

43. Some Problems in Karma

The law of karma is one of the fundamental laws in Nature. It is also called the Law of Action and Reaction. "As a man soweth, so shall he reap." It is a universal law, unchanging, impersonal, immutable and inviolable. As a man evolves through successive lives he makes 'Karma' and in due course will experience the reaction—in other words repay all his karmic debt. A man's karma is generally considered under three heads. First, the Sanchita Karma (the accumulated store of karmic debts), then the Prarabdha karma (that part which is chosen for repayment in a given incarnation) and thirdly Agamya karma (the karma he is making a-new of his own volition). Out of the total stock of one's individual karma, the Lords of Karma choose certain items to be worked out or ad-

justed in a particular life of the individual, the choice being made with a view to bring about the progress of the individual and the universe as quickly as possible. Obviously, this is a stupendous task and human mind will reel even from an attempt to envisage the magnitude of the task of dealing with the karmic relations of 60,000 million monads who are said to be in evolution. Anyway the Great Lords of Karma manage it. That particular part chosen by them for being worked out in a particular life of an individual is called *prarabdha* karma; and it is usually believed that this is unchangeable. It is generally compared to an arrow which has left the bow. Before the arrow leaves, its direction could be controlled; once it has left, it is beyond our control and we cannot do anything with it. It is this *prarabdha* karma which is indicated in the individual's horoscope. The span of one's physical life in that incarnation is one of the items included in *prarabdha* karma and this is fixed. A good astrologer will be able to predict the time of one's death—of course, within reasonable limits—from a properly-cast horoscope.

There are some other factors which are included in *prarabdha* karma which are indicated in the horoscope as well. But all this relates only to normal cases. People generally take it that the laws of karma as we understand them are *absolutely* rigid and inviolable. But Nature is more elastic than we presume or infer with our limited intellect. There are realms of life and consciousness beyond the province of the human mind and the real bases of the so-called Laws of Nature are rooted in those realms. It is safe not to be dogmatic about any "Law of Nature". Ordinarily, the *prarabdha* karma of an individual (in which is included the span of his physical life) for a particular incarnation is fixed; and in most cases this can be read in general outline from the horoscope. That is the scope of astrology.

Coming to the major question whether *prarabdha* karma is absolutely irrevocable, the answer will have to be "no". It is one thing to say that a law is absolutely inviolable, but it is entirely a different matter to say that it is ordinarily unchangeable. In dealing with this major question we are actually coming to the realm of "out of the ordinary" happenings. Though the time of death of the physical body is fixed, death may take place at other times under extraordinary conditions. I am not considering here the case of suicide which is an exceptional happening not provided for in the plan of a man's life.* There are cases where death may take place at a time other than that fixed in the *prarabdha* karma. We hear of mass catastrophes like ship-wreck, train accidents, plane crashes, huge fire, monsoon floods and so on, in which several persons lose their lives almost simultaneously. What happens generally in such cases is that persons whose karma needs to be worked out by their being drowned, as in a ship-wreck, are somehow brought together by their karma to travel in that particular ship, so that through that one accident several people's karma may be adjusted. Otherwise, a ship-wreck or something similar to it will have to be managed for each such individual. The Lords of Karma, as other Divine Agencies, have a keen eye for economy. So group accidents are arranged; or an accident is utilised as an opportunity to work out the karmic debts of several individuals at one stroke as it were. But there may happen to be passengers whose *prarabdha* karma does not provide for their being drowned at the time. Generally people who have planned to go in that ship but whose *prarabdha* karma does not include drowning in a ship-wreck, would have somehow been prevented from getting into the ship.

* For detailed information on this subject of suicide I would suggest a reference to Chapter VI of the book *Talks with a Class* by Dr. Annie Besant.

Such cases are not rare. On the way to the ship an accident may occur and the person kept back. I know definitely of several cases when at the last moment something happens and the person is prevented from being involved in such a mass disaster. If, however, some person chances to be on the ship whose *prarabdha* does not provide for dying in shipwreck, the Lords of Karma or Their agents in charge will find out if there is any piece of karma in the person's stock-karma (called the *sanchlta-karma*) which can be worked out by such a drowning, and if there is any such karma they will just let the person get drowned and carry over the unexhausted part of his *prarabdha* karma to the stock-karma from which to choose future *prarabdha* karma. But if there is no such piece of karma available in the person's stock-karma that person will *somehow* be saved, though the escape may seem to be miraculous. Such miraculous escapes are on record in abundance.

In this connection let me quote what Dr. Besant says on this matter.

"The fact is that the period of life under physical conditions *is* fixed; the period of striking off the physical body is *not* fixed. At one point or another death may come. There will be times when, because of the karma, death cannot be averted, but there may be other periods when an added force may turn it away like any other kind of karma. There are points that are certain, and there are those that may be varied by exertion.

".....But the whole life under physical conditions is a fixed period and if he passes out of earthly life before that period is fulfilled on the physical plane, he has to live on for the remainder of it under what you may call partly earth-life conditions in the astral world. His physical body has been struck away before the life period is over. But the normal period after death only begins when that earthly life-period is exhausted; that is the point you have to remember."

We have to note that man is always making karma; his stock-karma is being modified—added to or diminished—every moment. That past karma is pressing on him all the time and he is making new karma incessantly; these two greatly influence the way in which *prarabdha* karma is being worked out. I referred to *prarabdha* karma as being generally likened to an arrow which has been discharged from the bow and which cannot, therefore, be influenced in any manner thereafter. But is it really so unchangeable? It is true that the arrow once discharged mechanically goes its own course determined by dynamical considerations. The man however, if he is determined, can change the course of the arrow by sending another arrow with a suitable velocity and in a suitable direction so that it may hit the first arrow and change its course. If he is a man of knowledge he can so manipulate the second arrow that the course of the first arrow is changed in any manner he desires. As long as the free will of man is operative we have to provide for unexpected possibilities. While dealing with an ordinary conventional person the prevalent idea regarding horoscopes and the fixed nature of the hour of death and so on may be taken as applicable.

In passing I may refer to a point which has a relevant bearing on the question under consideration. Books on astrology are not so dogmatic as some of the interpreters of the science of astrology would lead us to believe. The science provides for the inferences proving incorrect in the case of Yogis and Bhaktas. So it is obvious that the rules and findings of astrology are taken to be applicable only to ordinary men and women who live normal conventional lives.

This brings us to a point of vital importance, especially to aspirants for spiritual life. What we call karma (individual or national or racial, etc.) is only a part of the “activities” in which every living being is engaged. Every centre

of life is active all the time. As Lord Sri Krishna says in Canto II of the Gita, "Nothing can remain inactive even for an instant." But all this is not karma which is under the operation of the "Law of Karma". When we speak of karma we generally refer only to that action—using this word in its most general sense of any impulse—in which an individual or a group of individuals is involved, for which there is a reaction. If anyone is not personally involved (that is, has no attachment, *sanga*) in an act, then the reaction of that act does not affect him. The forces generated by that act are there undoubtedly, but they go into a general reservoir which takes in such forces and is in charge of the Nirmanakayas who use that storehouse of energy for purposes of Their own. The great Adepts are engaged in "action" all the time but as They are not personally entangled in any such action there is no karmic reaction on them. When one engages oneself in action without any attachment to it or without getting personally entangled in it there cannot be any *personal* reaction.

Similarly, automatic action of the organs of a human body does not necessarily involve any karmic reaction on the individual. The only action which comes under the operation of the Law of Karma is that which is deliberately done by an individual, to which he is personally attached and through which he hopes to achieve some result. So, generally and theoretically speaking, the action of a person—this applies to group or mass consciousness also *mutadis mutandis*—may fall under three heads: (i) the automatic and instinctive action of his vehicles under the impulses set going by the first and second outpourings from the Third and Second Logoi, (ii) the action motivated by the person's individual will or desire or thought with a view to achieve a personal purpose, and (iii) action performed as sacrifice, as a matter of duty or as an offering to the Lord or the Master, action done out of Love for

others, done because he cannot help doing good to mankind, as the Great Ones are doing all the time. Of these three, the first and the last go into what we may call general storehouse and only the second category comes under the operation of the Law of Karma. The first category is common to all and so may be left out of our present consideration. In the case of the ordinary man of the world with very little spiritual leaning, the second category dominates and there is very little of the third category. As a man evolves, more and more of what he does comes into the third category, until he reaches a stage when he becomes free from any attachment to or entanglement in whatever he does. Thereafter there is nothing to bind him to any act; he becomes free, becomes a *Mukta*, a liberated one. Not that he does not act; on the contrary he is ever so much more active than before. But he is no more under the bondage of the law of personal karma, not bound to the wheel of births and deaths. The individual karma-ledger, so to say, exists only so long as he acts in his individual capacity. When he has ceased to be "I" and identifies himself with the One Life there is no personal ledger anymore for him. He becomes "karmaless".

Now there are one or two interesting problems which come up in this connection. We are told that the Law of Karma being a Divine Law is inviolable and absolute. Of course this is true. When it comes to a matter of applying this Divine Law to human life there are various factors that come into operation which are all provided for in the Divine Law but some of which are likely to be forgotten by us when we deal with the application of the Law to individual cases. *A* borrows from *B* two hundred rupees which are paid by *B* in two currency notes of hundred rupees denomination. *A* has to repay *B* sooner or later. If the law of compensation is applied mechanically and literally *A* has to pay back the loan in the same shape i.e., in two hundred rupee notes. (Of course here I am not

taking into consideration any interest). This interpretation is obviously far-fetched and absurd. The loan may be repaid in various ways: A may pay the same in full quickly—this is at times called “ready-money karma”—or pay it in small instalments within a certain period or may pay it later. In any case A will have to pay back the loan, if not in this life, in some future life. The manner in which the karmic debt is discharged is not rigidly prescribed. There is a good deal of elasticity about the matter. Again, the question may come up whether A himself should repay the loan to B. Suppose A does some good turn to C and C in turn undertakes to repay A's debt to B himself. Will not such an arrangement meet the needs of the law of compensation?

This incidentally raises the question of vicarious karma. This is too important a topic to be dealt with incidentally here. In any case we may take it that the actual working out of the law of karma in individual cases allows of great latitude and no one can be dogmatic about it. C.W.L. gives two instances to illustrate this point. “The school-boy who mischievously pinches a classmate will certainly not have to meet that classmate a thousand years hence under other skies in order to be pinched by him in return.....” Then again, “A man who murders another may conceivably sometimes himself be murdered in turn in another incarnation; but he can cancel the karma much more satisfactorily if he happens to have an opportunity in the next incarnation of saving the life of his former victim at the cost of his own. It would seem that sometimes he may cancel it without losing his own at all;” I have quoted these two extreme cases to show the great elasticity of the Law in its actual working.

Another question may arise in this connection, however academic or abstract or hypothetical it may seem. The question may be stated thus: A person has a karma

debt still to discharge. Is it absolutely necessary that he should discharge it in full before he reaches the Goal? I have designedly used the word "absolutely", because generally (in 99.999 per cent of cases) the law requires it. But the real point is whether there can be exceptions. Is it possible for the karmic debt of an individual to be taken over or shared by others? Is it possible at all for a karmic debt to be excused or condoned or cancelled? Here we are dealing with exceptional cases; people will be foolish if they forget that very important point. In the case of a disciple who has been drawn very close to his Master, it might happen that, in the interests of higher and more universal work, the Master takes over the disciple's karma and releases him for some higher work which he would have found impossible to do with that karmic debt hanging round his neck like a millstone. In this case the Master will suitably deal with that piece of karma in consultation with the Lords of Karma and the Nirmanakayas. So also in the case of a true devotee who has genuinely surrendered himself to the Lord unreservedly and thereby absolved himself of all individual liability, the Lord Himself takes up the responsibility of liquidating the devotee's debts. In the famous verse 22 of the IX Canto of the *Gita*, the Lord guarantees that in such extremely exceptional cases he will himself see to the devotee's karmic adjustments. But such cases are extremely rare; they may, for practical purposes, be taken as almost hypothetical.

As regards the possibility of sharing one's karma with others, the idea need not be so startling; because in the group-soul every member shares his karma with every other. We came from the group-soul condition to our present individualized condition; and finally when we realise the Unity of Life we shall be sharing what we have and what we are, with everyone else. But even before that stage

is reached there seems to be the possibility of an individual sharing his karma with others. (We might have heard of the "twin-soul" theory; but I do not propose to deal with it here). Mr. C. Jinarajadasa in his book *The Seven Veils Over Consciousness* referring to a letter from the Master Serapis (letter No. 19 in *Letters From the Masters of the Wisdom*, Second Series) in which the Master speaks of the union of two souls, says, ".....their karmas interblend. It is as if the two karmas were two tanks joined by a pipe. If the level in one rises, the level in the other rises also, till both are at the same level". The implication is obvious. If this is true of two souls, then theoretically it is possible for more than two karmas to be inter-connected so that all the karma-tanks keep the same level. Here again we have ever to keep in mind that we are dealing with very rare and exceptional cases. Barring such cases we may take it that the usual ideas about the application of the Law of Karma hold good.