

REINCARNATION AND KARMA

The belief in rebirth and various realms is a common ideology in Hinduism. According to Hinduism a soul is reincarnated again and again, undergoing many experiences, until it achieves perfection and unites as one with the divine. This idea of rebirth is referred to as reincarnation, that death relates only to the physical body but the soul continues on and is reborn into another body, human, animal or sometimes even a vegetable (Wadia 145). This continuing worldly existence is called *samsara*, which literally means “to wander” or “to flow together,” and thus refers to the cycle of repeated births (Rodrigues 94). Reincarnation is never a stand-alone doctrine; rather it is dictated by the law of *karma*. The word *karma* is derived from the ancient Sanskrit language of India, which literally means to “work” or “to act” (Garrett 37). *Karma* stands for all activity, motion or change which the world experiences, and thus the entire world is subject to the law of that which is *karma* (Singh 11). It is the law of the cosmos and the path leading to the absolute reality, Brahman. The idea that one’s actions have consequences in this life or the next and on subsequent rebirths, developed during the Upanisad period. It is in the Upanisad stories, for example that of the great sage Yajnavalkya, that the idea of reincarnation emerges (Wadia 146). Since then it has become a core ideology in the whole of India. *Karma* thus sets up a world of justice whereby every action has its outcome, whether good or bad. [For more interesting facts on *karma* and rebirth in classical Indian traditions see O’Flaherty (1980)]. It is difficult to write a paper on such a topic as reincarnation, as it takes on diverse meanings to individual Hindus. This paper attempts to only give a broad and general sense of the doctrine of reincarnation and *karma*.

In certain schools of Hindu metaphysics, the true identity of the self, the true Self, is not limited to the physical body; rather it is of a spiritual essence which is subject to rebirth when the current body possessed dies. This spiritual essence undergoes a chain of rebirths into many different bodies, forms, and personalities that are all just temporary vehicles of the true self, until one finally achieves liberation, *moksa* (Garrett 18). One can only achieve *moksa* through realizing this so called “true self” (or *atman*) and renouncing this worldly life. This would entail embodying the Dharma ideals of Hinduism so that you build good *karma*, and instead of coming back as say an animal or a lower class Hindu, you could become a god. [Singh (1981) explores more on the concept of Dharma]. It is important to note that Karma Yoga from the *Bhagavad Gita* takes a bit of a different stance than that of orthodox views on reincarnation and *karma*; in that it states that anyone, no matter what class, can be liberated. Even a householder can achieve liberation through self-realization. *Moksa* can be achieved simply by doing the right thing, in practicing your duties and with interaction in everyday societal life, as long as one avoids attachment to the fruits of the action; that is one should not be concerned with success or failure. Basically one should perform their duty while at the same time renouncing the world (Rodrigues 250). [For more on this topic of Karma yoga see Singh (1981)].

The idea of *karma* and reincarnation provides one with motivation to be better, or as some may say “fighting the good fight.” Being selfless in action, doing good to/for others, performing duties, practicing rituals, obeying class systems, is all a part in building good *karma* and seeking liberation in the Hinduism view. *Karma* can also present a solution to the everyday question of why good people sometimes suffer, or why bad people seem to get away with things (Wadia 145). Instead of feeling like the world is unfair and being confused as to why all this would happen, one need only to look at the ideas of reincarnation and *karma*, and see that life is

everything but unfair. This allows people to view suffering, misfortune, their current position in society, or even the way they look (i.e. their appearance), as consequences to their actions. In this sense it promotes one to take responsibility for their action. But it is important to realize that *samsara*, *karma* and *reincarnation* are not to be viewed as a burden from which to flee. Rather these are doctrines that promote growth, education and opportunities to learn from mistakes (Neufeldt 16).

The idea of reincarnation is not limited to Hinduism, it can be found in other faiths (e.g. Buddhism) and it touches some who do not even relate to a specific religion. But it is important to note that reincarnation takes on different meanings in relation to different faiths and cultures. For example, Henry Ford spoke on the importance of reincarnation theory to his life by stating: “I adopted the theory of reincarnation when I was twenty-six...Religion offered nothing to the point...Even work could not give me complete satisfaction. Work is futile if we cannot utilize the experience collected in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation ...time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the clock...the discovery of Reincarnation put my mind at ease...” (Garrett 22). In Henry Ford’s case the idea of reincarnation is not from a religious perspective, but more of an avoidance of the idea of death and an opportunity to continue in the enjoyment of this worldly life. He looks forward to being reincarnated again and again, not to reunite with any god or for liberation of any kind, like in the case of Hindus, but for the mere pleasure of continuing on in this world and basking in its enjoyment. This is the appeal of reincarnation to some, in that it is a kind of way to escape the fears of death in hopes of being reborn over and over again, providing a kind of immortality. This is one way to look at the doctrine. But for Hindus reincarnation as an escape from the reality of death tends to take away

from the beauty of the doctrine to begin with. The doctrine, in Hinduism, was not build on such principles; to hope for an eternal worldly life is to never realize the true self.

The doctrine of reincarnation is not itself difficult to understand, but the way in which people believe it is what makes for a more challenging task. More often than not there are differing views, as with any faith, on how reincarnation works in Hinduism and in many other religions and cultures adopting the doctrine. There are typically two ways in which one understands concepts in religion, literally or metaphorically (Garrett 18). And the question becomes should reincarnation be taken literally? Or should it be taken in a more metaphorical sense? There may be some dangers to taking the concept of *karma* and reincarnation too literally. The idea of reincarnation has found expression in India not as a metaphor, but as a metaphysical certainty. Reincarnation has justified social disparities and misery as being due to bad *karma* (Garrett 20).

Some controversy has surrounded certain practices in India as being social consequences to the doctrine of reincarnation and *karma*. For example, the caste system, *varna*, in India is well known to be firmly established to this day as a possible by-product of *karma* and reincarnation. There are four classes within the caste system, with the priestly class (i.e. Brahmin class) at the high end of the scale, who would represent good *karma* in action. Then there are the lowest of all lows, those who do not even get grouped into the caste system, but rather are the outcastes of society. The untouchables (or Candalas) represent the lowest end of the scale in the caste system, and embody bad *karma* in action. Because *karma* states that one pays consequences for action from past lives, it has provided some with the mentality that the untouchables deserve everything they get. In this sense, some believe that reincarnation and *karma* have increased tensions in India between the different classes, and justified mistreatment of individuals. To illustrate the

point, Tom O'Neil says (from an issue of National Geographic): "During the winter I spent in India, hardly a day passed that I didn't hear or read of acid thrown in a boy's face, or a wife raped in front of her husband, or some other act whose provocation was simply that an Untouchable didn't know his or her place" (Garrett 71). Here it is evident that the cultural manifestation of *karma* in India is very different from the formal terms of the theory (Garrett 58). These tragic outcomes have been explained by some as simply a tragic misunderstanding of reincarnation and *karma*. Swami Shivananda tries to clear these misconceptions: "Caste is a question of character. *Varna* is not the color of the skin, but the color of one's character or quality," (Garrett 71). Reincarnation and *karma* need not necessarily be linked to the caste system, as stated previously; in *karma* yoga untouchables can seek *moksa* just like a Brahmin can. Hindu texts have offered different ways to looking at the concept of reincarnation and *karma*, leaving much room for different interpretations.

The doctrine of reincarnation and *karma* are a means to promote good behavior, morality and growth in Hinduism. *Karma* speaks not only of how things are, but also of how they ought to be, it points towards the goal of liberation and enlightenment (Garrett 37). It is not easy for one to say that tensions within the caste system in India exist because of reincarnation and *karma*, because they are not necessarily linked to one another. Hinduism is a religion of diverse thoughts and beliefs, and its followers carry differing views and ideas on religious concepts.

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<http://www.shaivam.org/hipkarma.htm>

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

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Past_lives

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation_and_Hinduism

<http://www.spiritual-wholeness.org/faqs/reincgen/hindrein.htm>

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

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