

Theme 2C Religious concepts: Key moral principles of karma and reincarnation

Key concepts

- In Hindu thought, Karma means action, and the fruits of action, and is the force that drives reincarnation. It is the principle of cause and effect and reflects the nature of the universe: any activity must be paid back. This cyclical cause and effect generate the concepts of samsara (or the world) and birth and reincarnation.
- In the Vedic religion, a person's situation in this life is thought to be the result of karma in a past life or lives as karma is accumulated throughout a person's reincarnated lives.
- There are different aspects of karma which are stored reactions that determine each soul's destiny: sanchita karma, accumulated karma, this is the 'baggage' of karma from all past lives that is brought forward into the present life; prarabdha karma, fruit-bearing karma, this is the portion of accumulated karma that has ripened and appears as a particular problem in the present life, it is the portion of karma assigned to be worked out in the present existence; agami karma, karma in the making, 'agami' literally means 'not come'. It is the karma that will take effect in the future.
- The process of the soul transmigrating into a new body is called reincarnation. All Hindus believe that the individual soul (atman) exists in a cycle of birth into a body, followed by death and then rebirth into a new body, although not necessarily a human one. This cycle is called Samsara. The quality of the life the soul is reborn into depends on the previous life; it depends on karma.
- Karma is not the same as judgement in some other religions such as Christianity. It is automatic and impersonal. Hindus therefore aim to live their lives in a way that will earn them good karma and eventually free them from rebirth altogether.
- The ultimate aim of the soul is to be freed from this cycle altogether by attaining liberation (moksha).
- Moksha is release from rebirth. This is the ultimate aim of all Hindus. Each time a soul is born into a better life, it has the opportunity to improve itself further, and get closer to liberation. When a soul attains moksha it loses its individual identity and becomes part of Brahman.

Key quotes

- "The theory of karma harps on the Newtonian principle that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction."* (Subhamoy Das)
- "Our destiny was shaped long before the body came into being."* (Tulsidas, a Hindu saint)
- "As the embodied soul continually passes in this body from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into a new body at death."* (Bhagavad Gita 2:13)
- 'As a man casts off his worn-out clothes, and takes on other new ones, so does the embodied soul cast off his worn-out bodies, and enters others new.'* (Bhagavad Gita 2:12)
- "When a caterpillar has come to the end of a blade of grass, it reaches out to another blade, and draws itself over to it. In the same way the soul, having come to the end of one life, reaches out to another body, and draws itself over to it. A goldsmith takes an old ornament and fashions it into a new and more beautiful one. In the same way the soul as it leaves one body, looks for a new body which is more beautiful.*
- As people act so they become. If their actions are good, they become good; if their actions are bad, they become bad. Good deeds purify those who perform them; bad deeds pollute those who perform them."* (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4:4. 3-6a)

Key words

karma	samsara	Vedic	agami karma
grace	sanchita karma	moksha	atman
Brahman	reincarnation	rebirth	karmic debt
liberation	prarabdha karma		

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some see karma as being the biggest single influence on the life of a Hindu. Others would argue that dharma is the main focus of a Hindu's life. Some would argue that there are many influences on Hindu lifestyle.

Key questions

Is the belief in reincarnation relevant for Hindus today?
To what extent is karma an important aspect of a Hindu's life?
In what way is belief in karma different to a belief in fate?