

Karma

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[Page 11] THE Law of Karma is to my mind, after the Theory of Unity of the Universe, the most important teaching of that form of Theosophy at present put forward by the Theosophical Society, and at the same time that it is of extreme complexity in its detailed working, it is sublimely simple in its fundamental principle. It has been called the law of ethical causation, but this seems to me a misleading description. For it is the law which relates cause to effect and includes both cause and effect in its grasp, for it is the cause and the effect and the relation between them. All is Karma, and it holds sway wherever cause or effect are manifested. It has been called the adjuster. It has been compared to Nemesis, in the certainty with which the inviolable law fits effect to cause and brings home to the doer the true result of his actions. But it is not limited to the ethical world, it rules the mental, astral and physical. It does not replace the Personal God, the rewarder and avenger of orthodoxy, for it is not to be turned from its course by prayer and supplication, though conscious in its action it is in itself Law, not the maker of Law. Neither is it Fate in the sense of the fatalist or predestinarian. It is rigid justice. And in this law there is no room for either vengeance or mercy, there is simply justice. I am aware that this idea is repugnant to those who have learned to look up to a God of Love who would have pity on them, and forgive them and bless them and so on. But if these people would really analyse their own feelings, I think they would see that they were really worshipping their own susceptibilities. For what can exceed pure justice, — not angry punishment, which is foolish, as, in the case of human beings, all admit, nor mercy in the sense of releasing from consequences of acts done. For instance, a man commits a murder, causing thereby certain suffering to an individual, loss of life, *etc.*, and sorrow, loss and trouble to a number of others, then he asks for forgiveness: that is to say, he asks that the results of his acts may not fall upon him, that he shall be spared the pain of making good the harm he has done. This idea of asking forgiveness from a God for injury done to a fellow man, certainly does not look like a love of rigid justice; but equally on the other hand is the fear of the *anger* of a God opposed to a sense of justice. The personal element comes in with all its imperfections and inequalities: excessive anger on the one hand to be feared, and excessive kindness on the other to be invited by prayer and entreaty. But if the man has a belief in the absolute justice of the Law of Life, then he will fear no excess of retaliation, wish for no partiality which should leave the consequences of his acts to be borne by others, but would face the natural [Page 12] results of his acts as his fair share earned by his own deeds. But though this idea of praying for forgiveness seems to me unphilosophical and weak, not to say dishonest, at the same time I would point out that many people of high aspirations and pure and unselfish natures love to pray and worship a God of Love, and that in doing so they are in reality striving to raise themselves to that high Ideal of Love, — which is the aim, I take it, of the true Theosophist, — and the method of prayer in the form of any particular religion is simply the ready-made instrument for expressing their aspiration, and which has been adopted for want of a better and because it was ready to hand, and also because the reasoning faculty in those people is not largely developed. To such people the form often becomes in their minds identified with the ideal, and they are then pained and hurt and indignant when the formulae of their religion are shown to be illogical and unjust. But the thinkers, who examine the forms of their prayers, and ask, "How can they ask an all wise God to alter anything to suit them?" are generally led to abandon the use of supplication even while

still retaining their idea of a personal God.

There is an intuitive consciousness of justice as right in most people I believe, and a longing for it which is only opposed by the sensual part of our being wishing to avoid the unpleasant results of vicious or foolish "acts. This, as a simple proposition, would probably be admitted by all. Thus I can hardly conceive of a human being capable of thought denying that "Justice is Right" — and they would naturally attach the same relative meaning to the word Right as opposed to Wrong, as any other rational being, though they might all disagree as to what particular acts or things should be classed under these two headings. But even admitting this, almost everyone would naturally avoid the results of their own acts, not because of a doubt as to the rightness of justice, but because of their belief in their own right to enjoyment regardless of Law, and so they invoke a power, which, logically, must be higher than Law, to arrest results of causes already set in motion; thus bringing themselves into the position of offering advice to the omniscient, and either asking for *in*justice to be done or else admitting that the omniscient makes mistakes which can be pointed out by his creatures. All this appears hopelessly illogical, and therefore the teaching of the Law of Karma comes as a breath of fresh air to people stifling in a slum, while to others of less solid mental constitution it appears like a draught of cold wind let into a pleasantly warmed place, and they are pained and shocked by what they call blasphemy. They have not yet outgrown the dress of "Received Opinion", in "which they are wrapped to keep out the fresh air, which perhaps they are not strong enough yet to bear. They must wait and grow, but should not be allowed to prevent others expanding in the light of broader views — and because I think this is [Page 13] the case, personally I would not try to disturb those who are satisfied in their beliefs; but if they ask, then they have opened the door and let in the draught themselves.

It is evident that if one accepts the idea of Karma as the law of absolute justice, then supplicatory prayer is useless and abandoned, but as the defenders of prayer maintain that Prayer is the highest aspiration, how can they deny that the Theosophist who aspires to rise and evolve on to higher and higher planes of Spirituality does not pray. For myself I dislike the word, which always suggests begging, and prefer to speak of contemplation, meditation, or aspiration. And here comes in the practical application of the teaching of Karma. Progress, either for the individual or the Race, can only be attained by developing appropriate minds and bodies, and these are the outcome of lives in which the lower and grosser qualities are gradually replaced by the higher and purer; that is to say, progress is accomplished as a result of action in a right direction, not by an arbitrary act of so-called favour or mercy as an answer to supplicatory prayer. It comes by means of the rebirth of men who have striven in that direction before, men reborn with stronger wills, stronger hearts, and greater sympathies, so that each time they take up a new body they have a greater control over it than before, and consequently a greater control over their immediate surroundings. Thus the Law of Karma is an incentive to action, and further, it gives courage to those whose efforts seem ever doomed to failure, for though it is not for them to see at once the results of their work, they can smile at failure if they can see that an effort made is a cause set up, a seed sown, and the result must inevitably follow, not perhaps as they expect, but in accordance with the true nature of the force employed, and the true nature of the direction of that force.

But as there may be some who have not gone far in the study of this subject, I should like to remind you that this doctrine or theory of Karma cannot be studied apart from that of Reincarnation; but I do not wish to touch upon that further than to remind you that the two doctrines are inseparable in reality, and any consideration of one apart from the other must necessarily lead to much confusion. I can only put forward thoughts that have come from the study of the subject, and leave the real study to each one, for every

man must find the road himself, and make his own Karma. And it is useful to discuss one subject at a time, and try to join them together in our own minds after.

Now Karma is of three aspects. *One* in itself, but, like everything else, a trinity in action — and it is thus described: —

Kriyamana, those which are now being created.

Sanchita, those which are being stored.

Prarabdha, those which are now reaching fructification.

[Page 14] Thus it is the cause, the effect, and the link between them, and though in the abstract mind these three might be called one, yet directly ideation has become expressed in the region of time and space, then the three aspects are a necessity, for this reason: — A thought is born in time and at a certain conjunction of all the cycles of Life, Mind, Time, etc., which are within the reach of that thought (in astrology this would be symbolized by the positions of the planets, etc.) and the repetition of that thought or its fruition as act will come with the return of that same conjunction, which may be soon or at immense distances of time, according to the nature of the cycles whose conjunction saw its birth. But it is more usual to speak of Karma as the adjuster, that which fits the effect to the cause, as we have got into the way of looking at causes as distinct from effects, just as we buy eggs at one shop and fowls at another, and scarcely stop to consider the bewildering problem of which comes first as producer, the egg or the fowl.

The Unity of the Universe implies of necessity Universal Law, and a perfect fitness or justice in Law; now the Adjuster or Minister of justice is Karma, the Good Law, and it acts everywhere.

But the term Karma seems to be limited by H.P.B. in *The Secret Doctrine* to men, and she even says distinctly that some of the lower types of Australian aboriginals "have no Karma to work off" *i.e.*, Prarabdha Karma, but are now accumulating Karma by their actions as responsible human beings". The reason that she gives is that they are the last arrivals of the human Monad on this globe. So that we need not concern ourselves at first with that which would correspond in the lower kingdoms of nature to Karma in the human. Now it will be seen that when we say "All is Karma", we do not at all mean to say all is Fate, and all is predestined. The condition in which we find ourselves may to a great extent be predetermined by the action of Prarabdha Karma, and often the success or failure of a project, or even apparently of a man's whole life. This is what we usually call an unlucky life, by which we may mean something or nothing, but usually, I fancy, we have meant that the forces that militated against his success were altogether external to the man, that he was a victim of circumstances, and so on. This is not the view of one who accepts the doctrine of Karma, for at once Chance is banished.

But of course as each individual makes his own Karma, so each community, nation, or race makes its own, and thus we find the question very much complicated, and it seems to me that it is here particularly that comes in the opportunity of those generous natures who seek to bear the burdens of others as well as their own, for as the whole results of former national acts and thoughts has produced a general state of things which all must share, so there seems to me to be the chance for one to help [Page 15] another, without thereby in any way coming in contact with the individual Karma which is the particular and inseparable portion of that individual. I know that sometimes people argue that because one is in trouble

he must be left to suffer because "you must not interfere with Karma". You *can't* interfere with Karma unless you are greater than Universal Law. And what do you know about it ? How can you tell that it is his Karma to continue suffering, and not that it is his Karma to be now relieved and your opportunity of doing it ? Unless we can *know* these things we can only act by the light we have, and endeavour to help where and when we can, in the way that seems best to ourselves. If we saw a man on a ladder and the ladder slipping, shall we stand aside and say we must not interfere with gravity ? Will gravity cease to act if we hold the ladder and save the man ? — whether the man falls or not gravity remains the same. And we need not be so anxious to take the Universe under our wing, and if we make mistakes in attempting to do good shall we shirk the responsibility.

There is another mistaken view of this subject which is very common to persons who have not thought deeply on problems of Life. They say, "how very wicked so-and-so must have been to be so unfortunate or so poor now", and consequently how good all the rich people must have been! This appears to me very shallow and superficial, for who will pretend that rich people are in a better moral or spiritual condition than poor people ? These conditions of the physical are not the important question. And indeed let anyone try whether it is easier to develop real self-control and altruism in a position of luxury and well-being than in trouble and poverty, and I think they will see at once that riches, success and prosperity are far harder to bear than poverty, failure and misfortune. Indeed, I will venture on a paradox, and say that if spiritual evolution is the object of existence, then failure and disappointment are the true gems that are to be picked up in the mud of earth life. Another difficulty in the way of judging of a person's position by his present circumstances is this: As all the accumulated Sanchita Karma cannot become matured Prarabdha Karma in one Life, so a man may be enjoying a spell of sunshine just now, and next time will have to take his turn in the darkness and dirt of an East End slum, and thus, as said in *Light on the Path*, when warning against harsh judgments, the foul garment that you shrink from today, was yours yesterday, may be yours tomorrow. And we do become a little less severe in our judgment if we realise that we may have yet to pass through the experience of those who excite our disgust now. And another consideration is this: What is it that brings us into contact with those who cause us trouble, sorrow and loss ? May it not be the very violence of our opposition to those characteristics which distinguish them ? just as much as, on the other hand, sympathy might produce the same results, for sympathy [Page 16] and antipathy are of like nature, though of opposite direction, but either might serve as a tie between us and another, therefore we are warned not to be violent in denunciation, nor in opposing evil. Calm and firm, that is the mental position to be desired, I imagine. Nor should we *fear* the results of our own acts, nor waste our time in trying to "dodge" Karma, and skilfully to manoeuvre our way into a state of bliss, by whatever name it be called. For that is the climax of selfishness, and selfishness is the prime generator of Karma. Let us aim at the bold ideal of the Asa faith, so well expressed by William Morris in *Sigurd the Volsung*:

Wilt thou do the deed and repent it ? Thou hadst better never been born:
 Wilt thou do the deed and exalt it ? then thy fame shall be outworn:
 Thou shalt do the deed and abide it, and sit on thy throne on high,
 And look on today and tomorrow as those that never die."

Karma is the original Nemesis before its degradation by the Greeks into a personal goddess capable of being propitiated. Decharme says, "From Homer to Herodotus she was no goddess but a moral feeling rather". It was the effect of causes produced by man, for it produces nothing, neither does it design, it arranges and adjusts, and man returns again and again, and at the cyclic periods meets the effects of his own acts and thoughts, not all at once, but in their due time and place. But when he turns and tries to

mount the stream and reach the Light that shines above the troubled waters of Life, then the full strength of the torrent is felt, his sins rise up as the dread "*Dweller on the Threshold*", and he must face that shadow or fall back into the whirling stream of Life, to sow and reap over and over again the weary round of human joys and sorrows.

Those who make the great effort to rise out of their moral sleep and to become free meet all these foes: they come as troubles, losses shames, and failures, and unless recognised as our own children will be mistaken for ill-luck, etc., and by the kind and pious as a mark of Divine anger, a punishment for presumption, and all the rest of it. But to those who cannot risk the fight there is the other path, that which is called the open path.

"Follow the wheel of Life; follow the wheel of duty to race and kin, to friend and foe, and close thy mind to pleasures as to pain — exhaust the law of Karmic retribution, gain Siddhis for thy future births. If Sun thou cannot be, then be the humble planet.

"Point out the 'way', however dimly and lost among the host — as does the evening star to those who tread their path in darkness Give Light and comfort to the toiling pilgrim, and seek out him who knows still less than thou; who in his wretched desolation sits starving for the bread of Wisdom and the bread that feeds the Shadow without a Teacher, hope, or consolation and — let him hear the Law."