



Advaita Vedanta

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Based on the words of Swami Dayananda and Swami Paramarthananda

Doctrine of Karma

Now tell me about karma.

What would you like to know?

Is it a story or is it true?

What is it about the modern world that requires something to be either one or the other. The eastern philosophies have four states, something can be true, untrue, both true and untrue and neither true or untrue.

Very interesting but you haven't answered my question. Is Karma true?

That's what I was getting at. Karma falls into category 3 i.e. it is both true and untrue.

I suppose you find that amusing but here in the west we call that illogical.

First, we must establish the correct meanings here. Karma means action. What you mean is the doctrine of karma. Meaning that every action has a consequence and that the consequence is the effect of the action. Every action results in a beneficial or non-beneficial consequence. These are simplified in the west as simply Good or Bad. Good and Bad as judgement calls for something is rarely all good or all bad. In the east beneficial or non-beneficial refers to whether the consequence takes you closer to a spiritual life or further away from it. These consequences are often referred to as the fruits of one's action or simply, karmic fruits.

The reason that this is true is clear to see in your own experience. When you perform a beneficial act, how do you feel? When you perform a malicious or devious act how do you feel? These feelings survive long after the act itself. Indeed, many people suffer the 'guilt' of mean or harmful actions all their lives.

So, it is true?

Yes, from the perspective of you the separate, finite self. However, from the perspective of the infinite awareness there is no concept of action because action

implies change from one state to another. If you are infinite you are incapable of change as we have discussed many times. Therefore, you are incapable of action. You are incapable of karma. Since you do not perform the action, you are not the recipient of the consequences of that action.

So, it is untrue?

Don't be so simplistic in your questioning. You have to first establish who is asking the question. If you feel yourself to be the separate self, separate from all other people and objects in the world living this simple life that has a beginning and end then karma is true for you. On the other hand, if you believe that you are the infinite awareness and that this mind body is merely a temporary manifestation then karma is not true for you. Who is asking the question?

I see. OK let's say that I believe myself to be this mind and body and that from this perspective karma is true, how does it work and what is its purpose.

If you are this separate self with a limited life then you have to wonder why you were born. Indeed, why were you born here, at this particular time, at this particular place to particular parents and within a particular family. Who makes the choice of race, colour, size and strength. Who decides if you will be intelligent or dull, beautiful or just plain ugly. All the parameters of your life need a value set against them. Who decides all this?

God?

The doctrine of karma says that you do.

I do? How?

By your actions. As a separate self you are separate from other objects in the universe. Whenever you interact with them, some action is performed. You leave your bed in the morning, action. You brush your teeth, action and so on. The mere act of breathing is action. You cannot survive without action. Each of these actions has a result and the universe stores the accumulation of these results for you to benefit/suffer their consequences.

Every finite action has a finite result and the karmic fruit collected in this lifetime are called *agami* karma. Karmic fruit are said to 'fructify' as one works through them. Karmic fruit can only fructify with experience i.e. within a living experience. If you should die before all your agami Karma is consumed, then the agami karma goes into long-term storage as it were. This long-term storage is known as *sanchita* karma. The

universe stores this sanchita karma that is a collection from this and many other previous lives.

Reincarnation? Yes, I want to know all about that.

Yes, reincarnation is very interesting and we can discuss that later but for now let us assume that sanchita karma, this mass storage of karmic fruit from many lives, gets to such a state of fullness that it seeks an outlet. A proportion of the sanchita karma known as *prarabdha* karma therefore leaves this store and seeks to find a way to express itself. This prarabdha karma must fructify in the form of action. It must fructify through experience. The way we experience is by living, so this prarabdha karma determines the parameters of a life designed to experience them.

You mean we withdraw prarabdha karma from the karmic bank to last a lifetime?

Very good way of putting it. Yes, we are born as a result of prarabdha karma. It is the driving force of the creation of a separate life like water swells a seed and forces it to burst into life. The life that is created is designed to fructify the prarabdha karma it was created for. This is what is meant by fate or pre-destiny. As long as the prarabdha karma remains to be experienced, we live and as soon as it is all consumed, we die. Prarabdha karma is often described as an arrow that leaves the bow at birth and continues to travel by the momentum of prarabdha karma. When the momentum is no more, i.e. the prarabdha karma is exhausted the arrow stops and our life comes to an end.

During our lifetime, as we perform actions to exhaust the prarabdha karma, we are accumulating further results, agami karma again. Thus, the cycle continues, over and over. It's a 'catch 22' since you cannot perform actions without results and the consequences of results are more actions. This cycle causes rebirth over and over again. A cycle in which we are trapped through an infinite set of reincarnations. The good news is that there is a way to break the cycle.

Oh good. It was beginning to sound a bit grim for a moment. But before we get there, let me understand this concept of pre-destiny. Are you saying that our lives are pre-destined? That we have no free will?

According to the doctrine of karma which in the west is known by the phrase "As ye sow, so shall ye reap", your past actions directly contribute to who you are and the main events in your life. All the circumstances required for you to undergo the experiences required to fructify the prarabdha karma that caused you to be born in the first place, must come into being. These experiences are with other people and objects in the world. Thus, your parents, family, friends and relations are largely pre-determined. This includes partners and children as well.

Hang on. Just hang on. Did I hear you to say that our partners are chosen for us?

Only if you have prarabdha karma that requires interactions with a partner. Otherwise you will remain single. Prarabdha karma is like a railway track that has been built for you. You are the giant, powerful locomotive. You can go anywhere and pull as many carriages as you like, but you can only go where there are tracks! The tracks are your destiny and the locomotive is your will. Just as the locomotive cannot travel beyond the tracks, you cannot wander beyond the hand destiny has dealt you. You cannot fly for example. However, within that you are free to do as you please. You may take your locomotive forward or backward at any speed, take different tracks, these things are all under your control, your will. Whether you act beneficially or detrimentally to mankind is your responsibility and your responsibility alone for only you will have to suffer the consequences of your actions.

How can that be true? If I shoot someone then surely, they suffer the consequence of being shot and not me.

Exactly. They suffer the consequences of being shot i.e. the action of being shot, the consequences of the bullet and their body coming together. You suffer the consequences of the act of shooting which may be a prison sentence or the loss of your own life. The major experience of being shot will have its roots in prarabdha karma. That life came into being knowing that it was to end prematurely. If the shooting results in death then the prarabdha karma has been exhausted. If the person survives with injuries then those injuries themselves are part of the prarabdha karma destiny. Remember that those around you are also exhausting their own prarabdha karma as well.

You won't win many friends with this view. It seems a little too convenient to me. Are you saying those who get shot deserve to be shot.

It is not my judgement call one-way or the other. Those who are shot came to this life for that experience as a result of the actions of their own previous lives. They chose it for themselves. That is the way pre-destiny works. Your life is not chosen by others. Your life is not chosen by god. Your life is chosen by you though your actions in countless previous lives. Your actions now are setting up the circumstances of your lives yet to come. You are the one in charge there is no one else to blame or thank for the situation you find yourself in. Your life is not determined by outside people objects and events. It is determined by your actions alone. You are master of your own destiny.

How do you know all this? Have you made this up? Don't get me wrong, it seems very logical but is this all made up?

The wisdom traditions clearly tell us this and as we said earlier it is not made up but revealed. The doctrine of karma is a compromise to the belief that we are all separate for if you believe so, you need a method by which you come to exist. It cannot be proven as many things cannot be proven. It is logical, based on our own ideas of cause and effect. It is to be understood and accepted subject to a better, more logical explanation coming along to replace it. It is based on the idea of the doer.

The doer?

The doer yes. The one that does. That little voice in your head that says “I”. The one who thinks it is in charge. The I thought. The one who thinks that everything is done by him. If you believe that you are a separate self then the doer is your ego. Since it takes responsibility for every action, it must also take responsibility for every effect of such action. Karmic fruits belong to the doer.

The ego collects agami karma all its life and piles it on top of the existing sanchita karma at the time of death and is reborn again with prarabdha karma to repeat the cycle. It is necessary for the karma owner to survive death. That is why ego forms part of the subtle body – the intangible or non-physical body – that does not die when the physical body dies but instead attaches to another physical body at rebirth.

Wow, this is fascinating. How does this happen? Why does it happen?

Remind me to go into that later but for now, it is important to realise who owns the karmic results for it is they that will have to experience them. That experience can only happen in a physical dualistic world of objects since we need objects with which to have an experience. All experience is a relativistic action.

When you are enlightened meaning you come to realise that you are not this mind and body organism that you have been calling “I” all your life but a single awareness, pure consciousness, by which you know all your experience then you immediately distance yourself from the doer. It is your mind and body that does. You are the silent witness that merely experiences all that is done. When enlightened, you realise that you are not the doer and hence the karmic results do not belong to you. There is no need for rebirth.

So, the main reason for enlightenment is to stop reincarnation; to halt the cycle of birth and death?

No, the main reason for enlightenment is to truly know who you are. The cessation of reincarnation is a side effect. Enlightenment is the knowledge of your true being as pure awareness that is unchanging, complete and eternal. There is only

one awareness and when you come to know that is what you are, there is no rebirth. There cannot be because you cannot die.

So, what happens to all that Karma you accumulated before you were enlightened?

It rots away like unclaimed and unwanted fruit. The sanchita karma is still there but its owner is no more. Just as its owner has dissolved into awareness, so must the unwanted sanchita karma accumulated by that owner.

But what about life. Is it possible to become enlightened while living or do we have to wait till we die and go to heaven?

Listen carefully. There is no heaven or indeed hell. When enlightened you know yourself to be one with infinite consciousness. There is nowhere else to 'go'. There can be no heaven or hell. Heaven or hell is here and now. You are living it as a result of past actions and will continue to do so until you are enlightened and yes, one can be enlightened while living.

Then where does all that karma go? I mean you said we were born with prarabdha karma and it continues to 'fructify'. When finished, we are finished. That's what you said right?

Yes, that's what I said.

Then how can you be enlightened while alive? You come to realise who you are and the prarabdha karma disappears like a puff of smoke, the arrow stops and so do you.

Who says the prarabdha karma disappears? Its owner has disappeared not the karmic results. The arrow still continues to fly until the prarabdha karma has been exhausted. The enlightened being knows this. That is why they continue to suffer bodily even though enlightened. Why did Christ have to be crucified? Why did Ramakrishna have cancer? This is prarabdha karma playing out. The enlightened know this. If you were to ask them "why are you ill" they would answer "I am not ill, my body is ill". They understand fully who they are. They are not the mind and body we see them to be but infinite awareness.

One of the consequences of enlightenment while alive is that you have to observe the suffering you were born with while understanding the unity of everything. You have to continue to live in a dualistic world with a unity state of being. You have to observe your mind and body going about its business, getting up and brushing its teeth. You observe the accumulation of everyday agami karma yet know that this

karma does not belong to you. There is no more accumulation of karmic results. The doer is dead and in its place is the enlightened one. One underlying reality, unable to change, unable to perform any type of action.

[Then enlightened beings don't come back right? I mean they do not live again.](#)

They do not die and hence they cannot be reborn. They realise themselves to be part of the unity consciousness, the ground of all being. The underlying reality of everything. They are no longer separate from anything. Since all form, all objects in the world are manifestations from this one infinite awareness; there can be manifestations of enlightened beings who come to the physical realm to teach others. To help others find out who they really are. We call such manifestations **avatars**.

The east has many examples of such avatars. Indian mythology talks about them in their great epics for example Ram in the Ramayana and Krishna in the Mahabharata. In eastern traditions, avatars are seen as exemplars. Avatars tell you that you too can be like them. They show by example. Here in the west, avatars are rarer and when they do come, they are seen as saviours. Even though Jesus preached the gospel of unity, we are all one; he was always taken to be separate. Someone different who was there to save you, the sinner. Thus, the idea of a dualistic God is more prevalent in the west. The idea of God as someone different to me, superior to me; someone to look after me; someone to fear if I do wrong.

[If you took fear away from religion, most religions would die.](#)

They would deserve to. Who needs fear? As John Lennon famously sang, "Love is all you need."

[John Lennon was an Avatar ?????](#)