

A SUMMARY OF THE SECRET DOCTRINE

PART III

REINCARNATION AND KARMA

REINCARNATION and Karma have been rightly called "the twin doctrines of theosophy," because they are so inseparable, one logically involving the other, and it is almost impossible to speak of Karma without bringing in reincarnation, or of reincarnation without mentioning Karma. Karma is Eternal Law and Absolute Justice, reincarnation makes the action of that law and justice possible. One of the universal problems of the world, the question that confronts all men when they begin to think, is first, how to reconcile Divine Justice and Mercy with the terrible sin and suffering in the world, and second, how to solve the problem of one man's life of comfort and luxury, side by side with his brother's existence of incessant toil and struggle. What can explain the misery of the thousands of little children that perish every year in the dark and noisome tenements of our great cities, while the parents that brought them into the world are living like dogs with no hope of a better future? Can we wonder at the murders and suicides that we hear of every day, when we realise that they take place among people who have no idea of Divine Justice and no trust in Divine Love?

And besides the accidents of birth and station, how many men of more than average goodness are struggling painfully through life weighed down by a burden of inherited tendencies that gradually sap the strength and paralyse the energy of the character, and little by little drag the balance down to the side of evil. Should the man be held responsible for the outcome of such tendencies when perhaps he has not been given the strength to struggle against his insidious foes?

It is a wise old French proverb that says: "to know all is to pardon all." But only Divine Omniscience knows for how much of a man's Karma that man is directly responsible, and how much belongs to that of his race, his nation, and the people among whom his lot is cast, in all of which he is necessarily involved. Therefore no man should speak of another's trials as his punishment, or say of them, "that is his Karma," for the parti-colored threads of life are impossible to disentangle, and what seems to us righteous retribution, may be the last trial of a saint, or the first step upward of the future prophet.

Nor is it right to say, as some theosophists do, "the good Karma will take care of me," for Karma is not "good," any more than it is evil, nor does it "take care" of any one, being absolute and unerring Law.

"The Blessed Ones have naught to do with the purgations of matter." They are concerned with higher things.

Another frequent mistake is to speak of "interfering with Karma," as if one finger of little man could stop the cogwheels of the Universe. It is supposed by many that to help a person in distress is to interfere with his Karma, because his distress is a part of it, and therefore should not be relieved. But is it not just as truly your Karma which has made you able to help him? One might say with Emerson's *Rhodora*, "the self-same Power that brought me there brought you."

Another element in the seeming injustice of fate (and here we take up the thread of reincarnation again) is the shortness of life's span. Even seventy years is not enough under the most favorable circumstances, to create a character, to weed out its evil tendencies, and strengthen its good ones, to develop its powers, and give a chance for the achievements of the poet, the painter, the musician. How few men have lived to see the fulfilment of their dreams of beauty or usefulness! Of how many glorious youths that died in the heyday of their promise it might be said—" 'Tis not a life, 'tis but a piece of childhood thrown away."

But to the believer in reincarnation all these problems are solved by "the twin doctrines," and instead of a capricious Deity, lifting one man to heaven, and thrusting another into hell at his own pleasure, Eternal Justice metes out to every man the harvest of his own sowing in balances that can never weigh wrong, and he is given all eternity in which to develop the soul, and lead the inner man to perfection. Every good deed, every kind word or thought is stored up for him, and will help to make his next life better and nobler than this one. Not one life, but thousands of lives, if necessary, are his in which to learn the lessons of the higher life, and the today and tomorrow of every man depend upon his yesterdays, and the use he has made of them. What he has sown he shall most surely reap, and in the measure he meted it to others.

But it is not enough to make assertions, we should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us. In the first place, what is the meaning of "reincarnation" which is sometimes confused with "metempsychosis," a very different thing? The word *reincarnation* suggests at once the soul as a dweller in the flesh, and if once imprisoned in a fleshly tabernacle, why not many times? The word *metempsychosis* lays more stress upon the dweller, and was once applied to animals as well as to human beings. The latter, according to this doctrine, were doomed to reincarnation in an animal form as punishment for their sins, the dominant sin of the man finding its fitting habitation in the brute whose nature most nearly represented that sin. And the evil traits of men, their cruelty, their greed, their vices of every kind, went after their death, it was believed, to increase the sum of cruelty and greed in the universe, to make the tiger more cruel, the lion more fierce, the shark

more rapacious. Pythagoras, according to Shakespeare, thought the soul of a man's grandmother might inhabit a bird, but Malvolio "thought nobly of the soul, and in no way approved that opinion." Nor was it long before the doctrine of reincarnation superseded that of metempsychosis, and men began to think so nobly of the soul that they could not believe it could go backwards into animal bodies.

The objections to reincarnation have been founded for the most part on a misconception of the real meaning of its teaching. In the first place it must be understood what it is that reincarnates. Man has already been described as a complex entity, of a sevenfold constitution, endowed with a physical body, an astral body, a portion of the all-pervading Life, and that partially developed mind many of whose characteristics he shares with the higher animals. These four principles form what is generally known as the Quaternary, while the higher Mind and Atma-Buddhi, or the Spirit-Soul, made one with the Mind (or Intellectual Soul) form the human Trinity, sometimes called the Triad. Beginning with the lowest principle, the physical body, every one knows that it must decay at death and that the astral form decays step by step with it as soon as the life-principle departs, and that "the body of desire" (or the Kama-rupa) the sum of man's passional nature, the emotional Soul, has but a short and precarious existence after death, the length of its survival in the astral world depending, as already said, upon the more or less spiritual tendencies of the Ego. His Kama-rupa will dwell for a time on the astral plane clothed in a body made up of astral matter. If a man be of average goodness during his life-time, all that is pure and unsoiled in his nature will return after his death to its source in the Universal Mind, and the astral matter that is to be the mould of his next body will be gradually purified and made ready for a better master than the last.

All men pass from the portals of death into a state analogous to the dream-state, in which the soul, wearied by the cares and trials of life, rests from its labors, and carries out its highest ideals into a fulfilment, which if purely subjective, is none the less real to that soul.* While a man dreams, the outer world is lost to him, it ceases to exist, and the scenes and characters of his dream are realities to the sleeping Ego, who has lost all cognisance of waking existence.

Life as a whole runs in a cycle exactly corresponding to its smaller divisions. A man wakes from the quiet sleep of night to the activities of a new day. He fills his day with toil or pleasure or study, and returns again to the sleep of night and the rest that will enable him to go back to work when the next day begins, with renewed physical

*To understand this description of the state of the soul between incarnations it must be remembered that in Eastern philosophy the outer world of manifestation is regarded as "the great delusion," the rainbow-hued projection of the white light of the Oversoul in which all souls share. Thus as "the Kingdom of God is within," the soul enters a deeper reality as its consciousness is indrawn.

strength and quickened mental powers. During that period of sleep which we call unconsciousness, he may have received much spiritual help, that assisted the growth of the inner man, and aided him to develop his latent powers, but which he seldom recognises for what it is. So in the longer cycles, he has his periods of activity, his longer or shorter times of absolute rest, and then a new life with higher powers. The rest that comes between two active periods, or reincarnations, is called *Devachan*, or "the Kingdom of the Gods," and is, like our dream-life, wholly subjective. During this time, the Ego carries out all the long-cherished ideals of its last life, and for the time being, becomes the ideal reflection of the man it was when last on earth. As it is a subjective condition, there can be no consciousness of death in Devachan, and "nothing will be wanting to make the disembodied state one of perfect happiness... The Ego in Devachan lives its intermediate cycle between two incarnations, surrounded by everything it had aspired to in vain, and in the companionship of every one it had loved on earth... Spiritual, holy love is immortal, and love beyond the grave has a magic and divine potency which reacts on the living... for love is a strong shield, and is not limited by space or time." (*Key to Theosophy*, p. 150.)

Devachan, then, is the heaven that we make for ourselves, the reward of the aspiring soul, but what of its punishment? And here we have again the action of Karma, which is Absolute Justice. It is neither logical nor just, according to theosophy, to punish in the spirit the sins committed in the body, and for which the body is largely responsible. Therefore all sins that mar man's record in this life are to be punished in the physical body of other incarnations, just as he is suffering now from the retribution due him not only from his last life-cycle, but from all his previous lives on earth, however numerous they may have been. During the active periods of existence, the Ego builds the temple of his soul, eternal in the heavens, and fills it with treasures that moth and rust cannot corrupt. Then comes the peaceful rest in which he grows spiritually, and gradually prepares for a better life than the last. Meanwhile the "stern daughter of the voice of God," inexorable Karma, has been making up his balance-sheet, and his new life will be conditioned by the past, and will be hampered as that has been, by all the sins and errors which have stained the fair pages of his record.

The Ego then receives after death only the reward of the *unmerited* sufferings endured during its past incarnations. "The whole punishment after death, even for the materialist, consists therefore in the absence of any reward, and the utter loss of the consciousness of one's bliss and rest... Karmic *punishment* reaches the Ego only in its next incarnation." H. P. B. herself told the writer that in the case of an atheist who had led a moral life and had devoted himself to working for humanity, the time between incarnations would be short, perhaps only a few months, because he had ignored the spiritual side of his

nature, and laid up for himself none of those treasures in heaven which should have been his portion after death. This rapid resumption of life on earth would be the natural result of another Karmic law which regulates the time of reincarnation in normal cases. If the Ego, during its life on earth and its rest in Devachan has been storing up spiritual knowledge and experiences to which it is continually adding, it is not until all this spiritual provision has been exhausted that it is forced to yield to the thirst for earth-life, and to return to the physical plane.

One of the most frequent objections to the doctrine of reincarnation is the fact that we have no recollection of our past lives. But why should we? The organ of memory is the brain, and as long as the Ego resides in the physical body, all its records are imprinted on the brain. When the body dies, the memory also perishes, and with a new body we get a new brain, with all its tablets blank. Memory as a function of the physical brain is incapable of carrying its treasures over to another life, but as Swedenborg rightly said, there are two memories, the mental and the spiritual, and the spiritual memory is a function, not of the brain, but of the higher consciousness. As the Ego grows more and more spiritual, as that part of his nature becomes more and more developed, he learns to think of his present life as the ordinary man thinks of an old coat, which has nothing to do with the man himself, and is presently to be thrown away like all worn-out garments. Some flash of recollection may come across the brain-memory occasionally, born of some dear association with the long forgotten past, but for real memories of past incarnations we must wait until the memory of the soul is ours. As a rule, people who remember, or think they remember, their past incarnations, always remember themselves as the central figure in the picture. Marie Antoinette and Mary, Queen of Scots, for instance, are very favorite subjects for incarnation (I have met several of them myself), but I never met any one who claimed to have incarnated in the beggar at the door of either of these great ladies, or the scullion in their kitchen. And yet the beggar or the scullion might have attained a height of spiritual growth that neither queen had reached.

"The spiritual Ego of man moves in Eternity like a pendulum between the hours of birth and death," says the *Key*. "At the solemn moment of death, every man, even when death is sudden, sees the whole of his past life marshalled before him in its minutest details. For one short instant the *personal* becomes one with the individual and all-knowing *Ego*. But this instant is enough to show him the whole chain of causes which have been at work during his life...and he feels and knows the justice of all the suffering that has overtaken him...As the man at the moment of death has a retrospective insight into the life he has led, so at the moment he is re-born on earth the Ego, awaking from the state of Devachan, has a prospective vision of the life which awaits him, and realises all the causes which have led to it. He realises them

and sees futurity, because it is between Devachan and re-birth that the Ego regains his full *manasic* consciousness."

Nothing has been said so far of the possible loss of the soul, a terrible, but a very infrequent, consequence of *conscious* persistence in evil, the deliberate choosing of the worse instead of the better, for *its own sake*. The trend of the universe is towards perfection, and so long as a spark of good survives in the soul there is hope of its final redemption. Annihilation, moreover, is never instantaneous, and may require centuries for its accomplishment. With every incarnation the entity who has chosen the path of evil "sinks lower and lower until the evil force gradually wears itself out, and such a personality perishes, separated from the source of life. It finally disintegrates, to be worked up into other forms of living things, but as a separate existence it is lost."

This brief introduction to the study of theosophy can only indicate its most important teachings, and leaves the student to supply the missing links, which are very numerous. Theosophy has been described as a science, a philosophy and a religion, but here its scientific side has hardly been mentioned, although it is so often found anticipating the most modern discoveries in physics, astronomy, etc.

Next to the teaching of the Divine Unity, which involves that of Universal Brotherhood, the law of Karma is certainly the most important, as laying such stress upon individual responsibility, and the unerring action of Law. "Man's fate is what he himself makes it," says the *Key to Theosophy*, pp. 236-7. "Once grasp the idea that universal causation is not merely present, but past, present, and future, and every action on our plane falls naturally and easily into its true place, and is seen in its true relation to ourselves and others."

And if the student desires a summary of its religious teaching, let him take this passage from *Isis*: "There being but One Truth, man requires but one church, the Temple of God within us; walled in by matter, but penetrable by any who can find the way; *the pure in heart see God*." (*Isis*, II. 635.)

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