Karma and Justice

WHAT ARE the lines of Karma? What is the intrinsic character and active law of this energy of the soul and its will and development of consequence? To ask that question is to ask what is the form taken here by the dynamic meaning of our existence and what the curves of guidance of its evolving self-creation and action. And such a question ought not to be answered in a narrow spirit or under the obsession of some single idea which does not take into account the many-sidedness and rich complexity of this subtle world of Nature. The law of Karma can be no rigid and mechanical canon or rough practical rule of thumb, but rather its guiding principle should be as supple a harmonist as the Spirit itself whose will of self-knowledge it embodies and should adapt itself to the need of self-development of the variable individual souls who are feeling their way along its lines towards the right balance, synthesis, harmonies of their action. The karmic idea cannot be — for spirit and not mind is its cause — a cosmic reflection of our limited average human intelligence, but rather the law of a greater spiritual wisdom, a means which behind all its dumb occult appearances embodies an understanding lead and a subtle management towards our total perfection.

The ordinary current conception of law of Karma is dominantly ethical, but ethical in no very exalted kind. Its idea of karma is a mechanical and materialistic ethics, a crudely exact legal judgment and administration of reward and punishment, an external sanction to virtue and prohibition of sin, a code, a balance. The idea is that there must be a justice governing the award of happiness and misery on the earth, a humanly intelligible equity and that the law of Karma represents it and gives us its formula. I have done so much good, punya. It is my capital, my accumulation and balance. I must have it paid out
to me in so much coin of prosperity, the legal currency of this sovereign and divine Themis, or why on earth should I at all do good? I have done so much evil. That too must come back to me in so much exact and accurate punishment and misfortune. There must be so much outward suffering or an inward suffering caused by outward event and pressure; for if there were not this physically sensible, visible, inevitable result, where would be any avenging justice and where could we find any deterrent sanction in Nature against evil? And this award is that of an exact judge, a precise administrator, a scrupulous merchant of good for good and evil for evil who has learned nothing and will never learn anything of the Christian or Buddhistic ideal rule, has no bowels of mercy or compassion, no forgiveness for sin, but holds austerely to an eternal Mosaic law, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, a full, slow or swift, but always calm and precisely merciless *lex talionis*.

This commercial and mathematical accountant is sometimes supposed to act with a startling precision. A curious story was published the other day, figuring as a fact of contemporary occurrence, of a rich man who had violently deprived another of his substance. The victim is born as the son of the oppressor and in the delirium of a fatal illness reveals that he has obliged his old tyrant and present father to spend on him and so lose the monetary equivalent of the property robbed minus a certain sum, but that sum must be paid now, otherwise — The debt is absolved and as the last pice is expended, the reborn soul departs, for its sole object in taking birth is satisfied, accounts squared and the spirit of Karma content. That is the mechanical idea of Karma at its acme of satisfied precision. At the same time the popular mind in its attempt to combine the idea of a life beyond with the notion of rebirth, supposes a double prize for virtue and a double penalty for transgression. I am rewarded for my good deeds in heaven after death until the dynamic value of my virtue is exhausted and I am then reborn and rewarded again materially on earth. I am punished in hell to the equivalence of my sins and again punished for them in another life in the body. This looks a little superfluous and a rather redundant
justice, and, even, the precise accountant becomes very like an unconscionable hundred per cent usurer. Perhaps it may be said that beyond earth it is the soul that suffers — for purification, and here the physical being — as a concession to the forces of life and the symmetry of things: but still it is the soul that thus pays double in its subtle experience and in its physical incarnation.

The strands of our nature which mix in this natural but hardly philosophic conception, have to be disentangled before we can disengage the right value of these ideas. Their first motive seems to be ethical, for justice is an ethical notion; but true ethics is dharma, the right fulfilment and working of the higher nature, and right action should have right motive, should be its own justification and not go limping on the crutches of greed and fear. Right done for its own sake is truly ethical and ennobles the growing spirit; right done in the lust for a material reward or from fear of the avenging stripes of the executioner or sentence of the judge, may be eminently practical and useful for the moment, but it is not in the least degree ethical, but is rather a lowering of the soul of man; or at least the principle is a concession to his baser animal and unspiritual nature. But in natural man, born before the higher dharma and more potent and normal as a motive to action, come two other very insistent things, kāma, artha, desire and pleasure of enjoyment with its corresponding fear of suffering, and interest of possession, acquisition, success with its complementary pain of lacking and frustration, and this is what governs most prominently the normal barbaric or still half barbaric natural man. He needs to some not small extent if he is to conform his close pursuit of desire and interest to the ethical standard, a strict association or identity of result of virtue with some getting of his interest and pleasure and result of sin with some loss of materially or vitally desirable things and the infliction of mental, vital or physical pain. Human law proceeds on this principle by meeting the grosser more obvious offences with punishment and avenging pain or loss and on the other hand assuring the individual in some degree of the secure having of his legitimate pleasure and interest if he observes the legal rule. The cosmic law is expected by the popular theory of
Karma to deal with man on his own principle and do this very thing with a much sterner and more unescapable firmness of application and automatic necessity of consequence.

The cosmic Being must be then, if this view is to hold, a sort of enlarged divine Human or, we might say, a superior anthropoid Divine, or else the cosmic Law a perfection and magnitude of human methods and standards, which deals with man as he is accustomed to deal with his neighbour,—only not with a rough partial human efficacy, but either a sure omniscience or an unfailing automatism. Whatever truth there may be behind that notion, this is not likely to be an adequate account of the matter. In actual life, if we put aside the rebirth theory, there are traces of this method, but it does not work out with any observable consistency,—not even if we accept an unsatisfactory and hardly just vicarious punishment as part of the scheme. What surety have we, then, of its better or its faultless working out in rebirth except for some similar partial signs and indications and, to fill in the blanks, our general sense of the fitness of things? And again where does the true nature of ethics come in in this scheme? That more elevated action, it would almost seem, is an ideal movement of less use for the practical governance of life than as one part of a preparation for a fourth and last need of man, his need of spiritual salvation, and salvation winds up finally our karma and casts away the economy along with the very thought and will of life. Desire is the law of life and action and therefore of Karma. To do things above the material level for their own sake and their pure right or pure delight is to head straight towards the distances of heaven or the silence of the Ineffable. But this is a view of the meaning of existence against which it is time for the higher seeing mind and being of man to protest and to ask whether the ways of the Spirit in the world may not be capable of a greater, nobler and wiser significance.

But still, since the mind of man is part of the universal mind and reflects something of it in a however broken or as yet imperfect and crookedly seeing fashion, there may well be something of a real truth behind this view, though it is not likely to be the whole or the well understood truth. There are some certain or
probable laws of the universal working which are relevant to it and must enter into the account. First, it is sure that Nature has laws of which the observance leads to or helps well-being and of which the violation imposes suffering; but all of them cannot be given a moral significance. Then there is the certainty that there must be a moral law of cause and consequence in the total web of her weaving and this we would perhaps currently put into the formula that good produces good and evil evil, which is a proposition of undoubted truth, though also we see in this complicated world that evil comes out of what we hold to be good, and again out of evil disengages itself something that yet turns to good. Perhaps our system of values is too rigidly precise or too narrowly relative; there are subtle things in the totality, minglings, interrelations, cross-currents, suppressed or hidden significances which we do not take into account. The formula is true, but is not the whole truth, at least as now understood in its first superficial significance.

And at any rate in the ordinary notion of Karma we are combining two different notions of good. I can well understand that moral good does or ought to produce and increase moral good and moral evil to farther and to create moral evil. It does so in myself. The habit of love confirms and enhances my power of love; it purifies my being and opens it to the universal good. The habit of hatred on the contrary corrupts my being, fills it with poison, with bad and morbid toxic matter, and opens it to the general power of evil. My love ought also by a prolongation or a return to produce love in others and my hatred to give rise to hatred; that happens to a certain, a great extent, but it need not be and is not an invariable or rigorous consequence; still we may well see and believe that love does throw out widening ripples and helps to elevate the world while hatred has the opposite consequence. But what is the necessary connection between this good and evil on the one hand and on the other pleasure and pain? Must the ethical power always turn perfectly into some term of kindred hedonistic result? Not entirely; for love is a joy in itself, but also love suffers; hatred is a troubled and self-afflicting thing, but has too its own perverse delight of itself and
its gratifications; but in the end we may say that love, because it is born of the universal Delight, triumphs in its own nature and hatred because it is its denial or perversion, leads to a greater sum of misery to myself as to others. And of all true moral good and real evil this may be said that the one tends towards some supreme Right, the \textit{ātman} of the Vedic Rishis, the highest law of a highest Truth of our being and that Truth is the door of the spirit’s Ananda, its beatific nature, the other is a missing or perversion of the Right and the Truth and exposes us to its opposite, to false delight or suffering. And even in the perplexed steps of life some reflection of this identity must emerge.

This correspondence is, still, more essentially true in the inner field, in the spiritual, mental and emotional result and reaction of the good or the evil or of the effects of its outgoing action. But where is the firm link of correspondence between the ethical and the more vital and physical hedonistic powers of life? How does my ethical good turn into smiling fortune, crowned prosperity, sleek material good and happiness to myself and my ethical evil into frowning misfortune, rugged adversity, sordid material ill and suffering,—for that is what the desire soul of man and the intelligence governed by it seem to demand,—and how is the account squared or the transmutation made between these two very different energies of the affirmation and denial of good? We can see this much that the good or the evil in me translates itself into a good or an evil action which among other things brings about much mental and material happiness and suffering to others, and to this outgoing power and effect there ought to be an equal reaction of incoming power and effect, though it does not seem to work itself out immediately or with any discoverable exactness of correspondence. There does still appear to be a principle of rebound in Nature; our action has in some degree the motion of recoil of the boomerang and cycles back towards the will that has cast it on the world. The stone we hurl rashly against the universal Life is cast back at us and may crush, maim or injure our own mental and physical being. But this mechanical rebound is not the whole principle of Karma. Nor is Karma wholly a mixed ethical-hedonistic order.
in its total significance, for there are involved other powers of our consciousness and being. Nor is it again a pure mechanism which we set going by our will and have then helplessly to accept the result; for the will which produced the effect, can also intervene to modify it. And above all the initiating and receiving consciousness can change the values and utilities of the reactions and make another thing of life than this automatic mechanism of fateful return or retribution to the half-blind embodied actor in a mute necessity of rigorous law of Nature.

The relation of our consciousness and will to Karma is the thing upon which all the subtler lines of action and consequence must depend; that connexus must be the hinge of the whole significance. The dependence of the pursuit of ethical values on a sanction by the inferior hedonistic values, material, vital and lower mental pleasure, pain and suffering, appeals strongly to our normal consciousness and will; but it ceases to have more than a subordinate force and finally loses all force as we grow towards greater heights of our being. That dependence cannot then be the whole or the final power or guiding norm of Karma. The relation of will to action and consequence must be cast on more subtle and liberal lines. The universal Spirit in the law of Karma must deal with man in the lower scale of values only as a part of the transaction and as a concession to man’s own present motives. Man himself puts these values, makes that demand for pleasure and prosperity and dreads their opposites, desires heaven more than he loves virtue, fears hell more than he abhors sin, and while he does so, the world-dispensation wears to him that meaning and colour. But the spirit of existence is not merely a legislator and judge concerned to maintain a standard of legal justice, to dole out deterrents and sanctions, rewards and penalties, ferocious pains of hell, indulgent joys of paradise. He is the Divine in the world, the Master of a spiritual evolution and the growing godhead in humanity. That godhead grows however slowly beyond the dependence on the sanctions of pleasure and pain. Pain and pleasure govern our primary being and in that primary scale pain is Nature’s advertisement of things we should avoid, pleasure her lure to things she would tempt us to pursue.
These devices are first empirical tests for limited objects; but as I grow, I pass beyond their narrower uses. I have continually to disregard Nature’s original warnings and lures in order to get to a higher nature. I have to develop a nobler spiritual law of Karma.

This will be evident if we consider our own greater motives of action. The pursuit of Truth may entail on me penalties and sufferings; the service of my country or the world may demand from me loss of my outward happiness and good fortune or the destruction of my body; the increase of my strength of will and greatness of spirit may be only possible by the ardours of suffering and the firm renunciation of joys and pleasures. I must still follow after Truth, I must do the service to my race my soul demands from me; I must increase my strength and inner greatness and must not ask for a quite irrelevant reward, shun penalty or make a bargain for the exact fruits of my labour. And that which is true of my action in the present life, must be equally true of my connected action and self-development through many births. Happiness and sorrow, good fortune and ill-fortune are not my main concern whether in this birth or in future lives, but my perfection and the higher good of mankind purchased by whatever suffering and tribulation. Spinoza’s dictum that joy is a passage to a greater perfection and sorrow a passage to a lesser perfection is a much too summary epigram. Delight will be indeed the atmosphere of perfection and attends too even the anguish of our labour towards it, but first a higher delight which has often much trouble for its price, and afterwards a highest spiritual Ananda which has no dependence on outward circumstances, but rather is powerful to new-shape their meanings and transform their reactions. These things may be above the first formulation of the world energy here, may be influences from superior planes of the universal existence, but they are still a part of the economy of Karma here, a process of the spiritual evolution in the body. And they bring in a higher soul nature and will and action and consequence, a higher rule of Karma.

The law of Karma is therefore not simply an extension of the human idea of practical justice into future births and
a rectification there of the apparent injustice of life. A justice or rather a justness there must be in all the workings of the world-energy; Nature certainly seems to be scrupulous in her measures. But in the life of man there are many factors to be taken into the reckoning; there are too stages, grades, degrees. And on a higher step of our being things do not look the same nor are quite the same as on a lower grade. And even in the first normal scale there are many factors and not only the ethical-hedonistic standard. If it is just that the virtuous man should be rewarded with success and happiness and the wicked man punished with downfall and pain at some time, in some life, on earth or in heaven or in hell, it is also just that the strong man should have the reward of his cultivated strength, the intellectual man the prize of his cultivated skill, the will that labours in whatever field the fruit of its effort and its works. But it does not work rightly, you say, not morally, not according to the ethical law? But what is right working in this connection of will and action and consequence? I may be religious and honest, but if I am dull, weak and incompetent? And I may be selfish and impious, but if I have the swift flame of intellect, the understanding brain, the skill to adapt means to ends, the firm courageous will fixed on its end? I have then an imperfection which must impose its consequences, but also I have powers which must make their way. The truth is that there are several orders of energy and their separate characteristic working must be seen, before their relations can be rightly discovered in the harmonies of Nature. A complex web is what we have to unravel. When we have seen the parts in the whole, the elements and their affinities in the mass, then only can we know the lines of Karma.