Living One's Karma

by

Marco Pallis

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THE conception of Existence as *samsāra,* Cosmic Flux, together with its parallel conception of *karma,* "concordant action and reaction" as the determinant of each being's part in that flux, is an essential feature of all the traditions directly or indirectly deriving from India; though the subject is here being considered from a Buddhist angle, most of what will be said could apply to Hinduism equally well.

Let us first consider the Round of Existence through its symbolical representation, said to go back to the Buddha himself, as a circle sub-divided into six sectors each containing one of the typical classes of sentient beings. These sectors can be arranged in three pairs, as follows:

our world:	1) Human—the central state
	2) Animals—peripheral states
supernal worlds:	3) gods or *devas*
	4) titans or *asuras*
infernal worlds:	5) tantalized ghosts or *pretas*
	6) hells

This symbolic scheme is familiar wherever the Buddhist tradition prevails.

Let us examine each of the six components in somewhat greater detail. Quite evidently, the human sector, which was mentioned first, has been given a disproportionate share in the whole if one considers it solely from the point of view of the number of beings concerned. As compared with the vast multiplicity of their non-human neighbours, men represent a very small number indeed, apart from the fact that they form but one species as compared with an immense variety extending to genera, families and natural orders. The reason for this privileged treatment is twofold: firstly, being men ourselves it is natural for us to single out for study our own kind and manner of existing; and secondly, the human species is the chosen field of avatāric descent, of Buddhahood, and this, qualitatively speaking, entitles it to privileged consideration.

Passing to the animal sector; this contains a large number of different species situated at the same level of existence as man, but varying in respect of their nearness to, or remoteness from, the human position. It might then be asked: where do plants and minerals come in, since they do not seem to figure by name in any sector? The answer can only be that here one is not dealing with a chart of biological or geological statistics; one must not expect a meticulous consistency in regard to details. All the traditional picture of the Round is intended to do is to serve as a broadly sufficient guide to an understanding of the Universe, one which is based, all along, on qualitative factors rather than on "facts" or quantitative considerations such as enter into the purview of natural sciences in the usual sense of the word.

Regarded from the human point of view, the supernal states are those which in greater or lesser measure escape the physical and psychic limitations of our own state of existence. The two sectors grouped in the supernal class may, however, themselves include quite a number of different degrees which we, in our present state, are hardly concerned with. It is said of gods or *devas* that theirs is a state full of delights such as "wishing trees" able to grant any boon at the mere thought and other picturesque amenities of a similar kind; no pain can enter into this state while it lasts—which makes the moment of change when it strikes at long last all the more painful for the beings in question, as they suddenly wake up to the fact that their state of bliss is not eternal but remains subject to birth and death like every other existential state. As one Mongolian monk said to the writer: "the long-lived gods are stupid". Lulled into over-confidence by sheer absence of contrast in their present condition they are wholly unprepared for the fatal moment when it comes and they may sink as low as hell itself, a truly lamentable fate.

Not all the gods, however, display this lack of intelligence. Many of them play a creditable part in stories of the Buddha. Some, such as Vishnu's hawk-like steed *Garuda,* are constant attendants on the Buddha's person whose canopy they provide; others again, and especially *Brahmā* king of the *Devas,* after the Buddha's Enlightenment persuade him to preach the Doctrine lest the world be utterly lost—this overcoming of the Buddha's "reluctance" at the instance of the gods features in the history of every teaching Buddha and is meant to convey symbolically that the knowledge possessed by an Enlightened One is so profound as to be virtually incommunicable to men in their present state of ignorance. The Buddha however consents to teach thus showing that, ignorance notwithstanding, the Light is not unattainable. For this we have to thank the persuasion of the gods.

Titans or *Asuras,* for their part, though superior to men in virtue of their possession of various powers, are always represented as contentious beings, full of envy for the gods and their felicity and ever plotting to dethrone them. Typically they are beings who through "austerities", intense work carried out in various fields, have been enabled to extend their own natural faculties to the point of threatening Heaven itself. Sometimes titanic ambition even wears an altruistic mask as when Prometheus stole the fire from the gods in order to bestow it on mankind, thus exposing the latter to the consequences of his own act of profanation. It is typical of an asuric or promethean temperament to promote recklessly the use of abnormal powers from every kind of motive except the essential one, the one which could lead a being to Buddhahood. Lacking this motive it lacks all:

such is the asuric sign in beings.

The two infernal sectors of our symbolism, the land of tantalized ghosts *(pretas)* and the hells, are places whence joy and comfort are entirely banished. The first-named is a realm wherein reigns the most intense feeling of want, an insatiable hunger and thirst. *Pretas* are pictured as having huge, inflated bellies and pin-point mouths, so that enough nourishment can never find its way through the tiny inlet to meet the excessive cravings of the belly and thus the being remains in a constant state of misery which only a change of state may eventually relieve, could he but awaken to this possibility. The hells, on the other hand, more or less explain themselves: they are places of sheer expiation, hot or cold according to the nature of the offences committed (or opportunities disregarded) in the course of previous life. In this respect they hardly differ from the conception of hell as found in the Semitic religions except in matters of detail and, more especially, in the absence of any perfunctory attribution of "eternity" such as does not belong anywhere in the Round.

This last is the most important point to grasp. The keynote of *samsāra* is *impermanence,* the primary theme to meditate upon for every Buddhist. All that the world's flow brings into being is unstable; this is true of heavens or hells, happier states as well as more unhappy; the former admit of no complacency, the latter are never entirely without hope. For everything, in the fullness of becoming, when its particular possibilities have spent themselves, must change to something else. This is the universal law of existence in the Round.

The number and variety of beings extant in the Universe is incalculable: the same holds for world-systems, they are indefinite both in their incidence and in the variety of conditions to which each world-system is subject. But whatever the conditions governing a given world may be, the sixfold grouping can still be applied to it, with suitable allowance made for differences of detail. Thus every world must needs have its "central" or "axial" state which, by analogy with out world, may well be called "human"; just as there will also exist superior and inferior states classifiable as such from the stand-point of that state which provides the median term.

The essential characteristics of each world are integrally reflected in the being that is central to that world and in a more or less fragmentary manner in the various beings occupying peripheral positions. The central state, being a totality in its own order, constitutes something like an autonomous world of its own, *a microcosm,* and this is the case with Man in our world-system; knowing the state of man at a particular time one can almost say one knows the state of the world, so closely are the two interests bound together. A transposition of the sixfold symbolism from the greater world in all its extension to the human microcosm follows logically from this inter-relationship: thus certain properties of human nature can be said to correspond to certain classes of beings, in the sense that in proportion as a man identifies himself with such a property rather than with such another he will display, in his human life, something of the character of one or other of the non-human classes. To give one instance, it is easy to recognise the type conforming as nearly as possible to a state of "human animality", that of men regarded chiefly in the mass as feeders and reproducers in a quantitative sense: needless to say, no disparagement of animals is intended by the above allusion, for animals and plants in a state of nature live out their *karma* with sure instinct and exhibit qualities of dignity and

beauty which man, for his part, can only emulate by remaining faithful to his own vocation, which is of another order just because of his central position in the world.

To take another example, modern "economic man" oscillates between the animal and *preta* types, the latter being the one that is most consonant with his professed ideal of an indefinitely expanding production and of a so-called high standard of living. A vast machine of propaganda exists for the sole purpose of exacerbating an appetite for possessions, with the proviso, however, that the happiness these are supposed to procure must never be quite reached, for if man rested satisfied at any point the wheels would stop going round there and then and this would mean economic ruin, so inextricably have the two motives been geared to one another. Therefore man must keep on being tantalized into fresh desires—a far cry from Buddhism.

If this be not a picture of a *Pretaland* it is the next best thing to one. And to what kind of rebirth are men schooled in this way likely to attain? Might it be to rebirth as *pretas* perhaps?

As for the Hells, they are surely discernable among those dark reservoirs below the level of human consciousness wherein our psychologists so often like to fish; sometimes their contents also overflow: an utterly subhuman type is not uncommon in our midst, even without mentioning what he himself calls "art", a devilish appliance in its way. Naturally, one has been referring to extremes: the purer types are relatively rare, mostly one has to do with various blends and hybrids.

There is one other kind of man, however, the one who alone is able to realize the plenitude of the human possibility and this is the man who identifies himself, in intention and practice, not with some samsārically conditioned human faculty but with the axis of the human microcosm itself, the thread of Buddha-nature passing through the heart of every being, every world. For peripheral beings this identification can only be indirect and eminently passive; but with man, because he is an axial being by definition, this can also take place in active mode, without restriction of scope or finality. This, in fact, is the possibility of full awakening, Buddhahood, and justifies the statement, found in the Semitic Scriptures, that man has been made "in the divine image". Whether we call man "theomorphic" or "buddhomorphic" it makes little difference in this context.

Lastly, let us return to the traditional portrayal of the Round of Existence, as originally described, in order to point out that, like every true symbolism, it derives from the *nature of things* and not from some arbitrary contrivance of the human mind as if it were just a poetic allegory. Its purpose is to serve as a key to a heightened awareness, it has no other use.

A symbolical classification like the present one is not meant to be read in the sense of a compact formula, it has to be freely interpreted and intelligently applied, for *samsāra* as such is *indefinite,* it does not admit of systematisation. The *sūtras* in fact describe it as "without beginning" (i.e. undefined in terms of origin) but as "having an end (in Deliverance, *nirvāna)—a* paradoxical description since, metaphysically speaking, what has no beginning cannot have an end either, and vice versa. One can compare with this the similar (but inverse) Christian paradox of a world "with beginning" (in creation) yet able to become "world without end" (by salvation through Christ).

In both the above cases the object is to communicate a saving truth, not a nicely rounded off philosophical thesis, hence an apparent disregard of logic.

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We said at the outset that in *samsāra* the determinant of any coming into being or "birth" is antecedent action, with its consequent reaction. This is the doctrine of *karma and its fruits* which, ripening in their season as results, are fated in their turn to become causes containing, as they do, the seeds of further becoming. The continual inter-crossing of numberless strands of causality goes to make up the skein of *samsāra:* the conception is *dynamic,* a continual passage from state to state, with each birth marking a death to some preceding state and each death marking a fresh birth and so on indefinitely.

Here all being in a state of ceaseless flux, any event or object one chooses to observe has to be *abstracted* from the whole process in a more or less arbitrary manner, with the result that whatever one observes will necessarily have a certain character of *ambiguity:* both the object itself and the observing subject are changing all the time, which means that any judgment passed, on the basis of an empirical examination of objects found in the world, will remain approximate, provisional, relative, fluid and ambivalent. The empirical approach precludes any conclusion qualifiable as "exact" and "complete".

Having said this much, it is necessary also to mention the complementary aspect of the same doctrine, lest one be led unconsciously into a relativism which will itself assume a quasi-absolute character, to the point of doing away with all idea of truth itself; in these days of far-fetched and one-sided subjectivism, a dissolution of all objective values and criteria in a kind of psychoanalytical penumbra is a real danger and must be guarded against. A judgment is inadequate, insofar as it claims to judge the whole absolutely from a particular standpoint likewise treated as absolute; this is the error of "dogmatism" i.e**.,** of an abusive stretching of relative formulations that are true as far as they go. A judgment is valid, however, insofar as, starting out from criteria duly recognised to be relative, it judges a phenomenon the relative limits of which are likewise recognised. Given one is vigilantly heedful of these conditions, a judgment can be perfectly exact, to the point of being called "relatively absolute" within its proper context.

A Buddha is called an "awakened one" just because his knowledge owes nothing to the world or to the empirical ego that jointly provided the focus of his previous dreaming. When a man wakes from sleep we do not say he is someone else despite an apparent change in the nature of his consciousness; this analogy gives an inkling of the passage from the state of an ignorant being to Buddhahood. Knowledge is only possible inasmuch as the "eye *of Bodhi"* (the pure intellect), in the subject, perceives, in the object, the *"Bodhi* message" (i.e. its symbolism). When these two coincide there is instant awareness—"eternal awareness", as one might say, inasmuch as what pertains to *Bodhi* belongs *per se* to the intemporal and the changeless. The awakening to knowledge, at any degree, is like the flashpoint reached by the rubbing together of two sticks; the *satori* of Zen is of this nature. Were things otherwise, Enlightenment would not be a possibility for beings.

In *samsāra* it is evident that one can only judge fragments from standpoints no less fragmentary; in *nirvāna* such a question does not arise. Awareness of *samsāric* differences and our own response to them on the strength of that awareness detracts in no wise from the intrinsic reality of phenomena considered as a whole. Their totality then brings us back to *samsāra* as such and this, in essence, brings us back to *nirvāna.* Here we meet a basic Buddhist principle namely that he who really understands *samsāra* (or *karma,* which comes to the same) understands *nirvāna.* To see a single grain of dust in full awareness is to see the Universe: no more is needed for Enlightenment, wherein absolute and relative knowledge, the Buddha's two modes of truth, make but one.

What one always needs to bear in mind is that the world with its phenomena amounts to *a play of compensations* in such fashion that though every part is ever shifting and therefore out of balance and ungraspable in itself, yet the whole, *qua* whole, remains unchanged across all its vicissitudes, as does the ocean in spite of its many waves and currents. If we try to define one of those waves in fixed terms it will elude us, yet each reveals the unchanging in its own way. Hence the statement that a Buddha is to be found in every drop of water, every grain of sand.

This "non-graspable" nature of all things in existence is what has given rise, in the Buddhist spiritual economy, to another basic idea, one that people have found especially difficult to understand, namely the idea of *anattā,* "non-selfhood", as applying to beings at all levels and to the manifested universe itself.

We have seen that the basic "notes" of Existence are: relativity, impermanence, becoming, to which we must add "suffering", which is the characteristic that expresses the preceding three in the consciousness of beings. Universal possibility being unique, it excludes repetition in existence. In the Cosmos there can be likeness or analogy at every degree but never absolute identity or selfhood.

What does the word "selfhood" really convey to our minds? It conveys unequivocal *purity,* total non-admixture. A substance can only be called "pure" when it is nothing else but itself, being free from any trace of "otherness". Being such, it carries no incentive to change: it is the ambivalent character of the relative which is the root of change, for where there is more than one pole of attraction (or repulsion), there instability will prevail in some degree. What is wholly free from internal tensions cannot die, for what should there be to make it die? Whatever is liable to death, therefore, implies a dualism, the presence of forces pulling different ways, a composition of things partly incompatible, and this, by definition, is other than selfhood. It is the sharpening, in the course of becoming, of its internal contradictions that eventually causes a thing to fall apart, at the moment we call "death".

When we are led to fix our attention, not on the process of becoming as a whole but on an abstracted part of it (which may be our own person or any other thing), we are thereby easily led into attributing to that thing a fixed character; the same applies to a situation or an act when so regarded for its own sake: this is the error of *false attribution,* the congenital ignorance attaching to all extant beings as such. The specifically Buddhist doctrine of *anattāis* a way of dispelling this ignorance.

Let us now pass over to the more detailed consideration of *karma,* the impelling force behind every rebirth or redeath, that is to say *action* taken in the broadest sense of the

word (including its negative aspect, *omission)* together with its inseparable accompaniment, the reaction it inescapably provokes, the two being strictly proportioned to one another: the physical principle that action and reaction are equal and opposite is but one example of this universal cosmic dispensation.

Now, like everything else the mind is concerned with, this law of *karma* were best contemplated in a purely detached, impersonal way, as if we ourselves were standing outside the Round of Existence and looking at it from the vantage-point of a lofty and distant peak. But in point of fact such is not the case: we are deeply involved at every moment of our earthly sojourn and consequently, in so far as we feel ourselves to be "this person So-and-So", distinct from all the beings who, for us, fall under the collective heading of "other", we cannot help assessing this cosmic play going on all around us in terms of plus or minus, profit or loss, pleasure or pain, "good" or "evil" as we call them. This it is which accounts for the fact that, in religious life, *karma* has been explained, more often than not, in terms of moral sanction, as reward for good deeds and punishment for ill deeds, and this is how the matter is regarded, almost always, by the popular mind.

Now such a view is not in itself false, indeed it can be salutary; the only falseness is if one imagines this to be the whole story, the first and last word to be said on the subject. A full awareness of the implications of *karma* will carry one outside the circle of moral alternatives (and of the attachments which a personally biased view inevitably will foster in the long run); but nevertheless, for the common run of mortals, the view of *karma* as *immanent justice,* in the moral sense, is not unwholesome, since it inclines a man at least to take the lessons of *karma* seriously and apply them in his day-to-day life. All ethical laws, in every religion, have this character: they are *upāyas,* "means", far-reaching but still relative in scope, a fact which incidentally explains why the most hallowed moral laws some-times will not work, so that even in this sphere one must expect the occasional exception, if only "to prove the rule".

Immanent Justice, in its fullest sense, is nothing else but the equilibrium of the Universe, that state of balance between all the parts that the quivering scales express but do not visibly achieve; but here again, we have come outside the moral perspective which, though included in the general panorama of "justice", no longer needs to be given privileged emphasis in view of a particular human interest.

It is a commonplace with Buddhist controversialists, out to criticise what they look on as the arbitrary explanations offered by the theistic religions, to argue that the doctrine of *karma,* by accounting for the apparent irregularities of fate in terms of antecedent action leading to present sanction is "more just" than other views relating to the same facts. It is well to point out that once such an argument becomes clothed in a moral form it becomes every whit as anthropomorphic as the teachings about "the will of God" in relation to sin current in the Christian and kindred religions. The use of this kind of language and all arguments taking this form can be justified empirically, as satisfying the need of certain minds and, if so, it is no small profit. However, any simplification of this kind must always be accounted an expression of "popular apologetics" rather than of deep awareness of what really is at stake. It is nevertheless a mistake to laugh at such a view of things; if one is able to see the fallacy behind the argument one is free to transcend it in deeper understanding of the same truth, without taking up a patronising attitude towards

the simple souls for whom this argument has provided a stepping-stone in the way.

Speaking more generally, the important thing when comparing doctrines as propounded by different traditions is to find out, by an examination conducted with insight—scholarly scrupulousness in comparing the material is not by itself enough—whether the seeming divergences betray a genuine opposition or only a divergence of spiritual dialect, since both things are possible. Every religion resorts to certain accommodations in the doctrinal field in order to bring various truths within the purview of an average mind; it is left to the saint and the sage to see beyond these somewhat garbled versions in order to find the truth they nevertheless convey in their own fashion.

Here we see the difference between religion under its "exoteric" aspect, adequate to a collective need, and under the aspect qualifiable as "esoteric", where no such concessions have a place. This distinction rests, not on a rigid compartmenting of religious truth, but rather on the need for a graded approach to that same truth, the bright light of which has to be tempered to men's varying capacities of vision. The two broad categories we have mentioned explain themselves sufficiently in the light of this principle, which is an *upāya* of general applicability to every spiritual path.

An instance of how popularised interpretations can lead to a certain amount of doctrinal distortion is provided by current beliefs in Buddhist countries concerning the possibility of "rebirth as a man". People all too readily assume that a human rebirth, provided they keep leading fairly ethical lives (often at a lowish level) is there for the asking. I could mention several examples of this kind of attitude from my own experience, by no means all of them drawn from among the simple and uneducated. People find it easy to imagine that it is but a matter of a little careful moral accountancy on their part, and their next human life will be as good as assured! With these people "merit", good *karma,* comes to be regarded wholly in a quantitative sense, rather as if it could be meted out by the pound, a matter of manipulating a neat double column balance-sheet in such a way as not to leave oneself too heavily in debt. They forget the common dictum about "human birth hard to obtain" or the Buddha's parable about the purblind turtle swimming in a vast ocean where there is also a piece of floating wood with a hole in it. He estimated any particular being's chances of obtaining a human birth as about equal to the likelihood of that turtle pushing its head through that hole!

By this far-fetched parable he evidently wished to impress on people the extreme precariousness of the human chance, warning them thus against the folly of wasting a precious opportunity in trivial pursuits. In a world that likes to think of itself as "progressive" how many people, I wonder, make even a slight attempt to follow this advice?

Let everyone only ask himself the question "do I give the Buddha and his teachings (or Christ and his teachings for that matter), say, half an hour's worth of attention per day of my life?" and if the answer is in the negative is it then reasonable to expect, under the law of *karma,* to receive another human chance in this or other worlds? And if one is prepared to give an honest answer to this question, one must surely go on to ask oneself another, namely "why then do I so unaccountably hang back?" The opportunity lies here and now, this is certain; what sense is there in banking on some dubious future, on the strength of a naive attempt to strike a bargain with God—if we may here permit ourselves

a turn of phrase that is not strictly Buddhist.

The essential thing to remember, about the human state or any state describable as "central", is that it marks the point where exit from the fatal round of birth-and-death is possible without the prior need to pass through another state of conditioned existence. The door is there, whereas if one has been born into some more peripheral situation it is indispensable, before one can aspire to Deliverance, to gain a footing on the axis, in other words to find the way to a human birth. Once on the axis, the path lies open trodden by all the Buddhas; what is essential is not merely to occupy one's human position *passively,* thanks to the *karma* that placed one there, but to realize it *actively* and this is the express concern of a spiritual life.

If we pause to consider our present state of existence attentively, we will soon discover that it is, after all, not every man born who can be said to possess true humanity; we have already touched on this point when speaking of the human microcosm. In practice most human beings lead more or less sub-human lives, by which is meant, not that they are all great criminals—the Macbeths and Iagos of this world are comparatively rare—but that so much of their time and attention goes in trivialities utterly incompatible with a human status; if life on earth were fated to last a thousand years they could hardly be more wasteful of it. Certainly few escape this reproach altogether, even among those claiming some sort of religion for themselves. There is nothing more salutary than self-examination on this issue; a detailed diary if honestly kept would make cruel reading for, many of us.

What everyone needs to remind himself of in the first place (if he gets so far) is that before he can even begin to ascend the axial mountain that leads towards Buddhahood he has first to become "true man" (as Taoism puts it) which, in our world, is the station from which the mountain itself begins to rise; and that is why religion, in general, starts off by propounding the need for a purposeful life of virtue, because this chiefly is a means of regaining the missing human norm, the one we all bear in name but rarely possess in fact.

So far, *karma* has chiefly been considered under its cosmic aspect as the determinant, for beings, of their fate; plainly, when taken in this sense, *karma* can only be accepted in passive mode, since the nature of a being's existence in a given world is something that being is impotent to alter, wish as he may; in this sense, "the hairs of our head are all numbered". There is, however, side by side with this involuntary and imposed passivity, a possibility of living the same *karma* in *active* mode, that is to say mindfully and intelligently and here the human will, which allows us to choose this second way or to neglect it, counts decisively since,.without its active concurrence, all we have to do is to let ourselves drift to and fro like logs floating on the surface of *samsāra's* swirling waters; but this attitude hardly befits those who, by virtue of their human quality, already stand at the wicket-gate of freedom.

For a way to be justly describable as "active" it must be clearly related, under the double heading of intention and method, to the promoting of Enlightenment. A way that does not look beyond *samsāra,* even though some active elements may be called into play incidentally in the course of gaining merit, remains essentially passive in respect of its finality and by this criterion it falls short.

For *karma* to be utilisable as an instrument to serve the greater purpose a number of

"technical" conditions have to be satisfied three of which are of particular importance, so that they can fittingly provide the conclusion to this essay. The three are as follows:

Firstly: There must be conscious self-identification with one's *karma.* Secondly: There must be just discernment as to what really constitutes "good karma".

Thirdly: One's *karma* must be recognised as the determinant of vocation, of one's own specific *dharma.*

Let us take each of these points in order:

i. The basis of self-identification with one's *karma* is the clear recognition that it is essentially just, just in principle and just in the particular, including that particular we call "myself". Similarly one's future *karma* has to be accepted, as if by anticipation: one must expect to reap as one has sown and not otherwise.

   What must be remembered at every turn is that *karma is* the expression of the inherent equilibrium of the Universe, which is always present *in toto,* with every apparent disturbance of balance automatically entailing its compensating reaction whereby the total balance is maintained: *karma is* therefore not only just, it expresses the very principle of justice, which is *even balance.*

   For man, an attitude of acceptance in the face of his state of existence, as determined by antecedent *karma,* as also in the face of the unavoidable happenings of his existence while that state lasts, the fruits of *karma,* is both realistic in itself and morally sound. This attitude has often been stigmatised as "fatalistic", especially when displayed by Orientals, but the intended criticism starts out from a faulty premise, namely from a confusing of mere passivity versus one's fate with *resignation,* which is an intellectual attitude, active therefore and allied to detachment; it rests on an understanding of a real situation by a mind free from wishful thinking.

   Fatalism, which also exists among men, can only be imputed where someone adopts a helpless attitude in respect of elements still indeterminate and therefore still offering openings for the exercise of free willing and acting in some degree or other. If, for instance, the house catches fire or if one's child is taken ill these are results of *karma* and must, so far as that goes, be accepted; but there is no evidence to prove that standing by and letting the fire consume the house or failing to call in the doctor (whose existence in the neighbourhood, incidentally, is also a fruit of *karma)* is an already predestined fact and it would be straining the doctrine of *karma* to hold back from an obviously reasonable, as well as possible, action on the strength of a pessimistically prejudged result; lack of initiative and a spirit of resignation are two very different things.

   Admittedly the kind of attitude we have been describing is sometimes to be found among simple people, especially in the East, so that the accusation of fatalism is not unjustified in some cases. Equally often, however the attitude decried as fatalism is not such, but springs from true resignation in the face of unavoidable ills, in which case it is wholly justifiable and sane; just as, on the other hand, congenital readiness of Western people to fight an apparently losing battle is often rewarded by an unexpected success and represents realism of

another kind, namely a willingness to challenge fate as long as the least hope remains of altering a bad situation for the better. Each of the two attitudes has its proper place in human affairs and each goes with its characteristic abuse: as between an unthinking fatalism and a tendency to kick obstinately against the pricks there is not much to choose.

The point to grasp is that though the dispensations of *karma,* once declared, have to be accepted for what they are, as inherently just—therefore also without resentment which would in fact be futile--yet at the same time the use of such resources as lie to hand (also thanks to one's *karma) is* justified pending a final declaration of the result: within these limits remedial action is in no wise opposed to resignation.

The all-important thing, however, when undertaking any action aimed at promoting human welfare, whether at an individual or a collective level, is not to lose sight of the essential truth of impermanence, as pertaining to the action itself and its eventual consequences; whatever degree of success or non-success may appear to attach to the latter, this will never be definitive in either sense, such being precluded by the very nature of that samsāric process in which both action and its fruits appear but episodically. The pathetic hope, fostered by the *mystique* of "progress" that by a successive accumulation of human contrivances *samsāra* itself will somehow be, if not abolished, permanently tilted in a comfortable direction is as incompatible with Buddhist realism as with historical probability. Among obstacles to Enlightenment there can be none greater than to forget *samsāra* and our own inescapable place in it—in other words, to forget the first of the Four Noble Truths, enunciated by the Buddha, namely the necessary association of existence with suffering in some degree or other.

Though we have spoken at some length about acceptance of one's *karma,* as marking an important stage, a full self-identification with it takes one much further. For such to be realized it is necessary to recognise what should be an obvious fact, though often overlooked, namely that a man is his *karma* in the sense that all the various elements which together have gone into the composition of his empirical personality, what he and others take for his "self", are one and all products of *karma,* and so are the modifications through which that personality passes in the course of its becoming: family, possessions, occasional happenings, illness, old age or what you will. Apart from these "accidental" products of becoming, that personality would not exist and when they fall apart it no longer is. Therefore there is a real identity between the process and the product and once this is clearly recognised it should be possible to go a stage further and make friends with one's *karma* as Sāvitri made friends with Death when he came to fetch her husband and conquered him by so doing.

ii. Now for our second question: what constitutes good *karma?*

An average layman would probably answer something like this: merit, good *karma,* accrues to him who leads an upright, pious life, keeping the Precepts,

showing compassion to fellow creatures of every kind and contributing duly to the support of the sacred congregation, the *Sangha:* if the man is a monk he may add one or two items to the list, but broadly speaking this is the answer one will get. If one also asks him what are the fruits of meritorious *karma* he will probably say "a healthy and happy life, a painless death, with rebirth into a state of felicity among gods or the like, or else again as man." Now this kind of answer, which is conventional, though acceptable as far as it goes, hardly makes for a far-reaching aspiration. The attitude remains *samsāric,* there is no touch of Buddha-thinking here.

For one in whom "the mind of Bodhi" has begun to stir, be it ever so slightly, a different answer is required. Before he calls his *karma* "good" or "bad", he will want to know, above all, whether or not it places him in favourable circumstances for encompassing "the one thing needful", as Christ described it; rewards for merit, assessable only according to the scale of *samsāric* values, hold little attraction for such a man. A beatitude minus the essential opportunity is not far from being, for him, a hell.

Once a man begins to hold such views, his valuation of things around him and also in the world at large cannot but change its emphasis, since it will be influenced, at every turn, by this paramount consideration: is this conducive to Enlightenment or is it not, and if it is, how far is it so? This thought becomes the touch-stone of discernment in things great and small and nothing will henceforth be immune to reappraisal in the light of it.

By this criterion an unschooled beggarwoman in Tibet strong in the faith of Buddha has a more enviable lot than many an eminent professor in other lands whose obsessive pursuit of purely *samsāric* investigations constitutes an obstacle a hundred times more insurmountable than mere illiteracy and some degree of petty superstition could ever be for that poor woman; on balance, the illiteracy might even count as a gain, since it will have screened her mind effectively from the contagion of cheap literature—or rather would have done so had she been born in Europe, since in Tibet before the Communists came such a thing as profane literature was unknown, all books being attached to the sacred interest in some degree or other; the same of course would apply in any fully traditional society, whether of East or West. As between that woman and the professor, her simple faith, however limited, must count as an elementary knowledge, where colossal erudition, directed, not to the centre, but to numberless peripheral phenomena must count as a peculiarly pretentious form of ignorance. Therefore rebirth as that beggar-woman, for the professor, would spell almost unqualified gain; the reverse, for her, unqualified loss.

An English traveller was once asked by a Tibetan "what is the good of trying to suppress all superstitions since, on a final count, whatever exists outside *Bodhi,* outside Enlightenment, and whatever does not lead there, is but superstition?" A Mongol also once asked the writer if it was true that the British, as he had been given to understand, were all completely without superstitions of the kind to be found among the people of his own country or Tibet. On being given a few instances of superstitions still current in Europe he

said, with evident relief, "then there is hope for these people after all, since their mind is not completely closed (he might have said "sterilized") in respect of things that do not meet the eye". The above examples, which can be varied in a hundred ways, should be sufficient to illustrate the principle at play.

People speak of prosperity as if they had a right to it regardless of their *karma,* and of adversity as if it were something in which they had no stake; but here again it is necessary to discriminate in the light of the respective karmic fruits. For the man of insight, a form of prosperity tending to increase distraction (though this does not always happen, of course) must be reckoned a drawback from the point of view of fruits, while an adversity which serves to open one's eyes must be accounted more of a boon than a punishment: merit might earn the latter, where an unfavourable *karma* would place one in the former as a stage on the way to hell.

For instance, would the early Christian martyrs have been gainers if in place of the terrible suffering they were called upon to face they had been born, say, as prosperous business men in New York today? Was a certain monk murdered for refusing to preach against religion at the bidding of the Communists, or was the humble retainer they also murdered because he persisted in denying that the feudal landowner he served had behaved oppressively a victim of bad, or a gainer of good *karma?* On a short view they both suffered, on a long view both earned the crown of martyrdom, it is for oneself to judge which is the overriding criterion in every such case. Remember that in *samsāra* there are no absolute categories, every criterion can be read two ways. That is why each case that crops up has to be settled on its merits, in reference to the one supreme interest, otherwise one's conclusions will remain both crude and dubious.

One other example drawn from a source very foreign to the Buddhist world will help to clinch the argument: I remember an occasion some years ago when I sat listening to Wagner's music-drama *Die Walküre.* It was the scene where Wotan, chief of the gods, is about to sentence his daughter, Brunhilde, the celestial warrior-maiden, to deprivation of her godhood for having disobeyed his command to side with Hunding, and in his person with the laws of conventional morality, against Siegmund who here stands for the cause of spirit versus the letter and as the exception that proves the rule. This story was taken by Wagner from an ancient German myth, a symbolical narrative, that is to say, charged with a metaphysical message which the composer must have felt instinctively even if he did not consciously penetrate its every meaning.

The crux of the story is that Wotan, to punish his daughter, turns her into an ordinary woman: that is to say, Brunhild is caused to exchange a state which, though it bespeaks superior powers, remains peripheral, in favour of the human state, which is central. Thus the seeming punishment becomes a real reward: as a further result, according to the myth, Brunhild, now a woman, becomes the spouse of Siegried, type of the Solar Hero—and let us not forget that traditionally "solarity" is an attribute of the Buddha himself. If we translate the episode into Buddhist terms, Brunhild's good *karma,* due to her having shown true discernment when faced with a crucial choice, won her a place on the axis

of Deliverance: this is the essential point, the "punishment" is only incidental. This all came to me in a flash, as I sat under the spell of that glorious music, which thus served as an *upāya* as a catalyst of wisdom hidden in the old German and Scandinavian mythology which otherwise I might never have discovered for myself.

iii. Thirdly and lastly: concerning *karma* as determinant of a man's vocation, of his own specific *dharma:*

We said, when discussing the first of our three headings, that a man *is* his *karma* inasmuch as he owes to it all the various elements of which his human personality is compounded, nothing being found there that he can call his own in the sense of a personal constant or selfhood.

Now what is received through one's *karma is* necessarily delimited: it includes certain elements and excludes others and these between them mark the positive and negative boundaries of the personality concerned. By the same token one is shown what possibilities of action lie open to one—as also of thought. since this is activity of a kind and limited in its own way. The things one lacks cannot be utilised, each man must needs work with the tools, mental or physical, he has been given and this means, in effect, that he will be qualified for certain kinds of activity and not for others: it indicates for each his own vocational trend and this, when one is striving to find one's centre is already a valuable pointer.

The Buddhas have trodden the path beforehand: they have left a tradition as a compass to keep men facing in the right direction together with various "means of grace" from the Noble Eightfold Program downwards. What even the Buddhas do not do, however, is to travel in our place; each must approach the Centre of Knowledge in his own peculiar way, for the experience of each being is unrepeatable, every possibility in the Universe is unique.

Let no one feel discouraged because his knowledge is as yet minute; rather let him think of enlarging it by every means in his power; minute or not, it is a spark and with a spark it is possible to kindle a still brighter lamp and thus pursue the way.

May that lamp grow, for each and all of us, till it has reached the brillance and magnitude of a Vaisakh Moon.[1]

[1] According to the Indian Calendar, the full moon in the month of May which marked the Buddha's Enlightenment at the foot of the World-Tree at Gaya.