

The Cosmic Cycle in Hinduism

Hinduism is an Indian religion that is thousands of years old. The Hindu belief system is based on four fundamental principles. They are the principle of rebirth or reincarnation, the principle of cause and effect (karma), the principle of birth, death, rebirth (samsara), and the principle of liberation (moksha). These four principles govern the system of the belief system in Hinduism, as these principles teach the followers and believers of the values, notions, mannerisms, and lifestyle that is acceptable and pleasing to the gods (Sivananda).

Fundamental Principles

The first principle is that of rebirth and reincarnation. The belief is that the soul or the Atman, after death, takes on a new physical body. This process continues until the soul is liberated, or receives Moksha. The concept and understanding of rebirth and reincarnation are spoken about in Katha Upanishad and in the Bhagavad Gita. In Katha Upanishad, the god of death and the underworld, Yama, explains to Nachiketa about metaphysics involving the soul and the life after death. In the Gita, Lord Krishna, who is the manifestation of the supreme deity Vishnu, makes Arjuna understand the meaning of different Vedantic and Yogic philosophies. This conversation was initiated due to Arjuna's moral dilemmas and the uncertain feeling he had before the great war. Both the texts describe that death is natural and unavoidable, but it is not the real end, as the Atman moves on to a different and new body until it is ready to unite with Brahman or the ultimate reality (Dalal).

The second principle is the principle of cause and effect. Cause and effect are tied to the term “karma”, as karma means the work, deed, or action done. Hinduism believes that karma is responsible for the quality of life that humans experience. The concept of karma ties in with rebirth and reincarnation. It is believed that good deeds done in a person’s past life will enable them to have a good life in the present and bad deeds done in the past life will bring misfortune and bad effects on the person’s current life. Karma stays with the Atman as it leaves one physical body and moves into another body.

The third principle is the principle of Samsara. Samsara is said to be the cycle of life, which includes birth, death, and rebirth. The two principles that were discussed previously come within the principle of Samsara. Samsara includes the process of reincarnations and also the factor of karma (Dalal). In the Gita, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna the importance of Samsara. Additionally, the Upanishads also teach and explain the concept of Samara along with the other principles.

The fourth and final principle is moksha. Moksha is defined as the liberation of Atman from Samsara. The Atman becomes free of the endless cycle of rebirth and reincarnation and merges with the Brahman. Moksha is a concept that can be translated as the liberation of the soul after death, or it can be translated as the liberation of the soul from physical attachments, which hold no value in the afterlife and the next life. These four principles ultimately teach humanity to follow certain paths and rules if they want to be one with the Brahman.

The Two Opposing Strands

The Hindu cosmology and religious systems were based on two specific goals: to maintain the cosmic order, and to achieve liberation from the cosmic order. The goal to maintain the cosmic order was based on the belief that the Vedic hierarchical structure must be maintained to ensure the continuity of the world. On the other hand, there existed the need for the liberation from the cosmic order that divided the society. The cosmic order assigned a hierarchical structure that made the social structure for poor people very hard and discriminatory. People believed that they needed to break away from this system in order to achieve true freedom and peace.

Political and religious powers were assigned to different classes while the people at the bottom of the hierarchy did not receive any support or powers. The warrior class, Kshatriyas governed the military and political matters, while the priestly class, Brahmins, took care of the spiritual and religious aspects of the system. This gave rise to the discrimination and superiority complex among the rich and powerful. The lower classes, Vaishyas and Shudras were looked down upon by the upper class. These factors brought forth the need to break free from the existing structure, in the minds of the lower classes (Narayanan). This liberation was defined as Moksha, where a person is liberated from the cosmic cycle that utilizes the system of rebirth and reincarnation. In Hinduism, there was the common belief that the need to uphold the cosmic structure was necessary, as it was intertwined in the religious and physical history that existed around them. Therefore, for this reason, the two goals were said to be the opposing strands of Hinduism.

Moksha and Immortality

Moksha is defined as the liberation of a person's soul or Atman, from the cosmic cycle which is Samsara. Samsara is the concept of birth, death, rebirth, reincarnation, and karma (Thrane). A person's Atman would attain Moksha when they are fit and ready to merge with the cosmic truth or Brahman. Immortality is the state of life where a person does not die from any cause and lives forever. Moksha and immortality are two separate concepts that do not share any common features. A person attains Moksha when they pass away, whereas a person needs to be alive in order to be immortal. Moksha is something that happens in the afterlife by becoming free from the cosmic cycle of reincarnation. Immortality does not allow a person to attain Moksha in the literal sense. However, immortality can help the person come to terms with their beliefs and thoughts, relinquish their earthly ties and pleasures so that they can connect with the cosmic unity, and attain peace.

Karma After Death

Karma plays a key factor in the cosmic structure and cycle. Hinduism believes that the cosmic cycle involves rebirth and reincarnation. According to Hinduism, the good deeds and the bad deeds that a person did in their lifetime are accumulated as karma. When the person dies, they are bound to be reincarnated as someone else, as their Atman leaves the old body and enters a new body. The new being does not have any recollection of their previous life, nor do they keep any physical or mental traits from the old life. However, the person will retain their karma (Thrane). This karma decides the type of life the person will have in their current life. If the person was cruel and unjust in their previous life, in their new life, they will suffer badly for the sins they

committed in their previous life. If they were a good and religious person in their previous life, their current life would be good, peaceful, and successful. The concept of karma encouraged people to be good so that they would be better and successful in their next life.

References

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