

## Karma and Social Improvement by Annie Besant

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[Page 1] IN face of the terrible wrongs and daily misery suffered by the disinherited masses in every civilised country, the impulse of true-hearted men and women who recognise the tie of human brotherhood, is to spring forward with helping hand and to labour for the improvement of the condition of the poor. In the past, by well-intentioned, but too often ill-resulting, charity — in the present by efforts to bring about a change in the very foundations of the social system — this tribute of human service has been rendered by all worthy of the name of man. Lately, however, taking advantage of misunderstood Theosophical teachings, a new view of human duty has been promulgated by a few — the duty to sit idly regarding the sufferings of the more unfortunate members of the human family, murmuring: "It is their Karma. We cannot interfere with Karma. We must not fight against Karma".

By some this view has been accepted reluctantly, from a motive that is more creditable morally than it is well-founded intellectually. They sincerely desire [Page 2] to range themselves in the universal order, to conform themselves to natural law, to avoid vain and fretful railing, which is at once undignified and useless. They bear their own griefs in stoical silence and suffer without complaint, and expect others to do the same. But with the larger number it is to be feared Karma is used as a cloak for lacking sympathy and slothful indifference; they are as sensitive to pain for themselves as they are insensitive to it for other people, and while they use Karma as an excuse for not helping others, they never allow it to avail as a reason for not helping themselves. Such have yet to learn the very alphabet of Theosophy, to realise that the bond of brotherhood is so real a fact in nature that as none can rise without helping upwards also his brothers, so the degradation of those brothers must be a clog on him in his efforts to progress. For such this paper is not written; it is intended only as a help to the former class, by offering them some suggestions from a fellow student on the complex and difficult question of the bearing of Kārmic law on schemes of social improvement. To me, at once a Socialist and a Theosophist, the matter is of vital importance, for the possibility of realising Socialism turns on the capacity of the human race for self-improvement; and if man be a mere helpless straw on the stream of Destiny, the strenuous efforts of the Socialist would be but useless writhings, exhausting strength without producing progress. [Page 3]

The first step towards unravelling our tangle is to realise clearly what we mean by Karma. I, am inclined to think that a good many Theosophists coming out of ecclesiastical religions, unconsciously transfer to Karma their conceptions of a personal God, and so acquire a vague sort of notion that there is some kind of rebellious blasphemy in any attempts to modify exterior conditions; that these conditions exist by the will of some supreme Power, and that we must not, therefore, struggle against them. To state in plain language this vaguely felt notion is, of course, to show its baselessness. Karma is not a person, a conscious agent: it is a law, impersonal and unconscious. It is, as Colonel Olcott said, "the law of ethical causation"; it is an invariable sequence, the expression on our terrestrial plane of a fundamental principle which binds together the Cosmos, the reflexion in the phenomenal world of the eternal noumenon.

Now in that it is a law, we can argue as to its working by analogy from the working of other laws on the physical plane, laws which are easier to trace and to understand. On every hand we are surrounded by "natural laws"; we cannot breathe, or speak, or move, save in harmony with these laws, and it might seem, at first sight, as though we must be mere passive lumps, pushed hither and thither by the hurtling forces around us. Yet we move through life in [Page 4] conscious freedom, and, so true is that great word, "Nature is conquered by obedience", that we use these very laws, which look like barriers, to bring about the realisation of our wishes, learning to select and to combine the forces by which we can effect any desired result. The very fact that these laws are immutable, that they are invariable sequences, enables us to depend upon them with absolute confidence; we have to guard ourselves against the intrusion of fresh forces which would modify the result, but given complete knowledge — complete for our purpose, that is — of the forces we are using, and sufficient skill in the handling of them, and we can calculate with certainty the resulting event. "Complete knowledge is complete prevision", it has been truly said, and such prevision guides, it does not fetter, action; it lends exactitude to our aim without dictating in what direction we shall shoot; it does not command any particular course, but tells us how to follow the course chosen with the greatest efficiency, with the least expenditure of strength.

Least of all does the knowledge that we are in a realm of law compel us to sit idly by, and watch, without effort to prevent, evils which are brought about by the action of the various forces at work around us. The observed tendency of bodies to move towards each other is described by men of science as "the law of gravitation". It would be idle "to fight against" this law; but it would be idiotic to [Page 5] allow a rock to fall on a child's head, when a little muscular action would divert its course, on the plea that we cannot fight against gravitation, and that the rock is moving in obedience to that law. This instance, simple as it is, gives the key to the riddle; we cannot change natural laws, but we can modify the results brought about by their action by the introduction of new forces.

Let us apply this reasoning to Kārmic law. The Karma of the individual is the resultant of the forces flowing from the actions of that individual in this and in past incarnations. (I am omitting, for the present, the bearing on the individual of the national or collective Karma.) At any moment it is, so to speak, a fixed quantity, the resultant of all past unexhausted forces. But with each moment he is generating fresh Karma, and the force thus added to the previous combination must inevitably affect the resultant. In the endless chain of causation each effect, as it is born, becomes itself a new cause, and the totality is changed by the addition of that unit. Let us grant that at any given moment a man's misery-filled position is the inevitable result of Karma. In that position he is continuing to generate Karma. Is there any law which says that he must continue to generate evil Karma, creating fresh misery for a dreary and hopeless future? Nowhere have I read any such teaching, and the very fact of progress implies the contrary. But further, since men are members of a [Page 6] Brotherhood joined together by an underlying unity, they must necessarily affect each other; and any aid that I can give my brother as he strives to tread the upward path will be a force introduced on the same lines as his, improving the future for us both. Let him be depraved, miserable, desperate, yet must my love for him, my faith in him, my hope for him, come as fresh forces into his; life, and while they cannot change his past nor the present that results from it, they can and must modify his future, all that lies in front of the present hour. Nor should it be forgotten that the very love and brotherliness that work for improvement are themselves the result of Kārmic law, and these ameliorative influences have been preparing in the past as much as the evils which they are seeking to remove. We do not and cannot really interfere with Karma; every struggle for social improvement is the inevitable outcome of past causes, is itself part of Karma, and proves that some of the evil Karma generated in the past has worn itself out, has become exhausted.

Suppose it is agreed that the Karma now a-making may be modified by the efforts of those who are suffering and of those who sympathise with them, it may yet be argued: " These people deserve their misery, why should we intervene to save them from a deserved punishment ? " Again postponing any answer that may come from the recognition of a collective Karma, there are two replies to the above question. [Page 7] First, any improvement that we can make in their lot must fall within the limitations of Kārmic law. *We cannot escape from law.* It may be that their evil is exhausting itself, and that the help we bring is as much deserved by them as was their previous suffering. Each of us is, in a sense, a Kārmic agent, and if we can decrease human poverty and misery it is because, in the revolution of the centuries, the time has come for that social improvement to be made. If we slothfully and selfishly refuse to do our appointed share in sowing the good seed, we are generating fresh evil Karma by our refusal, and though the good seed will be sown by other hands and bear its glorious fruit, we are shutting ourselves out from a share of that harvest, sowing thorns and thistles which shall spring up in our path in some future incarnation, to tear our feet until we have trodden them down by selfless discharge of duty.

The second answer is that the principle of Brotherhood forbids us to stand aside looking on at the suffering of our brother, however that suffering may have been caused. A man may, by his own carelessness, have broken his leg. Are we therefore to look at him, as he lies in agony, refusing to bring him aid or to bear him home, because he has brought the suffering on himself? His Karma will work itself out in bodily suffering without our giving an additional pinch, and we need not be so nervously anxious to take the universe into our charge and to [Page 8] see that it works properly. If we *must* busy ourselves with superintending the working of law, might it not be as well to develop a little anxiety on the other side, and exert ourselves lest anyone should receive more than his share of suffering ? This is quite as likely as that he should receive less, but I have not noticed any fear lest such result should accrue from our non-interference. The answer which would probably be made to any such suggestion would be that as Karma is based on justice, or rather is the expression of justice, no such overplus of pain could be wreaked. Then, on the same argument, no overplus of happiness can be brought about, and we can work with a free hand, knowing that we are within a realm of law, and cannot overstep it, even if we would. We can no more evade Karma than we can evade any other law of the Cosmos , any efforts of ours that dash against its barriers will only fall back shivered into pieces, while any that succeed, by the very fact of their success, prove that they are in harmony with universal law.

Those who fear that they would be doing wrong in trying to change external conditions seldom extend this abstinence to efforts to modify interior conditions, or refuse to aid in the moral improvements of others. Yet inner affections, as much as outer circumstances, are under the sway of Kārmic law, and if we may seek to improve the one there is no reason, in consistency, why we should not seek to improve the other. Further, [Page 9] if we should not try to help forward the improvement of others, lest we should interfere with Karma, ought we to try to effect self-improvement ? The strenuous efforts made by Theosophists to progress towards a higher plane of being are quite as much an interference with Karma as any efforts towards bringing about a better social state; and if we are to listen to the pleas of fatalistic reasoners we should refuse to move, physically or morally, lest we should interfere with the workings of a law, which, we are told in the same breath, is irresistible and cannot be evaded. A saner view of human life bids us see in the present the creation of the past, and in the future the creation of the present, and so spurs us to unceasing efforts to bring about physical and moral improvement, initiating the causes whose effects shall be a better condition of humanity.

Throughout the preceding arguments I have dealt only with individual Karma, but in contemplating our

social state it is impossible to ignore the fact that collective life also generates a collective Karma, and that many may be whipped by the lash of this national fate. Our false standard of worth, our worship of rank and gold, our unbridled luxury, our shameful poverty, our slothful enjoyment, our pain-driven labour, all these combine to work out a national resultant seen equally in the *ennui* of the palace and the brutality of the slum. If, as a nation, we are to generate better Karma, we must change the causes which are [Page 10] working for future evil, and by national effort must place society on a sounder, because more moral, basis. The upper and middle classes who, in most unbrotherly fashion, have grabbed superfluities for themselves, while others are in lack of necessaries, receive their share of the national Karma in the hardening of their consciences and the materialising of their minds, a natural retribution which, to the insight of the saint, is in many degrees more terrible than the physical suffering of the poor. We cannot avoid the mental and bodily degradation, the withering and the dwarfing of our higher nature, which are the Karma from an evil past; but we need not lie down content with them, we need not continue them; let us improve the present, and the embryo of a nobler future will be generated by the efforts of today.

From the personal point of view we may profit by belief in this "law of ethical causation" in our own aspect towards our environment. We can use Karma as a shield against the arrows of a hostile destiny, as a coat of mail against the dagger-thrusts of envious fortune. While not permitting it to paralyse our efforts to build the future better than we have built the present, we can draw from it a dignified serenity, a steadfast courage, as of one too proudly strong to lament over the results of his own folly, or to break into fretful complainings over the outcome of his own acts. The wise man learns experience from the past, he does not weep over it; there is no [Page 11] time for tears while the moments are flying by on which depend the future of the individual and of the race.

To those who come from Materialism into Theosophy, there is nothing repugnant or novel in the idea of Kārmic law, save in so far as it touches on the pre-existence of the individual and of his survival after death. The materialist is already accustomed to the conception of the reign of law, to the idea of causation, to the inevitableness of natural sequence. Like the Theosophist, he regards the present as the necessary outcome of the past, not the result of an arbitrary will, but the expression of an inexorable law. Admitting this, he has also learned to utilise laws instead of being flung helplessly about by them, and so easily realises that here, as elsewhere, knowledge of law should not lead to fatalistic acquiescence, but to active co-operation.

For those who enter Theosophy from the Churches. the acceptance of the stern doctrine of Kārmic law must at first be accompanied by some stress and pain. For as Alexander Fullerton well says in his *Wilkesbarre Letters*: "Almost without exception, religious systems have provided machinery through which destiny was to be modified by some other agency than merit. Even when not set in motion by the grosser forces of cash or influence, it at least required some degree of information and some degree of intelligence, thus at once introducing an [Page 12] element of disparity where all should be upon a level. The doctrine of Karma replaces this with the principle of rigorous equality, sweeping away every distinction of intellect, creed, fortune, caste and influence, and applying to every man the one test of personal desert. With unsparing hand — for not a germ of deception must be left — it uproots all schemes of substitution, of sacrifice, vicarious or individual, of expiatory rites, of penances and compoundings and vows, clears the ground of every trace of intercession or of priestcraft, and uplifts the simple, intelligible precept — Character determines destiny."

The moral fibre of many people has become so atrophied through the teaching of the doctrines of

vicarious atonement, imputed righteousness, substitutionary sacrifice, that the bracing doctrine of personal responsibility seems to demand an exertion they are incapable of making. They are so accustomed to be carried that they fear to walk, and shrink even from the attempt to put their foot to the ground. To these we can answer nothing save the reminder that facts will not change to suit our fancies, and that it is the part of wisdom to learn to like what is when we cannot transform what is into what we like. There is, however, this further comfort for them, that exercise of the moral limbs will soon bring the feeling of returning health, and with health exertion will become a pleasure instead of a [Page 13] pain. Not only so, but the sense of reality is in itself a source of enjoyment; we have done with shams, we have cast aside subterfuges, and we stand facing Nature, naked, perhaps, but *ourselves*.

There is, however, one aspect of the attempts to bring about social improvement which may be in the minds of some, although it is not directly connected with Kārmic law. "Can we change to any good effect the surroundings of the poor, while they themselves, the men and the women, remain as they are? Must we not reform them ere we attempt to reform their environment? If we begin from outside, instead of from within, shall we not be wasting our efforts, only to find the purer surroundings defiled with the old uncleanness?" There is much reason in this argument, and frankly, though sorrowfully, I admit that I do not believe that any change in the environment would avail to raise some of the older inhabitants of our slums. They have lost the power of adaptation, of further growth, and they must die as they have lived. But there are many who desire a better state of things, and these would respond gladly the influences of a purer atmosphere. Then there are the children whom we are educating, however inadequately, and for these, in whom the inner change has begun and is working, it is urgently necessary to provide better and more wholesome surroundings. Physical science shows us how organism and environment act and react [Page 14] on one another; a plant cannot grow in darkness, nor the flowers of love and purity in an atmosphere of vice and crime. True, the inherent force of humanity is such that it will bring forth some blossoms despite the most unfavourable circumstances, and we are often startled by flashes of the most unexpected nobility in the lowest depths; but the average amount of development will be conditioned by the surroundings, and if we would raise the type we must environ it with health-giving and not with malarious influences.

The path, then, of the Theosophist seems to me to be plain: it is one of self-sacrificing and strenuous endeavour to raise his brethren out of poverty, out of misery, out of evil of every kind. This duty shines clearly out of the darkness that surrounds us, and who shall say that this beacon-light, faithfully followed, may not be the harbinger of the perfect day?