



Newsletter Archives

Exploring Karma Tales of a Universal Principle

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Exploring Karma - Tales of a Universal Principle

Article of the Month - October 2004



Garuda

High in the reaches of Mount Kailasha is the abode of Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction. One evening Vishnu, the god responsible for preserving the cosmic order, came to see Shiva. He left behind at the entrance Garuda, the half-man, half-eagle composite, who served as his vehicle.

Garuda sat alone, marveling at the natural splendor of the place. Suddenly his eyes fell on a beautiful creature, a little bird seated on the arch crowning the entrance to Shiva's place. Garuda wondered aloud: "How marvelous is this creation! One who has created

these lofty mountains has also made this tiny bird - and both seem equally wonderful."

Just then Yama, the god of death who rides a buffalo, came passing by with the intention of meeting Shiva. As he crossed the arch, his eyes went over to the bird and he raised his brows in a quizzical expression. Then he took his eyes off the bird and disappeared inside.

Now, in the ancient thought of India, even a slight glance of Yama is said to be the harbinger of death. Garuda, who had observed Yama's action, told himself, "Yama looking intently at the bird can mean only one thing - the bird's time is up. Perhaps on his way back he will carry away the bird's soul with him." Garuda's heart was filled with pity for the helpless creature. That it was oblivious of its own impending doom further agonized Garuda and he resolved to save the bird from the clutches of death. He swooped it up in his mighty talons, rushed to a forest thousands of miles away and left the bird on a rock beside a brook. Then he returned to Kailasha and regained his position at the entrance gate.



Yama the God of Death

Soon after, Yama emerged from inside, and nodded to Garuda in recognition. Garuda greeted the god of death and said: "May I put a question to you? While going in, you saw a bird and for a moment you became pensive, why?"

Yama answered him thus: "Well, when my eyes fell on the little bird, I saw that it was to die in a few minutes, swallowed by a python, far away from here in a forest near a brook. I wondered how this tiny creature would traverse the thousand of miles separating it from its destiny in such a short time. Then I forgot. Surely it must have happened somehow."

Saying this, Yama smiled and went away. Did he know about Garuda's specific role in the matter? Nobody can know for sure. Garuda sat perplexed, mulling over the surprising turn events had taken.

Karma, and its Consequences:

The word karma is derived from the Sanskrit root 'kri,' meaning 'to do,' implying that all action is karma. Technically, the term incorporates both an action and its consequence. Thus Garuda's karma consisted of the act of carrying away the bird and also its consequent snatching by the cruel hands of destiny. Hence, a deed, pure in its content, led to an apparently unfavorable outcome. Through this subtle tale, we are made to confront a dilemma which constantly recurs in our own lives, namely, the relative impurity and purity of an action. Is an action to be deemed positive or negative solely on the basis of the result it generates? Or, is there some other criterion? Indeed there is. What determines the nature of the karma is the will or intention behind an act. As is mentioned in the Buddhist text Anguttara Nikaya, published by the Pali Text Society, "It is will (chetana), that I call karma; having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind."

Indeed, an action is right or wrong as the motive is right or wrong:

"One who acts with the best of intentions, does not get the sin of the outward consequence of his action." (Yoga Sikha). For example, a doctor is not responsible for murder, if the operation per chance ends in the death of his patient. In the above tale, Garuda's duty was not to protect the bird, but rather to try and protect it.

"Even if a man does not succeed, he gets all the merit of doing his duty, if he strives the utmost to his capacity." (Mahabharata: Udyoga Parva 93.6)

"Some undertakings succeed and others fail. That is due to the divine order of things. If a man does his part of the work, no sin touches him." (Mahabharata: Santi Parva 24.30)

It is the psychological impulse behind an action that is 'karma,' that which sets going a chain of causes culminating in karmic fruits. Actions then must be intentional if they are to generate karmic fruits. This Buddhist belief is slightly at variance from that of the Jains, and for the Buddhists, accidentally treading on an insect does not have such an effect as the latter believe. Thinking of doing some bad action is a bad karma, however, especially when one gives energy to such a thought, rather than just letting it pass. Deliberately putting down such a thought down is a good karma. In the same vein regretting a past bad action, and resolving not to do it again lessens its karmic result as it reduces the psychological impetus behind the act.

One of the most significant instructional references to karma comes from the Bhagavad Gita, which says:

"You have the right only to work, but not to the fruits thereof." (2.47)

Significant here is the fact that we are entitled only to act, and have 'no right' over the ensuing results. This profound assertion is not mere discourse, but rather loaded with sound practical advice, which can act as a sensible strategy for whatever we set out to achieve. This is because the outcome of any enterprise is not solely dependent on our individual efforts but is bound to numerous other factors over which we may or may not have influence. Thus why worry over something on which we do not have control? Also, detaching ourselves from the burden of anxiety over the impending result frees us from mental stress, and enables us to devote ourselves with calm concentration to the matter at hand.

Mill has very forcibly pointed out that the best way of getting happiness is to forget it: "The conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of realizing such happiness as is attainable."

The Question of Good versus Evil:

In medieval China there once lived an old farmer, who had a weak, ailing horse for ploughing his field. One day, the sickly horse ran away to the hills.

The farmer's neighbors offered their sympathy to him: "Such rotten luck!" they exclaimed.

"Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?" mused the farmer.

A week later, the old horse returned, bringing with it a herd of wild horses from the hills. This time, the neighbors swarmed around the farmer and congratulated him on his good luck. His reply however was the same: "Good luck? Bad luck? Who can tell?"

Sometime later, while trying to tame one of the wild horses, the farmer's only son fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this was bad luck. "Bad luck? Good luck? I don't know," said the farmer.

A few weeks later, the king's army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied young man living there. The farmer's son, who was laid up with a broken leg was let off, for he was thought to be of no use to them.

Now what was this? Good luck or bad luck? Who can tell?

Things that seem adverse on the surface may actually be good in disguise. And something that seems to be attractive and 'lucky' may actually be harmful to our best interests. The learned ones often leave it to a higher power beyond the material world to decide what is best for them.

Good and evil are not constant - they change according to time and circumstance. For example, an arrow is good if it penetrates its object; an armor is good if it is impenetrable by an arrow. In the heat of summer, coolness is good; while in winter, heat is beneficial. According to Zen, saying that what is evil includes the good is not to assert that there is no difference between evil and good, just that the traditional dualisms need to be replaced with an understanding of the unity of being. According to Zen master Suzuki: "All forms of evil must be said somehow to be embodying what is true and good and beautiful, and to a contribution to the perfection of Reality. To state it more concretely, bad is good, ugly is beautiful, false is true, imperfect is perfect, and also conversely. This is, indeed, the kind of reasoning in which indulge who conceive the God-

nature to be immanent in all things."

Kahlil Gibran puts it thus:

The selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

Some of you say, "joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

You cannot separate the just from the unjust and the good from the wicked;

For they stand together before the face of the sun even as the black thread and the white are woven together.

And when the black thread breaks, the weaver shall look into the whole cloth, and he shall examine the loom also.

Verily all things move within your being in constant half embrace, the desired and the dreaded, the repugnant and the cherished, the pursued and that which you would escape.

These things move within you as lights and shadows in pairs that cling.

And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy.

You would know the secret of death. But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

We read in the Bhagavad Gita again and again that we must all work incessantly. There it is also mentioned that all work by nature is composed of good and evil. We cannot do any work that will not do some good somewhere and indeed there cannot be any action that will be free of any harmful residue. Every work is thus necessarily a mixture of good and evil; yet we are commanded to work incessantly.

Swami Vivekananda puts it succinctly:

"There is a thorn in my finger and I use another to take the first one out. When I have taken out the first, I throw both of them aside; I have no necessity for keeping the second thorn because both are thorns after all. So any negative tendencies plaguing our minds have to be counteracted by the good ones. But what after that? Even the good tendencies have now to be restrained. The idea is to renounce attachment to any ideal - good or bad - and work, but let not the mind be unduly anxious about the results. Let the ripples come and go, let huge actions proceed from us, but let them not make a too-deep an impression on our souls. Work as if we are a stranger in this land, a sojourner, this is the amount of detachment that is required. Doing the duty, which is ours at any particular time is the best thing we can do in this world, and such a karma is our dharma. Never will unhappiness or misery come through work done without attachment. Work incessantly, but give up all attachment to work. Do not identify yourself with anything. In the ocean we cannot raise a wave without causing a hollow somewhere else."

If we want the reward we must also have the punishment. The only way to get out of the punishment is to give up the reward. The only way of getting out of misery is by giving up the idea of happiness, because they are but two sides of the same coin. On one side there is life and on the other death. The only way to get beyond death is to give up the love of life. Life and death are the same things looked at from different points. This ebb and flow, this rising and falling, is the world's very nature. It would be as logical to hold otherwise as to say that we may have life without death. Such an assertion is unjustifiable, because the very idea of life implies death and that of pleasure pain. The lamp is constantly burning out, and that is its life. If we want to have life we have to die every moment for it.

Emerson's Law of Compensation - Or Why Welcome Hardships in Your Life?

After a grueling five days, you are looking forward to a peaceful weekend. On Saturday night you set out with your loving wife seated next to you and your adorable kids lodged comfortably in the back seat. The family is all set to dine out in their favorite restaurant. You have been starving yourself the whole day preparing for the impending feast. Suddenly, the car starts swinging to one side and you realize that you have a flat. Swearing, you get down and open the boot. Shockingly it dawns upon you that the spare wheel too is punctured. Ruining your fate, you realize that the much-awaited dinner is now not possible. Then suddenly you compose yourself and thank god for the small inconvenience he has subjected you to. Your family stares at you, wide-eyed in astonishment.

There is a harmonious law of adjustment and compensation to which all natural processes are subject. It plays a balancing role in our lives. This is an order in which, according to Emerson, "Every excess causes a defect, every defect an excess, and all seem governed by the deep remedial force that underlies all facts." Indeed, it all works out with absolute exactness. Every sweet hath its sour, every evil its good. Every faculty, which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on it. As a Danish proverb has it, "After pleasant scratching comes unpleasant smarting." Every advantage has its tax. For everything you gain, you lose something, and for everything you have missed you gain something else.

Emerson's doctrine that every thing has its price - and that it is impossible to get anything without paying a price for it - is not less sublime in the columns of a ledger than in the budgets of states, in the laws of light and darkness, in all the action and reaction of nature. Indeed, punishment is a fruit that ripens unsuspected within the flower of pleasure, which conceals it. If

we escape one part we are tormented in another more vital part. Hence, let us all welcome the small trials, tribulations and discomforts which life offers us during our everyday existence. Totalled they will amount to much, and hence save us from the single, more damaging stroke which nature would otherwise subject us to.

Manipulating Karma - Or How to Put God in Our Debt

"There is a silent third party in all our bargains. If you serve an ungrateful master, serve him the more. Put god in your debt. Every stroke shall be repaid. The longer the payment is withheld, the better for you; for compound interest on compound interest is the rate and usage of this exchequer." (Emerson)

Perhaps this is what Jesus Christ had in mind when he said: "If any man take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also," (Matthew 5:40), because:

Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you will hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets. (Luke 6:24-26)

And further:

For whosoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted. (Luke 14:7-14)

Karma Yoga, or Work as Worship

"Your daily life is your temple and your religion." (Kahlil Gibran)

"Our daily activity is the anvil on which all the elements must pass and repass in order to be purified and refined." (Sri Aurobindo)

"Work done in the true spirit is meditation." (The Mother)

The word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root 'yuj,' meaning 'to yoke' or 'join'. Thus, yoga is the science that yokes 'the finite' with 'the Infinite', or 'the finite spirit' with 'the Supreme Spirit'. Connecting ourselves with the universal will through work is known as Karma Yoga. Ancient scriptures call it the 'highest kind of yoga.'

Karma yoga is a means for seeking divinity in action and life itself, and not in some far, beatific and abstract beyond. It is therefore the discipline for finding and uniting with the divine through our day-to-day actions, thoughts and works. Or it can be referred to as the way, which confers to our ordinary human actions a divine status.

Truly, every act is sacred since we are not the doer but a higher reality is acting through us. We intuitively understand that everything comes from the divine and we have to offer it back to its source. When we realize this, then even the smallest aspect of our lives to which we usually do not pay any attention or care ceases to be trivial and insignificant; it becomes full of meaning and opens up a vast horizon beyond. According to Aurobindo:

"What would you say if a temple, built according to the design of some great artist, were to

boast: "Admire my merits; am I not beautiful, well-built, solid and durable? Truly I am worthy of all praise!" - just as if it were the author of its own perfections. We would find that very silly and ridiculous, and yet that is what we are doing constantly. Because we do not perceive the labor of the Sublime Worker, we ascribe the merit of the work to ourselves."

Karmayoga is the consecration of one's life to the divine. It is to work with the feeling that the divine force is working behind our actions and leading us at every moment. Indeed, if we have succeeded, it was probably because the divine forces were there to help us, otherwise we would not have been able to achieve even what we have. We must not forget our limitations. Man proposes, and some one else disposes.



Kali

When we look upon work as worship, we offer up all the fruits of our work unto the divine. Our karma is offered as a sacred offering to the highest reality. Truly, this is the reason why the goddess Kali wears a girdle made up of severed hands; these signify the total sacrifice of the fruits of their karma by her devotees, offered at her feet in worship.

Understanding Karma - Towards an Ethical Way of Life

"Trickery succeeds sometimes, but it always commits suicide." (Kahlil Gibran)

The Dhammapada is one of the most sacred and best-loved of Buddhist texts. It points out the method of self-realization, by the way of moral conduct:

Like garlands woven from a heap of flowers, Fashion from your life as many good deeds.

The text further enlightens on the nature of the karmic fruit:

For while the fool's mischief Tastes sweet, sweet as honey, But in the end it turns bitter. And how bitterly he suffers!

Fresh milk takes time to sour. So a fool's mischief Takes time to catch up with him. Like the

embers of a fire It smolders within him.

A fool is happy Until his mischief turns against him. And a good man may suffer Until his goodness flowers.

But as dirt thrown against the wind, Mischief is blown back in the face Of the fool who wrongs the pure and harmless.

Nowhere! Not in the sky, Nor in the midst of the sea, Nor deep in the mountains, Can you hide from your own mischief.

Never speak harsh words For they will rebound upon you. Angry words hurt And the hurt rebounds.

But the fool in his mischief forgets And he lights the fire Where in one day he must burn.

He who harms the harmless Or hurts the innocent, Ten times shall he fall Into torment or infirmity, Injury or disease or madness, Persecution or fearful accusation, Loss of family, loss of fortune.

Wilfully you have fed Your own mischief. Soon it will crush you As the diamond crushes stone.

As iron is corroded by rust Your own mischief will consume you.

If you kill, lie or steal, Commit adultery or drink, You dig up your own roots.

You are the source of all purity and impurity.

What you give to him Will be given back to you, And more.

For whatever you do, you do to yourself.

Finally there is what is known as the Golden Rule where Confucius argues that the central principle of ethics is not to do what you would not want to have done to yourself:

'Tzu-kung asked, "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" The Master said, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.'"

The Bible too guides us to right action:

"All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

We are responsible for what we are; and whatever we wish ourselves to be we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act. Why should we do good to the world? Apparently to help the world, but really to help ourselves.

According to the law of karma, the action one has done cannot be destroyed until it has borne its fruit; no power in nature can stop it from yielding its result. If I do an evil action, I must suffer from it. Similarly, if I do a good action, it is bound to bear good results. Can there be a higher motivation for an ethical existence on this planet?

Indeed, the law of karma is the best motivation we can have for right thinking, right action and right living. Karma however, is not god's code of punishment. It is not passive or defeatist. Rather, it puts men and women at the center of responsibility for all that they do and all that is done to them. Thus is it rightly said:

Watch your thoughts, for they become words. Watch your words, for they become actions. Watch your actions, for they become habits. Watch your habits, for they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.

Nature's dispensation is simple. Each of us has been given a field of life. We are free to sow whatever we want in this field, which is our karma-kshetra. In other words, we must eat the fruits of our own harvest. This is identical with the biblical idea that "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Galatians 6:7)

Many of us usually equate karma with evil and sin. This is probably because we become aware of karma only when we are hard-pressed with difficulties, taking for granted all good things in our lives. The fact however remains that: "Men are not punished for their sins, but by them." (Elbert Hubbard)

Understanding karma is getting to know the knowledge of the secret of work. We see that the whole universe is working and is perpetually in a state of dynamic flux. Why? Because it is the only way in which we can justify our existence and residence on this earth, and go on actively creating and fashioning our lives. According to Vivekananda: "The world is a grand moral gymnasium wherein we have all to take exercise so as to become stronger and stronger spiritually."

Put in the immortal words of Kahlil Gibran:

"You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth.

For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life's procession that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite."

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