

Karma: We Are What We Do

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.

—*Bṛihad-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 cited to explain karma, but they capture only a fragment of what the idea of karma is meant to teach in these two spiritual traditions. To gain a more complete and deeper understanding of karma, we need to study it against the background of the Hindu history. After all, it is an idea first developed in Hinduism.

After the Aryan people entered the India 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 outcastes with no hope to improve their lot. What would you have done if you had found yourself born into such a bondage? Would you have been 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. *Prima facie* they seem to give Hindus hope to escape the iron grip of the caste system through good karma, which would allegedly lead to a rebirth into a higher caste. The doctrine of how karma affects rebirths also 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. In addition to providing an explanation, the belief that bad people will be punished in the next life can also serve as a deterrent by drilling fear into people's hearts so that they dare not transgress.

However, karma, understood this way, would become an idea that sustains the unjust caste system. By telling members of lower castes to place their hope in the next life, it weakens their motivation to challenge and eliminate the inhumane and cruel system. It also camouflages the fact that the caste system was what caused people in the lower castes to yearn for the escape from its iron grip in the first place.

The fishy stench of such an account gets stronger when it attempts to explain away the inequality in terms of karma from the previous life. If you were an untouchable under the caste system, it would not be surprising that the question of "Why me?" would cross your mind at some time or another. Why would you be born as an untouchable while others were born as princes or princesses? Instead of acknowledging that the caste system is blatantly unfair, such a pseudo-explanation amounts to an in-your-face shout "It all your own faults! You deserve it!" So instead of questioning the legitimacy of the caste system and fighting against its injustice and cruelty, people in the lower castes were taught to put blame on their bad karma from their previous lives and accept their lot as punishments. If they wanted to better their next lives, then they should slave away their lives to accumulate good karma.²

This shows how the teachings of karma and rebirth can be hijacked and misused to solidify the power and privileges of the upper classes. Beliefs in karma and rebirth can be twisted to convince members of the lower castes to stay put in their stations of life and place their hope in the next life. This way, the ruling classes can minimize the likelihood of an uprising. Religions can give people hope and inspire people to strive

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

²This begs for comparison with the use of divine right in Europe to justify the feudal hierarchy.

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.³

The view that good karma will result in a higher rebirth and bad karma, a lower rebirth should be rejected not only for the ploy to maintain the status quo and the detestable stance that the lower castes and the outcastes deserve their lot, but more importantly for its incoherence with the overall Hindu teachings.

First of all, rebirth according to both Hinduism and Buddhism 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.⁴ 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. But this is not what rebirth is according to Hinduism and Buddhism.

In Hinduism, a person, together with every other *maya*⁵ in the cosmos, is an appearance of Brahman (the Hindu term for the divine). Since we humans are appearances of Brahman, Brahman is what each of us truly is. Your *atman*—your true self—is Brahman.⁶ A person's birth is the beginning of Brahman appearing as he, and his death is the end of such an appearance. Once Brahman ceases to appear as a particular person, that person would cease 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).⁷ Since Brahman

³One cannot help but wonder what Christianity would have been like if it had not become the state religion of the Roman Empire.

⁴In addition to its traditional difficulties such as the mind-body problem and the problem of personal identity, dualism has been severely undermined by the advance of neuroscience and brain researches.

⁵The 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.”

⁶The term *atman* is commonly translated as “soul” in the West. Accordingly, the Hindu doctrine that your *atman* is Brahman should be read as “your *soul* is the divine.” If one uses the term “God” for the divine, then the doctrine would say that 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.

⁷The 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 he did in the previous life, in what sense can we say that he is being rewarded or punished in the present life?

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

is what the 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. Buddhism refrains from metaphysical speculations and avoids asserting the existence of Brahman. Instead, it focuses on the impermanence of the world and the dependent arising (or interacting) of karma. As a result, Buddhism counsels us not to see each other as individual beings. Instead, we should learn to recognize the interbeing (a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh) of all. Rebirth then is understood as the continuation of karma. Since we are what we do, a person's karma (legacy) can be emulated and carried on by others in the future. These future patterns of karma would be "his" rebirth.

It is worth pointing out that the popular saying "Good karma leads to good rebirths" is still correct and should be understood properly under both Indian traditions. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, a person is reborn when his good karma inspires and gives rise to new manifestations of such a legacy.⁸ What should be rejected is the view that a person with good karma will return in the next life as the *same* person and live a good life as the reward.

The second reason for rejecting the popular but mistaken view that karma determines one's rebirth is that such a view is very tunnel-visioned in seeing everything in terms of reward and punishment. It turns the spiritual teaching of karma into a scrooge's obsession in calculating his spiritual, moral debts and credits, with the impure, 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 empowered to be prudent, considerate and caring, a person is consumed with constant anxiety over his individual sum of karma, and the fear of bad karma catching up with him. It is clear that such a view does not sit well with Hinduism and Buddhism. Both aim to inspire people to be selfless and transcend the worldly concern of reward and punishment.

The third reason why the what-goes-around-comes-around view of karma is inadequate and misleading is that 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 he 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 me. This may lead us into thinking that what I do affects only myself, so I can do whatever I want in life; after all, it is my life. Consequently, it would promote self-centeredness. Second, such an individual-

⁸It is small wonder that epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are so important in the Indian traditions. This is not unique to India. Humans are always fascinated by narratives.

istic explanation leaves out how other people's karma affects a person, and hence is incomplete. A more comprehensive causal explanation of why someone were born into slavery in the Hindu Caste system has to take into account many things other people did before his birth: the deeds of the Aryan people who set up the system, the deeds of slave masters who continue to uphold the unjust system, the life of his parents, and so on.⁹

Some may complain that such a causal account does not address the issue of fairness. It does not answer the "Why me?" and "Why not me?" questions. It does not explain how comes I was not born as a prince or a prodigy.¹⁰

However, such a complaint begs the question. It presupposes that if I did not do anything to deserve it, then it is unfair for me to be born as a slave while another person was born as a prince. But this is exactly the wrong kind of thinking, namely, the individualistic, blame-the-victim mentality, the Hindu teaching of karma is meant to help us overcome.

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, 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.

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

Indeed, it is unfair if some are born as princes and princesses while others are born as slaves. A person born as a prince cannot in good conscience use the superficial understanding of karma to justify his being born as a prince and others being born as his servants and maids, thinking that everyone deserves his or her lot due to past karma. Rather, if he is spiritual, he may want to change 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 would shun using his advantages as a head start in life. Instead,

⁹By the same token, we should reject the simple-minded explanation that a baby's death in a drunk-driving accident must be due to her bad karma from the previous life.

¹⁰One can also ask the same question in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Critically examining the commonly proposed answers such as "one is born in a certain way to overcome the difficulty, become stronger spiritually and serve as an inspiration for others" may help us gain insights in assessing the plausibility of these stock answers.

he would commit himself to serve others.

The questions of “Why me?” and “Why not me?” arise also because we see each other as individuals. When we compare individual lives and notice the inequality, we demand an answer of why some people seem to be better off than others. In Hinduism, the teaching of “We are Brahman” aims to inspire us to *see spiritually* that we are one and share one life together—in the sense that we are willing to take other people’s joy as our joy and their suffering as our suffering. In this way, the seeming inequality in life dissolves in the ocean of love. When we all have the same life, how can life be unfair?

Many may find this totally absurd. They would object out loud, “What are you talking about? How can we all have the same life? I don’t feel what others feel.”

But not being able to or not wanting to feel what others feel is exactly where the difficulty lies. We cannot feel others’ feelings 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 there cannot be compassion without empathy.

The teaching of karma is really fairly simple, straightforward and commonsensical. It says that our intentions and deeds affect us 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 in Hinduism and Buddhism promotes universal, spiritual love, and is a key part of these two spiritual traditions. Karma is not some mysterious metaphysical, or 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.

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