Chapter IX

The Pure Existent

One indivisible that is pure existence.

*Chhandogya Upanishad.*1

When we withdraw our gaze from its egoistic preoccupation with limited and fleeting interests and look upon the world with dispassionate and curious eyes that search only for the Truth, our first result is the perception of a boundless energy of infinite existence, infinite movement, infinite activity pouring itself out in limitless Space, in eternal Time, an existence that surpasses infinitely our ego or any ego or any collectivity of egos, in whose balance the grandiose products of aeons are but the dust of a moment and in whose incalculable sum numberless myriads count only as a petty swarm. We instinctively act and feel and weave our life thoughts as if this stupendous world movement were at work around us as centre and for our benefit, for our help or harm, or as if the justification of our egoistic cravings, emotions, ideas, standards were its proper business even as they are our own chief concern. When we begin to see, we perceive that it exists for itself, not for us, has its own gigantic aims, its own complex and boundless idea, its own vast desire or delight that it seeks to fulfil, its own immense and formidable standards which look down as if with an indulgent and ironic smile at the pettiness of ours. And yet let us not swing over to the other extreme and form too positive an idea of our own insignificance. That too would be an act of ignorance and the shutting of our eyes to the great facts of the universe.

For this boundless Movement does not regard us as unimportant to it. Science reveals to us how minute is the care, how cunning the device, how intense the absorption it bestows upon the smallest of its works even as on the largest. This mighty energy is an equal and impartial mother, samam brahma, in the great term of the Gita, and its intensity and force of movement is the same in the formation and upholding of a system of suns and the organisation of the life of an ant-hill. It is the illusion of size, of quantity that induces us to look on the one as great, the other as petty. If we look, on the contrary, not at mass of quantity but force of quality, we shall say that the ant is greater than the solar system it inhabits and man greater than all inanimate Nature put together. But this again is the illusion of quality. When we go behind and examine only the intensity of the movement of which quality and quantity are aspects, we realise that this Brahman dwells equally in all existences. Equally partaken of by all in its being, we are tempted to say, equally distributed to all in its energy. But this too is an illusion of quantity. Brahman dwells in all, indivisible, yet as if divided and distributed. If we look again with an observing perception not dominated by intellectual concepts, but informed by intuition and culminating in knowledge by identity, we shall see that the consciousness of this infinite Energy is other than our mental consciousness, that it is indivisible and gives, not an equal part of itself, but its whole self at one and the same time to the solar system and to the ant-hill. To Brahman there are no whole and parts, but each thing is all itself and benefits by the whole of Brahman. Quality and quantity differ, the self is equal. The form and manner and result of the force of action vary infinitely, but the eternal, primal, infinite energy is the same in all. The force of strength that goes to make the strong man is no whit greater than the force of weakness that goes to make the weak. The energy spent is as great in repression as in expression, in negation as in affirmation, in silence as in sound.

Therefore the first reckoning we have to mend is that between this infinite Movement, this energy of existence which is the world and ourselves. At present we keep a false account. We are infinitely important to the All, but to us the All is negligible; we alone are important to ourselves. This is the sign of the original ignorance which is the root of the ego, that it can only think with itself as centre as if it were the All, and of that which is not itself accepts only so much as it is mentally disposed to acknowledge or as it is forced to recognise by the shocks of its environment. Even when it begins to philosophise, does it not assert that the world only exists in and by its consciousness? Its own state of consciousness or mental standards are to it the test of reality; all outside its orbit or view tends to become false or non-existent. This mental self-sufficiency of man creates a system of false accountantship which prevents us from drawing the right and full value from life. There is a sense in which these pretensions of the human mind and ego repose on a truth, but this truth only emerges when the mind has learned its ignorance and the ego has submitted to the All and lost in it its separate self-assertion. To recognise that we, or rather the results and appearances we call ourselves, are only a partial movement of this infinite Movement and that it is that infinite which we have to know, to be consciously and to fulfil faithfully, is the commencement of true living. To recognise that in our true selves we are one with the total movement and not minor or subordinate is the other side of the account, and its expression in the manner of our being, thought, emotion and action is necessary to the culmination of a true or divine living.

But to settle the account we have to know what is this All, this infinite and omnipotent energy. And here we come to a fresh complication. For it is asserted to us by the pure reason and it seems to be asserted to us by Vedanta that as we are subordinate and an aspect of this Movement, so the movement is subordinate and an aspect of something other than itself, of a great timeless, spaceless Stability, sthāṇu, which is immutable, inexhaustible and unexpended, not acting though containing all this action, not energy, but pure existence. Those who see only this world-energy can declare indeed that there is no such thing: our idea of an eternal stability, an immutable pure existence is a fiction of our intellectual conceptions starting from a false idea of the stable: for there is nothing that is stable; all is movement and our conception of the stable is only an artifice of our mental consciousness by which we secure a standpoint for dealing practically with the movement. It is easy to show that this is true in the movement itself. There is nothing there that is stable. All that appears to be stationary is only a block of movement, a formulation of energy at work which so affects our consciousness that it seems to be still, somewhat as the earth seems to us to be still, somewhat as a train in which we are travelling seems to be still in the midst of a rushing landscape. But is it equally true that underlying this movement, supporting it, there is nothing that is moveless and immutable? Is it true that existence consists only in the action of energy? Or is it not rather that energy is an output of Existence?

We see at once that if such an Existence is, it must be, like the Energy, infinite. Neither reason nor experience nor intuition nor imagination bears witness to us of the possibility of a final terminus. All end and beginning presuppose something beyond the end or beginning. An absolute end, an absolute beginning is not only a contradiction in terms, but a contradiction of the essence of things, a violence, a fiction. Infinity imposes itself upon the appearances of the finite by its ineffugable self-existence.

But this is infinity with regard to Time and Space, an eternal duration, interminable extension. The pure Reason goes farther and looking in its own colourless and austere light at Time and Space points out that these two are categories of our consciousness, conditions under which we arrange our perception of phenomenon. When we look at existence in itself, Time and Space disappear. If there is any extension, it is not a spatial but a psychological extension; if there is any duration, it is not a temporal but a psychological duration; and it is then easy to see that this extension and duration are only symbols which represent to the mind something not translatable into intellectual terms, an eternity which seems to us the same all-containing ever-new moment, an infinity which seems to us the same all-containing all-pervading point without magnitude. And this conflict of terms, so violent, yet accurately expressive of something we do perceive, shows that mind and speech have passed beyond their natural limits and are striving to express a Reality in which their own conventions and necessary oppositions disappear into an ineffable identity.

But is this a true record? May it not be that Time and Space so disappear merely because the existence we are regarding is a fiction of the intellect, a fantastic Nihil created by speech, which we strive to erect into a conceptual reality? We regard again that Existence-in-itself and we say, No. There is something behind the phenomenon not only infinite but indefinable. Of no phenomenon, of no totality of phenomena can we say that absolutely it is. Even if we reduce all phenomena to one fundamental, universal irreducible phenomenon of movement or energy, we get only an indefinable phenomenon. The very conception of movement carries with it the potentiality of repose and betrays itself as an activity of some existence; the very idea of energy in action carries with it the idea of energy abstaining from action; and an absolute energy not in action is simply and purely absolute existence. We have only these two alternatives, either an indefinable pure existence or an indefinable energy in action and, if the latter alone is true, without any stable base or cause, then the energy is a result and phenomenon generated by the action, the movement which alone is. We have then no Existence, or we have the Nihil of the Buddhists with existence as only an attribute of an eternal phenomenon, of Action, of Karma, of Movement. This, asserts the pure reason, leaves my perceptions unsatisfied, contradicts my fundamental seeing, and therefore cannot be. For it brings us to a last abruptly ceasing stair of an ascent which leaves the whole staircase without support, suspended in the Void.

If this indefinable, infinite, timeless, spaceless Existence is, it is necessarily a pure absolute. It cannot be summed up in any quantity or quantities, it cannot be composed of any quality or combination of qualities. It is not an aggregate of forms or a formal substratum of forms. If all forms, quantities, qualities were to disappear, this would remain. Existence without quantity, without quality, without form is not only conceivable, but it is the one thing we can conceive behind these phenomena. Necessarily, when we say it is without them, we mean that it exceeds them, that it is something into which they pass in such a way as to cease to be what we call form, quality, quantity and out of which they emerge as form, quality and quantity in the movement. They do not pass away into one form, one quality, one quantity which is the basis of all the rest,—for there is none such,—but into something which cannot be defined by any of these terms. So all things that are conditions and appearances of the movement pass into That from which they have come and there, so far as they exist, become something that can no longer be described by the terms that are appropriate to them in the movement. Therefore we say that the pure existence is an Absolute and in itself unknowable by our thought although we can go back to it in a supreme identity that transcends the terms of knowledge. The movement, on the contrary, is the field of the relative and yet by the very definition of the relative all things in the movement contain, are contained in and are the Absolute. The relation of the phenomena of Nature to the fundamental ether which is contained in them, constitutes them, contains them and yet is so different from them that entering into it they cease to be what they now are, is the illustration given by the Vedanta as most nearly representing this identity in difference between the Absolute and the relative.

Necessarily, when we speak of things passing into that from which they have come, we are using the language of our temporal consciousness and must guard ourselves against its illusions. The emergence of the movement from the Immutable is an eternal phenomenon and it is only because we cannot conceive it in that beginningless, endless, ever-new moment which is the eternity of the Timeless that our notions and perceptions are compelled to place it in a temporal eternity of successive duration to which are attached the ideas of an always recurrent beginning, middle and end.

But all this, it may be said, is valid only so long as we accept the concepts of pure reason and remain subject to them. But the concepts of reason have no obligatory force. We must judge of existence not by what we mentally conceive, but by what we see to exist. And the purest, freest form of insight into existence as it is shows us nothing but movement. Two things alone exist, movement in Space, movement in Time, the former objective, the latter subjective. Extension is real, duration is real, Space and Time are real. Even if we can go behind extension in Space and perceive it as a psychological phenomenon, as an attempt of the mind to make existence manageable by distributing the indivisible whole in a conceptual Space, yet we cannot go behind the movement of succession and change in Time. For that is the very stuff of our consciousness. We are and the world is a movement that continually progresses and increases by the inclusion of all the successions of the past in a present which represents itself to us as the beginning of all the successions of the future,—a beginning, a present that always eludes us because it is not, for it has perished before it is born. What is, is the eternal, indivisible succession of Time carrying on its stream a progressive movement of consciousness also indivisible.[1](http://incarnateword.in/sabcl/18/the-pure-existent#fn1) Duration then, eternally successive movement and change in Time, is the sole absolute. Becoming is the only being.

In reality, this opposition of actual insight into being to the conceptual fictions of the pure Reason is fallacious. If indeed intuition in this matter were really opposed to intelligence, we could not confidently support a merely conceptual reasoning against fundamental insight. But this appeal to intuitive experience is incomplete. It is valid only so far as it proceeds and it errs by stopping short of the integral experience. So long as the intuition fixes itself only upon that which we become, we see ourselves as a continual progression of movement and change in consciousness in the eternal succession of Time. We are the river, the flame of the Buddhist illustration. But there is a supreme experience and supreme intuition by which we go back behind our surface self and find that this becoming, change, succession are only a mode of our being and that there is that in us which is not involved at all in the becoming. Not only can we have the intuition of this that is stable and eternal in us, not only can we have the glimpse of it in experience behind the veil of continually fleeting becomings, but we can draw back into it and live in it entirely, so effecting an entire change in our external life, and in our attitude, and in our action upon the movement of the world. And this stability in which we can so live is precisely that which the pure Reason has already given us, although it can be arrived at without reasoning at all, without knowing previously what it is,—it is pure existence, eternal, infinite, indefinable, not affected by the succession of Time, not involved in the extension of Space, beyond form, quantity, quality,—Self only and absolute.

The pure existent is then a fact and no mere concept; it is the fundamental reality. But, let us hasten to add, the movement, the energy, the becoming are also a fact, also a reality. The supreme intuition and its corresponding experience may correct the other, may go beyond, may suspend, but do not abolish it. We have therefore two fundamental facts of pure existence and of world-existence, a fact of Being, a fact of Becoming. To deny one or the other is easy; to recognise the facts of consciousness and find out their relation is the true and fruitful wisdom.

Stability and movement, we must remember, are only our psychological representations of the Absolute, even as are oneness and multitude. The Absolute is beyond stability and movement as it is beyond unity and multiplicity. But it takes its eternal poise in the one and the stable and whirls round itself infinitely, inconceivably, securely in the moving and multitudinous. World-existence is the ecstatic dance of Shiva which multiplies the body of the God numberlessly to the view: it leaves that white existence precisely where and what it was, ever is and ever will be; its sole absolute object is the joy of the dancing.

But as we cannot describe or think out the Absolute in itself, beyond stability and movement, beyond unity and multitude,—nor is that at all our business,—we must accept the double fact, admit both Shiva and Kali and seek to know what is this measureless Movement in Time and Space with regard to that timeless and spaceless pure Existence, one and stable, to which measure and measurelessness are inapplicable. We have seen what pure Reason, intuition and experience have to say about pure Existence, about Sat; what have they to say about Force, about Movement, about Shakti?

And the first thing we have to ask ourselves is whether that Force is simply force, simply an unintelligent energy of movement or whether the consciousness which seems to emerge out of it in this material world we live in, is not merely one of its phenomenal results but rather its own true and secret nature. In Vedantic terms, is Force simply Prakriti, only a movement of action and process, or is Prakriti really power of Chit, in its nature force of creative self-conscience? On this essential problem all the rest hinges.

1 Indivisible in the totality of the movement. Each moment of Time or Consciousness may be considered as separate from its predecessor and successor, each successive action of Energy as a new quantum or new creation; but this does not abrogate continuity without which there would be no duration of Time or coherence of consciousness. A man’s steps as he walks or runs or leaps are separate, but there is something that takes the steps and makes the movement continuous.