



Karma Theory And Positive Psychology: An Overview

KEYWORDS

Karma, happiness, positive psychology, stress

Dr. Nidhi Chadha

Post Graduate Government College, Sector 11, Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to ascertain the importance of Eastern and Western concepts in reducing stress and consequently enhancing happiness and well-being in one's life. The focus of this paper is on Karma theory as described in Indian religious traditions and its meaning in relation to happiness. Firstly, as proposed in the Holy book Bhagavad Gita, that one should neither worry about one's 'past' nor 'future', rather should live in the 'present'. Secondly, it emphasized on work is worship and that only work come in our jurisdiction and not the result. The teachings and principles of Karma theory are therapeutic in nature and map similarity to quite an extent with Positive Psychology constructs. Thus, this study is in a growing line of research that attempts to draw relationships between core beliefs of Indian philosophy of Karma theory and happiness.

Introduction

Karma refers to a conceptual principle that originated in India, often descriptively called the principle of karma, sometimes as the karma theory or the law of karma (Potter, 1980). The earliest known occurrence of Karma in ancient Indian literature is in Rigveda, where it occurs 40 times in context of ritual or sacrificial acts. Karma, the Pali term, means the executed 'deed', 'work', 'action', or 'act', and also the 'object' and the 'intent'. Also, it alludes to the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual (cause) influence the future of that individual (effect). *Good intent and good deed contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deed contribute to bad karma and future suffering* (Halbfass, 2000; Lochtefeld, 2002)

Karma Theory and Religious Viewpoints

A notion regarding karma is demonstrated in the phrase "what goes around comes around" and karma theory is one of the distinguished features of Indian religions since thousands of years. Following are the perspectives on karma theory espoused by various religions.

Hinduism

The earliest Upanishads began with the questions about how and why man is born, and what happens after death. Over and over again, the chapters of Mahabharata recite the key postulates of karma theory. That is: intent and action (karma) has consequences; karma lingers and doesn't disappear; and, all positive or negative experiences in life require effort and intent (Long, 1980). For example: Happiness comes due to good actions, suffering results from evil actions, by actions, all things are obtained, by inaction, nothing whatsoever is enjoyed. If one's action bore no fruit, then everything would be of no avail, if the world worked from fate alone, it would be neutralized. —Mahabharata, *xiii.6.10 & 19* (Dutt, 1896).

Sikhism

Sikhism believes in the doctrine of- we harvest exactly what we sow; no less, no more. This infallible law of karma holds everyone responsible for what the person is or is going to be. Based on the total sum of past karma, some feel close to the Pure Being in this life and others feel separated. This is the Gurbani's (Sri Guru Granth Sahib) law of karma. Like other Indian and oriental schools of thought,

the Gurbani also accepts the doctrines of karma and reincarnation as the facts of nature.

Buddhism

Karma and *karmaphala* are fundamental concepts in Buddhism and these concepts explain how our intentional actions keep us tied to rebirth in *samsara* (Timme, 2006). In the Buddhist tradition, *karma* refers to actions drive by *intention*, a deed done deliberately through body, speech or mind, which leads to future consequences (Richard, 1997). The Buddhist teaching of Karma is not a rigid and mechanical process, but a flexible, fluid and dynamic process. There is no set linear relationship between a particular action and its results (David, 1975). The karmic effect of a deed is not determined solely by the deed itself, but also by the nature of the person who commits the deed, and by the circumstances in which it is committed (Thanissaro, 2010).

Jainism

In Jainism, "karma" conveys a totally different meaning from that commonly understood in Hindu philosophy and western civilization (Kuhn, 2004). In Jainism, karma is referred to as karmic dirt, as it consists of very subtle and microscopic particles (*puṅgava*) that pervade the entire universe. Jainism advocates that a soul's karma changes even with the thoughts, and not just the actions. Thus, to even think evil of someone would endure a *karma-bandha* or an increment in bad karma. For this reason, the Ratnatraya gives a very strong emphasis to *samyak dhyana* (rationality in thoughts) and "samyak darshan" (rationality in perception) and not just "samyak charitra" (rationality in conduct).

Taoism

The karma doctrine of Taoism developed in three stages (Kohn, 1998). In first stage, causality between actions and consequences was adopted, with supernatural beings keeping track of everyone's karma and assigning fate (*ming*). In second phase, transferability of karma ideas from Chinese Buddhism were expanded, and a transfer or inheritance of Karmic fate from ancestors to one's current life was introduced. In the third stage of karma doctrine development, ideas of rebirth based on karma were added. One could be reborn either as another human being or another animal, according to this belief.

Christianity

Mary Jo Meadow suggests karma is akin to "Christian notions of sin and its effects." (Mary Jo, 2007). She stated that the Christian teaching on Last Judgment according to one's charity is a teaching on karma (Mary Jo, 2007). Christianity also teaches morals such as reap what one sows (Galatians 6:7) and live by the sword, die by the sword (Matthew 26:52) (Chaudhuri, 2001). The concept of last judgment is considered different than karma, with karma as ongoing process that occurs every day in one's life, and last judgment in contrast being a one time review at the end of life.

Recently, Sri Ramana (2014) aptly assert about Karma theory that, when we do a karma, it does not yield its fruit immediately, because whatever we experience in our present life is predestined, being what God has selected from the large collection of fruits of our past karmas for us to experience in this lifetime. Hence the fruit of whatever fresh karma we do in any lifetime will not be experienced by us during that lifetime, but will be stored in order to be experienced in future lives. As karma is not conscious, it could not bear fruit except by the ordainment of God. That is, what fruit each karma should yield, and when and how that fruit should be experienced is determined only by God, because he alone can know the moral worth of each action and what fruit would be appropriate to it.

Karma Theory: Bhagavad Gita (East) meets Positive Psychology (West)

Positive psychology studies the factors and conditions leading to pleasurable and satisfying life. The correlation between karma theory and positive psychology revolves around the journey for an individual to discover the way to living a satisfying and rewarding life (Kumar & Kumar, 2013). *This journey is met with practical strategies to deal with life's stress to achieve the arrival at a state of virtuous happiness.* Understanding Karma yoga and its practice has a similar role that lead an individual towards work and leading to a satisfied life (Kumar & Kumar, 2013).

Bhagavad Gita is probably the first recorded evidence of crisis intervention psychotherapy. (Ahuja, 2002). Philosophical concepts of Gita's are Ishvara (The Supreme Controller), Jiva (Living beings/the soul), Prakrti (Matter), Karma (Action) and Kala (Time) (Prabhupada, 1972). Bhagavad Gita proposed that true enlightenment comes from growing beyond identification with the temporal ego and self. According to Krishna, the root of all suffering and discord is the agitation of the mind caused by a selfish desire. *The only way to quench the flame of desire is by simultaneously stilling the mind through self-discipline and engaging oneself in a higher form of activity.*

Karma-Yoga, the technique of performing action such that the soul of the doer is not bound by the results of the action, constitutes the Indian work ideal (Mulla & Krishnan, 2008). Karma-Yoga was found to be related to some dimensions of empathy. The findings indicated that Karma-Yoga is similar to altruism motivation in the Indian context. Individuals who are high on empathic concern and low on personal distress are more likely to take actions for the benefit of others rather than for their own benefit. *Therefore, the teachings of Karma theory follow closer to the concept of intrinsic motivation because it focuses more on the internal well-being. The focus is not on external awards for participating in the activity but rather internal satisfaction* (Kumar & Kumar, 2013).

Karma Theory: Management of Stress and Enhancement in Happiness

Stress, the major factor predisposing depression can be reduced just by overcoming anxiety related to our daily hassles. Management of stress may be a possible alternative to improve one's lifestyle and reducing mortality and morbidity in community. *Cutting down the worry (past) and result expectation (future) may be one of the positive factors to reduce anxiety. At the same time, good future planning (living in present) boosts up our spirits to perform good work up to the mark.* Recent trend is changing to the improvement of normal life to make it more fulfilling. *This was the basis of origin of positive psychology, which is a branch of psychology that "studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive"* (Compton, 2004).

Thus in nutshell it can be said that karma appears the differences in the birth of beings as high and low, happy and miserable. Depending on the difference in karma appears the difference in the individual features as being beautiful and ugly, high-born or low born. Depending on the difference in karma appears the difference in worldly conditions, such as gain and loss, blame and praise, happiness and misery. *The connection between our action and happiness show the need to be skilful (right deeds) in one's pursuit of happiness.* For happiness to last, one has to look for the ways that are harmless and that would enable one to be happy in the midst of aging, illness and death. *Therefore, when we cause pain or injury, we add to the karmic debt we carry into our future lives hence, building ground for - stress and when we give to others in a genuine way, we lighten our karmic load thus, paving way towards happiness and contentment in one's life.*

REFERENCES

1. Ahuja, N. (2002). *A Short Textbook of Psychiatry*. 5th ed. New Delhi: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers (P) Ltd.
2. Prabhupada, B.S. (1972). *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*. Bhaktivedanta. Veda-Base Network (ISKCON).
3. Chaudhuri, H. (2001). *Karma, rhythmic return to harmony*. The Meaning of Karma in Integral Philosophy, pp. 78 and 79.
4. Compton, W.C. (2004). *An Introduction to Positive Psychology*. Wadsworth Publishing; Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positive_psychology downloaded on 08.03.2010
5. David, K. (1975). *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, University of Hawaii Press
6. Dutt, M.N. (1896). *Vana Parva - in multivolume series: A prose English translation of the Mahabharata*, Elysium Press, pp 46-47.
7. Halbfass, W. (2000). *Karma und Wiedergeburt im indischen Denken*, Diederichs, München, Germany.
8. Kohn, L. (1998). *Steal holy food and come back as a Viper - Conceptions of Karma and Rebirth in Medieval Daoism, Early Medieval China*, 4, pp 1-48.
9. Kuhn, H. (2004). *Karma, the Mechanism*.
10. Kumar, A. & Kumar, S. (2013). Karma yoga: A path towards work in positive psychology. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, S150-S152. Doi:10.4103/0019-5545.105511.
11. Lochtefeld, J. (2002). *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Rosen Publishing, New York, ISBN 0-8239-2287-1, pp 351-352.
12. Long, J.B. (1980). *The concepts of human action and rebirth in the Mahabharata*, in Wendy D. O'Flaherty (1980), *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, University of California Press, Chapter 2, ISBN 978-0520039230.
13. Mary Jo, M. (2007). *Christian Insight Meditation*. Wisdom Publications Inc. p. 199. ISBN 9780861715268.
14. Mulla, Z. R., & Krishnan, V. R. (2008). Karma-Yoga, the Indian work ideal, and its relationship with empathy. *Psychology Developing Societies* 20 (1), 27-49.

15. Potter, K. (1980). In *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (O'Flaherty, Editor), University of California Press, ISBN 978-0520039230, pp 241-267.
16. Ramana, S. (2014). *Happiness of Being*. The philosophy and practice of the spiritual teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. Retrieved on 12 September 2014 at [www. Happinessofbeing.com](http://www.Happinessofbeing.com)
17. Richard F. G. (1997). *How Buddhism Began. The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
18. Thanissaro, B. (2010). *Wings to Awakening: Part I* (PDF), Metta Forest Monastery, Valley Center, CA
19. Timme, K.U. (2006), *Early Buddhist Theories of Action and Result: A Study of Karmaphalasambandha, Candrakirti's Prasannapada, verses 17.1-20*, Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, ISBN 3-902501-03-0 Gurbani.org