



Karma – the law of cause and effect

Course Handout

Acknowledgement

This handout is comprised mainly of material from *The Ancient Wisdom*, (Chapter 9: Karma), by Annie Besant.

Introduction

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, ignorant 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 Ancient Wisdom*, pp 318–319)



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. Humanity 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 centre, 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 or she utilize these forces; by selecting those with which he or she 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 an 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 person stumbles helplessly along, striking himself against the immutable laws and seeing their efforts fail, while the man or woman of knowledge walks steadily forward, foreseeing, causing, preventing, adjusting, and bringing about that at which he or she aims, not because he or she is lucky but because he or she 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 them onwards in the direction chosen by his or her 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. Humanity can become the master of their personal 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 and woman the power of controlling their future — of choosing alike their future character and future circumstances. The knowledge of karma that threatened to paralyze, becomes an inspiring, supporting, uplifting force. (*The Ancient Wisdom*, pp 319–324)



The law of cause and effect

Humanity is continually sending out forces on all the planes on which he or she functions; these forces – themselves in quantity and quality the effects of his or her past activities – are causes which he sets going in each world he inhabits; they bring about certain definite effects both on him or herself and on others, and as these causes radiate forth as centre over the whole field of his or her activity, we are thus 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 and women a field of influence within which play the forces they emit, and these forces work in curves that return to their forth-sender, that re-enter the centre whence they emerged.

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



Three classes of energies

Three classes of energies are sent forth by US in OUR 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 or women, advancing more swiftly than their fellows, gains the ability to function on higher planes, he or she then becomes the centre 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 person who generates them and their effect on others who come within the field of their 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.

Further, we have to realise that while a person makes their own individual karma they also connect themselves thereby with others, thus becoming a member of various groups — family, national, racial — and as a member they share 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 and woman makes their own karma, creating alike their own capacities and limitations; and that working at any time with these self-created capacities, and within these self-created limitations, they are still themselves, the living soul, and can strengthen or weaken their capacities, enlarge or contract their limitations.

The chains that bind us are of our own forging, and we can file them away or rivet them more strongly; the house we live in is of our own building, and we can improve it, let it deteriorate, or rebuild it, as we 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 or she 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 our 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 or woman can have no thought-power, no mental ability, that he or she has not themselves created by patiently repeated thinkings; on the other hand, no mental image that has thus been 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 or woman can gradually make for themselves the mental character they desire to possess and they can do it as definitely and as certainly as a bricklayer can build a wall. Death does not stop their work, but by setting them free from the encumbrance of the body facilitates the process of working up their mental images into a definite organ we call a faculty, and he or she brings this back with them to their next birth on the physical plane, part of the brain of the new body being moulded 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 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." (Chandogyopanishad IV, xiv, 1.). 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 or woman that we are considering, however, affects others by their thoughts. For these mental images that form their 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 elsewhere (See *Karma*, by Annie Besant (1979) p. 25—*Theosophical Manual No. IV*) 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 karmic links between these others and themselves; thus they largely influence their 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 us, 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 their body of desire, or astral body, shape his or her fate when they pass into Kamaloka after death, and determine the nature of their astral body in their 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 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 reincarnation; 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 person 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. (See Brihadaranyakopanishad, IV, iv, 5,7, and context). They are one of the causes that determine the place of rebirth.

The astro-mental images caused by desires affect others as do those generated by thoughts

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.

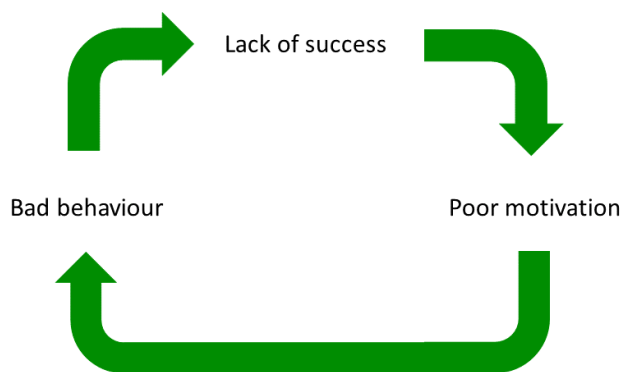


Suppose a man by sending out a thought of bitter hatred and revenge has helped to form in another the impulse which results in a murder; the creator of that thought is linked by his karma to the committer of the crime, although they have never met on the physical plane, and the wrong he has done to him, 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 person that they have not deserved, but their 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 or Women. Broadly speaking, the favourable or unfavourable 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 or she has made people physically happy by sacrificing wealth or time or trouble, this action karmically brings him favourable physical circumstances conducive to physical happiness. If he has caused people wide-spread physical misery, he will reap karmically 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.

Every force works on its own plane

If we sow happiness for others on the physical plane, we will reap conditions favourable to happiness for ourselves on that plane, and the motive in sowing it does not affect the result. A man might sow wheat with the object of speculating with it to ruin his neighbour, 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 neighbours 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 honours (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 karmic 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 wide spread physical enjoyment, and his sacrifice of physical wealth will bring him his due reward, the karmic 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. (The Ancient Wisdom, pp. 337–338)

Truly, the ways of karma are equal. It does not withhold from the bad man or women 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 person escape physical suffering if they cause physical misery by mistaken actions done from good motive; the misery they caused will bring them misery in their physical surroundings, but good motive, improves their character, will give them a source of perennial happiness within, and they will be patient and contented amid 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 bewildered 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 their reason and judgment to the utmost; they are scrupulously careful about their motive, eliminating selfish considerations and purifying their heart; then they act fearlessly, and if their action turn out to be a blunder they willingly accept the



suffering which results from their mistake as a lesson which will be useful in the future. Meanwhile, their high motive has ennobled their 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.

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 or her 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 or women 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 or she can show forth by moulding 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 their 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 or woman has no power of choice; all is fixed by the choices they have made in the past, and must be discharged to the uttermost farthing the liabilities they have 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 their past rises up in judgment against them, marking out the limitations which they have made for themselves. Cheerfully to accept these, and diligently to work at their improvement, is the part of the wise person, for they 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 person 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 them without his renewed volition, unconsciously, unto the commission of the act. He cannot stop to think; he or she 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 them over. Under these circumstances a man will marvel at their own commission of some crime, or at their own performance of some sublime act of self-devotion. They say: "I did it without thinking," unknowing that they had thought so often that he had made that action inevitable. When someone has willed to do an act many times, they at last fix their will irrevocably, and it is only a question of opportunity when they will act. So long as he can think, his freedom of choice remains, for they 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; by the exercise of free will we gradually create necessities for ourselves, 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 person which imprisons them 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 or her later development; like a chicken ready to be hatched, who 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 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 karmically, the play of karmic 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 their individual karma into a family, having set up in previous lives ties which closely connect them 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 their own individual past, there was a wrong-doing which can be exhausted by suffering caused by the family karma, he or she 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 them, the stranger being one who in the past was their 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 allowed 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 person suffer that which they have 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.

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 their 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 out-ward-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.

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, and prompts men to the activity that yields them experience. Until man is approaching divinity he needs the urgings of desires, 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 him- self 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.

Group karma

Nations have group or collective karma. As they sow they also reap. Individuals are sent to incarnate in nations whose karma harmonises 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 attention 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*, pp 199-200

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. (*The Ancient Wisdom*, pp 352–353)