The Foundation

The IDEA of Karma has behind it two ideas that are its constituent factors, a law of Nature, of the energy or action of Nature, and a soul that lives under that law, puts out action into that energy and gets from it a return in accordance and measure with the character of its own activities. And here certain considerations have at once intervened which it will not do to ignore. This putting out of action and its return cannot have anything more than a mechanical importance, it cannot have a mental, moral and spiritual significance, if the action of universal Nature is something quite different from the soul’s action in character, in meaning, in the law of her being that constitutes it, if it is not itself the energy, the work of a Mind, a Soul, a Spirit. If the individual energy is that of a soul putting out action and receiving a return in kind, physical, mental, moral and spiritual from the universal energy, the universal energy too that makes the return should be that of an All-Soul in which and in relation to which this individual flame of the All-Soul lives. And it is apparent, if we consider, that the individual’s energy of action is not something miraculously separate and independent, it is not a power born of itself, living in itself, acting in its separate and wholly self-formed puissance. On the contrary it is the universal that acts in the individual energy and acts, no doubt with an individual application, but on universal lines and in harmony with its universal law. But if that were all the truth, then there would be no real individual and no responsibility of any kind except the responsibility of universal Nature to carry out the idea or to execute the force put forth in the individual as in the universal by the All-Soul, the cosmic Spirit. But there is also this soul of the individual, and that is a being of the Infinite and a conscious and efficient portion of the All-Soul, a deputy or representative, and puts forth the energy given to it according
to its own potentiality, type, limits with a will that is in some sense its own. The Spirit in the cosmos is the lord, the Ishwara of all Nature, but the individual soul is likewise a representative, a delegate Ishwara, the underlord at least if not the overlord of his nature,—the recipient, agent and overseer, let us say, of his own form and use of the universal energy of Nature.

And next we see that each being is actually in life, in the world an individual in a species and each species has a nature of its own, a Swabhava or way of the self-being, and each individual too a nature of his own, an individual way of his self-being within that of the species. The law of the action is determined generally by this swabhava of the species and individually by the swabhava of the individual but within that larger circle. Man is at once himself, in a certain way peculiar and unique, and a depressed portion of God and a natural portion of mankind. There is in other words a general and an individual Swadharma or natural principle and law of all action for the kind and for the individual in the kind. And it is clear too that every action must be a particular application, a single result, a perfect or imperfect, right or perverted use of the general and within it of the individual swadharma.

But again, if that were all, if each man came into life with his present nature ready determined for him and irrevocable and had to act according to it, there would be no real responsibility; for he would do good according to the good and evil according to the evil in his nature, he would be imperfect according to its imperfection or perfect according to its perfection; and he might have to suffer the return of his good or evil, bear exactly the just consequences of his perfection or his imperfection, but mechanically and not by his choice: for his apparent choice would be the compulsion of the nature in him and could not be in any way, directly or indirectly, the result of his spirit's will. But in fact there is within his being a power of development, a power of change, or in the language of our modern conceptions an evolutionary power. His nature is what it is because he has so made it by his past; he has induced this present formulation by a precedent will in his spirit. He has risen to humanity by
the force of his spirit and by the power of the All-Soul out of the vast possibilities of universal Nature. He has developed by his own long evolution of that humanity the character and law of action of his present individual being; he has built his own height and form of human nature. He may change what he has made, he may rise even, if that be within the possibilities of the universe, beyond human and to or towards superhuman nature. It is the possibility of the universal Nature and her law that determines his natural being and action, but it is part of her law to be subject to the spirit, and she will develop in reply to an insistent call; for then she must respond, she must supply the needed energy, she must determine the acts in that direction, she must assure its issue. His past and his present nature and the environment he has secured may present constant obstacles, but they must still yield in the end to the evolutionary will in him in proportion to its sincerity, wholeness and insistence. All the possibility of the All-being is in him, all the power of the All-Will is behind him. This evolution and all its circumstances, his life, its form, its events, its values arise out of that urge and are shaped according to the past, present or future active will of his spirit. As is his use of the energy, so was and will be the return of the universal energy to him now and hereafter. This is the fundamental meaning of Karma.

At the same time this action and evolution of the spirit taking birth in a body are not an easy and simple thing, as it would or might be if Nature were all of one piece and evolution were only a raising of the degrees of a single power. For there are many strands, many degrees, many forms of energy of Nature. There is in the world of birth an energy of physical being and nature, arising out of the physical an energy of vital being and nature, arising out of the vital an energy of mental being and nature, arising out of the mental an energy of spiritual or supramental being and nature. And each of these forms of energy has a law of its own, lines of its own action, a right to its own manner of operation and existence, because each is fundamental to some necessity of the whole. And we see accordingly that each in its impulse follows its
own lines regardless of the rest, each in the combination imposes as much of its domination as it can on the others. The mental being is itself a most complex thing and has several forms of energy, an intellectual, a moral, an emotional, a hedonistic energy of mental nature, and the will in each is in itself absolute for its own rule and is yet forced to be modified in action by the running into it and across it of the other strands. The way and the movement of the world action are indeed a difficult and entangled process, gahanā karmano gatih, and therefore too the way and movement of our own action which we cannot separate in its law, however much the mere mind in us might like to have it so, from the law of the world action. And if all these energies are forms of energy of the nature of the Spirit, then it is likely that only when we rise into the consciousness of the supreme spiritual being can we hope wholly to understand all the integral secret and harmony of the world action and therefore the integral meaning and law of Karma.

It may therefore serve a partial purpose but can be of little eventual advantage to try to cut the knot of the riddle by reducing to the law of one form of energy alone all the apparent tangle of the cosmic action. The universe is not solely an ethical proposition, a problem of the antinomy of the good and the evil; the Spirit of the universe can in no way be imagined as a rigid moralist concerned only with making all things obey the law of moral good, or a stream of tendency towards righteousness attempting, hitherto with only a very poor success, to prevail and rule, or a stern Justicer rewarding and punishing creatures in a world that he has made or has suffered to be full of wickedness and suffering and evil. The universal Will has evidently many other and more supple modes than that, an infinity of interests, many other elements of its being to manifest, many lines to follow, many laws and purposes to pursue. The law of the world is not this alone that our good brings good to us and our evil brings evil, nor is its sufficient key the ethical-hedonistic rule that our moral good brings to us happiness and success and our moral evil brings to us sorrow and misfortune. There is a rule
of right in the world, but it is the right of the truth of Nature and of the truth of the spirit, and that is a vast and various rule and takes many forms that have to be understood and accepted before we can reach either its highest or its integral principle.

The will in the intellectual being may erect knowledge and truth of knowledge as the governing principle of the Spirit, the will in the volitional being may see Will or Power as very God, the will in the aesthetic being enthroned beauty and harmony as the sovereign law, the will in the ethical being have a vision of it as Right or Love or Justice, and so on through a long chapter. But even though all these may very well be supreme aspects of the Supreme, it will not do to shut up the acts of the Infinite into one formula. And for a beginning it is best to phrase the law of Karma as generally and vaguely as may be and put it simply thus without any particular colour or content that according to the energy put forth shall be its return, not with any mathematical precision of conscious will and its mechanical consequences, but subject to the complicated working of many world forces. If we thus state broadly our foundation, the simplicity of the ordinary solutions disappears, but that is a loss only to love of dogma or to the mind’s indolence. The whole law of the cosmic action or even the one law governing all the others cannot well be the measure of a physical, mechanical and chemical energy, nor the law of a life force, nor a moral law or law of mind or of idea forces; for it is evident that none of these things by its single self covers or accounts for all the fundamental powers. There is likely to be something else of which all these are the means and energies. Our initial formula itself can be only a general mechanical rule, but still it is likely to be the practical rule of all parts of the mechanism, and if it only states itself and does at first nothing more, yet an impartial regard on the variety of its operations may open out many meanings and may lead us to the essential significance.

The practical and the efficient base of Karma is all the relation of the soul to the energies of Nature, the use by Purusha of Prakriti. It is the soul’s demand on, consent to or use of the energies of Nature and the return and reflex of her energies on the soul that must determine the steps of our progress in
our births, whether that progress be in a given direction or a long up and down or in a perpetual circle. There is another, a circumstantial aspect of the law of Karma and that hinges on the turn of our action not only to our self, but to others. The nature of the energies we put forth and even the return and reflex of their consequence upon us affects not only ourselves but all around us and we must account too for the direction of our acts upon others, its effect upon them and the return of the direction and rebound of consequence of the effect upon our own life and being. But the energy we put forth on others is ordinarily of a mixed character, physical, vital, moral, mental and spiritual, and the return and consequence too are of a mixed character. A physical action, a vital pressure thrown forth from ourselves carries in it a mental or moral as well as a physical and vital power and issues often quite beyond our conscious will and knowledge and the consequence to ourselves and to others is found to be different enough in character and measure from anything we intended or could have calculated and foreseen. The calculation escapes us because too complex by far is the universal energy acting through us and our conscious will intervenes in it simply as an instrument; our real acceptance is that of a more fundamental power within, a secret, a subliminal assent of our subconscious and superconscient spirit. And the return too, whatever the agents, is of the same complex universal energy and determined by some difficult correlation of the force acting and the force acted upon in her.

But there is another, an ultimate and essential sense of Karma, a relation in it between the soul in us and the Supreme or the All-Self; on that all is founded and to that all leads and must refer to it at every step. That relation too is not so simple a thing as is imagined by the religions. For it must answer to a very vast spiritual sense underlying the whole process of Karma and there must be a connection of each of our workings in the use of the universal energy to that fundamental and perhaps infinite significance. These three things, the will of the soul in Nature and the action of Nature in and on the soul and through it and back to it, the effect of the intercrossing between the action of
the soul on others and the return to it of the force of its action complicated by theirs, and the meaning of the soul’s action in relation to its own highest Self and the All-Self, to God, make up between them all the bearings of Karma.