

Opinion/Viewpoint

## Karma as a Non-religious Scientific Concept

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The concept of Karma is very practical, useful, and empowering concept, though it is also widely misunderstood. One common misunderstanding is that it is a religious concept belonging to Hindu religion. However, the perspective that Karma is actually a scientific concept needs to be recognized. To understand its scientific basis, we have to understand how the concept of Karma was originally developed.

Ancient thinkers and philosophers in India came up with this concept, most likely, to explain the seemingly inexplicable happenings in human life. In order to understand how this happened, we have to transport ourselves back in time to before 1500 BCE. Ancient humans observed that every action results in a corresponding outcome, conceptually similar to Newton's third law of motion – namely, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction [1]. This was evident from the day-to-day happenings in their lives. Some of these outcomes could be easily explained as to why they happened in reference to immediate past actions. For example, if a person ate more than his gastric capacity, he would vomit soon after eating. So, his vomiting would be easily explained as a result of overeating.

But some events happened which could not be explained when they looked at immediate past behaviors but could be explained when they looked at recent past actions. For example, if a person vomited today, they did not find anything in his same-day actions that could cause him to vomit. But when they looked at his behaviors in the previous couple of days, they may find that the person ate food that had gone bad because it was stale, contaminated, or spoiled. So, previous action of two days ago could explain today's outcome of vomiting. Generally, food poisoning due to eating spoilt or contaminated food takes several hours to show its effect because the bacteria contaminating the food need several hours to release enough toxins that cause vomiting or other problems.

And sometimes things happened which could not be explained even when they looked at recent past behaviors. For example, if a person vomited today and they looked at his actions from the recent past, they did not find anything that could cause vomiting. However, if they looked at his behaviors over the

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last six months to a year, they may find that the person was eating a particular poisonous herb in small quantities for a long period which slowly accumulated in his body and ultimately lead to vomiting. Thus, his behaviors over the past one year could explain today's outcome of vomiting.

Thus, commonly the current happenings could be explained as they expanded their time horizon. For example, if a person develops clogged arteries of the heart, that did not happen because the person ate fatty foods and did not engage in any physical exercise for the past one week or one month or even one year. But it can happen because of lifestyle habits for the last 10 or 20 or even 30 years. This is because the process of clogging of arteries is very slow and it generally takes several years to develop to a level where it can cause a heart attack or other physical problems.

But sometimes it so happened that the current event could not be explained even if they looked at an entire lifetime of behaviors. For example, if a person developed cancer of the stomach, they could not explain it by his behavior in this life. Somebody may think that this person ate too much spicy food but then there are thousands of other people who ate similarly, if not more, spicy foods but they did not develop stomach cancer. So most likely there were some behaviors or actions by that person before his current life in his previous life which are contributing to the outcome of cancer in this life. To refer to those actions done in the previous life and to distinguish them from the actions done in this life, they coined the term 'Karma'. Thus, the word Karma helped in two ways: First, whenever they used the word Karma, it automatically meant the actions undertaken in a previous life. Secondly, this word helped in the communication process. For example, instead of saying "actions done in a previous life" they simply had to use only one word 'Karma'. Going back to our example of cancer, you may ask how did the past Karmas done in a previous life contribute to cancer in this life? We will soon come back to this question, but first, those scientists who remain unconvinced about transmigration of the soul across multiple lifetimes may need to seriously consider their position based on the following statements:

Plotinus (AD 205-270) has this to say about transmigration of the soul, *"The human soul is part of the world soul. It turned towards matter and fell from the spiritual state. It must struggle to free itself from the bondage of matter. If it fails, it enters other bodies after death. It passes through a series of births and deaths until it is entirely freed of all material impurity. When purification is attained through various forms of discipline, the soul unites with the world soul and ultimately with the God-head."*

Even the original Bible contained several thoughts and passages on reincarnation and transmigration of the soul. But Christian theologian leaders who met in A.D. 543, at the Quincentennial Council of Christianity in Constantinople, decided to expunge them from the Bible with the following injunction, *"If anyone maintains the legendary pre-existence of souls and the monstrous idea of restitution, let him be anathema."* Such excised passages are still preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library in Rome and may become available to authorized Biblical scholars.

Thomas Huxley, (1825-1895), a relatively modern scholar, has made the following observations on this theme, *"every sentient being is reaping what it has sown, if not in this life then in one or other of the infinite series of antecedent existence of itself..... like the theory of evolution, it is based on reality."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), another great American thinker, has said, *"There are stairs below us and stairs above..."*, whereas Walt Whitman Jr. (1819-1892) also comments, *"No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before."* The rhymes of a famous English poet, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) are often quoted:

*"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's staff  
Hath had elsewhere its setting....."*

An ancient Iranian poet, Maulana Rumi, who was the disciple of his great master, Shams-i-Tabrīzī or Shams al-Din Mohammad (1185–1248), is considered a great Sufi saint of Islam and his verses are found in many books on Sufi thought and mysticism:

*“I died as mineral and became a plant  
I died as plant and rose to be animal  
I died as animal and I was man  
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?  
Yet, once more I shall die as man to soar  
With angels blessed, but even from angelhood I must pass on  
All except God doth perish.  
When I have sacrificed my angelhood  
I shall become what no mind ever conceived  
Oh! let me not exist. For non-existence proclaims in organ tones  
To HIM we shall return.”*

Scientific proof for transmigration of the soul has been amply demonstrated through the meticulous research observations of a well-known psychotherapist, Dr. Brian Weiss, Chairman Emeritus of Psychiatry at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami. He wrote several books titled: *“Many Lives, Many Masters”*; *“Same Soul, Many Bodies”*; *“Only Love is Real”*; and *“Through Time Into Healing”*. Similar observations were corroborated by several modern scientists in our current times, eliminating the last vestiges of doubt or dogma related to transmigration of the soul.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand that our past Karmas determine the parents assigned to us in this life because we are born to those persons with whom we have a lot of Karmas in common as explained in Karmic Law #33 [see ref. 2]. Since we inherit our genes from our parents, therefore if we could inherit a gene with stomach cancer susceptibility, then we are more likely to develop stomach cancer in this life if we eat spicy foods for a long time. Thus, the occurrence of stomach cancer in this life, which could not be explained even when we looked at lifelong behaviors in this life, was explained when we looked at the actions or Karmas done in a previous life. This is an example of how, when we broaden our time horizon enough, we can get closer to the truth.

The concept of Karma was developed and introduced in the thought process thousands of years ago in India and since then it has been able to explain the seemingly inexplicable happenings in the lives of millions of people and often alleviate their mental stress and agony. When we look at how this concept was developed in a logical manner, a few observations are worth mentioning:

1. The concept of Karma was developed by the scholarly philosophers and thinkers in ancient times and not by religious or spiritual leaders. Thus, the concept of Karma is originally a scholarly concept and not a religious or spiritual concept. But later on, it was presented as a religious or spiritual concept, resulting in the widely-held misconception. Since this concept originated in India and *Sanathana Dharma* was the predominant religion in India at that time, so these thinkers and philosophers happened to follow the most prevalent religion. People worldwide now think that Karma is a Hindu concept and it belongs to Hindu religion which is not correct.
2. The concept of Karma is not an empirical concept, and it was not empirically conceived by a random person without any logic or reasoning. As explained above, it was developed after rigorous observation and scientific thinking by the most brilliant thinkers of that time. Thus, it is a rigorous scientific concept, in the strictest sense of that term. By the term “scientific”, I mean systematic, organized, logical, and open-minded which meets the most rigorous definition of “scientific” in the present times.

3. The concept of Karma developed thousands of years ago has helped to alleviate the distress and mental agony of millions of people by providing them a logical explanation for the problematic happenings in their lives which cannot be explained by any other means. Some examples of these problematic events can be illustrated in the following questions:
- a. Why does one newborn child have heart disease at birth while another child does not?
  - b. Why does a particular treatment work for one patient but not for another patient with the same problem?
  - c. Why is there so much inequality in the world, such as disparity between the rich and the poor?
  - d. Why is it that some people who are doing bad things like cheating and lying all the time are flourishing and good people who are always helpful to others and are honest are doing poorly?

As described before [3], these questions are not meant to discourage the reader to be resigned to one's so-called fate, because in fact, according to the laws of Karma, we all have the ability to improve, or perhaps even eradicate the consequences of our past Karmas. This is the empowering aspect of Karma.

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