

Karma and Grace

Virginia Hanson

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The concept of karma is one of the most complex, the most profound, and probably the least understood of all the great universal principles with which Theosophy deals. In approaching the subject from a Christian background, one is sooner or later confronted with the juxtaposition of karma as a mechanical law and the Christian concept of grace with its secret and mysterious dynamics which seem to operate independently of law.

In human affairs, both karma and grace may, in a sense, be said to “happen,” that is, they are experienced and experienceable. This seems undeniable fact, so that neither karma nor grace can be denied. We feel instinctively that fact cannot be untruth; at the same time, it can never be the whole of truth even in its own area; it can never contain all that it implies. It indicates truth. It says, in effect, “I am both hiding and revealing truth.”

The full implications of what we call karma and grace are surely beyond our finite comprehension. The mere placing of the two words together may seem to be drawing lines for an irresolvable conflict. In the dead-letter, literal interpretation of karma as a mechanical process grinding on and on like a locomotive on a single pair of tracks, there can be no such thing as grace. In the sentimental, wishful, unrealistic view of grace as a favor dispensed by a jealous and erratic God, to be gained by flattery and profession of belief (whether actual or not), karma is a concept to be rejected vehemently. Yet in any real and earnest search for truth there can be no conflict, for the searcher does not begin with rejection; he does not begin with any conditioned attitude at all, but only with eyes and mind open to see what he may find.

What is the nature of the reality of karma? What is the nature of the reality of grace? And what is the nature of the relationship between them? Are they two sides of a coin, or are they totally foreign and antagonistic to each other?

H. P. Blavatsky calls karma “the One Law which governs the World of Being” (*The Secret Doctrine* (Adyar Edition), Vol. II, page 359). It has been described as the Absolute in the process of manifestation and as manifestation seeking to restore the harmony of the Absolute. It is spoken of as impersonal, inexorable, immutable—but also as modifiable. It has been called “a mathematical equation.”

We are familiar with the statement of Sir James Jeans in his book *The Mysterious Universe* that, as physicists pursue their investigations, it appears increasingly that the Great Architect of the Universe is a mathematician; the universe itself “begins to seem more like a great thought than a great machine, and the laws which govern it are more like the laws which govern the dancing of a cotillion than they are like the laws of a machine.” They seem volitional rather than automatic; they are dependable and observable, yet they hold forever the potential of creative innovation. But, mysteriously, the innovation never creates confusion; rather it seems to grow logically out of the inner meaning of the dance. Such steps as are no longer appropriate become transformed into that which is useful to an ever-expanding synthesis.

In his book, *Out of My Later Years*, Albert Einstein comments on the element of unpredictability in atomic behavior and adds: “One need only think of the weather, in which case accurate prediction even for a few days ahead is impossible. Nevertheless, no one doubts that we are confronted with a causal connection. Occurrences in this domain are beyond the reach of exact prediction because of the variety of factors in operation, not because of any lack of order in nature.”

In other words, the creative innovations of nature do not mean breaches of law. They simply mean that the law has so many variables within it that no one can say he has final and conclusive knowledge of all its workings.

So we have a concept of a great mathematician whose nature is law, but with untold reserves of ways in which the law may work out. Even here on our mundane plane of operations, with our limited intellects, it is a commonly known mathematical principle that when we change the relation of the elements within a mathematical equation, we change the results. As very simple examples, we can add and get one result; we can subtract, multiply, divide, square a number and carry the process to the n th power; we can extract square root, cube root, twelfth root, sixteenth root—any root; or we may introduce some new element into the equation. In all these ways we get different results. The mathematical equation remains what it is, always operating according to the laws of mathematics, but the elements introduced into the equation and the relationships in which those elements are arranged determine the nature of the equation itself and what the results will be. It is known also that the solution to any equation, to any mathematical problem, always lies within the problem itself, never outside, although we may find that a problem cannot be solved because it is not complete; some element is lacking so that the relationships have no integrity; it is not a whole problem and therefore it has no solution.

Surely the relationships between the myriad elements of life affect each other and the end results in any situation, in any experience, just as do the elements within a mathematical equation. The law itself makes no exception, but it would be staggeringly brash to say that we know what all the elements are or that we can predict everything that can happen within the operation of the law, particularly since no situation, no experience, can ever be exactly duplicated. Though there be but One Law, it has so many facets, so many variables, that it seems to be many laws in operation; and at times, we may not even be able to discern law at all because it is operating at a level far above our comprehension.

So it would seem that the mechanical explanation of karma hardly explains what is taking place. It is particularly inadequate, and holds no key to growth and understanding, if we use it *merely* as an explanation and search no deeper, in ourselves and in nature, for causes—for those elements which will make the problem whole and, in that very process, make it non-existent.

As karma operates in our own lives, it is undoubtedly the law through which we inherit our own past. But, again, there is a hint of something deeper and more profound. The universe turns as one (which is the root meaning of the word “universe”) and we all live in one element. Out of this emerges the principle of relativity. Every part of the universe must therefore be kept, at every moment, in harmony with its own integral balance. That happens, it is suggested, not only at the physical level, but at higher energy levels which are inconceivable to us. We might think of this as a “making perfect” process—or perhaps a more descriptive term would be the invincible divine will to perfection eternally in action. This gets away from the idea of something static and motionless, as well as mechanical.

Rather would it seem perfect rhythm and perfect harmony, or balance, in simultaneity. The will to perfection is conceived of as the Logoic Will, and its operation in maintaining the equilibrium of the universe is, one might say, stretched out in space and time. This might be termed universal, or cosmic, karma.

As this applies to the individual, it is a mystical energy of inconceivable power which derives from the Logoic Will, is one with it, and is—at every moment—in rhythmic balance at the level of the Self. Disturbances take place in the outer circumstances where the fragment, the personality, is focused. The impact of these disturbances is felt—or perhaps a better term is “absorbed”—in what, in Theosophy, is known as the Causal Body. But it does not here disturb the integrity and equilibrium because here all is immediate and whole; no element is missing, so that everything *is* balanced and perfect at every moment. Perhaps what takes place is a perfectly coordinated of centrifugal and centripetal forces at every level of energy. At the mundane level the action is slowed down so that, to us, it “takes time.” It becomes our world experience. At the Causal level it is instantaneous.

Events as cause and effect in space and time, then, must be worked out in the personality. This would seem to be the responsibility of the Ego. One might even go so far as to say that the Ego initiates the disturbances, that is, it uses the law as a tool for its own growth, for it can develop its powers only through learning to deal with circumstances at the outpost of consciousness which we call the personality. In the earlier stages of evolution, this is perhaps a feeble and even fumbling process. But as the Ego develops its capacities and becomes more facile in using them, it comes more and more to direct the process and even to pose for itself greater challenges out of the inexhaustible storehouse of past experience. This carries the clear implication that what happens to us happens by the secret will of our own innermost being. For the Ego is not separate from the Self, is indeed that aspect of the Self through which action must take place.

Thus, we are always in the process of creating our world from within. This creation, which in its outer aspect is continual adjustment to the interrelation or interaction between the personality and its environment, is what we ordinarily think of as karma. And because, as personalities, we are unaware that, as Egos, we have brought it all about, even the causes seem to us to impinge on us from the outside. But surely these can no more be outside ourselves than we can be “outside” our own hearts and minds. The causes are within us and so long as they remain, they must continually create effects.

Once a disturbance has taken place, it may take time for the balance, the harmony, to be achieved in the outer circumstances, because the personality experiences sequentially. But to the Self, the concepts of time and space must be irrelevant. “When” the Self acts in our lives, then, it seems from our point of view already to be acting in time and space. But what we experience as adjustment to the personality is already perfect at the Causal level; has “never” been anything but perfect.

The Self is not subject to the working out of personal causality because it is not subject to the personality. It *is* harmony, integrity, perfection. Personal karma cannot operate in such a sphere of absoluteness, however rigidly and inflexibly it operates in the space-time world of our everyday experience. It has been pointed out that just as the sky’s nature remains the same however black the clouds which pass across it, so the Self’s original purity is undisturbed by the human thoughts, emotions, and passions which move within its projection, the personality—although in some mysterious manner it descends into the depths with us and teaches us the meaning of the heavenly agony. But we have to remember that, even in

this, the Self is still experiencing itself when it experiences the world; it is still seeing itself when it sees the myriad personal lives through which it manifests. And since it *is* perfection, it *experiences* only perfection. This is poetically expressed in the words, “Of purer eyes than to behold evil.” Unfortunately, such concepts are too subtle for the blundering usages of language. We are constantly faced with the fact that words are indeed, as someone has called them, “the broken wreckage of the reality of thought.”

Quite tentatively, therefore, and at the risk of being misunderstood, it might be said that the Self “cares” beyond measure what happens to the personality, but because it is love in the ultimate it is not “concerned.” Worry is a vice which belongs exclusively to the personality, in which love is incomplete and which is therefore insecure.

In this view, presumably, everything is “right,” and when we see that which we regard as wrong or evil and attempt to remedy it, that is a part of the rightness. In this view, too, life has a kind of “built-in” integrity and immortality. Everything has an inner balance and truth and harmony; everything, in its true nature, reflects that perfect equilibrium at the core of all creation.

It seems possible, then, that this built-in integrity and immortality can be equated with the element of redemption which has received so much emphasis in the Christian religion and without which, perhaps, no resolution of karma is possible. Redemption, in this view, is not to be thought of as coming about through the sacrifice of God in the person of one son, but mystically through the Logoic sacrifice on the cross of matter, redeeming matter (which seems to resist but in reality is ever “seeking” to be redeemed), the process repeated endlessly, down to the lowliest cells and atoms of our bodies.

The symbol of the cross is of course a universal one, far antedating the Christian era. We find the conception that at the “beginning of time”—that is, of manifestation—the Logos impressed Himself upon creation in the form of a cross, the pattern of all manifestation, repeated at every level. Therefore the symbol implies, if we look deeply enough, that our efforts are divine efforts unrecognized. Or, perhaps more accurately, the cross is a symbol of the mutual sacrifice of spirit and matter in becoming one. It is not, in its profounder meaning, a symbol of death, even death as sacrifice, but of the union of opposites—God and man in mutual and simultaneous self-surrender. In every kind of cross known there is a point at which the perpendicular and horizontal shafts become indistinguishable—where they are not opposites at all, each being completely “lost” in the other. This point is at the very heart of the cross. It is what makes the symbol a cross and not some other figure. It is what makes the cross a triumph and not a disaster. It is the pattern throughout life, and it is the inner secret of redemption. Because of it, grace is a reality.

Grace, then, is not something that comes “unearned”; rather is the earning something quite different from what we think it is. It is perhaps not earning at all in the sense of achieving some reward as a direct result of conscious effort. Grace is unpredictable; it cannot be commanded; it operates when it will and as it will and often in ways which may seem strange to us.

In the Biblical story of Joseph, the beloved son who was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery in Egypt, there is a curious statement. We remember that, after his betrayal, Joseph rose from his humble status as a slave to that of the most powerful man in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. He was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dream and so save the country from starvation during the long famine which visited the land. When Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt for help, and when he finally made known to them his identity, they were

profoundly afraid, for now, they thought, he would revenge himself upon them. But Joseph reassured them and added, “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good.” Thus was grace operating unseen through even a perfidious act. The story of Joseph, whether or not rooted in history, is a marvelous allegory of the universal grace operating in nature and which, we would say, forever makes good come out of evil.

In his book, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell tells the story of Viracocha, a great divinity of prehistoric Peru: “His tiara is the sun; he grasps the thunderbolt in either hand; and from his eyes descend, in the form of tears, the rains that refresh the life of the valleys of the world . . . The meaning is that the grace that pours into the universe through the sun door is the same as the energy of the bolt that annihilates and is itself indestructible: the delusion-shattering light of the Imperishable is the same as the light that creates.”

Is this not the truth expressed in the mystical statement that the son of God becomes the son of man and the son of man becomes the son of God? This is the heart of the Cross, and it is the reality of grace. But it is not something that happened once and for all time, historically. It is true eternally; it is being manifested universally throughout all life.

Is it not possible that the ultimate resolution of karma is not through an extension of good deeds on the part of man, not even through detachment from the fruits of action, but mysteriously through participation in a sovereign state of being in which attachment is meaningless—through the total surrender of self and a simultaneous Self-surrender in an act of grace, the sublime and heavenly gift. The mystical energy which is the will to perfection eternally in operation “moves out” into the personality. This comes inevitably like a “visitation from on high.” It is experienced within, yet it *seems* to the personality to come from *outside* because the personality has been isolated in its own zone of awareness. In other words, the Christian would say it comes from God—a God who is generally thought of as completely outside His creation. It is unexpected; it is unpredictable; and it seems totally undeserved.

This “undeserved” aspect is probably because the full flow of grace comes usually—although not always—when the self has been completely surrendered; it comes to the humble and the contrite heart, repentant and earnestly seeking to be filled with the fire and sweetness of the living God. It is the Kingdom of Heaven which “cometh as a thief in the night.” It would seem to be identical with the energy, the active will to perfection, which has been termed karma—the most dynamic, the most potent form that karma can take because it brings about the awareness, in the personality, of its real nature, that total fulfilment represented by the perfect equilibrium at the heart of the cross where God and man become one. The fulfilment is inherent in the very nature of the law itself. For its nature is ever the nature of the cross. When that realization flows into the personality it is known as grace.

Grace has its own purposes, not to be discerned or controlled by man. Not always does it wait for the surrender of the self; it sometimes forces that surrender. When this happens, it can be devastating. Paul, on the road to Damascus, was blinded by it and was three days without sight or ability to eat or drink. Yet thereafter he preached, through every persecution and trial, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Paul spoke of being “above the law, in grace,” and this is often taken to mean that we can escape the working out of the law in some miraculous manner, even as it functions in our personal lives. Obviously, he was speaking in mystical, not literal, terms. It is quite true that the experience of grace must be dimensionless and timeless. But the individual must

come back again and function in his everyday consciousness; he may even be faced with a particularly difficult evolutionary assignment, as was the case with Paul. And again he is subject to the operation of the law in space and time. But there is a difference. The power of grace to alter circumstances is incalculable because it completely alters the personality, which is the most important element in the circumstances. Old causes in the character are “blotted out” and new and powerful causes are initiated. New effects therefore become inevitable. This may be thought of as the “forgiveness of sins.”

Such forgiveness can hardly mean, however, that the world experience will immediately become one long, sweet song, or that the individual will never meet the consequences of the things he has done in the past. But he will meet them in an entirely different manner, so that they themselves will become something entirely different from what they would have been in the ordinary course of events. It is probably not too much to say that the measure of the flow of grace into his life determines the degree of strength and wisdom with which he now meets and deals with experience. “The lamp of knowledge is the perception of truth. The lamp is the passionless heart; its oil is Divine grace; the air that keeps it burning is the breeze of love that blows between man and God; and the boisterous wind from which it is protected is the desire for things perceived by sense or mind.” (Commentary on verse 11, Chapter X, *The Bhagavad Gita*, translation by M. Chatterji.) Or, as it is expressed by the 17th century mystic, Brother Lawrence: “Our sanctification consists not in changing our works but in doing that for God’s sake which formerly we did for our own.”

As to what brings about the dynamic moment of fulfilment, that moment when the law becomes self-transformed into an act of grace, who can say? Perhaps it is a decision of the Self. If so, we cannot know, at our level of comprehension, why that decision is taken. Perhaps there is no “why” in our understanding of the term. As Ruskin says of art, “It happens.” But I think we may be sure that no law is being violated; rather that it is being fulfilled. “Bliss cannot be bought through any sacrifice, through any virtue, through any drug,” says Krishnamurti. “It is not a reward, a result. It comes when it will; do not seek it.”