

An Introduction to Karma & Reincarnation

Within the Upanishads & Bhagavad Gita we find a great deal of information regarding the Nature of Reality.

At root they tell us that everything is part of an ocean of Brahman or Pure Awareness, and all seemingly separate manifestations of nature, including ourselves, exist as waves rising up and then falling away again within the ocean; that ultimately there is only One (the essence of a Monistic viewpoint). And we are told that we can experientially realize that Pure Awareness is our true Self and can live in that state of Being as a Jivanmukta, one who is in a state of freedom whilst embodied; that we will all eventually seek the evolution of our own consciousness and ultimately Freedom or Moksha. We are told:

“The deathless Self meditated upon Himself and projected the universe as evolutionary energy. From this energy developed life, mind, the elements, and the world of karma, which is enchained by cause and effect. The deathless Self, sees all, knows all. From him springs Brahma, who embodies the process of evolution into name and form by which the One appears to be many.” Mundaka Upanishad Part One, (1), v8 & v9

Within these texts it is made clear to us that whilst the universe may at first seem to be chaotic there are basic underlying laws governing our reality at every level of manifestation.

Two fundamental laws are The Law of Karma and Law of Reincarnation.

Karma “action”

The Law of Karma is the **Law of Cause and Effect** where there will **always be a causative factor for an action and a consequence to an action**; one thing will naturally lead to another as nature always seeks balance or a state of equilibrium. So that for instance simply stated a ball thrown in the air, all things being equal, must fall down again. In relation to our own lives we are told whatever we do or think is a consequence of an earlier thought or action, and what we think or do now will create a future thought or action. This is also a way of perceiving how we are ‘bound’ where our consciousness is limited according to our conditioning so we experience little freedom, with samskaras or ingrained ways of thinking and acting determining how we meet the world & ourselves. This is an intricate web, where the links are not always evident, but they will always exist. However, we must remember in this paradigm **there is no retribution or punishment it is a natural law of cause and effect.**

Traditionally there are several types of karma:

- 1) **Agami Karma:** acts performed in our present life
- 2) **Sanchita Karma:** the complete ‘store’ of karma accumulated over all previous births
- 3) **Prarabdha Karma:** the karma giving rise to a particular birth

This means in essence that we are constantly accruing karma (agami) which will sit within our storehouse of karma (sanchita) and that only a portion of this total store will determine each birth (prarabdha); it is as if we have a whole pack of playing cards and will only play a number of them within each life.

We can also divide karma into three further classifications:

- 1) **Sattvic Karma:** where there is no attachment and selfishness
- 2) **Rajasic Karma:** where there is selfishness, focusing upon oneself and one’s own needs

- 3) **Tamasic Karma:** where there no consciousness of consequences, being very selfish and possible violent or malevolent

And note here that the significant factors are attachment and selfishness meaning that the keys to not accrue further karma through our thoughts and actions are non-attachment and selflessness!

It may be surprising to know that today much of the world's population still believe in the Law of the Karma, however simplistically, and certainly even in our society the word 'Karma' has become part of common language. [See Brihadaranyaka Upanishad page 114 v5 to v7]

The Wheel of Samsara: 'The cycle of rebirth, life and death'.

As long as there are things to be experienced, or you could say to be learnt, we continue to be reborn. We are kept on the Wheel of Samsara for as long as we have unfulfilled kamas (desires) "but not those who are free from desire; they are free because all their desires have found fulfillment in the Self." Brihadaranyaka v6. The mechanism though which we are reborn is known as the Law of Reincarnation.

The Law of Reincarnation

It is perhaps most valuable to initially explore this law in terms of the koshas as they are linked to the Sharira or three bodies. We are told at death the physical body (**Sthula Sharira**) is destroyed returning to its constituent parts. The astral or subtle body (**Sukshma Sharira**) containing the pranamayakosha, manomayakosha and lower vijnamayakosha (i.e. forces of the personality) functions for a while just as in our dream state, and eventually all of the unfulfilled kamas or desires still needing expression are withdrawn into the causal body (**Karana Sharira**).

The Karana Sharira or causal body is the unmanifested form of the subtle body existing as a formless state of awareness. It does not live or die but holds our deepest life thoughts & perceptions, our vasanas (traits which are collections of samskaras), founded upon our kamas or desires. Once revealed these lead us to another birth where the causal body creates a new astral body, which creates a new physical body, i.e. we continue within the Cycle of Samsara.

[See Brihadaranyaka Upanishad page 114 v1 to 4]

We also find reference to the Law of Reincarnation in the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 2:

"12. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist. 13. As the same person Inhabits the body though childhood, youth, and old age, so too at the time of death he attains another body. The wise are not deluded by these changes.

14. When the senses contact sense objects, a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These experiences are fleeting; they come and go. Bear them patiently, Arjuna. 15. Those who are not affected by these changes, who are the same in pleasure and pain, are truly wise and fit for immortality. Assert your strength and realize this!

16. The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. Those who have seen the boundary between these two have attained the end of all knowledge. 17. Realize

that which pervades the universe and is indestructible; no power can affect this unchanging, imperishable reality. 18. The body is mortal, but he who dwells in the body is immortal and immeasurable. Therefore, Arjuna, fight in this battle.

19. One man believes he is the slayer, another believes he is slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither the slayer nor slain. 20. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed, you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. 21. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay and cause another to slay?

22. As a man abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the Self, who lives within.

23. The Self cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire; water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it. 24. The Self cannot be pierced or burned, made wet or dry. It is everlasting and infinite, standing on the motionless foundations of eternity. 25. The Self is unmanifested, beyond all thought, beyond all change. Knowing this, you should not grieve.

26. O mighty Arjuna, even if you believe the Self to be subject to birth and death, you should not grieve. 27. Death is inevitable for the living; birth is inevitable for the dead. Since these are unavoidable, you should not sorrow. 28. Every creature is unmanifested at first and then attains manifestation. When its end has come, it once again becomes unmanifested. What is there to lament in this?

Bhagavad Gita Chapter Three:

“17. But those who realize the Self are always satisfied. Having found the source of joy and fulfilment, they no longer seek happiness from the external world, 18. They have nothing to gain or lose by any action; neither people nor things can affect their security.”

Bibliography

Easwaran, E, The Bhagavad Gita, 2007 2nd Edition, Nilgiri Press: Ca
Easwaran, E, The Upanishads, 2007 2nd Edition, Nilgiri Press: Ca

For further reading on these subjects see:

The entire Brihadaranyaka Upanishad
The Bhagavad Gita: Chapters 2, 3 and 4