

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

A Note on Karma

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THE HAND that writes this is the hand of karma. He of whom this hand is part was, from the moment of conception, burdened by an infinite biological inheritance, conditioned by the entire past of the human species of which he is the product and of its animal antecedents stretching into the deepest recesses of the abyss of time. He is simply rooted and has his being in the biosphere of this planet as a short-lived aggregate of riddlesome, untraceable constellations of genes and other givens out of the cosmic reservoir. From the very minute he was born, he became molded further by all the forces of a childhood environment, kneaded by family, programmed by school and nation, by a culture—in his case the European culture, sub-culture: Southern Dutch—by the dominant symbols of transcendence that surrounded him. In young adulthood he was cast by the collective karma of the human race in this appalling century into alien cultural environments, British, American, Japanese and African, each one of which modified his early programming. The name which signs this article is a purely arbitrary label, transferred according to the conventions of a patriarchal system and refers to the complex mosaic I presume to refer to as Me. . . .

To write about karma—an unenviable task, impossible to fulfill in huge tomes and almost ludicrous to attempt in a few pages—is to write about an expression of the inter-relatedness of everything in the universe, in which not a thought, not an action is lost without reverberating into its most remote outposts, for karma refers to the peculiar causal structure of this universe, to the composite of laws that governs the entire contingent world, the temporal existence of this planet and every existence on it, in an infinite network of interdependence and interrelatedness.

As an isolated being, as an empirical ego, I am a mere abstraction, an extrapolation of Reality as It is. I am no more than a point of reference, a focus of experiencing.

The karma doctrine in both Brahmanism and Buddhism is not a logical demonstration of the Structure of Reality, but an attempt to make sense, moral

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sense, of the vicissitudes of human life, an expression analogous to the biblical "What you sow, that you shall reap" and "By their fruits thou shalt know them." The word karma means both action and the fruit of action. The way I respond to my karmic situation determines the quality of my existence in present and future, but is by no means limited to my particularized present and future.

There is no remedy against the suffering and affliction this unproven law of karma may bring. Even if I should attain Enlightenment, it will not protect me against getting wet when it rains, or when I am quite unsteady on my legs after a fifth martini. If I should hope for such release from karma, I would be the old fox man in Pai-chang's story, dating to the T'ang dynasty:

An old man who regularly attended Pai-chang's sermons said to the master:

"Innumerable kalpas ago I lived here on this mountain. One day, one of my students asked me, 'Does an enlightened man fall into causation or not?'"

"Not," I replied.

And as a result of this pithy answer I have had to live in the form of a fox ever since. Would you, master, correct my answer so that I may be liberated from my fox form? He then repeated the question to Pai-chang:

"Does an enlightened man fall into cause-effect or not?"

The master smiled and said gently: "He does not evade the law of cause-effect, he does not stand in its way."

At this, in a flash of insight, the old fox man was enlightened. The following day Pai-chang and his pupils buried an old, mangy fox skin with solemn ceremonial in the temple grounds.

Pai-chang tells us that the enlightened man allows the law that governs the moral as well as the physical world to take its course; he does not contest it or struggle against it and thereby overcomes it, feels no longer imprisoned by it. There is no escape clause in the law of causation, except: to be content to let karma have its way with me. Since escape is not possible, my one option of release is in the unconditional trust, in that irresistible attraction to the Center that makes me set out on the Way to the point where karma and no-karma have become one, and an absolute faith in being blessed with the energy to overcome the many pitfalls on this Way. The Center is *Buddhata*, that Buddha Nature of which the thirteenth century Zen sage Dōgen propounded: "All beings *are* the Buddha Nature," thus radically transforming the age-old maxim: "All beings *have* the Buddha Nature."

Dōgen sees all beings to *be* to the same extent the one complete Buddha Nature, present at any moment, so that no one monad is more real than any other—my precious little ego, alas, included—and that no process of *becoming* can diminish the reality of the Buddha Nature all beings *are*, which is the ul-

ultimate Reality of all things, animate and inanimate. If indeed my ultimate reality is that I *am* the Buddha Nature, this is my I AM, the I AM before Abraham. . . .

I am karma, however, to the precise extent that I *have* karma. This is namely what the specifically human inner process must maximally come to terms with during its existence-time, for ego is a process in time, and the realization of the timeless I AM, the being Buddha Nature is the end-point of my specifically Human inner process. To define Buddha Nature, language fails to provide the tools. . . .

It has, however, been said that the visceral realization of the transitoriness of all that is comes close to it; D. T. Suzuki, at ninety, spoke of it as the Unattainable Self that is attainable only *as* Unattainability.

The inner process can only be completed in timelessness. Jesus was existence-time and died. Christ rises in the timelessness of time. The inner process completed is the Divine Image—"I and the Father are not-two"; "Who has seen Me, has seen the Father . . ."—made manifest.

From before birth steeped in the unawareness of *avidyā*, we were born as selves in ignorance of the Self, that True Self that is another symbol behind the symbol God. I was, and am likely to die steeped, imprisoned in this primal unawareness or ignorance, this *avidyā* (*vidyā*, in Sanskrit, is intelligence, *avidyā*, the lack of it!). Leon Bloy said that our tragedy is not to be saints. Expressed Buddhistically our tragedy is to live and die in unawareness of our Center. For those who speak of the Fall, of Original Sin, as the estrangement of the self from the Self, sinful conduct results from this almost incurable alienation. Repentance of sin then becomes more than sentimental regret. It becomes the realization of the reality of my condition of alienation, rootcause of all the barbarities and compulsions of the isolated ego. Mere sentiments of guilt and contrition are no more than additional proof of the gross overestimation of my little ego's importance in the scheme of things. True repentance encompasses the pledge, the vow and the dynamic needed to overcome my condition of sinfulness.

My human freedom then consists in submission to past karma, and in my capacity to give at any moment a new direction to present thought and action, redeeming my "karmic debt." For every moment's thought creates new karma: "We die with the last thought, are reborn with the next."

In contemporary Southeast Asia, karma is becoming interpreted in an activist mode, namely as humanity's present capacity for altering its own destiny; hence Buddhist scripture is stressed in its aspect of the denial of caste ("I call him a Brahmin from whom anger, greed and folly have dropped as a mustard seed from the point of a needle," says the Dhammapada as it might well be a criterion for the proper use of the label "Christian" . . .). The Bodhisattva ideal replaces the Arhat ideal of primitive Buddhism.

In Hinayana, in spite of the *anatta* doctrine which denies the reality of ego, the

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interpretation of karma remains nevertheless individualistic. Human life-pain and suffering, *dukkha* is to be overcome by asceticism, self-knowledge and discipline. The ideal of Hinayana is the fully enlightened Arhat, ripened to enter the realm of beatitude.

Mahayana interprets karma less individualistically. It is cosmically conceived in the Chain of Interdependent Arising. The ideal figure becomes here that of the Bodhisattva, who, fully enlightened as he is, refuses the bliss of Nirvana until all beings have attained liberation, and who therefore descends into the marketplace to bestow the blessings of his infinite Wisdom-Compassion on all who are still suffering in darkness, all those "others" who no longer are "others," for the Bodhisattva is "neither I nor other". . . .

Whereas the Buddha in Hinayana remains a historical figure, the great Teacher who bids men to be "lamps unto themselves," the Buddha in Mahayana is ever so much more than a great historical figure. He is the trans-historical presence in all, the Presence of the Buddha Nature.

The doctrine of karma seems to have emerged as an esoteric teaching among the ancient Brahmins who felt the need to counter popular beliefs that life's signal events were decreed by the arbitrary wills of gods, gods that could be petitioned and propitiated by means of prayer, sacrifice, ceremonial and all those ritualistic techniques which have been universally used and are still used in the hope of concluding deals with the forces that determine human destiny. In the Upanishads, karma emerges as the law of cause and effect, "by pure acts a human being becomes pure, by evil acts evil." Regardless of the precise nature of karma, in the famous conversations between King Milinda and the sage Nagasena, theories about the precise workings of karma seem to be no more than conceptualization of a universal intuitive perception of a moral order at work in the universe. In primitive Buddhism karma was seen as strictly automatic retribution. Fundamentalist Brahmanist bigots of today still object to the building of hospitals, the care of the indigent, as being an obstruction of the law of karma; as if it might not be my karma to offer the helping hand, as if it could not be both your and the sufferer's karma to comfort and to be comforted. When stricken by disease or disaster, such unfortunates will regard it as a deserved karmic debt, surely and personally incurred in this or a previous incarnation.

The biblical saying that the sins of the fathers will be visited on future generations seems more analogous to later recognition, specifically in Mahayana, that all causes are interdependent, and hence to the conception of concentric circles of karma which encompass individuals, groups, ethnic bodies, all of humanity, gathered in that general, cosmic karma in which all beings and things are subject to the phases of appearance, development or maturation, decline and disap-

pearance, Mount Everest included. All are equally transient, all are related in that sheer unsubstantive relatedness, symbolized so wonderfully in the celestial Lord Indra's net, and in Kegon's *ji-ji muge hokkai*.

Individuals are complexes of energies which, when tending to what is "good," by generous, loving and compassionate actions affect their future tendencies positively. Opposite tendencies lead to petty, ego-dominated and hence evil behavior. The rewards of good action therefore are not the fulfilment of sensual desire, the acquisition of riches, power, fame, but an inner transformation of character that enhances the fullness of being that is bound to flow over beneficially into other lives. Cruel, stupid, malevolent and ego-ridden action on the other hand is bound to coarsen and weaken the higher functions and affect other lives negatively.

One could picture an infinity of waves of action created in the ether, affecting one another uninterruptedly in ever changing patterns, each wave made up out of particles deriving from countless others, all set in motion by these endless chains of *avidyā* that lie, untraceable, in the beginningless past, forever producing the triad of ignorance → desire → action. . . .

Our most profound and erudite ideas and theories are irremediably rooted in our *avidyā*, what I venture to write here not being an exception. . . .

Could it be that the awareness we call "conscience" has its origin in a species-specific intuition of the structure of the universe being a moral one? Might such an ontic discernment linger in us ever since our mythical ancestors ate from the mythical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, preserved in what Mahayana calls the "storehouse consciousness or Karma Supporting Consciousness," a reservoir one might say of all human experience from the beginningless past. It might account—long before the invention of the super-ego—for feelings of sinfulness, of discomfort at lying, of guilt for thoughts and acts of anger, cruelty, lovelessness. Might Original Sin and *avidyā* as well as karma be intuitions which, long before they became doctrine, were our species-specific awareness of that flaw in human existence which consists in the hereditary distortion in our view of the relationship between subject and object, a dichotomy that results automatically in ego's assumption that only "I" am really real? All the rest of creation is so much less real than this "I" that "I" can regard it as props to be manipulated as best "I" can, even as a mere backdrop to ego's fascinating solo performance. When these barbarous little empirical egos, Self-estranged and mutually externalized, snowball into collectivities, they are doomed to produce those monstrous, murderous collective egos of race, nation, church, sect that cause the continuum of wars, bloodbaths and holocausts we call history. It is our collective ego that continues to burden us daily with ever more frightful karma, with the delusional crimes that proceed unabatedly: the impoverishment, the pollution, the poisoning of the biosphere, of the entire human-divine milieu,

the building up of ever more powerful means of mass murder, massive destruction and the very extinction of our species.

It is mind boggling to contemplate the criminally insane preparations for the mutual arson of a man-made Kalpa fire, for the suicidal collective death, the global Jonestown, in which the life process itself is extinguished with no hope of Resurrection, no encounter on where the road once led to Emmaus. Ultimate sin against the Holy Spirit.

A cat leads the perfect cat life. We live the imperfect human life, burdened as we are by our common human karma. The one great privilege, however, of having been born human is that we may become fully aware of being karma-bound, of our individual lives being literally made up of karma. For it is in this awareness, that lies our freedom to transcend it. The struggle for this transcendence means suffering. As D. T. Suzuki points out: "What we call the spiritual life, is life-pain raised above the level of mere sensation. . . ."

The awareness, the contemplation of our karma bondage is inextricably interwoven with the urge to transcend it, an urge expressed in the life of prayer insofar as prayer is the expression of the painful realization of our impotence to rise above our barbarous little selves.

Pai-chang's story demonstrates that the overcoming of karma bondage is the acceptance of it as a fact of life experience, in the triumphant discovery that it does not really affect our innermost being. Reason and intellect cannot perfect this awareness; at best they can foreshadow it. Grace is the built-in, ever available trust in the central Reality of the True Self, of what Rinzai (ninth century) calls "The True Man without rank or label in this mass of red protoplasm." One might speak here of the awakening of faith as being synonymous with the discovery of this fountain of grace at the human core, the inexhaustible fountain of the Indwelling Spirit, the indestructible Buddha Nature, the unquenchable Light that lighteneth everyone come into the world, guarantor—however deep the layers of anger, greed and delusions, neuroses and psychoses—of our ultimate freedom and sanity.

The blindness of Pai-chang's fox man was that he mistook cause-effect as being some external agent, his ignorance of being himself both the moral agent and the Law inherent in his own being, from which no "enlightenment" could grant dispensation. "Enlightened" as he imagined himself to be, he was still imprisoned in the object/subject dichotomy of *avidyā*, of Original Sin, still failing to realize the self-identity of subject and object. He had not yet taken the leap from the intellectual-moral plane to the spiritual level on which the physical and natural assumes the entirely new significance of a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Jesus in Gethsemane was no fox man! His was the full humanity in which Jesus' all too human cry, "Let this cup pass," was instantly corrected by the Christ's "But not my will, but Thy will be done."

Is the Cross the cross of ego, of karma? Is it that which we are habitually resigned to speak of as "just human nature" to which Jesus so humanly harkened back when he asked in the depth of pain to let the cup pass, that let him cry "Why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Could I be mistaken in seeing this "just human nature" as the merely proto-human nature, the karma-nature of ego, which is overcome by the completed inner process of the Human, in the final words: "In Thy hands I commend my spirit"? Karma has been totally accepted . . . the realm of karma has been transcended, that of the no-karma, that is karma entered, the Resurrection accomplished. Those who condemned him may indeed not have "known" what they did, for they were merely obeying the "just human nature" of the proto-human.

The man who was to be remembered as the paradigm of the fully Human, however, knew precisely what he did. Having dared to see the relentless Structure of Reality in the face, daring to address It as Father, he was aware of the end to which it was bound to lead and of what was to follow this end. This paradigmatical Humanness may well be called divine, for It is the fullness of the manifestation of the Divine Image in man that makes the Son of Man Son of God, totally identified with and integrated in the Structure of Reality; not impeding but fulfilling its Law: the Will of God fulfilled. The Resurrection that is the Life, is the Law of Karma overcome, the perennial inner Human process completed. This is the Truth that sets man free. . . .

I often think that the Cross of the Crucifixion by itself is inadequate in expressing only one aspect of the Christ event. To represent it fully Crucifixion/Resurrection would have to be expressed in the symbol below, for they are not-two.

The chasm between East and West also is one of the delusions of our *avidyā*: both have recognized, each in its own way, the Human Image as lodestar on man's pilgrimage: The Risen One and the Awakened One, embodiments of the Great Oneness that does not obliterate infinite differentiation but encompasses it, are not-two. The Buddha says: "I am the Eye of the world," the Christ: "I am the Light of the world."



ALTERNATIVE:

"Take up thy cross and follow Me. . . ." I can only understand as the call to the completion of the inner process to the point where the realm of karma ("Why hast Thou forsaken me?") is transcended in its total acceptance ("In

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Thy hands I commend My Spirit") to where karma and no-karma fuse and the realm of Resurrection opens up.

Those who have taken this leap paradigmatically in West and East, the Risen One and the Awakened One are the lodestars on our pilgrimage to the point where karma and no-karma fuse.