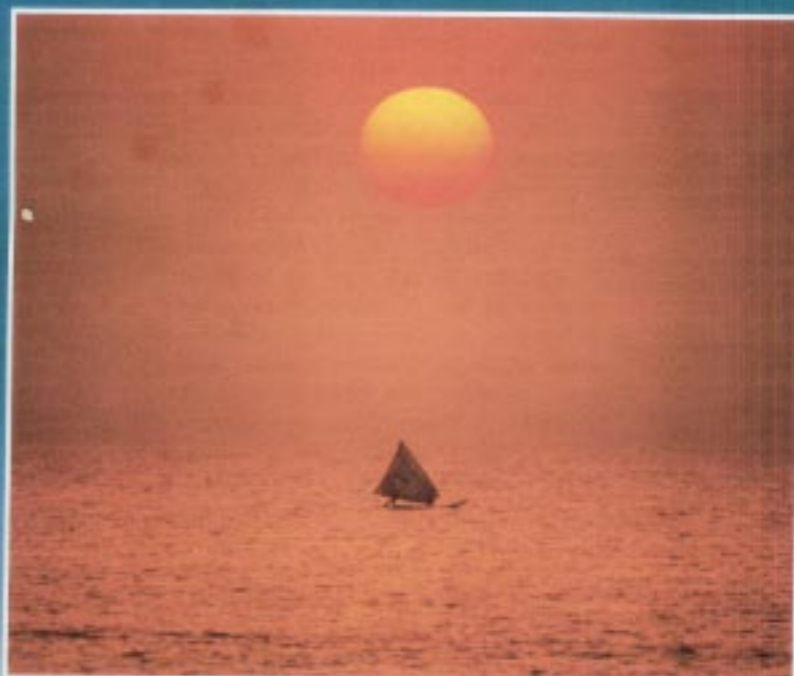


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Karma, Reincarnation, and Freedom

ROBERT S. CORRINGTON

SEVERAL years ago I had a conversation about the concepts of reincarnation and karma with a Swami of the Ramakrishna Order. At one point, feeling a little exasperated, I asked him about the seven million deaths in the Nazi Holocaust, and he answered my query with two simple words: "Who cares." This answer stunned, perplexed, and yet intrigued me, especially since the Swami is a gentle soul without a hint of anti-Semitic beliefs. I have never let those two words out of my mind as I continue to ponder the power of karma in social and personal history. I am persuaded that karma is quite real and that reincarnation is the fundamental truth of the journey of our Monad's external manifestations through time, but I remain deeply concerned about the issue of historical tragedy and responsibility; namely, with the problems of freedom and responsibility for others in the context of karma.

In her masterpiece, *The Ancient Wisdom*, Annie Besant correctly argues that the reality of karma only makes sense within the context of reincarnation and vice versa. Both concepts entail each other in a tightly bound dialectic that

seems to have no room for anything like our contemporary notions of freedom. In his wonderfully concise *The Ocean of Theosophy*, William Q. Judge makes this point in his own way:

It [karma] is the twin doctrine to reincarnation. So inextricably interlaced are these two laws that it is almost impossible to properly consider one apart from the other. No spot or being in the universe is exempt from the operation of Karma, but all are under its sway, punished for error by it yet beneficently led on through discipline, rest and reward, to the distant heights of perfection.¹

Thus from the length to the breadth of the world, karma and reincarnation work in consort to ensure that the divine laws are maintained, even though neither karma nor reincarnation require a divine law giver who rewards and punishes. Karma is *what* is transmitted and reincarnation is *how* karma is transmitted in the time process.

In classical terms, our karma, the ongoing deposit of all of our previous incarnations, shapes everything that we do, think, contrive, or envision in this

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current incarnation. The freedom that we sense we have may be little more than the freedom to accept or deny the inevitable unfolding of our personal karma during our biblical three score and ten years of earthly life. Consequently, the Nazi prison guard and the Jewish inmate are merely acting out a drama that was prepared perhaps millions of years ago. For us to say 'yea' or 'nay' to this event is to violate the deeper logic of karma — or is it?

Our moral sensibility tells us that this conclusion is profoundly wrong, yet our equally strong awareness of the truth of karma compels us to accept that in some sense we are behind our own triumphs and tragic *dénouements*. Does this logic apply to whole peoples? Were the native Americans decimated by the English and European invaders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of a debt owed to their conquerors from so long ago? And if so, how do we know when the debt, so called, has been paid? Were the people of India partly enslaved by the British Raj because of some past transgressions, or were the British tied to India because of something deeply missing in their world view and psychic reality? The questions are endless.

However, some progress can be made in our attempts to understand how karma and reincarnation work in history and in the lives of discrete individuals. Besant comes to our aid with one piece of sage advice: "The knowledge of karma, that threatened to paralyse, becomes an inspiring, a supporting, an uplifting force."² Rather than reminding us of our

utter littleness in the face of the inertial power of millions of previous incarnations and choices (if they were such), the doctrine of karma reminds us of our powers of transformation in the light of this knowledge — for no change is possible without a prior grasp of just what forces brought us to the point where change is now demanded.

To become aware of the power of karma is to become aware that there is meaning in the world, a meaning that penetrates right down into the heart of reality. If karma exists, then everything living has some meaning in its own given life span, and that meaning can be seen by those who have been liberated by the ancient wisdom alluded to by Annie Besant. If I were to name this insight I would call it the philosophy of 'pansignificance'; namely the view that sees *everything* (the prefix 'pan') as having some significance in the vast scheme of things, even if that meaning, that significance, is exceedingly hard to find. Clearly it is one thing to believe in the doctrine of pansignificance, it is another entirely to find meaning in each and every case of living and dying. But an ability to do the latter does not follow logically from the belief in the former. All it asserts is that, given ideal conditions of wisdom, meaning can be found in every actual and possible event in the world (or worlds) we inhabit. Even the masters of wisdom cannot see the meaning of absolutely everything, but their view extends beyond ours, and it follows that beings yet more advanced

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have greater vistas within which to approach the truth of passignificance.

Just how do we explain the suffering of the concentration camp victim vis-à-vis the seeming freedom and relative happiness of the prison guard? We already have one clue; namely, that the greater an individual is steeped in the ancient wisdom, the more she or he understands the karma that, in this case, links the victim to the guard. Yet we do not know anything about the past lives of these two individuals, so the first clue does not help us very much in the 'real' world we inhabit, a world in which we must make moral choices, and in which we would clearly side with the camp inmate.

Nature has put a 'veil of ignorance' between our present personality and its past lives. This veil, however, is not an arbitrary by-product of our spiritual evolution, but a necessary protection against too much data streaming into the fragile personality of the present incarnation. Further, if one is too much aware of past lives, then the present demands of karmic growth might be ignored in favour of a nostalgic re-enactment of the alleged glories of the past. Simply put, I cannot live in my past lives precisely because their upshot has propelled me into this life, and this is the only life in which I can grow and move more fully towards the liberation of the monadic self from its external manifestations. I must be oblivious of my past incarnations until the very end when I am about to leap into full awareness of the higher Self within. This insight is contained in the classical story

of the Buddha, who was not aware of his past lives until he was on the very cusp of enlightenment — at which point these experiences came streaming into his mind in a great parade of figures, both animal and human.

Thus we can say that we live by necessity behind a veil of ignorance that keeps us from being mesmerized by our past lives. Yet this fact does not entail the rejection of passignificance. On the contrary, it shows us how we begin our pilgrimage towards those moments of awareness in which we do see something of the karmic fields within which people move and carry out their lives. We know that our own lives have a meaning that will slowly unveil itself, not only in this life but also in the other worlds we occupy after the death of the physical body.

What then is a karmic field? The analogy here is to the corona of the sun that appears during a full solar eclipse. Only when the moon blocks out the overwhelming glory of the sun can the more tenuous and subtle energies of the corona appear to the naked eye. The gently flaming halo surrounding the sun is one of the most striking manifestations in the natural world and it almost seems as if it has been put there to give us a lesson on the nature of spiritual seeing. For it is when the blinding and oft-times misleading light of the everyday physical world is overcome by something powerful that the fuller reality behind and within the world becomes manifest — and this powerful thing is the insight that comes out of the ancient wisdom. The sun per se is the

personal self and all of its manifestations, while the corona, seen only under the most of conditions, is the karmic field that surrounds the sun and shows what the sun's scope and context is.

Thus we can see the karmic field around living things under those conditions that are favourable to such vision, that is, when what Śri Kṛṣṇa called the 'spiritual eye' is opened. We can gain access to the karmic tendencies and traces that surround us and other creatures in this world. The veil of ignorance that separates us from both our past lives and also from our karma is partially rent asunder. But what is gained in this process? Is there a correlation between spiritual vision and freedom? Is our ability to see the corona of karma, of the vast trajectory of past lives, equivalent to attaining some freedom over the very inertial power of the corona?

There is some connection between learning to see how karma surrounds the self and the freedom to work from within the karmic field towards its ultimate transfiguration into a body of wisdom. Knowledge of causes often gives the knower power to ameliorate the effects, or even to cancel the undesirable effects by changing their causes. This fact also applies to the case of the karmic field in which a vast ocean of causes and effects move forward into this present incarnation. Let us work out this logic for the individual and then see what we can say about other selves and even entire peoples.

As I struggle in my spiritual opacity to

see my karmic field, and through a glass darkly something of the overall trajectory of my past lives, I slowly learn to see more subtle forms of cause and effect. But this is never an easy process. For example, it often takes the alcoholic years of denial before finally seeing that she or he is an alcoholic. By the same token, it may take many decades before an individual even becomes aware that karma exists and that so much that has been perplexing in this life has its roots in the karmic field. First we must recognize that our finite personality is at the centre of a vast corona, a miniature sun surrounded by its karmic halo that determines where and what it is. Yet here the analogy must reverse itself. While in the physical order the corona is caused by the nuclear activities within the heart of the sun, in the spiritual order the corona is the cause of the small sun at its heart that we call the personality.

The corona (karmic field) is the cause of the sun (personality) and the personality must learn to stop looking at its own borrowed luminosity to see the priority of the karmic field within which it lives and from which it derives its existence. No longer blinded by itself, the personality comes to see how the karmic field not only lies outside of it, but also penetrates into its deepest recesses. The personality sees that it is karma's child, and that it is not self-caused, as it had assumed in its proud delusion. Put differently, it is as if karma had turned back from its externalization to begin to see itself as it is and has been. But is this the same as seeing what it will be?

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With this analogy in hand we can now approach the problem of freedom with some philosophical care. The precise formulation of the question is: how does the opening of the spiritual eye of the personality, an opening that brings the karmic field into focus for the first time in this life, make it possible for the personality to become free from the field that created it in the first place? Is there a less deterministic future for the newly aware personality?

In *The Secret Doctrine* HPB spends a great deal of energy and time explaining the inner logic of karma. She, too, faced the moral implications of the belief in karma and contrasted it to the more common belief, in the West, in Providence. Often allied to the belief in Providence is a belief in strict determinism, a belief that assigns reward and punishment to a divine agent. For HPB the belief in Providence manifested not only a profound ignorance of the laws of Nature, but also a deeper ignorance of the prospects for freedom from the powers that so often drag individuals and peoples down to their demise in history. Her comments towards the end of the first volume are of the highest importance:

For the only decree of Karma—an eternal and immutable decree—is absolute Harmony in the world of matter: as it is in the world of Spirit. It is not, therefore, Karma that rewards or punishes, but it is we, who reward or punish ourselves according to whether we work with, through and along with Nature,

abiding by the laws on which that Harmony depends, or—break them.

Nor would the ways of Karma be invulnerable save men to work in union and harmony, instead of disunion and strife. For our ignorance of those ways . . . would surely disappear, if we would but attribute all these to their correct cause.³

This emphasis on harmony gives us a second clue as to the nature of karma and to its transfiguration under the conditions of our seemingly finite existence in this incarnation. Our first clue is that the growth in wisdom enables us to see more deeply into the cosmos of karma that surrounds us and that also flickers around others. The second clue is that the violation of the harmony of cosmic law is equivalent to the misuse of karma. What happens is that the finite personality of the individual is guilty of an arrogant usurpation of the harmonic laws of reality, of which karmic law is one key dimension. A willful-control subjectivity, the finite and desire-cidden personality, rages against the depth-logic of the universe and wills to impose its own laws onto itself and others. The delusion is that this self-law is some kind of higher harmony when in fact it is precisely the disharmony that refuses to let the world be the lawful world that it is.

Let us be more concrete as to how disharmony works. The prison guard assumes that he or she is the measure of the real, and represents the power of fate over another individual. The inmate is seen as a mere means towards the end

of, in this case, an allegedly racially pure Europe. As a mere means the prisoner is compelled to fulfil a demonic and willful mythology that the prison guard assumes is tied to the very fate of the victim—i.e., the Jews were fated by history to be exterminated by the Third Reich. The execution of the prisoner is the 'deserved' fate of the people from whom the given individual derives. So goes this pseudo-logic. The delusion is deepened because the prison guard assumes that he or she is part of a vast and harmonic apparatus that brings about the desired result, genocide, by rational and legal means. If the prison guard were to use our language it would be: it is the karma of the Jews to die and the karma of the Germans to thrive in the new order of things.

We are now ready to draw two conclusions from these analyses. The first is that the Jews did not deserve the Holocaust as part of some alleged karmic pact with the Germans. Their historical tragedy was caused by a violation of the deeper harmonic laws of karma in which effects must be proportionate to causes. Secondly, until we attain absolute knowledge in this life, as per impossibility, we must remain behind the veil of ignorance even though we can learn to see more and more through parts of it. But we will never be able to see enough to 'know' some kind of historical and karmic truth linking victim to perpetrator. This fact should keep us from inventing a 'reason' for the victimization.

But the time factor is also important.

For Theosophy, the time spent in this life is only a fraction of the time occupied by the seven dimensions of the Self as it moves from its opacity in matter to its luminosity in the realm of *ātman*. In his brief but encompassing work *A Textbook of Theosophy*, C. W. Leadbeater reminds us of the different time ratios involved:

This is the scheme of evolution appointed for man at the present stage—that he shall develop by descending into grosser matter, and then ascend to carry back into himself the result of the experiences so obtained. His real life, therefore, covers millions of years, and what we are in the habit of calling a life is only one day of this greater existence.⁴

Our third clue as to the nature of karma and its correlation with reincarnation is that whatever happens in this life, no matter how horrible, is only a brief moment within the complex drama of involution and evolution by which the Monad unfolds into matter and regathers itself through the domains of spirit. Of course, it is easy for those of us who have a comparatively painless existence to make such claims, but were we in the same situation the logic would be the same even if it would be that much harder to see at the time.

— Where then does freedom come in? The theosophical literature always acknowledges that even within the unrelenting sweep of karma there is room for differing responses to what karma has dictated to the present personality. But on a deeper level, there is a freedom within

karma that comes from working towards the transfiguration of the personality so that it no longer rages against the harmony of the world. Freedom and grace are often held to go together in the Christian theological world, and this correlation should be seen to operate within the theosophical world as well. When the personality sees that it is a child of karma, and not the origin of its own fate, it also has a chance to see that it can let go of its imperial intentions and desires and become translucent to karma, thereby ameliorating its effects.

In the social order the results are clear. Whenever we see a self in distress we are called upon to help that personality become a translucent clearing unto its own karma so that the powerful upshot of its past incarnations loses its force. But there are contexts (or so I would argue) where intervention to alleviate suffering is imperative. It is even more compelling to stop the Nazi prison guard from violating the harmony of the universe than to simply assume that there is an ethical logic at play in the tragic conflict between the Jews and Nazis. On the contrary, the conflict is the result of a

profound misuse of karmic principles and shows a wilful ignorance of the absolute right of each individual, of each group, to find their own way towards liberation (*svoksha*) without hindrance from another group or individual.

The ultimate law of karma is that of freedom, a freedom that we must grant to ourselves and to others, even if that sometimes requires dramatic intervention to stop evil and cruelty from eroding the harmony of karma. I believe I have an answer to the two words with which I began: "Who cares?" We all should care at the very core of our being if any individuals, any peoples, are visited with a suffering in which the effects are far greater than the causes. We should care deeply when the fabric of karma, the gift of harmony to all living things, is violated by demonic personalities in the grip of self-worship. And we should care for any self or group that is kept from fulfilling its own karmic mission in the world. The Nazi Holocaust did not happen because of karma and past reincarnational debts, but against karma, and it is this insight that the Ancient Wisdom leaves us. *

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