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The Law of Karma As Reflected
In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism

by

Samuel Williams

The word karma is derived from the Sanskrit Kri, "to do". All action is karma. Technically this word also means the effects of actions. In connection with metaphysics it sometimes means the effects of which our past actions were the courses. It is in this light that we shall be concern with the law of karma as reflected in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

The law of karma means "deeds" or "works," the law dictates good rewards for good deeds, and bad rewards for bad deeds. It is a doctrine, or belief that every deliberately willed action will receive its reward or punishment. A man's state in any particular life is determined by his actions in previous lives. The New Testament makes it clear that a man shall reap what he sows. In this same light the Hindu states, "the body is the field, the soul is the cultivator; virtue and vice are seeds, and the soul must reap as it sows." Thus, this is an inexorable law, the working of cause and effect. It places emphasis on the fact that, if there is a balance of good to a man's credit, he gets the benefit of it by being reborn on a higher plane. However, if he has given himself up to wickedness, he sinks lower at rebirth. Each man lays up a stock of good and bad deeds and, so to speak, accumulates moral capital. Therefore, the debit of vice can be wiped out by the credit of virtue, and men may thus rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things.

This belief in the law of karma may be described in threefold as following: First, it may be described as a working hypothesis of the riddle of existence. It explains the potent inequalities and enigmas of life, the fact that one man is born to honour, another to dishonour, and the wicked so often flourish while the good have to endure misery and suffering. Secondly, it may be regarded as a pessimistic doctrine, for a man's presence is fashioned by a past of which he has no memory or knowledge, and no effort of his can improve it. Thirdly, it has elements of optimism, for a man can rise to a better state in future lives by virtuous conduct. In this sense it seems to me that the person is the captain of his ship and the master of his fate.

According to the pantheistic doctrine emancipation from the long chain of existences is finally obtained when the human soul loses its individual existence by being united with and merged in the universal spirit from which everything comes and to which everything will eventually return. "The soul enchained", said a modern teacher of Vendantism, Ramakrishna Paramhamsa, "is man; free from chains, it is God . . . as a piece of lead, thrown into a basin of mercury, is soon dissolved therein, so the human soul loses its individual ex-
istence when it falls into the ocean of Brahma.”1 However, other Hindus hold that while salvation consists in the union of the soul with God, it does not lose its identity. Moreover, spiritual beatitude and release from rebirths are obtained not by the soul’s reabsorption in the Supreme Spirit, but by its communion with God, whether conceived of as Brahma or as Siva or as Vishnu.

Authorities seem to agree that nothing perhaps has done so much to maintain the popularity of orthodox Hinduism as the idea of good works which is part of the belief in karma, that is, the idea of the efficacy of good deeds in improving a man’s chances of having a higher or happier life in his future terrestrial existences. This is often described as the acquisition of merit, and its effect is to encourage the performance not only of virtuous acts but also of the observances of orthodox Hinduism. The so called acquisition of merit, includes such things as worship in temples, where the vision of an idol is accounted for righteousness, domestic ceremonies, the repetition of a god’s name, gifts to Brahmans, pilgrimages, fasts, etc. All of these add to the stock of a man’s good deeds and to to his credit in the record of his lives.

On the other hand, the spiritual value of the belief in karma is impaired by the teachings of the Brahmans and the superstition of the people themselves. The former however, have popularized the idea that certain months, days and places are more sacred than others, and that worship at such times and places is more efficacious than worship at other times and places. They contend that pilgrimages have an extraordinary power to wipe out the record of past offenses. Moreover, death at Benaves is a short cut to heaven; offerings at Gaya are sufficient in themselves to take the souls of one’s father and ancestors to heaven. They recognized bathing and expiatory ceremonies as sufficient atonement for many sins, and they sometimes allow offences to be compounded for by payment to themselves. The people for their part consider that the mechanical performance of rites and ceremonies or the repetition of the name of a god are sufficient for the acquisition of merit. Some even keep birds trained to say the name of a god, in the belief that the repetition of the sacred name by the birds will be added to the times it passes their own lips and so increase the total of their good deeds.

The belief in karma and the transmigration of souls is prevalent in areas where Brahmanism has established itself, and the ideas of the people about the life after death have been shaped by Brahmanical influence. For example, the result of special inquiries made in the United Provinces during the census of 1901 shows that, “the doctrine of karma is one of the firmest beliefs of all classes of Hindus”, and that most of them have fairly clear ideas that wrong-doing is displeasing to Parameshuwar and that the wrongdoer must suffer for his misdeeds, possibly in his present existence, but certainly in his future life or lives.2

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2Ibid., p. 29.
On the other hand, in some areas where Brahmical influence is not operative, and among classes which have no Brahmans to minister to them, belief in karma cannot be said to be prevalent.

According to Noss, the law of karma carries an ethical consequence since one’s lot in future existences is fixed by one’s thoughts, words, and deeds. Therefore, the respect for the law of karma is a direct incentive to morality because it encourages the practice of virtues, such as truth, charity, etc., which add to the stock of man’s good deeds. However, the motive is not so much the desire to do good for its own sake, or to worship God without thought of self, but the desire to rise to a higher level in another life. Noss states, “those who are of pleasant conduct here—the prospect is, indeed”, so runs the chandogya upanished, “that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the womb of a kshatriya, or the womb of a vaisy. But those who are of stinking conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an outcast.” In any case, the law of karma operates like the law of nature. The process is quite impersonal. There is no judge and no judgment. There is no punishment, no repentance or amends, no remission of sins by divine clemency. The truth of the matter is, the inexorable causal nexus of the eternal universe itself.

Since Buddhism is an off-shoot of Hinduism, let us look now at the law of karma as reflected in Buddhism. According to my study and observation, the law of karma operates very much the same in Hinduism and Buddhism as well as Jainism. However, there are differences as to the law of karma in Jainism which are more pointed than those of Hinduism and Buddhism. This we shall discuss later in this paper.

The law of karma is a view that belongs to many religions, but it receives a much deeper significance when combined with the doctrine of rebirth. Recompense for actions is not always evident, but the idea becomes conceivable when combined with the belief in a former existence and the prospect of another life, in which the fruit of past actions may be reaped. Buddhism has accepted this view and emphasizes it as follows: “Of no one is the deed destroyed, it comes, indeed its master meets it; in the next world the sinful fool suffers in his own self the pain.” Moreover, good deeds might lead to heaven, but even such bliss last only until the accumulated merit is exhausted, and then the wheel of birth turns again. The problem then for Buddha was the same that faced everyone. Is there a way to escape from rebirth? According to E. J. Thomas the teachers of the upanishads claimed to have a way, which made union with the one reality the goal. Thomas also states however, that this factor was never mentioned by the Buddhists, and was probably unknown to them, because it was a secret doctrine taught to initiates. This is very strange to me however, that Buddah, or Buddhists would not

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know of this factor since Buddah claimed to have found a better way. The doctrine of the Jains is aimed at the annihilation of karma. However, Buddha claimed to have discovered an original way, a doctrine unheard before. This doctrine of Buddha was not a creed, but a course of mental training. The great aim is to get rid of all the evil tendencies of the individual, which hinder him from seeing things as they are. In this the system was unlike such religions as aimed at appeasing a deity by sacrifices or at finding salvation by annihilating karma. Instead it set forth a scheme of self-training within the reach of everyone. To see things as they really are means seeing them as taught by the truths of Buddhism, and to this extent Buddhism involves a creed. It begins with a belief in the impermanence and continual change of everything in the universe including the gods. But this is combined with the belief in a permanent state of peace to be attained, the goal of Nirvana. Mere belief however, is not enough. The truths must be known, meditated upon, and understood, until they are realized with absolute conviction.

Now, let us look at the similarities or differences of the law of karma in Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddha gave the law of karma flexibility than most later philosophers were willing to do. According to Buddah a man of any caste or class could experience so complete a change of heart or disposition as to escape the full consequence of sins committed in previous existences. This view of the Buddah is indifferent to the caste system, so distinctive of Hindu social life which affects every aspect of society, political, economical, social, religious or otherwise. The outcasts constitute the dregs of society, unclean and without the hope of ever rising in the social scale in this life, or the next existence. On the other hand, the law of karma in Buddhism operates remorselessly and without remission of one jot or tittle of the full recompense upon all who go on in the old way, the way of unchecked desire. However, it cannot lay hold upon a man completely changed, who had achieved arahatship, "the state of him that is worthy." The holy man who by steadfast mind has become exempted from evil desire may feel assured that their old karma is exhausted. Moreover, no new karma is produced, their hearts are free from the longing after a future life; the cause of their existence being destroyed, and there is no new springing up within them, they, the wise are extinguished at death like a lamp. Furthermore, their will be no rebirth for them. This factor is common with all three religions Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, however, Budda's doctrine of rebirth seems more objective and modern.

Finally, let us look at the law of karma as reflected in Jainism. In my study of Jainism I was able to ascertain that there are nine fundamental categories, or truths of the Jaina's faith. Moreover, the law of karma, the energy accumulated by action, underlay them all. Five of the categories were concerned entirely with either the acquisition, prevention, impeding, or destruction of karma, and two others dealt with bondage to it or freedom from it. Seven out of nine principles show the enormous importance Jaina is in common with all other Indian religions attached to karma. From my observa-
tion, I would conclude that these nine fundamental truths of Jainism are factors which parallel with the eightfold path of Buddhism.

Karma for the Jaina is the key that solves all the riddles of this unintelligible world. The root of the word karma according to the Jaina is, the verb “kri” (to do), and they believe it to be the result of actions springing from four sources. These four sources of karma in Jainism in my view may be seen as factors that parallel with the four permissible goals of life in Hinduism.

The first of karma is avirati, or “attachment to the things of this life such as food rainment, lodging, women, or jewels. The unlimited use and enjoyment of any of these give rise to karma, and the more one limits one’s indulgence in them, the less karma one acquires. Secondly, karma is also engendered by giving the rein to anger, pride, deceit, or greed (kasaya), or any of their sixteen divisions or the nine principles. Thirdly, karma is produced by uniting one’s body, mind and speech to worldly things (yoga). Fourthly, (mithyatua), or false belief, is a fruitful source of karma.” 

The Jaina contends that there are nine ways of arresting karma. Karma can be arrested by not using one’s own mind, body or speech; by being careful not to cause any one else to use their mind, body, or speech. Moreover, never approving, or in any other way associating oneself with what another does by mind, body, or speech. According to the Jaina, “as heat can unite with iron, and water with milk, so karma unites with the soul, and the soul so united with karma is called a soul in bondage.”

The Jaina firm faith in karma is due to the inequalities of life and the desire to account for them. This is also true with Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the Jaina differs from the Hindus in two main points. The Hindus, according to the Jaina, believe that God inflicts punishment for evil karma just as a judge inflicts the penalties prescribed by the law. We must note here however, this is not true of all Hindus. For Noss states that the law of karma for the Hindus is quite impersonal. Moreover, there is no judge and no judgement; no punishment, no repentance or amends, no remission of sins by divine clemency, just the inexorable causal nexus of the eternal universe itself. On the other hand, the Jaina and Buddu do not believe in a Supreme God who takes any active part in the world’s governance, declare that karma accumulates energy and automatically works it off, without any outside intervention. The second point of difference stressed is, that while Hindus think of karma as formless, Jaina believe karma to have shape, and to prove this they argue that karma cannot be formless, because formless things cannot do us neither good nor harm. Thirdly, there is difference between Hindus and Jaina with regard to the remembrance of karma. Some Hindus believe that it is wrong to illusion that all remembrance of the deeds done in previous births, which led to the accumulation of karma is forgotten.

6Ibid., p. 179.
However, the Jaina holds that it is due to ignorance, and when the soul by means of austerities and good actions has gotten rid of ignorance it attains omniscience and remembers all the births it has undergone and all that happened in them.

The Jaina divide karma according to its nature, duration, essence and content, quoting the following sloka: “These are the four parts of karma: its nature, that is, its character, its condition, that is, the time it will last; its constitution, that is called its essence; its scope, or the whole of its content.”

In conclusion, the Jaina claims that there are eight kinds or divisions of karma. The first kind of karma is that which hides knowledge from us. Secondly, the karma which prevent us from beholding the true faith. The third kind causes us to experience either the sweetness of happiness or the bitterness of misery. The fourth kind and most dreaded karma, bemuse all one's faculties. The fifth kind determines the length of time which a soul must spend in the farm with which his karma has endowed him. The sixth kind of karma decides which of the four states, a man, a god, an insect, or a hell-being in which a person shall dwell. The seventh kind determines one's caste in his next and subsequent lives. The eighth kind of karma, prevents one from using his will or his bodily strength as he should like to do.

The Jaina also divide karma according to the period when it was acquired, is being experienced, or will be experienced.

The age old problem is how can one be liberated from his karma. The Jaina contends that there are fourteen steps to liberations from karma. However, we will not discuss these fourteen steps due to their extensiveness and their similarity in the light of what has already been said concerning the law of karma in the three religions of India. However, the Jaina believe that by following these fourteen steps one's soul may mount to Motesa, or Nirvana.

Even if it is in a poverty-stricken India, with its many religions, a communistic Russia with no claimed belief in a Supreme being, or an affluent America in the midst of turmoil and dilemma, or an ancient China with its belief in yong and yia, the cry may be summarized by Noss in his book Man's Religions, “Oh would that I could be delivered from the power of my karma over me! Would that I could find my way into a state of being where misery would be at an end and only joy remain.”

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Bibliography


