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KARMA IN ASIAN RELIGIONS

by

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Introduction

After a discussion about karma with my fellow classmates one day, I was thoroughly surprised at how most of us view the concept of karma as merely a “what goes around, comes around” notion, in which a good or bad action of an individual influences a good or bad consequence respectively. However, it is important to recognise that karma holds different meanings in different cultures. For example, some Asian religions associate karma with reincarnation, while others emphasise a cause and effect process in the present life. In this paper, I attempt to discuss karma in different Asian religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Falun Gong respectively) by outlining the nature of karma and also by noting the principles of karma in these respective religions.

History of Karma

The concept of karma is said to have originated in India. Karma in its most basic form means “deed,” “action” or even “intent” (Torwesten, 1994). In Indian teachings, there are different derivations of the concept of karma. For example, karma can be singular or a combination of causality (either ethical or non-ethical,) ethicisation (the idea that positive and negative deeds have corresponding consequences,) or even rebirth (O’Flaherty, 1980). Although it is unclear as to who exactly invented the concept of karma, it is clear though that many scholars of the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions have long been discussing, debating and evolving different theories of karma which are now being applied to in their respective religions. The following sections will explore the meanings and principles of karma in different Asian religions.

Karma in Hinduism

Karma is an important tenet in Hinduism that guides an individual’s actions and influences his/her suffering. In the Hindu belief, karma is not created by God to reward or punish His people, and

neither is it something that the gods can interfere with (Bowker, 2000). The Hindus believe that karma is an essential law of nature. Yoga as well as Vedanta texts have assigned three categories to karma. They are firstly, *prarabdha* karma, which is karma experienced during one's present life; *sanchita* karma, which is the accumulated karma yet to be resolved; and finally, *kriyamana*, which is karma that one is presently creating (Subramuniaswami, 2007).

In Hindu texts, bad karma refers to the accumulation of bad karma as a consequence of actions regarded as wrong or immoral. It is believed that this bad karma is responsible for binding one's soul to hardship, misfortune and adverse conditions in his/her next life, when he/she is reincarnated. The fruits of one's moral acts in one's current life will be reaped in the next life and this is said to be manifested through the individual's social class and personal character (Mahony, 1987).

However, since karma is not predetermined by God, it is possible to change the course of one's karma and obtain good karma. This can be done by performing self-created experiences which encourage spiritual advancement, for example, by going to pilgrimages, holy places, and by praying, sacrificing and performing acts of devotion (Sharma, 1960). It is argued that the good karma obtained from these positive actions will allow for one's movement up the Caste system, and positive consequences are likely to follow.

In Hinduism, the goal of life is to reduce bad karma as much as possible so that one can attain better fortune in his/her life, and also so that he/she can obtain a better reincarnation in his/her next life. The ultimate divine objective is to achieve liberation (*moksha*) from the repeating cycle of birth, life and death (Chapple, 1986). It takes a lengthy amount of time to fully deplete one's accumulated karma and achieve *moksha*, many Hindu texts suggest it takes hundreds or thousands of reincarnations (Sharma, 1960). Once a person attains *moksha*, no new karma is created and he/she is no longer reborn after death.

Karma in Jainism

Jainism, although an Indian religion, is said to convey a completely different meaning of karma compared to that of the Hindu philosophy, with regards to its nature and its working principle. Firstly, karma or karmic dirt is believed to be tiny microscopic substances that infiltrate the whole universe. They are attracted to the karmic surrounding of a person's soul, because of the vibrations produced by physical and mental deeds, including thoughts (Cort, 2003). The life that people experience occurs when karma and consciousness interact.

In Jainism belief, karma is a self-nourishing apparatus and is also regarded as natural law, without requiring any divine entity to manage believers. It is also believed that one's karma can change, not only by one's actions alone but even through his/her thoughts. To have unnecessary negative thoughts about another person can lead to the increase of bad karma. Because of this, Jainism teachings advocate the "triple gems of rationality" which are rationality in thoughts, rationality in perception, and rationality in conduct (Padmanabh, 2003).

Karma, the Jains believe, can be decreased or avoided in two ways. Firstly, by behaving well, one will not accumulate any karma. This includes non-injury to others. And secondly, having a right mental attitude will ensure that karma will not stick to one's soul (Lehtonen, 2000). It is also important to note that some karmas perish on their own after causing suffering. As long as the karmic substance exists in one's body, his/her soul remains in bondage. However, all souls are treated equally in Jainism, as all souls have an equal opportunity at attaining moksha. Austerity and a high degree of commitment to a pure life will increase one's chances of reducing his/her karma gradually, and ultimately reaching the end goal of achieving moksha (Reichenbach, 1989).

A famous Jain illustration that depicts the complete liberation of karma is that of Marudevi, the mother Rishabha, who is the founder of Jainism. She reached emancipation by transforming her thoughts while she was visiting her son who is a Tirthankara. A Tirthankara is one who is believed to have perfect and supreme knowledge of the soul and has achieved the highest degree of purity. They are completely free of inner passions and personal desire. It must be noted however, that tirthankaras

are not recognised as gods, but rather they are able to help people eliminate karma and achieve moksha through their grace, supreme knowledge and purity (Padmanabh, 2003).

Karma in Sikhism

In Sikhism, the doctrine of karma, unlike in Hinduism and Jainism, is part of the Divine law known as Hukam. Sikhs believe that the whole universe is bound by good or bad actions and that all sorts of greatness and suffering, and pleasure and pain are subject to Hukam (Chahal, 2011). It is through karma that the bodies we receive at birth are determined, and it is through God's grace that one is able to achieve moksha, in contrast to the teaching of Hinduism and Jainism. Sikhism texts distinguish between karma and kirat. Kirat, similar to the sanchit karma of Hinduism teachings, is the accumulated effects of deeds performed during sequential births. Karma, however, can only be destroyed through the understanding of the Hukam and through good conduct which will ultimately be rewarded by God's grace, manifested through the elimination of karma (Parrinder, 1983). Therefore, Sikhs believe that God is the creator of the first karma, and also the destroyer of it.

In Sikh theology, the analogy that life is like a field is very commonly used. It is further explained that karma is the seeds of the field, and that people reap exactly what they sow. This infallible teaching holds every individual responsible for their own life. The Gurbani law of karma in Sikh teachings is that the accumulated karma from the past can make some feel closer to the pure being in his/her life, while others may feel more distant from such purity (Singh, 2013).

Another difference observed in the karmic principles of Sikh doctrine as compared to Hinduism, is that unlike the Hindus, Sikhs do not believe in or follow the caste system. Guru Nanak's teachings (as cited in Prasoan, 2007) have suggested that only good deeds shall endure in the present life and that past bad deeds will not determine the caste or status of an individual at birth. Sikhs place more importance on the teachings of the Hukam so that believers may follow these teachings and choose

courses of actions that are positive which may lead to spiritual advancement, enabling them to achieve 'nadar' which is divine grace, the ultimate spiritual of Sikhism.

Karma in Buddhism

The Buddhist teachings of karma also differ from that of Hinduism. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2000), a Theravada Buddhist teacher, explains that Indian religions believe karma is a linear operation, in that past actions and deeds influence the conditions of the present, and present actions and deeds affect the future. In Buddhist teachings, however, karma does not operate in a straight line and is a more complex concept. Bhikku argues that the present is shaped by both past as well as present actions and deeds, and that present actions shape not only the future, but the present as well. In this way, this does not promote the acceptance of the status quo, unlike that in Hinduism. Early Buddhist teachings focused on the redemptive potential of what the mind is doing with every moment. To further explain this, who an individual is and where he/she comes from is nowhere as important as his/her mind's motives for doing what it is doing in the present (Schober, 1997). Buddhist philosophy accepts that poor conditions in one's life may be due to the conditions of past events, but the destiny of an individual is not fixed due to his past, as humans are capable of changing their future. Karmic actions are regarded as the engine that drives the cycle of rebirth. Correspondingly, comprehending fully the karmic process of action and result enables an individual to free themselves from the cycle of rebirth, and attain emancipation, just as in the teaching of Hinduism.

Buddhist teachings contend that when there is a conscious objective behind an action or a deed, be it positive, negative, or even neutral, that action is then regarded as karma and results that correspond are known as karmic results. Therefore, every physical deed, speech or thought is regarded as a karmic action, and the determinant of one's actions are his intentions and motivations. In Buddhism, karmic results are not considered as a judgment of actions by a divine being. Rather, they are the consequences of a natural process of cause and effect, similar to Hindu teachings. Rinpoche (2003), a contemporary Buddhist teacher, suggests that unlike the Jain philosophy, Buddhism is non-theistic -

there is no belief in a creator, but rather in the actions that dictate circumstances which then come to fruition, which is called karma. Karma is not kept tracked of, and one karmic cause can cause many karmic results. Karma in Buddhism is thus, in a constant flux. It does not encourage resignation to one's present being but rather, in its ultimate goal, empowers people through its teachings that we are indeed in charge of our own lives and destinies.

Karma in Falun Gong

Falun Gong, an Asian religion with influences from Buddhism, also adopts the concept of karma in its teachings. Very similar to Hinduism and Jainism, Falun Gong teaches that the soul of an individual is bonded in the cycle of rebirth because of accrued karma. Just like in Jain teachings, in Falun Gong, karma is a black substance that holds negative meanings and is accumulated over succeeding lifetimes by performing bad actions and deeds and by thinking negative, immortal thoughts (Ownby, 2008).

Unlike Buddhist teachings however, Falun Gong contends that karma legitimises suffering, and is the determining factor that hinders people from achieving enlightenment. Karma in this religion is perceived only negatively and is not a process of award and punishment, in contrast to Buddhist teachings. Continuous reincarnation will occur until karma is entirely eliminated or unless the individual is destroyed because of his/her actions during his/her lifetime on Earth.

In Falun Gong teachings, karma is considered to be the cornerstone to one's moral behaviour and in terms of principles, it is similar to the Sikh philosophy of reaping what you sow. In terms of its nature, it adopts a similar fashion with Hinduism, such that every individual is reincarnated and his/her present life has been determined by the moral actions of his/her previous lives, in a process called karmic calculation. According to Falun Gong, human beings all fell to the earth as they no longer met requirements of the divine order. Humans fell to the Earth as mortal attachments attract karma, causing karma to accumulate and weigh humans down (Ownby, 2008). Similar to Jain teachings, the purpose of the people here on Earth is to experience a spiritual enlightenment (just like the Jain

Tirthankara) and that those who do not achieve that will be reincarnated until they accumulate a large amount of karma and are then destroyed.

Another facet of karma different from the ones previously discussed is that in Falun Gong, suffering reduces karma and that in order to improve one's karmic situation, one must endure the tribulations of his/her life (Li, 2000). Karma will be eliminated if a person's realm of mind improves drastically, and gradually, the suffering will pass and his/her life will also improve. Falun Gong beliefs suggest that people's mental states will continually be tested and all these tests, large or small, leads to big improvements in their present life conditions. The teachings highly encourage people to endure suffering so that their mental states will strengthen, thus eliminating karma. For example, when one is ill, he/she is discouraged from consuming medicine as he/she is missing an opportunity to reduce his karma (Ownby,2008).

Conclusion

It is without a doubt that karma holds different meanings and is manifested in different ways throughout different religions and cultures. Although Jainism and Sikhism are Indian religions, the concept of karma varies from India's primary religion (Hinduism.) For example, the Hindu and Jain teachings suggest that karma is a law of nature, while Sikhism emphasises that karma is created and destroyed by God. Similarly, Buddhism and Falun Gong hold different definitions of karma. While Buddhism acknowledges that there is good and bad karma, Falun Gong commentators hold karma with an exclusively negative connotation. Even the major Asian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) too have varying concepts on karmic laws. For instance, those of Hindu tradition believe that their circumstances are transferred to them as a result of karma from their past life, and thus, they accept the status quo. But Buddhist teachings encourage believers that their karma is changeable at any time and that karma is not a premise for them to accept poor conditions in their lives. Another similarity in the concept of karma is between Jainism and Falun Gong, in which both teachings argue that karma is a physical substance, however, Jains believe that karma can only be eliminated through good conduct

and a good mental attitude, while Falun Gong teaches believers that in order to eliminate karma, one must endure suffering and be resilient throughout tribulations. By understanding the similarities and differences about karma in different religions, it is clear to see that karma goes beyond a “what goes around, comes around” type of concept.

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