is Thought that is the creator (*formateur* or form maker as the Mother calls it.) The godheads of these worlds are stationed in spaces of ‘*rhythmic calm and joy*’. The phrase, ‘*rhythmic calm and joy*’ reveals this realm to be the birthplace of mantras which have come down to rishis who have ascended to the top of these higher planes of consciousness. Here the light is set free and not cabined in narrow forms of words with fixed meanings. Here are realms of seeing thought where revelation, illumination and intuition are the ways to Knowledge. Although absolute sight is lacking, yet ignorance is not there. The Godheads are conscious of a

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1. An explanation by Dr. Alok Pandey of lines 137-141 from Canto Eleven of Book Two of *Savitri* (pp. 263-64)

greater light beyond from which they have emerged. They have not yet fallen into the realms of little mind where ignorance abounds. There, Knowledge (of oneness and truth and the true law of things) is the leader, unlike here in our world where ignorance leads us towards knowledge, or in the vital worlds where force leads, or the realm of subtle matter where beauty of form is predominant. There, Knowledge is the leader, subordinating force and form to its sovereign light. Each of the worlds has a characteristic power that builds the forms and drives the beings of that world. In the vital world it is force that builds the forms, which in turn respond readily to vital forces. In the higher realms of the Greater Mind rhythmic Thought vibrations build the worlds. That is why we see that these mantras are also regarded as deities. Even the metres are regarded as living goddesses or living energies, since mantra has built these worlds. In the ancient story of Rishi Viswamitra we see him building a heavenly world for Trishanku, the ancestor of Rama, to live in permanently. The substance of these higher worlds responds readily to the pressure of thought (the rhythmic luminous thought which is found in these regions). Here in our world Matter is a substance that responds with some difficulty and adjustment to thought or even to vital force and spiritual energies. There, it is made of a substance that vibrates with those energies. In other words the substance of those worlds is luminous and vibrating with rhythmic calm and joy. That is what all the beings, traditionally described as 'gods', are made up of in those worlds (to different degrees of course). This is the import of these wonderful lines which set the tone for the much more that is yet to come.

# The English of *Savitri*

*Book Two, Canto Five,  
The Godheads of the Little Life  
Sections 3, 4 and 5  
by Shraddhavan*

This huge world unintelligibly turns  
In the shadow of a mused Inconscience;  
It hides a key to inner meanings missed,  
It locks in our hearts a voice we cannot hear.

‘*This huge world*’, the world that we live in, is turning, it is always moving ‘*unintelligibly*’. We cannot make sense of it. Although we are trying to grasp and explain it, we cannot, for it is unintelligible: impossible for us to understand. The poet says that it is turning and turning, ‘*In the shadow of a mused Inconscience*’. Yes, ‘*mused*’, not amused. The poet uses the verb ‘to muse’ very often in different forms; here he has used it as a past participle. He refers to the universe, ‘*This huge world*’, as being overshadowed by the ‘*Inconscience*’, which is in a state of muse or of trance, ‘brooding’ as he often says, like a mother bird incubating her eggs, protecting them until it is time for them to hatch. It is the superconscience sleeping, withdrawn. We speak of someone musing over a problem or a difficult situation, and we refer to a poet or an artist being inspired by their Muse, a human or even a heavenly being who inspires them with deep insights and creative energy. Here the poet tells us that ‘*This huge world*’, which is so mysterious and incomprehensible to us, is hiding ‘*a key*’ which could unlock many secret significances which we, with our imperfect consciousness, have missed because it locks them away, deep within our hearts.

Q: What are these ‘*secrets*’?

We will not know until we find the key, and the key, as he says, is hidden. In Book One, Canto Four he says that it is hidden beneath,

under the threshold of our waking consciousness. It is ‘subliminal’ to us, so we are missing all those deep inner meanings. We need to find the hidden key to our own deep heart because within us is ‘*a voice we cannot hear*’.

An enigmatic labour of the spirit,  
An exact machine of which none knows the use,  
An art and ingenuity without sense,  
This minute elaborate orchestrated life  
For ever plays its motiveless symphonies.

‘*Enigmatic*’ means ‘mysterious’. We cannot understand the work the spirit is doing in the world; it is a mystery to us. To us it looks like a very precise machine, but we do not know its purpose; nobody knows what it is for. What is this machine doing? All this ‘*art and ingenuity*’ – the skill of nature – what is the meaning of it? It seems to have no real meaning. The life which we observe at play in the world seems to be very minutely elaborated, worked out in minute details, all working together like musicians playing very complex music which seems to go on and on forever although to us it does not seem to have any motive, any purpose. Why? For what purpose? Those are the ‘*inner meanings*’ that we miss because they are locked in our hearts.

The mind learns and knows not, turning its back to truth;  
It studies surface laws by surface thought,  
Life’s steps surveys and Nature’s process sees,  
Not seeing for what she acts or why we live;

‘*The mind learns*’ but it does not really have knowledge. It ‘*learns*’ many things but cannot really know anything properly, fully; it is so busily working away that it turns ‘*its back to truth; / It studies surface laws by surface thought*’. It surveys ‘*Life’s steps*’, observing and trying to understand them; it tries to analyse ‘*Nature’s processes*’, but remains unable to see why she does what she does, and cannot understand why things are as they are, nor why we ourselves are alive and living as we do: ‘*Not seeing for what she acts or why we live*’.

It marks her tireless care of just device,  
Her patient intricacy of fine detail,  
The ingenious spirit's brave inventive plan  
In her great futile mass of endless works,  
Adds purposeful figures to her purposeless sum,  
Its gabled storeys piles, its climbing roofs  
On the close-carved foundations she has laid,  
Imagined citadels reared in mythic air  
Or mounts a stair of dream to a mystic moon:

The mind looking at nature '*marks*' and notes down or remembers all the miraculous details of nature's actions, observes '*her tireless care of just device*', the inexhaustible patience she seems to have and her actions that seem exactly suited to her purposes. A '*device*' is a tool or small machine designed to do a particular work. Nature's devices are so precise and correct. '*Her patient intricacy*' is sometimes just amazing in its '*fine detail*'; '*intricacy*' or '*intricate*' refers to patterns or forms which are complicated and have so many minute details . All this is part of '*The ingenious spirit's brave inventive plan*'. There seems to be some '*ingenious*', very clever, cunning and skilful intelligence at work and following a very daring and '*inventive plan*'. The mind perceives something like that behind Nature's '*great futile mass of endless works*'. To the mind the endless toil of Nature may seem '*futile*', useless; and mind adds something to it: there is the '*purposeless sum*' of Nature's work as the mind finds it and observes it; the mind takes what it observes and tries to detect '*purposeful figures*' in it all. It makes use of the processes of nature, trying to achieve things that seem meaningful and useful to it, creating a kind of mental architecture; it piles up its constructions. '*Storeys*' are the levels of a building, and '*gables*' are pointed roofs. Such constructions may have many levels and many ornate gables, '*climbing roofs*' piled one above the other. A roof that slopes downwards on two sides of a ridge and ends in a flat triangular wall is called a '*gable*'. Sometimes a window is built into the gable. Nature has laid the foundations; mind adds all this complicated architecture on top of it.

The poet suggests that many of the structures which mind builds are only '*Imagined citadels*', built on a foundation provided by nature but only '*reared*' or built up '*in mythic air*'. Here '*mythic*' means 'unreal'. The mind uses its elaborate constructions to climb up an imaginary '*stair of dream*' to reach some '*mystic moon*'. The moon may be mysteriously beautiful and suggestive as it reflects the light of the sun, but it can only provide a faint light, not the full light of the Sun.

The mind may be very ingenious, using very clever means to achieve its elaborate purposes. Sri Aurobindo seems to be warning us that if we use the mind to focus our attention only on the material levels we may fail to understand the deeper significances of the workings of nature.

Transient creations point and hit the sky:  
A world-conjecture's scheme is laboured out  
On the dim floor of mind's incertitude,  
Or painfully built a fragmentary whole.

Again the poet is speaking about the way that our minds work. The previous passage spoke about the way that they make constructions or dreams and fancies. Here he tells us that although these '*Transient creations*' of the mind may point very high, reaching up like tall spires towards the sky, they are only '*Transient*': they do not last.

Another thing that the mind does as it tries to understand the world around it is to work hard to create '*A world-conjecture's scheme*': a theory or hypothesis to explain what it experiences, ideas of how things might be organised; but there is nothing sure about a conjecture; it is a theory, the mental formation of a possibility. Our mind makes a guess or a formation of what might be, and on that basis, '*On the dim floor of the mind's incertitude*', it builds up '*a fragmentary whole*': a picture which it finds somehow convincing. But the mind cannot have certainty. Even all the evidence that it gathers, the '*proofs*' that seem to support its conjectures, its guesses, are all dubious, doubtful, uncertain and incomplete.

Q: But he says the mind's creations '*point and hit the sky*'.

Yes, but it has to build on something. So what is it building on? On its own *'incertitude'*; or it painfully builds *'a fragmentary whole'* – a picture that it thinks includes everything but in fact is only a jigsaw puzzle of many, many fragments. Every now and then it discovers a new fragment, which makes all the rest no longer fit. Just recently I believe some scientists thought that they have found some particles that seem to travel faster than light, which has completely blown their minds. Now they are all checking their calculations and wondering whether they have measured something wrong, because all the science of the last hundred years has been based on the conviction that nothing can travel faster than light. With great effort and difficulty our minds build up *'a fragmentary whole'* only to have it collapse because of some small new discovery.

Impenetrable, a mystery recondite  
Is the vast plan of which we are a part;  
Its harmonies are discords to our view  
Because we know not the great theme they serve.

Our minds cannot penetrate the *'recondite'* mystery, the great secret which is so complex, *'the vast [cosmic] plan of which we are a part'*; something *'recondite'* is difficult to understand. The other day we were reading that everything in this plan is perfectly in its place, and immediately someone said "Looking around at the world, I have great difficulty in believing that!" Sri Aurobindo tells us that this difficulty comes because the *'harmonies'* of the perfect cosmic plan seem more like *'discords'* to us. To our view many notes in the cosmic harmony seem to be disharmonious because we are not aware of *'the great theme'* that those notes are serving. A *'theme'* is a development in music. If we listen to the music of a great composer, like Bach, for instance, when he is developing his fugues sometimes we hear notes that sound as if they should not go together. Only if we can hear all the different voices at the same time, we may be able to understand that each of those notes is necessary exactly where it is. Similarly, looking around at the world we live in, we become aware of so many things that seem to be clashing and out of place. It appears like that to us, because we are not aware of the great theme

the composer has in mind, the great purpose and intention that these apparent discords are preparing.

Inscrutable work the cosmic agencies.  
Only the fringe of a wide surge we see;  
Our instruments have not that greater light,  
Our will tunes not with the eternal Will,  
Our heart's sight is too blind and passionate.

We use the word 'inscrutable' to refer to things that we find difficult to decipher or understand, for example, the facial expressions of unfamiliar people. Card players, gamblers try to keep their faces 'inscrutable' so that their opponents cannot guess their intentions. The '*cosmic agencies*', the forces that act in the universe, work in a way that is '*Inscrutable*' to us. We cannot understand them. This is partly because we only see a small part of their actions. We only see '*the fringe*', the borderline, the very edge of the vast ocean of cosmic energy. '*Our instruments*' – our body, our life force, our heart, our will, our mind – do not yet have the '*greater light*' they would need to be able to see and understand what is really going on. '*Our will tunes not with the eternal Will*'. It is not in tune with the divine intention and purpose. We create discords because our will wants something which is not in harmony with the eternal Will; and the way our heart sees things '*is too blind and passionate*' for us to be able to understand and accept what the eternal Will wants for us. It is so limited by our personal wishes and intentions that we cannot see wider and deeper options and possibilities. We cannot see beyond '*the fringe*' of the '*wide surge*'.

Impotent to share in Nature's mystic tact,  
Inapt to feel the pulse and core of things,  
Our reason cannot sound life's mighty sea  
And only counts its waves and scans its foam;

'*Will*' is one instrument which is given to us, the Heart is another and Reason is yet another. These instruments often seem to be pushing or pulling us in different directions, and '*Our reason*' is '*Impotent*': powerless, because it is unable '*to share in Nature's mystic tact*'. '*Tact*' means knowing exactly how to do and say things and its

meaning is connected with 'touch'. Nature has a mystic touch, a mystic way of doing things just right. Our reason is not able to share in that. It is '*Inapt*', it is not fitted – it is not suited '*to feel the pulse and core of things*'. We can feel our '*pulse*' here on the wrist, the throb of the life force flowing in our blood, circulating in our veins because our heart is acting as a pump. The word '*core*' means the part that is at the very centre. It is connected with the French word *coeur*, which means 'heart'. Our reason is not normally in touch with the heart of things, the life-pulse which is moving everything, because it '*cannot sound life's mighty sea*'. Life is an ocean. Sailors need to '*sound*' the ocean to find out how deep the sea is around them and beneath them. Nowadays sounding is done by sonar, but in earlier days sailors used to fasten a weight on a long cord and throw it into the sea to get a feeling of how much was the depth of sea under their ship. Reason cannot get to the bottom of things: it cannot measure how deep life's ocean is. All it can do is count the waves that come in and scan the foam floating on the surface. It can see only the surface of life's sea.

It knows not whence these motions touch and pass,  
It sees not whither sweeps the hurrying flood:  
Only it strives to canalise its powers  
And hopes to turn its course to human ends:  
But all its means come from the Inconscient's store.

Reason does not know where the movements of the great ocean of life are coming from, nor does it know where that powerful flood is heading to; '*whither*' means 'to what place or state' as opposed to '*whence*' which means 'from which place or state'. It does not see where that '*hurrying flood*', that current or sea of life, is going to. What the reason tries to do is to channel or '*canalise*' the great forces which it senses are at work in the ocean of life: to channel the life forces, to turn the forces of life to human ends. It wants to make use of the forces of Nature to serve human aims and purposes.

Q: Reason may not be able to channelise the powers of nature.

Here it is not so much the physical forces. It is the life forces. So you could say it is psychology or conditioning and these kinds of things.

Because we do not see the overall purpose, whatever we can grasp and understand we want to turn to our own purposes.

The ‘*means*’ that our reason has to work with – all the instruments that our reason can utilise – have all originated from the Inconscient and are still dominated by it.

The means that all the instruments that our reason has to work with have all originated from the Inconscient and are still dominated by it. So now Sri Aurobindo is going to tell us something about the inconscient and the subconscious.

Q: What exactly is meant by ‘*Inconscient*’?

Whatever is not conscious, and when Sri Aurobindo uses this word he is really speaking about the foundations of our material universe, the ultimate separation and limitation, which then somehow reaggregates itself to form matter.

Q: Is it the same state referred to by the word ‘ignorance’?

It is much more than ignorance. Ignorance is like a twilight state, with a mixture of light and darkness, but the inconscient seems to be completely dark. But on the other hand the Inconscient also seems to be infinite. And there seems to be a will somewhere in the Inconscient which appears not to know what it is doing and yet does everything perfectly: it has brought into existence the whole material creation with all its amazing details. In *The Life Divine* Sri Aurobindo says something very interesting about the nature of the inconscient.<sup>1</sup> All our awareness and the instruments which our mind, our consciousness, uses in its efforts to know and understand are based on what has come to us from the inconscient.

Unseen here act dim huge world-energies  
And only trickles and currents are our share.

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1. The Inconscience is an inverse reproduction of the supreme superconscience; it has the same absoluteness of being and automatic action, but is a vast involved trance; it is being lost in itself, plunged in its own abyss of infinity. Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Book Two, Chapter X, p.570

Here in our world ‘*huge world-energies*’, cosmic powers, are acting ‘*Unseen*’. We do not see them. They are invisible to us, or visible only in their effects rather than their workings. In our limited experience we receive only ‘*trickles and currents*’, tiny weak flows from the vast ocean of cosmic energy; a very little of its vast force comes to us as ‘*our share*’ of the vast and powerful world-energies that are acting in ways we cannot perceive or understand, doing things that we are not aware of at all.

Our mind lives far off from the authentic Light  
Catching at little fragments of the Truth  
In a small corner of infinity,  
Our lives are inlets of an ocean’s force.

This is because our mind is living at a great distance ‘*from the authentic Light*’, the true light. It lives ‘*In a small corner of infinity*’ where it can only try to catch ‘*little fragments of the Truth*’. Similarly ‘*Our lives*’ are nothing more than shallow and limited ‘*inlets*’ or offshoots of the great ocean of universal Life.

Q: ‘To catch at’ means what?

You try to catch something that is passing: a butterfly or a feather, something that is passing you: you catch at it, try to grasp it. Even if ‘*Our mind*’ manages to seize hold of something, it is still only a little fragment of the truth. And here we are – this little mind of ours is working anyway in only ‘*a small corner of infinity*’ and ‘*Our lives are inlets of an ocean’s force*’: On the edge of the open sea there may be a narrow inlet leading inland, away from the vastness. Our lives are like that, cut off in a way. Something of that ocean comes to us but not the full force of it.

Our conscious movements have sealed origins  
But with those shadowy seats no converse hold;  
No understanding binds our comrade parts;  
Our acts emerge from a crypt our minds ignore.

We think and say that we are doing things consciously when we are aware that we are doing them. But the real origin of the ‘*conscious movements*’ that we make is hidden; it is covered, ‘*sealed*’ up, secret.

We do not have any *'converse'*, any conversation, any communication with the *'seats'* where those movements originate. We are made up of many different parts but they are not communicating with each other, not understanding each other, and we may often find ourselves doing things without knowing why we are doing them, because *'Our acts emerge from a crypt our minds ignore'*: they originate from a dark underground level which our waking consciousness knows nothing about.

In everyday English, if we say 'I ignore somebody', it means that I do not pay any attention to him. But the root meaning of the word *'ignore'* is 'to not know', 'to be ignorant'. A *'crypt'* literally refers to a sacred space in the foundations of a cathedral or church. It is not only a sacred place but also a secret one. The adjective *'cryptic'* means 'mysterious'; *'encrypting'* means 'disguising the meaning of something, making it secret and difficult to decipher'. People who are expert at doing crosswords like to try their hand at *'cryptic crosswords'*, where the clues themselves are given in the form of riddles, to make them more mysterious and difficult to solve.

The *'crypt'* referred to here is a deep level lying far below our normal waking consciousness, and the real roots of our feelings and thoughts, our actions and reactions, lie in that deep place that we are unaware of.

Our deepest depths are ignorant of themselves;  
Even our body is a mystery shop;  
As our earth's roots lurk screened below our earth,  
So lie unseen our roots of mind and life.

*'Our deepest depths'*, the deepest parts of our being are not aware of themselves; they are inconscient or subconscious, and *'Even our body'* is a store full of mysteries. We do not know what is going on there, why things go wrong, or why things do not go wrong. The roots are the parts that hold us where we are and through which we draw our nourishment. A tree has to have deep roots to hold it firm so that it can grow tall and strong, and that is how it gets its food from the earth. He says that *'our earth'* has roots that are hidden; they *'lurk'* out of sight, *'screened below our earth'*, as if our earth, this

material principle that we think of as matter, is just a surface layer which is actually nourished and supported and kept in place by roots which we do not see, which we do not know anything about. In the same way our life and our mind have roots that we do not see.

Q: Does he mean the planet earth in this context?

Earth of course is the Planet, the planet earth that we live on, but it also represents the material principle. So when the poet says '*our earth*' he may mean the substance, the physical substance of our body, our most material part.

Our springs are kept close hid beneath, within;  
Our souls are moved by powers behind the wall.

'*Springs*' is another word which has two meanings. A '*spring*' can be the source of a river: just as water comes up out of the ground from an invisible source, the '*springs*' of our life and our consciousness may be invisible, hidden: we do not see where that energy or motivation is coming from. But a '*spring*' can also be a part of a machine in which invisible springs make it move: those kinds of springs are also hidden. Similarly we often do not know what is making us move. Even '*Our souls are moved by powers behind the wall.*' There is a wall of materiality which prevents us from seeing what is moving our souls. We do not see the subtle worlds and higher powers which are influencing our feelings and thoughts, our words and actions.

In the subterranean reaches of the spirit  
A puissance acts and recks not what it means;  
Using unthinking monitors and scribes,  
It is the cause of what we think and feel.

'*Subterranean*' means 'below the earth' or 'underground'. The poet speaks of '*subterranean reaches*': territories or lands. The spirit apparently has realms that lie deep below the surface of things. There, it seems, dwells a '*puissance*', a power which is active, but which is acting unconsciously, recklessly. The word '*reck*' is connected with reckoning, calculating; someone who is 'reckless' acts without caring or considering the consequences of his deeds.

This power from the deeper, darker levels of the spirit does not care about the significance or consequence of its actions.

Q: What does '*puissance*' mean?

'*Puissance*' is a French word meaning 'power' which Sri Aurobindo has adopted and uses very often in the poem. This power which is at work in the deep levels of spirit uses '*monitors and scribes*'. '*Scribes*' are people or beings who write or note things down. '*Monitors*' keep an eye on things, try to control things; but on these deeper levels the '*monitors and scribes*' are '*unthinking*': they are also unconscious and uncaring. The poet tells us that this subterranean *puissance* '*is the cause of what we think and feel*'. It works on our subconscious levels and lies at the root of most of what we think and feel and do.

The troglodytes of the subconscious Mind,  
Ill-trained slow stammering interpreters  
Only of their small task's routine aware  
And busy with the record in our cells,  
Concealed in the subliminal secrecies  
Mid an obscure occult machinery,  
Capture the mystic Morse whose measured lilt  
Transmits the messages of the cosmic Force.

'*Troglodytes*' are cave-dwellers who live underground. These beings live in that Vedic cave where everything is hidden: the cave of the '*subconscious Mind*'. There they work as '*interpreters*', interpreting the messages of the '*cosmic Force*' as they come into our subliminal consciousness, into our body. But they are not very good at their work. They are '*slow*' and '*stammering*' – which means that they cannot share the messages clearly and understandably. And they are like people with their heads bent to their task: each of them is focussed only on the small routine they are supposed to do. The poet says that they are busy '*with the record in our cells*', in the cells of our body where the subconscious mind is lodged.

The whole history of the universe is recorded in our cells, but they are keeping that record without understanding what they are doing – they are performing their tasks mechanically. That is why it is so

difficult to get them to change their little routines, and that is why work of physical transformation is so difficult. Each of them has its own little task and does not think about anything beyond that. They are hidden: ‘*Concealed in the subliminal secrecies*’ – in those secret places below the threshold of consciousness – in the midst of ‘*an obscure occult machinery*’. Their task is to ‘*Capture*’ the ‘*mystic Morse*’, the code in which the messages from the cosmic force are written. I hope you know about the Morse code. One of the ways in which it is transmitted is through groups of short and long sounds which represent words or messages: short, short, long: dit dit dash ... If you listen to someone transmitting a long message in Morse code you will hear a series of rhythmical sounds; Sri Aurobindo calls it a ‘*measured lilt*’. Ideally, that musical series is transmitting messages to a trained interpreter who can understand and translate them for those who need to receive them. The word ‘*lilt*’ refers to that rhythm, that series of sounds.

Q: Does that mean that those ‘*interpreters*’ are not necessarily always ‘*Ill-trained*’ and ‘*slow*’ and ‘*stammering*’?

Yes, those ‘*interpreters*’, if they are skilled, are very useful and important entities.

I remember reading a nice science fiction story – in my youth I used to read a lot of science fiction. The story was quite short. It was about a man who lived in some future civilisation, some city. He wanted to change something, something quite simple. In his efforts to bring about that small change he was sent from one office to another up and up and up the hierarchy of officials; he persisted until he reached the very top where it seemed that final decisions would be made. But when he got there, he discovered that final decisions were actually controlled by a kind of machine which carried information and instructions up from the very, very, very bottom. Up at the top, nothing could be decided. So he had to go right down to the very bottom (as if into the depths of the subconscious) and find a way to persuade the fellows working down there to change the templates which they were always sending up to the top. When I read these lines I cannot help thinking of that image; the person who wrote that

story had understood something. And when I want to change some small detail in Savitri Bhavan I find myself having to go through a similar process: I do not know how many times I have said that we do not need cushions on the floor in the square hall. I have said it to so many people on so many occasions! But I have not yet found the right little troglodyte to tell it to, so that no cushions are put on the floor there. Changing our genetic code must be something like this. You have to find out exactly where the little spring or the little button that needs to be pressed is in order for the thing to change. How can I make sure that the door to the storeroom is kept closed, for example, or that the right number of chairs are provided for a particular class, or such kinds of details? Here Sri Aurobindo is telling us about the way in which we, in our conscious minds, are controlled by all sorts of things that we are not conscious of, and showing us that many, if not most, of those things are not conscious at all in themselves.

A whisper falls into life's inner ear  
And echoes from the dun subconscious caves,  
Speech leaps, thought quivers, the heart vibrates, the will  
Answers and tissue and nerve obey the call.

Those interpreters who are capturing the '*mystic Morse*' emitted by the '*cosmic Force*' get it all wrong: they whisper something into the '*inner ear*' of our life. We do not even hear them doing it. That whisper echoes in those '*dun*', dark, colourless '*subconscious caves*' in the lower levels of our being, and there is a response: '*Speech leaps, thought quivers, the heart vibrates*': we think or say something or we feel something. Then the Will responds, wishes or wants something, and then '*tissue and nerve obey the call*', responding to impulses from the cosmic energy that have been distorted on the way by those '*troglodytes*'. Then:

Our lives translate these subtle intimacies;  
All is the commerce of a secret Power.

The way we live, the things we do and feel and think and want are simply translating these things, these subtle movements which are happening very intimately, very deep inside us. All this is the '*commerce*', the transactions, the business, the work '*of a secret*

*Power*' of which we are unaware, which we do not know anything about.

Here, when the poet mentions Mind and Reason and so on, he is not referring to the conscious mind, which we shall come to later on in Canto Ten. Here he is telling us about the Life Mind: mind as it operates in the life worlds: the mind which is '*A thinking puppet*', like a marionette controlled by a puppet master, or an automaton being moved by a machine. Yes, we usually associate that machine with *prakriti*: unconscious nature. But there are different levels of Nature; it is not only the material level. Here the poet is describing the lower life levels which are in many ways the most dangerous levels of all because they are under the control of the hostile adverse forces which we shall read about soon.

I think that is why these two cantos about The Kingdoms and the Godheads of the Little Life are amongst the longest in the whole poem: because Sri Aurobindo knows that it is very important for us to become aware of how these forces are working under the surfaces of things and influencing us human beings from those lower levels of being and consciousness. In this canto he tells us a lot about that: how it works, why it is like that. But in the last section of this Canto Five he also shows us that there is a deeper truer significance underlying all this: something else is making use of these small unconscious movements.

End of Section 3

#### **Section 4 – lines 400-457**

A thinking puppet is the mind of life:  
Its choice is the work of elemental strengths  
That know not their own birth and end and cause  
And glimpse not the immense intent they serve.

The poet continues to tell us about the '*godheads*', the subtle beings that inhabit the realm of 'The Little Life'. Already he has explained that this realm has different levels: one which is more physical and

dominated by matter; one that is more purely vital; and one where a kind of desire mind enters in. Now he will tell us about that '*mind of life*'. He says that it is '*A thinking puppet*'. There are various kinds of puppets, such as 'finger puppets' which can be moved by a single finger, or 'glove puppets' which you can wear on your hand like a glove and move with the thumb and fingers together, or there are the marionettes which are controlled by strings attached to their different parts so that the puppeteer, hidden behind a curtain, can manipulate them from above to make them move in a wonderfully realistic way. Here in Asia we have other puppets that are flat, made of leather or paper, which are used for shadow-plays against an illumined screen. In Japan they have fully life-sized puppets which are beautifully clothed and painted while the puppeteers are dressed in black to make themselves very inconspicuous, almost invisible as they move the limbs of the puppets. It is very interesting to watch. Here Sri Aurobindo is telling us that in the same way as the puppeteer moves the puppet, there are hidden '*elemental strengths*': very primitive but powerful beings that are connected with the elements and which manipulate and influence the choices made by the mind of life. Those forces themselves are ignorant: they do not know how or why they are born and how they will die and what their cause is, and they have no idea of the '*immense intent they serve*', but they are part of the great cosmic plan. They have a role to play in that plan but they do not know it; they are only aware of their own small wills. They do not get even a glimpse of the great world purpose which they unconsciously serve.

In this nether life of man drab-hued and dull,  
Yet filled with poignant small ignoble things,  
The conscious Doll is pushed a hundred ways  
And feels the push but not the hands that drive.

'*This nether life*', this lower life '*of man*', the poet tells us, is '*drab-hued*': it does not have any beautiful colours; it is rather dull and uninteresting, but it is filled with many '*poignant small ignoble things*'. '*Ignoble*' means the opposite of '*noble*'. In the higher vital, in the greater life there is a lot of nobility but these lower beings delight in small, petty, shameful, unpleasant things that are '*ignoble*'. But he

tells us too that those petty things can also be '*poignant*'. Something that is '*poignant*' can touch you and move you, and we often use this word to refer to things that touch our hearts. These small things can upset us, they can move us, they can give us a little wound here or there. This puppet, this '*conscious Doll*', this life-mind, gets pushed in all directions by those elemental forces, and it '*feels the push*'. If you observe yourself carefully you may sometimes notice the push coming, the impulse: "Oh now I want to do this", "I ought to do that." But we do not see the little beings that are poking us, telling us to do this or that, the hands that are driving us.

For none can see the masked ironic troupe  
To whom our figure-selves are marionettes,  
Our deeds unwitting movements in their grasp,  
Our passionate strife an entertainment's scene.

The poet refers to the elemental puppeteers who manipulate us on the lower mind levels as a '*troupe*'. This is a word which is used for a group of travelling performers, a circus troupe or a troupe of acrobats. This troupe of puppeteers wear masks so that they cannot be recognised; and they are '*ironic*': They are making fun of us in a rather unpleasant way. They want to make fools of us and pull our strings to make us dance like marionettes, so that '*our deeds*', the things that we do, are '*unwitting movements*' that we do unconsciously, without realising what we are doing or why. Our '*passionate strife*', the struggles that cost us so much anguish and difficulty, are just '*an entertainment's scene*' for them: they laugh at our troubles and enjoy them.

There is a mocking kind of humour which we call '*ironic*'. The '*ironic troupe*' refers to the beings that are manipulating us like puppets. They are mocking us, making fun of our human weaknesses. They have no respect for the dolls they are pushing around: they amuse themselves by making us do all kinds of silly things, but it may not be so amusing for the puppets that are being driven around like that.

We are the marionettes, the puppets that are being manipulated by puppeteers using invisible strings. Our deeds, the things that we do are '*unwitting movements*'. We do not even know that we are doing

those things. ‘*Unwitting*’ means ‘without knowing’, ‘ignorant’, ‘unconscious’. The puppeteers hold us ‘*in their grasp*’ and make us do things by pulling the strings that control us. They may involve us in all kinds of strong feelings, quarrels, love affairs, all kinds of things. Here the poet mentions ‘*strife*’: struggles and quarrels with all their intensities. For those beings our painful struggles are just an entertainment to amuse them.

Ignorant themselves of their own fount of strength  
They play their part in the enormous whole.  
Agents of darkness imitating light,  
Spirits obscure and moving things obscure,  
Unwillingly they serve a mightier Power.

The manipulating puppeteers themselves do not know the source of their strength, what gives them the right to exist. They exist to play a part in the ‘*enormous whole*’: this great cosmic scheme. They act as ‘*Agents of darkness*’, spreading ignorance and ignoble lower feelings, but unconsciously they are ‘*imitating light*’. Although they themselves are ‘*obscure*’, dark and shadowy, playing with darkness, ‘*unwillingly*’, without knowing what they are doing, without intending to do it, they are serving a higher power. They are not doing it deliberately, on purpose: they do not even know that they are serving a higher power. They do not know that they are playing a role in the cosmic scheme.

Ananke’s engines organising Chance,  
Channels perverse of a stupendous Will,  
Tools of the Unknown who use us as their tools,  
Invested with power in Nature’s nether state,  
Into the actions mortals think their own  
They bring the incoherencies of Fate,  
Or make a doom of Time’s slipshod caprice  
And toss the lives of men from hand to hand  
In an inconsequent and devious game.

‘*Ananke*’ is a terrifying faceless goddess from ancient Greek mythology. She represents the inescapable force of cosmic Necessity. Even the Olympian gods turn their faces away when she comes near.

They do not want her to look at them and they do not want to look at her. She is one of the great primal forces of the universe and she makes use of these perverse obscure spirits of the lower life levels to get her work done. What has been decided by the Supreme Will gets worked out by the combined play of Necessity – of what must be – and Chance. For that, Ananke makes use of these little elemental entities, these *'perverse'* – not conforming to accepted norms or standards – *'Channels'* of *'a stupendous Will'*, a very great high Will. They are just channels that cause things to happen, without even knowing what they are doing. They are *'Tools of the Unknown'*. Those obscure entities *'use us as their tools'*; but they themselves are *'Tools of the Unknown'*. They are *'Invested with power'*: given some authority, some area that they are responsible for. In the *'nether state'*, the lower state of Nature, they use that power *'to bring the incoherencies of Fate'* *'Into the actions mortals think their own'*: we humans think that we have free will and that we can decide what we want and what we will do – but how often do things not work out the way we had planned, because something unpredictable comes in the way and makes them happen differently! Then we wonder “Oh, why did that have to happen?!” Those mischievous little beings are responsible: They are bringing those *'incoherencies of Fate'* to upset our well-laid plans. Incoherence is equivalent to confusion and disorder. Just a little stray mishap will upset our expectations. Or those mischief-makers engineer *'a doom'*: a disastrous event which seems to happen just by accident for no reason, which makes us wonder, “Why should that terrible thing have happened?” They make use of *'Time's slipshod caprice'*. A *'caprice'* is a whim, a casual passing thought which seems to have little significance: perhaps, just for a moment you think “Maybe it would be nice if such-and-such happened” without taking it seriously. But those puppeteers may make use of that passing thought or movement, and if you are not careful, if Time is careless and *'slipshod'*, that little movement may lead to a disastrous outcome. The adjective *'slipshod'* refers to something carried out without proper care or thought.

Those beings do not care about us humans, our sufferings, and our feelings. They just play with us. They *'toss the lives of men'* like a ball,

throwing it here and there ‘*from hand to hand / In an inconsequent and devious game.*’ ‘*Inconsequent*’ suggests something that has no serious purpose or intention. In a game of professional football both the teams know what they want to achieve, and winning or losing may have serious consequences for the players or the team or club; but often when kids play they do not have any particular idea. Just playing the game is fun enough and they will toss the ball this way and that way without any particular intention. It does not matter who wins or loses – that is inconsequential. But the games that those obscure beings play are not only ‘*inconsequent*’ – random and purposeless, without much significance for the players; they are also ‘*devious*’: not straightforward and clear but deceitful, sly, cunning and tricky.

Q: What does ‘*devious*’ mean?

It is connected with the verb ‘to deviate’, which means ‘to turn away’ from something; if somebody is ‘*devious*’, he will not act in a frank and straightforward way but disguise his intentions and try to do some mischief without being detected. These beings are like that.

Against all higher truth their stuff rebels;  
Only to Titan force their will lies prone.  
Inordinate their hold on human hearts,  
In all our nature’s turns they intervene.

These beings are rebellious; they revolt, they do not want to obey. They do not want to be in tune with any higher truth. ‘*Against all higher truth their stuff rebels*’: their very substance resists the truth, the higher light. The only thing they will obey is ‘*Titan force*’. They can be controlled only by a more powerful will; then ‘*their will lies prone*’: it becomes quiet and submissive when a higher powerful will is exerted. That is how the Mother and Sri Aurobindo used to control these little beings, not by force but by the power of their will.

Those beings have a tremendous influence over ‘*human hearts*’. It is ‘*Inordinate*’ – out of all proportion, and they will not let us go: ‘*they intervene*’ or interfere in every turn of our lower nature. They are always at work there.

Insignificant architects of low-built lives  
And engineers of interest and desire,  
Out of crude earthiness and muddy thrills  
And coarse reactions of material nerve  
They build our huddled structures of self-will  
And the ill-lighted mansions of our thought,  
Or with the ego's factories and marts  
Surround the beautiful temple of the soul.

So this is what they are doing with the power, with the 'hold', the influence that they have over our nature. They act as 'architects' and 'engineers', not very great or important ones, just 'Insignificant' ones: maybe not very skilled. But they are building the 'structures' of our nature. They build for us 'low-built lives', like small mud huts, and the mechanisms that they use for that are 'interest and desire'. Our self-interest, our selfishness, our limited view of what is good for us and what we desire is one of the primary motivations of human beings. Only later on do we develop higher aims such as *dharma* and *moksha*. Until then, these puppeteers make use of our 'crude earthiness', our most material parts, which give us 'muddy thrills', thrills from things that are primitive and unrefined: 'coarse reactions of material nerve'. That is the level where they are working. 'They build our huddled structures of self-will', the things we insist on doing to satisfy our personal desires and inclinations. He compares those movements to 'huddled structures', pressed close together as in slums. Often in cold weather animals will huddle together, for protection or to keep warm. The poet is giving this as an image of the primitive desires which those beings arouse in the lower levels of our consciousness: like huts, poor huts made of mud and packed close together. But they also build 'mansions'. 'Mansions' are much bigger buildings than huts, and originally the word would mean almost a palace, a noble house. But here in India it has come to mean an apartment block: a place where many people live in small apartments. The 'mansions of our thought' may be bigger structures than mud huts but they are 'ill-lit'. They have only the little life-mind to light them; they are dingy, dull places. Our lower-life parts construct

and live in slum-like huts and dingy, badly-lit apartments and around these '*structures of self-will*' are crowded '*factories*' where the ego is making its products, and '*markets*': markets or bazaars. In the centre stands '*the beautiful temple of the soul*'; but as we often see in cities the beautiful sacred temple is closely surrounded by all these other humbler and cruder structures which are not beautiful at all.

Artists minute of the hues of littleness,  
They set the mosaic of our comedy  
Or plan the trivial tragedy of our days,  
Arrange the deed, combine the circumstance  
And the fantasia of the moods costume.

In their little way these beings are '*Artists*' but they occupy themselves only with '*minute*' details, and use only drab colours '*of littleness*' to create '*the mosaic of our comedy*'. A '*mosaic*' is a picture or decoration made of small stone tiles. Mosaics can be extremely beautiful, but these beings are piecing together only a drab dull picture '*of our comedy*': illustrating ridiculousness of our little life. Apart from '*comedy*' there is another kind of drama that we call '*tragedy*', but the dramas which this '*ironic troupe*' involve us in have nothing to do with the great, noble tragedies that have a purifying effect on our consciousness. These are '*trivial*' tragedies. They prompt us to get upset about small unimportant things. Those puppeteers are there, arranging everything: the drama, the mood, the circumstances, and like artistic directors they are even choosing the right costumes for each scene of the drama of our lives.

Q: What does '*fantasia*' mean?

A fantasy, an extravagant or unrealistic imagination.

These unwise prompters of man's ignorant heart  
And tutors of his stumbling speech and will,  
Movers of petty wraths and lusts and hates  
And changeful thoughts and shallow emotion's starts,  
These slight illusion-makers with their masks,  
Painters of the decor of a dull-hued stage

And nimble scene-shifters of the human play,  
Ever are busy with this ill-lit scene.

All the imagery in this passage is from the theatre: the '*prompter*' is hidden under the stage to remind the actors if they forget what they are supposed to say or do. These entities, these little beings are always prompting '*man's ignorant heart*' from below and they are not prompting it wisely; they are '*unwise prompters*', misleading us. They are '*tutors*' coaching us about what to say and what to aim for. They are '*Movers*', moving us to anger, to lust and longing and passion and to hate, making suggestions to upset us so that we get angry, and inspiring in us '*changeeful thoughts*' and shallow but troubling emotions. These beings are '*slight*', insignificant, and not very powerful but still they can create illusions, and they wear masks to deceive us. As in a theatre, they paint scenery for their dramas but they create '*a dull-hued stage*': the colours are not bright and luminous but dull greys and browns. They are '*nimble scene-shifters*' setting the stage and moving the scenery around. '*Nimble*' means 'quick and agile': they cleverly change the appearances of things. It seems they are always busy at work, fixing and arranging the '*ill-lit scene*' of this lower life, the lower levels of our nature.

Ourselves incapable to build our fate  
Only as actors speak and strut our parts  
Until the piece is done and we pass off  
Into a brighter Time and subtler Space.

On that lower life level and in that state of consciousness we are unable to control our own fate. The Mother tells us that this is the most important thing that we, human beings should do: take charge of our own destiny, become conscious of who we really are and for what we are here on earth. But in these lower levels of our nature we are not able to do that. We are '*incapable to build our fate*'. We are like hired actors who must only say and do what the director tells them. We are just speaking the words that those prompters put into our mouths and doing the things that they tell us to do. As long as the play lasts we may '*strut our parts*', as actors in the ancient Greek theatre used to do, wearing enormous boots and brightly coloured

masks and making the very exaggerated movements that we call ‘strutting’ so that they could be clearly seen from even the most distant seats high up in the amphitheatre. Then we may feel very important for a while, but when our part in the play is over we must leave the stage and ‘*pass off / Into a brighter Time and a subtler Space*’ – perhaps to a higher and truer level of existence.

Thus they inflict their little pigmy law  
And curb the mounting slow uprising of man,  
Then his too scanty walk with death they close.

In this way those elemental beings control our lives and make us suffer under ‘*their little pigmy law*’. ‘*Pigmy*’ means ‘very small’. This is the point the poet is emphasising: the smallness of these beings and their motives and their behaviour. They force us to follow their law of littleness, and in that way they ‘*curb*’ or hold back the ‘*slow uprising of man*’. The ‘*uprising of man*’, the higher evolution of humanity, is inevitable. Progress is the true law of our nature, and we shall inevitably fulfil it in time. But meanwhile these elemental beings do their best to hold us back. A ‘*curb*’ is a piece of metal or leather that is put into the mouth of a horse so that the rider can pull on the reins to control him. Or alongside the street there is a ‘*curb*’, a raised barrier that separates the roadway from the pavement; it is supposed to prevent motorcycles and cars going up where people walk. ‘To curb’ something means ‘to hold it back’, preventing it from moving too quickly. Those beings do their best to ‘*curb the mounting slow uprising of man*’. They allow us to make as little progress as possible in our lifetime, in the very little time and space that we are given, and then ‘*they close*’ our ‘*too scanty walk*’. They say, ‘Now it is time to go, your time is up!’ and we have to move on to the next stage. What we are or seem to be at this lower-life level is not our true state; we have not yet fulfilled our destiny or reached our final destination.

End of Section 4

## Section 5, lines 458-601

In this section Sri Aurobindo will tell us more about the ‘*human animal*’ who has a human form but only an animal consciousness and is under the influence of the manipulative beings of the Little Life realms.

This is the ephemeral creature’s daily life.  
As long as the human animal is lord  
And a dense nether nature screens the soul,  
As long as intellect’s outward-gazing sight  
Serves earthy interest and creature joys,  
An incurable littleness pursues his days.

In the previous section we read about the malicious beings who manipulate our lives, our emotions and our mind in the realm of the Little Life, making us their puppets and playthings. Now the poet tells us: ‘*This is the ephemeral creature’s daily life*’. ‘*Ephemeral*’ means ‘short-lived’. We human beings are far from immortal; our life lasts only a very short time. The poet tells us that we shall remain in this state – of being pursued by ‘*an incurable littleness*’ – ‘*As long as the human animal is lord*’: that is, until we have become truly human, until we have become fully mental beings, and as long as we remain at this stage of having a human form but still living the animal life: ‘*As long as the human animal is lord / And a dense nether nature screens the soul*’. We have a soul of course. The divine presence is within us, but it is screened, covered up by ‘*a dense nether nature*’ which is dominated by unconsciousness and unable to receive divine vibrations, because the screen does not allow them to pass through. Even when we are in that state there is some kind of mind – a life-mind; but that ‘*intellect’s outward-gazing sight*’ is turned only towards outer sensations and concerns, and is focused only on ‘*earthy interest and creature joys*’, on what seems materially good and enjoyable: how to get nice food and more comfort and rest and an easy and pleasant life, and the joys of the lower nature. As long as we are in that state of consciousness, ‘*An incurable littleness pursues [our] days*’: some pettiness, some smallness in

us remains incurable: it can only be cured by rising to a higher level of consciousness.

Q: What does he mean by ‘*earthy*’?

‘Earthiness’ is connected with the earth, with soil, with the ground, with what is material.

Q: Is there a difference between ‘*earthy*’ and ‘*earthly*’?

In religious texts we may read about ‘*worldly*’ or ‘*earthly*’ things as opposed to ‘*heavenly*’ things; but here Sri Aurobindo has said not ‘*earthly*’ but ‘*earthy*’. I think that he wants us to think of the earth: of the matter which is our physical base and the kind of ‘*joys*’ it inspires in us.

Ever since consciousness was born on earth,  
Life is the same in insect, ape and man,  
Its stuff unchanged, its way the common route.

The first manifestation of ‘*consciousness ... on earth*’ was in primitive life-forms, and the nature of life has not changed since their emergence. Life on earth is still the same. Maybe insects came first, then later the fish and mammals, including the many different primates and then ‘*man*’ the highest primate, but the basic stuff of this little life is ‘*unchanged*’ and still follows ‘*the common route*’: the same path that all life is following.

Q: Hasn’t there been some evolution?

There has been some evolution but that lower life has not changed fundamentally. It is basically the same. The life interests have remained the same: survival, food, possession, some very limited, primitive enjoyments. That has not changed, Sri Aurobindo says. Of course some evolution has happened, with some mental and emotional development so that now we are no longer entirely human animals, not simply ‘*naked apes*’ as we have been described by at least one eminent zoologist. To an extent we are touched by higher things, so we can become true human beings now. Nevertheless, the poet tells us:

If new designs, if richer details grow  
And thought is added and more tangled cares,  
If little by little it wears a brighter face,  
Still even in man the plot is mean and poor.

Here when Sri Aurobindo says '*If*' we should understand it as meaning 'although' or 'even though'. Even though '*new designs*' and '*richer details*' have been added to the possibilities of life-expression, and although '*thought*' has been added to our human possibilities bringing with it '*more tangled cares*', more complicated anxieties and concerns, and despite the fact that '*little by little*' life may perhaps have begun to wear '*a brighter face*', still '*even in man*' – even at the level of human beings who are supposed to represent the higher capacity of mind – '*the plot*', the story of human life, remains very '*mean*': small and petty, and '*poor*'.

A gross content prolongs his fallen state;  
His small successes are failures of the soul,  
His little pleasures punctuate frequent griefs:  
Hardship and toil are the heavy price he pays  
For the right to live and his last wages death.

This passage refers to Man: to us human beings and our story. If we are content to go on living at the little life level and remain satisfied with that, we shall not progress to a higher state, because '*A gross content*' will just prolong our condition, our '*fallen state*'. If we are just contented, satisfied with our '*earthy interest and creature joys*', our present imperfect state, which seems to correspond to a fall from our true higher nature, will be prolonged: it will simply last longer. For the '*human animal*' all his '*small successes*' at satisfying his desires and getting what he wants are actually '*failures of the soul*'. Sri Aurobindo says that he may get some '*little pleasures*' but they are just like dots or commas or colons punctuating his '*frequent griefs*': his many sufferings, prolonging his self-satisfaction and preventing him from developing further. All human beings have to suffer '*Hardship and toil*', difficulties and effort. That is '*the heavy price*' that every human being pays for '*the right to live*'; and after all the labour and effort and striving and suffering of our lives, the

last wages we receive, our last relief and liberation, comes in the form of ‘*death*’: we are told, “Now you can leave the body, leave this world and this difficult state.”

Q: What does ‘*gross*’ mean here?

Here it means ‘*crude*’ or ‘*unrefined*’. We speak about the difference between the gross physical body, the material body, and the inner subtle physical body. The gross physical substance is denser, heavier, less refined. In this context the phrase ‘*gross content*’ might also refer to the *tamasic* nature of our physical body which is helping to prolong ‘*our fallen state*’.

An inertia sunk towards inconscience,  
A sleep that imitates death is his repose.  
A puny splendour of creative force  
Is made his spur to fragile human works  
Which yet outlast their brief creator’s breath.

These are some other characteristics of our gross physical life. We need to rest, and in order to rest we go into a kind of inert state, a state without energy. We lie down to rest and fall asleep. Poets have referred to sleep as ‘*Death’s brother*’; here Sri Aurobindo says that our gross physical sleep ‘*imitates death*’. When we are really deeply asleep perhaps someone might think that we are dead.

Q: That can happen even when we are not sleeping also, for instance, when someone is in deep trance.

Yes, we sometimes say of an unresponsive person that he or she is ‘*dead to the world*’.

Even if we are aware to some extent, we cannot stay fully aware all the time. There is something in our lower nature, in the way that we are tied to our material origin, ‘*inertia*’ or the quality that resists any movement or change, which means that we always tend to sink back ‘*towards inconscience*’, unconsciousness. But then what is it that which occasionally spurs us into action? Sri Aurobindo calls it ‘*A puny splendour of creative force*’. ‘*Puny*’ means ‘*weak*’. He says that this positive dynamic, ‘*creative force*’

is also a characteristic of life as opposed to matter but it is given to us in a very small measure. That ‘*creative force*’ always has some ‘*splendour*’ about it although it may be very limited. That is the ‘*spur*’ which drives the individual, the motivation which goads him or impels him to act, to achieve something, even if only some ‘*fragile human works*’. Our human achievements do not last very long; eventually they will crumble or be destroyed, but even so, the poet says, those achievements may last longer than the individual himself and ‘*outlast*’ the lifetime of their creator, ‘*their brief creator’s breath*’. That may be one of the things which spurs us to try to be creative: the idea of producing or doing something that may last a little longer than the brief moment when we created them and our own short lifetime.

He dreams sometimes of the revels of the gods  
And sees the Dionysian gesture pass,—  
A leonine greatness that would tear his soul  
If through his failing limbs and fainting heart  
The sweet and joyful mighty madness swept:  
Trivial amusements stimulate and waste  
The energy given to him to grow and be.

Some human beings do have higher dreams and visions. Perhaps they may glimpse sometimes ‘*the revels*’ or celebrations ‘*of the gods*’ and see ‘*the Dionysian gesture pass*’. Dionysus was the ancient Greek god of wine who gave ecstasy and *ananda*. He corresponds to the Vedic god Soma and in classical art his ‘*Dionysian gesture*’ or movement is depicted as a procession of revellers. In Italy he was known as Bacchus and there are some wonderful old paintings showing him in his chariot which is being pulled by leopards or lions, surrounded by dancing nymphs and satyrs who are crushing grapes and drinking wine: images that express delight and rapture and divine intoxication. In ancient Greece annual theatre festivals were conducted as sacred rituals in honour of Dionysus, who would bestow a state of ecstasy upon his worshippers.

Q: What are ‘*revels*’?

Joyful celebrations. In the next line the poet refers to the procession of Dionysus and all his attendants and their ecstatic state as ‘*A leonine greatness*’. ‘*Leonine*’ is the adjective from ‘lion’.

Q: Leo the Lion?

Yes. That celebration of Dionysus is irresistibly powerful, like the leap of a lion. Its revelry would destroy the small human soul of the dreamer if that ‘*sweet and joyful mighty madness*’ really ‘*swept through his failing limbs and fainting heart*’, for we human beings do not have the capacity to bear that intense rapture, that ecstasy, that delight. It would just destroy us.

Q: Does ‘*If*’ here also mean ‘although’ as it did earlier?

No. In what we read earlier it meant ‘although’ or ‘even if’, but here the poet is warning us against getting carried away or caught up into that ‘*leonine greatness that would tear*’ the soul of the dreamer if that ‘*mighty madness*’ of Dionysus really swept through his being; but normally that does not happen: we are protected from such experiences which would be too much for us to bear. Or if occasionally it happens, perhaps the poor person does go mad: it is a ‘*sweet and joyful mighty madness*’ but it is too powerful for us human beings. A human being might perhaps dream of something like that; he might perhaps get a glimpse of passing Dionysian revelry. But in fact, in our little life, we are much more likely to indulge in ‘*Trivial amusements*’ that ‘*stimulate*’ or excite our life-energies and at the same time ‘*waste*’ them because they are not given to us to be spent on trivial amusements, but to enable us ‘*to grow and be*’: to become what we are truly meant to become.

‘*Trivial*’ means insignificant: unimportant and without much value. A trifle is something very small and not very important.

Trivial amusements stimulate and waste  
The energy given to him to grow and be.

These are two memorable lines. We can remember them and notice in our own lives and those of people around us how we tend to get stimulated by trivial amusements and how that leads us to waste

our precious life-energies which are given to enable us ‘*to grow and be*’.

The next passage continues this statement about the triviality that tends to occupy too much of our lives.

His little hour is spent in little things.  
A brief companionship with many jars,  
A little love and jealousy and hate,  
A touch of friendship mid indifferent crowds  
Draw his heart-plan on life’s diminutive map.

We human beings do not have a very long time to live. We have only a ‘*little hour*’ and we tend to occupy much of that short time with ‘*little things*’. The poet goes on to give us examples of ‘*little things*’ which occupy our lives and absorb our energy: ‘*A brief companionship with many jars*’. Even if we are lucky enough to find a supportive life-companion, there will still be many small clashes and disagreements: ‘*jars*’ between us. Human relationships are rarely, if ever, all harmonious. The typical human life-experience is made up of ‘*A little love and jealousy and hate,*’ and ‘*A touch of friendship*’, amongst ‘*indifferent crowds*’ of people who mean little to us.

Q: What do ‘*jars*’ have to do with this?

Here it means ‘clashes’ or ‘disagreements’. When a door is not properly closed, so that every little breeze makes it bang against the door-frame with an irritating sound, we say that it is ‘ajar’ or ‘jarring’. Here the poet is pointing out to us how small ‘*trivial things*’ define the course of our lives and ‘*draw the plan*’ of our hearts ‘*on life’s diminutive map*’: ‘*diminutive*’ means ‘extremely small’. He is emphasising the pettiness of our normal emotional lives.

If something great awakes, too frail his pitch  
To reveal its zenith tension of delight,  
His thought to eternise its ephemeral soar,  
Art’s brilliant gleam is a pastime for his eyes,  
A thrill that smites the nerves is music’s spell.

If or when something greater, some greater possibility, wakes up in us for a moment, we simply do not have the capacity to respond to it adequately. The word *'pitch'* is used in music to refer to the range of notes a particular instrument, or a particular human voice, can produce. Unfortunately the human instrument, this human animal, is too *'frail'* and weak to be able to express the full *'tension of delight'* of greater possibilities. The *'zenith'* is the highest point; the human being normally cannot reach the high pitch that would adequately express the great things he has glimpsed or dreamed of. He may get a glimpse or hint of them; something higher may wake up in him, but he cannot express it. His thought is not able to provide a form which could give an eternal expression to that *'soar'*, that higher flight which he has experienced just for an *'ephemeral'* moment. As an example the poet mentions *'Art'*. Art, poetry and music are among the higher human achievements which can potentially bring us a truer and greater kind of delight, but too often we regard them as just a *'pastime'*: a pleasant and agreeable way of passing our time. We do not normally dedicate a lot of time and attention to them; only a few people really value art and take it seriously. Great music can transport a sensitive listener into higher realms, but for the little-life part of our human nature it is only a passing *'thrill that smites the nerves'*; *'to smite'* means *'to hit'*.

Amidst his harassed toil and welter of cares,  
Pressed by the labour of his crowding thoughts,  
He draws sometimes around his aching brow  
Nature's calm mighty hands to heal his life-pain.  
He is saved by her silence from his rack of self;  
In her tranquil beauty is his purest bliss.

One great relief that we may experience in the midst of all the *'toil'* and worries of our ordinary lives may come from the touch of *'Nature's calm mighty hands'* which can heal and relieve our anxieties and exhaustion. It is not only that human beings have to work hard; there always seems to be something interfering with our peace of mind. We feel *'harassed'*. We are trying to concentrate and get something worthwhile done, but there are so many interruptions

and disturbances and distractions which make us feel *'harassed'* as if a pack of hungry dogs is barking at our heels, always pursuing us with a *'welter of cares'*: *'welter'* is a word used to evoke the movement of an angry sea, when huge waves follow swiftly one after another. Cares, anxieties, troubles may seem to be tossing us around as if in a stormy sea, and we feel as if we are being *'Pressed by the labour of [our] crowding thoughts'*: It is so tiring when troublesome thoughts and duties keep coming up and will not stop. Then we are blessed if we can turn to nature: *'He draws sometimes around his aching brow / Nature's calm mighty hands to heal his life-pain'*. We may be able to look up to the sky at night and see the moon or the stars or the clouds moving and feel some relief, some vastness, and some healing touch. Or perhaps we can go and stand on the seashore, or take a walk in a park or forest and feel the life of the trees: these are healing experiences that give us relief from the troubles of the little life and our *'crowding thoughts'*.

Q: What is meant by *'His aching brow'*?

When you are disturbed by *'crowding thoughts'* and anxieties your head may start to ache. Then it feels very soothing if someone comes with cool hands to smooth away the tension and headache. That is one of the things that we turn to nature for: the comfort of those soothing hands. Then we are *'saved by her silence'*: by the silence of nature man is saved *'from his rack of self'*. The *'rack'* was an instrument of torture used in the olden days. They would tie a person onto a complicated wooden framework and then pull the levers and tear his joints apart. We often seem to be torturing ourselves. Then one of the things that can save us is the silence of nature. *'In her tranquil beauty is his purest bliss'*. Turning to nature is perhaps the best way for us to experience some pure happiness.

Q: What does the word *'self'* refer to in *'his rack of self'*?

It is our *'little self'*, which causes us pain. Of course we have a higher self which does not torture us like that, but there are times when it is difficult for us to get away from our lower selves and our troubles and worries. Then to take a walk in a park or a forest or to go down to the sea, or even just to look up into the sky can give a

great relief. It is perhaps the easiest way for us to widen our narrow little selves to some extent.

A new life dawns, he looks out from vistas wide;  
The Spirit's breath moves him but soon retires:  
His strength was not made to hold that puissant guest.

If we can widen ourselves a little like that, we may experience the dawning of '*a new life*', and new wider '*vistas*' or perspectives may open up before us; we may even feel touched by '*The Spirit's breath*'. But that feeling usually does not last long; it '*soon retires*': it withdraws. The little life-self does not have enough strength to receive '*that puissant guest*': the powerful visitor who brings us a touch of '*The Spirit's breath*'.

All dulls down to convention and routine  
Or a fierce excitement brings him vivid joys:  
His days are tinged with the red hue of strife  
And lust's hot glare and passion's crimson stain;  
Battle and murder are his tribal game.

Whatever relief we may experience, soon everything '*dulls down*' again to the little life of '*convention and routine*', of duties and dull respectability. Or some kind of '*fierce excitement*' brings us '*vivid joys*', but too often those joys and excitements come from '*strife*': from quarrelling and fighting or from the passions of the flesh: '*lust's hot glare and passion's crimson stain*'. These give some excitement and some sense that life is worth living; and for this human animal, '*Battle and murder are his tribal game*', even if the game takes the form of football or tennis or any other kind of competition.

Q: In this passage we see the colours '*red*' and '*crimson*' mentioned. Is red the colour of Little Life?

Red is the typical colour of the guna *rajas*, as is deep blue the colour of *tamas* and yellow the colour of *sattwa*. This passage is describing the *rajasic* passions that are typical of the Little Life.

Time has he none to turn his eyes within  
And look for his lost self and his dead soul.  
His motion on too short an axis wheels;

He cannot soar but creeps on his long road  
Or if, impatient of the trudge of Time,  
He would make a splendid haste on Fate's slow road,  
His heart that runs soon pants and tires and sinks;  
Or he walks ever on and finds no end.

If the life-self is occupied with dull routine or trivial amusements or with exhausting excitements, there is no time for the individual 'to turn his eyes within' to look for 'his lost self and his dead soul'. The soul seems to be dead. The movement of the little life-self is very limited: 'His motion on too short an axis wheels': the wheels of a vehicle are joined by an axle; the length of the axle determines the 'axis' around which the wheels rotate. If that 'axis' is too short the wheels cannot turn or 'wheel' very freely, so the driver of the vehicle cannot move it very far or very fast. Also the little life-self is bound to the surface of things: it cannot 'soar' or fly to a great height like an eagle. It has to creep very slowly, like a worm, on its long evolutionary road.

'To trudge' means 'to walk slowly and with difficulty': in the morning you may set out on a long walk feeling full of energy, but by the evening perhaps you are trudging along to reach your goal. If the being gets impatient 'with the trudge of Time', with the way that time seems to be moving too slowly while he wants to 'make a splendid haste' because he wants to do something magnificent and progress quickly 'on Fate's slow road', his heart may have that impulse and that energy and that wish, but it soon gets tired. He cannot sustain the will to move more quickly and make a big progress. 'His heart that runs' soon gets tired 'and sinks', so he cannot go very far: if you run very fast, soon you start panting, the breath does not come properly, and you 'sink'. Or if he is not rushing along like that, he is just walking on and on and on without coming to any end. This allows him only a very limited perspective.

Hardly a few can climb to greater life.

All tunes to a low scale and conscious pitch.

Only a few people or souls can succeed in rising to a higher life, because in this little-life state everything tends towards 'a low scale

*and conscious pitch*'. We came across this word '*pitch*' a little earlier; it is a term that is used in connection with music: an instrument or voice can have a high pitch or a low pitch. Here it refers to the prevailing level of consciousness in this nether life.

His knowledge dwells in the house of Ignorance;  
His force nears not even once the Omnipotent,  
Rare are his visits of heavenly ecstasy.

Here the poet mentions three important elements of our being: our capacity for knowledge, for strength, force, vital energy and will, and our capacity for delight. At the level of the human animal, '*knowledge*' is confined to living '*in the house of Ignorance*', surrounded by so much that is unknown and unseen. His '*force*' or strength is also very limited: it never '*even once*' comes anywhere near the all-powerful. And the capacity for delight is similarly restricted: if at all he is visited by '*heavenly ecstasy*' it happens only very rarely. Only now and again there might come some touch of higher delight.

The bliss which sleeps in things and tries to wake,  
Breaks out in him in a small joy of life:  
This scanty grace is his persistent stay;  
It lightens the burden of his many ills  
And reconciles him to his little world.

Sri Aurobindo has often told us that everything in this world is made by bliss, by *ananda*; but in the material world that bliss is sleeping. It is sleeping '*in things*', in material objects and trying to wake up. Earlier he described to us how that bliss expresses itself in plants and animals. In the human animal it '*Breaks out*' in a small limited '*joy of life*'; but even that little is precious, a grace and blessing although it is a '*scanty grace*'. '*Scanty*' means 'insufficient' or 'inadequate': but still, even though it is not much, not enough, this '*small joy of life*' is the '*persistent stay*' of the being. Here '*stay*' means 'a support', a help, something that can be relied on: the thing that keeps him going. If it were not for this little '*joy of life*' everybody would give up in inertia and despair. That '*joy of life*' '*lightens the burden*', the heavy load of all the many things

everybody has to suffer: all the things that go wrong with the body and life. That '*joy of life*' '*reconciles*' the being '*to his little world*': he accepts the inadequacy of his experience only because of that small '*joy of life*'.

He is satisfied with his common average kind;  
Tomorrow's hopes and his old rounds of thought,  
His old familiar interests and desires  
He has made into a thick and narrowing hedge  
Defending his small life from the Invisible;  
His being's kinship to infinity  
He has shut away from him into inmost self,  
Fenced off the greatneses of hidden God.

This being of the lower-life level '*is satisfied with his common average kind*'. He accepts the pettiness and limitations of the little world he finds himself living in. There is little or no aspiration, no urge to become higher or nobler or for things to be better. The little hopes for tomorrow, what will be good; the '*old rounds of thought*', the accustomed accepted way of thinking and '*old familiar interests and desires*', all these things together form '*a thick and narrowing hedge*' around his life as a kind of defence and protection. As the hedge grows thicker it leaves him less and less space for movement. But it defends his small life. It helps him to survive in his separateness, protects him '*from the Invisible*': against all the scary invisible things which he cannot see. But at the same time it cuts him off from his '*kinship to infinity*'. We are all connected to infinity. We are part of the family of the infinite; but at this little-life level the beings have separated themselves from that '*kinship*' and shut themselves away from their true '*inmost self*', and '*Fenced*' themselves off from '*the greatneses*' of '*hidden God*', who inhabits even the least of his creations. All of us have that greatness within us, but it is very difficult to break through the defensive fence or hedge which we have erected around ourselves.

His being was formed to play a trivial part  
In a little drama on a petty stage;

In a narrow plot he has pitched his tent of life  
Beneath the wide gaze of the starry Vast.

Now the poet tells us that this human animal has been formed as he is because he has a part to play. It is only a small role, '*a trivial part*' and the drama that he has to act in is only '*a little drama on a petty stage*'. It seems to be not very important and yet it does have a certain importance. It is as if this being is like a nomad, with no fixed abode. When he comes into the material world he does not have a permanent home, but only a tent which he has put up on a small space, '*a narrow plot*'. It is not a very big space, but overhead there is '*the wide gaze of the starry Vast*': the vast sky full of stars. From his '*narrow plot*' he can look up into the whole universe with all those uncountable stars. Every one of them is a powerful sun of truth, although we see them only as tiny little lights.

He is the crown of all that has been done:  
Thus is creation's labour justified;  
This is the world's result, Nature's last poise!

At a certain stage in evolution, this little life-being may have seemed to be the ultimate achievement; and perhaps that is how that little creature felt about himself: that '*He is the crown*', the highest achievement of all that has been done and that the creation has come into existence only in order to achieve this result, and that he himself is the '*last poise*' of Nature. But of course that is not the case.

And if this were all and nothing more were meant,  
If what now seems were the whole of what must be,  
If this were not a stade through which we pass  
On our road from Matter to eternal Self,  
To the Light that made the worlds, the Cause of things,  
Well might interpret our mind's limited view  
Existence as an accident in Time,  
Illusion or phenomenon or freak,  
The paradox of a creative Thought  
Which moves between unreal opposites,  
Inanimate Force struggling to feel and know,

Matter that chanced to read itself by Mind,  
Inconscience monstrously engendering soul.

If he were right, if what we now see, all these outer appearances, were indeed all that was intended when the creation was manifested, if this were indeed the world's last result and nature's final achievement, if '*nothing more were meant*' and '*If what now seems were the whole of what must be*', if there were nothing more to come, '*If this were not a stade*' – a stade: a stage or a phase, some part of a journey '*through which we pass*' / *On our road from Matter to eternal Self*', then we could have accepted '*our mind's limited view*' of '*Existence*', which is elaborated in the rest of this passage. In fact, this '*human animal*' stage is just one phase in a much longer journey, the journey '*To the Light that made the worlds*' – the light of consciousness that has caused all this to appear, that Light which is '*the Cause of things*'. If what we see now is really everything and nothing more is planned and intended then '*Well might our mind's limited view*', not seeing all the rest, interpret '*Existence as an accident in Time ...*'. And In fact that is what the modern mind often does. It says, "All this has come about by Chance, it has happened accidentally". Or some people have come to the conclusion that all this is unreal, just an '*Illusion*'; or it is a '*phenomenon*', an effect of something that we do not know about; or it is a '*freak*' – that is another way of saying an accident, something strange, abnormal. What is existence as we see it? It seems to be something paradoxical, contradictory. There is this power of '*a creative Thought*', of consciousness, that seems to be moving between '*unreal opposites*'. We live in a world of duality, which seems to be made up of contradictory opposites. The poet lists three such apparent contradictions for us:

Inanimate Force struggling to feel and know,  
Matter that chanced to read itself by Mind,  
Inconscience monstrously engendering soul.

How can such contradictions come into existence? How can '*Inanimate Force*', manifesting as atoms or subatomic particles, come together in conscious forms, as animals or human beings

who struggle to explore their environment through the senses and to reach some kind of knowledge about the world they inhabit? How could material forms begin to become self-aware and learn to understand themselves by the power of Mind? How could this inconscient universe produce conscious beings, aware of being divine souls?

But these apparently contradictory opposites are in fact part of one reality. There is now even a scientific – you cannot even call it a hypothesis anymore – a scientific position, a point of view called The Anthropomorphic Principle which points out that even if our world has been made by chance it has happened in a way that allows the presence of conscious beings like ourselves. And because the scientists do not want to believe that this could be purposive, that there could be a cosmic plan and intention behind all this, it has led them to the theory of many universes: that there must be an infinite number of universes, and that we just happen to live in one where the conditions are such that, by chance, beings that are conscious enough to ask these questions could arise. One characteristic of this world that we live in is *'Inanimate force'*: material force, material energy, which seems in human beings to be *'struggling to feel and know'*. If we look at it evolutionarily, perhaps even in the plant or the simplest life forms there is a force that is trying to feel and to know, and as evolution progresses that force may be feeling and knowing more and more. If indeed all this universal existence is only matter or a product of matter, somehow that matter has come to a state where it can begin to use something called mind, a power or product of matter called mind, *'to read itself'*, to try to understand itself. Here the poet says that if the human animal were really the Cause of everything, our mind's limited view might very well see it like this: as *'Inconscience monstrously engendering soul'*. The beginning of our universe, our material universe seems to be a state of total inconscience – with no consciousness at all. And yet somehow, inexplicably, out of inconscient matter, out of primitive life, out of struggling mind, something has emerged which seems to have higher properties than mind, something that we call soul, which has another power of knowledge and energy.

Here, when the poet says '*Monstrously*', I think that he means 'abnormally'. This presence or experience that we call '*soul*' is a complete freak – how could it ever come into existence? There is no rational explanation, there is no visible process by which inconscience could produce what we call the soul. So it must be an '*Illusion or phenomenon or freak*'.

Q: What does '*engender*' mean?

Engendering is the father's part in creating a child: he provides the seed from which it can grow.

Q: What is the difference between an '*illusion*', a '*phenomenon*' and a '*freak*'?

An '*illusion*' is a mistaken sense perception, something which is perceived but misunderstood. A '*phenomenon*' means an object or appearance which we can become aware of through the senses; but we may observe the phenomena without understanding what has caused it or why it has happened. A '*freak*' is an abnormal phenomenon, such as a goat with two heads, something that is unnatural. It appears in nature but it is obvious that something has gone wrong. To the scientists, life is a phenomenon of matter: a function or an expression of matter.

Q: What does '*phenomenal*' mean?

In ordinary speech if we say that something is '*phenomenal*' we mean that it is outstanding and unusual.

At times all looks unreal and remote:  
We seem to live in a fiction of our thoughts  
Pieced from sensation's fanciful traveller's tale,  
Or caught on the film of the recording brain,  
A figment or circumstance in cosmic sleep.

Sometimes the world seems '*unreal*' to us and '*remote*': far away from our ordinary experience. Then we may feel that what we are experiencing is '*a fiction of our thoughts*', something we have made up on the basis of some fantastic tale we have heard or read about, or on some misleading sensory experience: a

'figment' created by our imagination or a dream. Earlier the poet was pointing out that '*our mind's limited view*' may show us the world in a way that agrees with the conclusions of science; but '*At times*' to our experience it may appear differently, more like a kind of dream. Sometimes we think all this is real; at other times we may feel that we are living in a product of our minds. There is even a school of philosophy called Idealism, which claims that everything we experience, everything that we think is real, with a separate independent existence, is all only the product of our own thoughts, the workings of our brain. Then we may '*seem to live in a fiction*': something imagined and unreal. A '*fiction*' is something made up. It is not real, it never happened. That '*fiction*' he says, is '*Pieced*' together, put together, on the basis of sensation, of what our senses tell us. But, he adds, what our senses tell us is like a '*fanciful traveller's tale*'. Historically we know of travellers' tales that must be based on something true. But because only one person saw it and he tries to make it understandable to other people, it may become '*fanciful*' also. For instance, it has been said that somewhere in Africa there lived dog-headed men, men with heads like dogs. Then when you see the baboons that live in Ethiopia then you think "Oh that is what they were talking about: these little men with heads similar to dogs." Or one ancient historian wrote that in the far north you come to a place where the sky is full of feathers. Some traveller must have told him about snow. In a similar way, our senses may not always be giving us an accurate picture of what we are seeing or hearing, so the way we perceive the world is a fiction '*Pieced from sensation's fanciful traveller's tale*'. Or our ideas, even memories, may just have been caught '*on the film of the recording brain*': it seems the brain subconsciously records every sensation we experience, everything that happens to us. But we do not clearly remember it all: our consciousness makes and records a selection of all those sense-impressions. Some things it may simply invent: 'figments'. A '*figment*' is a construction, something made up. Or our consciousness may have caught hold of something that really did happen in some '*cosmic sleep*'. The consciousness which is supporting the world is sleeping; it is dreaming. It is dreaming us – our thoughts, our dreams, our experiences, our sensations.

Some people have experienced things very vividly like this and concluded that this whole universe is just a dream. And who is dreaming it? There is an Indian tale which tells about a *rishi* who very, very much wanted to experience the true reality. It happened that as Lord Vishnu was sleeping on the infinite serpent Ananta and dreaming the universe into existence, the *rishi* fell out of his mouth and awoke to find himself in the midst of the cosmic ocean; he sees Vishnu sleeping there, cradled on the coils of Ananta, the snake of infinity. After a while Vishnu woke up a little bit and seeing the *rishi* floundering in the cosmic waters, picked him up and popped him back into his mouth, so that he finds himself back in his forest abode. Then the *rishi* does not know which of his experiences was real and which was the dream.

A somnambulist walking under the moon,  
An image of ego treads through an ignorant dream  
Counting the moments of a spectral Time.

A '*somnambulist*' is a sleepwalker, someone who walks in their sleep. Here Sri Aurobindo is giving this as an image of our ego. The ego is not our true self but only a false image of our self. That false image of our self is walking '*through an ignorant dream*', and in that dream it is '*Counting the moments of a spectral Time.*' '*Spectral*' is an adjective related to the noun 'spectre' which means 'a ghost' or 'phantom'. The ego itself is unreal and it is moving through an unreal dream and counting the moments of a Time which also does not have any fundamental reality: it is just the way that our ego is experiencing things as it wanders through an unreal experience of Time. Sri Aurobindo is not saying that our world is really like that: he is giving this as an example of the way in which our mind may experience things and explain the world to itself.

Q: What does '*spectral*' mean?

A spectre is something that you see although it is not really there. '*Spectral*' is the adjective corresponding to that noun.

Q: Does the word 'spectrum' have anything to do with spectres?

Yes. A 'spectre' is something that you see; other related words are 'spectacles' which you wear so that you can see things and 'spectrum' which is a range of things that can be seen.

In a false perspective of effect and cause,  
Trusting to a specious prospect of world-space,  
It drifts incessantly from scene to scene,  
Whither it knows not, to what fabulous verge.

Here we get the same root coming again in the word '*perspective*' which can refer to an artist's way of reproducing how we see things. Objects that are far away from us look smaller than if they were nearby. When an artist wants to reproduce this effect of depth and distance in a painting he may use the technique of '*perspective*' to make distant objects look further away. This method is used to paint scenery for the theatre, and there was a time when it was very fashionable if you had a beautiful house to make it look even bigger by painting '*vistas*' on the walls to give the impression of endless corridors or vast gardens. This technique can produce a misleading impression. We have the sense of passing through time and space, but here the poet speaks of a '*false perspective*' which gives a misleading impression.

Q: Why do we sometimes hear about a '*false perspective*'?

Your psychological perspective is your way of seeing things. From your standpoint, what do things look like? If you think that you are looking at things from too close up you can step back and then you might see the larger picture from a wider perspective.

Sri Aurobindo says that the ego is '*Trusting to a specious prospect of world-space*': A '*prospect*' is a view that you may see from a high window or balcony. Similarly the ego, which itself is an unreal formation, is likely to perceive the world around it from a '*false perspective*' because the senses are giving it '*a specious prospect*': a view which is misleading, unreliable. The limited ego, he says, is drifting through these false perspectives, through these specious prospects. It is drifting '*incessantly*', endlessly, '*from scene to scene*',

from one scene to another. It does not know where it is going, ‘*to what fabulous verge*’. A ‘*verge*’ is an edge or borderline. Nowadays we use the term ‘*fabulous*’ as a word of praise for something remarkable, fantastic; but its original sense is of something that is told in a story, something out of a fable or fairytale.

Q: What does ‘*whither*’ mean?

‘Whither?’ is a question meaning ‘where to?’ I think we have come across this word several times before, along with its companion words: ‘hither’ which goes with ‘come’ to make an invitation or command: ‘come hither’ meaning ‘come here’; similarly ‘thither’ means ‘there’. Sometimes we put these two together to refer to someone who is wandering ‘hither and thither’, not knowing which way to go. There is another triplet of such words: ‘Whence’, meaning ‘from where’, ‘hence’ meaning ‘from here’, and ‘thence’ meaning ‘from there’.

The poet says:

All here is dreamed or doubtfully exists,  
But who the dreamer is and whence he looks  
Is still unknown or only a shadowy guess.

Everything we perceive in this world is only a dream, and it is doubtful whether it really exists as it seems to. And who is dreaming this dream? Where is he looking at the world from? What is his standpoint? Sri Aurobindo tells us that in our present state we do not know that; we can only make a ‘*shadowy guess*’ about that ‘*dreamer*’ and his position.

Or the world is real but ourselves too small,  
Insufficient for the mightiness of our stage.

This is another view which some philosophers have taken: that ‘*the world is real*’ but it is so vast that in comparison to it we are like tiny ants. What does the ant know about the universe? We are too small to be able to understand the vast universe around us; we cannot know or really participate in the ‘*mightiness*’ of the vast ‘*stage*’ on which the cosmic drama – in which we ourselves are a part, is being played out.

A thin life-curve crosses the titan whirl  
Of the orbit of a soulless universe,  
And in the belly of the sparse rolling mass  
A mind looks out from a small casual globe  
And wonders what itself and all things are.

There seems to be a '*thin life-curve*' crossing this '*titan whirl*', the vast movement of this universe which appears to be '*soulless*', to have no soul, no consciousness; and '*in the belly*', in the very middle of the '*sparse rolling mass*' which we perceive as the material universe, a little '*mind looks out from a small casual globe*': a globe which has apparently appeared by accident; and that mind looks and '*wonders what itself and all things are.*' How astonishing this is!

Q: What does '*sparse*' mean?

'*Sparse*' means 'thinly spread'. It is the opposite of 'dense'. There seems to be a lot of empty space in this material universe, so it is referred to as '*the sparse rolling mass*'.

And yet to some interned subjective sight  
That strangely has formed in Matter's sightless stuff,  
A pointillage minute of little self  
Takes figure as world-being's conscious base.

What a mystery! In the midst of the '*sparse rolling mass*' of the material universe, a mind looks out; and that mind – our mind – wonders about itself and what it perceives. This means that the mind has a '*subjective*' experience. '*Interned*' or imprisoned within the mass of the material universe appears a consciousness which has the capacity to wonder about itself and the world around it. How has this '*subjective sight*', this power of inner vision and self-awareness formed in the '*sightless stuff*' of '*Matter*'? That itself is a mystery. Paradoxically, inexplicably, how has this '*sparse rolling mass*' which we perceive as the material universe produced this evidence of consciousness, this tiny sign of self-awareness, this '*pointillage minute of little self*' which '*Takes figure as world-being's conscious base*'?

Q: What is '*Pointillage*'?

This is a French word which refers to a technique of painting used by artists. In French the word '*point*' means the same as it does in English, although the pronunciation is different. The word '*pointillage*' means using tiny points or dots of colour to build up a realistic-looking painting. There are some beautiful examples. Here the poet seems to use the term to refer to the appearance in the material universe of small points of individual self-awareness: '*minute*', very, very tiny points '*of little self*'; small individual selves seem to take on the '*figure*' or appearance of being the '*conscious base*' of '*world-being*'.

Q: What does '*subjective*' mean?

We can make a distinction between '*subjective*' and '*objective*' experiences or perceptions. What we ourselves perceive or feel personally may be considered '*subjective*', while what is agreed upon by many people may be considered more '*objective*' and less dependent on personal opinions or preferences. Compared to the whole universe the individual's internal subjective sight is only a minute point. And yet these tiny points of subjective consciousness seem to be the base of world consciousness. How else can we be conscious of the world around us? Only through our own subjective perceptions.

Q: I think that everyone experiences the world differently.

Yes, each of us perceives the world differently; yet there is enough commonness that we are agreed about certain basic things: this is a table, this is a fan, this is a light. So if there is a conscious base to the existence of the world it seems to come from these minute points of individual consciousness. How do you know anything about the world outside yourself, outside your own body? You have to use your senses: you use your eyes, your ears, your tongue, your nose and your skin for the sense of touch. That is what tells you what the world is like outside your own bag of skin. But there is also something else, a subjective sight, which tells you what you feel like inside. You know the difference between feeling your body from outside and feeling it from inside; and inside you have feelings and perceptions and ideas and dreams – all these are subjective.

Such is our scene in the half-light below.  
This is the sign of Matter's infinite,  
This the weird purport of the picture shown  
To Science the giantess, measurer of her field,  
As she pores on the record of her close survey  
And mathematizes her huge external world,

The poet says that what he has described above '*is our scene*': this is the way we perceive things in the '*half-light below*', in the twilight of ignorance; and this twilight '*is the sign of Matter's infinite*,' the infinity of Matter. This is the way that '*Science*' sees it and that our reason sees it. This is '*the weird purport*' or strange meaning '*of the picture*' that is '*shown / To Science the giantess*', that gigantic spirit, as she measures the '*field*' of her observations, what she can see, and '*pores on the record of her close survey*'. That is the way '*Science*' works: by measuring what is observed and expressing those observations in mathematical terms, and '*poring*' or looking very closely and minutely at the observations she has collected as she surveys the world, as she tries to grasp the meaning of all the data she has observed and recorded. When we make a '*survey*' we first take an overview and then look at it more closely in greater detail. That is one of the ways in which '*Science*' tries to understand the observations that she makes of the natural world.

To Reason bound within the circle of sense,  
Or in Thought's broad impalpable Exchange  
A speculator in tenuous vast ideas,  
Abstractions in the void her currency  
We know not with what firm values for its base.

This is the picture that our '*Reason*' reaches as it tries to understand our universe, if it confines its observations to what the senses can tell us: when it remains '*bound within the circle of sense*', using only what it can discover with the help of our senses or of the instruments that we make to extend the scope of our senses, such as microscopes and radio telescopes and so on. If Reason does not confine itself to observations which are supported by the evidence of our senses, it may become '*A speculator in tenuous vast ideas*', '*in*

*Thought's broad impalpable Exchange*. 'Tenuous' means 'weak', 'insubstantial', 'far-fetched'. If our ideas are not supported by clear and tangible observations, there is almost no limit to the wild and baseless conclusions we may reach 'in *Thought's broad impalpable Exchange*'.

The poet is saying that this is the way that '*our mind's limited view*' interprets the world. This is what it looks like to Science and this is what it looks like '*To Reason*' as long as it is '*bound*' by evidence provided by our senses. But now he is also showing us what the universe may look like when our reasoning mind follows its pure operations, unrestricted by '*the circle of sense*'. Then it is likely to end up dealing with '*abstractions*', abstract '*ideas*' which are not firmly based on verifiable evidence. There is a vast range of speculation which our reason can explore freely and unrestrained, because it is '*impalpable*' or beyond the reach of the senses, not verifiable by the senses. There the philosophers, the metaphysicians can '*Exchange*' their ideas freely as money and property gets exchanged on the Stock Exchange where speculation goes on with money, property, commodities and shares. In the mind a different kind of speculation goes on: "This might be true" or "It might be like this": speculation '*in tenuous vast ideas*'; something that is '*tenuous*' is thin and unsubstantial. Such ideas may be very lofty and complex and very fascinating to some minds, and yet not have much reality or significance for more practical people. When '*Reason*' is operating like that, '*Abstractions in the void*' are '*her currency*' in the '*Exchange*' which goes on between different minds. And we do not know what value those '*Abstractions*' may have. In fact we cannot know whether they have any lasting value or not. When our money is backed by gold or silver in the bank then we may believe that it has a real value. But nowadays, of course, we have a different kind of money and we also do not know how far it is supported by any '*firm values*' if at all. Does it have any substance at all? Or is the bottom about to fall out of everything so that our money has no value any more? It is something similar to the operations of pure '*Reason*'. If we cannot verify them in any practical way we do not know how correct they are. Those ideas may be very exciting, very

interesting and convincing but we do not know whether they have any '*firm values*' as a '*base*'. So then what about Religion? Can it give us any more reliable assurances of credibility? The poet seems to be speaking ironically when he tells us:

Only religion in this bankruptcy  
Presents its dubious riches to our hearts  
Or signs unprovisioned cheques on the Beyond:  
Our poverty shall there have its revenge.

If you do not find the conclusions of Science or Reason convincing – Reason in either of its applications: whether as practical reason or metaphysical reason – then you may turn to '*religion*'. If you do not believe in the value of metaphysics, if you do not believe in the value of material science and are convinced that they are bankrupt, that they have no true value, then perhaps '*religion*' offers the possibility of another kind of wealth to your heart. It does have a certain attraction perhaps. But also in the case of religion we cannot be certain whether it has any '*firm values for its base*'. The poet says that Religion seems to be offering us only '*dubious riches*' – doubtful wealth – and signing '*unprovisioned cheques*' that are drawn '*on the Beyond*': '*cheques*' that are going to bounce if we try to cash them in this world. When we give them to the bank the manager will say "Oh you know these are worthless. There is no money in that account." These '*cheques*' are drawn '*on the Beyond*': they cannot be cashed in this material world; but '*religion*' tells us "In the next world you will be able to cash these cheques." There '*Our poverty*', our present impoverished state will '*have its revenge*'. Jesus has said that those who are poor in this world are blessed because when they get to heaven they will be rich.

Our spirits depart discarding a futile life  
Into the blank unknown or with them take  
Death's passport into immortality.

In the mind's limited view it may seem like this: if we do have an immortal spirit it just departs: it lets go of this '*futile life*' like discarding some worn out garment and disappears from this world '*Into the blank unknown*' – we have no idea where it goes. People

who believe in religion may feel that when they leave the body they are taking with them a kind of ‘*passport*’ which will guarantee them ‘*immortality*’ in the other world, in heaven. They may not be able to achieve immortality in this material world, but perhaps after they leave the physical body they may find ‘*immortality*’ beyond, in the blissful subtle worlds.

**End of Section 5 of Book Two, Canto Five**

*To be continued*

**Savitri Shabdarnut**  
**Volume 11**

Gujarati translation by Shri Kirit Thakkar of Shraddhavan’s English of *Savitri* talks on Sri Aurobindo’s epic *Savitri* covering Cantos 5 and 6 of Book Two – The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds.

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# ***Savitri, Canto 13***

## **“In the Self of Mind”**

*A Comment on this Canto by Professor Arabinda Basu*  
(Based on a talk given at Savitri Bhavan on September 26 1999)  
by Shraddhavan

Aswapati in his journey to the fullness of the realisation of the Divine is going from plane to plane, and passing through each of them. During this journey, he comes to the plane that Sri Aurobindo calls ‘the Self of Mind’.

“The Self of Mind” means the Self as it is on the plane of Mind. Self is everywhere, on all planes, down to the physical: the physical self. Sri Aurobindo also refers to the *Mahanatma*: an Upanishadic expression meaning ‘the Great Self’. Normally people think that the Great Self is the Self as such, Self in its essence. But no, it isn’t. The Great Self is the Self on the plane of Greatness: *mahat*, which in Sri Aurobindo’s language is the Supermind. And just as there is the Self in the Supermind, so also there is the Self in the Mind. There is a Self in the vital, and a Self in the physical. So in the course of his journey, Aswapati comes to the Mind plane and finds the Self there. But this is a kind of self which does not help him very much in his sadhana. It is important to know that there is a Self of Mind, because what we are after is an integral apprehension, but let us take a look at what this Self is like: Here are a few lines from this canto:

*He stood on a wide arc of summit Space  
Alone with an enormous Self of Mind  
Which held all life in a corner of its vasts.  
Omnipotent, immobile and aloof. (p.283)*

This is the Self of the Mind - and Sri Aurobindo gives Mind a capital M. In point of fact, in Sri Aurobindo’s own technical terminology, Mind and Maya are the same reality, the same force. Mind creates

division - so does Maya: *vedapratha - maya*. Wherever you have got division, you have got *maya* - or rather, Maya is there and it creates division. Mind does the same. But the Self of Mind is utterly aloof, apart, detached from all that Maya does. Sri Aurobindo puts it like this:

*... an enormous Self of Mind  
Which held all life in a corner of its vasts.  
Omnipotent, immobile and aloof.*

Life is there, in one corner of its vastness, but the Self seems hardly aware of it. This Self doesn't take part in the work of Maya at all. It only witnesses, observes, watches. It does not take any part in what it sees. This is the Self that Aswapati comes across on the plane of Mind. Sri Aurobindo says of this Self of Mind:

*In the world which sprang from it, it took no part: ...  
It acted not but bore all thoughts and deeds,  
The witness Lord of Nature's myriad acts  
Consenting to the movements of her Force.*

Static, silent, quiet, uncreative - not only uncreative, but not even participating. Now Aswapati naturally cannot be satisfied with this Self of Mind. He has to know it, because it is part of the total reality; but even so, this is not what he wants. He wants something more positive, more affirmative, more active, more dynamic. So at the end of Canto 13 we come to these lines:

*It moved veiled in from Self's infinity  
In a world of beings and momentary events  
Where all must die to live and live to die.  
Immortal by renewed mortality,*

This is the nature of the mental plane. The world of Maya is a mortal world, but it continues to exist. It is immortal by continuity, not by essential reality.

*It wandered in the spiral of its acts  
Or ran around the cycles of its thought,  
Yet was no more than its original self*

*And knew no more than when it first began.*

*To be was a prison, extinction the escape.* (p.288)

If you are in the mental plane, you feel that you are in a prison. And if you are in a prison, what do you want to do? You want to escape. And if existence itself is a prison, extinction seems the only escape. Canto 13, “In the Self of Mind” ends with the sentence :

*To be was a prison, extinction the escape.*

But this obviously cannot be the last word for Aswapati. In the next Canto, Canto 14, *The World Soul*, he is shown a very different way of escape, a very beautiful and positive one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a talk given at Savitri Bhavan on September 26 1999 by Professor Arabinda Basu.

# *Savitri* Nursery — Growing Flowers, Growing Humans

Savitri Nursery was started in 2018 in the garden of Savitri Bhavan with the idea of growing plants whose flowers were given spiritual significance by the Mother in order to be able to offer them to Auroville and the world.

Auroville was celebrating its 50th anniversary then, and many people felt the need to grow in individual and collective consciousness. As Mother has given complete, profound and accessible teachings through flowers, which are more receptive to her Grace and Powers than us humans, it became a natural choice for us to grow and blossom with and like flowers.

At Savitri Nursery, we have been experimenting with “unity in diversity”: we have regular and flexible work timings; we grow various flowers from seeds, cuttings, by layering, etc.; we make different composts and fertilizers; we sing and chant, smile and laugh while gardening; when offered plants, people can make a voluntary contribution, donate seeds and/or plants, share knowledge or volunteer.

Over time, we increasingly realise and feel grateful that everything we need is already there: Nature’s collaboration and leading role, helping hands, creativity, spaces, tools, earthworms that diligently work on the fertility of the soil, birds, bees and butterflies that pollinate and add to the living beauty, little wild creatures and cows that come to feast on the abundance and check on our patience, and above all, the constant, tangible, and radiating joy of working together consciously in a free flow where each one and each thing does find its right place.

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From Savitri Nursery volunteer team With deep joy and gratitude.



*The Divine Grace flower blossoming at the entrance of the Main Building of Savitri Bhavan*



*The final session of English of Savitri online classes held on 17th Sep.2020*



*Two Volunteer Teams take care of cleaning Savitri Bhavan in the evenings. They are made up of young men from Auroville and the surrounding region who are studying in local colleges. We are very grateful to them for their valuable services.*

## *The Dream of Savitri Bhavan*

We dream of an environment in Auroville

that will breathe the atmosphere of Savitri

that will welcome Savitri lovers from every corner  
of the world

that will be an inspiring centre of Savitri studies

that will house all kinds of materials and activities  
to enrich our understanding and enjoyment of  
Sri Aurobindo's revelatory epic

that will be the abode of Savitri, the Truth that  
has come from the Sun

Support is welcome from everyone who feels that  
the vibration of Savitri will help to manifest a better  
tomorrow.

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Savitri Bhavan is mainly dependent on donations, and all financial help from well-wishers is most welcome. 100% exemption is available for offerings from Indian tax-payers under section 35 (i) (iii) of the IT act.

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For all correspondence and queries, please contact

Savitri Bhavan

Auroville 605101

Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Phone : +91 (0)413 262 2922

e-mail : savitribhavan@auroville.org.in

website: www.savitribhavan.org

*Savitri*  
*is a Mantra*  
*for the transformation*  
*of the world*

The Mother