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A CONSIDERATION of the lines of Karma ought certainly to begin with a study of the action of the world as it is, as a whole, however contrary it may be to the rule or to the desire of our moral or our intellectual reason, and to see if we cannot find in its own facts its own explanation. If the actual truth of the world breaks out from the too rigid cadres our moral sense or our intelligence would like to see imposed on the freely or the inevitably self-determining movement of the Infinite, on the immeasurable largeness of his being or the mighty complexities of his will, it is very likely that that is because our moral sense and our intellect, since they are mental and human, are too narrow to understand or to bind him. Any shifting of the base of the problem by which we get out of the difficulty, impose our limits on what overpasses us and compel God to be even as ourselves, may very well be an evasion and an intellectual device and not the way of truth. The problem of knowledge is after all this, to reflect the movements of the Infinite and see, and not to force it into a mould prepared for it by our intelligence.

The ordinary idea of Karma follows this latter unsound method. The world we see is to our notions, if not immoral, yet non-moral and contradictory to our idea of what it should be. Therefore we go behind it, discover that this earth life is not all, erect anew there our moral rule and rejoice to find that after all the universe does obey our human conceptions and therefore all is well. The mysterious conflict, the Manichean struggle, the inextricable tangle here of good and evil is not cured or accounted for, but we say that at least the good and the evil are justly dealt with according to their kind, this duly rewarded and that duly punished in other worlds or other births, there is therefore a dominant moral law and we may cherish a faith that the good will prevail, Ahuramazda conquer and not Ahriman,
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and on the whole all is as it should be. Or if not, if the tangle is inextricable, if this world is evil or existence itself an enormous mistake — as it must be, man is inclined to think, if it does not suit his desires and conceptions, — then at least I individually by satisfying the moral law may get out of the tangle away to the pleasures of a better world or to the bodiless and mindless peace of Nirvana.

But the question is whether this is not a rather childish and impatient mood and whether these solutions come anywhere near solving the whole complexity of the problem. Let us grant that a dominant moral law governs, not action, — for that is either free or, if not free, compelled to be of all kinds, — but the result of action in the world and that a supreme good will work itself out in the end. The difficulty remains why that good should use evil as one and almost the chief of its means or the dominant moral law, sovereign, unescapable, categorical, imperative, the practical governor, if not the reason of our existence, should be compelled to fulfil itself through so much that is immoral and by the agency of a non-moral force, through hell on earth and hell beyond, through petty cruelty of punishment and huge fury of avenging calamity, through an immeasurable and, as it seems, never ending sequence of pain and suffering and torture. It must surely be because there are other things in the Infinite and therefore other laws and forces here and of these the moral law, however great and sovereign to itself, has to take account and is compelled to accommodate its own lines to their curve of movement. And if that is so our plain course, if we are to see the true connections, is to begin by studying the separate law and claim of these other forces: for till it is done we cannot know rightly how they act upon and condition or are acted upon and utilised by any moral rule that we may distinguish intervening in the complex of the world action. And first let us look at the terrestrial law as it is apart from any question of rebirth, the joining, the play, the rule, the intention of the forces here: for it may be that the whole principle is already there and that rebirth does not so much correct or change as complete its significance.

But on earth the first energy is the physical; the lines of
the physical energy creating the forms, deploying the forces of the material universe are the first apparent conditions of our birth and create the practical basis and the original mould of our earthly existence. And what is the law of this first energy, its self-nature, swabhava and swadharma? It is evidently not moral in the human sense of the word: the elemental gods of the physical universe know nothing about ethical distinctions, but only the bare literal rule of energy, the right track and circuit of the movement of a force, its right action and reaction, the just result of its operation. There is no morality, no hesitation of conscience in our or the world’s elements. The fire is no respecter of persons and if the saint or the thinker is cast into it, it will not spare his body. The sea, the stormwind, the rock on which the ship drives do not ask whether the just man drowned in the waters deserved his fate. If there is a divine or a cosmic justice that works in these cruelties, if the lightning that strikes impartially tree or beast or man, is—but it would appear in the case of the man alone, for the rest is accident,—the sword of God or the instrument of Karma, if the destruction wrought by the volcano, the typhoon or the earthquake is a punishment for the sins of the community or individually of the sins in a past life of each man there that suffers or perishes, at least the natural forces know it not and care nothing about it and rather they conceal from us in the blind impartiality of their rage all evidence of any such intention. The sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike; the beneficence and the maleficence of Nature, the gracious and dreadful Mother, her beauty and terror, her utility and her danger are bestowed and inflicted without favour or disfavour on all her children and the good man is no more her favourite than the sinner. If a law of moral punishment is imposed through the action of her physical forces, it must be by a Will from above her or a Force acting unknown to her in her inconscient bosom.

But such a Will could not be itself that of a moral Being ethical after the conceptions of man,—unless indeed it resembled man in his most coldly pitiless and savage moral reason or unreason. For its action involves terrors of punishment that
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would be abhorred as atrocities in an all-powerful human ruler and could not be other than monstrous in a moral Divine Ruler. A personal God so acting would be a Jehovah-Moloch, a merciless and unrighteous demander of righteousness and mercy. On the other hand an inconscient Force mechanically executing an eternal ethical rule without an author or mover would be a paradox: for morality is a creation of conscious mind; an inconscient machinery could have no idea of good and evil, no moral intention or significance. An impersonal or omni-personal conscious Will or Spirit in the universe could well enact such a law and assure its execution, but must then be, although imposing on us good and evil and their results, itself beyond good and evil. And what is this but to say that the universal Being escapes from our ethical limitations and is a supramoral, appearing to us here in physical Nature as an infra-moral, Infinite?

Now, that a conscious Infinite is there in physical Nature, we are assured by every sign, though it is a consciousness not made or limited like ours. All her constructions and motions are those of an illimitable intuitive wisdom too great and spontaneous and mysteriously self-effective to be described as an intelligence, of a Power and Will working for Time in eternity with an inevitable and forecasting movement in each of its steps, even in those steps that in their outward or superficial impetus seem to us inconscient. And as there is in her this greater consciousness and greater power, so too there is an illimitable spirit of harmony and beauty in her constructions that never fails her, though its works are not limited by our aesthetic canons. An infinite hedonism too is there, an illimitable spirit of delight, of which we become aware when we enter into impersonal unity with her; and even as that in her which is terrible is a part of her beauty, that in her which is dangerous, cruel, destructive is a part of her delight, her universal Ananda. If then all else in us, our intelligence, our dynamic and volitional, our aesthetic, our hedonistic being, when they regard the physical universe, feel intuitively the satisfaction in it of something great and illimitable but still mysteriously of their own kind, must not our moral sense, our sense of Right, find too there the satisfaction of something of which it is itself the
reflection? An intuitive perception of this kind is at the root of our demand for a moral order in the universe. Yes, but here too our partial conceptions, our own moral canons are not sufficient; this is a greater and illimitable Right, not bound to the ethical formula, and its first principle is that each thing should observe the law of its own energy and each energy move in its own lines in the total scheme and fulfil its own function and make its own returns. The physical law is the right and justice, the duty, the ought of the physical world. The godhead of Fire in the Upanishad, questioned by the Spirit, “What is the power in thee?” makes answer “This is my power that whatever is cast to me, I burn,” and a similar answer is made by each physical thing to the question of the life and the mind. It observes the lines of its physical energy and is concerned with no other law or justice. No law of Karma, the moral law included, could exist, if there were not to begin with this principle as the first foundation of order.

What then is the relation of man to this physical Nature, man this soul intervening in and physically born of her in a body subjected to her law of action? what his function as something that is yet more than her, a life and a mind and a spirit? what his swabhava, his swadharma? First, he owes to her a mechanical obedience of which she herself working in his body takes care: but also, as a soul evolving the power of consciousness secret in her, his business is to know and to use her law and even in knowing and using it to transcend her more material limit, habit, purpose and formula. Observance of Nature but also transcendence of first nature is continually the purpose of the Spirit within him. A continuous series of transcendences is the most significant thing in the world action and evolution itself is only Nature’s constant impulse and effort of self-exceeding, of a greater self-becoming, her way of expressing more and more, getting out a greater form of birth and awakened power of presence of the self that is in her. Life brings in a whole range of these transcendences, mind another and greater range, and since mind is so evidently imperfect and incomplete, a thing of seeking in its very nature, there must surely be a range or many ranges
of transcendence above mind. Man meets with the powers of his mind the rule of the physical action and the law of vital Karma, brings in a law of mental and moral Karma and lifts along the ladder of these scales to something more, to a potency of spiritual action which may even lead him to an exceeding of Karma itself, a freedom from or of birth and becoming, a perfecting transcendence.

Man's exceeding of the physical law does not come solely by his evolution of a moral sense in a non-moral world of Nature. Its essential rule is rather a turning of a conscious intelligence and will on life and matter, morality itself only this knowledge and will seeking for a rule of truth and right of action, satyam rtam, in his relation to his inner self and to his fellow-beings. But his dealings with the purely physical lines of Nature are non-moral, a matter at first of observance where he must, of satisfaction by instinctive or experienced utilisings, of suffering at her hands by compulsion, and more and more, as he grows, of a struggle of his knowledge and will to know and master her forces for his use and pleasure, for instruments and expedients, for a greater base and circle of opportunities, for the joy itself of will and knowledge. He makes her forces his opportunities and to increase them faces her perils. He defies her powers, transgresses her limitations, sins constantly against her first prohibitions, takes her punishments and overcomes them, becomes by wrestling of his mind and will with her acquainted with her greater possibilities which she herself has left unused while she waited for his coming. She meets his effort with physical obstruction and opposition, with a No that constantly recedes, with the mask of his own ignorance, with the menace of her danger. One might suggest the fancy,—attributing to her that resistance which certain instincts in man oppose to the daring of spiritual adventure, to new enlargings of knowledge, new forms of will or new standards of conduct, regarding them stupidly as sin and impiety because they transgress what is established,—that to physical Nature in her first power life itself with its starts and deviations and stumblings and sufferings is a sin against her law of sure physical harmony and exact measure and much
more mind with its daring, its sin of boundless adventure, its final yearnings towards the unmeasured, the above-law, the infinite.

But in fact all that the godhead of physical Nature is concerned with in man’s dealings with her is to observe a just law of return of her energies to his effort. Wherever his knowledge and will can harmonise itself with the lines of her energies, she makes a return according to its action on her: where it works on her with insufficiency, ignorance, carelessness, error, she overpowers his effort or injures; as he wills more and discovers more, she returns to him a greater utility and fruit of her powers, consents to his masteries and favours his violences. He has arrived at a unity, a Yoga with her in her greater secret possibilities, — he has liberated them and, as he uses them, so he has from her their return. He observes and he extends for her her lines and she responds with an exact ministry and obedience. All this he can do at present within certain physical limits and lines of working and there is a modification but not a radical change. There are indications that by a more direct pressure of a mental and psychical energy on the physical, the response can be made more variable, the physical depart from what seem to be fixed limits and habits, and it is conceivable that as knowledge and will entered into the region of higher and yet higher powers, the action of physical energy might grow entirely responsive, giving whatever return is seemingly demanded from her, and its lines perfectly flexible. But even this transcendence would have to regard the great original measures fixed by the All-Will: there could be a free use, perhaps a large transformation of the physical energy, but not a departure from its fundamental law and purpose.

All this founds a reign of law, a principle of the just return of energy that is the neutral essence of Karma, but it has no eye of regard for ethical measures and no moral significance. Man may and does invent cruel and immoral means of getting at physical knowledge and its powers or turn to unethical ends the energies she places at his service, but that is a matter between his will and his own soul and of his relation with other living beings, his and their concern and not hers. Physical Nature gives impartially her
results and rewards and demands from man observance not of the moral but the physical law: she asks for a just knowledge and a scrupulous practice of her physical lines and nothing else. There is no karmic retort from her on the many cruelties of science, no revolt against an unethical use of her facilities, much punishment of ignorance but none of wickedness. If there is something in the lower rounds of Nature which reacts against certain transgressions of the moral law, it begins obscurely on a higher scale, with life. A vital reaction of the kind there is and it produces physico-vital effects, but mark that in this kind of reaction there is no observance of our limits and measures, but rather the same promiscuous impartiality as in the acts of physical Nature. In this field we have to admit a law of vicarious punishment, a constant smiting of the innocent for the sins of the guilty which would seem shocking and brutally unethical and unjust to us if inflicted by a human being. Life seems to punish itself for its errors and excesses without any care to limit the reaction to the agent of the excess or the error. There is here an order of the lines of energy that is not at least primarily or in intention ethical, but rather concerned with a system of returns not governed by our moral ideas.

The movements of life seem indeed to be as little as the physical laid on ethical lines. The fundamental right and justice of life is to follow the curve of the vital energies, to maintain the functions of the life force and to give a return to its own powers. Its function is to survive, to reproduce itself, to grow and possess and enjoy, to prolong and enlarge and assure its action, power, having, pleasure as much as earth will allow. All means are good to life that secure these ends: the rest is a matter of right balance between the vital energy and its physical means, of a putting forth of its powers and the kind of return it gets for those powers. At first — and this continues even after the emergence of mind in life and as long as mind is subservient to the life force, — that is all we see. Vital nature works out her ends faultlessly enough, but not by any means blamelessly in the ethical sense. Death is her second means of self-preservation, destruction her constant instrument for change and renovation.
and progress, suffering inflicted on oneself or on others often-
est her price for victory and pleasure. All life lives upon other
life, makes a place for itself by encroachment and exploitation,
possesses by association but even more by struggle. Life acts
by mutual shock and mutual use of creatures by each other;
but it works only partly by mutual help and very much by a
mutual assault and devouring. And its reproduction is bound to
a means that the ethical sense even when most tolerant feels to
be animal and inferior, is inclined to regard as immoral in itself
and, when raised to its ascetic or puritan acuities, rejects as vile.
And yet when once we put aside our limited human conceptions
and look with impersonal eyes on this vast and various and
wonderful vital nature into which we are born, we find in it a
mysteriously perfect order, the work of a deep and illimitable
intuitive wisdom, an immense Power and will at its perfectly
seeing work, a great whole of beauty and harmony built out of
what seems to us a system of discords, a mighty joy of life and
creation which no heaviest toll of individual death or suffering
can tire or discourage and which, when we enter into oneness
with the great Ananda of its movement, these things seem rather
to cast into relief and against the hue of its ecstasy these shades
not to matter. There is here also, in these steps of vital Nature
and the law of her energies, a truth of the infinite; and this truth
of the Infinite’s insistence on life, life as it were for its own sake
and for the joy of creation has its own standards of right and
harmony, just balance and measure, fit action and reaction of
energy that cannot be judged by the human rule. It is a pre-
mental and still impersonal Tapas and Ananda and therefore a
still non-moral order.

Man’s relation with vital Nature is, again, first to be one
with it by observance and obedience to its rule, then to know
and direct it by conscious intelligence and will and to transcend
by that direction the first law of life, its rule and habit, formula,
initial significance. At first he is compelled to obey its instincts
and has to act even as the animal, but in the enlarged terms of
a mentalised impulsion and an increasingly clear consciousness
and responsible will in what he does. He too has first to strive
to exist, to make a place for himself and his kind, to grow and possess and enjoy, to prolong, to enlarge and assure the first vital lines of his life movement. He too does it even as the others, by battle and slaughter, by devouring, by encroachment, by laying his yoke on earth and her products and on her brute children and on his fellow-men. His virtue, his dharma of the vital nature, *virtus, aretē*, is at first an obligation to strength and swiftness and courage and all things that make for survival, mastery and success. Most even of the things in him that evolve an ethical significance have at root not a truly ethical but a dynamic character,—such as self-control, *tapasyā*, discipline. They are vital-dynamic, not ethical energies; they are a rightly massed and concentrated, rightly ordered putting forth of mentalised life forces and the return they seek and get are of the vital and dynamic kind, power, success, mastery, increased capacities of vital possession and expansion or the result of these things, vital-hedonistic, the satisfaction of his desires, vital happiness, enjoyment and pleasure.

Man’s first business is to bring his conscious intelligence and will to enlarge the lines of life of the individual and the race. Here again it is to these two powers primarily and only secondarily and partially to any moral force that the life energy gives its returns. The battle in life’s primitive values is to the strong and the race to the swift, and the weak and the torpid cannot claim the goal and the crown on the strength of their greater virtue; and there is in this a justice, while the moral principle of reward would be here an injustice, for it would be a denial of the principle of the right returns of energy which is fundamental to any possible law of Karma. Raise the action by the powers of the mind and still the greater successes, the glory and the victory, fall to the men of great intelligence and the men of great will and not necessarily to the more ethical intelligence or to the more moralised will. Morality counts in this dynamic aspect of life only as a prudential check or a concentrating tapasya. Life helps those who most wisely and faithfully follow her impulses while observing her limits and restraints or those who most powerfully aid her greater impulses of expansion. It is those that get the most
prudential profit out of her and these the most of her power and movement and joy.

The greater movement at the same time brings in a power of greater suffering as well as joy, the greater sins of life and its greater virtues. Man as he dares the perils of physical nature, dares too the perils of the vital energy by transgressing her safe rules and limits which she imposes automatically on the animal. There are balances of her use of her energies, safe measures and restraints which make living as secure as it can be, — for all living is naturally a peril and an adventure, but a certain prudence in Nature minimises the adventure as much as is consistent with her ends and the intelligence of man tries to do still better, to live securely and not dangerously, to exclude the more formidable incertitudes from the order of his life. But the instinct of expansion in man is continually breaking Nature’s vital balances and disregarding his own limits and measures. He is avid of experience, of the unmeasured and unknown in power and experience and enjoyment as of the common and known and safe, of the perilous extremes as of the sane averages. He must sound all life’s possibilities, test the wrong as well as the right use of her energies, pay his toll of suffering and get his prize of more splendid victories. As far as mind working in life’s ways can do it, he has to enlarge the lines of life and to make a transformation of its action and its possibilities. This has hitherto been a greatening of forms and never gone so far as to make a radical change and override its first nature. It is only by a transformation of our inner life that we can get beyond the magnified, mentalised, reasoning and consciously willing animal that for the most part the greater number of us are and only by raising it up to unity with some spiritual power we have not yet reached that we can hope to transform vital nature and make her a free instrument of the higher spirit. Then man may be really what he strives to be, master of his life, in control of vital and physical Nature.

Meanwhile it is through an inward turn of his mind that he gets to something like a transcendence, a living not for life but for truth, for beauty, for power of the soul, for good and right,
love, justice. It is this endeavour that brings down into the lower rounds of energy the powers of a higher circle, something of a mental and a truly moral tending at its end to become a spiritual law of action and the fruits of action of Karma.