

Karma: We Are What We Do

Wu Weiming

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*According as one acts,
according as one conducts himself,
so does he become.
The doer of good becomes good.
The doer of evil becomes evil.*
—Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5

The term “karma” literally means “deeds,” and has become a commonly used word even among people who are not Hindus or Buddhists. Clichés such as “You reap what you sow” and “What goes around comes around” are often repeated to explain karma, but they capture only a fragment of what the idea of karma is meant to teach in Hindu and Buddha *dharma*. To gain a more complete and deeper understanding of karma, we need to study it against the background of Hindu history. After all, it is an idea first developed in India.

Karma, Rebirth and the Caste System

After the Aryan people migrated to the Indian subcontinent, they set up the Caste system to consolidate their rule over the indigenous people in the Indus Valley. The rigid and unjust system caused tremendous suffering among people in the lower castes. Had you been born as a member of the lower castes or, worse, as an untouchable, not only would you have had a hard life, but your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would also have been members of the same caste or outcaste with no hope of improving their lot. It would not be surprising that the question of “Why me?” would cross your mind at some point in time. Wondering why you were born as an untouchable while others were born as princes or

princesses would fill you with anguish and fury. What would you do if you found yourself born into such a bondage? Would you be willing to just accept your fate and toil all your life for a meager subsistence?

We can imagine the agony and wretchedness of such a life due to despair. There would be no hope that things would get better for you and your offspring. Thus, it is quite understandable that Hindus would turn to religion to find a way out. There is truth in the aphorism that religion gives people hope. One way to understand various spiritual traditions and religions is to see how they help their followers answer basic questions, address common concerns and cope with hardships in life.¹ By looking into how the idea of karma and the belief in rebirth helped people of the lower classes cope with the injustice and brutality of the Caste system, we can gain a deeper appreciation of their significance in the Indian spiritual traditions.

At first glance, the doctrine of how karma affects rebirth seems to give the lower castes and the untouchable hope to escape the iron grip of the Caste system through good karma. Allegedly, by accumulating good karma in this life one could be reborn into a higher caste in the next life. Moreover, it seems to provide an explanation of why people are born into different castes. It is claimed that people are born into lower castes because of bad karma from previous lives.

However, this doctrine, widely attributed to the religious teachings of India, is a corrupted understanding of karma and rebirth that could be used to sustain the unjust Caste system. Hindu dharma is antithetical to the blatant unfairness, brutality and cruelty of the Caste system.² *Alas*, the teaching of karma and rebirth is perverted by such a commonly repeated view to justify the status quo and add insult to injury. "You are born into a low caste because of your bad karma from the previous life. You deserve your lot in this life! It is all your own fault!" So instead of questioning the legitimacy of the Caste system and fighting against its injustice and cruelty, people in the lower castes were brainwashed into putting blame on their bad karma from their previous lives and accepting their lot as punishment. They were told that if they wanted to better their next lives, then they should slave away in this life to accumulate good karma.³ By telling members of

¹The story of Exodus is another example that illustrates how a religion helped its followers overcome the bondage of slavery.

²Gandhi is truly an embodiment of Hindu spirituality. He adamantly opposed the Caste system and insisted that it be outlawed after India gained independence from Britain.

³This begs for comparison with the use of divine right in Europe to justify the feudal hierarchy.

the lower castes to place their hope in the next life, the corrupted teaching weakens their motivation to revolt against the cruel and inhumane system. In addition, it masks the fact that the Caste system was what cast them into such a miserable lot in the first place. Also, the belief that bad people will be punished in the next life drills fear into people's hearts and serves as a deterrent so that they dare not rebel. This way, the ruling classes can minimize the likelihood of an uprising.

Religions can give people hope and inspire people to strive for a better future, but they can also be turned into a powerful system of reward and punishment to control people and keep them subjugated.⁴ The view that good karma will result in a higher rebirth and bad karma, a lower one should be rejected for three reasons. First, it is perverted to maintain the status quo. Second, the stance that the lower castes and the outcastes deserve their lot is detestable. Third, and more importantly, it is inconsistent with both Hindu and Buddha dharma.

Atman, Anatta and Rebirth

First of all, rebirth according to both Hindu and Buddha dharma is not the transmigration of an individual soul from body to body. The transmigration view presupposes a metaphysical dualism that claims that a person consists of a physical body and a non-physical soul.⁵ Upon death, a person's soul would leave the body. Later on, the soul would enter a new body and result in the rebirth of the person. This view is widespread and commonly held, but it is not what rebirth really is according to both spiritual traditions.

In Hindu dharma, a person, together with every other *maya*⁶ in the cosmos, is an appearance of *Brahman*. Since we humans are appearances of Brahman, Brahman is what each of us truly is. Your *atman*, i.e., your true self, is Brahman.⁷ A person's birth is the beginning of Brahman appearing as her, a person and *maya*.

⁴One cannot help but wonder what Christianity would have been like if it had not become the state religion of the Roman Empire.

⁵In addition to its traditional difficulties such as the mind-body problem and the problem of personal identity, metaphysical dualism has been severely undermined by the advance of neuroscience and brain research.

⁶The Sanskrit term *maya* means "that which appears for a while and then disappears." It is commonly translated as "illusion," but a better translation should be "phenomenon."

⁷The term "*atman*" is oftentimes translated as "soul", and "*Brahman*" as "the divine" or "God". Accordingly, the Hindu doctrine that your *atman* is Brahman could be read as "your *soul* is God." This clearly is at odds with the transmigration view of rebirth, which requires each of us to have an individual and distinctive soul.

Her death is the end of such an appearance. Once Brahman ceases to appear as a particular person, that person would cease to exist as *maya*. But her true self, Brahman, would continue to exist. Brahman may appear in the future as someone very similar to that person, but it is not the same person returning to live another life. Rather, *it is Brahman that is reborn* (that is, reappears).⁸ Since Brahman is what a person truly is, in this sense it can be said that the person is reborn.

The Buddhist view on rebirth differs from the Hindu's. Buddha dharma refrains from metaphysical speculations and avoids asserting the existence of Brahman. Instead, it focuses on the impermanence of the world and the dependent arising (co-conditioning and interacting) of karma. As a result, Buddha dharma counsels us not to *see* each other as individual beings. (This is the gist of the teaching of *anatta*.) Instead, we should learn to recognize the *interbeing*⁹ of all. Rebirth then is understood as *the continuation of karma*. A person's karma is who she is and is constantly reverberating in the ocean of karma. Because of dependent arising, her karma can be emulated and carried on by others in the future. These future patterns of karma would be her rebirth. In this sense, a person who truly embodies the teachings of the Buddha would be his rebirth, and a person exemplifies Jesus' spirituality would be the reincarnation of Jesus.

For people who long for a continuing existence after death, these proper understandings of rebirth can be a letdown. However, not clinging to individual existence is the key to *maksha* in Hindu dharma and *nivarna* in Buddha dharma. It is also worth pointing out that the popular saying "Good karma leads to good rebirths" is nonetheless correct under these proper understandings. In both Hindu and Buddha dharma, a person is reborn when her good karma inspires and gives rise to new manifestations of such a legacy.¹⁰ What should be rejected is the view

⁸The problem of personal identity has been a very challenging issue for Western philosophy and religious traditions. It also undermines the plausibility of the transmigration view. A common question is why most, if not all, people do not remember their previous lives. If the soul retains a person's memory, shouldn't the memory get passed along from one life to the next? Moreover, if a person does not remember what she did in the previous life, in what sense can we say that she is being rewarded or punished in the present life?

Once rebirth is understood correctly in Hindu dharma as the reappearance of Brahman, then it would become clear that these questions are pseudo-questions stemming from the error in the transmigration view.

⁹"Interbeing" is a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh. I have learned a great deal from his writings and been moved and inspired by his spirituality.

¹⁰"What man does in life echoes in eternity." This well-known line uttered by Maximus in the movie *Gladiator* is fitting here. It is small wonder that epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are

that a person with good karma will return in the next life as the *same* person and live a good life as the reward.

Transcending Reward and Punishment

The popular view that karma determines whether a person has a good or a bad rebirth is at odds with the proper understandings of rebirth. It is misguided and should be rebuffed. Another reason for rejecting such a view is that its tunnel-vision in seeing everything in terms of reward and punishment stifles spiritual growth. It turns the spiritual teaching of karma into a scrooge's obsession with the balance sheet of merits and demerits. It taints spiritual pursue with the impure and self-serving motivation of avoiding punishment and getting reward. This distorted view leads many people to think of karma in terms of the worn-out saying "What goes around comes around." This kind of thinking can suffocate one's spiritual growth. Instead of being inspired and empowered to be more prudent, considerate and caring, a person is consumed with constant anxiety over her individual sum of karma, and the fear of bad karma catching up with her. It is clear that such a view does not sit well with Hindu and Buddha dharma. Both spiritual traditions aim to inspire people to be *selfless* and transcend the worldly concern of reward and punishment.

The what-goes-around-comes-around view of karma is inadequate and misleading. It is too individualistic, and goes against an important insight in the teaching of karma—one's intentions and deeds affect not only oneself but also other people. Accounting for a person's fortune or misfortune solely in terms of what she did in the past has at least two shortcomings. First of all, this would make it seem as if my karma has effects only on myself. This would lead to the wrong-headed thinking that since what I do affects only myself, I can do whatever I want in life. After all, it is my life. This mindset would promote self-centeredness. Second, such a narrow and individualistic view leaves out how other people's karma affects a person, and hence is lacking in helping us make sense of the fortune and misfortune in life. A more comprehensive explanation of why someone was born into servitude in the Caste system has to take into account many things that other people did before her birth such as the deeds of the Aryan people who set up the system, the deeds of the upper castes who continued to uphold the unjust system,

so important in the Indian traditions. This is not unique to India. Humans are always fascinated by stories.

the fact that her parents were born into the Shudras caste, and so on.¹¹

Karma and Fairness in Life

Some may complain that it is unfair that other people's deeds impact my life. It does not address the questions of "Why me?" and "Why not me?". It does not explain how comes I was not born as a prince or a prodigy.¹²

Even though it is not acknowledged enough, it is undeniable that the inequality at birth is unfair. But it is unfair because of the value system and the socio-economic structure a person is born into. In a world that favors people born with talents, good looks and so on, people born with lesser degrees of the desirable traits would suffer discrimination. We shouldn't judge fairness in terms of a person's merits or demerits. Otherwise we would fall into the mind trap that if a person gets what she deserves, then all is fair. How could a baby deserve to be born blind? Don't we say that babies are innocent? This individualistic, you-deserve-it thinking is exactly the wrong kind of mindset the Hindu teaching of karma is meant to help us break away from.

Instead, you were who you were at birth because you were your parents' child, and you were born into a certain family, area, society and culture at a certain time in history. Your parents' genes and what they and other people did before your birth affected you in one way or another, and contributed to the physical and mental conditions, what kind of family and socio-economic class you were born into. So whether you were born healthy or not, into a good family with loving parents or not, is beyond your control and should not be seen as somehow a result of your own doing so that you either deserve or don't deserve it.

We should not accept an understanding of karma that promotes the it's-all-your-own-fault mindset just to satisfy our demand for fairness based on the crude conception that all is fair if everyone gets what she deserves.

Indeed, it is unfair if some are born as princes and princesses while others as servants and maids. A person born as a prince cannot in good conscience use the

¹¹By the same token, we should reject the simplistic explanation that a baby's death in a drunk-driving accident must be due to her bad karma from the previous life.

¹²One can also ask the same question in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The commonly proposed answers such as "It is God's will that one is born in a certain way so as to overcome the difficulties, become stronger spiritually and serve as an inspiration for others" need to be critically examined. Doing so can help us gain insights in assessing the plausibility of these stock answers.

superficial understanding of karma to justify his privileges and entitlements. It is wrong to think that everyone deserves his or her lot due to past karma. Rather, if he is spiritual, he would want to reform the socio-political system into a more equitable one.

It is also unfair that some are born with talents and others, disabilities. Realizing this, a spiritual person should shun using her advantages for personal gains in life. Instead, she should use it to benefit the world and commit her life to serve others. Isn't this what the Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi did in their lives?

The Spiritual Teaching of Karma

Another reason the questions of "Why me?" and "Why not me?" arise is we see each other as individuals. When we compare individual lives and notice the inequality, we tend to demand an answer to why some people seem to be better off than others. In Hindu dharma, the teaching of "We are Brahman" aims to inspire us to transcend individualism and *see spiritually* that we are one and share one life together. This point is depicted movingly in the prison scene in the movie *Gandhi* where Gandhi said to Rev. Charlie Andrews "If I want to be one with them, I have to live like them." The Hindu spiritual teaching can be encapsulated as this: "*Take other people's joy as our joy and their suffering as our suffering.*" In this way, the inequality in life would dissolve in the ocean of love. When we all strive to better each other's life, life would be fairer.

Many may find the teaching of taking other people's joy as our joy and their suffering as our suffering unfathomable. They would decry "Oh, for crying out loud, what are you talking about? With separate consciousness, how can one person feel another person's joy or sorrow. I don't feel what others feel." or "Why would I do that? I have my own life to deal with."

But not being able to or not wanting to feel what others feel is exactly where the difficulty and challenge lies. We would rather be numb about others' feeling because we are more or less self-centered. Self-centeredness blinds us and blocks our empathy. It is only through the expansion of empathy can we feel what others feel, and merge our lives with their lives. This is why without empathy there cannot be compassion.

The teaching of karma is really fairly simple, straightforward and common-sensical. It says that our intentions and deeds affect ourselves and other people, so we should nourish good will and do our best to make everyone's life better. It

is in this way the idea of karma promotes universal and spiritual loving kindness, and is a cornerstone of Hindu and Buddha dharma. Karma is not some mysterious metaphysical, supernatural force or power that somehow comes back to haunt you. Karma is simply what we do. Learning to do better is just part of growing up. And growing up is just life.