Karma

ONE FINDS an unanswerable truth in the theory of Karma, — not necessarily in the form the ancients gave to it, but in the idea at its centre, — which at once strikes the mind and commands the assent of the understanding. Nor does the austerer reason, distrustful of first impressions and critical of plausible solutions, find after the severest scrutiny that the more superficial understanding, the porter at the gateways of our mentality, has been deceived into admitting a tinsel guest, a false claimant into our mansion of knowledge. There is a solidity at once of philosophic and of practical truth supporting the idea, a bedrock of the deepest universal undeniable verities against which the human mind must always come up in its fathomings of the fathomless; in this way indeed does the world deal with us, there is a law here which does so make itself felt and against which all our egoistic ignorance and self-will and violence dashes up in the end, as the old Greek poet said of the haughty insolence and prosperous pride of man, against the very foundation of the throne of Zeus, the marble feet of Themis, the adamantine bust of Ananke. There is the secret of an eternal factor, the base of the unchanging action of the just and truthful gods, devâñâm dhruvâñi vratâni, in the self-sufficient and impartial law of Karma.

This truth of Karma has been always recognised in the East in one form or else in another; but to the Buddhists belongs the credit of having given to it the clearest and fullest universal enunciation and the most insistent importance. In the West too the idea has constantly recurred, but in external, in fragmentary glimpses, as the recognition of a pragmatic truth of experience, and mostly as an ordered ethical law or fatality set over against the self-will and strength of man: but it was clouded over by other ideas inconsistent with any reign of law, vague ideas of
some superior caprice or of some divine jealousy, — that was a
notion of the Greeks, — a blind Fate or inscrutable Necessity,
Ananke, or, later, the mysterious ways of an arbitrary, though
no doubt an all-wise Providence. And all this meant that there
was some broken half-glimpse of the working of a force, but
the law of its working and the nature of the thing itself escaped
the perception, — as indeed it could hardly fail to do, since the
mental eye of the West, absorbed by the passion of life, tried to
read the workings of the universe in the light of the single mind
and life of man; but those workings are much too vast, ancient,
unbrokenly continuous in Time and all-pervading in Space, —
not in material infinity alone, but in the eternal time and eternal
space of the soul’s infinity, — to be read by so fragmentary a
glimmer. Since the Eastern idea and name of the law of Karma
was made familiar to the modern mentality, one side of it has
received an increasing recognition, perhaps because latterly that
mentality had been prepared by the great discoveries and gener-
alisations of Science for a fuller vision of cosmic existence and
a more ordered and majestic idea of cosmic Law. It may be as
well then to start from the physical base in approaching this
question of Karma, though we may find at last that it is from
the other end of being, from its spiritual summit rather than its
material support that we must look in order to catch its whole
significance — and to fix also the limits of its significance.

Fundamentally, the meaning of Karma is that all existence is
the working of a universal Energy, a process and an action and
a building of things by that action, — an unbuilding too, but as
a step to farther building, — that all is a continuous chain in
which every one link is bound indissolubly to the past infinity of
numberless links, and the whole governed by fixed relations, by a
fixed association of cause and effect, present action the result of
past action as future action will be the result of present action, all
cause a working of energy and all effect too a working of energy.
The moral significance is that all our existence is a putting out of
an energy which is in us and by which we are made and as is the
nature of the energy which is put forth as cause, so shall be that
of the energy which returns as effect, that this is the universal
law and nothing in the world can, being of and in our world, escape from its governing incidence. That is the philosophical reality of the theory of Karma, and that too is the way of seeing which has been developed by physical Science. But its seeing has been handicapped in the progress to the full largeness of its own truth by two persistent errors, first, the strenuous paradoxical attempt — inevitable and useful no doubt as one experiment of the human reason which had to have its opportunity, but foredoomed to failure — to explain supraphysical things by a physical formula, and a darkening second error of setting behind the universal rule of law and as its cause and efficient the quite opposite idea of the cosmic reign of Chance. The old notion of an unintelligible supreme caprice, — unintelligible it must naturally be since it is the working of an unintelligent Force, — thus prolonged its reign and got admission side by side with the scientific vision of the fixities and chained successions of the universe.

Being is no doubt one, and Law too may be one; but it is perilous to fix from the beginning on one type of phenomena with a predetermined will to deduce from that all other phenomenon however different in its significance and nature. In that way we are bound to distort truth into the mould of our own prepossession. Intermediately at least we have rather to recognise the old harmonious truth of Veda — which also came by this way in its end, its Vedanta, to the conception of the unity of Being, — that there are different planes of cosmic existence and therefore too of our own existence and in each of them the same powers, energies or laws must act in a different type and in another sense and light of their effectuality. First, then, we see that if Karma be a universal truth or the universal truth of being, it must be equally true of the inly-born mental and moral worlds of our action as in our outward relations with the physical universe. It is the mental energy that we put forth which determines the mental effect, — but subject to all the impact of past, present and future surrounding circumstance, because we are not isolated powers in the world, but rather our energy a subordinate strain and thread of the universal energy. The moral energy of our action determines similarly the nature and effect of the moral
consequence, but subject too — though to this element the rigid
moralist does not give sufficient consideration, — to the same
incidence of past, present and future surrounding circumstance.
That this is true of the output of physical energy, needs no saying
nor any demonstration. We must recognise these different types
and variously formulated motions of the one universal Force,
and it will not do to say from the beginning that the measure
and quality of my inner being is some result of the output of
a physical energy translated into mental and moral energies, —
for instance, that my doing a good or a bad action or yielding to
good or to bad affections and motives is at the mercy of my liver,
or contained in the physical germ of my birth, or is the effect of
my chemical elements or determined essentially and ultimately
by the disposition of the constituent electrons of my brain and
nervous system. Whatever drafts my mental and moral being
may make on the corporeal for its supporting physical energy
and however it may be affected by its borrowings, yet it is very
evident that it uses them for other and larger purposes, has a
supraphysical method, evolves much greater motives and signif-
icances. The moral energy is in itself a distinct power, has its
own plane of karma, moves me even, and that characteristically,
to override my vital and physical nature. Forms of one universal
Force at bottom — or at top — these may be, but in practice they
are different energies and have to be so dealt with — until we
can find what that universal Force may be in its highest purest
texture and initial power and whether that discovery can give
us in the perplexities of our nature a unifying direction.

Chance, that vague shadow of an infinite possibility, must be
banished from the dictionary of our perceptions; for of chance
we can make nothing, because it is nothing. Chance does not at
all exist; it is only a word by which we cover and excuse our
own ignorance. Science excludes it from the actual process of
physical law; everything there is determined by fixed cause and
relation. But when it comes to ask why these relations exist and
not others, why a particular cause is allied to a particular effect,
it finds that it knows nothing whatever about the matter; every
actualised possibility supposes a number of other possibilities
that have not actualised but conceivably might have, and it is convenient
then to say that Chance or at most a dominant probability
determines all actual happening, the chance of evolution,
the stumblings of a grooping inconscient energy which somehow
finds out some good enough way and fixes itself into a repetition
of the process. If Inconscience can do the works of intelligence,
it may not be impossible that chaotic Chance should create a
universe of law! But this is only a reading of our own ignorance
into the workings of the universe,—just as prescientific man
read into the workings of physical law the caprices of the gods
or any other name for a sportive Chance whether undivine or
dressed in divine glories, whether credited with a pliant flexi-
bility to the prayers and bribes of man or presented with an
immutable Sphinx face of stone,—but names only in fact for
his own ignorance.

And especially when we come to the pressing needs of our
moral and spiritual being, no theory of chance or probability
will serve at all. Here Science, physical in her basis, does not
help except to point out to a certain degree the effects of my
physicality on my moral being or of my moral action on my phys-
icality: for anything else of just illumination or useful purpose,
she stumbles and splashes about in the quagmire of her own
nescience. Earthquake and eclipse she can interpret and predict,
but not my moral and spiritual becoming, but only attempt to
explain its phenomena when they have happened by imposing
polysyllables and fearful and wonderful laws of pathology, mor-
bid heredity, eugenics and what not of loose fumbling, which
touch only the draggled skirts of the lowest psycho-physical
being. But here I need guidance more than anywhere else and
must have the recognition of a law, the high line of a guiding
order. To know the law of my moral and spiritual being is at
first and last more imperative for me than to learn the ways of
steam and electricity, for without these outward advantages I
can grow in my inner manhood, but not without some notion
of moral and spiritual law. Action is demanded of me and I need
a rule for my action: something I am urged inwardly to become
which I am not yet, and I would know what is the way and law,
what the central power or many conflicting powers and what the height and possible range and perfection of my becoming. That surely much more than the rule of electrons or the possibilities of a more omnipotent physical machinery and more powerful explosives is the real human question.

The Buddhists’ mental and moral law of Karma comes in at this difficult point with a clue and an opening. As Science fills our mind with the idea of a universal government of Law in the physical and outward world and in our relations with Nature, though she leaves behind it all a great unanswered query, an agnosticism, a blank of some other ungrasped Infinite,—here covered by the concept of Chance,—the Buddhist conception too fills the spaces of our mental and moral being with the same sense of a government of mental and moral Law: but this too erects behind that Law a great unanswered query, an agnosticism, the blank of an ungrasped Infinite. But here the covering word is more grandly intangible; it is the mystery of Nirvana. This Infinite is figured in both cases by the more insistent and positive type of mind as an Inconscience,—but material in the one, in the other a spiritual infinite zero,—but by the more prudent or flexible thinkers simply as an unknowable. The difference is that the unknown of Science is something mechanical to which mechanically we return by physical dissolution or laya, but the unknown of Buddhism is a Permanent beyond the Law to which we return spiritually by an effort of self-suppression, of self-renunciation and, at the latest end, of self-extinction, by a mental dissolution of the Idea which maintains the law of relations and a moral dissolution of the world-desire which keeps up the stream of successions of the universal action. This is a rare and an austere metaphysics; but to its discouraging grandeur we are by no means compelled to give assent, for it is neither self-evident nor inevitable. It is by no means so certain that a high spiritual negation of what I am is my only possible road to perfection; a high spiritual affirmation and absolute of what I am may be also a feasible way and gate. This nobly glacial or blissfully void idea of a Nirvana, because it is so overwhelmingly a negation, cannot finally satisfy the human spirit, which
is drawn persistently to some highest positive and affirmation of itself and only uses negations by the way the better to rid itself of what comes in as an obstacle to its self-finding. To the everlasting No the living being may resign itself by an effort, a sorrowful or a superb turning upon itself and existence, but the everlasting Yes is its native attraction: our spiritual orientation, the magnetism that draws the soul, is to eternal Being and not to eternal Non-Being.

Nevertheless certain essential and needed clues are there in the theory of Karma. And first, there is this assurance, this firm ground on which I can base a sure tread, that in the mental and moral world as in the physical universe there is no chaos, fortuitous rule of chance or mere probability, but an ordered Energy at work which assures its will by law and fixed relation and steady succession and the links of ascertainable cause and effectuality. To be assured that there is an all-pervading mental law and an all-pervading moral law, is a great gain, a supporting foundation. That in the mental and moral as in the physical world what I sow in the proper soil, I shall assuredly reap, is a guarantee of divine government, of equilibrium, of cosmos; it not only grounds life upon an adamant underbase of law, but by removing anarchy opens the way to a greater liberty. But there is the possibility that if this Energy is all, I may only be a creation of an imperative Force and all my acts and becomings a chain of determination over which I can have no real control or chance of mastery. That view would resolve everything into predestination of Karma, and the result might satisfy my intellect but would be disastrous to the greatness of my spirit. I should be a slave and puppet of Karma and could never dream of being a sovereign of myself and my existence. But here there comes in the second step of the theory of Karma, that it is the Idea which creates all relations. All is the expression and expansion of the Idea, sarvāṇi vijñāna-vijñāmbhitāni. Then I can by the will, the energy of the Idea in me develop the form of what I am and arrive at the harmony of some greater idea than is expressed in my present mould and balance. I can aspire to a nobler expansion. Still, if the Idea is a thing in itself, without any base but its own spontaneous
power, none originating it, no knower, no Purusha and Lord, I may be only a form of the universal Idea and myself, my soul, may have no independent existence or initiation. But there is too this third step that I am a soul developing and persisting in the paths of the universal Energy and that in myself is the seed of all my creation. What I have become, I have made myself by the soul's past idea and action, its inner and outer karma; what I will to be, I can make myself by present and future idea and action. And finally, there is this last supreme liberating step that both the Idea and its Karma may have their origin in the free spirit and by arriving at myself by experience and self-finding I can exalt my state beyond all bondage of Karma to spiritual freedom. These are the four pillars of the complete theory of Karma. They are also the four truths of the dealings of Self with Nature.