

Appendix 9

Karma

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The earliest appearance of the word *karman* is found in the Rig Veda. The term *karman* also appears significantly in the Atharva Veda. It is said: "a man is born to the world he has made" and a man is "constituted by his desires" from previous lives as well as the current lifetime. Scholars have generally agreed that the earliest formulation of the Karma doctrine occurs in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, which is the earliest of the Upanisads. The doctrine occurs here in the context of a discussion of the fate of the individual after death.

The doctrine of transmigration of the soul, with respect to fateful retribution for acts committed, does not appear in the Rig Veda. The concept of karma first appears strongly in the Bhagavad Gita. The topic of karma is mentioned in the ancient oral tradition of the Puranas (predating the Vedas) where it is explained that even the gods experience karma.

"Karma" literally means "deed" or "act", and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction, which Hindus believe governs all consciousness. Karma is not **fate**, for we act with what can be described as a conditioned **free will** creating our own destinies. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determine our future.

The conquest of karma lies in intelligent action and dispassionate reaction. Not all karmas rebound immediately. Some accumulate and return unexpectedly in this or other lifetimes. Human beings are said to produce karma in four ways:

- Through thoughts
- Through right attitude and words
- Through actions that we perform ourselves
- Through actions others perform under our instructions

Everything that we have ever thought, spoken, done or caused is karma, as is also that which we think, speak or do this very moment. Hindu scriptures divide karma into three kinds:

- *Sanchita* is the accumulated karma. It would be impossible to experience and endure all karmas in one lifetime. From this stock of *sanchita karma*, a handful is taken out to serve one lifetime and this handful of actions, which have begun to bear fruit and which will be

exhausted only on their fruit being enjoyed and not otherwise, is known as *prarabdha karma*.

- *Prarabdha* Fruit-bearing karma is the portion of accumulated karma that has "ripened" and appears as a particular problem in the present life.
- *Kriyamana* is everything that we produce in the current life. All *kriyamana karmas* flow in to *sanchita karma* and consequently shape our future. Only in human life we can change our future destiny. After death we lose Kriya Shakti (ability to act) and do (kriyamana) karma until we are born again in another human body.

Some believe that only human beings who can distinguish right from wrong can do (kriyamana) karma. Therefore, animals and young children are considered incapable of creating new karma (and thus cannot affect their future destinies) as they are incapable of discriminating between right and wrong.

As long as the stock of *sanchita karma* lasts, a part of it continues to be taken out as *prarabdha karma* for being enjoyed in one lifetime, leading to the cycle of birth and death. A devotee cannot attain liberation from the cycle of birth and death, until the accumulated *sanchita karmas* are completely exhausted. Unkindness yields spoiled fruits, and good deeds bring forth sweet fruits. As one acts, so does one become: one becomes virtuous by virtuous action, and evil-by-evil action.