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MY TURN

Karma Was Fouled!

Why Hoddle did no wrong to the disabled

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Glenn Hoddle's comments on karma, reincarnation and disability (Hinduism Today, May, 1999, page 28) should have attracted little attention. The belief that disability is the result of past life karma is held by Hindus, Buddhists and other religionists. If Hoddle, UK's national football team coach, had been winning a few more games, the nation might have ignored his comments. However, The Times newspaper made them a national issue, resulting in his termination. Some UK Hindus sought to explain our central concepts of karma and reincarnation, others ducked the issue. I think all Hindus should understand how Hoddle's views on karma and reincarnation came to be wrongly taken as an insult to disabled people.

The misinterpretation was clearly stated by Anne Rae, chairperson of the British Council of Disabled People. "Hoddle's views have angered and frustrated those Disabled People who understand that these medieval beliefs underlie much of the (unspoken) justification for prejudice and discrimination

against us. Good life, good reincarnation; bad life, bad reincarnation. Not dissimilar to the view held by some Christians that 'the sins of the father are visited upon the children.'" Our issue is this: will any particular explanation of disability, either by birth or accident, automatically result in "prejudice and discrimination" against the disabled? I think Hinduism offers a very rational explanation for disability and a compelling rationale for respect and proper treatment of the disabled.

When I encounter disability, how, from my Hindu perspective, should I react? True, according to the laws of karma and reincarnation, the disability is necessarily a result of some past action. But the question before me is not, "Why him or her?" It is, "Given the situation, what is my duty?"

One must ask the right question if one wants the right answer. To conclude that the disabled, or others, are being punished for actions in a former life and that therefore I am excused from the obligation of helping them is not only a wrong deduction on my part, it is also a dangerous one. Such unfeeling, cold logic is not what a belief in karma countenances or recommends. It commends warm-hearted concern to minimize the person's problems, even though caused by his or her own actions in the past. Otherwise, according to that same law of karma, when we find ourselves similarly disadvantaged, we will ourselves be so treated, and will have deserved such treatment by our own callousness. It is not for us to say, "It is the result of your karma." It is for us to ask, "Given his or her condition, what is my duty, my dharma?" Otherwise, if you blame the victim, you will be blamed, rather than helped, when you happen to be the victim. As one

spokesperson for the disabled in America pointedly quipped in a television interview, "Remember, we are an equal-opportunity club. You can become one of us anytime."

The person with the disability is indeed entitled to ask the perennial question, "Why me?" And, for him or her, karma and reincarnation provides an answer: it is a result of your own past deeds. This serves two ends. First, it keeps the one disabled from concluding that we live in a Godless, capricious universe and are victims of a purposeless fate. Second, one can now look to the future, for the doctrine of karma does not end with the proposition that what happens to us is the result of what we have done. It equally advances the proposition that we create our future by how we act now. So, do not wallow in self-pity but strive for a better future, an endeavor in which all others should readily help.

If I trip and fall, do I blame the law of gravitation? It explains my fall. But it also explains why I can walk again after standing up, without fear of flying off the Earth. So, while one can blame one's past karma, one cannot blame the law of karma.

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