Karma, Will and Consequence

WILL, KARMA and consequence are the three steps of the Energy which moves the universe. But Karma and consequence are only the outcome of will or even its forms; will gives them their value and without it they would be nothing, nothing at least to man the thinking and growing soul and nothing, it may be hazarded, to the Spirit of which he is a flame and power as well as a creature. The thing we first see or imagine we see, when we look at the outward mechanism of the universe, is energy and its works, action and consequence. But by itself and without the light of an inhabiting will this working is only a huge soulless mechanism, a loud rattling of crank and pulley, a monstrous pounding of spring and piston. It is the presence of the spirit and its will that gives a meaning to the action and it is the value of the result to the soul that gives its profound importance to all great or little consequence. It would not matter to anyone or anything, not even to the cosmos itself, though this universal stir came to an end tomorrow or had never been created, if these suns and systems were not the field of a consciousness which there rolls out its powers, evolves its works, enjoys its creations, plans and exults in its immense aims and sequences. Spirit and consciousness and power of the spirit and Ananda are the meaning of existence. Take away this spiritual significance and this world of energy becomes a mechanical fortuitu or a blind and rigid Maya.

The life of man is a portion of this vast significance, and since it is in him that on this material plane it comes out in its full capacity of meaning, a very important and central portion. The Will in the universe works up to him in the creative steps of its energy and makes of his nature a chariot of the gods on which it stands within the action, looks out on its works from the very front and no longer only from behind or above Nature’s doings
and moves on to the ultimate consequences and the complete evolution of its purpose. The will of man is the agent of the Eternal for the unveiling of his secret meaning in the material creation. Man’s mind takes up all the knots of the problem and works them out by the power of the spirit within him and brings them nearer to the full force and degree of their individual and cosmic solutions. This is his dignity and his greatness and he needs no other to justify and give a perfect value to his birth and his acts and his passing and his return to birth, a return which must be — and what is there in it to grieve at or shun? — until the work of the Eternal in him is perfected or the cycles rest from the glory of their labour.

This view of the world is the standpoint from which we must regard the question of man’s conscious will and its dealings with life, because then all things fall into their natural place and we escape from exaggerated and depreciated estimates. Man is a conscious soul of the Eternal, one with the Infinite in his inmost being, and the spirit within him is master of his acts and his fate. For fate is \textit{fatum}, the form of act and creation declared beforehand by a Will within him and the universe as the thing to be done, to be achieved, to be worked out and made the self-expression of his spiritual being. Fate is \textit{adṛśta}, the unseen thing which the Spirit holds hidden in the plan of its vision, the consequence concealed from the travailing mind absorbed in the work of the moment by the curtained nearnesses or the far invisible reaches of Time. Fate is \textit{niyati}, the thing willed and executed by Nature, who is power of the Spirit, according to a fixed law of its self-governed workings. But since this Eternal and Infinite, our greater Self, is also the universal being, man in the universe is inseparably one with all the rest of existence, not a soul working out its isolated spiritual destiny and nature while all other beings are nothing but his environment and means or obstacles, — that they are indeed, but they are much more to him, — which is the impression cast on the mind by the thought or the religions that emphasise too much his centre of individuality or his aim of personal salvation. He is not indeed solely a portion of the universe. He is an eternal soul which, though limited for certain
temporal purposes in its outward consciousness, has to learn to enlarge itself out of those limits, to find and make effective its unity with the eternal Spirit who informs and transcends the universe. That spiritual necessity is the truth behind the religious dogma.

But also he is one in God and one in Nature with all beings in the cosmos, touches and includes all other souls, is linked to all powers of the Being that are manifest in this cosmic working. His soul, thought, will, action are intimate with the universal soul, thought, will and action. All acts on and through him and mixes with him and he acts too on all and his thought and will and life mix in and become a power of the one common life. His mind is a form and action of the universal mind. His call is not to be busy and concerned only with his own growth and perfection and natural destiny or spiritual freedom. A larger action too claims him. He is a worker in a universal work; the life of others is his life; world-consequence and the world-evolution are also his business. For he is one self with the selves of all other beings.

The dealings of our will with Karma and consequence have to be envisaged in the light of this double truth of man’s individuality and man’s universality. And seen in this light the question of the freedom of our individual will takes on another appearance. It becomes clear enough that our ego, our outward personality can be only a minor, a temporal, an instrumental form of our being. The will of the ego, the outward, the mentally personal will which acts in the movement cannot be free in any complete or separate sense of freedom. It cannot so be free because it is bound by its partial and limited nature and it is shaped by the mechanism of its ignorance, and again because it is an individualised form and working of the universal energy and at every moment impinged upon and modified and largely shaped by environing wills and powers and forces. But also it cannot so be free because of the greater Soul in us behind the mind which determines works and consequence according to the will in its being and the nature, its power of being, not in the moment but in the long continuities of Time, not solely by the immediate
adaptation to the environment, but by its own previous intention which has shaped the environment and already predetermined in great part the present act and consequence. The inward will in the being which is in intimacy with that Power is the real will and this outward thing only an instrumentation for a working out from moment to moment, a spring of the karmic mechanism. That inward will we find when we get back to it, to be a free will, not armoured in a separate liberty, but free in harmony with the freedom of the Spirit guiding and compelling Nature in all souls and in all happenings. This thing our outward mind cannot see easily because the practical truth which it feels is the energy of Nature at once working on us from without and forming too our action from within and reacting upon herself by the mental will, her instrument, to continue her self-shaping for farther Karma and farther consequence. Yet are we aware of a self and the presence of this self imposes on our minds the idea of someone who wills, someone who shapes even the nature and is responsible for consequence.

To understand one must cease to dwell exclusively on the act and will of the moment and its immediate consequences. Our present will and personality are bound by many things, by our physical and vital heredity, by a past creation of our mental nature, by environmental forces, by limitation, by ignorance. But our soul behind is greater and older than our present personality. The soul is not the result of our heredity, but has prepared by its own action and affinities this heredity. It has drawn around it these environmental forces by past karma and consequence. It has created in other lives the mental nature of which now it makes use. That ancient soul of long standing, sempiternal in being, puruṣāḥ purāṇāḥ sanātanah, has accepted the outward limitation, the outward ignorance as a means of figuring out in a restriction of action from moment to moment the significance of its infinity and the sequence of its works of power. To live in this knowledge is not to take away the value and potency of the moment’s will and act, but to give it an immensely increased meaning and importance. Then each moment becomes full of things infinite and can be seen taking up the work of a past
eternity and shaping the work of a future eternity. Our every thought, will, action carries with it its power of future self-determination and is too a help or a hindrance for the spiritual evolution of those around us and a force in the universal working. For the soul in us takes in the influences it receives from others for its own self-determination and gives out influences which the soul in them uses for their growth and experience. Our individual life becomes an immensely greater thing in itself and is convinced too of an abiding unity with the march of the universe.

And karma and consequence also get a wider meaning. At present we fix too much on the particular will and act of the moment and a particular consequence in a given time. But the particular only receives its value by all of which it is a part, all from which it comes, all to which it moves. We fix too much also on the externalities of karma and consequence, this good or that bad action and result of action. But the real consequence which the soul is after is a growth in the manifestation of its being, an enlarging of its range and action of power, its comprehension of delight of being, its delight of creation and self-creation, and not only its own but the same things in others with which its greater becoming and joy are one. Karma and consequence draw their meaning from their value to the soul; they are steps by which it moves towards the perfection of its manifested nature. And even when this object is won, our action need not cease, for it will keep its value and be a greater force of help for all these others with whom in self we are one. Nor can it be said that it will have no self-value to the soul grown aware of freedom and infinity; for who shall persuade me that my infinity can only be an eternal full stop, an endless repose, an infinite cessation? Much rather should infinity be eternally capable of an infinite self-expression.

The births of the soul are the series of a constant spiritual evolution, and it might well seem that when the evolution is finished, and that must be, it might at first appear, when the soul involved in ignorance returns to self-knowledge, the series of our births too ought to come to a termination. But that is only one
side of the matter, one long act here of the eternal drama, doing, karma. The spirit we are is not only an eternal consciousness and eternal being; its characters are an eternal power of being and an eternal Ananda. Creation is not to the spirit a trouble and an anguish, but a delight expressed, even though in the entirety of its depths inexpressible, fathomless, endless, inexhaustible. It is only the limited action of mind in the ignorance straining after possession and discovery and unable to find the concealed power of the spirit that makes of the delight of action and creation a passion or suffering: for, limited in capacity and embarrassed by life and body, it has yet desires beyond its capacity, because it is the instrument of a growth and the seed of an illimitable self-expression and it has the pain of the growth and the pain of the obstacle and the pain of the insufficiency of its action and delight. But let this struggling self-creator and doer of works once grow into the consciousness and power of the secret infinite spirit within it and all this passion and suffering passes away into an immeasurable delight of liberated being and its liberated action.

The Buddhist perception of karma and suffering as inseparable, that which drove the Buddha to the search for a means of the extinction of the will to be, is only a first phase and partial appearance. To find self is the cure of suffering, because self is infinite possession and perfect satisfaction. But to find self in quiescence is not the whole meaning of the spiritual evolution, but to find it too in its power of being; for being is not only eternal status, but also eternal movement, not only rest, but also action. There is a delight of rest and a delight of action, but in the wholeness of the spirit these two things are no longer contraries, but one and inseparable. The status of the spirit is an eternal calm, but also its self-expression in world-being is without any beginning or end, because eternal power means an eternal creation. When we gain the one, we need not lose its counterpart and consequence. To get to a foundation is not to destroy all capacity for superstructure.

Karma is nothing but the will of the Spirit in action, consequence nothing but the creation of will. What is in the will of being, expresses itself in karma and consequence. When the will
is limited in mind, karma appears as a bondage and a limitation, consequence as a reaction or an imposition. But when the will of the being is infinite in the spirit, karma and consequence become instead the joy of the creative spirit, the construction of the eternal mechanist, the word and drama of the eternal poet, the harmony of the eternal musician, the play of the eternal child. This lesser, bound, seemingly separate evolution is only a step in the free self-creation of the Spirit from its own illimitable Ananda. That is behind all we are and do; to hide it from mind and bring it slowly forward into the front of existence and action is the present play of Self with Nature.