

कर्म - the economy of action

“a person consists of desires. As is one’s desire so is one’s will; as is the will so is the deed that is done, and one’s deeds conditions what one will become”. (Br. U. 4:5)

1. The jiva which is a distinguishable ray of the Supreme Brahman somehow experiences a “fall from knowledge” – it becomes separated as it were, from the Godhead. How and why this occurs is the ultimate Mystery. The Vedas intimate that it is because of *desire* – a desire to experience duality.
2. The jiva then begins its samsaric journey by evolving into the lowest forms of existence such as plants in which state its natural consciousness is contracted to the maximum.
3. Slowly through a process of spiritual *involution* the jiva develops and matures, expanding its consciousness through the various lower forms of life – insects and animals until it finally reaches the human stage. This primary transmigration through the lower life forms takes about 8,400,000 births according to tradition. This is a natural and progressive process because these life forms have no concept of right and wrong or the ability to make moral choices, and therefore no Karma. Animals are not responsible for their actions, they are motivated by instinct and the drive to fulfil their natural needs of sustenance, security and procreation.
4. The secondary transmigration which is an active and self-directed process, starts with the human birth. All people in every society upon the earth have concepts of right and wrong and laws governing their relationships with each other, based upon a perception of justice. There are universal values and truths which every social group in every place in the world has access to. Hinduism teaches that Isvara cares about all beings in the cosmos and makes provision for their spiritual development and unfoldment by revealing guidelines in a manner appropriate to those particular individuals. The human evolution (becoming involved in samsara) and involution (becoming liberated from samsara) is governed by the Law of Karma (see next section).
5. Finally the Supreme Goal of human existence which is Liberation from the continued round of births and deaths is obtained. Tradition says that from the lowest type of human birth to the birth in which spiritual awareness arises, one passes through approximately 100,000 births. So we see that this is a very long and arduous process, from the moment of spiritual arousal to the actual achievement of enlightenment and liberation can still take numerous births. So our sages have always exhorted us not to waste this precious human birth which is so rare.

Karma is the most basic doctrine of Sanatana Dharma and a thorough understanding of the dynamics of Karma is essential for any degree of Spiritual advancement. Sanatana Dharma takes for granted that there is order pervading the universe. Karma is the doctrine of the economy of action. The word *Karma* means ‘action’ and refers to the entire cycle of action and its consequences. Every action in addition to its material goal, produces a moral consequence which manifests as either joy or sorrow. Whatever we put out into the universe we get back in equal measure. All positive actions produce happiness and all negative actions

result in suffering. This law operates whether we are aware of it or not. It is the process by which we shape our own destinies and build up our own reality. Through ignorance we bind ourselves by selfish actions, feelings or thoughts. As long as our actions are directed towards self gratification alone, there is not the slightest possibility of working towards liberation from the cycle of reincarnation. Even the smallest thought or act has consequences which are not settled with death.

Cause and Effect

In this life we experience the effect of our past actions, and often feel resentful that we are now suffering for the course of action set into motion by *someone else*. But when one looks at life from the point of view of immortality, and the Self as an eternal imperishable spiritual atom, then everything falls into a pattern of cause and effect. Karma, as the law of spiritual dynamics, makes us self-reliant beings with the realization that we can never escape responsibility. We can never plead ignorance of the law, nor take the attitude – “this time it won’t matter!” In fact the effect is inherent in the cause and therefore the two are in fact one continuum. In the inviolability of the law lies our potential freedom. It enables us to modify, change and remold our character which is the result of our past lives, and to create our future character in greater perfection – improving on our mistakes from the past, knowing that not one single iota of effort goes to waste. Objections are often raised that the doctrine of Karma is unjust because we are now suffering for actions we have done in the past of which we have no recollection. Recollection of the exact cause is irrelevant, the causes may be manifold, but the effect in ourselves and in others is either joy or sorrow. Every single action that we do potentially has a threefold effect – it either makes someone happy or sad or leaves them feeling indifferent. Actions which cause indifference do not have much of a karmic effect. Actions which cause either sorrow or joy to others will rebound upon the doer.

Predestination & Karma

Karma is often misunderstood as a synonym for destiny or fate. Karma is neither of these – it is a cosmic law which negates any possibility of luck, good fortune, or chance. Behind every fortuitous opportunity or apparent stroke of luck lies the energy which we ourselves have generated. Likewise behind every loss and misfortune lies the negative energy which we ourselves have created. We are powerless to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and to alter what actually happens to us, but we have complete freedom to determine how we will deal with each and every situation that arise, and turn it into a means of progression or retrogression. Predestination, fate or destiny implies that there is an external force which is imposing its own agenda onto us. Karma is the law whereby we create and experience our own agendas. We have the power to visualize, plan, work for and achieve our own certain future.

Dynamics of Karma.

The actual working out of the law of Karma is extremely complex, including millions of fine permutations and tunings affecting the lives of all of those around us and everyone that we have ever known. All these dynamics are controlled by the Devas (Cosmic Forces) of Karma – the Nine Planets (Navagraha). But there are certain basic principles which we need to understand. We are all acting on three different realms; physical, emotional and mental, with energies appropriate to each realm. Physical actions determine our physical environment, our emotional life revolves around our family, friends and associates and determines our interaction with them, and our world of thoughts, goals and aspirations determine how we interact with the world around us and ultimately understand ourselves. All these three energies together make up our character.

Karma & Sin

Sin as such is very much a Judeo/Christo/Islamic concept which is basically defined as an offence against God. For Christians all humans are born with original sin which requires rectification and redemption. These concepts are totally alien to Hinduism. Although some Sanskrit words are often translated as “sin” they bear no similarity to the Abrahamic coalition’s concept of sin. The seminal term **papa** often translated as sin, can be defined as any act that obstructs one’s return to Brahman. It is summed up as follows; –

Those actions which cause hurt and suffering to any other living beings (animals included) are to be considered as papa (sin, demerit, unskillful action); and punya (virtue, merit, skilful action) is defined as those actions which bring joy and happiness to others.

Sometimes we hurt others intentionally, but mostly we do it through error or due to lack of attention or consideration. All “sin” is traceable to individual accountability – the “human error factor”. The inclination to cause suffering to others (sin) is not original, or part of our essential nature, but *adventitious*, or *circumstantial*. “Sin” in Hinduism is not the central spiritual problem but a symptom of ignorance and it’s resultant misidentification with the body/mind complex – Ignorance (nescience) is the real spiritual problem. The Self is essentially pure and divine and different from the physical body. The accumulated actions of the past birth (*Karma*) give rise to the individual tendencies (*Samskara*) in this birth, either to act virtuously or un-virtuously. These tendencies or natural dispositions are seated deep in the subconscious mind.

No action can in fact be said to be neutral; every word, deed or thought has an effect. Our thoughts affect us directly while our speech and physical actions affect our environment.

The entire moral theology of Hinduism rests upon the concept of “benefit of all beings” (*loka-sangraha*). Motivation or intention is the deciding factor of the moral nature of an action. Motivation which centers on the welfare of others, is of the nature of spirituality, goodness and purity, whereas motivation which centers upon the individual, is negative and leads to suffering, and bondage to the cycle of births and deaths.

The Ten Forms of “Sin”.

“Sin”, remember is an *unskilled* use of action, a lack of spiritual understanding which causes one to transgress the Cosmic Laws (Rita), and the means of performing unskillful actions are three:– the mind, the speech and actions.

The unskillful use of thought is manifest in (1) thinking harmful thoughts directed towards others, and (2) clinging to irrational and erroneous doctrines.

The unskillful use of speech is (3) lying, (4) slandering, (5) gossiping, and (6) abusing others and (7) giving false advice or teachings.

The unskillful use of action is (8) causing physical injury to other living beings, (9) sexual misconduct and (10) not rendering assistance in time of need.

All well-directed virtuous actions leads to spiritual development and happiness, all unskillful actions retard spiritual growth and produce unhappiness and delay the unfolding of our *Brahma-nature*.

Three types of Karma

There are three types of Karma including both negative and positive;

- § 1. *Sanchita Karma*; – the accumulated results of acts which have been committed in the past lives and are waiting to come to fruition in the future.
- § 2. *Prarabdha Karma*; – acts done in the past which have resulted in the circumstances of the present incarnation and are causing all the joys and sorrows which we are now experiencing.
- § 3. *Kriyamana Karma*; – All the actions which are now being performed; the results of which will be experienced at a later date and will condition the circumstances of the next incarnation.

Prarabdha Karma is beyond the control of the individual and the results which have produced our present conditions have to be born with patience. It is like the seed which has been planted in the past and is now flowering. *Sanchita Karma* is like seed which has been stored and can be remitted through the Grace of the Guru or Isvara. The *Kriyamana Karma* or the present actions are entirely under the control of the individual, and must be performed with the utmost awareness that each individual is the author of his/her own destiny and each and every action, no matter how trivial will have an effect, unless all actions and their consequences are surrendered unto Isvara. Once surrendered, all actions are purified and everything is done as service to Isvara alone and thus even mundane actions become the vehicle of Liberation.

Therapeutic Suffering

The doctrine of Karma explains the universal experience and problem of suffering and why good people suffer. There are three factors in suffering; – the person who is suffering, an agent which is the cause of suffering such as another sentient being, thing, condition etc., and the degree of suffering. Once we have understood the nature of the Self as it really is and understood the dynamic of actions and their consequences, then the agent of suffering becomes incidental and secondary. This understanding then helps us to turn our suffering into a vehicle for positive spiritual growth and enlightenment. We no longer bear any anger or resentment towards the person or thing that is seen to be causing the suffering because they are merely agents of our own Karma. It is on this basis and this basis alone that we can truly love our “enemy” and return love for hurt, compassion for thoughtlessness. When the experience of suffering is thus understood, it becomes an opportunity for self-development and spiritual transformation and its intensity is greatly diminished. The suffering and happiness of each person is in exact proportion to his/her deeds. And even suffering is meant to correct and rehabilitate one. Suffering is the source of great lessons and the vehicle of greater understanding and insight, if used with awareness and insight into the law of Karma. In everything good there is the seed of evil, in everything evil there is the seed of good.

The Three Poisons

To those who are free from desire and anger, who aspire [for Self-realisation] whose minds are controlled, and who have attained self-mastery – the Great Nirvana is close at hand. (Gita 5:26)

There are three drives which cause us to perform negative actions which lead to demerit and suffering; they are **Desire** (*Kama*), **Anger** (*Krodha*) and **Greed** (*lobha*). These three are the *three poisons* which retard spiritual growth and are said to be the three gateways to hell.

Desire – primarily and generally refers to the libido which is the strongest drive we have. In more specific

terms it refers to the desire which is self-centered or self-referent and directed purely at self-gratification. It is wrongly directed desire which is unhelpful to spiritual progress, and thus prolongs one's existence in Samsara — the cycle of births and deaths.

Aggression — the reaction towards unfulfilled desires and failed expectations one has of others or the feeling of being threatened. This leads to causing injury and hurt to others which in turn results in bad Karma and further suffering. Our sages teach us that a moment's outburst of anger destroys heaps of merit painstakingly accumulated over long periods of time.

Greed — the craving for more beyond the limits of necessity or comfort. Its goal is having and possessing for the sake of possession itself without any personal use or utilization for the benefit to others. Its dynamism lies in the delusive identification with body, possessions and resources and the resultant inability to share them with others and to rejoice at the good fortune of others. It actually manifests as a desire to obstruct the progress and prosperity of others.

All these three poisons have their roots in delusion. **Delusion** (*moha*) is the notion that the mind/body complex is the "self" and that the individual is a unique and separate entity to all others which leads to craving and clinging. This conviction is the very axis on which the wheel of reincarnation revolves. Until we attain enlightenment and realize that we are not the physical complex but eternal spiritual beings which are perfect rays of divinity, and thus interconnected with all life forms, then we will continue indefinitely in bondage to the material nature.

Karma and Grace

Naturally this teaching leads to the question 'What part does Isvara (God) play in this doctrine of Karma' ? The answer is that Isvara acts as the *Dispenser of the fruits of action*. He does not *cause* happiness or sorrow, we ourselves are the cause. He, with perfect justice, hands out exactly what each person deserves according to his/her accumulated unskillful acts (*papa*) or skilful acts (*punya*). We choose what we want and God grants it with perfect Justice. If we make the wrong choice we can hardly blame God! Karma is considered to be beginningless and it is almost impossible to free oneself from the tangle of actions and reactions by self-effort — it requires hundreds of births in which a concerted and continued effort is made to reach perfection. So it is only through Divine Grace that Liberation from the fetters of Karma which obstruct our path to Self-realization can be achieved quickly. The way of liberation lies in the path of self-surrender. By surrendering to Divine Grace, the accumulated Karma can be eliminated, and to a degree, through the goodwill of the Guru, but the Karma presently fructifying has to be experienced until it wears out. The Karma that we are presently generating is transformed by our surrendering to the Divine and by our intention to dedicate all our actions to the welfare of all sentient beings — through this act of surrender and self-dedication we can cease the creation of new Karma.

Many readers will now be asking; "Is there free will?" Well the answer is yes and no. None of us chose the circumstances into which we are born. We did not choose our sex, nationality, race or intellectual powers, nor our inherent susceptibility to certain diseases. Even from a materialistic point of view all these conditioning factors are either 'accidents' or they are 'genetic'. From the Hindu point of view everything that we experience in life is our "just desserts". If we cannot trace the cause in this present life we can attribute it to our previous one. We deliberately and freely choose to act in a certain way and this behavior sets up a chain reaction, the consequences of which it is impossible to avoid! One may choose to leap off a cliff or not, but once the fall has begun there is no question about avoiding the inevitable impact! So we have complete free will to act but there is no free will or choice in the experience of the results.

When compared to infinity, the span of human life is a split second. How can the results of this exceedingly short life span mean anything in eternity in terms of the afterlife which is said to be eternal. How does one explain the moral injustices accruing in cases of unmerited suffering. Why does a compassionate God allow innocent people to suffer? Why are people born with handicaps? Why do so many people prosper with relative ease and others live a life of constant sorrow and hardship? Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? The general explanation of the Abrahamic-coalition is that it is the (capricious) will of God. This doctrine is totally rejected by Sanatana Dharma because God is morally perfect and no negative qualities can be attributed to Him.

Reincarnation and the doctrine of Karma are the only rational explanations for the diverseness of the human condition. Many people would also raise the objection that – “because all suffering is deserved why should one feel pity for a suffering being?”. The answer is that compassion is not to be based upon a personal moral judgement of another; it is a spontaneous feeling of empathy which gives rise to the desire to alleviate the suffering, regardless of the cause. Compassion naturally arises in one who is spiritually developed, and should be cultivated in those who are not yet developed.

Forgiveness of Sins

Completely relinquishing all self-initiated means for your salvation, take refuge in Me alone. I will release you from all your negative Karma (sins), grieve not. (Gita 18:66.)

One may also well ask whether the Law of Karma makes provision for mercy and forgiveness of transgressions? This is again a transference of responsibility to another. We ourselves destroy our own accumulated Karma through the development of wisdom. Wisdom is the greatest purifier. God is an ocean of unconditional love and compassion and cannot bear to see the suffering of beings and is always ready to forgive them, liberate them and to be reunited with them – they need only realize this and turn towards the Divine, the Divine will then act as the catalyst to eliminate all stored Karma which obstructs our reunion. It must be stressed that in the Hindu view of life, God has not separated Himself from us because no separation actually exists – it is an illusion (*maya*) – we ourselves have created and maintained the fiction of separation. It is therefore up to us to let go of separateness and realize our inherent ever present oneness with the Divine through a process of self-surrender.

Forgiveness of sins by God is not much stressed in Hinduism because of the concept of the boundless magnanimity and unconditional love and compassion of God who like a mother does not bear grudges and naturally forgives us whether we request it or not. The main point of “requesting forgiveness” for misdemeanors is the acceptance of our error and the resolve not to perform the same act again – a self-corrective management. It is more important to acknowledge and own our failings and foibles and to request forgiveness from those whom we have wronged, rather than requesting God to forgive us.

It is also generally taught that good works (merit) cancel the results of negative actions (demerit). It is preferable to modify and refine one’s behavior than it is to pray for forgiveness. The load of accumulated Karma that we carry from birth to birth can be reduced by the performance of charity, social service, pilgrimages, and acts of piety and devotion. During rites of absolution and sanctification (*punyaha vachanam*) one prays for the elimination of the negative dispositions and attainment of a purified and regenerate mind which in turn will take an active interest in serving God through working for the welfare of other beings.