

KARMA AND REINCARNATION

History of Understanding Karma

The Antyesti (Final rite) of a person is a practice in which the body of the sacrificed, for example the deceased, is used as a material offering. It is a process in which the dead person is moved away from the living world into another life form.

Karma, the doctrine which is now famously used to understand aspects of physical and spiritual life all over the world was introduced after the well-known Brahman sage

Yajnavalka recited the formal Vedic doctrine for a dead person on their funeral pyre. In many scholarly texts, it is described that Karman was first recognized when Yajnavalka was asked by an associate, Artabhaga, “What becomes of a person who is dead?”

Yajnavalka and Artabhaga had a long conversation in which Yajnavalka concluded with the doctrine of Karman (action) (Tull 2). He states clearly that a person’s actions are judged as good Karman when good deeds are performed and bad Karman when bad actions are performed. This, he said, is what determines a person’s afterlife. The first mention of the Karman principle according to scholars is generally agreed to be in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad which is an early Upanisad (Tull 28). The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad is acknowledged as belonging to the 600-500 BCE time period. In order to understand the principle of Karman, scholars initially had to separate the Brahmanas from Upanisads. They agreed that the Upanisads focused on the nature of reality in one’s life whereas Brahmanas focused more on proper ritual and sacrifices included in Hindu tradition such as the Antyesti ritual (Tull 3).

Earlier on there were many debates on the topic of Karman and on what Karman was primarily based. Yajnavalka had stated that good and proper performance of rites along with bad or incorrect performance of rites will determine what type of afterlife lies

before a dead person. He was not referring to the funeral rite as people originally thought. He was actually referring to the acts performed by the individual in his lifetime before death took place. This is because a dead person cannot perform their own death rites once they are physically dead. Scholars concluded that Yajnavalka was referring to a lifetime of sacrificial performances and duties that are prescribed in Hindu texts and scriptures that are supposed to be followed by good Hindus (Tull 2).

In one explanation of Hindus' views on Karman, it is represented through the cultivation of rice. Rice symbolizes the rebirths of people because rice is actually planted twice throughout its life span. First the seed is planted; then the seedling is planted again to be harvested over a year, repeatedly, as opposed to being harvested just once during one season. This symbolizes the passing of a person, who also goes through many lives if she or he has not freed themselves from the Karman chain or the cycles of rebirth (Tull 5). Scholars have used Yajnavalka's statement to understand Karman and the conditions a person endures after physical life has passed. Conditions are determined and result from the actions that the individual had taken part in before death occurred. This is what is now labelled as the principle of Karman (Tull 28).

Purpose of Karma

The purpose of the Karma doctrine is to help people better judge actions they performed during their lifetime, and this, in return, made people want to perform better actions. A person can take on from a variety of different Rupas (Form) in their next life (Tull 31). [For further readings regarding different Rupas, see Wadia]. Sometimes people will endure pain, sorrow and death in a new life which is the result of something that happened in their previous life. This Prarabdharman (Result) follows a person into

their new life, and as is said in Western terms, it haunts that person till they receive recognition for their actions (Neufeldt 62). In Hinduism it is also believed that in order to release the Jiva (Soul) from another sorrowful rebirth, the family can take the ill or dying person to the Ganga River, a known Hindu holy river and there perform a ritual bathing with the aid of a Brahman priest. Through this rite the participants can transfer some of their own good Karman to their dying relative (Neufeldt 62-63).

Karman entails that a person's present state is not a consequence of present actions but is due to actions that have taken place during his or her previous state or of lives. Also, Karman theorizes that one's actions during the present life will determine the consequences one suffers or will face in the next life (Neufeldt 2). N.A. Nikam, a scholar, states: "The Law of Karma is based on the reality of human freedom, and it pre-supposes the notion of responsibility, and the Law does not state an unalterable necessity but a modal possibility or a conditional relativity" (Neufeldt 4). This statement implies that persons are capable of changing their fate which is pre-determined at birth or perhaps before birth in a possible positive way so that way they are free to do as they wish along with being able to shape their future according to what they want. [For further readings on scholarly discussions regarding Karma views, see Neufeldt].

Other scholars also have another view in which they agree that what is actually happening in the concept of Karma is all rooted from Avidya (Ignorance). "Your experiencing the fruits is not due to your Karma, but Avidya" (Neufeldt 8). Fruits, in this context are referring to consequences one may endure in their lifetime. This is also what the Upanisads state in their teachings of Karma; one's ignorance can also decrease chances of attaining Moksa (Liberation). [For further readings regarding Avidya and Karma, see Anand 278-281]. This explanation does make common sense because it has a

part of our everyday lives. For example, if an aspect is ignored in our daily lives, there are more chances that we will not respond to that aspect and therefore, in the end, we must suffer the consequences of our chosen actions; in this case to ignore the aspect. An example to illustrate this is if one's grandmother is really ill and the person doesn't make an effort to stand by her and enjoy with her the last few moments of her life; there will be consequences to suffer once the grandmother has passed away that cannot be taken back because when the grandmother was alive, the person didn't make time (the aspect ignored) to be with her. Like this example, there are many examples in one's life where aspects are simply ignored and dwelled upon later when nothing can be done to change it.

Ending the Cycles of Rebirth

In Hinduism, there are three yogas or theories that help many people lead good lives and therefore reinforcing good karmic acts. The three following concepts are mentioned in one of Hinduism's widely read scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita* or the "Song of the Lord." The Karma-Marga is followed by many people and fairly common amongst Hindus. The *Bhagavad Gita* represents Karma-Marga as a path into liberation and self-realization. The Mimamsa School, which is very Orthodox in its views, suggests that Karman acts as a connecting bridge between the soul and any bondage it may acquire (Anand 278). In Karma-Marga, according to Mimamsa, sins can include Pratisiddha (prohibited acts) along with Kamya Karmas (selfish acts). There is also the non-performing acts category in which one would not be performing the proper Nitya (obligatory) and Naimittika Karmas (occasional acts) of appropriate Hindu Dharma. A person who is trying to attain Moksa (liberation) from the endless cycles of rebirth should

end all acts that would be categorized as Pratisidda and Kamya Karmas (Anand 278-279). This person must perform the proper acts which are Nitya and Naimittika Karmic acts as is recommended in Hindu scriptures. The purpose of this theory is that when the person's physical body falls, the person would have already achieved Moksa therefore there are no Karmas left to be judged, in order to give him another birth cycle. Since Mimamsa is only one view of this concept and regarded as very proper and Orthodox in its interpretations, not all Hindus believe this view, as there are many others (Anand 278-279).

The second view is called Jnana-Marga. Jnana meaning "knowledge," shows that this view is dominated by an outlook where having transcendental knowledge is a crucial aspect. Karma-Marga and Jnana-Marga are different from each other because in Karma-Marga, action and performing correct duties is important, whereas in Jnana-Marga, having intuitive knowledge is an important feature. Having knowledge would entail that one is to know *Brahman* or the Divine Being as believed by Hindus. According to the Mimamsa view, everything else is ignorance and foolish, consisting of people who think they are wise and have learned everything but yet still go from life to life, round and round without true meaning and suffer from misery. The basic statement is that true nature of the self is not different from Brahman but it is Brahman itself. Mimamsa states that a person who thinks otherwise is a fool and therefore goes from death to death and birth to birth. This ignorance can only be removed by knowledge and not only good Karma can remove a person from the re-birth cycle. A person wishing to attain this state obtains this by practicing the Patanjala Yoga in which his intellectual side is the greatest self. The Patanjala Yoga can be summarized in the following hierarchy order. One's speech derives from the mind (before speaking, one thinks about it in their mind); his

mind is due to his intellect (what the mind contains is due to certain knowledge or experience one has) and therefore raising intellect (what one knows) to the greatest level in order to achieve this goal (Anand, 279-280).

The Astangika-Yoga is used to help control outwards thoughts of the mind. This yoga removes all illusions from the mind allowing the individual to focus on what actually exists, which is known as absolute reality. As soon as this knowledge is understood there is no more bondage to the soul. Spiritual knowledge is emphasized in Jnana-Yoga to help a person realize the true nature of Brahman that is equated to knowing himself better (Anand, 278). This theory states that everyone has this knowledge, but it is hidden within people. An example to illustrate this knowledge is that this knowledge was also hidden in Newton's mind, till he came to understand that absolute knowledge better (Anand 279-281).

The final way in which one may escape reoccurring cycles of birth is through the Bhakti-Marga. This is a path in which devotion or pure faith in a deity is placed. According to the Mimamsa view, the devotee (person who is worshipping the deity) believes that they have a part in his or her Lord's world. An example to better demonstrate Bhakti-Marga is to imagine the devotee as an instrument placed in the hands of his Lord. Through worshipping, along with encompassing chaste faith, the devotee becomes an aspirant for deserving liberation. These devotees believe that there is no such thing as difference in caste, beauty, wealth, creed or occupation. Everyone is alike to them and therefore all these proper actions of devotion according to Orthodox Mimamsa views, will help end the cycles of rebirth for the devotee (Anand 281).

Through these various views or theories in accordance to the Mimamsa School, one can perform proper daily tasks and duties to escape from sin and wrong doings or in

other words staying away from Pratisidda and Kamyas, one can escape from the cycles of rebirth (Anand 281-289).

Karma has transformed from being an ancient belief explaining to Hindus, along with many others in the world, where people go after they die into a more sophisticated belief about what people can do to gain liberation and end the cycles of rebirth. Karma and reincarnation interactively play a role in helping people determine spiritual beliefs on what may happen to them in their next birth or aid in explaining metaphysical matters which cannot be explained by the world of science.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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- Wadia, A. R. (1965) "Philosophical Implications of the Doctrine of Karma." *Philosophy East and West* 15, no.2: 145-152.

RELATED TOPICS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Antyesti
Brahman
Yajnavalka
Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad
Brahmanas
Upanisads
Indus Valley Civilization
Rupas
Jiva
Prarabdhakarma
Priesthood in Hinduism
Avidya
Moksa
Bhagavad-Gita
Karma-Marga
Mimamsa School
Dharma
Jnana-Marga
Patanjala Yoga
Astangika-Yoga
Bhakti-Marga

NOTEWORTHY WEBSITES RELATED TO THE TOPIC

<http://www.himalayanacademy.com/resources/pamphlets/KarmaReincarnation.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma#Law_of_Karma

<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/conceptofkarma.asp>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma#Hinduism>

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<http://www.indianchild.com/karma.htm>

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