Mind Nature and Law of Karma

MAN IS not after all in the essence of his manhood or in the inner reality of his soul a vital and physical being raised to a certain power of mental will and intelligence. If that were so, the creed that makes our existence a manifestation of a Will to life, a Life Force moved by no other object than its own play, heightening, efficient power, expansion, might have a good chance of being the sufficient theory of our universe, and the law of our Karma, the rule of our activities would be in entire consonance with that one purpose and ordered by that dominant principle. Certainly in a great part of this world's outer activities,—or if we, fixing our eye mainly on the vital play of the spirit of the universe, consider them as man's chief business and the main thing that matters,—there is a colourable justification for this limited view of the human being. But the more he looks into himself and the more he goes inward and lives intimately and pre-eminently in his mind and soul, the more he discovers that he is in his essential nature a mental being encased in body and emmeshed in the life activities, manu, manomaya puruṣa. He is more than a thinking, willing and feeling result of the mechanism of the physical or an understanding nexus of the vital forces. There is a mental energy of his being that overtops, pervades and utilises the terrestrial action and his own terrestrial nature.

This character of man's being prevents us from resting satisfied with the vitalistic law of Karma: the lines of the vital energy are interfered with and uplifted and altered for man by the intervention of the awakened mental energy of the spirit that emerges in the material universe and creates here on earth the form of man for its habitation, his complex nature to be its expressive power, the gamut of its music, and the action of his thought, perception, will, emotions the notation of its
harmonies. The apparent inconscience of physical Nature, the beautiful and terrible, kindly and cruel conscious but amoral Life Force that is the first thing we see before us, are not the whole self-expression of the universal Being here and therefore not the whole of Nature. Man comes into it to express and realise a higher law of Nature and therefore a higher system of the lines of Karma. The mental energy divides itself and runs in many directions, has an ascending scale of the levels of its action, a great variety and combination of its dynamic aims and purposes. There are many strands of its weaving and it follows each along its own line and combines manifoldly the threads of one with the threads of another. There is in it an energy of thought that puts itself out for a return and a constant increase of knowledge, an energy of will that casts itself forth for a return and increase of conscious mastery, fulfilment of the being, execution of will in action, an energy of conscious aesthesis that feels out for a return and an increase of the creation and enjoyment of beauty, an energy of emotion that demands in its action a return and a constant increase of the enjoyment and satisfaction of the emotional power of the being. All these energies act in a way for themselves and yet depend upon and are inextricably accompanied and mingled with each other. At the same time mind has descended into matter and has to act in and through this world of the vital and physical energy and to consent to and make something of the lines of the vital and physical Karma.

Man, then, since he is a mental being, a means of the evolution of the mental self-expression of the spirit, cannot confine the rule of his action and nature to an obedience to the vital and physical law and an intelligent utilisation of it for the greater, more ordered, more perfect enjoyment of his vital and physical existence, perpetuation, reproduction, possession, enjoyment, expansion. There is a higher law of mental being and nature of which he is bound to become aware and to seek to impose it on his life and his action. At first he is very predominantly governed by the life needs and the movement of the life energies, and it is in applying his mental energy to them and to the world around him that he makes the earliest development of his powers of
knowledge and will and trains the crude impulses that lead him into the path of his emotional, aesthetic and moral evolution. But always there is a certain obscure element that takes pleasure in the action of the mental energies for their own sake and it is this, however imperfect at first in self-consciousness and intelligence, that represents the characteristic intention of Nature in him and makes his mental and eventually his spiritual evolution inevitable. The insistence of the external world around him and the need of utilising its opportunities and of meeting its siege and dangers causes his mind to be much obsessed by life and external action and the utility of thought and will and perception for his dealings with the physical and life forces, and to this preoccupation the finer more disinterested action and subtler cast of motive of the mind nature demanding its own inner development, seeking for knowledge, mastery, beauty, a purer emotional delight for their own sake, and the pursuits which are characteristic of this higher energy of the mental nature, appear almost as by-products and at any rate things secondary that can always be postponed and made subordinate to the needs and demands of the mentalised vital and physical being. But the finer and more developed mind in humanity has always turned towards an opposite self-seeing, inclined to regard this as the most characteristic and valuable element of our being and been ready to sacrifice much and sometimes all to its calls or its imperative mandate. Then life itself would be in reality for man only a field of action for the evolution, the opportunity of new experience, the condition of difficult effort and mastery of the mental and spiritual being. What then will be the lines of this mental energy and how will they affect and be affected by the lines of the vital and physical Karma?

Three movements of the mental energy of man projecting itself along the lines of life, successive movements that yet overlap and enter into each other, have created a triple strand of the law of his Karma. The first is that, primary, obvious, universal, predominant in his beginnings, in which his mind subjects and assimilates itself to the law of life in matter in order to make the most of the terrestrial existence for its own pleasure and profit,
artha, kāma, without any other modification or correction of its pre-existing lines than is involved in the very impact of the human intelligence, will, emotion, aesthesis. These indeed are forces that lift up and greatly enlarge and infinitely rarefy and subtilise by a consciously regulated and more and more skilful and curious use the first crude, narrow and essentially animal aims and movements common to all living creatures. And this element of the mentalised vital existence, these lines of its movement making the main grey solid stuff of the life of the average economic, political, social, domestic man may take on a great amplitude and an imposing brilliance, but they remain always in their distinctive, their original and still persistent character the lines of movement, the way of Karma of the thinking, willing, feeling, refining human animal, — not to be despaired or excluded from our total way of being when we climb to a higher plane of conception and action, but still only a small part of human possibility and, if regarded as the main preoccupation or most imperative law of the human being, then limiting and degrading it; for, empowered up to a certain point to enlarge and dynamise and enrich, but not raise to a self-exceeding, they are useful for ascension only when themselves uplifted and transformed by a greater law and a nobler motive. The momentum of this energy may be a very powerful mental action, may involve much output of intelligence and will power and aesthetic perception and expenditure of emotional force, but the return it seeks is vital success and enjoyment and possession and satisfaction. The mind no doubt feeds its powers on the effort and its fullness on the prize, but it is tethered to its pasture. It is a mixed movement, mental in its means, predominantly vital in its returns; its standard of the values of the return are measured by an outward success and failure, an externalised or externally caused pleasure and suffering, good fortune and evil fortune, the fate of the life and the body. It is this powerful vital preoccupation which has given us one element of the current notion of law of Karma, its idea of an award of vital happiness and suffering as the measure of cosmic justice.

The second movement of mind running on the lines of life
comes into prominent action when man evolves out of his experience the idea of a mental rule, standard, ideal, a concretised abstraction which is suggested at first by life experience, but goes beyond, transcends the actual needs and demands of the vital energy and returns upon it to impose some ideal mental rule, some canon embodying a generalised conception of Right on the law of life. For its essence is the discovery or belief of the mind that in all things there is a right rule, a right standard, a right way of thought, will, feeling, perception, action other than that of the intuition of vital nature, other than that of the first dealings of mind seeking only to profit by the vital nature with a mainly vital motive, — for it has discovered a way of the reason, a rule of the self-governing intelligence. This brings into the seeking of vital pleasure and profit, artha, kāma, the power of the conception of a mental truth, justice, right, the conception of Dharma. The greater practical part of the Dharma is ethical, it is the idea of the moral law. The first mind movement is non-moral or not at all characteristically moral, has only, if at all, the conception of a standard of action justified by custom, the received rule of life and therefore right, or a morality indistinguishable from expediency, accepted and enforced because it was found necessary or helpful to efficiency, power, success, to victory, honour, approval, good fortune. The idea of Dharma is on the contrary predominantly moral in its essence. Dharma on its heights holds up the moral law in its own right and for its own sake to human acceptance and observance. The larger idea of Dharma is indeed a conception of the true law of all energies and includes a conscience, a rectitude in all things, a right law of thought and knowledge, of aesthesis, of all other human activities and not only of our ethical action. But yet in the notion of Dharma the ethical element has tended always to predominate and even to monopolise the concept of Right which man creates, — because ethics is concerned with action of life and his dealing with his vital being and with his fellow-men and that is always his first preoccupation and his most tangible difficulty, and because here first and most pressingly the desires, interests, instincts of the vital being find themselves cast into a
sharp and very successful conflict with the ideal of Right and the
demand of the higher law. Right ethical action comes therefore
to seem to man at this stage the one thing binding upon him
among the many standards raised by the mind, the moral claim
the one categorical imperative, the moral law the whole of his
Dharma.

At first however the moral conceptions of man and the
direction and output and the demand of return of the ethical
energy in him get themselves inextricably mixed with his vital
conceptions and demands and even afterwards lean on them very
commonly and very considerably for a support and incentive.
Human morality first takes up an enormous mass of customary
rules of action, a conventional and traditional practice much of
which is of a very doubtful moral value, gives to it an imperative
sanction of right and slips into the crude mass or superimposes
on it, but still as a part of one common and equal code, the true
things of the ethical ideal. It appeals to the vital being, his desires,
hopes and fears, incites man to virtue by the hope of rewards
and the dread of punishment, imitating in this device the method
of his crude and fumbling social practice: for that, finding its
law and rule which, good or bad, it wishes to make imperative
as supposing it to be at least the best calculated for the order
and efficiency of the community, opposed by man’s vital being,
bribes and terrifies as well as influences, educates and persuades
him to acceptance. Morality tells man, accommodating itself
to his imperfection, mostly through the mouth of religion, that
the moral law is imperative in itself, but also that it is very
expedient for him personally to follow it, righteousness in the
end the safest policy, virtue the best paymaster in the long run,—
for this is a world of Law or a world ruled by a just and virtuous
or at least virtue-loving God. He is assured that the righteous
man shall prosper and the wicked perish and that the paths of
virtue lie through pleasant places. Or, if this will not serve, since
it is palpably false in experience and even man cannot always
deceive himself, it offers him a security of vital rewards denied
here but conceded in some hereafter. Heaven and hell, happiness
and suffering in other lives are put before him as the bribe and
the menace. He is told, the better to satisfy his easily satisfied intellect, that the world is governed by an ethical law which determines the measure of his earthly fortunes, that a justice reigns and this is justice, that every action has its exact rebound and his good shall bring him good and his evil evil. It is these notions, this idea of the moral law, of righteousness and justice as a thing in itself imperative, but still needing to be enforced by bribe and menace on our human nature,—which would seem to show that at least for that nature they are not altogether imperative,—this insistence on reward and punishment because morality struggling with our first unregenerate being has to figure very largely as a mass of restraints and prohibitions and these cannot be enforced without some fact or appearance of a compelling or inducing outward sanction, this diplomatic compromise or effort at equivalence between the impersonal ethical and the personal egoistic demand, this marriage of convenience between right and vital utility, virtue and desire,—it is these accommodations that are embodied in the current notions of the law of Karma.

What real truth is there behind the current notions of Karma in the actual facts or the fundamental powers of the life of man here or the visible working of the law of the energies of the cosmos? There is evidently a substantial truth, but it is a part only of the whole; its reign or predominance belongs to a certain element only, to the emphasis of one line among many of a transitional movement between the law of the vital energy and a greater and higher law of the mind and spirit. A mixture of any two kinds of energy sets up a mixed and complex action of the output of the energy and the return, and a too sharp-cut rule affixing vital returns to a mental and moral output of force is open to much exception and it cannot be the whole inner truth of the matter. But still where the demand is for the vital return, for success, an outer happiness, good, fortune, that is a sign of the dominant intention in the energy and points to a balance of forces weighing in the indicated direction. At first sight, if success is the desideratum, it is not clear what morality has to say in the affair, since we see in most things that it is a right understanding
and intelligent or intuitive practice of the means and conditions and an insistent power of the will, a settled drive of the force of the being of which success is the natural consequence. Man may impose by a system of punishments a check on the egoistic will and intelligence in pursuit of its vital ends, may create a number of moral conditions for the world’s prizes, but this might appear, as is indeed contended in certain vitalistic theories, an artificial imposition on Nature and a dulling and impoverishment of the free and powerful play of the mind force and the life force in their alliance. But in truth the greatest force for success is a right concentration of energy, tapasyā, and there is an inevitable moral element in Tapasya.

Man is a mental being seeking to establish a control over the life forces he embodies or uses, and one condition of that mastery is a necessary self-control, a restraint, an order, a discipline imposed on his mental, vital and physical being. The animal life is automatically subjected to certain measures; it is the field of an instinctive vital Dharma. Man, liberated from these automatic checks by the free play of his mind, has to replace them by willed and intelligent restraints, an understanding measure, a voluntary discipline. Not only a powerful expenditure and free play of his energies, but also a right measure, restraint and control of them is the condition of his life’s success and soundness. The moral is not the sole element: it is not entirely true that the moral right always prevails or that where there is the dharma, on that side is the victory. The immediate success often goes to other powers, even an ultimate conquest of the Right comes usually by an association with some form of Might. But still there is always a moral element among the many factors of individual and collective or national success and a disregard of acknowledged right has at some time or other disastrous or fatal reactions. Moreover, man in the use of his energies has to take account of his fellows and the aid and opposition of their energies, and his relations with them impose on him checks, demands and conditions which have or evolve a moral significance. There is laid on him almost from the first a number of obligations even in the pursuit of vital success and
satisfaction which become a first empirical basis of an ethical order.

And there are cosmic as well as human forces that respond to this balance of the mental and moral and the vital order. First there is something subtle, inscrutable and formidable that meets us in our paths, a Force of which the ancient Greeks took much notice, a Power that is on the watch for man in his effort at enlargement, possession and enjoyments and seems hostile and opposite. The Greeks figured it as the jealousy of the gods or as Doom, Necessity, Ate. The egoistic force in man may proceed far in its victory and triumph, but it has to be wary or it will find this power there on the watch for any flaw in his strength or action, any sufficient opportunity for his defeat and downfall. It dogs his endeavour with obstacle and reverse and takes advantage of his imperfections, often dallying with him, giving him long rope, delaying and abiding its time, — and not only of his moral shortcomings but of his errors of will and intelligence, his excesses and deficiencies of strength and prudence, all defects of his nature. It seems overcome by his energies of Tapasya, but it waits its season. It overshadows unbroken or extreme prosperity and often surprises it with a sudden turn to ruin. It induces a security, a self-forgetfulness, a pride and insolence of success and victory and leads on its victim to dash himself against the hidden seat of justice or the wall of an invisible measure. It is as fatal to a blind self-righteousness and the arrogations of an egoistic virtue as to vicious excess and selfish violence. It appears to demand of man and of individual men and nations that they shall keep within a limit and a measure, while all beyond that brings danger; and therefore the Greeks held moderation in all things to be the greatest part of virtue.

There is here something in the life forces obscure to us, considered by our partial feelings sinister because it crosses our desires, but obedient to some law and intention of the universal mind, the universal reason or Logos which the ancients perceived at work in the cosmos. Its presence, when felt by the cruder kind of religious mind, generates the idea of calamity as a punishment for sin, — not observing that it has a punishment
too for ignorance, for error, stupidity, weakness, defect of will and tapasya. This is really a resistance of the Infinite acting through life against the claim of the imperfect ego of man to enlarge itself, possess, enjoy and have, while remaining imperfect, a perfect and enduring happiness and complete felicity of its world-experience. The claim is, we may say, immoral, and the Force that resists it and returns, however uncertainly and late to our eyes, suffering and failure as a reply to our imperfections, may be considered a moral Force, an agent of a just Karma, though not solely in the narrowly ethical sense of Karma. The law it represents is that our imperfections shall have their passing or their fatal consequences, that a flaw in our output of energy may be mended or counterbalanced and reduced in consequence, but if persisted in shall react even in excess of its apparent merits, that an error may seem to destroy all the result of the Tapasya, because it springs from a radical unsoundness in the intention of the will, the heart, the ethical sense or the reason. This is the first line of the transitional law of Karma.

A second line of Karmic response of the cosmic forces to our action puts on also an appearance which tempts us to give it a moral character. For there can be distinguished in Nature a certain element of the law of the talion or — perhaps a more appropriate figure, since this action seems rather mechanical than rational and deliberate — a boomerang movement of energy returning upon its transmitter. The stone we throw is flung back by some hidden force in the world life upon ourselves, the action we put out upon others recoils, not always by a direct reaction, but often by devious and unconnected routes, on our own lives and sometimes, though that is by no means a common rule, in its own exact figure or measure. This is a phenomenon so striking to our imagination and impressive to our moral sense and vital feelings that it has received some kind of solemn form and utterance in the thought of all cultures, — “What thou hast done, thou must suffer”, “He that uses the sword shall perish by the sword”; “Thou hast sown the wind and thou shalt reap the whirlwind”; — and we are tempted to erect it into a universal rule and accept it as sufficient evidence of a moral order. But the
careful thinker will pause long before he hastens to subscribe to any such conclusion, for there is much that militates against it and this kind of definite reaction is rather exceptional than an ordinary rule of human life. If it were a regular feature, men would soon learn the code of the draconic impersonal legislator and know what to avoid and the list of life's prohibitions and vetoes. But there is no such clear penal legislation of Nature.

The mathematical precision of physical Nature's action and reaction cannot indeed be expected from mental and vital Nature. For not only does everything become infinitely more subtle, complex and variable as we rise in the scale so that in our life action there is an extraordinary intertwining of forces and mixture of many values, but, even, the psychological and moral value of the same action differs in different cases, according to the circumstance, the conditions, the motive and mind of the doer. The law of the talion is no just or ethical rule when applied by man to men and, applied by superhuman dispenser of justice or impersonal law with a rude rule of thumb to the delicate and intricate tangle of man's life action and life motives, it would be no better. And it is evident too that the slow, long and subtle purposes of the universal Power working in the human race would be defeated rather than served by any universality of this too precise and summary procedure. Accordingly we find that its working is occasional and intermittent rather than regular, variable and to our minds capricious rather than automatic and plainly intelligible.

At times in the individual's life the rebound of this kind of Karma is decisively, often terribly clear and penal justice is done, although it may come to him in an unexpected fashion, long delayed and from strange quarters; but however satisfactory to our dramatic sense, this is not the common method of retributive Nature. Her ways are more tortuous, subtle, unobtrusive and indecipherable. Often it is a nation that pays in this way for past crimes and mistakes and the sign manual of the law of the talion is there to point the lesson, but individually it is the innocent who suffer. A commercially minded king of Belgium is moved to make a good thing of the nation's rubber estate and human
cattle farm in Africa and his agents murder and mutilate and
immolate thousands of cheap negro lives to hasten the yield and
swell his coffers. This able monarch dies in the splendour of
riches and the sacred odour of good fortune, his agents in no
way suffer: but here of a sudden comes Germany trampling her
armed way towards a dream of military and commercial empire
through prosperous Belgium and massacred men and women
and mutilated children startlingly remind us of Karma and illus-
trate some obscure and capricious law of the talion. Here at least
the nation in its corporate being was guilty of complicity, but at
other times neither guilty individual nor nation is the payer, but
perhaps some well-meaning virtuous blunderer gets the account
of evil recompense that should have been paid in of rights by
the strong despots before him who went on their way to the end
rejoicing in power and splendour and pleasure.

It is evident that we cannot make much of a force that works
out in so strange a fashion, however occasionally striking and
dramatic its pointing at cause and consequence. It is too uncer-
tain in its infliction of penalty to serve the end which the human
mind expects from a system of penal justice, too inscrutably
variable in its incidence to act as an indicator to that element
in the human temperament which waits upon expediency and
regulates its steps by a prudential eye to consequence. Men and
nations continue to act always in the same fashion regardless
of this occasional breaking out of the lightnings of a retaliatory
doom, these occasional precisions of Karmic justice amidst the
uncertainties of the complex measures of the universe. It works
really not on the mind and will of man — except to some degree
in a subtle and imperfect fashion on the subconscient mind —
but outside him as a partial check and regulator helping to
maintain the balance of the returns of energy and the life pur-
poses of the world-spirit. Its action is like that of the first line
of transitional Karma intended to prevent the success of the
vital egoism of man and serves as an interim compression and
compulsion until he can discover and succeed in spite of his vital
self in obeying a higher law of his being and a purer dynamism
of motive in his directing mind and governing spirit. It serves
therefore a certain moral purpose in the will in the universe, but
is not itself, even in combination with the other, sufficient to be
the law of a moral order.

A third possible and less outwardly mechanical line of
Karma is suggested by the dictum that like creates like and in
accordance with that law good must create good and evil must
create evil. In the terms of a moral return or rather repayment
to moral energies this would mean that by putting forth love
we get a return of love and by putting forth hatred a return of
hatred, that if we are merciful or just to others, others also will
be to us just or merciful and that generally good done by us to
our fellow-men will return in a recompense of good done by
them in kind and posted back to our address duly registered in
the moral post office of the administrative government of the
universe. Do unto others as you would be done by, because then
they will indeed so do to you, seems to be the formula of this
moral device. If this were true, human life might indeed settle
down into a very symmetrical system of a harmoniously moral
egoism and a mercantile traffic in goodness that might seem
fair and beautiful enough to those who are afflicted with that
kind of moral aesthesis. Happily for the upward progress of the
human soul, the rule breaks down in practice, the world-spirit
having greater ends before it and a greater law to realise. The
rule is true to a certain extent in tendency and works sometimes
well enough and the prudential intelligence of man takes some
account of it in action but it is not true all the way and all
the time. It is evident enough that hatred, violence, injustice
are likely to create an answering hatred, violence and injustice
and that I can only indulge these propensities with impunity if
I am sufficiently powerful to defy resistance or so long as I am
at once strong enough and prudent enough to provide against
their natural reactions. It is true also that by doing good and
kindness I create a certain goodwill in others and can rely under
ordinary or favourable circumstances not so much on gratitude
and return in kind as on their support and favour. But this
good and this evil are both of them movements of the ego and
on the mixed egoism of human nature there can be no safe or
positive reliance. An egoistic selfish strength, if it knows what to do and where to stop, even a certain measure of violence and injustice, if it is strong and skilful, cunning, fraud, many kinds of evil, do actually pay in man’s dealing with man hardly less than in the animal’s with the animal, and on the other hand the doer of good who counts on a return or reward finds himself as often as not disappointed of his bargained recompense. The weakness of human nature worships the power that tramples on it, does homage to successful strength, can return to every kind of strong or skilful imposition belief, acceptance, obedience: it can crouch and fawn and admire even amidst movements of hatred and terror; it has singular loyalties and unreasoning instincts. And its disloyalties too are as unreasoning or light and fickle: it takes just dealing and beneficence as its right and forgets or cares not to repay. And there is worse; for justice, mercy, beneficence, kindness are often enough rewarded by their opposites and ill will an answer to goodwill is a brutally common experience. If something in the world and in man returns good for good and evil for evil, it as often returns evil for good and, with or without a conscious moral intention, good for evil. And even an unegoistic virtue or a divine good and love entering the world awakens hostile reactions. Attila and Jenghiz on the throne to the end, Christ on the cross and Socrates drinking his portion of hemlock are no very clear evidence for any optimistic notion of a law of moral return in the world of human nature.

There is little more sign of its sure existence in the world measures. Actually in the cosmic dispensation evil comes out of good and good out of evil and there seems to be no exact correspondence between the moral and the vital measures. All that we can say is that good done tends to increase the sum and total power of good in the world and the greater this grows the greater is likely to be the sum of human happiness and that evil done tends to increase the sum and total power of evil in the world and the greater this grows, the greater is likely to be the sum of human suffering and, eventually, man or nation doing evil has in some way to pay for it, but not often in any
intelligibly graded or apportioned measure and not always in clearly translating terms of vital good fortune and ill fortune.

In short, what we may call the transitional lines of Karma exist and have to be taken into account in our view of the action of the world forces. But they are not and cannot be the whole law of Karma. And they cannot be that because they are transitional, because good and evil are moral and not vital values and have a clear right only to a moral and not a vital return, because reward and punishment put forward as the conditions of good doing and evil doing do not constitute and cannot create a really moral order, the principle itself, whatever temporary end it serves, being fundamentally immoral from the higher point of view of a true and pure ethics, and because there are other forces that count and have their right, — knowledge, power and many others. The correspondence of moral and vital good is a demand of the human ego and like many others of its demands answers to certain tendencies in the world mind, but is not its whole law or highest purpose. A moral order there can be, but it is in ourselves and for its own sake that we have to create it and, only when we have so created it and found its right relation to other powers of life, can we hope to make it count at its full value in the right ordering of man’s vital existence.