

CHAPTER 9

KARMA AND REBIRTH

Dr. D.C. Rao

Karma means action. An action is undertaken by an individual with a specific intention. It is this individual, known as the ‘doer,’ who is responsible for the action and therefore has to reap the consequences of the action. A central idea in Hindu philosophy is the unshakeable link between action and consequence, as between cause and effect. Each action creates a consequence that the doer of the action must necessarily experience; and each experience of an individual has its cause in a prior action by that same individual.

Because of this tight connection between action and consequence, the word *karma* is also used to indicate the result or ‘fruit’ of an action. Depending on the intention behind the action, the fruit may be desirable, undesirable or mixed. Actions that are selfish, malicious and hurtful result in sorrow, tension, regret and guilt. These are known as *papa*. Actions that are driven by a sense of duty and concern for others bring joy and inner fulfillment. These are known as *punya*. Only good actions with good intentions lead to good *karma*: one cannot harvest mangoes by planting a cactus.

The time interval between the action and its consequence may be very short, even immediate, or very long, stretching over many lives. Thus, our experiences in this life may be the result of our actions performed in past lives; and the fruit of our present actions may be experienced by us in future lives. Since we do not remember our past lives, we frequently cannot understand why we suffer pain and sorrow; and we may fail to see in this life the rewards of our good actions that fructify as good experiences in future lives. It is fortunate that we forget our past lives. If we remembered them, we might be plagued by guilt or anxiety and the memory of past associations might poison relationships.

The karmic consequences of all our actions in all our previous lives are accumulated in seed form that produce fruit in future lives. This accumulation is known as *sancita karma*. As long as there is *sancita karma* in our karmic account, we are bound to be reborn until we exhaust this accumulation. Since it has been accumulated over many lives, the burden of the past is too much for us to exhaust in this life alone. If the *sancita karma* is thought of as a warehouse full of our past *karmas*, one part of it, designated to be exhausted in this life, is like a truckload in our front yard. This is known as *prarabdha karma*, a subset of our *karma* that must be experienced in this life. It is our destiny for this life, determining the circumstances of our birth, our life span and the principal elements of our lives.

Who selects *prarabdha karma* as a subset of *sancita karma*? This is the prerogative of *Ishwara*, the all-knowing, all-powerful and compassionate God who set in place the law of *karma* and oversees its operation. *Ishwara* helps us exhaust our accumulated *sancita karma* in the most

efficient way possible in successive births. The purpose of each birth is to exhaust *prarabdha karma* and, as far as possible, avoid adding to the stock of *sancita karma*. To grasp how this is done, one needs to understand the link between our actions and our latent desires.

Each action is driven by a desire, consciously or unconsciously. Even when we believe we are acting out of a conscious intention, we frequently act out of habit. The habits we cultivate by repeated actions over many lives are known as *vasanas*. Since our actions are driven by our *vasanas*, we can only exhaust our *karma* when we have overcome our *vasanas*. *Vasanas* dwell in our mind and are acted on by our body. In His compassion, Ishwara provides us with the body and environment that is best suited to exhaust our *vasanas*. For example, *vasanas* of violence may be best exhausted in the body of a tiger and *vasanas* of stubbornness in the body of a mule. When our mind is overwhelmed by *vasanas* that constitute an obstacle to our spiritual growth, Ishwara gives us a birth in a non-human form best suited to exhaust those *vasanas*. Since animals act from instinct, they are not “doers” and do not create any new karma by their actions. Thus each animal ends its life with a reduction in *sancita karma*. Humans have greater choice in how they act. When humans act to fulfil desires, they add to their *sancita karma*. Actions driven by selfish desires such as anger, add to bad karma; and actions motivated by a higher purpose and undertaken in a spirit of dedication to God add good karma to their stock of *sancita karma*. Ishwara gives us a human birth only when our minds are sufficiently evolved and capable of the self-control needed to make right choices. When humans fail to exercise self-control and act to fulfil base desires, they are propelling themselves toward an animal birth in the future. Based on the changing composition of *sancita karma*, each of us might have gone through many lives in a variety of different forms, human and non-human.

This cycle of births and deaths in one body after another is a journey undertaken by our minds. Our minds are filled with desires and habits accumulated over many past lives and we are deluded into thinking that the way to happiness is the fulfillment of our desires. It is only through long and bitter experience that we learn that the well of desires is bottomless and that seeking happiness by fulfilling desires is foolish. Spiritual practice consists of seeking fulfillment in helping others; working unselfishly for a higher purpose; training our minds to be detached and single-pointed; reflecting on who we are and how we relate to the world around us; and surrendering all our actions and their fruits to God. That is how we accumulate good *karma*. The goal of spiritual evolution is to realize that our own true nature is eternal, blissful and universal, unaffected by the joys and sorrows that are an inevitable part of all individual experience. This is Self-Realization. A Realized person no longer sees himself or herself as a “doer” of actions; and the warehouse of *sancita karma* is as if burnt, bringing complete liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

The law of *Karma* is not ‘fatalism’ or ‘pre-determination.’ First, our experiences today are merely the consequences of our own actions in the past, maybe past lives that we do not recall. This is a theory of full accountability rather than ‘pre-determinism.’ Second, while what we experience is a consequence of our past actions, how we conduct ourselves in the midst of these

experiences determines our own destiny in the future. This again is individual responsibility and exercise of free will rather than fatalism.

A proper understanding of how the law of *karma* operates in our lives helps us sustain peace of mind in the midst of turmoil and sorrow while strengthening our motivation to engage positively in meeting life's challenges.

Note: for a fuller treatment of this subject, including important nuances and lessons drawn from engaging scriptural stories, see *From Death to Birth: Understanding Karma and Reincarnation* by Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, Himalayan Institute, 1997; ISBN 0-89389-147-9.