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Karma: Special Section

We Mold Our Lives Like a Potter Fashions a Pot

Karma has quite a karma. Long after India's seers immortalized it in the Vedas, it suffered bad press under European missionaries who belittled it as "fate" and "fatalism," and today finds itself again in the ascendancy as the subtle and all-encompassing principle which governs man's experiential universe in a way likened to gravity's governance over the physical plane. Like gravity, karma was always there in its fullest potency, even when people did not comprehend it.

The early seers who brought through the Vedas were practitioners, mystics and divine oracles who put into practice the knowledge of karma. To them, Karma-from the root kri, "to do"-was a power by which they could influence the Gods, nature, weather, harvests and enemies through right intent and rites righteously performed. Thus by their actions they could determine their destiny. Through the ages, other realized souls explained the workings of karma, revealing details of this cosmic law and, when the tradition of writing came into vogue, recording it for future generations. In this way they established karma as perhaps the fundamental principle of Hindu consciousness and culture then and now. Primordial and unborn, karma is anadi, "beginningless." Its Rig Veda definitions are linked to the performance of the homa, the potent fire rite that temporarily opens a window between the three worlds-physical, subtle and causal. With Sanskrit mantras, mudras and meditative powers, Vedic priests precipitated a flow of shakti from highly evolved souls,

Mahadevas, residing in inner worlds, securing the blessings of the Gods, insuring happiness for the clan. Neglecting the rites or misperforming them made negative karma and invited calamity and loss of wealth. Communities were tight knit, and the clan prospered or suffered collectively. When one person did transgress, elders suspected not so much an individual's willful intent to do malice as malperformance of the homa. The ritual was held responsible for sustaining a spiritual force-field strong enough to ward off demonic entities that torment, confuse and misguide weak individuals. Priests assumed primary responsibility for the well-being of the community. Indologist Herman W. Hull, author of *The Vedic Origins of Karma*, writes: "In the context of Vedic ritual thought, good and bad apparently refer to a valuation of action based on ritual exactitude: good being equated with the correct performance of the rite, bad with the incorrect performance." Swami Vivekananda, who spoke and wrote on karma extensively, commented on this understanding of the law: "The Vedic doctrine of karma is the same as in Judaism and all other religions, that is to say, the purification of the mind through sacrifices and such other external means." The Upanishads (circa 1500-600 bce), the philosophic treatises of the Vedas, show how karma relates to the individual and his or her actions-with questions of morality, responsibility, reward and retribution. They clearly command the individual to be responsibly concerned about personal conduct and not expect the priesthood alone to secure and safeguard one's karma through the performance of sacred rites. As Sage Yajnavalkya says in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "What becomes of this man? Indeed, one becomes good by good action and bad by bad action." *Karma in Mystical Vision* The yogis of the ancient Sankhya philosophical system offered a deeply mystical vision. They scrutinized karma to profound levels of magnification and stressed its bearing on the soul of man. What they saw was a

plasmic jelly pulsating within the subtle bodies of each person. Embedded in this plasma, which persists from life to life, are the seeds of all past thought and action. In each lifetime, certain of these karmic seeds are released into the nerve system with coded impulses and tendencies affecting present actions. The effects were most commonly understood to determine three spheres of life: a) jati, family and occupation; b) ayus, health and length of life; c) bhoga, quality and enjoyment of life.

Karma as a Cosmic Building Block To the rishi seers, karma appeared with such fundamental force and substantive reality that they perceived it as one of the thirty-six primary evolutes of form, called tattvas, which range from Parashakti, pure consciousness, to prithivi tattva, earth. Karma is number eight, called niyati tattva, a spiritual-magnetic energy form. This identification of its magnetic quality is a crucial clue to understanding how karma "comes back," rather than just "goes out." Each karma, or action, generates a vibration, a distinct oscillation of force, a vasana, or subliminal inclination that continues to vibrate in the mind. These vasanas are magnetic conglomerates of subconscious impressions. Like attracts like. Acts of love attract loving acts, malice attracts malice. And each action, karma, continues to attract until demagnetized. This is accomplished through re-experiencing it, or resolving it with understanding-rather than compounding it with reaction-or through other subtler spiritual means and practices.

Karma Goes Global "What goes around comes around," sings country Western singer Willie Nelson. His ballad about "getting back what you give out" dominated US and European radio waves for years and became the West's homespun Upanishad on the Hindu concept of karma. You can hardly watch TV today without a subtle lesson in this cosmic law of cause and effect. Everywhere, karma has squeezed through the white picket fences of non-Hindu religions and irrevocably attached itself to

the global ethic emerging worldwide. But karma has suffered a chronic association with the word fate. Fate is a Western idea, derived largely from the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It means, with wide variation, that one's life has been set by agencies outside oneself. Karma is exactly the opposite. " 'It is the coward and the fool who says this is fate,' goes the Sanskrit proverb," said Swami Vivekananda. "But it is the strong man who stands up and says, 'I will make my fate.' " Sidebar: Karma Glossary
karmabhandha: The bonds of actions, i.e., being bound to rebirth. karmadosha: Sinful work or vice, blunder; evil consequences. karmadushta: Corrupt in action. karmaja: Act-born; resulting or produced from an act, good or bad. karmajiva: Livelihood earned by work, trade, profession. karmakshaya: Annihilation of work. karmakshetra: Place of religious acts. karmanirhara: The removal of bad deeds or their effects. karmanishtha: Diligent in performing religious actions. karmapaka: Ripening of acts, matured results of acts of former births. karmaphala: The fruit of actions. karmarambha: The commencement of an act. karmashaya: "Holder of karma." Describes body of the soul. karmasamya: Equipose of karma. karmasiddhi: Successful action. karmatyaga: Abandoning worldly duties and obligations. karmavasha: The necessary influence or repercussion of actions. karmavidhi: Rule of action; mode of conducting ceremonies. karmayoga: "Union through action;" selfless religious service. kriyamana karma: Actions being made. Karma being created. papa: Wickedness, sin, crime. Wrongful action. Demerit from wrongdoing. prayaschitta: Penance. "Predominant thought or aim; weighing heavily on the mind." prarabdha karma: Actions set in motion. Sanchita karma released to bear fruit in one's current life. punya: Holy, virtuous; auspicious. Meritorious action. sanchita karma: The entirety of all karmas of this life and past lives. Reference: A Sanskrit English Dictionary, Sir Monier

Monier-Williams.Karma Poster

As gravity governs mass, so karma guides experience. What does tradition say about this mysterious law which returns everything to us so that we may learn and unfold?

We blame it, bear it, bemoan it and brave it. It baffles us, scares us and silently cares for us. It's a law, but it's us, too. It's karma, that ever-wise teacher, internal mirror and guide. No force so intimately impels our every act and so profoundly determines who we have become. We are the pulsating sum effect of quintillions of thoughts, feelings and acts set into motion from our many lives on earth. Yet we remain mostly oblivious of the wondrous spiritual law that engineers all these connections. Karma is always there, recording, realigning, redesigning, retiming, replaying and reflecting us back to ourself with computer-like accuracy. Karma literally means "deed or act" and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction which governs all life. Karma is a natural law of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. Karma is not fate, for man acts with free will, creating his own destiny. The Vedas tell us, if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in this and previous lives, all of which determines our future. It is the interplay between our experience and how we respond to it that makes karma devastating or helpfully invigorating. 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 births. The law of karma acts impersonally, yet we may meaningfully interpret its results as either positive (punya) or negative (papa)-terms describing actions leading the soul either toward or away from the spiritual goal. Karma is further graded as: white (shukla), black (krishna), mixed (shukla-krishna) or neither white nor black (ashukla-akrishna). The latter term

describes the karma of the jnani, the knower, who, as Rishi Patanjali says, is established in kaivalya, freedom from prakriti through realization of the Self. Similarly, one's karma must be in a condition of ashukla-akrishna, quiescent balance, in order for liberation to be attained. This equivalence of karma is called karmasamya, and is a factor that brings malaparipaka, or maturity of anava mala-the individuating veil of duality, ignorance and finitude. It is this state of resolution in preparation for samadhi at death that all Hindus seek through making amends and settling differences. Karma is the driving force that brings the soul back again and again into human birth in the evolutionary cycle of transmigration called samsara. When all earthly karmas are resolved and the Self has been realized, the soul is liberated from rebirth. This is the goal of all Hindus. Accumulated, Active and Current Karmas Karma is threefold: sanchita, prarabdha and kriyamana. Sanchita karma, "accumulated actions," is the sum of all karmas of this and past lives. Prarabdha karma, "actions begun; set in motion," is that portion of sanchita karma that is bearing fruit and shaping the events and conditions of the current life, including the nature of one's body, personal tendencies and associations. Kriyamana karma, "being made," is the karma being created and added to sanchita in this life by one's thoughts, words and actions, or in the inner worlds between lives. Kriyamana karma is also called agami, "coming, arriving," and vartamana, "living, set in motion." While some kriyamana karmas bear fruit in the current life, others are stored for future births. Each of these types can be divided into two categories: arabdha (literally, "begun, undertaken;" karma that is "sprouting"), and anarabdha ("not commenced; dormant"), or "seed karma." In a famed analogy, karma is compared to rice in its various stages. Sanchita karma, the residue of one's total accumulated actions, is likened to rice that has been harvested and stored in a granary. From the

stored rice, a small portion has been removed, husked and readied for cooking and eating. This is prarabdha karma, past actions that are shaping the events of the present. Meanwhile, new rice, mainly from the most recent harvest of prarabdha karma, is being planted in the field that will yield a future crop and be added to the store of rice. This is kriyamana karma, the consequences of current actions. For each of the three kinds of karma there is a different method of resolution.

Non-attachment to the fruits of action, along with daily rites of worship and strict adherence to the codes of dharma, stops the accumulation of kriyamana. Prarabdha karma is resolved only by being experienced and lived through. Sanchita karma, normally inaccessible, is burned away only through the grace and diksha of the satguru, who prescribes sadhana and tapas for the benefit of the shishya. The three-fold edict of karma has both individual and impersonal dimensions. Personal karma is thus influenced by broader contexts, sometimes known as family karma, community karma, national karma, global karma and universal karma. **Punya-A Pastel Array of Good Acts** **Punya** includes all forms of doing good, from the simplest helpful deed to a lifetime of conscientious beneficence. Each act of punya carries its karmic consequence, karmaphala, "fruit of action"-the positive reward of actions, words and deeds that are in keeping with dharma. Awakened psychics who have developed clairvoyant sight can clearly see the punya accrued in the inner subconscious aura as a colorful, free-flowing, astral, light-energy, pranic substance. **Punya** is seen as light-hued, pastel colors, whereas its counterpart, **papa**, is seen as shades of darker colors which are usually static. **Punya** colors produce inner contentment, deep joy, the feeling of security and fearlessness. **Punya** is earned through virtuous living, following the multi-faceted laws of dharma. **Punya** depends on purity of acts according to many factors including: 1) the karma and evolution of the individual,

2) degree of sacrifice and unselfish motivation and 3) time and place. For example, virtuous deeds, sadhana, tapas and penance have greater merit when performed in holy places and at auspicious times, and a small act done for a great and worthy soul carries more punya than even a large act performed for a lesser person. Papa-A Dark Dungeon of Sinful Deeds Papa includes all forms of wrongdoing, from the simplest infraction to the most heinous crime, such as premeditated murder. Each act of papa carries its karmic consequence, for which scriptures delineate specific penance for expiation. Those who have awakened psychic sight can clearly see papa in the inner subconscious aura as a colorful, sticky, astral substance. Papa appears as dark unrelated colors. These color arrangements are not unlike modern art murals. Papa colors can produce disease, depression, loneliness and such, but can be dissolved through penance (prayashchitta), austerity (tapas) and good deeds (sukritya). There are specific consequences that result from each type of transgression of dharma. For example, a man who steals from his neighbor creates a cosmic debt which may be repaid later by having his own possessions taken away. There are also specific penances that can be performed for atonement and the accrual of punya and balances out the papa, the negative karma of the wrongful act. The Laws of Manu give several types of penance for the crime of murder, including 1) making a forest hut and subsisting there on alms for twelve years and using a human skull as one's emblem; and 2) walking 100 yojanas (900 miles), while reciting the Vedas, eating little and remaining continent. A contemporary example: if a man fells a large healthy tree, he might atone for it by planting ten trees, ensuring that at least one grows to replace it. Along with any penance, an accompanying genuine sense of remorse is the most potent force to dissolve papa. The degree of papa accrued from an action depends on various factors, including

the personal karma, the dharma and the spiritual advancement of the individual and the intent or motivation. For example, the karma created by a soldier who kills in the line of duty is different from the karma of the man one who murders out of sheer malice. The time and place of the action are also influencing factors. For example, unvirtuous deeds carry great demerit when performed in holy places. The Great Teacher in the Classroom of Life Karma itself is neither good nor bad but a neutral principle that governs energy and motion of thought, word and deed. All experience helps us grow. As we mature, life after life, we go through pain and joy. The divine law is: whatever karma we are experiencing in our life is just what we need at the moment, and nothing can happen but that we have the strength to meet it. Even a harsh karma, when faced in wisdom, can be the greatest catalyst for spiritual unfoldment. Performing daily sadhana, keeping good company, pilgrimaging to holy places, seeing to others' needs-these evoke the higher energies, direct the mind to useful thoughts and avoid the creation of troublesome new karmas. A Polynesian Priestess Speaks on Karma Though Hinduism developed an almost encyclopedic compendium of insight into the workings of karma, it would be mistaken to suppose it had the sole grasp or only deep appreciation of the law. Buddhism has explored its every nuance. Christianity embraces it with "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." For most indigenous religious cultures, it is a guiding belief intertwined with its corollary, the interconnectedness of all life. One of the most strikingly cogent messages on karma was spoken by Molokai's Polynesian priestess Kaili'ohe Kame'ekua before she died in 1931 at age 115: "The ancient ones believed that all time is now and that we are each creators of our life's conditions. We create ourselves and everything that becomes a part of our lives. Any situation we might find ourselves in is brought about by us-in learning the many pathways of life.

"There is one body of life of which we are all a part. Everything that grew on our land and swam in our sea we called brother and sister. There is no dividing line between two people. You cannot hit your brother without hitting yourself, your father and your mother. We were taught from the time we could understand that there are no accidents. All things happen for reasons. We may not know what the reason is at the moment, but always be happy even for misfortune, for with it comes some wisdom that we could not have had otherwise." Hindu Scriptures Reveal the Law "Loose me from my sin as from a bond that binds me. May my life swell the stream of your river of Right." Rig Veda Samhita 2.28.5 "Here they say that a person consists of desires. And as is his desire, so is his will. As is his will, so is his deed. Whatever deed he does, that he will reap. According as one acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action." Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.4.5-6 "Borne along and defiled by the stream of qualities, unsteady, wavering, bewildered, full of desire, distracted, one goes on into the state of self-conceit. In thinking, 'This is I' and 'That is mine' one binds himself with himself, as does a bird with a snare." Krishna Yajur Veda, Maitri Upanishad 3.2 "The action of the unattached man-who is free, whose understanding is firmly rooted in knowledge and who acts as a sacrifice-is wholly dissolved." Bhagavad Gita, 4.23