

Karma, Choice, and Consequence: A Psychological View from Indian Philosophy

Aishwarya Gandhe¹, Siri Chandana², Nigama Neligi³, Dr. K. Meenarani⁴

^{1,2,3}Student Bhavan's Vivekananda College of Science, Humanities and Commerce, Sanikpuri

⁴Assistant Professor Bhavan's Vivekananda College of Science, Humanities and Commerce, Sainikpuri

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ABSTRACT

In Indian philosophy, karma has two main uses: to encourage a person to act ethically and to provide a framework from which people view suffering/moral injustice.

Essentially, karma defines an individual's present and future experiences through good/bad actions or behaviors, due to the belief that whatever an individual does, whether on purpose or by accident (with no intention), will have consequences for that individual, not only in their current life but in future lives as well (by rebirth). "Karma" does not equate to "blind fate," rather karma promotes moral responsibility and agency (i.e., having the ability to choose), therefore all actions, not just physical, have some level of consequence.

Karma also serves as a psychological and experiential tool in linking intent/action with consequence, enhancing moral consciousness through self-evaluation, controlling emotions, etc. As such, karmic principles provide an important context through which an individual develops resilience, discipline, and responsibility in daily living.

This paper aims to explore karma from various contexts, including how different philosophies interpret karma (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), and how they relate psychologically and experientially.

Keywords: Karma, Ethics and Morals, Intent and Action, Psychological, Experiential, Principles, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism.

INTRODUCTION

Karma is an important aspect of Indian philosophy that is used to connect human intention, action, and the effects of those actions. Karma can be felt in a person's current lifetime, and also experience when rebirth occurs as well. It is comprised of three basic philosophies rooted in Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism based on moral responsibility, choice, and progression. In essence, a person's internal (psychological) condition connects and cooperates along with external conditions i.e. experiences and events. In this way, it can be said that the way a person behaves through their thoughts, actions, intentions and words will determine what they experience or how they experience things in life.

Karma can be thought of as a psychological "moral compass," helping guide people toward self-reflecting, regulating their feelings, and making good decisions (Buhler et al. 2000). The focus of Indian philosophy and the idea of cetana resonates deeply with actually-growing theories on cognitions, self-control, metacognition, and so forth. Therefore, both the concepts of karma and the principles associated with karma are relevant to spiritual conversations as well as modern psychology in terms of helping individuals develop and practice resilience, discipline, and heightened awareness of one's self by taking one's own intentions and consequences into account.

The purpose of this paper is to look at karma as an experience and a psychological concept within Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism highlighting their individual views and shared ethical foundations. The paper will connect ancient Indian philosophical ideas with concepts in contemporary psychological theory to show how karma functions as a personal system for moral growth and development for human beings..

Similarities and Distinctions:

Though metaphysically distinct in their descriptions of karma, all three traditions converge in their descriptions of the psychological effects of karma; Hinduism unifies it with concepts of morality (*dharma*) and religious release, Buddhism with mental intent and release, and Jainism with morality.

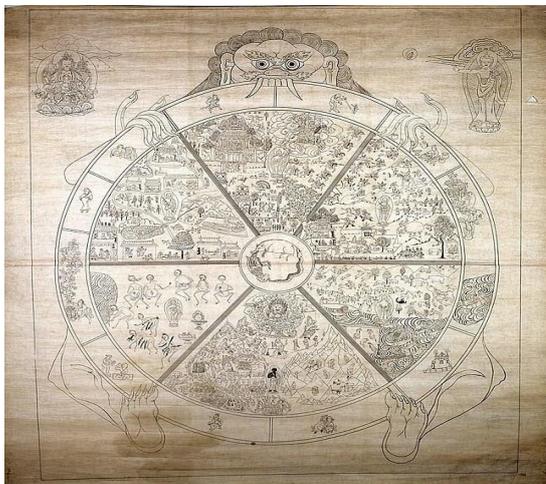
Despite these differences between the traditions, all the traditions emphasize that the essential meaning of karma is an experiential principle guiding moral decision and self-development. This uniformity between the traditions reveals that the essential function of karma was its psychological model for understanding ethics.

Karma as an Intrapersonal Moral Framework:

This emphasis on intention is highly applicable to recent psychological studies on moral cognition, as researchers have placed primary emphasis on intentionality. This connection of moral value to internal motivation rather than external actions promotes a sense of constant self-assessment and evaluation within an individual. This further promotes personal moral consciousness and ethical sensitivity through understanding mental and emotional states.

In a psychological sense, this intentionality promotes a form of metacognition, or thinking about how we think, that is necessary in ethical decision-making. Thus, a form of karma as a moral compass, acting through a form of intrapersonal regulation, becomes a conceptual framework.

The Knobe effect shows that people ascribe intentionality to harmful actions much more easily because of the influence of moral evaluations, and this encourages a consistent self-evaluation process similar to karmic introspection. This is where it underlines karma as an intrapersonal regulator since feelings of guilt or pride due to intentions are at the root of ethical sensitivity and do not rely on approval from others.



source: wikimedia commons - wheel of life, karmic cycle

Meta Thinking: Thinking about one's thinking develops ethical conscience, much like how karma is supposed to work in monitoring mind states for their moral tone. In support, available evidence indicates that metacognitive efficiency associates with greater moral courage and shrinks value-action gaps, which places karma as a metacognitive agent of self-regulation by nature. This would frame karma, in your paper, as promoting resilience through internal moral equilibrium, drawing from psychoanalytic views such as guilt via the superego.

Emotional Regulation:

Karmic Principles on Emotions:

Law of Intention (Cetana): A fundamental concept in both Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita, karma does not actually derive from an action itself but from an intention to perform the action, i.e., anger planted within an individual that matures into combat through prescience of outcomes.

Doctrine of Mental Kamma: In Buddhism's Abhidharma tradition, 89 forms of consciousness comprise 20 that are wholesome (e.g., equanimity and compassion) and 29 that are unwholesome (e.g., aversions and delusions). Control over the latter by mindfulness relieves impulsive patterns and can be related to the 'delayed gratification model' in the Marshmallow Test.

Jain Anekantavada and Non-Violence (Ahimsa): Jains divide karma into eight kinds: four kinds are harmcausing and are regulated by rigorous vows. Even the slightest emotions like greed need to be subdued for freedom.

Psychological Alignment:

These principles parallel the self-regulation theory that the "ability for future-oriented thinking (karmic foresight) suppresses impulsivity through activation of the prefrontal cortex, reducing the response of the amygdala." Buddhism's emphasis on mindfulness increases emotional intelligence directly and has been shown to correlate with reduced hostility/aggressiveness and increased self-containment in meditation practitioners.

Overview

This particular series of findings situates karma within a role that is more than simply a metaphysical construct; it locates it within a practical system of psychological integration that involves issues of ethical thought, emotional state, and experience. This analysis, through a series of interpretative lenses that embrace a range of fundamental belief systems within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, seeks to identify karmic principles within their role as a system of moral causality that promotes issues of agency, responsibility, and resilience.

Karma as Fatalism and Locus of Control:

Amongst the most relevant repercussions of this theory of karma is that it counters fatalism. Unlike fatalism, the principle of karma offers consolation because agency would bring relief, given that although past karma might set conditions, it is the present intentions that create the shape of the future—a sentiment that finds resonance in Bhagavad Gita's detached action, 2.47. Therefore, by understanding life circumstances as possibly partially under individual control, karmic philosophies promote active engagement with life challenges on a strictly ethical basis. One finds a balance in karma in terms of cause and effect combined with choice. This balance in karma makes it a liberating and empowering feature of life.

The Role of Meaning-Making in Psychological Adaptation:

The function of the concept of karma with regard to human understanding of suffering is also a very important psychological function. The function of providing a meaningful understanding of adversity and moral injustice is also closely in line with psychological understanding of the significance of narrative coherence with regard to mental health.

The comprehension of suffering as an integral part of a moral continuum enables an individual to place a situation in context without lapsing into helplessness or despair. Even though this comprehension does not eradicate or remove suffering, as a construct, it harnesses suffering as purposeful or redemptive, which adds to one's resilience and emotional toughness. However, it should also be acknowledged that there exists a danger of selfblame through the rigid application of these interpretations.

System of Moral Learning:

Similar to B.F. Skinner's idea of operant conditioning, "good" intentions provide a positive outcome for a future state (reinforcement) and strengthen ethical mind patterns, while negative urges lead to aversive loops (punishment) and eliminate "bad" habit loops. Regular mindful acts, as in Gita's concept of 'Nishkama Karma,' can develop automatics similar to Duhigg's idea of habit formation - cue: ethical dilemma, routine: restraint, reward: inner peace, even without conscious cues like Duhigg's idea of virtues such as compassion.

Despite obvious differences in doctrine, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism share common ground in their psychological implications about the value of karma. All three systems place strong emphasis on selfunderstanding, self-control, and ethical constraint, though in varying conceptual frameworks.

By serving as a common model in experiencing the world, karma mediates as much philosophy as it moves from abstraction to psychological fact. It is a universal concept, providing a cultural setting in character, decision, emotion, and life course.

FINDINGS

This demonstrates that karma is not an important metaphysical concept, but rather a psychologically operative model for regulating human conduct in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. As it is, all three faiths prioritize an intention-centric model to determine the consequences of any action, similar to contemporary psychological models of human morality in terms of internal drive as opposed to external outcome. This type of continuous monitoring and evaluation of ethical conduct, as well as an evaluation of a person's own mental and emotive state, serves as an example of an intrapersonal system as opposed to an interpersonal system of regulation.

The findings also suggest that there is a counter-discourse against fatalism within karmic philosophy, by its emphasis on the role of present action and decision-making. Though past action influences current circumstances, present decisions are decisive in relation to outcomes, securing the internal control dimension of a psychologically resilient coping response. The emphasis on duty and right action without determinism can be seen as promoting a non-fatalistic approach to conceptions of right action.

Moreover, the principles of karmas also perform an important role as an emotional control measure, as it prevents an impulsive emotional state as described above. These factors correspond to neuroscientific/psychological research on self-regulation's association with decreased emotional response patterns and increased moral consistency. A meaning-making aspect of karma is also highlighted as suffering is positioned on a continuum of morality, although it is also recognized in the findings as having the capacity for maladaptive self-blame if rigid application of karmas is employed. Ultimately, it is proposed in the findings that the contemporary significance of the concept of karma can be quantified as its psychological usefulness as a model of ethical learning, emotional control, and human morality.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an analysis of what is meant by the concept of karma as it is understood in psychological theory in Indian philosophical traditions, particularly in relation to its role in relation to decision-making, responsibility, etc. As has been made clear in this paper through comparative studies of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophies, it is evident that one of first things that karmic theory makes clear is that individuals in each of these three traditions have agency in creating their own present and future in accordance with their own thoughts, feelings, etc.

The psychological role of the phenomenon of karma lies in its function as a moral cognition tool that helps in emotional regulation and learning from experiences. The principle of "karmic causality" helps individuals cultivate reflection and ethical understanding by promoting responsible behavior out of fear of consequences attached to one's intentions or actions. The belief in the workings of karma helps individuals understand suffering and injustice in a meaningful way, acting as a buffer for resilience and adaptive coping while ensuring personal responsibility.

Furthermore, the research also points out that karmic principles remain highly applicable today, especially when it comes to issues concerning education, psychiatric health, justice, and ethical governance. Even though research has been carried out using a concept-based analysis, one would argue that these research findings serve as an anchor for further research that will investigate comparatively the psychological implications that karmic beliefs have on people from different ethnic backgrounds. Arguably, one would conclude that karma, according to Indian metaphysics, is interesting today from both an existential and psychological point of view.

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