

The Creation of Karma

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IN the whole Theosophic code there is no other injunction so emphatic and so repeated as "Kill out the self". Of course this has to be understood in a rational sense, for Nature has made us separate individuals, with distinct characters and aptitudes, and a man would not improve upon Nature by making himself, on the one hand, everybody, or, on the other hand, nobody. Obliteration is not as good a thing as renovation. To kill out the self is to abandon the practice of making self the pivot around which all interests turn, the centre from which all activities radiate and to which all thoughts converge, the point, in their relation to which, topics and people and things are rated. The selfish man may not be a greedy man; he may not be aggressive on others' privileges or rights; he may not be envious or jealous or malignant; but he is truly selfish so long as he is self-centred, self-conscious, estimating all objects according to their bearing on his own personality. There is a very great abundance of such men in the world, and their critics unknowingly repeat a Theosophic prescription when they say, "Get out of yourself, stop thinking of your own ideas, try to see how questions appear to others". For in such language they are really embodying two leading Theosophical truths, first, that it is his thoughts which really measure a man, second, that he and they will always be narrow till he bursts the shell of his personality and emerges into the limitless expanse without.

All action is restricted if it is tethered, and it must be tethered so long as it can move only as its relations to some interior point permit. Just as much [Page 19] as in any other field, this must be true if the interior point is the self and the confining cord the creation of Karma. In other words, if the making of Karma for oneself is the actuating principle of life, movement is narrow and also selfish.

We shall see this the better if we look into some marks of movement in general, noting how and under what conditions it most easily proceeds. All movement is subject to law, each phase of it coming under special provisions of the special department, and the whole of it encircled by universal law as the atmosphere surrounds every object on earth. A new-comer into the world learns these facts very gradually, the infant picking up one by one its elementary experiences, and the child coordinating them into simple lessons, and the man formulating broad generalizations as he acquires more and thinks better. During this process two things come about — it is found that action is most successful and most free when it conforms to the laws which Nature has impressed upon it, and the repeated effort to do so at last produces an automatic habit, when thought is no longer bestowed upon movement, but is used for purposes which have not yet become spontaneous.

In the physical world the best illustration of this is walking. Walking is really a very complicated and difficult process, as we learned to our cost in childhood and may learn to our profit by observing childhood. To adjust each muscle with the requisite force and rigidity, to raise the feet successively at the right instant and simultaneously give the trunk the fitting inclination to the leg, to preserve the adjustment

of the centre of gravity so delicately that the upright body with its ever-changing base shall not fall forward or backward or sideways — these are operations in which there is a combination of distinct acts volitional and muscular, all of them related to the law of force and to the law of gravitation. There is a never-ceasing tendency for the perpendicular body to fall prone to the earth, and this is each instant resisted and counteracted by muscular pressure and by the incessant shifting of the centre of gravity. As a delicate and symmetrical adjustment of opposing forces, there is nothing neater in Nature than the walk of a two-legged animal.

The point is that this complex operation has become so thoroughly habitual that it virtually goes on by itself, and, except in slippery weather, we never give it a thought. The little child receives many a bruise and sheds many a tear in its solemn effort to gain command over its legs and recover its balance as it totters along, but in time that mastery is so complete that attention is withdrawn altogether from it and given to other studies still to be undergone. So it is in mental processes. The most ignorant man, with his few subjects and small vocabulary, puts together the needful words with little or no effort; and the ready conversationalist, [Page 20] capacious of thought and phraseology, finds no more trouble in his broader realm. Yet each began in tender years with laborious fitting of syllable to syllable and word to word, and the automatic speech of later time is but the result of innumerable practice, the deliberate and strained becoming the spontaneous and free.

The higher ethical and moral plane displays the same facts. We are not born with a developed and instinctive sense of right, which promptly sways action towards its proper course. The greedy propensities of children need continual restraint by parents, and the conception that there are other beings in the world whose feelings are to be considered and rights observed is only driven in by many a precept and many a discipline. The abstract conception of right in itself, that mark of fine and noble souls, forms but slowly even in them, for all abstractions are but the essence, the deliberately extracted essence, of a thousand concrete cases. Very gradually the moral sense attains quickness and accuracy, but it does come to a point when it is prompt, spontaneous, sensitive, working without effort and without strain.

In all these departments of action, then, we note that action is most really free when it never contravenes the natural law which regulates it, and also that it becomes in time so habitual as to be unconscious. An inspection of the workings of the self-principle shows how true this is there.

Born in each man is an instinct of self-preservation, of care for the production of happiness. This is not unseemly, for without it there would be inadequate motive to the protection of life, to the accumulation of those resources in the absence of which the industrial arts cannot advance, and to energy in the conduct of affairs. An instinct essential to the preservation and progress of the race is not of itself reprehensible. But, like every other instinct, it has its limitations and abuses, and, if allowed to act without reference to these, it exceeds its legitimate field and becomes aggressive and injurious. This is the tendency in all of us, and society has expressed its approval of the self-seeking impulse by inventing the maxim "Look out for Number One". He who accepts it not only implies that Number Two, Number Three, and the rest are of less consequence, but avows that in any collision he will see that Number One is victorious. This placing of the Self in the fore-front of thought and purpose, no other considerations having equal weight or force, gradually makes it the arbiter of all questions whatever. Nothing is judged upon its own merits, but always as related to the interests of the Self; nobody is valued for his character or work, but only as either bears upon the comfort of the "I". Social, political, economic, literary, moral topics have no attention

as matters of abstract right, but all turn on the pivot of personal benefit, one consequence being that it is always possible to foretell the attitude of such a character to the subjects [Page 21] brought before him. If they do not concern his immediate welfare, he naively avows that he has no interest in them; if they appear to promote or antagonize it, he faces accordingly.

One purpose of life is the evolution of a sound judgment, of the perception of things as they are; another is the evolution of a broad sympathy, sensing meritoriousness wherever it exists; and still another is the evolution of the desire to do right, whatever may be the loss in gratification. Not one of these three is possible so long as intellect, moral sense, and will are tethered by an inelastic cord to a fixed point; and so all moral systems, pre-eminently the Theosophic, insist that the very first condition to all improvement is the loosening of that bond, its detachment from the self-centre, the liberation of all faculties from such restraint. You can never abolish littleness till you abolish a little motive; you can never gain freedom of movement till you gain freedom from shackles.

So, then, says Theosophy, we need not for the moment concern ourselves with more recondite truths or principles in the macrocosm or the microcosm, but may simply take very obvious facts in any obvious field. If you wish ease and largeness of action, you must cut away the ties which confine it; if you wish breadth of view and sympathetic responsiveness, you must rid yourself of the peculiarities which make either impossible; if you wish spontaneous conformity to right, you must substitute the right habit for the wrong habit.

Then comes up at once the question — How ? It is not an easy thing to reverse the practice of a life-time, to be and to do the opposite of what we have been and done. Still, this is the *sine qua non* to progress, and it is exactly here that one may clearly see some of the first steps on the Theosophic path, those steps as to which so much mystery and doubt often exist. Let us take three illustrations.

The foremost is in the matter of *opinion*. Not only on Theosophic subjects, but on all others of every kind, each of us at times encounters what is to him a new and strange idea. The first impulse is to resent it and dismiss it because it is opposed to those familiar. But this is really to imply that nothing is worth consideration which is different from the ideas we already hold, and the implication is further divisible into two branches, first that we are at this point sufficiently developed to have attained to final truth, second that the satisfaction or otherwise upon the sight of a new thought is to determine whether it shall be examined. The former makes the limits of self the limits of truth; the latter makes the serenity of self the condition of inquiry. In other words, the mind shall function only as the self-tie lets. Obviously all thought is crippled. Now at this stage the immediate duty is to force home by the will a perception that the new idea is right or wrong irrespective of its strangeness or its repugnance, that its conformity [Page 22] to pre-existing ideas is a matter of no moment, that its proofs or disproofs lie without us, not within us, that we are, to cut loose from all restraints of self and examine it on its own merits. This once perceived, there is but a step to that examination.

Now this process, wilfully repeated each time that a strange thought startles or perturbs us, soon abates the old habit. Simultaneously there forms the new habit of meeting thoughts without reference to ourselves, of inspecting them without prejudice or prepossession, of weighing carefully their evidences and values. It is their relation to truth, not their relation to the truth-seeker, which evokes attention, and the seeker forgets that he has a self. His mental operations steadily enlarge, the tether is snapped, he is

free.

A second case is in the matter of *desire*. Plans have hitherto concerned Number One. But the incipient Theosophist believes that the universe outside his aura is more worthy than the small part within. He by no means adopts the affectation and the folly of denying his own existence or the provisions it necessitates, but when arranging for his own betterment includes as an element the well-being of others and of the race. Larger property is not merely for luxury or display; greater powers are a trust for general good; he is diligent in business and sagacious in investment for larger reasons than that he may coddle the self-principle and exult in success because it means surmounting. Each time that the welfare of another is a deliberate part of any scheme, the hampers of the old narrowness are weakened, the play of sentiment becomes broader, the nature widens and tastes the joy of liberty. Then the habit forms, and the altruist, flushed with the health of unconfined activity, wonders that he was ever little and petty and bound.

A third case is in the matter of *action*. Here again the customary movement of old was simply in the direction and along the lines spontaneous to the self. And here again the freer movement comes by deliberately changing the direction and multiplying the lines. And here, still further, that is achieved by single efforts, each making easier its successor and prompting it. If I determine that my daily acts shall recognize the rights, comforts, pleasures of my fellows, I incorporate them with my own, and the result is that each thing done signifies a principle — the principle of united interest; illustrates a truth — the truth of mutual service; and establishes a habit — the habit of liberation from selfishness. In time the action becomes spontaneous, never needs to be constrained or pushed, is freed even from the effort to be free. It *is* free.

Thus it is that the movements of the interior being are like all other movements, and are facile and unhindered when they conform to the great laws of Nature which encompass them, and by long continuance have [Page 23] become spontaneous. Why should it not be so in the "making of Karma", as we call it? Karma is a terror to many. They know that they are forming it each moment, that it will of necessity work itself out, and that prudence advises that such only shall be formed as is good. And so the accumulation of Karmic capital becomes an ever-present aim, promoting the actions, guiding the steps, motivating the judgment. How to save from ill and how to store up merit stands before the eyes as a ceaseless monitor, and, like a fear of hell or a wish for heaven, dominates the life. But, of course, precisely the same objections hold to it as to the Christian motive. It is selfish in its quality, and it is cramping in its influence. If we are to make the best Karma, it must be by surpassing the thought of making Karma at all, just as we walk best and think best and talk best when we are so habituated to easy movement that we give no attention to the process. Then it is that self-consciousness has disappeared, that the functioning is so natural that it goes on of itself. Thus too in the creation of Karmic store. As the higher motives have displaced the lower, as right thought, right speech, and right action have become instinctive and moral, as the interests of all are as much essential to the being as its own, Karma needs no study — it proceeds healthily and unobserved. This is true freedom, the freedom from self-checking as from self-seeking, the emancipation of the self from the self. It is the freedom of the Adept. So fused is he in the great Nature of which he is a part, so harmonious, so identified, so at-one, that he floats airily in that limitless expanse, fearing no mistake, no antagonism, no fall. Serene and secure in his oneness with the vast system, his will unfettered by his personality and his free action accordant with the universal life, Karma is no extraneous force to restrain his plans or modify his powers. Karma! Why he feels Karma, he exhibits Karma, he *is* Karma.