

KARMA

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1. *IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE*

The Indian solution of the great riddle of the origin of suffering and the diversity of human conditions is to be found in the word *karma*, which, through the theosophists, has become familiar to European ears. Hindus believe that souls have been transmigrating from the beginning; they practically hold that the well-being or the suffering of everybody is only the result of former acts (*karma*). This solution of the great riddle is not altogether satisfactory, as we get no answer concerning the “very beginning”; but it is a happy one, eminently moral, and to a large extent a true one.

The doctrine of *karma*, i.e., acts and their retribution, is of great antiquity in India. It gradually broke away from Vedic naturalism, mysticism, and piety.

Karma struck hard against the old belief in sacrifice, penance, and repentance as destroyers of sin (E. W. Hopkins, *JRAS*, 1906, p. 583).

It became formulated at an early stage in definite terms:

As a man himself sows, so he himself reaps; no man inherits the good or evil act of another man. The fruit is of the same quality with the action, and, good or bad, there is no destruction of the action (*ib.*, p. 581; quoted from *Mahābhārata*).

This doctrine might be called the essential element, not only of all moral theories in India, but also of popular belief. If a person is born deformed or unhealthy, it must be—so people say—because of sins committed in his former life. It is in Buddhism, however, that the doctrine of *karma* reaches its climax and assumes a unique character. Elsewhere it meets with correctives; there are counteractions to human acts; but in Buddhism it may be said that *karma* explains everything, or ought to.

2. **EGO AND KARMA.**

Other Indian philosophies admit the existence of a self-existent soul or an ego. In Buddhist philosophy the ego is merely a collection of various elements constantly renewed, which are combined into a pseudo-personality only as the result of action. It has, therefore, been asserted that Buddhism does not admit transmigration: when a being dies, a new being is born and inherits his *karma*; what transmigrates is not a person, but his *karma*. This explanation is justified by some texts;¹ but it would be more exact to put the matter in a different way: an existence is a section of the existences of a certain soul—or, to use Buddhist terms, of a “series” composed of thoughts, sensations, volition, and material elements. This series never had a beginning. It has to “eat” the fruits of a certain number of acts under certain conditions, and the experience of these acts constitutes an existence (see DEATH [Buddhist]). When this existence comes to an end, there are still some acts to be “eaten,” both new and old. The series, therefore, passes into another existence, and lives a new section of life, under new conditions. It cannot be said that acts are the sole material cause of this re-incarnation; for the physical elements of the new being, blood and seed, are not intelligent; *karma* (the possibilities of retribution called *karma*) is not intelligent; while the new being is intelligent from the embryo. It is the “series” as a whole, with all its moral and material elements, that is incarnated. If the series does not dissolve at death, if it becomes re-incarnate, it is because its acts must entail retribution. The new being is what its acts have made it: all the pleasant and unpleasant experiences to which it will have to submit are simply the retribution of acts. In fact, there is no agent (*kartar*); there is nothing but the act and its fruit; organs, thoughts, and external things are all the fruit of acts, in the same way as pleasant and unpleasant sensations.

3. **KARMA AND DESTINY**

Over and above human energy and free will Brāhmanism placed “destiny” (*davīa*, from *deva*, “god”). To Buddhists “destiny” is merely “past acts.” The earlier Indian belief was that the world was re-created by Brahmā at the end of each period of chaos. Buddhist held that the whole universe, with all its variety, is the work of acts. But by “acts” we must here understand the combined mass of the acts of all beings; e.g., at the beginning of the re-creation of the world there

¹ The present writer has recently found one text with this meaning, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, iii. 24; but see *ib.*, iii. 11f.

rise in the vast void of the universe “winds born of acts,” which heap up the clouds from which the creative rain will pour, and so on (see COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY [Buddhist]).

4. **NATURE OF KARMA.**

“Act” was variously interpreted by the Indian philosophers. The early thinkers attributed an importance to liturgical action and penance which Buddhist contest or even deny. For them an act is essentially action that can be morally qualified. It is (1) volition (*cetanā*), mental or spiritual act (*mānasa*), and (2) what is born of volition, what is done by volition, what a person does after having willed, i.e., bodily or vocal act. Mental acts are acts *par excellence*, inasmuch as there is no act without mental action. We are what we think; we are what we will.² No act is imputable, or, in Buddhist terminology, accumulated (*upacita*), put in reserve for future retribution, unless it is intentional, deliberate, accomplished, and free from regret and antidote (remorse, confession, etc.). *Cetanā*, being mental, leaves traces (*vāsanās*) in the “series of thoughts (*viññānasantāna*); this is the explanation of retribution. In certain cases the act of thought is the most potent act; the anger of a *ṛṣi*, e.g., can depopulate a whole region. But the mental act is not the only act; and, as a rule, “what one does after having willed” is more important than the willing. To kill an enemy is more efficacious and more serious than to wish to kill him. Hence the importance of physical and spoken acts. Physical and spoken acts make something known (*viññāpayati*), for speech and gesture are significant; they are, therefore, named *viññāpti*; but the Buddhist school admits that they create *aviññāpti*. By *aviññāpti* we must understand a thing of particular nature, derived from the four great material elements, earth, water, etc., but subtle. Once produced by a conscious and voluntary vocal or bodily act, it exists and develops of its own accord, without the agency of thought, unconsciously, whether a man is sleeping, waking, or absorbed in contemplation. It is part of the series that takes the place of the soul in Buddhism.

5. **SAṂVARA AND ASAṂVARA**

Here we must notice the important tenet of *saṁvara*, moral restraint, and its opposite, *asaṁvara*. The man who, in accordance with the established rules of the community, undertakes to keep the Buddhist vows, or simply the five rules “not to kill,” “not to steal,” etc., creates by this solemn declaration (*viññāpti*) an *aviññāpti* of particular virtue. This *aviññāpti* constitutes what might be compared—roughly, of course—to the merit attaching to religious vows in Christian theology. The merit of the man who has declared (*viññāpayati*) his intention of keeping the vows goes on increasing. Every abstention from murder, theft, etc., is reckoned a merit to him, though, as a rule, it is no special merit to the ordinary man to abstain from those crimes. The *saṁvara* constituted by the acceptance of rules continues to exist until the rules are categorically renounced—until an act is committed which is in direct opposition to them.

² In this the Buddhists differ from the Jains, who do not recognize mental acts.

The man who, on the other hand, devotes himself professionally to a certain sin—the murderer, butcher, judge, or king—lives in *asaṃvara*, and is vowed to perdition.

6. **PURE AND IMPURE KARMA**

There are two kinds of acts: acts free from *āsravas*, or pure acts, and acts accompanied by *āsravas*, or impure acts. The meaning of *āsrava* is not quite certain (“deadly floods” [according to Rhys Davids]; “discharge, matter, pus” [Childers]), but it is right to say that it has something to do with desire and ignorance: “pure” means free from passion (*kleśa*). Being free from desire and ignorance, pure acts have no retribution; they do not contribute to existence; they are, by their nature, the destroyer of existence; they prepare the way to *nirvāṇa*. Such are the “volitions” by which one gets rid of human and transitory interests to contemplate and meditate upon the four “noble truths” by which one enters into the path of Arhatship.

All other acts are impure, and are further distinguished as good or bad, merit or demerit. The principle of distinction seems to be retribution: the act with pleasant retribution is good; that with unpleasant retribution is bad. It may also be said that acts performed with a view to happiness in this world are bad; acts performed with a view to happiness in the world beyond are good. We sometimes meet with the noteworthy statement that good and bad actions (*sucarita* and *duṣcarita*) are characterized by their intention for the good or harm of others.

7. **ROOTS OF KARMA.**

The good act (*kuśala*) has three roots: non-lust (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adveṣa*), and non-error (*amoha*). All bad acts are in contradiction to good acts; but false doctrine alone (*mithyādr̥ṣṭi*)—“denial of good and bad, of fruit, of salvation”—cuts the “roots of the good act.” It must, however, be strong-strong (there are nine categories: weak-weak, weak-medium, weak-strong, etc.). Only men can cut the root; gods cannot, because they know the retribution of acts; women cannot, according to some teachers, owing to their instability of mind. In order to cut the root, a man must be an “intellectual” (*dr̥ṣṭicarita*), a being capable of a strong determination to sin; this excludes “passionate men” (*tṛṣṇācarita*), eunuchs, the damned, and animals. The roots are restored by doubt as to the existence of good and evil, and by recovery of belief in good and evil.

8. **CLASSIFICATIONS OF KARMA.**

Acts are distinguished as of three kinds: good (*kuśala*), bad (*akuśala*), and indifferent (*avyākṛta*), i.e., beneficial, pernicious, and neither the one nor the other; i.e., acts protecting from suffering either temporarily (by assuring a happy lot) or finally (leading to *nirvāṇa*), acts followed by unpleasant retribution, and acts different from both of these—not to be “enjoyed” pleasantly or painfully.

Acts may also be classified as meritorious (*puṇya*) demeritorious (*apuṇya*), and fixed (*āniṇjya*). The good act of the sphere of desire, i.e., bearing fruits which will be well rewarded in the sphere of

desire (*Kāmadhātu*; see COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY [Buddhist]), is called meritorious; when it attaches itself to a higher sphere, it is called “fixed.” As a matter of fact, the retribution of a good act in the sphere of desire is not absolutely determined: an action which ought to have a retribution of force, beauty, and so on, may in fact be enjoyed in a divine, human, or animal birth. This is not the case with the good act to be rewarded in the higher spheres; here an act never gets retribution in one stage instead of in another. The demeritorious act is the bad act. The act which is final protection from suffering, i.e., which leads to *nirvāṇa*, is good (*kuśala*), since it is “pure,” but not meritorious (*punya*).

9. RETRIBUTION (VIPĀKA).

The fruit of retribution of acts includes not only the sensation, but also everything that determines the sensation—organs, etc. The three kinds of acts produce agreeable sensation (*sukhavedanīya*), disagreeable sensation, and indifferent sensation. The first two are easily understood; the proper sphere of retribution for the third is the fourth ecstasy; but it is also believed that the indifferent act produces the vital organ, etc., and other data hedonistically neutral. It is regarded as good, but not intense.

Acts may be (a) determinate (*niyata*), and (b) indeterminate (*aniyata*)—i.e., they involve or do not involve a necessary retribution.

(a) Five kinds of acts are called *ānantaryas*, “immediate,” because their retribution (hell) cannot be interrupted by an act allowing of fruit in another existence: matricide, patricide, murder of an Arhat, schism, and malicious wounding of a Buddha. Mother and father are benefactors in an eminent degree; the Arhat, the community, and the Buddha are “fields of qualities.” To kill one’s father in the endeavor to kill flies is not *ānantarya*; but to kill an Arhat without knowing that he is an Arhat is *ānantarya*, because the intent to murder is determined: “I shall kill some one.”

Acts said to be “similar to *ānantaryas*,” and necessarily entailing hell, are violation of a mother who is an Arhatī, murder of a Bodhisattva, murder of a saint of the *śaikṣa* class, theft from the community, and destruction of a *stūpa*.

(b) The retribution of all other acts may be arrested (1) by the acquisition of the spiritual stage called “patience” (*kṣānti*), which brings one past the stage of retribution of acts leading to evil destiny, just as a man may escape his creditors by emigrating; (2) by the acquisition of the quality of the saint “who never returns” (*anāgāmin*); one passes beyond the sphere of desire; only those acts bear fruit which must bear fruit in this present existence; (3) by the acquisition of Arhatship; all *karma* is destroyed, with the reservation already noted. When, by so-called “worldly” perfection (*laukika*), i.e., not properly Buddhist, a man obtains birth into the higher spheres and detachment from all affection for the sphere of desire, the retribution of acts to be rewarded in the sphere of desire is suspended, since the lower sphere cannot be finally abandoned except by the “noble path.”

Good acts of the body, voice, and thought are purification; they arrest, either temporarily or finally, soiling by the passions of bad acts.

A distinction is also drawn between (1) the act felt in the same life in which it is accomplished; (2) the act felt in the following life; and (3) the act felt later.

10. **PROJECTION OF KARMA**

An existence is “projected,” or caused, by an act; but a number of acts combine to condition an existence, and hence the variety of human fortune. Hence the theory of the white-black act applies.

Every bad act is black; the act that is good in relation to the higher spheres is white; the act that is good in relation to the sphere of desire is white-black, because being always weak, it is always mixed with evil. It is good in itself, but coexists in the “series” (soul) along with bad acts.

A human existence cannot be projected except by a good act. But, supposing this existence follows an infernal existence, the latter has been projected, in the course of the existence preceding it, by a bad act “to be punished in a following existence”; the former has been projected, in the course of the same preceding existence, by a good act “to be rewarded in an existence following the following.” In a human existence following upon an infernal existence, a man may have a short life, or may suffer scarcity of food and property, or may wed an unfaithful wife, etc. All these misfortunes are the fruit of the stream (*niṣyanda*) of murder, theft, adultery, etc., which have had infernal existence as their fruit of retribution (*vipāka*).

A man causes suffering to the living being whom he kills, therefore he must suffer in hell (*vipāka*); he makes him die, therefore he must himself die soon (*niṣyanda*).

Acts have also a fruit of a general kind. Towards the end of the little cosmic period (*antarakalpa*; see COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY [Buddhist]), plants etiolate, are crushed by stones and rain, and bear little fruit; this is the result of a super-abundance of murder, theft, etc.—the fruit of *karma* as sovereign (*adhipati*). The creation of the universe is the result of the acts of all beings together; the hells are created by the acts that require to be punished in hell, and so on.

11. **PATHS OF KARMA**

Among good and bad acts ten paths of acts (*karmapatha*) are distinguished because of their gravity: (a) for the body: murder, theft, and forbidden love; (b) for the voice: lying, slander, insolence, and “unprofitable conversation” (stultiloquium, etc.); (c) for the spirit: covetousness, malice, and false doctrine. Their opposites are abstention from murder, etc.

False doctrine (*mithyadr̥ṣṭi*) is the denial of good and evil, of retribution and salvation. It is bad because it is the principle of the will to hurt others.

The first seven, from murder to “stultiloquium,” are physical and spoken acts (*karma*), and paths of acts (*karmapatha*), i.e., paths of mental action, i.e., volition (*cetanā*); the last three, covetousness, malice, and false doctrine, are not acts, but simply paths of volition. Confusion of passions (*kleśas*) with acts must be avoided.

We must further distinguish in an act the preparation, the act proper, and the “back” (*prṣṭha*)—e.g., all the preparation for the murder of an animal by the butcher (the going to the market to buy the beast, etc.), the actual death-dealing blow, and the cutting up and selling of the meat. The act proper alone constitutes the “path of act”; and hence important consequences arise from the point of view of responsibility.

It is also to be noted that the “path of act” presupposes accurate knowledge of what one is doing, and is incompatible with a mistake in the person. When one is in doubt whether the thing which he hits is alive or not, he is thinking of destruction, but not of murder. The Jains hold that the man who commits a murder without intent is nonetheless guilty, just as a man who touches fire is burned.

This, however, would lead to palpable absurdities. The Jain himself would be culpable for preaching terrible austerities; the embryo and the mother would be culpable for making each other suffer; the murdered being himself would be culpable, since he is the origin of the action of murder. Further, a man would not be guilty of murder if he got another person to commit it; for we are not burned if we touch fire by means of another.

All this is very well worked out, but in other things the school is not so wise.

If a man has intercourse with another man’s wife, thinking that she is his own, he is not guilty of adultery. If he has intercourse with another’s wife while thinking that she is the wife of a third man, opinions differ as to his guilt. Some hold him guilty of adultery, for the wife of another man is the object of the preparation and the object of the indulgence. Others say that there is no adultery, for the object of the preparation and the object of the indulgence are different persons.

The somewhat mechanical and very scholastic character of the Buddhist theory of retribution may be illustrated by the subjective and objective elements in giving.

For a thorough valuation of the worth of giving, or charity (*dāna*), we must take into account (1) the qualities of the giver (faith, morality, learning, etc.), and the manner of giving (with respect, with the right hand, at the opportune moment, etc.); (2) the qualities of the object given (excellence in color, smell, etc.); and (3) the qualities of the person who receives: (a) excellence in relation to his lot in life; a gift made to an immoral man has 100 times the value of one made to an animal; (b) excellence due to suffering; a gift to an invalid, a person who is cold, etc.; (c) excellence due to service received (parents, preacher of the True Law, etc.); and (d) excellence due to qualities (morality, knowledge, etc.).

There is a hierarchy among acts—e.g., whether one's destiny is human, or infernal, etc., determined by morality (*śīla*, abstention from murder, etc.). Gifts are only a sort of extra, to assure riches and other enjoyments.

LITERATURE:

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"Birth Stories" (*Jātakas*) and *Avadānas* contain many details on the retribution of *karma*; see, e.g., H. Chavannes, *Cinq cents contes et analogues extraits du Tripiṭaka*, Paris, 1911.

Every work on the philosophies and religions of India contains some exposition of the doctrine of *karma*, e.g.:

E. W. Hopkins, *The Religions of India*, London, 1896, pp. 100, 231, etc..

A. Barth, *The Religions of India*, 1888, pp. 77, 110.

P. Oltramare, *Hist. des idées théosophiques dans l'Inde*, i. (Paris, 1906) 99, 106.

H. C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, Cambridge, Mass, 1906, Index, s.v. "Karma".

R. C. Childers, *Dict. of the Pāli language*, London, 1875, pp. 178f., 198.

Special mention may be made of the article by R. W. Hopkins on "Modification of the Karma Doctrine" in *JRAS*, 1906, pp. 583–98, 1907, pp. 855–72, which give a clear view of the contradictions and evolution of the doctrine.

For the theory of the Jains, who regard action as a subtle matter, see the texts translated by H. Jacobi in *SBE*, xxii [1884] and xlv [1895] and cf. art. JAINISM.