THE THEOSOPHIST

VOL. 124 NO. 11 AUGUST 2003

CONTENTS

On the Watch-Tower 403
Rudolf Burnier

Rediscovering Our Lost Chord 407
Linda Oliviera

Karma, Reincarnation and Freedom 414
Robert S. Carrington

Fragments of the Ageless Wisdom 421

Discovering the Hidden Perfection 422
Ricardo Lindemann

The Secret Doctrine 429
D. P. Sahia

Catholicity in Islam 431
M. H. Abdil

Convention Rates 436

Theosophical Work around the World 437

International Directory 438

Editor: Mrs Rudolf Burnier

NOTE: Articles for publication in The Theosophist should be sent to the Editorial Office.

Cover picture: Sunrise on the Bay of Bengal — by Kamalkey

Official organ of the President, founded by H. P. Blavatsky, 1879. The Theosophical Society is responsible only for official notices appearing in this magazine.
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 myth 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 his 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 crime by it yet benevolently led on through discipline, rest and reward, to the distant heights of perfection.

Thus from the length to the breadth of the world, karma and reincarnation work in concert 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, create, or envision in this
Karma, Reincarnation, and Freedom

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 'yes' or 'no' 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 dispositions. 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 own 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. Bonast 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." Rather than reminding us of our utter futility in the face of the ineluctable power of millions of previous incarna-
tions 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 'pamignificance', namely the view that sees everything (the prefix 'pa') 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 pamignificance, 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...
have greater vistas within which to approach the truth of parami/Samadhi.
Just how do we explain the suffering of the monotonous camp victim vis-à-vis the
sensing 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 inmates.

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 that 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 monastic self from its external manifestations. I must be oblivious
of my past incarnations until the very end when I am about to step 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
peak 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 overwhelmed by our past lives. Yet this fact does not entail the
rejection of preexistence. 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 tenacious and noble 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 covers out of the
ancient wisdom. The run per se is the
personal self and all of its manifestations, while the corona, seen only under the
right conditions, is the karmic field that surrounds the sun and shows what the
sun’s scope and content is.
Then we can see the karmic field around living things under those condi-
tions that are favorable to such vision; that is, when what Sri Krishna called the
‘sacred 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 our past lives and also from our kamma 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 kamma, of the
vestigial traces of past lives, equivalent to attaining some freedom over the
very mental power of the corona?
There is some connection between learning to see how kamma 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 negate 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 kamma 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 person-
ality 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 person-
ality must learn to stop looking at its own
borrowed luminosity to see the intensity
of the karmic field within which it lives
and from which it derives its existence.
No longer blinded by itself, the personal-
ity 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 kamma’s child,
and that it is not self-caused, as it had
assumed in its proud delusion. Put
differently, it is as if kamma had turned
back from its externalization to begin to
see itself as it is and has been. But is this
the same as saying what it will be?
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 controls 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. But, too, faced the moral implications of the belief in karma and continued 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 translates 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 degree of Karma — an eternal and immutable theme - is absolute slavery 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, through and along with Nature, striking by the laws on which the Harmonic nexus, or — break them.

Nor would the ways of Karma be incapable some men to work in areas and harmonies, instead of disasters and trials. For our ignorance of these ways...would merely disfigure, we would but attribute all these to their correct causes."

This emphasis on harmony given as a second clue as to the nature of karma and its translation 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 corrupt of karma that surrounds us and that also orders 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 apparent negation of the harmonic laws of reality, of which karma law is one key dimension. A world-conceived subjectivity, the finite and desire-styled personality, vagary against the depth-logic of the universe and wills to impose its own laws unto itself and others. The disjunction is that this self-law in some kind of higher harmony when in fact it is precisely the disharmony that refutes to let the world be the lawful world that it is.

Let us be more concrete as to how disharmony works. The person just assumed that he or she is the measure of the world, and negates the power of force over another individual. This innate is seen in a more system towards the end..."
of, in this case, an allegedly racially
pure Europe. As a mere means the
prisoner is compelled to fulfill a demonic
and willful mythology that the prison
wardens instilled in 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
prisoners 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
wardens assume that he or she is part of a
vast and harmonious apparatus that brings
about the desired result, genocide, by
rational and legal means. If the prison
wardens 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 derive the
Holocaust as part of some alleged karmic
pact with the Germans. Their historical
tragedy was caused by a violation of the
deep harmonic laws of karma in which
effects must be proportionate to causes.
Secondly, until we attain absolute knowl-
edge 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
shines from its opacity in matter to its
luminosity in the realm of Atman. 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 greater
matter, and then ascend to carry back into
himself the result of his experience so
obtained. His real life, therefore, covers
millions of years, and what we see in the
habit of calling a life is only one day of
this greater existence.

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 terrifi-
ing 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 peace 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 ambitions and desires and become transfigured 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 transcendent clearing away its own karma so that the powerful specter of its past incarnations be banished. But there are contacts (as so ) which stem from 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 role in 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 willful ignorance of the absolute right of each individual, of each group, to find their own way towards liberation (mutual) 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 it sometimes requires dramatic intervention to stop evil and oratory from eroding the harmony of karma. I believe I have an answer to the two words with which I began: "What can we do?" We should care at the very core of our being if any individuals, any peoples, are involved with a suffering in which the efforts are far greater than the cause. 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 cosmic mission in the world. The Nazi Holocaust did not happen because of karma and past non-karmic debts, but against karma, and it is this insight that the Ancient Wisdom teaches us.

References