



The Skeptics SA guide to The Law of Karma

Although the Law of Karma exists independently of the concept of reincarnation, it is difficult to examine one without the other, for the two theories rely upon each other, [see Skeptics SA Reincarnation]. ‘Karma’ comes from the Sanskrit, and means, ‘action, work or deed’. Sometimes described as a ‘law of equilibrium, a law of spiritual dynamics’ or the moral law of cause and effect.¹

This ‘law’ attempts to express the idea of a universal cycle of cause and effect, especially as to the influences, and the accumulative effects, of personal thoughts and actions upon the destiny of all humans.

According to the Law of Karma, we exist on three levels, or worlds, physical, emotional and mental. Our individual character is viewed as a combination of physical acts, desires and thoughts. Within this system, human thoughts are considered most important. Unlike Western science which perceives thoughts as simply short-term electrochemical processes within the brain, some Eastern religions claim that, Our thoughts are dynamic and persist, their energies forming the basis for the law of Karma.²

Underlying this belief is the idea of a universal system of equilibrium, wherein the natural

balance is influenced by the behavior of individual humans. Their individual thoughts are believed to be able to create ripples in the fabric of the cosmos, creating either positive or negative influences upon the operation of the physical universe. Originally a belief of the Hindu priestly caste, the Brahmins, the concept spread to Jainism and Buddhism. This ‘law’ proposes the idea of a just universe, where, despite the injustices experienced during our earthly lives, justice, (often equated with retribution), will eventually finally prevail, and all will receive their appropriate reward, or punishment.

As such, it offers a simplistic explanation of ultimate morality, proposing a transcendental explanation as to why some people were born to wealth, others to poverty. According to the Chandogya Upanishad various rewards and punishments are meted out; those who lived good lives would be reborn to a Brahman mother, (a great reward); while those who had lived an evil life would be reborn to an Untouchable woman, (a terrible punishment). The Law of Karma is closely related to the idea contained in many other religions, namely, that good works reap a divine reward, while evil deeds bring destruction. Behind every piece of good fortune lie the causes that the

individual has consciously or unconsciously precipitated, perhaps recently or in a previous life. Behind every bit of misfortune lies the energy likewise generated by the individual.³

However, unlike those religions which offer their followers a heavenly reward, because of its inexorable involvement with reincarnation, Karma’s reward is the final release of the individual from the eternal cycle of rebirths. Although Karma is a form of determinism, the idea that our own decisions and actions determine results, its believers argue that despite the inevitability of the ultimate plan, we are still free to make the decisions that will determine our individual destiny. There are however a number of problems with the so-called Law of Karma.

Firstly, the so-called ‘Law of Karma’ is no more a ‘law’ than is ‘the law of the jungle’. Rather it is merely a vague religious, philosophical concept, based upon a belief that every part of the entire physical universe is under the control of certain natural and impartial principles which ensure that the ultimate reward of every individual will depend upon the type of life(s) that they have led.

Just as the term ‘the law of the jungle’ is another way of expressing the idea of ‘survival of

the fittest', the 'Law of Karma' is merely another way of expressing the idea that for every thought or action, however slight they might be, inevitably somewhere else in the universe, there is some corresponding effect, equal in influence, to the original event.

Like many pseudo-beliefs its supporters seek to validate it by applying accepted scientific principles to support the concept. Thus, they claim that since the science of physics demonstrates that no particle of energy can be put forth anywhere in the universe without a natural result following [then] All thought, desire and action disturb in some measure the equilibrium of the universe.⁴

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of difference between natural principles and theoretical ideas. One does not necessarily support the other. Unlike scientific principles that are based upon observable and repeatable phenomena, the concept of karma is a vague, unscientific and untestable concept.

Indeed, the concepts upon which the Law of Karma are based are completely at odds with Western scientific thought. The idea, for instance, that individual 'thoughts' are able to affect the course of the universe is absurd. There is no evidence for whatsoever for such a claim. Western science considers that the thoughts and actions of each individual are brief limited events; their influence short and direct, with their influence restricted to ourselves and those whom we might influence, either through direct contact, or through indirect contact such as books and written material.

Skeptics SA

Furthermore, the Law of Karma is not only not scientific, it is not even remotely based upon anything which resembles scientific principles. It is based purely upon irrational and emotive principles, the human desire for equality and justice, applied on a cosmic level. It reflects an early religious idea that dates from at least early Egyptian times, and possibly earlier: the philosophical concept of reward and punishment, simply another version of the heaven and hell mythos. It is an emotive concept, one which Osborn stated, even if it does not actually exist,... is one of those concepts which one feels ought to be true.⁵ It utilises the concept of cosmic justice, so that despite the experiences of an individual during their earthly life, each would ultimately receive a reward or punishment. After death the spirit would return in another body: those who had suffered in their previous life would move upwards on the social scale, according to their past behaviour, while evil-doers would move downwards, perhaps even returning as animals, of a type befitting their punishment. The glutton for instance, would return as a pig, and those who had heaped pain and suffering upon others would return as a beast of burden, the property of a sadistic master.

While to some degree unique in its overall vision of the ultimate destiny of the individual, it really differs very little from other similar religious ideas that by living either a righteous or a sinful life, the individual will reap appropriate rewards, the former gaining the greatest reward conceivable to the believer, release from the eternal cycle of rebirths, while for

the latter, never being able to escape from that same cycle.

While at first glance the Law of Karma appears to be a moral and just concept, unfortunately, closer examination reveals that it is based upon a harsh and remorseless system of retribution, reminiscent of the harshest judgments of the Biblical Pharisees concerning 'the sins of the fathers'. As Christmas Humphreys, the founder of the British Buddhist Society commented concerning the Law of Karma, "He who suffers, suffers from his deliberate use of his own free will. We must not show any sympathy for cripples, dwarfs and those born deaf or blind, since these afflictions are the products of their own past actions."⁶

References

- 1 Smith, H, *The Religions of Man*, New York, Harper and Row, 1965, p 76
- 2 Osborn, AW, *The Superphysical*, London, Frederick Muller Ltd, 1974, p 297
- 3 *Karma The Universal Law of Harmony*, Theosophical Society brochure, p 3
- 4 *Ibid*, p 1
- 5 Osborne, *op. cit*, p 297
- 6 Humphreys, C, *Karma and Rebirth*, 1983, p 55

Laurie Eddie

Skeptics SA

Email: <info@skepticssa.org.au>

Web site: <www.skepticssa.org.au>