

LESSON 5

KARMA

In our studies of Theosophy we find emphasis on the postulate that this a universe of law and order, that nothing happens by chance. All is governed by natural law, not only in the physical world, but also in the psychological and spiritual realms, and in the realm of ethics and morals. No force can be lost, no particle of energy can be expended anywhere in the universe without a corresponding effect. A pebble tossed into the air returns at once to earth as a result of the law of gravity. A greater time is involved in the ticking off of the minutes and hours after the winding of a clock, but the process is an exact working out of cause and effect. In similar manner, the energy put forth in thoughts and desires will sooner or later produce definite results. No human being can escape the consequences of his acts, however slight, however thoughtless. Sometimes the cause works out in immediate results. In more complex circumstances, a considerable time may intervene. Death does not settle the score any more than moving to a new town pays debts incurred at one's former residence.

This law of cause and effect is called "karma"," a Sanskrit word meaning, literally, action, but implying the totality of action--or action and reaction. It operates wherever there is life and relationship, and it is especially important for man who, by virtue of his humanhood, is morally responsible for the causes which he initiates. One need only reflect upon this for a moment to see how inevitable it is. We can not act at all without affecting our relationship with our families, our friends, our business associates, the strangers whom we meet--as these come within the range of our actions. In the Western world there is no word that exactly expresses this concept, although the "law of compensation," to use Emerson's term, approximates it. It is the principle implicit in the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "...for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again..."*, and in St. Paul's statement that "...whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."** All this, as can be seen, implies action in relationship, with consequent reactions which then become causes for further actions, and so on through a network in which it is not too much to say the universe itself is involved. The staggering importance of our attitude toward our relationships thus becomes apparent.

Strictly speaking, perhaps, the word "karma" should be applied only to the law itself, but it is used with slightly varying connotations, e.g., as when one might say of something that had happened to him, "It is my karma," or designate the

* Mathew 7:2

**Galatians 6:7

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incarnation as “the karma I was born with.” It might be more accurate these instances to speak of “karmic effects” or “karmic causes”, but for convenience the word “karma” is used in all these ways to mean the cause, the action, or the effect of the action, as well as the totality of the process.

To grasp something of the nature of karma is to render life more intelligible and give one an insight into how he may cooperate with the law and thus help onward the great evolutionary process. It is an extremely complex subject, perhaps the least understood of all the great principles expounded in the literature of Theosophy. Perhaps one way to arrive at some understanding of its nature would be to consider a few of the erroneous conceptions which have grown up about it.

It is inaccurate, for example, to speak of “good” karma and “bad” karma -- meaning, of course, that which we find pleasant and that which we find painful. Karma is neither good nor bad; it is always educative, whether we regard the process as pleasant or unpleasant. It is the law of our soul’s growth through which we learn the skill in action so essential to the achievement of our goal.

Another error is to regard karma as a system of rewards and punishments. It may bring happiness to those who have caused happiness and the reverse to those who have caused unhappiness, but this is because it is in reality the law of harmony and equilibrium in the universe, not a process imposed upon us arbitrarily by some outside authority. We are inevitably a part of the universe and, as such, involved in its processes. Karma is utterly impersonal; it has no “designs” upon us individually, either one way or the other. When we can understand it in this way we stop feeling abused by fate when things go wrong, and begin to hear the sublime chords with our inner ears. We begin to realize that our own note, our own refrain, is an integral part of a cosmic symphony, and that it is by virtue of this symphony -- this larger scheme in harmony --that our own small refrains have any significance at all; and, paradoxically, that it is by virtue of all the small refrains that the symphony can be played out.

Karma, then, is a universal process in which every false note we strike, every discord we create, is immediately brought into balance and harmony on the inner planes of being so that, at that level, the perfection of the symphony is never disturbed. So far as the outer consciousness, the outer experience, is concerned, it may be days, years, even lives, before the force which harmonizes the action is manifested.

It can be seen that karma is not merely a law of retributive justice at the physical, emotional, and moral levels of our being; it is not merely a law which makes us inherit the results of our past actions, although it does this. It is

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and eternally, at every moment, to adjust every individual action to the universal action. The results of our individual actions fail within the universal operations as a small concentric circles inside larger ones. Every part is thus bound to the whole; the very core of the universe is equilibrium. We cannot disturb that core; it adjust itself perfectly with every action. The disturbance of which we are conscious is on the periphery, in space and time, where we exist.

Ultimately, there are only two motions in the universe -- the going forth and the return, the centrifugal and centripetal forces. In electricity, these travel between the positive and negative poles; in mechanics they are represented by the action of the piston; in human destiny they operate as cause and effect, or karma. Even in our small daily lives we obey these forces; we rise from sleep and we return to sleep; we go forth from our homes during the day, and we return to them in the evening. In the larger sense, that which we send forth must ultimately return to us, not because an action must have punishment or reward, but because each of us is a continuum, because there is not and cannot be any break in what we are.

As indicated in previous lessons, man normally lives in three worlds, or fields of energy: physical, emotional and mental, contacting each through an appropriate vehicle. In each of these fields, he generates causes which return to him as effects in proportion to the amount of energy which he has "charged" them. Every human being is constantly generating these forces in this manner, and they determine not only the kind of life he leads here, with its success or failure, and the state of his consciousness after death but also the environment and the relationships with others in his succeeding incarnations. Obviously, the balance of justice is not always struck within the limits of one lifetime. That is why reincarnation is said to be a means to an end, not an end in itself. Reincarnation is part of the plan of evolution. When the soul has developed power and skill in action, and perfect nobility of character -- that is to say perfection at all these levels -- the goal has been reached and reincarnation ceases.

There is an unfortunate, widespread tendency to regard karma as fatalistic: "Well, it is the law and I can't change it. I can't do anything about it". The statement that it is the law is true, of course, but it isn't the whole truth. Naturally, we cannot annihilate the law, but we can, and we continually do, modify its effects. We have a perfect right to do so. In her book, Karma, Annie Besant points out that if any condition inconveniences us or blocks us, or causes us pain and discomfort, we have a right, and in some instances an obligation, to do what we can to change it. We grow and develop our powers through karma, through learning to deal with problems. In spite of our best efforts, the block or condition remains, it may have other purposes -- perhaps

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reasonably good grace -- but we would make very sure it is inevitable.” We have to find out for ourselves, and it is not always easy . The only thing that is necessary is that we shall know what we are doing; otherwise we may get ourselves into greater difficulties. Sometimes we have to wait--not in a state of static inertia but in an attitude of dynamic and alert acceptance -- until we can see what is the right action. But we can change results when and as we see the steps which can be taken. Suppose, for example, that the Wright brothers and others interested in aviation, had accepted as final the idea that nothing heavier than air could rise above the ground. . Even though gravity is a basic law of nature, they knew that other principles -- air resistance and the general laws of aerodynamics--could be used to neutralize the law of gravity and, in one sense, fulfill it. For nature’s principles are not isolated things; all are part of the great-functioning organism which is the universe. We now travel with incredible speed through the air and even venture into outer space. Had man tried to fly without studying the law, however, his efforts would have met with complete failure and disaster. Suppose no one had ever thought of applying the principle of displacement to neutralize the principle of flotation: steel ships would never have been invented and voyagers would still be at the mercy of the winds. The Panama Canal is another example of using law to neutralize law.

Each must decide for himself when karma’s decrees are to be accepted just as they come and when to set in motion opposing forces. If, after intelligent consideration, we see a way of neutralizing the decrees of karma, the law itself permits us to do so by introducing new factors, which affect the results. No one can tell us how to do this; we shall not find explicit instructions in any book, for each situation varies with the individual and all the elements involved in the situation. One man’s way is not another man’s way, because Nature can never exactly duplicate herself in any two of us or in any set of circumstances; in the consciousness of each there is some juxtaposition of elements which makes us utterly and completely unique. When we begin to find the right answers, we shall realize that they come from ourselves, where the problems came from -- for the answer is always in the problem; it may appear simply as the result of stating the problem in the right way.

Someone has remarked that when we have to swallow our medicine, the spoon always seems about three times too big and the medicine much more bitter than we thought it would be when we were brewing it. However, we should always remember that all the beautiful and wonderful things that happen to us are also of our own “brewing.”

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cannot be duplicated because they are threads of our own consciousness. It can be seen that there are infinite possibilities for wavelength in the universe, as well as infinite potentials for the wavelengths of one individual to intersect and affect those of others when all are directed toward some conjunction of time or space.

Each of us, then, is constantly in the process of creating his own world. As stated in a letter from one of the great sages of the East to an early member of the Theosophical Society: "...man is continually peopling his current in space with a world of his own, crowded with the offspring of his fancies, desires, impulses, and passions; a current which reacts upon any sensitive or nervous organization which comes in contact with it, in proportion to its dynamic intensity".*

Another factor which has bearing on karma as the principle of harmony and equilibrium in the universe is that of collective karma: family karma, national karma, race karma, and even total karma of mankind. It is said that the esoteric interpretation of karma recognizes that, even though each of us is unique, the wholly isolated individual does not exist except as a figment of our imagination. As stated earlier in this lesson, we all operate in an intricate network of relationships. Each man's life is intertwined with the life of all mankind through ever-expanding circles of local, national, continental, and finally, planetary extent. Each thought is influenced by the world's predominant mental atmosphere (to which each of us contributes) and each action is unconsciously accomplished with the cooperation of this whole atmosphere. This may appear abstruse, but it can be seen as reasonable when we reflect that we can never separate ourselves from our relationships. The consequences of what each thinks and feels and does flow like a tributary into that larger river of society, there to mingle with the waters of innumerable other sources: this makes our over-all karma the result of all these mutual associations and consequently raises it from a personal to a collective level. That is to say, you as an individual share in the karma generated by all other individuals, while they share in yours. There is a difference, however, between the shares. Each receives the direct results of his own personal activity because it is on his wavelength, and the indirect results of the activity of the rest of mankind, just as others receive the direct result of their own activity and share in the indirect result of yours.¹

We can see this in the world-wide effects of two great wars which caught all mankind in their net. We may not consciously or intentionally have had a part in helping to create those wars; we may not have deliberately committed any act in this life or another which would draw upon us the karma of war. Yet no one

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* "The Occult World", A.P. Sinnett, pg. 132

way, if not by personal tragedy, at least by the physical inconveniences or the sorrow of friends . “We live in common with others,” it has been said, “and must be redeemed in common. This is the last word, dismaying, perhaps, to those who have outstripped their fellows, but heartening to those who have lagged behind”.*

Looked at in this way, then, we can see that trying to live by the Great Law is not merely that we may create pleasant karma for ourselves. We people our currents in space, yes, but it happens also that our actions, our motives and thoughts and desires flow into the common stream of life. Every time we think or feel or act unselfishly and nobly, we are helping to “lift a little of the heavy karma of the world,” as we have been requested by one of the Masters of the Wisdom to do. Every time we feel or act selfishly or ignobly, we add to the weight of that heavy karma. Mankind still has much work to do before his dark and barbaric past has been blotted out. But since all ultimately depends upon what we, as individuals, do, we can perhaps seek ways in which to aid the process -- not, of course, solely that we ourselves may reap the benefit, but that evolution may be fulfilled and mankind’s total “redemption” achieved.

There is a great truth behind the spiritual command to give generously of time, work, wealth, knowledge, love--or whatever our gifts may be. “Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days.” ** Many days may mean many lives, but all that is given returns, so that even from a limited point of view it is well to give, for this leads to an interchange of friendly emotions by which both the giver and the receiver grow and expand.

Theosophy offers understanding of the law, but suggests also that it is important to begin now to work in harmony with it, for each day new causes and effects are being produced, and these will have far-reaching consequences. The ties between loved ones can be strengthened, the bonds of hate dissolved, so that in the future, life for all may glow more beautifully and nobly.

In fact, it is said that more is expected of one who knows than of one who does not know the law. To be guided by the law of karma is to lead a more useful and happier life. Each man is destined to become master of his fate, captain of his soul, and to accept this with certainty is to bring the light of illumination and the certainty of the law into action here and now.

Diagram V illustrates the working of the law of karma at various levels--physically, emotionally and mentally--and in accordance with the needs of the unfolding ego.

* "The Wisdom of the Overself", Paul Brunton, pg. 270

** Ecclesiastes 11:1

Karma, Annie Besant

Light on the Path (Commentary on Karma), Mabel Collins

Karma, The Universal Law of Harmony, Edited by Virginia Hanson and Rose Marie Stewart

Karma and Rebirth, Christmas Humphreys

The Key to Theosophy, H.P. Blavatsky, page 121 (Quest abridgment)

Basic Theosophy, Chapter 9, Geoffrey Hodson

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What is meant by karma? What other names or statements of this law can you identify?
2. How does natural law differ in essence from man-made law?
3. What is the difference between karma and fate?
4. In what way is karma greater than the working out of cause and effect at the personal level?
5. Why is it inevitable that the causes we generate must return to us as effects?
6. What are some of the common misunderstandings of karma? Explain why they are incorrect.
7. In what way can karma be modified?
8. Have we any right to try to change our karma?
9. Ought we to try to help someone else who is undergoing some unhappy unhappy karma as a result of his debts. Justify your answer.
10. Give some examples of using natural laws to neutralize other natural laws.
11. Why is it important to know what we are doing when we seek to modify our karma?
12. What is the true reason for striving to live by the Great Law?