

Theory of Karma

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Jain religion is one of the ancient religions of India and has a lot of material devoted to the theory of karma in its holy scriptures just as some of the other religions do. I hope that the people belonging to faiths other than Jainism would find some ideas in this article close to those preached by their own saints and consider using them in their daily lives. Upon study and reflection, many of us would conclude that the Theory of Karma does have relevance even in to-day's world.

All of us have heard the saying 'As you sow, so you reap'-. Several eastern religions have expressed the same idea in different ways. In any case, I think this simple saying contains the essence of human wisdom. Basically it implies a strong cause/effect relationship. And it is the same cause and effect relationship on which the scientific and technological world is based. The question then is: If the cause and effect relationship is so powerful in the material world we live in, why should it not be just as powerful in the spiritual world? If we accept this line of reasoning, the Theory of Karma will be easier to accept because it is nothing but a cause/effect spiritual phenomenon.

What is Karma ?

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word Karma is deeds, including thoughts and words. However, according to Jainism, Karmas are invisible, fine particles of matter prevailing all around us just like the air particles. Our souls attract these karmas through activities related to mind, body and speech. This means every time we get angry, we attract karmas, every time we kill some one, we attract karmas, every time we deceive someone or become greedy, we attract karmas. These karmas form layers upon layers over our souls and keep us from realizing our true potential.

As the theory goes, the true nature of soul is pure, crystal clear and full of true knowledge. However the karmas keep the soul away from the truth and make it go through the cycles of birth and death. A wordly soul remains under uncertain condition- at one moment it gets closer to the truth, the next moment it starts doubting it.

Strength and duration of the Karmic bonds (layers):

The strength and duration of karmic bonds are very much dependent on the intensity of our passions (kashayas). In other words, our motives at the time of performing any good or bad acts determine the strength and duration of the bondage of karma. Thus motive counts a lot in Jainism: two people performing similar activities could acquire karma in a completely different way. For example, a person killing a deer intentionally is producing a karmic bond much stronger than a person killing insects unintentionally while walking. Both involve an act of killing but the impact is substantially different with regard to the acquisition of karma.

Types of Karmas:

There are 8 different types of Karmas :

1. Knowledge-obscuring (Gyanavaraniya) Karma:

Gyan means knowledge. Varaniya means stoppage. This karma prevents the soul from acquiring true knowledge and keeps us ignorant just as a blindfold keeps us from seeing. How can we improve our lot unless we know what we are?

2. Perception-obscuring (Darshanavarniya) Karma:

Darshan means faith or perception. This karma prevents us from having a rational, common-sense approach towards our lives and surroundings.

3. Feeling-producing (Vedaniya) Karma:

This karma makes us experience either the sweetness of physical happiness or the bitterness of misery.

4. Deluding (Mohaneeya) Karma:

This karma, like too much alcohol, confuses all the human faculties and makes us forget what is right and what is wrong. It makes the souls bewildered and perplexed.

5. Life-span-determining (Ayu) Karma:

This karma determines the life spans of all living beings.

6. Physique-determining (Nam) Karma:

This karma determines the looks, skin, form etc. of the bodies of living beings.

7. Status-determining (Gotra) Karma:

This karma determines the family and status of our birth.

8. Obstructing (Antaraya) Karma:

This karma prevents us from doing a good deed or undoing a bad action when there is a desire to do it. For example, we may want to give donation to a charity but this karma might put obstacles in our path and stop us from doing so.

The Jain system has further sub-divided these eight karmas into 144 sub classes designed to account for almost every conceivable experience that a living being could have in a life time. All interactions between the worldly souls and other entities of the world are guided by these karmas. This is true of humans as well as other living beings. The same rules apply to all worldly souls. These karmas keep us trapped in the cycles of birth and death, happiness and unhappiness.

Is there a way out?

Jain religion is proactive in this area. It offers an excellent solution to rid one's soul of karmas. The solution lies in following this two step process: 1. Stoppage (Samvar) and 2. Shedding (Nirjara)

Samvar means stopping the inflow of karmas, Nirjara means getting rid of the past karmas with the practice of these virtues: Non-violence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya), Non-stealing (Achaura), Purity of body, mind and spirit (Brahmacharya), and Non-possessiveness (Aparigrah) and by using self-restraint and discipline in daily

lives.

By practicing these virtues, one can ultimately purge himself of the past karmas and stop the influx of the new ones and ultimately purify one's soul.

Is there anyway to validate this theory?

Since the subject falls in the area of spiritualism, the validity is rather difficult. We can only observe some concrete examples in day-to-living and establish some connection between cause and effect:

Looking at two extreme examples: lives of Nixon and Adolph Hitler seem to reinforce the karma theory. However direct correlation between evil deeds and agony (or the direct opposite of it) within the same life span is difficult to establish in many cases. If we believe in the life after death and believe that every one has to pay a price for his evil deeds either now or later, then karma theory holds good nicely. The theory does not seem to contradict our common sense; each person has to decide for himself and understand the real meaning of karma theory through study and experience.

Conclusions:

1. If the Cause and effect holds good in our daily material lives, then the theory of karma must hold good in our spiritual lives.
2. Motives count a lot in Jainism. Hence the very heavy emphasis on pure thoughts in this religion.
3. Karmas are formed by evil deeds/thoughts/words. They can be stopped by good conduct and proper mental activity. The karmic accounts can be settled by practicing the virtues of truth, non-violence, austerity, discipline and self sacrifice.