

## Rebirth and Karma

THE ANCIENT idea of Karma was inseparably connected with a belief in the soul's continual rebirth in new bodies. And this close association was not a mere accident, but a perfectly intelligible and indeed inevitable union of two related truths which are needed for each other's completeness and can with difficulty exist in separation. These two things are the soul side and the nature side of one and the same cosmic sequence. Rebirth is meaningless without karma, and karma has no fount of inevitable origin and no rational and no moral justification if it is not an instrumentality for the sequences of the soul's continuous experience. If we believe that the soul is repeatedly reborn in the body, we must believe also that there is some link between the lives that preceded and the lives that follow and that the past of the soul has an effect on its future; and that is the spiritual essence of the law of Karma. To deny it would be to establish a reign of the most chaotic incoherence, such as we find only in the leaps and turns of the mind in dream or in the thoughts of madness, and hardly even there. And if this existence were, as the cosmic pessimist imagines, a dream or an illusion or, worse, as Schopenhauer would have it, a delirium and insanity of the soul, we might accept some such law of inconsequent consequence. But, taken even at its worst, this world of life differs from dream, illusion and madness by its plan of fine, complex and subtle sequences, the hanging together and utility even of its discords, the general and particular harmony of its relations, which, if they are not the harmony we would have, not our longed-for ideal harmony, has still at every point the stamp of a Wisdom and an Idea at work; it is not the act of a Mind in tatters or a machine in dislocation. The continuous existence of the soul in rebirth must signify an evolution if not of the self, for that is said to be immutable, yet of its more outward active

soul or self of experience. This evolution is not possible if there is not a connected sequence from life to life, a result of action and experience, an evolutionary consequence to the soul, a law of Karma.

And on the side of Karma, if we give to that its integral and not a truncated meaning, we must admit rebirth for the sufficient field of its action. For Karma is not quite the same thing as a material or substantial law of cause and effect, the antecedent and its mechanical consequence. That would perfectly admit of a Karma which could be carried on in time and the results come with certainty in their proper place, their just degree by a working out of the balance of forces, but need not in any way touch the human originator who might have passed away from the scene by the time the result of his acts got into manifestation. A mechanical Nature could well visit the sins of the fathers not on them, but on their fourth or their four-hundredth generation, as indeed this physical Nature does, and no objection of injustice or any other mental or moral objection could rise, for the only justice or reason of a mechanism is that it shall work according to the law of its structure and the fixed eventuality of its force in action. We cannot demand from it a mind or a moral equity or any kind of supraphysical responsibility. The universal energy grinds out inconsciently its effects and individuals are only fortuitous or subordinate means of its workings; the soul itself, if there is a soul, makes only a part of the mechanism of Nature, exists not for itself, but as a utility for her business. But Karma is more than a mechanical law of antecedent and consequence. Karma is action, there is a thing done and a doer and an active consequence; these three are the three joints, the three locks, the three *sandhis* of the connexus of Karma. And it is a complex mental, moral and physical working; for the law of it is not less true of the mental and moral than of the physical consequence of the act to the doer. The will and the idea are the driving force of the action, and the momentum does not come from some commotion in my chemical atoms or some working of ion and electron or some weird biological effervescence. Therefore the act and consequence must have some relation to the will and the

idea and there must be a mental and moral consequence to the soul which has the will and idea. That, if we admit the individual as a real being, signifies a continuity of act and consequence to him and therefore rebirth for a field of this working. It is evident that in one life we do not and cannot labour out and exhaust all the values and powers of that life, but only carry on a past thread, weave out something in the present, prepare infinitely more for the future.

This consequence of rebirth would not follow from the very nature of Karma if there were only an All-Soul of the universe. For then it would be that which is carrying on in myriads of forms its past, working out some present result, spinning yarn of karma for a future weft of consequence. It is the All-Soul which would be the originator, would upheave the force of the act, would receive and exhaust or again take up for farther uses the returning force of the consequence. Nothing essential would depend on its doing all these things through the same individual mask of its being. For the individual would only be a prolonged moment of the All-Soul, and what it originated in this moment of its being which I call myself, might very well produce its result on some other moment of the same being which from the point of view of my ego would be somebody quite different from and unconnected with myself. There would be no injustice, no unreason in such an apparently vicarious reaping of the fruit or suffering of the consequence; for what has a mask, though it be a living and suffering mask, to do with these things? And, in fact, in the nature of life in the material universe a working out of the result of the action of one in the lives of many others, an effect of the individual's action on the group or the whole is everywhere the law. What I sow in this hour, is reaped by my posterity for several generations and we can then call it the karma of the family. What the men of today as community or people resolve upon and execute, comes back with a blessing or a sword upon the future of their race when they themselves have passed away and are no longer there to rejoice or to suffer; and that we can speak of as the karma of the nation. Mankind as a whole too has a karma; what it wrought in its past, will shape its future

destiny; individuals seem only to be temporary units of human thought, will, nature who act according to the compulsion of the soul in humanity and disappear; but the karma of the race which they have helped to form continues through the centuries, the millenniums, the cycles.

But we can see, when we look into ourselves, that this relation of the individual to the whole has a different significance; it does not mean that I have no existence except as a more or less protracted moment in the cosmic becoming of the All-Soul: that too is only a superficial appearance and much subtler and greater is the truth of my being. For the original and eternal Reality, the Alpha and Omega, the Godhead is neither separate in the individual nor is he only and solely a Pantheos, a cosmic spirit. He is at once the eternal individual and the eternal All-Soul of this and many universes, and at the same time he is much more than these things. This universe might end, but he would still be; and I too, though the universe might end, could still exist in him; and all these eternal souls would still exist in him. But as his being is for ever, so the succession of his creations too is for ever; if one creation were to come to an end, it would be only that another might begin and the new would carry on with a fresh commencement and initiation the possibility that had not been worked out in the old, for there can be no end to the self-manifestation of the Infinite. *Nāsti anto vistarasya me*. The universe finds itself in me, even as I find myself in the universe, because we are this face and that face of the one eternal Reality, and individual being is as much needed as universal being to work out this manifestation. The individual vision of things is as true as the universal vision, both are ways of the self-seeing of the Eternal. I may now see myself as a creature contained in the universe; but when I come to self-knowledge, I see too the universe to be a thing contained in myself, subtly by implication in my individuality, amply in the great universalised self I then become. These are data of an ancient experience, things known and voiced of old, though they may seem shadowy and transcendental to the positive modern mind which has long pored so minutely on outward things that

it has become dazed and blind to any greater light and is only slowly recovering the power to see through its folds; but they are for all that always valid and can be experienced today by any one of us who chooses to turn to the deepest way of the inner experience. Modern thought and science, if we look at the new knowledge given us in its whole, do not contradict them, but only trace for us the outward effect and workings of these realities; for always we find in the end that truth of self is not contradicted, but reproduced and made effectual here by law of Energy and law of Matter.

The necessity of rebirth, if we look at it from the outward side, from the side of energy and process, stands upon a persistent and insistent fact which supervenes always upon the generality of common law and kind and constitutes the most intimate secret of the wonder of existence, the uniqueness of the individual. And this uniqueness is everywhere, but appears as a subordinate factor only in the lower ranges of existence. It becomes more and more important and pronounced as we rise in the scale, enlarges in mind, gets to enormous proportions when we come to the things of the spirit. That would seem to indicate that the cause of this significant uniqueness is something bound up with the very nature of spirit; it is something it held in itself and is bringing out more and more as it emerges out of material Nature into self-consciousness. The laws of being are at bottom one for all of us, because all existence is one existence; one spirit, one self, one mind, one life, one energy of process is at work; one will and wisdom has planned or has evolved from itself the whole business of creation. And yet in this oneness there is a persistent variety, which we see first in the form of a communal variation. There is everywhere a group energy, group life, group mind, and if soul is, then we have reason to believe that however elusive it may be to our seizing, there is a group-soul which is the support and foundation — some would call it the result — of this communal variety. That gives us a ground for a group karma. For the group or collective soul renews and prolongs itself and in man at least develops its nature and experience from generation to generation. And who knows whether, when

one form of it is disintegrated, community or nation, it may not wait for and assume other forms in which its will of being, its type of nature and mentality, its attempt of experience is carried forward, migrates, one might almost say, into new-born collective bodies, in other ages or cycles? Mankind itself has this separate collective soul and collective existence. And on that community the community of karma is founded; the action and development of the whole produces consequence of karma and experience for the individual and the totality even as the action and development of the individual produces consequences and experience for others, for the group, for the whole. And the individual is there; you cannot reduce him to a nullity or an illusion; he is real, alive, unique. The communal soul-variation mounts up from the rest, exceeds, brings in or brings out something more, something new, adds novel powers in the evolution. The individual mounts and exceeds in the same way from the community. It is in him, on his highest heights that we get the flame-crest of self-manifestation by which the One finds himself in Nature.

And the question is how does that come about at all? I enter into birth, not in a separate being, but in the life of the whole, and therefore I inherit the life of the whole. I am born physically by a generation which is a carrying on of its unbroken history; the body, life, physical mentality of all past being prolongs itself in me and I must therefore undergo the law of heredity; the parent, says the Upanishad, recreates himself by the energy in his seed and is reborn in the child. But as soon as I begin to develop, a new, an independent and overbearing factor comes in, which is not my parents nor my ancestry, nor past mankind, but I, my own self. And this is the really important, crowning, central factor. What matters most in my life, is not my heredity; that only gives me my opportunity or my obstacle, my good or my bad material, and it has not by any means been shown that I draw all from that source. What matters supremely is what I make of my heredity and not what my heredity makes of me. The past of the world, bygone humanity, my ancestors are there in me; but still I myself am the artist of my self, my life,

my actions. And there is the present of the world, of humanity, there are my contemporaries as well as my ancestors; the life of my environment too enters into me, offers me a new material, shapes me by its influence, lays its direct or its indirect touch on my being. I am invaded, changed, partly recreated by the enviroing being and action in which I am and act. But here again the individual comes in subtly and centrally as the decisive power. What is supremely important is what I make of all this surrounding and invading present and not what it makes of me. And in the interaction of individual and general Karma in which others are causes and produce an effect in my existence and I am a cause and produce an effect on them, I live for others, whether I would have it so or no, and others live for me and for all. Still the central power of my psychology takes its colour from this seeing that I live for my self, and for others or for the world only as an extension of my self, as a thing with which I am bound up in some kind of oneness. I seem to be a soul, self or spirit who constantly with the assistance of all create out of my past and present my future being and myself too help in the surrounding creative evolution.

What then is this all-important and independent power in me and what is the beginning and the end of its self-creation? Has it, even though it is something independent of the physical and vital present and past which gives to it so much of its material, itself no past and no future? Is it something which suddenly emerges from the All-Soul at my birth and ceases at my death? Is its insistence on self-creation, on making something of itself for itself, for its own future and not only for its fleeting present and the future of the race, a vain preoccupation, a gross parasitical error? That would contradict all that we see of the law of the world-being; it would not reduce our life to a greater consistency with the frame of things, but would bring in a freak element and an inconsistency with the pervading principle. It is reasonable to suppose that this powerful independent element which supervenes and works upon the physical and vital evolution, was in the past and will be in the future. It is reasonable also to suppose that it did not come in suddenly from some

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unconnected existence and does not pass out after one brief intervention; its close connection with the life of the world is rather a continuation of a long past connection. And this brings in at once the whole necessity of past birth and karma. I am a persistent being who pursue my evolution within the persistent being of the world. I have evolved my human birth and I help constantly in the human evolution. I have created by my past karma my own conditions and my relations with the life of others and the general karma. That shapes my heredity, my environment, my affinities, my connections, my material, my opportunities and obstacles, a part of my predestined powers and results, not arbitrarily predestined but predetermined by my own stage of nature and past action, and on this groundwork I build new karma and farther strengthen or subtilise my power of natural being, enlarge experience, go on with my soul evolution. This process is woven in with the universal evolution and all its lines are included in the web of being, but it is not merely a jutting point or moment of it or a brief tag shot into the tissue. That is what rebirth means in the history of my manifested self and of universal being.

The old idea of rebirth errs on the contrary by an excessive individualism. Too self-concentrated, it treated one's rebirth and karma as too much one's own single affair, a sharply separate movement in the whole, leaned too much on one's own concern with one's self and even while it admitted universal relations and a unity with the whole, yet taught the human being to see in life principally a condition and means of his own spiritual benefit and separate salvation. That came from the view of the universe as a movement which proceeds out of something beyond, something from which each being enters into life and returns out of it to its source, and the absorbing idea of that return as the one thing that at all matters. Our being in the world, so treated, came in the end to be regarded as an episode and in sum and essence an unhappy and discreditable episode in the changeless eternity of the Spirit. But this was too summary a view of the will and the ways of the Spirit in existence. Certain it is that while we are here, our rebirth or karma, even while it

runs on its own lines, is intimately one with the same lines in the universal existence. But my self-knowledge and self-finding too do not abolish my oneness with other life and other beings. An intimate universality is part of the glory of spiritual perfection. This idea of universality, of oneness not only with God or the eternal Self in me, but with all humanity and other beings, is growing to be the most prominent strain in our minds and it has to be taken more largely into account in any future idea or computation of the significance of rebirth and karma. It was admitted in old times; the Buddhist law of compassion was a recognition of its importance; but it has to be given a still more pervading power in the general significance.

The self-effectuation of the Spirit in the world is the truth on which we take our foundation, a great, a long self-weaving in time. Rebirth is the continuity of that self-effectuation in the individual, the persistence of the thread; Karma is the process, a force, a work of energy and consequence in the material world, an inner and an outer will, an action and mental, moral, dynamic consequence in the soul evolution of which the material world is a constant scene. That is the conception; the rest is a question of the general and particular laws, the way in which karma works out and helps the purpose of the spirit in birth and life. And whatever those laws and ways may be, they must be subservient to this spiritual self-effectuation and take from it all their meaning and value. The law is a means, a line of working for the spirit, and does not exist for its own sake or for the service of any abstract idea. Idea and law of working are only direction and road for the soul's progress in the steps of its existence.