
Karma: The Theory of Cause & Effect

Karma is a central tenet in Hinduism. It forms one of the prescribed paths / methods whereby one can gain elevation and even moksha (liberation) through the performance of action. In its definition it is more than just “action”, for karma also implies the reactions which would result as a consequence of carrying out a given action or thought (which forms an integral part of the action). The repercussions of actions are not necessarily limited to a single lifetime, but are said to adhere until a suitable time when an individual is in a position to “pay back” (see later).

The law of Karma is therefore sometimes stated as “What you sow so shall you reap”.

“He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is wise among men; he is a yogi, who has performed all actions”.

Chapter 4 (Jnana-Karma-Samnyasa-Yoga), sloka 18

Here in the dialogue between Arjun and Lord Shri Krishna, the Lord addresses the complexities surrounding the nature of action and the apparent paradox which exists around it. Lord Shri Krishna also defines the word “Yogi” as it refers to action and how it would relate to a man performing his prescribed Karma perfectly without attachment – “Karma Yogi”.

With the “reintroduction” of the theory of Karma in the Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, Bhagvan Shri Krishna is introducing the philosophy of action and its means where an ordinary man can live his daily life and activities and yet still attain the highest goals. The Lord begins to instruct Arjun in the way of Action as a means of liberation and to realise its end results as the same as those attained through Knowledge (“Jnana”), Devotion (“Bhakti”) or Renunciation (“Sanyas”).

The state reached by the Jnanis is also reached by Karma Yogis. He sees who sees Jnana and Karma Yoga as one.

Chapter 5 (Sanyas Yoga), sloka 5

Also,

Better indeed is knowledge that (formal) Abhyas; better than knowledge is meditation; better than meditation is the renunciation of the fruits of action; peace immediately follows renunciation.

Chapter 12 (Bhakti Yoga), sloka 12

Paradoxical View of Action

“Inaction in action” introduces the idea that although an individual performs actions (relating to both mental as well as physical), he can be free from the results of those actions on the proviso that one does not lust, strive or hanker after its results. The “inaction” thus refers to the non attachment to the outcome which results through the physical or mental actions that are performed.

Having abandoned attachment to the fruits of action, ever content, depending on nothing, though engaged in karma, verily he does nothing.

Chapter 4 (Jnana-Karma-Samnyasa-Yoga), sloka 20

On a deeper level the line also implies the subtle relationship of the physical body and the “Atma”. The Atma, changeless, eternal and untouched remains independent of the body and is just a silent witness to the actions which are performed by the mind and body. Thus the Atma remains action less (“inaction”) and only an observer even when the physical body carries out actions. It is only as a result of the mind identifying with the body that the Atma becomes shrouded and veiled.

In the same line **“action in inaction”** refers to motivated deeds and Lord Shri Krishna thus implies that even if no bodily action is carried out (inaction), it is still regarded as action where mental thoughts direct and desire the fruits and end results of deeds that are carried out. In any case even the act or remaining stationary still requires action, for the action in this case is the act of remaining still.

In stating so, there is a subtle indication that the mind is at the centre of the activity. It is irrespective of whether the body carries out physical actions or remains motionless, karmic consequences will be determined not just by the action carried out, but also by the underlying desire and motives of the doer.

The word attachment or desire is not used in this verse (although introduced in later verses of the Gita) and more implicitly neither is the use of words which describe action as “good” or “bad”. Instead the motive is highlighted as well as the mind-intention of the doer, for in the end it is really the mind which determines the actions of the physical body.

“Action in inaction” can also signify that while the spiritual man is aloof, acting for God, he is not working mechanically like a robot, but is carefully proceeding with the business at hand even while he inwardly disowns the fruits of his actions.

How the Wise Performs Action

It is then obvious from the above that what constitutes action without further karmic repercussions is motiveless action – “Niskamkarma” . The Lord thus appears to describes a man “wise” who is able to recognise the subtleties of action as well as approach action and duty in a way which has no self motive i.e. is surrendered and done as an act of sacrifice for the sake of the Lord (yagna).

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you gift away, whatever austerity you practice, O Kaunteya, do it as an offering to Me.

Chapter 9 (Rajvidya-Rajaguhya Yoga), sloka 27

Bhagvan Shri Krishna goes to the extent of explaining that even if He (God) stopped performing action, then the whole of creation would full into confusion and all beings suffer.

These worlds would perish if I did not do action; I should be the cause of confusion of species and I should destroy these beings

Chapter 3 (Karma Yoga), sloka 24

Karma Yogi – The One who has Performed (Performs) All Actions

Bhagvan Shri Krishna then concludes this shloka by indicating that he is a “Yogi” who has performed all his actions.

As opposed to instructing Arjun to flee the battlefield, the Lord reminds Arjun of his Kshatria duties and wills him on to act. That is to say, not flee and avoid action by renouncing the world as Arjun was hinting in chapter one, but to act and carry out his ordained dharma.

It is interesting to see how the Lord uses the word “Yogi”, which usually congers up images of a meditating saint or aesthetic. Here the yogi is hinted as one who disinterestedly plays in the dream drama of life just to please God – hence he (yogi) is really inactive in action.

It is well known that Hindu philosophy, which believes in life after death, holds the doctrine that if the karma of an individual is good enough, the next birth will be rewarding, and if not, the person may actually devolve and degenerate into a lower life form. In order to achieve good karma it is important to live life according to “dharma”, which loosely translated means correct, right or moral conduct.

According to the ways of life chosen by a person, his karma can be classified into three kinds:

“*Satvik Karma*”, action which is without attachment, selfless and for the benefit of others;

“*Rajasik karma*”, action which is selfish where the focus is on gains for oneself;

“*Tamasik Karma*”, action which is undertaken without heed to consequences, and is supremely selfish and savage.

The nature of an individual’s karma will therefore determine his situation in the current as well as birth in the next life.

As indicated in the initial paragraph and above, the law of karma is binding. Although not directly indicated in the passages of the Gita itself, scholars classify karma into three types:

Sanchit Karma – those actions that yield fruit in distant births

Kriyaman (Agami) Karma – those actions which bear consequences in this or near births

Prarabdha Karma – fruits which yield in the present birth due to past life karma

Although the above is not directly mentioned in the Gita, the “Gita Mahatmay” (Greatness of the Gita) refers to “Prarabdha Karma”, indirectly implying the existence of the other two types and the following story (possibly an extrapolation from the Mahabharat) beautifully describes the working of the above:

At the end of the epic war of the Mahabharata, Dhritarashtra had become very upset, and fell in a state of shock of losing all his 100 sons. In his plight he then addressed Lord Shri Krishna and asked him:

"I have done nothing wrong in my life to get such harsh a punishment yet not even a single son of mine lives today. What can be more shocking for a father and why did this happen to me?"

The Lord explained and took the King back in time to about 70 births. Here the King was a hunter and had once trapped a 100 young offspring as well as some adult birds on a tree with a net. He then set the net on fire, which blinded some of the fleeing birds as well as burning to death the 100 chicks which could not yet fly. Lord Shri Krishna then advised Dhritarashtra, "the law has paid back in a just manner by taking away 100 sons from you, this being the result of your karma, 70 births back".

The King then asked "then why did it wait for 70 long births, why didn't it punish me in the next birth straightway?"

Lord Shri Krishna replied "the law is fair and just too... it waited for you to carry out good deeds, and accumulate good fortune to be blessed enough to have a 100 sons in the first place! Once you had accumulated enough good karma, and got 100 sons in this birth, the law which was waiting, matured, and paid you back."

Although elements of karmic law are seen in other religions, they tend to exist in simple forms of instructions such as "thou shall not steal" and the results of these contrary actions are usually implied indicating that something bad shall happen if the commandment was to be broken.

On the other hand, the theory of karma as is laid out in the Bhagavat Gita and Upanishadic teachings; clearly outline the nature of the karma and how actions can be woven into everyday life without incurring reactions or repercussions for present and future lives.

It provides knowledge for a harmonious lifestyle and a means whereby the individual can realise his true identity and unity with the Supreme Being.