

THREE: THE SOUL AND KARMA

Karma is a word derived from the Hindu religious scriptures; it is a Sanskrit word, meaning “actions” or “the result of actions.” The early Greek philosophers were familiar with this idea as well, and called it, *adrastreia*, “she from whom none can escape”. *Adrastreia* was a common epithet of the goddess, Rhea Cybele, in her attribute as the Mother who punishes human injustice. Both the Greeks and Romans identified her with Nemesis, or just retribution. Among the ancient Greek philosophers as well as in the Hindu tradition, the belief in the effects of one’s *karma*—the results of one’s actions—was integrally associated with and reliant upon a belief in the reincarnation or re-embodiment of the soul. Not only the Greeks, but some Jewish sects during the time of Jesus, as well as the Hindus, and the Buddhists, saw the soul’s progress toward enlightenment as a journey extending beyond one single life, and believed that this journey extended through many lifetimes and had cumulative causal effects from each life to the next.¹ According to this belief, the current state of our lives is the result of our actions, our *karma*, in our previous life. The sum of all those decisions and actions throughout our lives has resulted in our current life situation. According to this understanding, our lives are what we ourselves have made them. It may also be assumed that our present karma determines what we are to become in a subsequent lifetime. As Heraclitus said, “Character is destiny.”

Our actions are not always under our own rational determination, however. They may, in fact, be influenced by impulses that seem to arise out of the blue. We are all familiar with the struggle that often arises within us between a strong commitment to a personal ideal and a mental impulse to act in a way contrary to that ideal. This is familiar to all of us as “the temptation to sin”. And, all too often, we read on the front pages of our newspapers of celebrities or politicians who have famously lost that struggle and fallen from grace. But what, we must wonder, is the origin of this pervasive struggle, this wrenching conflict that we frequently experience within ourselves?

In some ancient cultures, a semi-divine alter-ego to God was suggested as the culprit—an invisible, but persuasive daemon variously known as “the devil”, “Satan”, or the fallen angel, “Lucifer”, whose purpose was to mislead the well-intentioned from their intended paths by whispering his fiendish suggestions into their inner ears. This fanciful daemon appeared in the

mythologies of many ancient religious cultures of the Middle East, such as the Zoroastrians, the Manichaeans, and the early Jews. In fact, this mythology seems to have been popular among the Jews at the time of Jesus, who taught that such daemons sometimes inhabited unwary individuals, and this legacy of daemonic possession passed into some branches of Christianity, where it remains to this day.

A dissimilar tradition arose in the Vedic culture in the Indian sub-continent of South Asia, which attributed this inner struggle not to a daemonic presence that contended with our divine conscience for our ear and allegiance, but rather to the presence within us of tendencies resulting from habits of the past stored within our minds or souls, much as physical characteristics are stored and contained in the codes of our inherited DNA. These tendencies, in the form of subtle desires, were called *vasanas*. It was also recognized that there were subtle “impressions” on our souls of the actions (*karma*) performed in both past and present lifetimes, which appeared as deeply ingrained habits influencing our current thoughts and activities; these were called *samskaras*.

Today, the science of evolutionary biology lends credence to the possibility of the existence within all of us of memories, impressions, going back even to pre-human states—impressions that originate in our mental and physical actions, and affect our neuronal ‘wiring’, including parts of our brains that may even be considered remnants of a reptilian evolutionary stage. Such impressions may be unique to our species, race, or regional origins, or may relate to specific experientially reinforced characteristics or traits unique to us as individuals. It has been suggested that these self-created and long-established impressions or tendencies (*vasanas* and *samskaras*) may be responsible for the “temptations” that sometimes pull at us from within, and not the whispered suggestions from some wily and invisible daemon from without.

Astrology claims a link between these karmic ‘impressions’ and the planetary patterns accompanying each new nativity on earth. In other words, astrologers assert that the positions and angular relationships between the planets of the solar system reflect or symbolize the positive and negative impressions or qualities of the soul born under those planetary configurations. For astrologers, a study of the map of the heavens accompanying the birth of millions of individuals has tended to uphold this conviction, though to the great majority of the uninitiated, the whole

proposition that the planets act as symbols of the characteristics of the individual psyche seems so farfetched that they won't even examine the evidence.

To me, it is abundantly evident that we create our own *vasanas* and *samskaras* by our subtle choices, and hence we create our own karma. Likewise, by our own choices, we purify our minds (souls) of the negative or harmful impressions and create new karma. But I don't see how this can be proven. Even if it is granted that the natal map (horoscope) accurately describes the characteristics of the soul born at that place and time, what prevents us from concluding that each of us is simply a result of the fortuitous timing and placement of our birth, with no previous karmic factors involved? In other words, might we not be simply the effects and artifacts of the planetary patterns in effect at our birth, leaving out any causal factors carried over from a previous incarnation?

It seems quite reasonable to accept this simpler hypothesis rather than the more complex one; but this simpler hypothesis implies a causal link between the planetary pattern at our birth and our soul-characteristics and makes us victims rather than fashioners of our individual fates. If we are nothing more than the effect of the transient planetary conditions present at our birth, then the arbitrary timing and placement on earth of our nativity determines whether we end up as a hopeless basket case or a prince of fortune, a schizophrenic in a mental ward or a wizened sage. If such is the case, we are not bearers of a soul evolved over lifetimes, but merely one-time manifestations of cosmic energies. We are not the result of past efforts and experiences; but merely a serendipitous stamp of the planetary pattern existing in the sky at the time and place of our birth. If this is the case, there is no reward for accumulated merit, no punishment attending wrong-doing, and all is mere accident and chance, a game of cosmic Russian roulette. Can we accept such a scheme? Would we wish to live in a world so unjustly framed?

We seem inclined by our very nature to believe, however, not only in a physical Cosmos ruled by cause and effect, but in a universal Psyche or Soul ruled by the same principle of *adrasteia*, whereby we reap just what we have sown. But it must be admitted that, while we have mountains of evidence to show that the planetary patterns accompanying human births appear to have a direct correlation with the soul characteristics of each human being, there is no empirical evidence for the existence or reincarnation of souls or for the

retention from one life to another of the karmic impressions of a past incarnation. This is not to say that there is no circumstantial or anecdotal evidence for metempsychosis or for the retention of past-life soul characteristics. It is simply a matter, I suppose, of what one wishes to regard as evidence that is compelling enough.

Personally, I find the notion of the reincarnation of the soul through multiple incarnations rationally appealing and worthy of acceptance—insofar as its purpose is not merely the obtaining of lifetimes of experience, but is for the evolution or purification of the soul, bringing it into likeness with the Divinity, and making it worthy to see and know itself as the one deathless Reality, the divine Self of all. There have been many examples of persons who have reported possessing memories of past life-experiences, but these reports are merely anecdotal. And I am conscious of the fact that this evolutionary scheme does not appeal to everyone, and that this and all the other metaphysical schemes are highly speculative and not immediately apparent or confirmable.

There is, of course, an alternative scheme taught in the Abrahamic religions, in which there is no transmigration of souls, but rather a one-time embodiment and then an eternity of reward or punishment based on one's behavior in that one embodiment. But this, as well as the conception of the transmigration of souls, is but a projection of the human mind, one of many imaginative schemes, with no conclusive evidence for any of them. We are blind as to the afterlife, and we are only able to guess at what the truth may be. We get an occasional glimpse, but not enough to know with certainty what to expect after passing from this current body. And yet, we forage on, prepared for all eventualities by holding on as best we can to the one certainty, the one great Light, the enduring Center, the Divine Self. For this much has been shown by direct experience to be true: that the one all-pervading Mind is the only reality, blissful forever, appearing as each and every one of us individual beings evolving through our paces on this spinning earth, within this revolving planetary circus, in our own bright corner of the universe.

NOTE:

1. See the article, “Reincarnation In The Bible” by Kevin R. Williams, B.Sc., at “Near-Death Experiences And The Afterlife” (<https://www.near-death.com>).

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