**Karma and Dharma: New Links in an Old Chain.**

**Authors:**

[Sharma, Arvind](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','ss~~AR%20%22Sharma%2C%20Arvind%22%7C%7Csl~~rl','');)1

**Source:**

[Tikkun (Duke University Press)](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','mdb~~a9h%7C%7Cjdb~~a9hjnh%7C%7Css~~JN%20%22Tikkun%20%28Duke%20University%20Press%29%22%7C%7Csl~~jh','');). May/Jun2008, Vol. 23 Issue 3, p14-15. 2p. 1 Black and White Photograph.

**Document Type:**

Article

**Subject Terms:**

\*[KARMA](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','ss~~DE%20%22KARMA%22%7C%7Csl~~rl','');)  
\*[DHARMA](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','ss~~DE%20%22DHARMA%22%7C%7Csl~~rl','');)  
\*[HINDUISM](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','ss~~DE%20%22HINDUISM%22%7C%7Csl~~rl','');)  
\*[HINDUS -- Conduct of life](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','ss~~DE%20%22HINDUS%20--%20Conduct%20of%20life%22%7C%7Csl~~rl','');)  
\*[HINDU philosophy](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','ss~~DE%20%22HINDU%20philosophy%22%7C%7Csl~~rl','');)

**Abstract:**

The article discusses the karma and dharma in Hinduism. It mentions that karma underlines the association between an action and its result. It notes that dharma concerns the course of moral action which supports a person's personal, professional, moral or religious integrity. It adds that in a dynamic world, the relation between karma and dharma within Hinduism has evolved into a forward-looking formulation.

**Author Affiliations:**

1Birks Professor of Comparative Religion, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

**Full Text Word Count:**

990

**ISSN:**

0887-9982

**DOI:**

10.1215/08879982-2008-3007

**Accession Number:**

**31946240**

 

Karma and Dharma: New Links in an Old Chain

**Full Text**

[Listen](https://app-na-readspeaker-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/cgi-bin/rsent?customerid=5845&lang=en_us&readid=rs_full_text_container_title&url=https%3A%2F%2Fweb-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org%2Fehost%2Fdetail%2Fdetail%3Fvid%3D0%26sid%3D79d4d1be-2667-463a-9d25-8e8d00e419e8%2540sessionmgr103%26bdata%3DJnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl&speedValue=medium&download=true&audiofilename=KarmaandDharmaNewLinks-SharmaArvind-20080501)                    

MOST PEOPLE IN THE WEST HAVE HEARD THE TERMS "KARMA" AND "dharma," but many associate them with a static reading of Hinduism. What's exciting today is that there is growing energy among Hindus for a renewal of these categories in ways that make Hinduism a less static religious tradition. Let me explain.

Karma and dharma constitute two key terms in Hindu religious and moral discourse. Both terms have multiple meanings and are virtually untranslatable, but it is possible to indicate the manner in which they orient our thinking in accordance with the concepts they encompass. The word karma is derived from a root that means "to act" and emphasizes the link between an action and its result. Some one-liners help highlight the concepts underlying karma: "One reaps as one sows" "What goes around comes around," "Life is the sum of our choices," or that "karma is unfinished business." The word dharma is derived from a root which means "to uphold" and so denotes the course of moral action which upholds our personal, professional, moral or religious integrity, as the case may be. The famous statement of Rabbi Zusya: "In the world to come I shall not be asked why I was not Moses. I shall be asked: Why I was not Zusya," captures one semantic flavor of the word dharma admirably.

The relation between karma and dharma within Hinduism is particularly fraught and possesses several dimensions, both historically and potentially. One way in which they are related in classical Hinduism is that our past karma determines our present station in life, for which a particular dharma or moral lifestyle is deemed appropriate. It is of course true that moral choices made in an earlier life are responsible for our present station in life, which decides our present dharma or web of duties, but classical Hinduism was backward-looking rather than forward-looking in this respect. It focused more on where we are and how we got there, than on where we can go from where we are now. In this respect, the response of classical Hinduism was conventional rather than creative, inasmuch as it encouraged us to perform our duty in the position we found ourselves in. Perhaps such an approach is to be expected in a society which tended to be static and in which the circumstance of birth determined the basic contours of one's life.

We now live, however, in a more dynamic world, in which longevity and geographical mobility combine to ensure that one can be reborn within a lifetime; that is to say, one can compress several lives in one as it were. This permits the reformulation of the karma-dharma link from a backward-looking one into a forward-looking one, and makes the relationship between the two capable of a radical reformulation in our increasingly morally complex world. The key to this reformulation consists of the recognition that in modern life we confront genuine moral dilemmas of greater range and intensity than perhaps was the case earlier.

Now what does it mean to say that modern life presents us with genuine moral dilemmas? This is best understood by contrasting this position with that represented by fideism and rationalism. Fideism represents the view that all moral dilemmas would be resolved if only we possessed enough faith. Rationalism would represent the view that all moral dilemmas would be similarly resolved if only we possessed enough reason. The view that we confront genuine moral dilemmas implies that we rarely if ever have, will have, or even can have, such faith and such reason, so that in life one will have to make agonizing moral choices. Hindu ethics has always recognized this fact. This is one reason why Hindu text constantly wrestle with the question of dharma--of what is the right thing to do in a specific set of circumstances. It also accounts for the fact that Hinduism has never confused a search for truth with a search for certainty, on account of its awareness of the claims that multiple values can lay upon us, and the matrix of multiple possible paths this generates, including the less traveled ones.

Let us suppose a Hindu woman has an unwanted pregnancy. In the classical Hindu way of looking at it, this would be attributed to bad karma of the past and the present dharma would consist of giving the child up for adoption, as abortion was considered un-dharmic. If, however, we take a more creative and progressive view of the matter in keeping with modern developments, then one would weigh the moral or dharmic choices concerned as involving either abortion, or carrying the child to term. Then one could either give the child up for adoption or bring it up as a single mother. She will of course have to live out the consequences of whatever decision she takes. This new range of choices was not available earlier and this fact enables us to propose a more forward-looking linkage between the two concepts of karma and dharma. Because the range of moral choices or dharma was expanded, the concept of karma can be reinterpreted as the consequence which flows from the moral or dharmic choices which are made, which reverses the earlier flow from karma to dharma, into one from dharma to karma.

Hinduism does not have a pope or a "decider" to rule on what reinterpretations of the tradition are legitimate and which are to be discarded. So as the new understandings of karma and dharma become more widely accepted, Hinduism renews itself as it has throughout its history.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): India Shining I (Gandhi and the Laptop) Sculpture by Debanjan Roy

~~~~~~~~

By Arvind Sharma

Arvind Sharma is the Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal, Canada and currently engaged in promoting the adoption of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions.