

## Karmic Suggestions

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Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 4

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

THAT human nature which is so strong in us all, and which Theosophy insists must undergo very great modification before it can produce its best works, is in nothing more conspicuous than in this — that it hates to be classified. Men like to feel that they have an individuality of their own, a distinct character apart from others; and to treat them as members of a species is a sore wound to personal pride. The Country Parson tells of a youth who was raving over Tennyson to an older woman. "Yes", said she, "there is a class of young men who admire Tennyson". He was humiliated into silence. And I suppose that no one who has not rationalized away his native vanities and cured in himself common faults exactly because they *are* common and therefore inexcusable, can ever feel with equanimity his inclusion in a class or a group or a law.

It is exactly here, however, that Theosophy begins its reformatory process. The notion that he is generically different from, or superior to, or removed beyond his fellow mortals is the first of his cherished possessions that an incipient Theosophist has to disgorge. The doctrine of Universal Brotherhood, of the solidarity of the human race, of course contradicts it, but that doctrine is so very general a statement that it has not much pungency until it is thought out, and one may very readily assent to it as a proposition without being moved by it as a principle. "Oh yes", not a few think, "all of us belong to the genus homo, but there are as many species in that as there are in the genus equns. We no doubt sustain certain relations to the rest, but as no one would think of putting the thoroughbred and the cart-horse on the same level, so it is absurd to class together the refined gentleman who rides the thorough-bred and the wild Irishman who drives the cart-horse. Nature has made distinctions; we are unnatural if we ignore them".

Certainly there is some truth in this, for there are differences between men as between races, and Theosophy would be a strange system if it began by defying facts. But what made the differences? Chance? Not at all. Divine manipulation? Far from it. Climatic and other environment? Only in a secondary way. What then? Simply the evolving outwards on the physical plane of the results of character on the plane of soul. "But", someone may say, "this only pushes the matter one step backward. For those variant characters must have had some cause for their variation, and how can you explain that unless by a Higher Power assigning and securing it?" Very directly: the free action of the Ego itself, choosing **[Page 9]** its line of action, forming its habits, framing its destiny — in other words, Free Will. And why has that eventuated in such different lots in life, such different progressions in knowledge and merit? Simply because of the great Law of Cause and Effect all through the range of human action, the Law of Karma. And thus it comes about that all human beings, diversified, unlike, as they may be in situation, temperament, learning, morals, are yet the same in the two fundamental facts — that they have unfettered freedom of choice, and that they are what they have made themselves. All are dropped to the same level of responsibility for action and of experiencing its results.

Karma is thus the most democratic of all governments on earth. It sweeps away every vestige of class distinction or superiority. The King and the peasant sustain to it precisely the same relation, and feel its effects in precisely the same degree. The cultured scholar and the ignorant boor are quite alike to its indiscriminating gaze, for it has no concern with other than the one element common to both — the power of self-action. Divine favouritism is of course excluded. There are no "chosen peoples", "elect nations", or individual *protégés*. Nothing could be more ludicrous or more incongruous than the notion that a universal Law is deferential to a few favoured subjects and altogether rigid to everybody else. So, too, there are no ambassadors of Heaven, or other diplomatic agents invested with authority and a sacred character. Some men have studied more deeply into the nature of things and are fitted by knowledge and training to expound facts to the less informed, but they stand on no privileged ground or are otherwise outside the range of the great Karmic Law to which every human being is equally subjected. Priests and all other mediatorial agencies seem very hollow things when Karma is perceived to treat them as it does the rest of mankind. The very Teachers are the foremost to disclaim prerogative, and to insist that they are powerless to avert or to annul the pervading Law.

Still, the old human instinct, however much the mind at first concedes these facts, will not readily conform itself to them. It antagonizes itself in two ways. It is quite prompt to accept good as just desert. Who ever heard of a man (other than the Duke in "Patience") freely asserting that his happy fortune was unmerited and that his real place was far to the rear? Self-love will always warm the heart with the secret assurance that these blessings were none too many, if not, indeed, too few. And, on the other side, there is hesitation to concede that the ills have been deserved. "It seems so hard", each says, "that I should suffer this deprivation or this pain, I who have at the worst been foolish or thoughtless or hasty". And the self-love buoys up with a deep feeling that injustice has been done, and finds in innocence the balm for martyrdom. If you tell it of the [Page 10] universal Law, it has still its dislike for classification, and repels the idea that it is but one of many, an illustration of, not an exception to, the rule.

Theosophy has therefore an enemy in human nature as now existing. We are constantly told that selfishness is the great bar to real advance, that it has innumerable forms and disguises, each one of which holds at bay the forces tending to liberation. There is no great difficulty in understanding this when the cases are palpable, as in greediness or rapacity or conceit. But when they are interior and subtle, cases of mental perception or temperamental impulse, cases where the coolest reason must unite with the finest principle to ensure control, a greater percipience is required. We are all, like Narcissus, in love with ourselves, and do not see, any more than he did, how misplaced is that affection. So when Theosophy confronts us with an absolutely rigid doctrine, and tells us that we have what we ought to have and are where we ought to be, that we are in no respect different from our neighbours, in the essentials of humanity, and that all alike are subjected to one indiscriminating discipline, the inner selfhood is nettled in its pride and secretly protests even when it does not outwardly rebel.

Even supposing, however, that the truth in this matter is allowed, an honest difficulty presents itself. If it is the fact that we get exactly what we deserve, why is not the converse statement equally a fact, — that we deserve exactly what we get? Character is thus to be interpreted from condition. Prosperity must mean goodness and adversity must mean badness, and so the contrasts in life receive a double accentuation, for the moral element must be added to the physical. It seems rather hard that a sufferer is to bear also the opprobrium of being a sinner, and the joyous to be surrounded by the halo of saintship. I think that this difficulty would have serious force if we understood good and evil fortune as an affair of external circumstance. If good means wealth or health or rank, and if evil means poverty or sickness or obscurity,

the awards of Karma are made to manifest purely on the physical plane. But this would be not only a narrow view of a broad function, but an unphilosophical confounding of means with end. One purpose of Karma is to secure to the individual the degree of happiness he has earned. Happiness, however, is an interior state? produceable by different causes in different men, and therefore not produceable by the *same* causes in different men. There are persons of simple tastes, retiring habits, and contemplative tendency: the possession by them of conspicuous station or great wealth would be precisely what they did not want, and would thwart their natural action at every turn. Where, then, would be the happiness? We can go deeper still. A man by good conduct has entitled himself to the next stage in the evolutionary process up to perfection. He has, however, a weakness or an evil yet uncorrected. Until it is corrected he must flounder about with uncertain movements, [Page 11] never sure of his ground, and liable at any moment to bring that process to confusion. To put him in a painless environment might be to increase his defect and make his succeeding incarnation worse instead of better. There would be no real kindness in granting him a transient enjoyment at the expense of a long drawn-out discipline, and so Karma, which is very far-sighted and takes in the whole field of action, adjudges him a career of anxiety or disease that will excite the curative agencies of Nature and purge him of his crippling fault. He can very well undergo some years of pain if the result is to secure him some centuries of progress, and the just Law kindly gives him a sorrow which it sees that he will transmute into a joy. I do not believe this a visionary explanation. In my own small Theosophic observation I have noted with some perplexity the prevalence of ill-health among the most eminent Theosophists, and it seemed hardly fair, hardly consistent, even, with the work they were effecting, that they should ever be hampered with a sick body or a depressed spirit. And yet, as I marked the vigorous will which rose over and crushed down these seemingly paralyzing ills, the expanding spirit which refused to yield to physical pain and deliberately throttled it when it suggested a near victory of the lower nature over the higher, I was sure I saw the rich gift of a generous Karma disguised as a cross. The pain and the weariness simply stimulated the inner strength to an output which should ensure its dominance permanently, and which should shape later births to the conditions needed for a quicker arrival at Adeptship. In such cases, paradoxical as it may seem, trouble was a tribute and bitterness a boon. It is even possible that we, lowlier workers in the field, may detect in some of our tribulations a wholesome quality which was needed in correction, and feel ourselves the better for having been the poorer.

Karma as a far-off force, operating vaguely in moral spheres as magnetic attractions may be supposed to operate among the stars, is certainly not an arousing topic. Karma at work all around us and applying itself impartially to our neighbours, but not affecting ourselves, is as certainly not an energizing thought. Theosophy is quite relentless in its insistence that each Theosophist is to purge himself of the notion that to be classified is undignified, to be under Law distasteful. Small vanities are incompatible with large conceptions. Heine said that he was too proud to be vain. There is very much in this. If one was a traveller in an unmapped land, the roads indistinct and without finger-posts or guides, he might excuse himself if he went astray. But if in a populous region, the highways clearly defined and the signs explicit, the directions and the routes and the other travellers all unmistakably in view, he blundered in his course, absolutely nothing of palliation could be urged. So it is with faults. Something unknown, unheard of [Page 12] before, a novelty in temptation, might easily mislead anyone of us. But what could be said if we made an error we had seen made hundreds of times, criticized hundreds of times, heard warnings of hundreds of times? Nothing but that we were stupid or wilful. No one likes to feel himself stupid or wilful. Hence he would be ashamed to fall into a common fault, and undergo humiliation proportioned to its commonness. The most common of all faults is conceit, the notion that we are of finer quality, better stuff, than we really are. To be a victim of it would be intolerable to a proud man, and Heine was right. Thus another paradox comes about, — the thoughtful Theosophist, to the degree he realizes his solidarity with the race, revolts from imitating it in its most conspicuous feature, and is farthest removed from ordinary humanity at the

very moment of his closest identification with it!

But having thus freed himself from a general tendency, having lost all hesitation to be classified, and no longer supposing that Karma treats him otherwise than as the rest, such a Theosophist is only started on the path of right advance. Karma is disciplinary, but it is also explanatory. To the process of knowing oneself, self-analysis is indispensable. Is not Karma the clue to its method? The fact that I was born here, and not in Zulu land or China, means something. The fact that I live in the 19th century, not in the 17th or the 21st, has its significance. The fact that at a certain epoch Theosophy came within my horizon and that I ran to meet it is suggestive. The fact that I am in the Theosophical Society, a sharer in the currents of spiritual vitality which sweep through it and enliven it, privileged to take part in its grand mission of recovering humanity from nonsensical opinions or surface aims, one of the atoms in a body which is growing and strengthening and working, is full of import. This is the line of thought each one of us may tread. But along it are countless other facts, peculiar to the individual and to be interpreted by him alone. Why this temperament of body or mind, this disposition, this taste, aptitude, tendency, habit, inner yearning? Why this healthfulness or sickliness, the good fortune at such a time, the sorrow at another? Why am I hampered here and free there, interested in certain topics, indifferent to others? Why is this burden so persistent and so irksome, this happiness so apparently unearned? These things are not accidental, casual; they are consequences pointing back to prior forces, finger-posts indicating the way I must have come. Though an impenetrable mist hides every feature of the region left, present facts give hints of it, hints which would be revelations to a faculty more acute. That faculty may be trained. To exercise it is to do more than fancifully speculate, for the tracing back of effects to causes is a healthful use of the rational power. Then to learn their lesson is a moral renovation. He who cheerfully includes himself [Page 13] within the realm of Law, welcomes Karma as the universal power which has him, as all other human beings, in its control, feels the common faults discreditable to one who should have reasoned for himself beyond them, and interprets the contents of this life as outlining the character of the past and the possibilities of the future, is a philosopher after the pattern of the Wisdom religion. For he has first perceived Truth through intelligence, and then practised duty through devotion.