

Lesson 5

KARMA

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Condensed from *The Ancient Wisdom*

Having traced the evolution of the soul by the way of reincarnation, we are now in a position to study the great law of causation under which rebirths are carried on, the law which is named Karma.

Karma is a Sanskrit word, literally meaning “action”; as all actions are effects flowing from preceding causes, and as each effect becomes a cause of future effects, this idea of cause and effect is an essential part of the idea of action, and the word action, or karma, is therefore used for causation, or for the unbroken linked series of causes and effects that make up all human activity. Hence the phrase is sometimes used of an event, “This is my karma,” *i.e.*, “This event is the effect of a cause set going by me in the past.” No one life is isolated! It is the child of all the lives before it, the parent of all the lives that follow it, in the total aggregate of the lives that make up the continuing existence of the individual. There is no such thing as “chance” or as “accident”; every event is linked to a preceding cause, to a following effect; all thoughts, deeds, circumstances are causally related to the past and will causally influence the future; as our ignorance shrouds from our vision alike the past and the future, events often appear to us to come suddenly from the void, to be “accidental,” but this appearance is illusory and is due entirely to our lack of knowledge. Just as the savage, ignorant of the laws of the physical universe, regards physical events as uncaused, and the results of unknown physical laws as “miracles”; so do many, igno-

rant of moral and mental laws, regard moral and mental events as uncaused, and the results of unknown moral and mental laws as good and bad “luck.”

THE MASTERY OF DESTINY

When at first this idea of inviolable, immutable law in a realm hitherto vaguely ascribed to chance dawns upon the mind, it is apt to result in a sense of helplessness, almost of moral and mental paralysis. Man seems to be held in the grip of an iron destiny, and the resigned “kismet” of the Moslem appears to be the only philosophical utterance. Just so might the savage feel when the idea of physical law first dawns on his startled intelligence, and he learns that every movement of his body, every movement in external Nature, is carried on under immutable laws. Gradually he learns that natural laws only lay down conditions under which all workings must be carried on, but do not prescribe the workings; so that man remains ever free at the center, while limited in his external activities by the conditions of the plane on which those activities are carried on. He learns further that while the conditions master him, constantly frustrating his strenuous efforts, so long as he is ignorant of them, or, knowing them, fights against them, he masters them and they become his servants and helpers when he understands them, knows their directions, and calculates their forces.

Hence the saying that “knowledge is power,”

for exactly in proportion to his knowledge can he utilize these forces; by selecting those with which he will work, by balancing one against another, by neutralizing opposing energies that would interfere with his object, he can calculate beforehand the result, and bring about what he predetermines. Understanding and manipulating causes, he can predict effects, and thus the very rigidity of Nature which seemed at first to paralyze human action can be used to produce and infinite variety of results. Perfect rigidity in each separate force makes possible perfect flexibility in their combinations. For the forces being of every kind, moving in every direction, and each being calculable, a selection can be made and the selected forces so combined as to yield any desired result. The object to be gained being determined, it can be infallibly obtained by a careful balancing of forces in the combination put together as a cause. But, be it remembered, knowledge is requisite thus to guide events, to bring about desired results. The ignorant man stumbles helplessly along, striking himself against the immutable laws and seeing his efforts fail, while the man of knowledge walks steadily forward, foreseeing, causing, preventing, adjusting, and bringing about that at which he aims, not because he is lucky but because he understands. The one is the toy, the slave of Nature, whirled along by her forces: the other is her master, using her energies to carry him onwards in the direction chosen by his will.

That which is true of the physical realm of law is true of the moral and mental worlds, equally realms of law. Here also the ignorant is a slave, the sage is a monarch; here also the inviolability, the immutability, that were regarded as paralyzing, are found to be the necessary conditions of sure progress and of clear-sighted direction of the future. Man can become the master of his destiny only because that destiny lies in a realm of law, where knowledge can build up the science of the soul and place in the hands of man the power of controlling his future — of choos-

The Three Types of Karma

Eastern philosophy classifies Karma into three important categories:

Unripe Karma: the karma that will not yet be activated in this particular life

Ripe Karma: those which will manifest during this lifetime

Present Karma: the karma forces that are constantly being generated by the individual at the present time.

ing alike his future character and his future circumstances. The knowledge of karma that threatened to paralyze, becomes an inspiring, a supporting, an uplifting force.

THE LAW OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

Karma is, then, the law of causation, the law of cause and effect. It was put pointedly by the Christian Initiate, S. Paul: "Be not deceived, God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap."¹ Man is continually sending out forces on all the planes on which he functions; these forces — themselves in quantity and quality the effects of his past activities — are causes which he sets going in each world he inhabits; they bring about certain definite effects both on himself and on others, and as these causes radiate forth from himself as center over the whole field of his activity, he is responsible for the results they bring about. As a magnet has its "magnetic field," an area within which all its forces play, larger or smaller according to its strength, so has every man a field of influence within which play the forces he emits, and these forces work in curves that return to their forth-sender, that re-enter the center whence they emerged.

As the subject is a very complicated one, we will subdivide it, and then study the subdivisions one by one.

¹ *Galatians*, vi, 7

Group Karma

Nations have group or collective karma. As they sow they also reap. Individuals are sent to incarnate in nations whose karma harmonizes with their own, generated by them in former lives.

Belgium offers an example of national karma. Why did she suffer so heavily in the two World Wars? Can we find in her history aggressive conduct and wanton infliction of cruelty upon weaker people of such a nature and on such a scale as would seem to justify, according to the principle of cause and effect, her subsequent military disasters and the sufferings they brought to her people? Yes, I think we can. With every respect to the noble people of Belgium, I would draw at-

tention to what have come to be known by historians as “the Belgian Congo atrocities.” I shall not describe here in detail these products of the purely colonial administration of the Belgian government at that time, but would refer those who are interested . . . to the official records and photographs illustrating the barbarous treatment meted out to the indigenous population of the Belgian Congo colonies. From these it may be deduced that the Congo atrocities constituted a sowing from which the later national disasters were a not inappropriate reaping, to use the analogy of St. Paul.

– Geoffrey Hodson, *Basic Theosophy*,
199-200

THREE CLASSES OF ENERGIES

Three classes of energies are sent forth by man in his ordinary life, belonging respectively to the three worlds that he inhabits; mental energies on the mental plane, giving rise to the causes we call thoughts; desire energies on the astral plane, giving rise to those we call desires; physical energies aroused by these, and working on the physical plane, giving rise to the causes we call action. We have to study each of these in its workings, and to understand the class of effects to which each gives rise, if we wish to trace intelligently the part that each plays in the perplexed and complicated combinations we set up, called in their totality “our Karma.” When a man, advancing more swiftly than his fellows, gains the ability to function on higher planes, he then becomes the center of higher forces, but for the present we may leave these out of account and confine ourselves to ordinary humanity, treading the cycle of reincarnation in the three worlds.

In studying these three classes of energies we shall have to distinguish between their effect on

the man who generates them and their effect on others who come within the field of his influence; for a lack of understanding on this point often leaves the student in a slough of hopeless bewilderment.

Then we must remember that every force works on its own plane and reacts on the planes below it in proportion to its intensity, the plane on which it is generated gives it its special characteristics, and in its reaction on lower planes it sets up vibrations in their finer or coarser materials according to its own original nature. The motive which generates the activity determines the plane to which the force belongs.

Next it will be necessary to distinguish between ripe karma, ready to show itself as inevitable events in the present life; the karma of character, showing itself in tendencies that are the outcome of accumulated experiences, and that are capable of being modified in the present life by the same power (the Ego) that created them in the past; the karma that is now

making, and will give rise to future events and future character.²

Further, we have to realize that while a man makes his own individual karma he also connects himself thereby with others, thus becoming a member of various groups — family, national, racial — and as a member he shares in the collective karma of each of these groups.

It will be seen that the study of karma is one of much complexity; however, by grasping the main principles of its working as set out above, a coherent idea of its general bearing may be obtained without much difficulty, and its details can be studied at leisure as opportunity offers. Above all, let it never be forgotten, whether details are understood or not, that each man makes his own karma, creating alike his own capacities and his own limitations; and that working at any time with these self-created capacities, and within these self-created limitations, he is still himself, the living soul, and can strengthen or weaken his capacities, enlarge or contract his limitations.

The chains that bind him are of his own forging, and he can file them away or rivet them more strongly; the house he lives in is of his own building, and he can improve it, let it deteriorate, or rebuild it, as he will. We are ever working in plastic clay and can shape it to our fancy, but the clay hardens and becomes as iron, retaining the shape we gave it. A proverb from the *Hitopadesha* runs, as translated by Sir Edwin Arnold:

“Look! The clay dries into iron, but the potter moulds the clay;
Destiny today is the master — Man was master yesterday.”

Thus we are all masters of our tomorrows, however much we are hampered today by the results of our yesterdays.

Let us now take in order the divisions already set out under which karma may be studied.

Three classes of causes, with their effects on

their creator and on those he influences. The first of these classes is composed of our thoughts. Thought is the most potent factor in the creation of human karma, for in thought the energies of the SELF are working in mental matter, the matter which, in its finer kinds, forms the individual vehicle, and even in its coarser kinds responds swiftly to every vibration of self-consciousness. The vibrations which we call thought, the immediate activity of the Thinker, give rise to forms of mind-stuff, or mental images, which shape and mould his mental body, as we have already seen; every thought modifies this mental body, and the mental faculties in each successive life are made by the thinkings of the previous lives. A man can have no thought-power, no mental ability, that he has not himself created by patiently repeated thinkings; on the other hand, no mental image that he has thus created is lost, but remains as material for faculty, and the aggregate of any group of mental images is built into a faculty which grows stronger with every additional thinking, or creation of a mental image, of the same kind. Knowing this law, the man can gradually make for himself the mental character he desires to possess and he can do it as definitely and as certainly as a bricklayer can build a wall. Death does not stop his work, but by setting him free from the encumbrance of the body facilitates the process of working up his mental images into a definite organ we call a faculty, and he brings this back with him to his next birth on the physical plane, part of the brain of the new body being molded so as to serve as the organ of this faculty, in a way to be explained presently. All these faculties together form the mental body for his opening life on earth, and his brain and nervous system are shaped to give his mental body expression on the physical plane. Thus the mental images created in one life appear as mental characteristics and tendencies in another, and for this reason it is

² These divisions are familiar to the student as Prārabdha (commenced, to be worked out in the life); Sanchita (accumulated), a part of which is seen in the tendencies, Kriyamāna, in course of making.

written in one of the Upanishads: “Man is a creature of reflection: that which he reflects on in this life he becomes the same hereafter.”³ Such is the law, and it places the building of our mental character entirely in our own hands; if we build well, ours the advantage and the credit; if we build badly, ours the loss and blame. Mental character, then, is a case of individual karma in its action on the individual who generates it.

This same man that we are considering, however, affects others by his thoughts. For these mental images that form his own mental body set up vibrations, thus reproducing themselves in secondary forms. These generally, being mingled with desire, take up some astral matter, and I have therefore elsewhere⁴ called these secondary thought-forms astro-mental images. Such forms leave their creator and lead a quasi-independent life — still keeping up a magnetic tie with their progenitor. They come into contact with and affect others, in this way setting up kârmic links between these others and himself; thus they largely influence his future environment. In such fashion are made the ties which draw people together for good or evil in later lives; which surround us with relatives, friends, and enemies; which bring across our path helpers and hinderers, people who benefit and who injure us, people who love us without our winning in this life, and who hate us though in this life we have done nothing to deserve their hatred. Studying the results, we grasp a great principle — that while our thoughts produce our mental and moral character in their action on ourselves, they help to determine our human associates in the future by their effects on others.

The second great class of energies is composed of our desires — our outgoing after objects that attract us in the external world; as a mental element always enters into these in man, we may extend the term “mental images” to include them, although they express themselves chiefly

in astral matter. These in their action on their progenitor mould and form his body of desire, or astral body, shape his fate when he passes into Kāmaloka after death, and determine the nature of his astral body in his next rebirth. When the desires are bestial, drunken, cruel, unclean, they are the fruitful causes of congenital diseases, of weak and diseased brains, giving rise to epilepsy, catalepsy, and nervous diseases of all kinds, of physical malformations and deformities, and, in extreme cases, of monstrosities. Bestial appetites of an abnormal kind or intensity may set up links in the astral

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world which for a time chain the Egos, clothed in astral bodies shaped by these appetites, to the astral bodies of animals to which these appetites properly belong, thus delaying their re-incarnation; where this fate is escaped, the bestially shaped astral body will sometimes impress its characteristics on the forming physical body of the babe during antenatal life, and produce the semi-human horrors that are occasionally born.

Desires — because they are outgoing energies that attach themselves to objects — always attract the man towards an environment in which they may be gratified. Desires for earthly things, linking the soul to the outer world, draw him towards the place where the objects of desire are most readily obtainable, and therefore it is said that a man is born according to his desires.⁵ They are one of the

3 *Chhândogyopanishad* IV, xiv, 1.

4 See *Karma*, by Annie Besant (1979) p. 25—Theosophical Manual No. IV

5 See *Brihadâranjakopanishad*, IV, iv, 5,7, and context

causes that determine the place of rebirth.

The astro-mental images caused by desires affect others as do those generated by thoughts. They, therefore, also link us with other souls, and often by the strongest ties of love and hatred, for at the present stage of human evolution an ordinary man's desires are generally stronger and more sustained than his thoughts. They thus play a great part in determining his human surroundings in future lives, and may bring into those lives persons and influences of whose connection with himself he is totally unconscious. Suppose a man by sending out a thought of bitter hatred and revenge has helped to form in another the impulse which results in a murder; the creator of that thought is linked by his karma to the committer of the crime, although they have never met on the physical plane, and the wrong he has done to him, by helping to impel him to a crime, will come back as an injury in the infliction of which the whilom criminal will play his part. Many a "bolt from the blue" that is felt is utterly undeserved is the effect of such a cause, and the soul thereby learns and registers a lesson while the lower consciousness is writhing under a sense of injustice. Nothing can strike a man that he has not deserved, but his absence of memory does not cause a failure in the working of the law. We thus learn that our desires in their action on ourselves produce our desire-nature, and through it largely affect our physical bodies in our next birth; that they play a great part in determining the place of rebirth; and by their effect on others they help to draw around us our human associates in future lives.

The third great class of energies, appearing on the physical plane as actions, generate much karma by their effects on others, but only slightly affect directly the Inner Man. Broadly speaking, the favorable or unfavorable nature of the physical surroundings into which we are born depends on the effect of our previous actions in spreading happiness or unhappiness among other people. The physical results on others of actions on the physical plane work out karmically in repaying

to the actor physical good or bad surroundings in a future life. If he has made people physically happy by sacrificing wealth or time or trouble, this action kârmically brings him favorable physical circumstances conducive to physical happiness. If he has caused people wide-spread physical misery, he will reap kârmically from his action wretched physical circumstances conducive to physical suffering. And this is so, whatever may have been his motive in either case — a fact which leads us to consider the law that:

EVERY FORCE WORKS ON ITS OWN PLANE

If a man sows happiness for others on the physical plane, he will reap conditions favorable to happiness for himself on that plane, and his motive in sowing it does not affect the result. A man might sow wheat with the object of speculating with it to ruin his neighbor, but his bad motive would not make the wheat grains grow up as dandelions. Motive is a mental or astral force, according as it arises from will or desire, and it reacts on moral and mental character or on the desire-nature severally. The causing of physical happiness by an action is a physical force and works on the physical plane. "By his actions man affects his neighbors on the physical plane; he spreads happiness around him or he causes distress, increasing or diminishing the sum of human welfare. This increase or diminution of happiness may be due to very different motives — good, bad, or mixed. A man may do an act that gives widespread enjoyment from sheer benevolence, from a longing to give happiness to his fellow creatures. Let us say that from such a motive he presents a park to a town for the free use of its inhabitants; another may do a similar act from mere ostentation, from desire to attract attention from those who can bestow social honors (say, he might give it as purchase-money for a title); a third may give a park from mixed motives, partly unselfish, partly selfish. The motives will severally affect

these three men's characters in their future incarnations, for improvement, for degradation, for small results. But the effect of the action is causing happiness to large numbers of people does not depend on the motive of the giver; the people enjoy the park equally, no matter what may have prompted its gift, and this enjoyment, due to the action of the giver, establishes for him a kârmic claim on Nature, a debt due to him that will be scrupulously paid. He will receive a physically comfortable or luxurious environment, as he has given widespread physical enjoyment, and his sacrifice of physical wealth will bring him his due reward, the kârmic fruit of his action. This is his right. But the use he makes of his position, the happiness he derives from his wealth and his surroundings, will depend chiefly on his character, and here again the just reward accrues to him, *each* seed bearing its appropriate harvest.⁶ Truly, the ways of karma are equal. It does not withhold from the bad man the result which justly follows from an action which spreads happiness, and it also deals out to him the deteriorated character earned by his bad motive, so that in the midst of wealth he will remain discontented and unhappy. Nor can the good man escape physical suffering if he cause physical misery by mistaken actions done from good motive; the misery he caused will bring him misery in his physical surroundings, but his good motive, improving his character, will give him a source of perennial happiness within himself, and he will be patient and contented amid his troubles. Many a puzzle maybe answered by applying these principles to the facts we see around us.

These respective effects of motive and of the results (or fruits) of actions are due to the fact that each force has the characteristics of the plane on which it was generated, and the higher the plane the more potent and the more persistent the force. Hence motive is far more important than action, and a mistaken action done with a good motive is productive of more good to the

doer than a well-chosen action done with a bad motive. The motive, reacting on the character, gives rise to a long series of effects, for the future actions guided by that character will all be influenced by its improvement or its deterioration; whereas the action, bringing on its doer physical happiness or unhappiness, according to its results on others, has in it no generating force, but is exhausted in its results. If bewil-

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dered as to the path of right action by a conflict of apparent duties, the knower of karma diligently tries to choose the best path, using his reason and judgment to the utmost; he is scrupulously careful about his motive, eliminating selfish considerations and purifying his heart; then he acts fearlessly, and if his action turn out to be a blunder he willingly accepts the suffering which results from his mistake as a lesson which will be useful in the future. Meanwhile, his high motive has ennobled his character for all time to come.

This general principle that the force belongs to the plane on which it is generated is one of far-reaching import. If it be liberated with the motive of gaining physical objects, it works on the physical plane and attaches the actor to that plane. If it aims at devachanic objects, it works on the devachanic plane and attaches the actor thereto. If it has no motive save the divine service, it is set free on the spiritual plane, and therefore cannot attach the individual, since the *individual* is asking for nothing.

6 See *Karma*, pp. 50, 51.

THE THREE KINDS OF KARMA

Ripe Karma. Ripe Karma is that which is ready for reaping and which is therefore inevitable. Out of all the karma of the past there is a certain amount which can be exhausted within the limits of a single life; there are some kinds of karma that are so incongruous that they could not be worked out in a single physical body, but would require very different types of body for their expression; there are liabilities contracted towards other souls, and all these souls will not be in incarnation at the same time; there is karma that must be worked out in some particular nation or particular social position, while the same man has other karma that needs an entirely different environment. Part only, therefore, of his total karma can be worked out in a given life, and this part is selected by the Great Lords of Karma — of whom something will presently be said — and the soul is guided to incarnate in a family, a nation, a place, a body, suitable for the exhaustion of that aggregate of causes which can be worked out together. This aggregate of causes fixes the length of that particular life; gives to the body its characteristics, its powers, and its limitations; brings into contact with the man the souls incarnated within that life-period to whom he has contracted obligations, surrounding him with relatives, friends, and enemies; marks out the social conditions into which he is born, with their accompanying advantages and disadvantages; selects the mental energies he can show forth by molding the organization of the brain and nervous system with which he has to work; puts together the causes that result in troubles and joys in his outer career and that can be brought into a single life. All this is the “ripe karma,” and this can be sketched out in a horoscope cast by a competent astrologer. In all this the man has no power of choice; all is fixed by the choices he has made in the past, and he must discharge to the uttermost farthing the liabilities he has contracted.

The physical, astral and mental bodies which the soul takes on for a new life-period are, as we

have seen, the direct result of his past, and they form a most important part of this ripe karma. They limit the soul on every side, and his past rises up in judgment against him, marking out the limitations which he has made for himself. Cheerfully to accept these, and diligently to work at their improvement, is the part of the wise man, for he cannot escape from them.

Inevitable actions. There is another kind of ripe karma that is of very serious importance — that of inevitable actions. Every action is the final expression of a series of thoughts; to borrow an illustration from chemistry, we obtain a saturated solution of thought by adding thought after thought of the same kind, until another thought — or even an impulse, a vibration, from without — will produce the solidification of the whole; the action which expresses the thoughts. If we persistently reiterate thoughts of the same kind, say of revenge, we at last reach the point of saturation, and any impulse will solidify these into action and a crime results. Or we may have persistently reiterated thoughts of help to another to the point of saturation, and when the stimulus of opportunity touches us they crystallize out as an act of heroism. A man may bring over with him some ripe karma of this kind, and the first vibration that touches such a mass of thoughts ready to solidify into action will hurry him without his renewed volition, unconsciously, unto the commission of the act. He cannot stop to think; he is in the condition in which the first vibration of the mind causes action; poised on the very point of balancing, the slightest impulse sends him over. Under these circumstances a man will marvel at his own commission of some crime, or at his own performance of some sublime act of self-devotion. He says: “I did it without thinking,” unknowing that he had thought so often that he had made that action inevitable. When a man has willed to do an act many times, he at last fixes his will irrevocably, and it is only a question of opportunity when he will act. So long as he can think, his freedom of choice re-

mains, for he can set the new thought against the old and gradually wear it out by the reiteration of opposing thoughts; but when the next thrill of the soul in response to a stimulus means action, the power of choice is exhausted.

Necessity and Freewill. Herein lies the solution of the old problem of necessity and free will; man by the exercise of free will gradually creates necessities for himself, and between the two extremes lie all the combinations of free will and necessity which make the struggles within ourselves of which we are conscious. We are continually making habits by the repetitions of purposive actions guided by the will; then the habit becomes a limitation, and we perform the action automatically. Perhaps we are then driven to the conclusion that the habit is a bad one, and we begin laboriously to unmake it by thoughts of the opposite kind, and, after many an inevitable lapse into it, the new thought-current turns the stream, and we regain our full freedom, often again gradually to make another fetter. So old thought-forms persist and limit our thinking capacity, showing as individual and as national prejudices. The majority do not know that they are thus limited, and go on serenely in their chains, ignorant of their bondage; those who learn the truth about their own nature become free. The constitution of our brain and nervous system is one of the most marked necessities in life; these we have made inevitable by our past thinkings, and they now limit us and we often chafe against them. They can be improved slowly and gradually; the limits can be expanded, but they cannot be suddenly transcended.

Sudden "conversions." Another form of this ripe karma is where some past evil-thinking has made a crust of evil habits around a man which imprisons him and makes an evil life. Meanwhile the soul has been growing and has been developing noble qualities. In one life this crust of past evil is thrown out by opportunity, and because of this the soul cannot show his later development; like a chicken ready to be hatched,

he is hidden within the imprisoning shell, and only the shell is visible to the external eye. After a time that karma is exhausted, and some apparently fortuitous event — a word from a great Teacher, a book, a lecture — breaks the shell and the soul comes forth free. These are the rare, sudden, but permanent "conversions," the "miracles of divine grace," of which we

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hear; all perfectly intelligible to the knower of karma, and falling within the realm of the law.

Accumulated Karma. The accumulated karma that shows itself as character is, unlike the ripe, always subject to modifications. It may be said to consist of tendencies, strong or weak, according to the thought-force that has gone to their making, and these can be further strengthened or weakened by fresh streams of thought-force sent to work with or against them. If we find in ourselves tendencies of which we disapprove, we can set ourselves to work to eliminate them; often we fail to withstand a temptation, overborne by the strong outrushing stream of desire, but the longer we can hold out against it, even though we fail in the end, the nearer are we to overcoming it. Every such failure is a step towards success, for the resistance wears away part of the energy, and there is less of it available for the future.

Present Karma. The karma which is in the course of making has been already studied.

Collective karma. When a group of people is

considered kârmically, the play of kârmic forces upon each as a member of the group introduces a new factor into the karma of the individual. We know that when a number of forces play on a point, the motion of the point is not in the direction of any one of these forces, but in the direction which is the result of their combination. So the karma of a group is the resultant of the interacting forces of the individuals composing it, and all the individuals are carried along in the direction of that resultant. An Ego is drawn by his individual karma into a family, having set up in previous lives ties which closely connect him with some of the other Egos composing it; the family has inherited property from a grandfather who is wealthy; an heir turns up, descended from the grandfather's elder brother, who had been supposed to have died childless, and the wealth passes to him and leaves the father of the family heavily indebted; it is quite possible that our Ego has had no connection in the past with this heir, to whom in past lives the father had contracted some obligation which has resulted in this catastrophe, and yet he is threatened with suffering by his action, being involved with family karma. If, in his own individual past, there was a wrong-doing which can be exhausted by suffering caused by the family karma, he is left involved in it; if not, he is by some "unforeseen circumstances" lifted out of it, perchance by some benevolent stranger who feels an impulse to adopt and educate him, the stranger being one who in the past was his debtor.

Yet more clearly does this come out, in the working of such things as railway accidents, shipwrecks, floods, cyclones, etc. A train is wrecked, the catastrophe being immediately due to the action of the drivers, the guards, the railway directors, the makers or employees of that line, who thinking themselves wronged, send clustering thoughts of discontent and anger against it as a whole. Those who have in their accumulated karma — but not necessarily in their ripe karma — the debt of a life suddenly cut short, may be al-

lowed to drift into this accident and pay their debt; another, intending to go by the train, but with no such debt in his past, is "providentially" saved by being late for it.

Collective karma may throw a man into the troubles consequent on his nation going to war, and here again he may discharge debts of his past not necessarily within the ripe karma of his then life. In no case can a man suffer that which he has not deserved, but, if an unforeseen opportunity should arise to discharge a past obligation, it is well to pay it and be rid of it for evermore.

LORDS OF KARMA

The "Lords of Karma" are the great spiritual Intelligences who keep the kârmic records and adjust the complicated workings of kârmic law. They are described by H. P. Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* as the Lipika, the Records of Karma, and the Mahārājas⁷ — and Their hosts, who are "the agents of Karma upon earth." The Lipika are They who know the kârmic record of every man, and who with omniscient wisdom select and combine portions of that record to form the plan of a single life; They give the "idea" of the physical body which is to be the garment of the reincarnating soul, expressing his capacities and his limitations; this is taken by the Mahārājas and worked into a detailed model, which is committed to one of Their inferior agents to be copied; this copy is the etheric double, the matrix of the dense body, the materials for these being drawn from the mother and subject to physical heredity. The race, the country, the parents, are chosen for their capacity to provide suitable materials for the physical body of the incoming Ego, and suitable surroundings for his early life. The physical heredity of the family affords certain types and has evolved certain peculiarities of material combinations; hereditary diseases, hereditary finenesses of nervous organization, imply definite combina-

7 The Mahādevas, or Chaturdevas of the Hindus

tions of physical matter, capable of transmission. An Ego who has evolved peculiarities in his mental and astral bodies, needing special physical peculiarities for their expression, is guided to parents whose physical heredity enables them to meet these requirements. Thus an Ego with high artistic faculties devoted to music would be guided to take his physical body in a musical family, in which the materials supplied for building the etheric double and the dense body would have been made ready to adapt themselves to his needs, and the hereditary type of nervous system would furnish the delicate apparatus necessary for the expression of his faculties. An Ego of very evil type would be guided to a coarse and vicious family, whose bodies were built of the coarsest combinations, such as would make a body able to respond to the impulses from his mental and astral bodies. An Ego who had allowed his astral body and lower mind to lead him into excesses, and had yielded to drunkenness, for instance, would be led to incarnate in a family whose nervous systems were weakened by excess, and would be born from drunken parents, who would supply diseased materials for his physical envelope. The guidance of the Lords of Karma thus adjusts means to ends, and insures the doing of justice; the Ego brings with him his kârmic possessions of faculties and desires, and he receives a physical body suited to be their vehicle.

LIBERATION FROM KARMA

As the soul must return to earth until he has discharged all his liabilities, thus exhausting all his individual karma, and as in each life thoughts and desires generate fresh karma, the question may arise in the mind: "How can this constantly renewing bond be put an end to? How can the soul attain his liberation?" Thus we come to the "ending of karma," and have to investigate how this may be. The binding element in karma is the first thing to be clearly grasped. The outward-going energy of the soul attaches itself to

some object, and the soul is drawn back by this tie to the place where that attachment may be realized by union with the object of desire, so long as the soul attaches himself to any object, he must be drawn to the place where that object can be enjoyed. Good karma binds the soul as much as does bad, for any desire, whether for objects here or in Devachan, must draw the soul to the place of gratification.

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Action is prompted by desire, an act is done not for the sake of doing the act, but for the sake of obtaining by the act something that is desired, of acquiring its results, or of enjoying its fruit. Desire for the fruit of action moves them to activity, and enjoyment of that fruit rewards their exertions.

Desire is, then, the binding element in karma, and when the soul no longer desires any object in earth or in heaven, his tie to the wheel of re-incarnation that turns in the three worlds is broken. Action itself has no power to hold the soul, for with the completion of the action it slips into the past. But the ever-renewed desire for fruit constantly spurs the soul into fresh activities, and thus new chains are continually being forged.

Nor should we feel any regret when we see men constantly driven to action by the whip of desire, for desire overcomes sloth, laziness, inertia,⁸ and prompts men to the activity that yields them experience. Until man is approaching divinity he needs the urgings of de-

8 The student will remember that these show the dominance of the tāmasic guna, and while it is dominant men do not emerge from the lowest of the three stages of their evolution

sires, and the desires simply grow purer and less selfish as he climbs upwards. But none the less desires bind him to rebirth, and if he would be free he must destroy them.

When a man begins to long for liberation, he is taught to practice “renunciation of the fruits of action”; that is, he gradually eradicates in himself the wish to possess any object; he at first voluntarily and deliberately denies himself the object, and thus habituates himself to do contentedly without it; after a time he no longer misses it, and he finds the desire for it is disappearing from his mind. At this stage he is very careful not to neglect any work which is duty because he has become indifferent to the results it brings to him, and he trains himself in discharging every duty with earnest attention, while remaining entirely indifferent to the fruits it brings forth. When he attains perfection in this, and neither desires nor dislikes any object, he ceases to generate karma; ceasing to ask anything from the earth or from Devachan, he is not drawn to either; he wants nothing that either can give him, and all links between himself and them are broken off. This is the ceasing of individual karma, so far as the generation of new karma is concerned.

BREAKING OLD CHAINS OF KARMA

But the soul has to get rid of old chains as well as to cease from the forging of new, and these old chains must be either allowed to wear out gradually or must be broken deliberately. For this breaking, knowledge is necessary, a knowledge which can look back into the past, and see the causes there set going, causes which are working out their effects in the present. Let us suppose that a person, thus looking backward over his past lives, sees certain causes which will bring about an event which is still in the future; let us suppose further that these causes are thoughts of hatred for an injury inflicted on himself, and that they will cause suffering a year hence to the wrong doer; such a person can introduce a new cause to intermingle with the causes working from the past, and he may counteract

them with strong thoughts of love and goodwill that will exhaust them, and will thus prevent their bringing about the otherwise inevitable event, which would, in its turn, have generated new kârmic trouble. Thus he may neutralize forces coming out of the past by sending against them forces equal and opposite, and may in this way “burn up his karma by knowledge.” In similar fashion he may bring to an end karma generated in his present life that would normally work out in future lives.

Again, he may be hampered by liabilities contracted to other souls in the past, wrongs he has done to them, duties he owes them. By the use of his knowledge he can find those souls, whether in this world or in either of the other two, and seek opportunities of serving them. There may be a soul incarnated during his own life-period to whom he owes some kârmic debt; he may seek out that soul and pay his debt, thus setting himself free from a tie which, left to the course of events, would have necessitated his own reincarnation, or would have hampered him in a future life. Strange and puzzling lines of action adopted by occultists have sometimes this explanation — the man of knowledge enters into close relations with some person who is considered by the ignorant bystanders and critics to be quite outside the companionships that are fitting for him; but that occultist is quietly working out a kârmic obligation which would otherwise hamper and retard his progress.

Those who do not possess knowledge enough to review their past lives may yet exhaust many causes that they have set going in the present life; they can carefully go over all that they can remember, and note where they have wronged any or where any has wronged them, exhausting the first cases by pouring out thoughts of love and service, and performing acts of service to the injured person, where possible on the physical plane also; and in the second cases sending forth thoughts of pardon and good will. Thus they diminish their kârmic

liabilities and bring near the day of liberation.

Unconsciously, pious people who obey the precept of all great Teachers of religion to return good for evil are exhausting karma generated in the present that would otherwise work out in the future. No one can weave with them a bond of hatred if they refuse to contribute any strands of hatred to the weaving, and persistently neutralize every force of hatred with one of love. Let a soul radiate in every direction love and compassion, and thought of hatred can find nothing to which they can attach themselves. "The Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me." All great Teachers knew the law and based on it Their precepts, and those who through reverence and devotion to Them obey Their directions profit under the law, although they know nothing of the details of its working. An ignorant man who carries out faithfully the instructions given him by a scientist can obtain results by his working with the laws of Nature, despite his ignorance of them, and the same principle holds good in worlds beyond the physical. Many who have not time to study, and perforce accept, on the authority of experts, rules which guide their daily conduct in life, may thus unconsciously be discharging their kârmic liabilities.

In countries where reincarnation and karma are taken for granted by every peasant and laborer, the belief spreads a certain quiet acceptance of inevitable troubles that conduces much to the calm and contentment of ordinary life. A man overwhelmed by misfortunes rails neither against God nor against his neighbors, but regards his troubles as the results of his own past mistakes and ill-doings. He accepts them resignedly and makes the best of them, and thus escapes much of the worry and anxiety with which those who know not the law aggravate troubles already sufficiently heavy. He realizes that his future lives depend on his own exertions, and that the law which brings him pain will bring

him joy just as inevitably if he sows the seed of good. Hence a certain large patience and a philosophic view of life, tending directly to social stability and to general contentment. The poor and ignorant do not study profound and detailed metaphysics, but they grasp thoroughly these simple principles — that every man is reborn on earth time after time, and that

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each successive life is molded by those that precede it. To them rebirth is as sure and as inevitable as the rising and setting of the sun; it is part of the course of Nature, against which it is idle to repine or to rebel. When Theosophy has restored these ancient truths to their rightful place in western thought, they will gradually work their way among all classes of society in Christendom, spreading understanding of the nature of life and acceptance of the result of the past. Then too will vanish the restless discontent which arises chiefly from the impatient and hopeless feeling that life is unintelligible, unjust, and unmanageable, and it will be replaced by the quiet strength and patience which come from an illumined intellect and a knowledge of the law, and which characterize the reasoned and balanced activity of those who feel that they are building for eternity.

Annie Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*. Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai, India, 1977.

Questions for Review:

1. What is the law of karma and what is its role in human life?
2. How do we mold our own destiny?
3. What are the three types of karma?
4. What are the three classes of causes that produce karma?
5. What is the role of motive in action? How does it compare to the action itself in terms of effects?