

Concept of *Karma* in Hinduism and Buddhism

Section - 3

Concept of *Karma* in Hinduism

Karma literally means action. *Karma* means "deed or act". *Karma* is the law of action and this law governs man's consciousness. *Karma* is a part of philosophy of the Hindus. The term came into being in Hinduism, based on the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. One of the first and most dramatic illustrations of *karma* can be found in the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. The original Hindu concept of *karma* was transformed into the religious practices and later enhanced by several other movements within the religion, most notably *Vedanta*, *Yoga*, and *Tantra*.

To the Hindus, *karma* is the law of the nature or phenomenal cosmos that is part of living within the dimensions of time and space. *Karma* may differ on the basis of the time factor- past, present, and future. Consequence is the part of the action and the consequence always comes only after the action. Thus suffering is not the consequence of a wrong act, but an actual part of the act, although the consequence may be only experienced later. A soldier is sometimes wounded in battle, and in the excitement does not feel any pain. Afterwards, when he is quiet and away from the battle, he feels the pain. In this way, a man sins and feels no suffering, but later the suffering makes itself felt. The suffering is not separated from the wound, any more than the heat from fire, though that is experienced as a result.

All actions are parts of the laws of nature. For example, a boat without oars, sails, or rudder is carried about helplessly by the winds and currents. The sailor finds himself drifting along under the press of forces that he can neither change nor direct. But a clever sailor, with oars, sails and rudder, can send along his boat in any direction he pleases, not because he has changed the winds and the currents, but because he understands their directions, and can use those that are going in the direction he wants, and can lay off, the one against the other, the forces that oppose him. A man must know the laws of nature. If a man knows the laws of nature, he can utilise those whose forces are going his way and neutralize those which oppose. Therefore, knowledge is indispensable; the ignorant are always slaves.

A law of nature is not a command to act in a particular way, but only a statement

of the conditions within which action of any kind can be done. Water boils at 100° C under normal pressure. This is a law of nature. It does not command a man to boil water, but states the conditions under which water boils. The laws state conditions under which certain results follow. According to the results, desired conditions may be arranged, and, given the conditions, the results will invariably follow. Hence, law does not compel any special action, but only renders all actions possible, and knowledge of law is power.

The *Jivatma* is three-fold in his nature. He consists of *Ichchha*, *Jnana* and *Kriya*, i.e. Will, Wisdom and Activity. These, in the lower world of upadhis, of forms, express themselves as Desire, Knowledge and Action, and these three fashion a man's karma, and each works according to a definite law.¹

Desire stands behind Thought, stimulating and directing it. Thought, energised and determined by Desire, stands behind Action, expressing itself therein in the world of objects. Mans nature is desire-based; as is his desire, so is his thought; as (his) thought is, so he does action; as he does action, so he attains. Therefore, the following three laws make up the Law of karma:

1. Desire carries the man to the place where the objects of desire exist, and thus the desire determines the channels of his future activities.
2. Mind is the creative power, and a man becomes that which he thinks. His mind determines his personality.
3. Circumstances are made by actions.

Devoted to the fruits of acts, whatever kind of acts a person does, covetous of fruits, accomplishes, the fruits, good or bad, that he actually enjoys, partake of their character. Like fishes going against a current of water, the acts of a past life are flung back on the actor. The embodied creature experiences happiness for his good acts, and misery for his evil ones.

These three laws cover the making of karma, because the *Jivatma* consists of Will, Wisdom and Activity. These show themselves in the world by desires, thoughts and actions. When we have divided the factors in a man's destiny into opportunities, character—or capacities—and surrounding circumstances, we have covered them all. Nothing else remains.

One very commonly felt difficulty in connection with karma is this: the quiry

follows like this: "If I am destined by my karma to be bad or good, to do this or not to do it, it must be so; why then make any effort?" This is merely a fallacy. The fallacy of this line of thought should be very clearly understood, if the above has been grasped, because it turns upon a complete misunderstanding of the nature of karma. The effort is part of the karma, as much as the goodness or badness. *Karma* is not a finished thing awaiting us, but a constant becoming, in which the future is not only shaped by the past but is being modified by the present. If a man desires to be good, he is putting forth an energy which presently will make him good, however bad he may be now.

Another mistake sometimes made by people regarding the *karma* is that which leads them to say respecting a sufferer: "He is suffering his karma; if I help him I may be interfering with his *karma*." Those who thus speak forget that each man is an agent of the karma of others, as well as an experiencer of his own. If we are able to help a man, it is the proof that the *karma* under which he was suffering is exhausted, and that we are the agent of his *karma* bringing him relief. If we refuse to carry the karmic relief, we make bad *karma* for ourselves, shutting ourselves out from future help, and someone else will have the good *karma* of carrying the relief and so ensuring for himself aid in a future difficulty.

Karma is said to be of three kinds: *Prarabdham*, *Sanchitarm*, and *Vartamanam*. *Prarabdha karma* is that which is ripe for reaping and which cannot be avoided. It is only exhausted by being experienced. *Sanchita karma* is the accumulated karma of the past, and is partly seen in the character of the man, in his power, weaknesses and capacities. *Vartamana karma* is that which is now being created.²

The *Sanchita karma* is the *karma* which is gathered, collected and heaped together. It is the mass which lies behind a man, and his tendencies come from this. The *Vartamana karma* is the actual, that which is now being made for the future, or the *Agami*, the coming *karma*. The *Prarabdha karma* is that which has begun, is actually bearing fruit. In Vedantic literature, it is sometimes compared to an arrow already shot.

Prarabdha karma is unchangeable within the scope of one life, since it is the 'setup' for the life in question. It is the karma of one's past life. After death, the atma leaves the body, as the casting off of old vestments, and carries with it the *samskaras* (impressions) of the past life of thoughts, actions and events. These *samskaras* manifest themselves in the unchangeable situation into which one is born and also in certain key events in one's life. These include one's birth, one's time of death, one's economic status,

family (or lack of family), etc.

The *samskaras* that one inherits from the past life create one's personality, inclinations, talents, the things that make up one's persona. One's likings, abilities, attitudes and inclinations are based on the thoughts and actions of past life. One's *Samchita karma* is somewhat alterable with much practice and by doing a lot of efforts. This might be seen through the Hindu system of *Yoga* and the dynamic of the *gunas*. An example can be taken as someone who, through meditation, has slowly evolved into a more stable personality.

Vartamana or Agami karma is the karma of the present life over which the soul has complete control. Through it, one creates one's karma in the present for the future of the current life and in times to come.

Hindus have belief on *karma*. They believe that human fate is determined by the *karma*. They talk about different kinds of karma but many of them are not conscious about the kinds. They cannot say, sometimes, if an event in life has been caused by *Prarabadha* or *Agami karma*. The idea of "bad things happening to good people" is as a result of *Prarabadha karma*. This is more simply understood as karma from a past life. It is said that karma works within a cyclical framework that sees the phenomenal universe being created and eventually dissolving back into itself, back into realization that it was nothing other than *Maya* imposed on the truth of *Brahman*. Therefore, people believe that *karma* will eventually be worked out. What the *karma* has been done by them is important because the fruit will be received accordingly. They say, through exceeding devotion and love of God, one can be helped to speed through *karma phal* (*karmic fruit*). By developing '*vairagya*' or 'detachment' from the fruits of one's *karma*, as Lord Krishna most famously summarized, one can transcend *karma* and be liberated. One is aided by love of God. All the *Yogas* of Hinduism seek to transcend *karma* through different means of realization.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* categorises *karma*, listing three kinds of human actions: (1) *karma*: those which elevate, (2) *Vikarma*: those which degrade, and (3) *Akarma*: those which create neither good nor bad reactions and thus lead to liberation.

In Hinduism, if one does pious activities, he can accrue good karmic credits and attain a higher birth. Thus, he can enjoy his life with heavenly blessing without any difficulties. However, if the pious credits are exhausted, he will fall again to earth.

Samkhya Yoga classifies actions into four kinds, according to their capability to produce pleasure and pain: 1) *Sukla* (white) refers to those actions which produce pleasure as well as the actions of those who are engaged in scholarly activities; 2) *Krisna* (black) refers to vicious or veda-prohibited actions that produce pain; 3) *Sukla-krisna* (white/black) refers to actions which produce both pleasure and pain and involve most of our day-to-day activities; 4) *Asukla-akrisna* (neither white nor black) refers to actions which neither produce pleasure nor produce pain, and thus refers to activities like introspection and self-disciplining—activities that are conducive to yogic aspiration.³

It is believed that, if one transgresses universal and God-given laws, his soul is degraded to the status of lower species. Only by gradual purification (and that's by suffering), he can rise again to the human status. When he is in the status of the lower species, his soul cannot exercise free will. Rather he is more or less condemned to a "sentence."

Karma and fate are often interchangeable terms in Hinduism. *Karma* is misunderstood as fate. Fate is an unchangeable destiny decreed long ago by some forces external to human beings such as the planets and stars, or most probably the Gods. Some argue that *karma* is neither fate nor predetermination. Each soul has absolute free will. Its only boundary is *karma*. They say that God and Gods do not dictate the events of human lives, nor do they test human beings. They also say that there is no cosmic force that molds human life. Indeed, when beseeched through deep prayer and worship, the Supreme Being and His great Gods may intercede within our *karma*, lightening its impact or shifting its location in time to a period when we are better prepared to resolve it.

In Hindu astrology, or *Jyotisha*, they show a strong relation between human beings and the geography of the solar system and some star clusters, but we must know that it is not a cause-effect relation. Planets and stars don't cause or dictate *karma*. They have orbital relationships which establish proper conditions for *karmas*. These conditions activate and inspire a particular type of personality nature to develop. *Jyotisha* describes a revelation from the orbital relationships. It reveals *prarabdha Karmic* patterns for a given birth and how we will generally react to them (*Kriyamana karma*). With astrological knowledge, we are aware of our life's *Karmic* pattern and can thereby anticipate it wisely.

We have thousands of earth lives. We experience different forms or a remarkable variety of life patterns. We exist as male and female, often switching back and forth from

life to life as the nature becomes more harmonized into a person exhibiting both feminine nurturing and masculine intrepidity. We come to earth with different roles in different forms as princesses and presidents, as paupers and pirates, as tribals and scientists, as murderers and healers, as atheists and, ultimately, God-realized sages. We take bodies of every race and live the many religions, faiths and philosophies as the soul gains more knowledge and evolutionary experience.⁴

Therefore, a Hindu knows that the belief in a single form of life on earth is not possible. A single form of life in the earth followed by eternal joy or pain is utterly wrong. Such belief merely causes great anxiety, confusion and fear. Hindus believe that all souls reincarnate. They take one body form and then another, evolving through experiences over long periods of time. *Karma* operates not only in this lifetime but across lifetimes. The results of an action might be experienced in a new life after the present life.

Hindus believe that human beings do their actions with good or bad consequences. They might reap the rewards of their action in this present life, or in a future life with human rebirth, or they might reap the rewards of their action in a heaven or hell in which the self is reborn for a period of time.

This process of reincarnation, birth after birth, is called *samsara*, or a continuous cycle, in which the soul is reborn over and over again according to the law of action and reaction. Many Hindus believe that, at death and after death, the soul is carried by a subtle body into a new physical body. This can be a human or non-human form (an animal or divine being). The goal of liberation (*moksha*) is to make us free from this cycle of action and reaction, and from birth and rebirth. One is not liberated until he has done all his *karmas*. Upanishad clearly speaks,

*The object to which the mind is attached, the subtle self goes together with the deed, being attached to it alone. Exhausting the results of whatever works he did in the world he comes; again from that world to this world for (fresh) work. This is for him who desires. But he who does not desire...his breaths do not depart. Being Brahman he goes to Brahman.*⁵

This is very much similar to the Buddhist theory of *Nirvana*. The belief in karma and reincarnation brings to every Hindu inner peace and self-assurance. That maintains discipline of their actions. They believe that the maturing of the soul takes many lives. If the soul is immature in the present birth, there is still hope, because there will be many

opportunities for him for learning and growing in future lives. These beliefs and the attitudes eliminate their anxiety, developing a strong perception that everything is all right as it is. And, there is also a keen insight into the human condition and appreciation for people in all stages of spiritual unfoldment. The *Bhagvad-Gita* speaks, regarding the exhaustion of *karma* and attaining the Brahma state—

*He who is free from attachment, who is liberated, whose mind is established in knowledge, whose actions are but actions of sacrifice only, his actions are completely dissolved.*⁶

The lines say that his offering is *Brahman*, his oblation is *Brahman*; his sacrificial fire is *Brahman*, the sacrificer is *Brahman*. He certainly attains *Brahman* who finds *Brahman* situated in all activities. These are similar lines to the Buddhist concept of *karma*.

Concept of *Karma* in Buddhism

Karma (in Pali called *Kamma*) means in Buddhism "action" or "doing". Whatever one does, says, or thinks is a *karma*. Buddhism teaches that there are other forces beside karma that shape our lives. These include natural forces like the changing seasons and gravity. When a natural disaster like an earthquake strikes a community, this is not some kind of collective karmic punishment. It's an unfortunate event that requires a compassionate response, not judgment. In the (*Anguttara Nikaya Nibbedhika Sutta*), the Buddha said the following words: Intention (*cetana*), monks, is karma, I say. Having willed, one acts through body, speech and mind.

Every time a person acts or does something there is some quality of intention at the base of the mind. It is that quality rather than the outward appearance of the action that determines the effect. If a person professes piety and virtue but nonetheless acts or does something with greed, anger or hatred (veiled behind an outward display of well-meaning intent), the fruit of those actions will bear testimony to the fundamental intention that lay behind them and will be a cause for future unhappiness. The Buddha spoke of wholesome actions (*kusala-kamma*)—that result in happiness, and unwholesome actions (*akusala-kamma*)—that result in unhappiness.

For *Buddhists*, *karma* has implications beyond this present life. Bad actions in a previous life can follow a person into their next life and cause bad effects. Good actions can cause good effects. Even an Enlightened One is not exempt from the effects of past karma. One story tells that the Buddha's cousin tried to kill him by dropping a boulder on

him. Although the attempt failed, the Buddha's foot was injured. He explained that this was karmic retribution for trying to kill his step-brother in a previous life.

In *Buddhism*, *karma* is fundamentally related to suffering and by implication, to the idea of nirvana or the cessation of suffering through individual liberation. In *Majjima Nikaya*, the Lord Buddha says-

*Whatever kind of feeling (vedana) one experiences—pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent—one approves of and cherishes the feeling and clings to it. While doing so, lust originates; but lust of feelings means clinging to existence (upadana); and on clinging to existence depends the karma-process (kamma-bhava); on the karma-process rebirth depends; and depending on rebirth are decay and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Thus arises the whole mass of suffering.*⁷

Karma, therefore, has to offer a comprehensive account of universal organization of worldly existence. In this sense, *karma* is primordially objective and does not distinguish between the rich and the poor, the beautiful and the ugly, or the healthy and the sick.

The theory of *karma* should not be confused with so-called 'moral justice' or 'reward and punishment'. The idea of moral justice, or reward and punishment, arises out of the conception of a supreme being, a God. God sits in judgment. He is a law-giver and he decides what is right and wrong. The term 'justice' is ambiguous and dangerous, and in its name more harm than good is done to humanity. The theory of *karma* is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction. It is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the idea of justice or reward and punishment.

Accompanying *karma*, there comes usually a separate tenet called *Vipaka*. It means result or effect. The reaction or effect can itself also influence an action. In this way, the chain of causation (*karma*-effect) continues *ad infinitum*. When Buddhists talk about *karma*, they are normally referring to *karma* that is 'tainted' with ignorance - *karma* that continues to ensure that the being remains in the everlasting cycle of *samsara*.

To make this more intelligible, one has to account for (un)wholesome actions and (un)wholesome states and their respective meaning in Buddhism. The former is outlined in the *Noble Eightfold Path*. Action springs from volition, which springs from intention,

which springs from thought, and so forth. The quality of actions can be described in ethical terms, simply as either good or bad, or both good and bad, or indifferent.

The Buddha has defined three types of *karma* that a human being can do: (i) The *karma* of words (*vachi kamma*), (ii) The *karma* of *sarir* (bodily karma), and (iii) The *karma* done by mind (*mano karma*). Among the three *karmas*, the *karma* of mind or the intention is the most important of all mental events because it gives direction to the mind, determining whether we engage with virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral objects.

An intention is a mental action. It may be expressed through either physical or verbal actions. Thus, action, or *karma*, is of two types: the action of intention and the intended action. The action of intention is the thought or impulse to engage in a physical or verbal act. The intended action is the physical or verbal expression of our intention. *Karma* actually refers to the action of intention but in general usage it includes the intended action and the seeds that are left in the mind as a result.

There are various grades of ethical qualities. Most people have an intuitive understanding that enables them to discern between good and bad, although the discerning ability depends on the person's state of mental development. A wise person at a high level of mental development can clearly discern mental activities and actions in an ethical dimension, while a deluded person has difficulties or is even unable to do so.

In Buddhism, *karma* is not pre-determinism, fatalism or accidentalism, as all these ideas lead to inaction and destroy motivation and human effort. These ideas undermine the important concept that a human being can change for the better no matter what his or her past was, and they are designated as "wrong views" in Buddhism.

- (i) *Purbbekatahetuvada*: The belief that all happiness and suffering, including all future happiness and suffering, arise from previous karma, and human beings can exercise no volition to affect future results (past-action determinism).
- (ii) *Issaranimmanahetuvada*: The belief that all happiness and suffering are caused by the directives of a Supreme Being (theistic determinism).
- (iii) *Ahetu-appaccaya-vaada*: The belief that all happiness and suffering are random, having no cause.

Karma is continually ripening, but it is also continually being generated by present actions. Therefore, it is possible to exercise free will to shape future *karma*. The

Buddha asserts effort and motivation as the crucial factors in deciding the ethical value of these various teachings on karma.

Buddhists try to cultivate good *karma* and avoid bad. However, the aim of Buddhism is to escape the cycle of rebirth altogether, not simply to acquire good *karma* and so to be born into a more pleasant state. These states, while preferable to human life, are impermanent: even gods eventually die.

Karma is not an external force. It is not a system of punishment or reward dealt out by a god. The concept is more accurately understood as a natural law which is similar to gravity. Buddhists believe that we are in control of our ultimate fates. The problem is that most of us are ignorant of this, which causes suffering. Buddhists suggest us to take conscious control of our behaviours.

Karma implies that a person is inherently accountable for everything that is happening to him. This implies that whether he experiences happiness or misery all depends on his actions. *Karma* encompasses all actions, and not just those perceived by the public. Even thinking badly about another person has its consequences.

In *Buddhism*, although the past has some influence on the present, the present also is shaped by the actions of the present. A famous *Theravada Bhikkhu* Thanissaro explains the theory of *karma* in Buddhism in this way—

*...instead of promoting resigned powerlessness, the early Buddhist notion of karma focused on the liberating potential of what the mind is doing with every moment. Who you are — what you come from — is not anywhere near as important as the mind's motives for what it is doing right now. Even though the past may account for many of the inequalities we see in life, our measure as human beings is not the hand we've been dealt, for that hand can change at any moment. We take our own measure by how well we play the hand we've got.*⁸

The function of *karma* and causation is explained by the principle of Dependent Origination (*pratityasamuppada*) in Buddhism. It is considered as one of the scientific and excellent theories of explanation of the Buddha which makes his teaching more scientific than any other religions. Dependent Origination consists of twelve links or chains. They are—

<i>avijja</i>	ignorance
<i>sanskara</i>	mental formations

<i>vigyana</i>	consciousness
<i>nama-rupa</i>	mind and matter
<i>sadayatana</i>	six sense organs
<i>sparsa</i>	contact
<i>vedana</i>	sensation
<i>trsna</i>	desire
<i>upadana</i>	grasping
<i>bhava</i>	becoming
<i>jati, jara, byadhi,</i>	birth, old age, disease, death <i>maranam</i>

The first two links, ignorance (*avijja*) and mental formations (*samskara*), relate how the past actions in a person's previous lives affect this present situation. Ignorance concerns the defilements that a person had in the past. Mental formations represent the *karma* resulting from the good and bad actions of a person in the past that determine many aspects of his present life. The think link, consciousness (*vigyana*), represents the consciousness that enters a mother's womb at the beginning of a person's present life. The other aggregates are also present in very subtle forms at this moment, but since consciousness is the dominant aggregate, it is used to represent this stage in a person's life. The fourth link, name and form (*namarupa*), corresponds to the fetus growing in the mother's womb and the development of its body and mind. The completion of the fetus's sense organs corresponds to the fifth link, the six sense organs (*sadayatana*). The child from birth until one or two years of age is equated with the sixth link, contact (*sparsa*) between sense organ and object. The sense organs, objects, and consciousness are all present, but the infant still cannot properly discriminate between suffering and pleasure. The stage at which a child is able to differentiate between suffering and pleasure but does not yet have any sexual desires corresponds to the seventh link, sensation (*vedana*). The emergence of sexual lust corresponds to the eighth link, desire (*trsna*). Striving for fame and fortune is represented by the ninth link, grasping (*upadana*). A person thus accumulates *karma* that will bear fruit in the future. This state corresponds to the tenth link, becoming (*bhava*).

The links of desire and grasping in the present are similar to the link of ignorance of the past, since all result in the formation of *karma*. In a similar way the link of becoming in the present is similar to the link of mental formations in the past, since both can be

equated with *karma*. The third through the tenth links are all explained as referring to a person's life. The five links from consciousness to sensation are called the five fruits of the present, which were caused by actions of the past. The three links of desire, grasping, and becoming are called the three present causes, which will bear fruit in the future.

A person's future birth is determined by the three present causes. Future births are represented by the eleventh link, birth (*jati*). Thus, *jati* is similar to consciousness at the moment of conception in the present life, in other words to the third link, consciousness. The result of future birth is old age and death (*jaramarana*), the twelfth link. It corresponds to the links of name and form through sensation in the present life.

When the twelve links are distributed among three lifetimes, two links concern past causes, five links present effects, three links present causes, and two links future effects. The cycle of cause and effect is repeated twice. Consequently this explanation is referred to as 'the two cycles of cause and effect over the three time periods.'⁹

Ignorance, desire, and clinging are all defilements (*klesa*). The *karma* arising from these defilements is represented by the links of mental formations and becoming. The phenomena arising from *karma* are represented by the remaining links, from consciousness to sensation and birth, old age, and death. Thus phenomena arise from *karma*. Later, those same phenomena serve as the basis for additional *karma*. The twelve links of Dependent Origination thus illustrate how existence can be characterized as endless cycles of defilement, *karma*, and phenomena. Moreover, since phenomena are characterized by suffering, these cycles may also be characterized as defilement, *karma*, and suffering. In this manner, twelve links may be explained as an illustration of *karmic* cause and effect.

In Buddhism, *karma* is supposed to be a seed. They say that an action (*karma*) results in the form of 'ripening' (*Vipaka*), and fruit ('*Phal*') which are attributes of a seed. The movement of beings, between birth and rebirth, is not a haphazard process. Rather it is governed and ordained by the law of nature. All kinds of beings are born in accordance with the nature and quality of their (past) *karmas*, and they are offshoots of their actions. Violent and hateful acts tend to lead to rebirth in a hell, acts of confusion and delusion will lead to a rebirth as an animal, and acts of greed tend a person to be reborn as a ghost. A person's actions (*karma*) mould their consciousness, making them into a kind of person so that, when they die, their outer form tends to match the type of a nature that has been developed.

Actions and results have correlations. If a person's bad actions are not so serious as to lead him to a lower birth, they affect, invariably, the nature of a human rebirth. For instance, stinginess leads to poverty, injuring other beings leads to repeated ailments, and anger leads to being ugly--the later aspect being extension of the process by which an angry person gradually develops ugly features during the course of his present life. It is solely due to the actions of their past lives that some people are ugly, ill or poor. Therefore, they must not think and blame for their present fate. They should think and act positively and in good ways for the good results in future.

Generous, kind, benevolent acts and moral restraints tend us to get birth again as human beings. If we attain meditative calmness of *Gyan* ('*Jhana*' in Pali), we will have a rebirth in heaven. All intentional actions, whether good or bad, matter a lot, because they leave a trace on the mind (of a person), which ultimately relates to future results.

People should not dwell mentally on a bad *karma*. Whether deliberately or accidentally it is done, it is a bad act. To contain and suppress it and not energise it is a noble/good *karma*. If a person resolves neither to conceive nor translate a bad karma into action, it will dilute the bad karmic results. A skilful action is '*Punya*' (auspicious) or fortunate, because it purifies the mind and, then, leads it to good fortune in the future. An unskilful action is '*Apunya*' or '*Papa*' (evil), ill-fortune, or inauspicious. Since beneficial results do not outflow from it, hence it is infertile.¹⁰

Punya is a good merit. It also implies 'deserving'. Any act of giving, even with expectation of something in return, or expecting the *Karmic* results, is a purer motive. It is of no use to say whether a gift is big or small, but if it gives joy, and supports a holy way of life, it is worth merit for where there is a joyful heart, no gift is small. Merit-sharing is simply a way of spreading the *Karmic* benefits of good deeds to others, as a gesture of goodwill.

There is no known beginning to the cycle of rebirths and the world, as there is no conceivable beginning of this world (*Samsara*). The cycle of rebirth involves countless lives over vast stretches of time. Buddhists believe that every birth or rebirth is occasioned by a prior cause and no being is an exception to it.

Human life is precious. It is a marvelous opportunity for spiritual growth. Therefore, they suggest, it should be used wisely. Life must not be frittered away, because it may be cut short, at any time, by death. The law of *karma* is believed to be dynamic,

fluid and flexible, because it is neither rigid nor mechanical.

A moral life is not necessarily followed immediately by a good rebirth, if a strong evil action of past life has not yet brought its results, or a dying person regrets having done good. Similarly an immoral life is not followed necessarily by a bad rebirth, as the appropriate results will come in time, so it says.¹¹

Thus, in short, *karma* has relationship with cause and effect combination. Birth and rebirth are affected from *karma* of past and present.

Critical Comparison regarding the concepts of *Karma* in Hinduism and Buddhism

Hinduism involves role of God. Buddhism does not involve the role of God. *Karma* in Hinduism differs from Buddhism on the basis of the same. Notably, unlike Buddhists and Jains who believe that *Karma*, as natural law, on its own, joins the soul when it reincarnates and comes to fruition, Hindus believe in the role of God for linking *karma* to the person. But this difference is only superficial. The very first verse of *Dhammapada* and the gathas of *Upanishads* and *Vedas* clearly indicate that the essence of these two religions regarding *karma* is the same. *Upanishad* speaks—

*Accordingly as one behaves so does he become. The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous actions. Others become bad by bad actions.*¹²

The next passage in the same verse identifies desire as the root cause of all human activity –

*Others however say that a person consists of desires. As is his desire, so is his will. As is his will so is the deed he does. Whatever deed he does that he attains.*¹³

Dhammapada also speaks the same lines on the nature of *karma*—

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cart-wheel follows the hoof of the ox (drawing the cart).

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.*¹⁴

Thus, certain philosophical viewpoints may term "destiny" or "fate" but that is in actuality, according to the laws of *karma*, the simple and neutral working out of *karma*. Many people compare *karma* to a moral banking system, which are very similar to a credit and debit of good and bad. However, this view falls short of the idea that any sort of

karma, whether we term it 'good' or 'bad', binds us in recurring cause and effect. In order to attain supreme consciousness, to escape the cycle of life, death, and rebirth and the knot of *karma*, one must altogether transcend *karma*. This method of transcendence is variously dealt with in many streams of not only Hinduism and Buddhism, but also in other faiths and philosophical systems.

Karma is needed as long as single trace of impurity exists within a soul or *Atman*, right from first manifestation to last. The effort of every soul or *Atman* remains reducing dross impurities within. It is only through complex process of *karma* that every soul or *Atman* gains more purity as one proceeds ahead in cosmic cycle of life. This philosophy of *Karma* is vividly expressed in *Gita* as well—

He whose all undertakings are devoid of desires, whose actions are burnt in the fire of knowledge, he is declared as a scholar by the wise.

*Renouncing all attachment to the fruits of his actions, ever satisfied, without seeking shelter or protection, depending upon nothing, he certainly does nothing though he is engaged in actions.*¹⁵

Lord Buddha also believed that *Trshna* is the main cause of one's *karma*. If one does not renounce *trshna*, one cannot be liberated.

Shri K. Thirugna Sambantha, in the section of *Karma* in his outline of *Saivism*, explains the concept of *Karma* in Hinduism by distinguishing its concept from that of the Buddhist and Jain religions which do not require an external Being like God as being necessary for it. In their beliefs, he notes that *Karma*, as a natural law, and like a calf, among a large number of cows, goes and finds its mother for obtaining the milk, also finds the related person and comes to fruition. However, he further argues that Hindus, on the other hand, would find flaw with this theory and would criticize it by noting that *Karma*, unlike the calf, is an unintelligent entity. Hence, *Karma* cannot go and find out the related person by itself. Shri Sambantha then concludes by noting that an intelligent Supreme Being with perfect wisdom and power, (e.g. *Shiva*, in *Shaivism*, for example.) is necessary to make *Karma* to join the related person. In such sense, God is the Divine Accountant.

Swami Sivananda, in his commentary synthesizing Vedanta views on the *Brahma Sutras*, also reiterates the same views. In his commentary,¹⁶ of *Brahma Sutras*, Sivananda notes that *Karma* is insentient and short-lived, and ceases to exist as soon as it is done. Hence, he points out that *Karma* cannot therefore bestow the fruits of actions at a future date according to one's merit. Furthermore, Sivananda notes that one cannot argue that

Karma generates *apurva*, or *punya*, which gives fruit. Since *apurva* is non-sentient, it cannot act unless moved by an intelligent Being, i.e., God. Hence, it cannot independently bestow rewards and punishments.

Notes and References:

1. Landon, A. E. (2003). *Reincarnation Magazine*, January 1917 to December 1918. *Body, Mind and Spirit*, US: Kessinger Publishing.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Padhi, Bibhu and Minakshi Padhi (1998). *Indian Philosophy and Religion*, New Delhi: DK Printworld, p212.
4. Lockyer, Lianne. (2009). *Angelic Karma*, UK, Arthur House.
5. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Chapter 4, Brahmana 4, Verse 10.
6. *Bhagavad-Gita* Ch 4: Verse 23 and 24.
7. Carus, Paul. (2012). *The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path*, UK, Jazzybee Verlag.
8. Thanissaro, Bhikkhu (1974). *What the Buddha Taught?*, Grove press: Bangkok,
9. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Chapter 4, Brahmana 4, Verse 5.
10. Sharma, Anurag. (2002). *Thus Spake Buddha*. New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books Pvt. Ltd.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Chapter 4, Brahmana 4, Verse 5.
13. *Ibid* verse 6.
14. *Dhammapada*, Yamaka Vagga V 1-2.
15. *Bhagavad-Gita* Ch4:19-20.
16. Swami Shivananda, *Phaladhikaranam*, Sutras 38-41.