

Karma and Rebirth in Indian Philosophy

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, in all their branches, also accept the underlying doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. All of these schools believe that one must be morally and spiritually perfected before one can attain salvation. They also believe that justice is the law of the moral life exactly as cause-and-effect is the law of the natural world. What one sows one must reap. Since justice and moral and spiritual perfection are not achievable in one life, all these systems believe in rebirth, so as to provide the opportunity for moral progress and eventual perfection. Throughout Indian philosophy, from the earliest Vedas to the latest developments, the moral order of the universe has been an accepted doctrine of all Indian thinkers except the Carvakas. *Karma* and rebirth are the instrumentalities by which the moral order of the universe is worked out in the life of the person.

-Radhakrishnan & Moore, "General Introduction" in *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, 1957, p. xxix.

From *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*

1. ...They who, being without desire, worship the Person
And are wise, pass beyond the seed [of rebirth] here.
2. The one who in fancy forms desires,
Because of these desires is born [again] here and there.
But of the one whose desire is satisfied, who is a perfected self,
All desires even here on earth vanish away...
5. Attaining Thou, the seers who are satisfied with knowledge,
Who are perfected selves, from passion free, tranquil—
Attaining Thou who is the universally omnipresent, those wise,
Devout selves into the All itself do enter...
7. Gone are the fifteen parts according to their station,
Even all the sense-organs in their corresponding divinities!
One's deeds and the self that consists of understanding—
All become unified in the supreme Imperishable.
8. As the flowing rivers in the ocean
Disappear, quitting name and form,
So the knower, being liberated from name and form,
Goes unto the Heavenly Person, higher than the high.
9. The one, verily, who knows that supreme *Brahman*, becomes very *Brahman*...
(III. ii.1-2, 5, 7- 9)

From *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*

8. Verily, this person, by being born and obtaining a body, is joined with evils. When he departs, on dying, he leaves his evils behind.
 9. Verily, there are just two conditions of this person: the condition of being in this world and the condition of being in the other world. There is an intermediate third condition, namely, that of being in sleep. By standing in this intermediate condition one sees both those conditions, namely, being in this world and being in the other world. Now whatever the approach is to the condition of being in the other world, by making that approach one sees the evils [of this world] and the joys [of yonder world]

From *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*

The eternal indestructible Self

18. The wise one [i.e., the *Ātman*, the Self] is not born, nor dies.
This one has not come from anywhere, has not become anyone.¹
Unborn, constant, eternal, primeval,
This one is not slain when the body is slain.

19. If the slayer think to slay,
If the slain think himself slain,
Both these understand not.
This one slays not, nor is slain.

20. More minute than the minute, greater than the great,
Is the Self that is set in the heart of a creature here. (II.18-20)

7. The one, however, who has not understanding,
Who is unmindful and ever impure,
Reaches not the goal,
But goes on to transmigration [rebirth].

¹ Compare: "It is because of your identification with the body as an entity that your consciousness, which is universal consciousness, thinks that it is dying. Nobody is dying, because nobody was born...Only that in which consciousness manifests itself is limited and created and destroyed. The total potential of consciousness remains. It is unlimited. [Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1994, 32-33] Also: "All that lives, lives forever....Only the shell, the perishable passes away. The spirit is without end... Eternal... Deathless..." (*Bhagavad Gita* 2: 16-17)

8. The one, however, who has understanding,
Who is mindful and ever pure,
Reaches the goal
From which the person is born no more...
10. Higher than the senses are the objects of sense.
Higher than the objects of sense is the mind;
And higher than the mind is the intellect [*buddhi*].
Higher than the intellect is the Great Self [*Ātman*].
11. Higher than the Great is the Unmanifest [*avyakta*].
Higher than the Unmanifest is the Person.
Higher than the Person there is nothing at all.
That is the goal. That is the highest course.

(III.7-8, 10-11)