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The Law of Karma and Mindfulness

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The Law of Karma and Mindfulness

Man lives in a world which seems to him to be something quite separate from himself. He often feels as if he were cast into a hostile environment that resists his endeavours to shape it according to his wishes.

At a primitive stage of development, man suspects a conscious individual is behind every phenomenon of the material world and he tries to come to terms with these powerful forces that he usually calls deities or gods. He does not want to be at their mercy and wants to influence them for his own immediate personal benefit.

At a later stage of development, he ascribes the power and capacity to rule over the happenings in the world—and, consequently, over the events of his own life, too—to one supreme being, an almighty God, a creator and, similarly as in the previous stage of development, tries to come to terms with this suspected universal, though personal, force.

The ways in which he tries to influence the suspected creator and ruler of the world to his own

benefit are manifold—from a naive persuasion in prayers, through bargaining with deities by offering them sacrifices in exchange for his material welfare, to subtle methods of approach as seen in the meditation of a mystic.

In the latest stage of development of human thought, when science came into being, man arrived at the formulation of impersonal forces of nature that regulate all happenings and events in the world and he calls them the laws of nature.

However, the scientist seems to be able to understand and grasp only the laws of material events and some psychological phenomena; he seems to be unable to extend his observation to the operation of laws in the sphere of moral action. In this respect, he either retains the belief in a wise almighty creator who supervises this sphere and takes care of righteous retribution of man's deeds, or he denies any lawful consequences of man's moral actions altogether.

Both of these attitudes show clearly the deficiencies in modern man's outlook and are directly responsible for the poor state of affairs in the world of today.

He who believes in an almighty creator is by his very belief prevented from trying to extend his knowledge of the laws of nature gained by observation and experiment, and formulated through

the process of abstract thinking to the sphere of moral action.

If it is believed that nothing happens without God's will, no investigation into the unknown ways of operation of natural laws in the moral sphere is encouraged. And when the belief in God weakens or even disappears, as it is often the case today, then man stands here with empty hands against a hostile world out of which he then tries to gain as much for his own personal benefit as he possibly can, without sufficiently considering the possible evil consequences for others as he does not assume that he could be himself caught by them one day.

Really, if man believes only in what he perceives through his five senses and denies *a priori* everything else, he is blind to the operation of laws in the moral sphere, even if he is a gifted scientist and knows and can make the best use of the laws of visible nature. His outer behaviour is then seldom adequate to the high moral standards conducive to real happiness of man so that his science often serves most immoral aims of power-seeking individuals or social groups.

Such a man usually short-sightedly prefers his immediate advantage and the satisfaction of his present desires to the wise consideration of the welfare of all fellow beings. It is a sad fact that the

politics of nearly all countries of the world, both in the East and in the West, are based on this short-sighted philosophy.

The wars between nations and social groups are the outcome of the false view that coercion can bring advantage to the oppressors, and that the consequences of their misdeeds cannot reach them or can be avoided. The menace of a destructive atomic war hanging over the world became somewhat less frightening to nations, because those who possessed the power to start such a war could no more feel safe from the immediate consequences of it. However, this is not a reliable security from the possibility of such a terrible world war breaking out. Hence a deeper insight into world events is indispensable.

Long before Western science came into being to formulate its conception of impersonal laws of nature, the wise seers of Vedic times in India gained a deep insight into the course of events in the cosmos. They expressed this insight by the term *rita* denoting the lawful course of things in all spheres of the universe. According to this conception, the universe is governed by an impersonal law that manifests itself outwardly as natural order in the physical world and inwardly as the urge towards righteousness in the hearts of men

and gods.

When the path of *rita* is followed, harmony prevails in the world. The same path of harmony or law is followed by the sun and stars on their daily routes in the firmament as by the righteous man in his daily conduct. Both the outer order in the cosmos and the inner harmony in man, which becomes manifest as his virtue, are the outcome of the same impersonal law called *rita*.

The concept of *rita* as an impersonal force governing the course of things in the outer universe as well as in the sphere of morality was not preserved in its purity and became coupled first with a guarding deity (Varuna) and later on with other gods or a supreme God. However, its deeper philosophical significance was never lost to Indian thinkers and it became the foundation of a more elaborate doctrine of karma. Karma is, in fact, the application and elaboration of the concept of *rita* in its moral aspect and from the point of view of individual beings.

Owing to this background, it is quite natural for most people in India and other Oriental countries to consider their moral actions as forces producing effects that cannot get lost and must influence, sooner or later, the course of life of the doer. On the other hand, modern Europeans who elaborated the concept

of laws of nature in their science find it often difficult to extend this concept to the sphere of morality.

In Europe, the moral sphere was for many centuries the sole domain of an almighty creator who was supposed to punish and reward men's deeds or bestow mercy upon men according to his divine will which could not be understood by men. With the loss of faith, the modern European lost the notion of moral retribution and often even of personal responsibility for all his deeds, especially for those that are not classified as crimes or transgressions by his various codes and statute books. With respect to the moral sphere he thus became a naive materialist.

Western philosophers still try in vain to find, by way of speculation, the obligatory principle underlying their postulated tables of moral values that usually form some part of their philosophical systems. It is often very difficult for an educated European to grasp the full meaning of the fact that so-called moral retribution is inherent in the course of things, similar to the natural sequence of physical phenomena in the outer cosmos that he so wonderfully expresses in scientific formulae called the laws of nature.

The best formulation of the moral aspect of the natural course of things manifest in the life of individual beings was given by the Buddha in his

doctrine of karma (*kamma*). In Buddhist tradition, karma (*kamma*), which means “action,” is nothing external. The term denotes the mental process of volition, of intention in the course of which a being ceases merely to observe the external happenings, but mentally takes part in them, identifies himself or herself with this or that standpoint and opposes another one, thus becoming mentally entangled in outer becoming. This mental taking part or becoming entangled in outer happenings is, of course, immediately followed by some act that may be performed by body, speech or merely by thought.

The nature of this entanglement lies in ignorance. One is ignorant of one’s own insubstantiality and deems oneself to be an independent centre of mental and outer activity. This ignorance of one’s own insubstantiality enables one to assume the importance of one’s own personality and the necessity of cultivating it. In cultivating one’s own personality one considers, for the purpose of this cultivation, one thing as desirable and another thing as undesirable.

The result of this false view is that one then pursues the desirable things and avoids the undesirable ones. This pursuit and avoidance takes on various forms, from subtle feelings of liking and disliking to gross emotions of craving and hate.

The trouble is, that all this proceeds very quickly in one's mind so that one is usually aware only of the end result of this compound process, namely, of a performed deed, a pronounced word, a formulated thought or some other particular state of mind. Only a very careful and repeated analysis of these processes in retrospection and during the time when these processes are in motion enables one to get some glimpse of these subtle details.

Moreover, these processes proceed more or less automatically without any creative participation of the individual concerned. One only seems to choose freely the objects of one's likes and dislikes, but, in fact, there is only blind pursuit of seeming pleasures with unforeseen consequences. As the welfare of every being depends on the quality of these processes, it is very important for everybody to get some insight into this matter.

Consequences of Mental Volitions

Every mental act of volition is, first of all, a conditioned act of the mind. It springs from the reaction to some outer impulse. One identifies oneself with that reaction and thus makes it one's own volition. This then produces manifold results. Let us consider some of them.

The first result of a mental volition is a performed act of body, speech or mind. This act is, at least at the moment, considered or felt by the doer as performed of his own free will or to his own benefit or in his own interest. However, further results of his act are quite independent of the doer's opinion and seldom correspond to his wishes. By his act he influences his environment and the attitude of other beings towards himself, and, as these beings usually pursue their own different aims, collisions are inevitable.

By performing an act of body, speech or mind as the outcome of one's volition, one also creates a possibility to act in a similar way in future. One, so to speak, lays foundations for creating a way of behaving, a habit or a tendency. In other words, one adds some new or strengthens some old feature of one's personality, perpetuating thereby one's state of conditioned existence and determining the quality of one's future character.

Further, by acts of mind and by mental concomitants of the acts of body and speech, one deeply influences one's outer appearance. Even during the moments of performing those acts, transitory changes are clearly observable. Kind thoughts and states of mind out of which we perform kind acts or speak kind words make the features of our countenance look bright and pleasant or even

beautiful. Thoughts, words and acts of anger or hate create in our face features of ugliness.

During our lifetime in our present form, the lasting results of these changes are not so obvious and our bodily appearance cannot adequately reflect all changes of our character. However, when a new form is being created in a new existence, its outer appearance corresponds to the character of the being at that moment. Of this we have direct evidence in the words of the Awakened One.

Furthermore, as well as the immediate result of influencing one's environment and the attitude of fellow-beings, there is also a far more important result of one's acts in the more remote future. In a way, it is the continuation of the immediate result of influencing one's environment. Every act, in fact, changes the whole universe, the cosmic process, even if it is an infinitely small change. But the totality of actions of an individual during his whole lifetime represents a sowing of influential powers which has its time of ripening and bearing fruits.

Thus, an adequate environment comes into appearance that precisely corresponds to the inner tendencies and outer actions of the individual concerned, though, in his ignorance, he is not able to realise that the surroundings he lives in are in reality

only projections of his own mind and that various events and occurrences he meets with are only fruits of his own past deeds.

The manifold and complicated relations of one being to another, and the many similar desires and tendencies that they share, cause various beings to appear, so to speak, in one and the same world. Thus whole worlds (and the whole universe, too) are created by the inner and blind tendencies of the beings therein as they pursue their particular aims, trying to satisfy the urge of their individual desires and tendencies. Though outwardly it looks like we are living in one and the same world, mentally every being is caught in the net of his own ideas about the world, and lives, in fact, in his own self-created world.

However, being ignorant of the laws of this process of creating the world, no more remembering one's past desires, wishes, angers, deeds, etc., which are the real seeds from which the present world has grown, one comes to the false opinion that one is a separate subject, living in an objective world that is quite independent from all other conscious beings.

Some wise seers of the Vedic and Upanishadic times knew this well and their insight survived in Hindu systems of philosophy of later times in the variously formulated and much misunderstood theory of *maya*.

But our aim here is not to spend more time on speculations regarding these philosophical theories. The Awakened One has shown us clearly the futility of all speculations and has stressed the importance of taking practical steps on the path to liberation. So, having gained an initial insight into the operation of karmic laws, how can we profit thereby in our daily struggle to prepare ourselves for the great moment of liberation?

The answer is quite simple. We have to be mindful, to be aware of every state and of every action of our mind. We can thereby catch the important moment in which a karmic result from the past (*vipāka*) presents itself to our mind and the mind's reaction to it comes into being, i.e. a volitional action is being undertaken whereby the karmic process is set into motion anew, is being perpetuated.

Inner Tendency

Our conscious life is based on perception. But not everything that is perceived becomes also fully conscious. Many physiological processes in our body are the products of reactions of our nervous system on various sense perceptions of which we take no notice, of which we are not aware. These reactions, though unconscious—or perhaps, just because they are

unconscious—are no doubt a constituent of our conditioned state of being; they add to our entanglement and bind us, in a way, to our present unfree state of existence. It would be useless for us, however, to try to bring these unconscious reactions under our conscious control, as some systems of Hindu yoga try to do, when we do not even control our higher mental reactions, leaving them to function automatically.

Other perceptions become more or less conscious. We take brief notice of them, examining them superficially as to their usefulness for our pattern of life, and soon forget them again.

But then there are those perceptions that awaken our interest, becoming fully conscious, because they correspond to some inner tendency of our character—either positively or negatively—and we then take appropriate steps to prolong or repeat, or to avoid such sort of perceptions, as the case may be.

Though this process goes on consciously, it is nevertheless an automatic and blind sequence of mental phenomena without any real meaning and it is quite similar to the sequence of unconscious physiological phenomena in a living organism. The purpose of both these sorts of processes is merely to perpetuate themselves and renew themselves on and

on, endlessly.

Consciousness here plays no deeply metaphysical part; it is only an outcome of the process of selection. Out of innumerable objects of perception that present themselves to our sense organs, only those that correspond, positively or negatively, to some part of our inner tendency awaken, through agreeable or disagreeable feeling, our interest and become conscious. The perceptions thus selected and presented to the consciousness become then the object of our desire and attachment, or of our hate and repulsion.

Now all perceptions—and there is no world, no environment for us outside perception—are the outcome of our past action, i.e. of our deeds, of our speech and of our active mental states. In short, all perceptions—conscious as well as unconscious—are *kamma*-results.

Those perceptions that do not influence us, which find no response in us, pass away without any further consequences. But those perceptions that find response in us, which awaken our interest, become an opportunity for new action whereby the *kamma*-producing process renews itself.

Whenever an object presents itself through perception to our mind, we can, if we try, watch our

immediate reaction. We either like or dislike the object; it either pleases us or makes us sad; it awakens our desire to possess it, or our envy, if it belongs to someone else, etc. Usually that reaction is followed by practical steps. We modify our living in order to acquire such a desired object; we plan some steps to change a disagreeable situation; we say a few harsh words to silence someone who speaks against our aims; or we at least, judge in thought, take someone's side, even when only listening to disputes or watching some events, even when we are not concerned personally.

All this is action; all this is *kamma*. All this produces results in the future that will come to us in disguise of various agreeable and disagreeable perceptions, constituting pleasant or unpleasant conditions and favourable or unfavourable events in our future lives.

Suspension of Kammic Process

Once we realise the futility of this endless and purposeless kaleidoscopic sequence of phenomena called *saṃsāra*, we may, with the help of thorough attentiveness, suspend it in this or that moment, in this or that situation and thus free ourselves, for that moment or situation, from the necessity of being a part of it, from blindly identifying ourselves with this

automatic process of conditioning.

We can then proceed by assuming an impersonal attitude of observing everything that happens to us, or that we happen to do. We try not to lose ourselves in the course of events, and we try not to live as if we were a fixed and separate centre of activity, and as if the world were the scene of it, containing the objects we can use to produce a feeling of satisfaction in us. In other words, we stop seeking anything; we give up the notion of acquiring anything, even the highest state of lasting happiness for ourselves, and only maintain the observing attitude of watchful mindfulness without awaiting any result.

There is no doubt that we shall not succeed in not identifying ourselves with our outer-acting personality right from the beginning, and that very often we shall lose ourselves in eager and spontaneous actions, words, feelings and thoughts as we used to do previously. However, later on, when we recall our intention to observe, we shall be able to do so at least retrospectively.

It is a thing of highest importance to bear in mind, when retrospectively examining events in which we played some part, that we ought not judge those events or our part in them. We should not approve of nor condemn them. That would be a new act of mental

volition and hence a new *kamma*-producing activity. We should only call them to our mind and just watch them as disinterestedly as a marionette play.

When proceeding in this way, we shall soon discover that now and then we have a moment of not merely retrospective observation, but of immediate watching of what is just going on. If we then analyse those moments and our actions performed during them, we shall see that these actions of ours were profoundly influenced by the mere fact of our being aware of them, of our mindful observing them.

We shall find out that when doing anything with full awareness, when fully knowing that we are doing something and what it is we are doing, we never do anything that we should repent afterwards. Our action will outwardly look selfless and inwardly will leave in us a sense of unsought for joy and happiness.

Furthermore, if the attitude of watchful mindfulness comes to us in a moment when we start doing something that would strengthen our self-centredness or when we were just about to do something out of desire for advantage or out of hate, envy or other deluded state of mind, the action will remain unfinished or the intention unaccomplished. The deluded state of mind will fall from us and we shall be able to watch its slow fading away.

In this way our observing attitude will gradually deepen and widen. From observing our own and our fellow-men's behaviour we shall uncoercively proceed to observe the motives behind that behaviour. As this observing is not combined with judging, the seeing of other people's motives behind their self-centred actions will not be followed by our condemnation, but in seeing the undesirable consequences they bring to themselves thereby, a feeling of compassion will be born in us.

And seeing the true motivations behind our own deluded actions and intentions, we shall not accomplish them, for we shall see that these actions and intentions are the outcome of the motives behind them that spring from pleasant and unpleasant reactions. The motives in themselves, however, are powerless. The capacity to accomplish the action comes from our identification with the motive. That identification ceases when we are aware of the motive and make it the object of observation.

In such a moment of living watchful awareness of what just is in us, we gain a real insight into the operation of the law of *kamma*. We clearly see that without mindfulness we are living in the realm of merciless reactivity; and with mindfulness we are standing on the threshold of freedom. For mindfulness frees us from the blind sequence of mental phenomena

that follow each other according to the impersonal laws of what we call *kamma*, i.e. from the sequence of *kamma*-resultant perceptions followed by blind reactions out of which come, or part of which are mental volitions, which again are kammic forces producing further kammic results and so on, endlessly.

Mindfulness disperses, step by step, the blind ignorance with which beings identify themselves with this process of becoming and gradually leads them to higher knowledge. In this way also the germs of two cardinal Buddhist virtues, of wisdom and compassion, will start to develop in us.

The observing attitude of constant everyday mindfulness which we thus assume, does not necessarily stop all our outer activity, does not force us to retire from the world to a monastery or another sort of outer seclusion. We can go on living with our family and be active in some suitable occupation. A superficial observer will hardly notice any change in us. True mindfulness does not cause one to look extraordinary or to be conspicuous in a particular way.

However, a more careful observer might notice a certain pertinence in the deeds and words of such a person, and a feature of unselfishness in his motives.

If we are in some situation in which we play an active part, we usually act so as to gain some benefit for us, to obtain a result that we believe is beneficial for us. Sometimes we take into consideration the benefit of others, too, but at other times, out of selfishness or neglect, we do not. The fact that we are not in possession of true knowledge or wisdom usually causes us to take as beneficial that which, in fact, is harmful to us, producing unexpected results and thus prolonging our entanglement and conditioned state of being.

If we, however, succeed in maintaining the attitude of watchful mindfulness in a particular situation, the intention to act out of self-centred motives falls from us and no foundation for future kammic results is laid.

Nevertheless, life is no static state; it is a dynamic process that does not stop. It mostly proceeds in inadequate directions, obstructed by selfish actions of individuals. Yet, in itself, life is a harmonious flow, tending to liberation. Craving, desire, hate, etc. are not of life; they are of the dead realm of mere phenomena.

Thus, if we become aware of the falseness of some intended act and we drop it, and we are, at the same time, able to see whether another outer action or word is necessary to help to bring the situation to its right or harmonious solution, we shall, of course, perform that

act or utter that word. Is this also a *kamma*-producing action? I think not. Outwardly, such an act looks unselfish, self-sacrificing or beneficial to others; it looks like a good deed which should be rewarded. But if it is performed in utter inner disinterestedness, only out of momentary perception of its objective rightness in the given situation, or if it is motivated by universal love (*mettā*) or compassion (*karuṇā*), then there is no binding power in such an action.

On the contrary, it has a liberating effect. Any act which, be it for a single moment, unburdens one of oneself, tends to liberation, provided that this little self of our personality is not masquerading as some bigger self, over-self, higher self, etc., due to the seductive and deceptive power of speculation which takes hold of one if mindfulness is not consistently applied even to thought.

Thus if, at least at some periods, pure mindfulness remains undisturbed and firm in us, even in outwardly difficult situations provoking the most powerful tendencies in us to bring us to immediate blind reaction, then we may some day in one moment clearly experience that we are free in this moment; we clearly see that the tendencies in us are not ours, that there is no "I" in them, that they do not constitute any "self" in us. Neither a self nor any self is being felt or experienced in that moment. It is a momentary act of

pure awareness, but this expression is not quite fitting, either. It is a “momentary liberation.”

Though the conditioned process of individual life in terms of “I,” “mine” and “self” emerges again afterwards, yet, in a way, there is the whole liberation in that momentary liberation. Though such an individual is not nearer to liberation than any other being, yet there is one difference: no more producing new *kamma*-results, or at least lessening the amount of *kamma*-producing actions. Such an individual, watching the *kamma*-results coming from past actions and presenting themselves to him as perceptions of environment, of events, of thoughts and ideas, knows that one day they will come to an end.

No entity is coming nearer to liberation during this process, only the sequence of conditioned phenomena is gradually nearing its end, for no life is being bestowed upon them in the deluded process of one’s identification with them. It may take some time or some aeons before that end comes. But time has no meaning here.

In the meantime, of course, the accidental good deeds produce their good results. Such an individual gradually grows out of unfavourable circumstances and his outer destiny becomes better. This is also the reason why, in Buddhist tradition, future Buddhas are

borne into noble and rich families.

But the watchful mindfulness guards such a person from becoming attached to any outer advantage and to be seduced by the pursuit of these things. He can use them occasionally in a purposeful way to solve some situation harmoniously or to help others to better understanding, which he does with his growing insight out of wisdom or out of love and compassion to all living beings.

And when such a person perceives that the outer comfortable circumstances might become a hindrance, he renounces them. And when deprived of them and perhaps even deprived of the possibility to help others, he even then remains mindful and without resentment.

Mindfulness thus in any situation proves to be the only way to the cessation of the sequence of conditioned phenomena, to the suspending of kammic process, which is liberation.

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