

## THE LAW OF KARMA AND THE CYCLE OF BIRTH AND DEATH

All intellectually inclined human beings, in their moments of deep reflection, have inquired to find answers to certain questions such as: Does life have a meaning or purpose? Is death the final end?

Why do good people face one calamity after another and suffer so much? Why do unworthy people meet with good fortune?

VEDANTIC HINDUISM offers some explanations or answers which appeal to reason. VEDAS are an ancient collection of HINDU SCRIPTURES which consists of two parts:

- KARMA KAANDA or the early part replete with rituals and sacrifices that are conducted with specific end results in view and are not really beneficial in achieving the final goal of LIBERATION (MOKSHA) from the cycle of birth and death through SELF-REALIZATION.
- JNAANA KANDA or the latter part containing the philosophical portion called the UPANISHADS which are truly beneficial in achieving the final goal of LIBERATION (MOKSHA) from the cycle of birth and death through SELF-REALIZATION.

VEDANTIC HINDUISM emphasizes CAUSE and EFFECT as they are closely related. Every EFFECT is preceded by a CAUSE and every CAUSE produces an EFFECT. It is a natural SEQUENCE and a LAW, like any other LAW in nature and science such as the Law of Gravity, Law of Motion etc. The new testament of the BIBLE says "As you sow, so shall you reap". Gautama Buddha said "Sesame was Sesame, Corn was Corn". In short, you cannot plant a certain type of seed and expect to gather a different type of harvest. Newton's third Law of Motion states "Every ACTION has an equal and opposite reaction." The law of cause and effect is the LAW OF KARMA. It should not be interpreted as fate, luck or chance. It should not make you callous or indifferent to the suffering of others. When you notice others' suffering, it is your karma to reach out to help and mitigate it. If you do so, you accumulate virtue (PUNYA) which will benefit you. If you don't, you will accrue sin (PAAPA) which will harm you.

The effects of action (KARMA) may not be easily perceived and may not be immediate; it may be delayed. Fairly often it is seen that people who perform evil actions escape their consequences in their present lifetime. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that there is AFTER LIFE; that is, LIFE AFTER DEATH; something survives after the phenomenon of death, which passes on to another birth where the effects of past karma are depleted. This continues until all Karma is exhausted thus making the process of birth and death cyclical. This is a FIRM CONVICTION rooted in Hinduism which is also shared by Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

The AIM, PURPOSE and GOAL of every JIVAATMAN (spirit embodied in human beings) is to attain union with the BRAHMAN or PARAMAATMAN, or AATMAN in short, which is also referred to as the supreme divine spirit or GOD and it is changeless, imperishable, ever-existent, infinite, and real. This union is called LIBERATION (Mukti or Moksha) or FREEDOM from the cycle of birth and death. The BRAHMAN is A SINGLE INDIVISIBLE ENTITY and the inner divine core in all beings (JIVAATMAN) is the SAME as BRAHMAN. The multiplicity perceived by beings is not REAL; it is only an appearance and is caused by the projecting power (AAVARANA SHAKTI) of MAAYA (THE DIVINE COSMIC ILLUSION) through the BODY

- MIND complex (Psycho-physical Cover). This is called NAAMA (name) ROOPA (form) BHEDA (difference).

The AATMAN, being identical with BRAHMAN, is NITYA SHUDDHAH (Ever Pure), NITYA BUDDHAH (Ever Enlightened), and NITYA MUKTAH (Ever Free). The Jivaatman (the embodied being) however, identifies himself with the Body-Mind cover due to MOHA (DELUSION, FALSE PERCEPTION, AVIDYA MAAYA, or IGNORANCE) and forgets his true divine nature. Thus he is entangled in the mortal world experiencing dualities such as pain and pleasure, sorrow and happiness, dishonor and honor etc.

During the course of life, people perform ACTION or KARMA: Actions performed according to DHARMA (the principle of righteousness) are virtuous and yield PUNYA (reward), while those done out of selfish interest are harmful and yield PAAPA (sin). PUNYA is spiritually elevating and PAAPA is spiritually degrading. According to the Law of Karma, both have to result in consequent effects of happiness and sorrow respectively. Note that PUNYA cannot compensate PAAPA and therefore PAAPA cannot nullify PUNYA.

When a person dies, only his GROSS BODY or the STHULA SHARIRA, which is made up of the five basic elements (PANCHA BHUTAS), dies. Actions performed by beings during their lifetime and unfulfilled desires of beings at the end of their lifetimes leave strong impressions which are then deeply ingrained in the beings' minds. Both of these become VAASANAS or SAMSKAARAS. These VAASANAS envelope the AATMAN (the pure spirit or Brahman), which is the inner core of all beings, in the form of imperfections and prevent the being from attaining MOKSHA (LIBERATION) or SELF-REALIZATION. These VAASANAS constitute the SUBTLE BODY or SOOKSHMA SHARIRA which accompanies the AATMAN even after the GROSS BODY dies so as to find another suitable body for further refinement towards perfection and ultimate MUKTI (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). A notable feature in VEDANTIC HINDUISM is that MUKTI is assured for all. It is up to the individual to exercise his HIGHER MIND (the INTELLECT or BUDDHI) - the unique quality to discriminate and reason – so as to always keep the goal of MUKTI in view and act accordingly. This is in stark contrast with most other religions where there is a Day of Judgement, Hellfire, and Eternal Damnation.

KARMA is of three types:

- PAST KARMA – SANCHITA KARMA – All accumulated Karma from previous births.
- PRESENT KARMA – PRAARABDHA KARMA – A portion of Sanchita Karma which the person has to deplete during his present birth.
- FUTURE KARMA – AAGAAMI KARMA – The sum of a portion of Sanchita Karma from previous births and the further Karma acquired during present births.

The defects of KARMA are clearly spelled out and ways to overcome them have been well-delineated in the GITA, especially in CHAPTERS 2, 3, 4 and 5 pertaining to KARMA YOGA (PATH of ACTION) with emphasis on RENUNCIATION (SANYAASA) and TYAAGA:

- KAAMA – DESIRE – All actions are preceded by thought, a perceived need, and the formative imagination of the result when that particular desire is fulfilled (SANKALPA).

- PHALA – FRUIT – the expected effect or result of the action performed.
- SANGA – ATTACHMENT to the object acquired or the person thought of
- KARTRTVAM – Sense of “I” or the EGO involved

The INSTRUCTION or TEACHING is to subdue the defects of KARMA by exercising the higher mind or intellect and by using the unique faculty available only to human beings to reason or discriminate between what would be beneficial towards attaining MUKTI (LIBERATION) and what would lead to bondage or rebirth.

The advice is either to adopt DAASYA BHAAVA (Servile Attitude). That is, “I am your loyal, humble, and devoted servant and I will do your bidding”. HANUMAAN, whose TOTAL SURRENDER (SHARANAAGATI) to RAAMA, is a perfect example for this attitude.

Recognize that the human mind, though a valuable instrument, is limited, finite and perishable, while the SUPERMIND (BRAHMAN or GOD) is limitless, infinite and imperishable. The common mistake made by human beings is to use their tiny mind in order to understand that only the SUPER MIND is REAL and the rest is due to the projecting power of MAAYA or ILLUSION. Once this is realized, it is better to willingly and gracefully accept this as a fact. The human mind, which is very much controlled by the “small I” or the ego, should be surrendered to the “SUPREME I” (the BRAHMAN or the AATMAN). The surrender should be total and is called SHARANAAGATI. This is the FINAL DECLARATION of and utterance by LORD SRI KRISHNA to ARJUNA (verse 66, Chapter 18 of the GITA) where he concludes the whole discourse by saying:

Sarva Dharmaan Parityajya Maamekam Sharanam Vraja

Aham Tva Sarva Paapebhyo Mokshaishyaami Maa Shuchah

The value of the human mind is very aptly illustrated by the parable of “two thorns”: A person walking barefoot in a forest treads on a thorn which gets embedded in his foot. It hurts him badly and he is unable to walk further. For want of any implement, he looks for another thorn equally strong. Using this, he is able to extract and remove the offending thorn. Now, he throws away both thorns, because having served its purpose, the second thorn is no longer useful to him. The first thorn is “the thorn of ignorance”, the non-realization of the SUPREME REALITY and the second thorn is “the thorn of knowledge used to remove ignorance”, which is no longer useful having attained the final goal of MUKTI (LIBERATION).

SWAAMI CHINMAYAANANDAJI gives another example from sports – POLE VAULT - for the thorn of knowledge which is of no use once the goal is achieved: The athlete runs with a long pole and then plants it firmly on the ground to clear a bar set at a height. When he reaches the set height and clears the bar, he lets go of the pole which he just used.