

Karma and the Environment

*A discourse by Guruji Sri Amritananda Natha
May 2006, at Devipuram*



It is true that we pay for what we do; or, to put it another way, that we reap what we sow. And the corollary commonly drawn from this rule seems to be that we *don't* reap what we have *not* sown. That part of the assumption, however, is wrong.

After all, someone else can perform an action – can “do a karma,” so to speak – for me, and I can benefit from it too. For example, farmers sow their seeds in the fields, and the vegetables they grow come to my table and I enjoy them. I did not sow those seeds, but I reaped their benefits. The things we enjoy are rarely the result of our personal actions alone, but are very much affected by the actions of the environment around us – in fact, the environment has a 99.9 percent role in what we say and do and we've got only a 0.1 percent role!

Really, the environment's karma is always acting on us and moving us in certain directions. So if you say, “my karma alone determines my future,” that's not correct. If you want to affect your future – which is 99.9 percent determined by the karma of others around you – then you've got to work on the environment, not just yourself.

That's why a management expert like Peter Drucker says the performance of a company is determined largely by forces outside the company. In the same way, your karmic results do not depend solely upon your efforts, but also on the environment around you. If your environment is a supportive one, your progress will be excellent. If your environment is working against you, you'll lose no matter how hard you try.

And that's the crux of the matter. You alone cannot determine your future. Everyone is creating it *together*. That's why Krishna says to Arjuna:

// karmani eva adhikarah te; ma phaleshu kadachana //

It means essentially, “You have the right to act, but not to the results of acting.” Again, that's because the results will be determined by the environment; they're not in Arjuna's control – they're not in *your* control. If you want to affect that massive portion of your destiny that is controlled by the environment, then you must either *become* the environment or else tune in to its wishes and visions so that it will support you and help amplify your efforts.

So that's how I look at karma: It's predetermined to a large extent – yes, agreed – but in a non-personal sense. And that is what puts the arrow on Time; that's what pins it down. Even so, I'm not so sure that people really get this part of it. They are always saying, “I'm the result of my karma alone.” But if you think about that for even a moment, it doesn't

make sense – not even from the moment of your birth! Your father and mother did some karma and as a result of that karma you were born into this world. Yes, the parents' karma reflects so very strongly on their children.

And that's the situation: The environment plays a large part in your life. You're doing your work; you're doing your karma properly. And yet, because of someone else's action, you suffer. What is to be done about that?

There are two things to be done: (1) you can remove yourself from your environment. If you were born in, say, Nicaragua, you can go to the U.S.A., Land of Opportunity. Pack up, leave everything behind, move to a new place; see if it helps. Or (2) you can help improve your present environment by tuning in to it; by merging with it. You've got to lose yourself. You've got to become your environment and work from there.



Aggregates of Life

That's where selflessness comes into the picture. In order to lose yourself and merge into your environment, you've got to understand the impulses that drive that environment. That is what all of our laws and constitutions and so on are trying to do – to abstract the principles that govern a society and define a life system or value system that extends beyond the personal.

So I've got my life, and my family has its own "family life." And every village and town likewise has a life of its own. Every nation has a life. The international regime has a life. And each of these lives contains separate lives within it. Each constitutes a sub-life of all these units. So there's nothing wrong in assuming that a nation or even a corporation has a life. A corporation is a living entity bound by certain rules and regulations which govern the flow of information in and around it. These flows are like the nervous currents that flow in our own bodies.

You see, a human being is not a single entity. It's a conglomerate. Every second there are about 1.2 million cells coming into your blood stream and another 1.2 million cells dying. It's a stream of life, which we simply consider – for convenience – to be a single person, a single entity. But this person does not die with each blood cell that dies and is not reborn with every new cell. So many lives are flowing through us. With such a complicated system in place, it really can't be said that such-and-such a person is always there – because he or she is becoming a different person with every second, every millisecond, and every nanosecond.

Each day you can put your feet in the river; but it's not the same river. It's a different river – different water, different fish, different silt and debris, different microbes with every passing moment – but you still call it by the same name. Likewise with the human entity: I call myself Sastry; but I'm not the same Sastry I was even one second ago.

So these names are confusing. The concept of the "individual self" is actually the concept of an aggregate. And once you accept that an aggregate can have a life – independent of any

particular cell coming into or passing out of it – then you’ll have no difficulty in understanding that a family has a life, a company has a life, a village has a life, a city has a life, Earth has a life, every planet has a life, the solar system has a life, Space has life. All of these are aggregate concepts; they simply represent different levels of the organization of intelligence.



Harmonizing with the Environment

To live in these aggregates – to live in your environment – requires both cooperation and a competitive spirit. Competitiveness enhances our quality of life; so does cooperation – but they are still opposing forces. How much competitiveness is appropriate and how much cooperation is a balance that each society strikes in its own way: A capitalist society defines it in one way, a communist society in another; and a religious institution will define it in yet a third way. There are different degrees of balance required, depending upon each given setup or context. Moreover, what is right for one person at one point of time is wrong for another person at another point of time: In the U.S.A., it’s often wrong if you’re not dating; in India, it’s often wrong if you are.

So how do we harmonize our own personal values with those of the environment in which we must function? Must we sometimes forsake our personal values? Should we forsake them here and there, now and then, or should we not?

Let’s look at the example of an orchestral musical composition. There is harmony in the music because the conductor tells the individual musicians in the orchestra, “Okay, now you play the violin at this octave, and you play the cymbals at this frequency,” and so on. And in order to achieve harmony, the musicians follow the conductor’s orders. In other words, we might say, they suppress their individual freedom to some extent – because if they were all to simply do their own thing, it would spoil the harmony. Similarly, for the sake of maintaining harmony in the aggregate life of our society, we are expected to follow certain rules and regulations – though the dynamic of following them is necessarily a suppression of our individual freedom.

In the world of business, to be frank, profitable trade usually depends upon someone cheating somebody else: “*Vyaparo dbroha chintanam.*” You have to give something less than what you get in order to make a profit, and profit is the supreme goal of business. Thus, corruption – in the sense of illegitimate earning – is necessarily part of the corporate ethic. In the same way, at any given moment, there are certain cells within you that represent chaos and disease, and others that represent order and maintenance. There is a war constantly ongoing between these two. Sometimes the protective white cells die; sometimes the invaders die; it’s a matter of life and death for the cells involved. Similarly, a company’s ethics represent the aggregate life of the corporate entity, whereas the personal ethics of an individual employee within that entity represent the life of the self. And these interests do diverge sometimes. They too can be at war.

Because it *is* a clash of values. An honest man in a corrupt society is a misfit: Either he becomes corrupt as well, or he perishes. That's just the way things are. Say, for example, that you need to get a government official's approval for some project and he lets you understand that a little money under the table will help make things happen. It's called "expediting money." Not corruption, of course.

What should you do? You've got to weigh the consequences – sometimes they're in your favor and sometimes not. And then you make a decision.

Which decision? I'll just say this: Peace of mind loses the battle when making money becomes the goal. People believe that money and the power are the means to achieving peace of mind. Then once they've accumulated these "means," they reason that since they can get peace of mind eventually anyway, why worry about it today? So it doesn't work – at the end of the day, you've got to ask yourself, "Look, do I want peace of mind? Or do I want power and money, which are the means to peace of mind?" If you choose the means, you forfeit the end: That's the clash that exists.

You see, what's wrong with the present paradigm is the equation that people make between possessions and happiness: The more you have, the happier you are, right? But that equation is valid only to certain extent: If you have a comfortable, air-conditioned house, what does it matter if that house has 60 rooms? You can only sleep in one of them. They say Bill Gates has a house with 120 rooms! But how many rooms can he live in?

What you enjoy is your wealth – what you don't enjoy really isn't yours at all. So this proportionality between possessions and peace flattens everything out. If I visit my friend's home for the night and he gives me the master bedroom to sleep in, then it's my house for the time I'm there. If you just let go of the concept of ownership, then all the houses in the world are yours. The concepts of "I" and "mine" are the problems.

The problem people have is failing to distinguish the point at which their wants and means are in proportion with one another. Because once you've crossed that equilibrium, it makes no difference whatsoever whether you have one million or 100 millions. Once you realize this truth, you're free to say, "I've got enough. I don't have to bend to anyone."



Astrology and the Environment

You can change the future, but you cannot know it. You can know the past, but you cannot change it. The present is the interface between knowing and changing, between knowing and acting. The past is history, the future a mystery. The past is His-story and the future is Her-story. The future belongs to the Mother and the past belongs to the Father.

It would be nice to know the future. All fear is caused by not knowing what the future holds. So people try to dispel its mystery by various means, such as astrology. And astrology can sometimes be a convenient thing, too! Say somebody has made a marriage proposal to your daughter. You don't like the match, but you don't want to take the blame for rejecting it. So you say, "The stars are bad; what can we do?"

As a result, many people conclude that astrology is based on myth. And it seems like a pretty good conclusion, doesn't it? Think about it: "What is your time of birth?" Well, what does *that* mean? Is it the time when the sperm meets the egg? Or is it when life occurs in the womb, which is the third month? Or is it when the head comes out of the womb? Or when the whole body comes out? Or when you cut the umbilical cord? What is the precise time of birth? Nobody specifies. What for? That's why they call astrology a pseudo-science.

But if we understand that every human being has a life, and that every planet has a life, and that each life interacts somehow with all other lives and therefore exerts some influence – well, then we can begin to understand astrology. The solar system has a life. And within that living entity, each planet is influencing the system's other entities in subtle ways that don't depend upon distance. To understand these interactions, or to get the right intuition about them, you need to do *sadhana*. For *sadhakas*, astrology works 100 percent. For people who want to earn money, it's all bunkum. There is a science and a non-science to astrology. And that is the difference between them.

So you do your *sadhana*. And once you realize that you are the Truth, what need have you to do more? Once you realize that all efforts take you away from yourself, then you can remove all the effort and just be what you are. What *sadhana* am I doing? I'm sitting and talking. I'm not doing *japa*. I'm not doing anything, just easing myself into a state of peace. That is what I'm doing.



Understanding Fear

All fear, once again, is caused by not knowing what the future holds. It's the fear of the unknown. And basically, it's a part of your programming as a human being. For most of human history, fear was necessary part of the life process itself. In the early days of civilization, people were living in the forests, jungles, savannahs – there was no light at night; no amenities. So every little noise that one heard had to be immediately interpreted and understood: “Should I be afraid of it? Should I face it? Should I run away? How should I react to it?” Fight or flight; that kind of instinct was necessary. And basically it's a process of naming – the mind seeks to name what it perceives, and if it cannot find a name then its level of alertness spikes.

What happens at a biochemical level is that catecholamines are released into the bloodstream, abruptly raising your energy to levels ten or 20 times higher than normal. Suddenly you're hit with a rush of energy strong enough to let you battle a tiger if necessary. The catecholamines are released during that brief moment before reasoning, understanding and labeling kick in. It's a superpower charge that lasts only ten seconds at the most and then dies down.

At that point, the mind takes another route; it begins reasoning and labeling: “Okay, that sound is the hiss of a snake; I should be afraid of it.” Once that thought arises, it's no longer a general rush of catecholamines pumping into your bloodstream; it's specifically a dose of adrenalin. The adrenalin prepares your system for a longer, sustained energy release of 20 minutes or so. Unlike the catecholamines, it can't deliver 20 times your normal energy – the adrenalin gives you much less; maybe 1.1 times normal. Then, after a little while, if your system keeps getting the same kind of impulse over and over, it releases additional shots of adrenalin. And as the adrenalin level in your bloodstream builds, there comes a point where the threshold is exceeded. At that moment, fear takes over.

So it's a three-step process: First, at the pre-recognition stage, there is no fear. Next, at the post-recognition/pre-reason threshold, there is unknown fear. And finally, at the moment our mind crosses that threshold from the subconscious to the conscious level, there is known fear. If you want to learn more about these concepts, you can read the book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman. Psychiatry explores fear quite deeply.

But let me put it to you very simply: It's Krishna you're afraid of. It's Kali you're afraid of. The unknowable; the unseen; death; the abyss into which you must one day fall, and from which you believe you can never return. The vastness of Space, the loss of your identity – that is what you fear.

And that fear is with you from the moment of your birth, when you emerge from your mother's womb. Before birth, the umbilical cord connected you to your mother. Through it, blood streamed from your mother into to you; through it, your mother breathed for you, with oxygen mixed into your blood. There's no need to breathe as you drift in the amniotic

fluid; it's so nice and smooth inside. But then you grow and grow, and things quickly change – soon you're fighting for a little space.

Then one day, you begin to fall, slipping downward. You're being squeezed; your entire body is under stress. Suddenly, something hard and cold clasps your head and you don't even have the language to express the fear. And that fear only increases once you emerge from the birth canal, your warm liquid environment abruptly replaced by an air environment. The umbilical cord is cut, and with it your oxygen supply. You're fighting for breath. Your lungs are filled with liquid, so the nurse holds your feet and gives you a slap. You cry out as your lungs fill with air.

So you're crying for life from the very moment of your birth. It is the deepest trauma your system ever knew, and you're afraid of repeating the process: "Am I going to die again?" That's your unknown fear and you have no language to express it. Before a child is socialized and educated, its only language is laughing and crying – binary emotion. You're happy, you're sad. You're hungry, you're full. You don't know what you want. Then suddenly something pokes into your mouth and you start sucking; an instinctive reflex. You taste some sweet liquid and suddenly you're happy and you smile. So the breast is a child's first interaction with its mother after the womb – is it any wonder there are so many breast fixations on the male side?

From the womb to the breast and on into the world beyond, our individual lives – and consequently, our individual karmic dispositions – are profoundly driven by the myriad environments we pass through on our journey. If you want to change the aggregate values of the environments you inhabit, you've basically got to start a new society and then educate its individual members into these new values. In the meantime, you have a choice: You can either merge with your environment and help drive its flow, or else be swept up in it and let it drive you.