



the VEDANTA *Kyokai*

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

Monthly Calendar

• Birthdays •

Swami Subodhananda
Thursday, Nov 02

Swami Vijnanananda
Saturday, Nov 04

• Shimbashi Talk •

Saturday, Nov 4 - 2 p.m.

Discussion on the
Bhagavad Gita

Shimbashi-Ekimae Bld.2, 9FL,
Shimbashi Station - Ginza Exit

• Kyokai Events •

NOVEMBER RETREAT

Sunday, October 19, 11 a.m.
All are cordially invited.

AKHANDA JAPAM
(continuous spiritual practice)

Sunday, Nov 26, 5 am to 8 pm
(sign-up at November Retreat)



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"Fire has no definite shape, but as glowing embers it assumes different forms. Thus the formless fire is seen as endowed with forms. Similarly, the formless God invests Himself with definite forms." ... Sri Ramakrishna

"Fire teaches many a lesson to everyone who contemplates its beams with an enquiring mind." ... Zarathushtra (Zoroaster)

OCTOBER RETREAT

Karma and its Effects

A talk by Swami Medhasananda

Today we shall discuss different aspects of a very important topic, Karma and its Effects. Karma in Japanese is 'hataraki' or 'work' because we are all doing karma either consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or involuntarily.

What Does Karma Mean?

Actually, whatever we do with the help of our organs, external and internal is karma. There are five senses of knowledge and five senses of work or action. The senses of knowledge are the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue and the skin. The senses of action are the hands, feet, speech, the organ of excretion and the organ of generation. Whatever one does with the help of these organs is work or action.

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There are also internal organs including the mind, ego, intelligence and memory. The mind plans and proposes, shall I do this or shall I do that? The intelligence is the determining faculty that decides whether or not to do something. Then whatever we do or think is stored in our memory. The ego is, of course, the feeling of I-ness or my-ness. Therefore if we think, if we feel, if we imagine, if we remember, and if there is ego, or the sense that I am doing this, this is mine, these internal functions are all also work.

According to Hindu scripture the idea of work is very, very comprehensive. Today we shall discuss the laws and effects of karma. This is very important because we are all concerned with the different aspects of karma and its effects.

Three Purposes of Work and Classes of Worker

There are three purposes of work. Ordinary work, the work by which we maintain our day to day life, our enjoyments; the secular aspects of life. Here the main concern is the individual's own interests, his family and friends. Then there is a higher purpose or type of work where one works for society, country and humanity; unselfish work. Then there is spiritual purpose; when one works for the service of God – when one works for salvation and freedom.

There are also three classes of worker. There is the efficient worker; he works both efficiently and sincerely, but the efficient worker is mostly concerned with individual or selfish work. Then there is the noble worker; he works in the service of others, for society, humanity, etc. While he is also an efficient worker, he works for the benefit of others. His work is noble. Then there is the spiritual worker; he works for spiritual realization.

The important thing is not what kind of work we are doing, but with what attitude we are working and with what purpose we are doing our work. This determines what kind of worker we are. In the Mahabharata there is a story of a housewife and meat-seller who, though doing very insignificant household chores and sales activities in a less than respectable trade, both realized the truth. We see here that it is not the type of work

which is important, but with what motivation, what purpose one is working.

What is the method of the spiritual worker? One is the jnana approach through knowledge and the other is the bhakti approach through devotion. The approach through knowledge is that whatever one does or thinks, he discriminates that he is not the doer, that his internal and external senses are doing the work. He is not attached to the work. He is not identifying himself with the world and the work, but with the Atman. According to the Bhagavad Gita one cannot live a single moment without work such as breathing, even the blinking of the eyes and dreams are work. The jnana yogi does not identify himself with the activity or work, but with the Supreme Reality, and through this path attains spiritual realization. While the bhakti or devotion approach is that whatever is done by the organs and senses is done in pleasing the Lord. Work to him is worship. Whatever he does, he offers the result of these works to the Lord. If one works in the spirit of devotion or in the attitude of detachment, one reaches spiritual realization.

The Laws of Cause and Effect

Karma presupposes the doctrine of repeated births and deaths. If we believe in the law of cause and effect, then we have to also accept the doctrine or theory of repeated births and deaths. Each cause must have an effect, that effect in its turn is a cause. When there is karma there is the effect of that karma and this effect creates yet another karma.

What is the connection between karma and rebirth? We sometimes witness a person leading a virtuous and moral life, helping others, yet he suffers in many ways throughout his lifetime. In another example we see a person living an immoral life, committing many wrongs, even crimes, but he lives very comfortably, even luxuriously. But the law is that if one does something wrong he must suffer the consequences, and if one does something good he must enjoy the good results of that karma. In such cases where is the effect? If we realize that everything does not end with the end of this lifetime, that there will be a next life, then we see that the person who committed wrong will suffer in his next life. Likewise, the person who has done much good will

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surely enjoy good results in his next life.

The Giver of Karma

Who then is the giver of the effects of karma? Who keeps the very complicated accounts of karma and its effects? Well, it is not any accountant of a multinational company. According to Hinduism it is God who is the giver of the results of one's karma. He never misses or makes a mistake in keeping this account of our karma and giving the results. His computer is much more efficient than any we make on this earth. I will never suffer or enjoy because of another's karma, I will only suffer or enjoy as a result of my own karma. God is very, very accurate in this. Whatever we do, we will reap the results either in this life or another life.

This is a very interesting aspect of Hindu philosophy we should all become very familiar with. We don't find such ideas in Christian or Islamic philosophy, and only some aspects of the laws of karma in Buddhism, which is largely based on Hinduism. In fact the words karma, as a noun, and karmic, as an adjective, have found their way into the English vocabulary since there is no effective English-language translation to describe its many complicated aspects and depth of meaning.

There are three types of karma. First is sanchita karma; accumulated or stored-up karmic forces from the actions of one's past lives. Prarabdha karma are those karmic forces that are yielding results in this life. Prarabdha karma determines the present body, where I am born, how long I live, when I die, and the amount of sufferings or enjoyments in this life; it is the karma that is bearing fruit. The third is kriyamana or agami karma which are the results or fruits of works we are doing in this life. We may enjoy or suffer some of the results of kriyamana karma in this life, but some will also be added to sanchita or those stored-up karmic forces from past lives. Therefore, sanchita karma continues to accumulate.

Because of bad or good karma, we suffer or enjoy in this life. No one is worried about enjoyments because at that time one is happy, but everyone is worried about suffering. Especially when one realizes that his current sufferings are the results of actions in past lives that are

beyond his control now. Everyone wants to know how to face or reduce this suffering.

Strategies for Mitigating Karma

Knowledge is one factor; realizing we are working out our bad karma through suffering and knowing that whatever the Lord does, He does for our own good. We are suffering, but surely we are the children of God. There is some good purpose behind my sufferings. Therefore, faith in God is another factor. A third factor is in understanding that since we have this human body, there is no escape from mental and physical sufferings, it is very natural. As Sri Ramakrishna said, "When you live in the house, you must pay the taxes."

In other words, when you live in the house of this body you must its taxes. Nobody willingly or joyfully pays taxes, but they have to be paid. These taxes are our sufferings. If we remember these three points, we can face our sufferings with patience, forbearance and strength. This is very important. There is a Hindi saying in effect, "When in a human body we must suffer, but a man of knowledge suffers with knowledge. When a foolish man suffers, he only cries and cries."

Suffering can also be reduced through self-effort. If one has an illness, he may go to a doctor for proper medicine, diet and exercise. Following a prescribed regimen, over time one can often recover. Here the bad karma of the disease is reduced by self-effort. And finally, suffering can be reduced by taking refuge in God. Paraphrasing what Holy Mother said, "One's karma may determine that he receives a serious cut, but by God's grace he may receive only a pin-prick."

One can negate the effects of kriyamana and sanchita karma by spiritual realization. If we realize God, kriyamana and sanchita karma will no longer yield results. Why? Because karmic desire no longer exists, and without such desire there is no seed for a new birth. There are many, many accumulated karmas from so many past lives that must yield results in our repeated births. All these will cease if we just realize God.

A beautiful example has been given in Hinduism of a quiver full of arrows. One arrow has been shot, over

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• A Story to Remember •

The Seven-Day-Path to Enlightenment

A modern master described how the Buddha had encouraged his monks by stating that those who practiced diligently would surely be enlightened in seven days or, if not in seven days, then in seven months or seven years. A young American monk heard this and asked if it was still true. The master, Achaan Chah, promised that if the young monk was continuously mindful without break for only seven days, he would be enlightened.

Excitedly the young monk started his seven days, only to be lost in forgetfulness ten minutes later. Coming back to himself, he again started his seven days, only to become lost once more in mindless thought – perhaps about what he would do after his enlightenment. Again and again he began his seven days, and again and again he lost his continuity of mindfulness. A week later, he was not enlightened but had become very much aware of his habitual fantasies and wandering mind – a most instructive way to begin his practice on the Path to real awakening.

... Buddhist

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which the archer no longer has control; this is prarabdha karma already yielding results. The quiver contains more arrows which the archer may or may not shoot; these represent sanchita karma. By realizing God, it is like the archer not shooting any of the remaining arrows. In this connection, if one has realized God, what happens to his prarabdha karma, that which is already yielding results? He may continue to live, suffer and enjoy, but those sufferings or enjoyments will not affect him because he has already realized the truth. It can be compared to a moving car in which the engine has been turned off but the brakes have not been applied. It will only roll along on its own momentum before coming to a stop.

Doctrine of Karma and Rebirth

After death we may go to heaven or hell to suffer or enjoy according to our karma for some time, after which we take birth again as a result of our previous karma and our unfulfilled desires. Again, one's accumulated karma determines body, place of birth, life-

span, sufferings and enjoyments. If one committed a particularly heinous sin, this birth may even be of a sub-human species or animal. But eventually, he will again get a human body and another chance to free himself.

What are the differences in being born an animal, a human or a god; or heaven, hell and this earth? In heaven or hell one may only enjoy or suffer, but you cannot perform any new works. Animal beings, Gods in heaven, or those suffering in hell, none of these can attain liberation. Liberation is only possible through action on this earth. Here we see the major differences between other major religions of the world.

In Islam or Christianity there is either eternal heaven or eternal hell, your fate is sealed in this very life. Hinduism says that once the suffering of bad karma is exhausted, again we will get a chance at spiritual realization as a human being. I have heard from my brother monks in foreign lands stories of Catholic mothers who lost children before baptism was possible.

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As that doctrine states that one who is not baptized goes to eternal hell, such mothers suffer so. Hinduism says that one's span of life is determined by one's karma. So the short life that resulted is not the end, but will continue with a new birth. When approached, our monks assure such mothers that neither heaven nor hell are eternal and that a new life and chance will be given.

How Do We Know There Is Rebirth?

Is karma just a theory? Is it just some concoction of scripture? Or are there actual proofs to show there are rebirths and our karma determines our next birth? One great objection against this theory of rebirth is that we don't remember previous births. People claim that though we may not remember our hundreds of previous births, we at least should remember our last birth! Swami Vivekananda addressed this particular point by saying that we may remember very little of our infancy, but that doesn't mean we had no infancy and did not live out those days. The reality of something does not depend upon our memory of that reality. We don't remember our own birth, others inform us about that. We believe our birth happened without memory of that event, so memory is not the only proof of whether or not something happened.

The next argument is regarding instincts. People claim that instincts influence various thoughts and actions. Swami Vivekananda said such 'instincts' are only long-accumulated habits and tendencies. What we call instinctive behaviors are only habituated past-life behaviors.

Thirdly, there are yogis that can, indeed, remember past lives. In fact, anyone, not only a yogi, by following the disciplines described in the Patanjali Sutras can recall past lives. It's your choice whether or not you want to remember a past life. I, for one, do not want to know, because I'm already burdened with the memories of this present life! I don't want to add to that burden of memories. Just think of all those things that happened in this life that you would like to forget, think of the suffering in remembering the pleasant and unpleasant of past lives!

There are also people all over the world who remember past lives. Examples have been clearly recorded and investigated. The science of parapsychology is based on this study. It has been noted that past memories seem to fade as new memories are acquired in this life. As an example, I was traveling from New Delhi to Kolkata by train when I met a gentleman who was a teacher in one of our Ramakrishna Mission schools. Naturally, we began to chat and he mentioned that he had a daughter who could remember her previous life. At first the parents paid little attention to the child's comments regarding the place of her previous birth, the village and her relatives. Later, out of curiosity, they took the child to that location. There, the village, the house, and even some people she had described as previous relatives, all of these, everything, was as she had said.

I also read an interesting account on the topic of rebirth by a spiritual leader. In this rather shocking account, a school teacher suddenly began to suffer from leprosy. The general attitude of society is to look down upon lepers as those who must have committed great sins. This teacher, of course, had to give up his work and, very saddened, he went to a Shiva temple and prayed for understanding and guidance. Later, in a dream, Shiva appeared and told him he had kicked his mother in his previous birth and as a result he was to suffer this disease. Again he prayed to Shiva and asked how this punishment may be alleviated. Again Shiva answered saying that his mother had been born as a cow in certain village. This tells us that the mother must have committed some serious error as well! Anyway, Shiva described the location and cowshed and said that if he could please that cow, the disease would be cured. The teacher found the owner of the cowshed and explained his plight. On being approached by the teacher, the cow, normally calm and quiet,

• Thought of the Month •

Character is the sum total of all our everyday choices ... anonymous

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turned to attack him. The teacher realized that there must, in fact, be some connection between them. Without fear or hesitation and with great patience the teacher was gradually able to feed and groom the cow. The cow in turn became pleased with him and began licking his sores. This cured him.

Another example of karma determining our births can be witnessed in many families. Children of the same parents, the same upbringing and lifestyles display such vastly differing talents and tendencies. Theories of genes, heredity or environment cannot begin to explain these differences. The theory of karma, however, can explain this.

There is one exception to the laws of karma, and that is an incarnation of God. In these cases there is no prarabdha karma, no sanchita karma, and no kriyama karma. He is born of His sweet will with the help of His inscrutable Maya. He carries out His mission on the earth and then departs.

Fatalism and the Law of Karma

The question is often asked whether the karma of our previous births determines our present life. Are all the events in this life predestined, preordained and only a matter of fate? If so, where is the role of self-effort or self-initiative? Where, then, is the grace of God?

Hinduism says no. Previous karma is but one of the driving forces of this life. There are also the impacts of one's ancestors, one's environment, personal-initiative, and the grace of God. These all combine to determine the course of one's life. As Swami Vivekananda would advise, if you are suffering the results of bad karma, simply do good and change the course of your life.

What should our attitude towards the suffering of others be? If we see that someone is suffering should we then think that he is suffering from his own bad karma and be indifferent to his suffering? No, because God has placed the virtue of compassion in our hearts. We should show compassion and try to help that person as far as possible by our means, otherwise we are creating our own bad karma.

In this connection, let me tell you about an incident that happened in India. In the 1930s there was very serious earthquake and many people were killed. At that time a great political leader said that this was a result of karmaphala (fruit of action). This comment was not appreciated by Swami Akhandanandaji, then president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, who said that rather than issue this kind of unhelpful and unkind comment, all effort should be given to helping and serving those that are suffering.

The Law of Karma and Liberation

If we have to take birth again and again as a result of our karma, how then is liberation possible? As mentioned before, rather than an eternal hell or eternal heaven, Hinduism believes that all will eventually be liberated. The cycle of birth and death will end with liberation, the main factor resulting in rebirth is desire. When there is no more desire, when all this repeated joy and suffering finally have no meaning or appeal, we will seek an escape velocity. When one has that strong urge for freedom one begins on the path of liberation. How? By working through one's inevitable bad karma; by ceasing actions that create new bad karma; by neutralizing one's bad karma with good works; by giving up all desire for enjoyment; by surrendering all the results of one's actions to God; and finally, by dependence on the grace of God.

These are all necessary for liberation from repeated births and deaths; liberation from repeated joys and sufferings. This will take place in everyone's life, if not in this very life, then in some future life. Hinduism tells us that this must take place, that this will take place, in everyone's life. It depends on us, whether or not we want to accelerate the process. And we can accelerate the course of our liberation by our own initiative and by depending upon God. •

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