

*Discharging the duty
of another is dangerous*



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It is better to do one’s own duty, even though it be devoid of excellence, than to perform another’s duty well. It is better to perish in the performance of one’s own duty; the duty of another is full of danger.

— *Bhagavad-Gītā* iii, 35; tr. Judge.

Our prime duty is to love our brother as ourselves, and to preserve peace and harmony around him.

It is the aim of the T.S.¹ to bring to the notice of those who are inclined to admit the spiritual nature of man and his progressive evolution, that on another plane of existence, a plane which partakes of a wider field of consciousness and which lies within the capability of development in every individual, that on that higher plane there is a spiritual unity, a Universal Brotherhood of mankind, and on that plane of being there is no separateness from homogeneous existence; and further that no permanent progress is possible through fostering the illusion of separateness, and that man’s true duty at all times and in all circumstances is the love of his kind and the preservation of harmony around him.²

Then we have to discover what we ourselves can do, without judging or criticizing the actions of another.

Each man is a potency in himself, and only by working on the lines which suggest themselves to him can he bring to bear the forces that are his. We should deny no man and interfere with none; for our duty is to discover what we ourselves can do without criticizing the actions of another. The laws of karmic action have much to do with this. We interfere for a time, with good results to come, when we attempt to judge according to our own standards the methods of work which a fellow member proposes for himself. Ramifying in every direction are the levers that move and bring about results, some of those levers — absolutely necessary for the greatest of results — being very small and obscure. They are all of them human beings, and hence we must carefully watch that by no word of ours the levers are obstructed. If we attend strictly to our own duty all will act in harmony, for the duty of another is dangerous

¹ [Theosophical Society]

² *Echoes of the Orient*, Vol. I, 2009: “Theosophy and the Theosophical Society,” p. 181.

for us. Therefore if any member proposes to spread the doctrines of Theosophy in a way that seems wise to him, wish him success even if his method be one that would not commend itself to you for your own guidance.¹

We should attend strictly to our own duty at all times.

Discharging the duty of another is dangerous for us.

If it is true that to ascertain the truth of the doctrines put forward by Theosophy many lives will be required after one has started on the Path, how and where am I to find that Path and to know it when I do?

But it is not necessary one should know that he is on the path. If he uses his best reason, best intuition, and best effort to find out his duty and do it, then one may be sure the path is there without stopping to look for it. And the path for one person may be the carting of packages, while for another it may lie in deep study or contemplation. On this the *Bhagavad-Gītā* [iii, 35] says that the duty of another is full of danger, and it is better to die in the performance of one's own duty than to perform most wonderfully the duty of another.²

More! We should be ever ready to help out equally foe or friend, without any desire for reward or recognition.

If another by altruistic service benefits one, is not such action vicarious and inconsistent with Karma?

A common error, which arises from incompletely viewing the doctrine of Karma, is the idea that we interfere with Karma when we benefit another. The question is equally applicable to the doing of any injury to another. It cuts both ways; so we might as well ask if it is not inconsistent with the law and vicarious for one to do any evil act which results harmfully to a fellow creature. In neither case is there vicarious atonement or interference. If we can do good to our fellows, that is their good Karma and ours also; if we have the opportunity to thus confer benefits and refuse to do so, then that is our bad Karma in that we neglected a chance to help another. The Masters once wrote that we should not be thinking on our good or bad Karma, but should do our duty on every hand and at every opportunity, unmindful of what may result to us. It is only a curious kind of conceit, which seems to be the product of nineteenth century civilization, that causes us to falsely imagine that we, weak and ignorant human beings, can interfere with Karma or be vicarious atoners for others. We are all bound up together in one coil of Karma and should ever strive by good acts, good thoughts and high aspirations, to lift a little of the world's heavy Karma, of which our own is a part. Indeed, no man has any Karma of his own unshared by others; we share each one in the common Karma, and the sooner we perceive this and act accordingly the better it will be for us and for the world.³

¹ *Echoes of the Orient*, Vol. I, 2009: "Methods of Theosophical Work," p. 205.

² *ibid.*, Vol. II, 2009: Question 4 to *The Theosophical Forum* (New Series), p. 371.

³ *ibid.*, *The Vahan*, Question III to "The Enquirer," p. 245.

He who considers himself a Karmic agent, for any purpose, is a fool.

Does an individual when acting as an agent for Karma entail any Karmic consequences upon himself because of the acts thus committed?

A great many of the things said by the Editor in the foregoing are very good, but I am compelled to differ from him on the main point. And I may say that while the articles "Topics in Karma"¹ are very well written, they do not by any means dispose of the question raised here. In the first place, the questioner assumes in the first ten words of the question that a human being sometimes is not an agent of Karma. According to my studies, and as I think inevitable according to the law of Karma, there is no time when a human being is not an agent of Karma, for in every act and thought we are carrying out Karma, making new Karma, suffering old Karma, or producing effects on other people, or all these together. This is clearly stated by the Editor in the first paragraph of his answer. So I take it that the questioner means to ask whether one is justified in attempting, of his own motion, to administer as judge, jury, and executioner, to another the effects of Karma. This is involved in the question, as well as whether any consequences are entailed upon a person so acting. Now the first paragraph of the Editor's answer stating clearly the law, it must follow that consequences are entailed upon someone in this supposed case of a person making himself a direct Karmic agent. Certainly both the actor in the case and the person to whom the punishment or reward is administered must have consequences entailed upon them, because the "Karmic agent" is the centre from which the action flows, and upon whom it must react, and the other person is the person who receives the present consequences. Merely to say to yourself that you are enforcing a right or administering what you conclude is punishment or reward does not absolve you from the consequences, whatever those may be. And those consequences will come to you in two ways. First, through your own attitude, and second, from what you set up in the other person. Involved in the first is a seemingly third possibility, which is a possible violation by you through ignorance of a law of nature. For instance, if you assume to administer punishment, considering yourself a Karmic agent, it is more than possible that you are simply gratifying some old spite or ill-feeling, under the guise of a judicial enforcement of right or punishment for wrong. We see this possibility every day in those cases where a person, declaring himself to be impartial and judicial, administers on the one hand to persons whom he does not particularly like punishment which he considers their just due, and withholds similar punishment from another person for whom he has such a regard that he fails to administer punishment, but exercises instead forgiveness and charity. This being a common human experience, does it not indicate that inasmuch as a person is through old Karmic likes and affinities led to be kind and charitable through what is called partiality, he may on the other hand, through old dislikes and antipathies, be led by a repulsion to administer punishment, when he might as well have exercised forgiveness? Each man, I think, can be left to himself to decide what is his duty in redressing wrong done to another, which redressing involves perhaps the punishment of a third. But in my opinion no one is wise who considers himself a Karmic agent for any purpose. Further, and overlooked by the Editor and apparently by the questioner, the term "Kar-

¹ [See *Theosophical Siftings*, Vol. IV, 1891-2, No. 14-15.]

mic agent” has a technical significance under which only certain persons are so considered; that is, the larger class of men are not Karmic agents, except in the mere sense that they are in the very act of life making or experiencing Karma in the mass. A few persons are what is known as “Karmic agents,” that is, human beings who by a certain course of training and previous life have become concentrated agents for the bringing about of certain definite effects which are well foreseen by the trained and initiated seer. This is one of the declarations of the Initiates who are supposed to know about these matters, and therefore any person assuming to be a Karmic agent may possibly be assuming too much altogether, and be bringing himself within the range of laws which will operate upon him with tenfold force in future lives. It is therefore more charitable, more wise, more kind, more theosophical to follow the words of Jesus, Buddha, and hosts of other Teachers which direct us to forgive our brother seventy times seven times, which tell us that charity covers a multitude of sins, and which warn us against the self-righteousness that might induce us to presume we have been raised up from the foundation of the world to correct abuses in other men’s actions rather than to attend to our own duty.¹

It would be wiser for all students to embrace every opportunity to act in a manner that fosters true brotherhood.

Those fools who run about pretending to be sages and adepts will pay dearly for their presumption.

I am told that an Adept has said “that one can help or cure another if his Karma does not prevent it.” Am I to understand that when suffering is before me I am not to relieve it if in my power to do so, on the ground that the suffering person’s Karma has brought him there and I must not interfere? Some Theosophists have enunciated this rule.

If an Adept said this it is not incorrect. But no Adept ever drew the conclusion you give. Some Theosophists have, we are sorry to say, declared that they may not help for the reason stated. It is not theosophical to take such a position. The sufferer’s Karma truly produced the suffering, but your Karma offers the opportunity for a kind deed that may relieve him; it may be his Karma to be relieved by you. It is your duty to do this kind act, of whatever nature it be. The meaning of the declaration attributed to the Adept is that you are to try to relieve suffering, which effort will have a beneficial effect unless the Karma of the sufferer prevents: but you know nothing of his Karma and must not judge it; your duty lies in the act presented to you for performance, and not with its result nor with the possible hindrances resulting from the Karma. The wrong view given by you in your question arises from the conceited attitude of persons who, having slight knowledge, presume to be the judges of others and of the great and hidden causes springing from Karma. Knowledge of these causes and of their operation in any particular case comes only to those who have reached Adeptship; for, in order to rightly judge how to rightly act, you must know absolutely the other’s Karma, together with your own, in order not to fall into the awful error of deliberately sinning. It would be wiser for all students to seek to do their duty and to act as true brothers on every occasion than to run about endeavouring to imitate Sages and Adepts.²



¹ *Echoes of the Orient*, Vol. II, 2009: Question 244 to *The Theosophical Forum*, pp. 325-27.

² *ibid.*, Question from *The Path*, pp. 404-5.