How to Ease Karma
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INSIGHT

How to Ease Karma

Hindu pennance is an unpopular subject, but it's mystical powers bring relief and solace to those courageous enough to perform the rites of expiation

A few years ago, a devout hindu couple pulled up to the drive-in window of their local Taco Bell fast-food Mexican restaurant in Ventura, California, and ordered a bean burrito--one of the few items on the menu these strict vegetarians could eat. After a few bites, the man suddenly realized that his spicy burrito was made not with beans but ground beef--the first time in his life he had ever tasted the flesh of the sacred cow. Aghast, he did the American thing: he sued Taco Bell, demanding the company pay for his expenses to return to India to do penance: specifically, to bathe in the Ganga River. Unfortunately, he lost the suit on the technicality that he could not prove to the court's satisfaction that he had actually consumed any beef. Early in the proceedings, Hinduism Today was contacted by an attorney in the case and asked about the need for purification. We explained that indeed the man's plight was quite real, and he did need to do something for having inadvertently eaten beef, a transgression codified in the Hindu law books.

We wrote to Swami Paramananda Bharati of Bangalore, our

1990 "Hindu of the Year," for advice. Swami, who is attached to Sringeri Mutt, replied by email, explaining that because the offense was unintentional, the prayaschitta, penance, could be relatively simple--the chanting of mantras for about half an hour a day for eleven days. Realizing that Hindus would like to better understand the ancient system of prayaschitta, we enlisted Swami's help in researching the concept. He, in turn, drafted Mrs. B.G. Sreelakshmi of Bangalore, with the approval of Sringeri Mutt, to research the texts. Mrs. Sreelakshmi submitted a lengthy analysis from which we have drawn this article. For her complete text see www.hindu.org/penance/.

Karmic basis: The guiding principles of penance in Hindu philosophy are derived from the law of karma, the principle of cause and effect. The doctrine of karma is complex, with many subtle distinctions and categories. But for the purpose of understanding penance, we may consider karma as two-fold: the meritorious or good, called punya or sukarma in Sanskrit; and the undesirable or bad, termed papa or kukarma. Papa includes all forms of wrongdoing, from the simplest infraction to the most heinous crime. According to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras (2nd century bce), man's inclination toward wrong action arises from the five klesas ("troubles" or "afflictions"): ignorance, ego, attachment, aversion and fear (or "will to live"). In the broadest sense, the entire system of

reincarnation is an elaborate form of penance, for we are born with the body, family, circumstances and even longevity and propensity toward disease brought about by our past actions. Prayaschitta is, however, an act of limited aim, intended only to mitigate or avoid altogether the karmaphala, "fruit of action," of some action we have taken in this lifetime. Actions from our past lives are not considered within reach of ordinary prayaschitta. The karmas of past lives can only be assuaged or erased altogether by intense tapas or austerities under the guidance of a guru, or by the extraordinary grace of God. Manu Dharma Shastras 11.54 states, "Penances, therefore, must always be performed for the sake of purification, because those whose sins have not been expiated are born again with disgraceful marks." Prayaschittas, in other words, permit us to resolve the papa created in this life and not carry it into the next.

Dharma as guide: Papa arises in two ways, from the commission of what is forbidden and the omission of what is ordained by dharma. "How does one become aware of dharma?" asks J.R. Gharpure in his book, Teaching of Dharmasastra.

"To say it again in another way: not from books of law or ethics, nor from sacred scriptures, nor by means of scientific theories, nor because public opinion or a special group of people expect it from him. But an enlightened person becomes aware of an urge within himself and, because it demands satisfaction, he follows and obeys."

Failure to follow dharma occurs in three ways according to Manu Dharma Shastras: by the body, by the speech and by the mind. "Broadly speaking," states this shastra, "it is the mind that is the instigator of all actions. For example, coveting another's wealth by unfair means, desiring that evil befall another and adherence to false doctrines are evil mental actions. Abusing others, speaking untruth, detracting from the merits of all men and talking idly are four kinds of evil vocal sins. Taking what has not been given, injuring sentient beings against the injunction of the shastras and adultery are bodily sins. A man obtains the result of a good or evil mental act in his mind, that of a verbal act in his speech and that of a bodily act in his body. [Manu 12:3-8]"

Manu and the other dharma shastras contain long lists of actions for which prayaschitta is advised. These range from what the modern penal code calls "capital crimes," such as murder, to felonies such as adultery, theft and cow killing, to misdemeanors like gambling, and what could be termed "civil offenses" such as "living outside the four ashramas." Manu offers a general list of wrongdoings. It reads in part: "Killing a brahmin, stealing, adultery, giving false information to the king, forgetting the Veda, reviling the Vedas, eating forbidden food, stealing a deposit, a horse or diamonds, incest, casting off one's teacher, mother, father or son, selling goods which one ought not to sell, injuring living plants, subsisting on the earnings of one's wife, sorcery, cutting down green trees for firewood, assault, killing an animal, accepting presents from blamed men, killing insects or birds, and stealing fruit, firewood or flowers." [Manu 11.55-71]. The list of transgressions is remarkable, differing only in details from modern penal codes, even though some of these lists are from books as old as the Rig Veda (c. 4000 bce). They also contain very modern--for the West--concepts such as the protection of plants and animals. One special form of transgression is association with a person guilty

of great crimes. The papa was considered transferred by sitting, sleeping, travelling, conversing or dining together--such association required half the penance of the actual crime.

Efficacy: Why should it be accepted that prayaschitta should destroy papa? This was a question even in ancient times. Some held that the prayaschitta did not actually destroy the karmaphala, but made the person fit for transaction with society. Others held, based on Vedic passages such as "One who performs the Aswamedha [horse] sacrifice is absolved of all sins," that prayaschitta actually fulfills the karma. Pleas to forgive transgressions of dharma were evident in the earliest Vedas, such as Rig Veda 7.89.5, "Varuna, whatever wrong we men have done against the divine beings, whatever rules of yours we have flouted through nonvigilance, do not on that account of sin strike us down." The ancient commentator Apararka, however, observed that repentance is less arduous than penance and not enough to destroy papa. He said repentance and not repeating the act are important aspects of prayaschitta, but they cannot independently take the place of penances

for their efficacy.

Manu 11.228-234 makes the definitive declaration: "By confession, by repentance, by austerity and by reciting the Veda a sinner is freed from guilt, and, in case no other course is possible, by liberality. In proportion as a man who has done wrong, and himself confesses it, even so far he is freed from guilt, as a snake from its slough. In proportion as his heart loathes his evil deed, even so far is his body freed from that guilt. He who has committed a sin and has repented is freed from that sin, but he is purified only by the resolution of ceasing to sin and by thinking 'I will do so no more.' Having thus considered in his mind what results will arise from his deeds after death, let him always be good in thoughts, speech and actions. He who, having either unintentionally or intentionally committed a reprehensible deed desires to be freed from the guilt of it must not commit it a second time. If his mind be uneasy with respect to any act, let him repeat the austerities prescribed as a penance for it until they fully satisfy his conscience."

Law and order: Every society has evolved some system of punishment to check erring behavior, with the belief that fear of punishment would deter error in the future. Within the Hindu tradition, there are three sources of punishment: the king, the parishad (assembly of wise men) and the individual himself. Prayaschitta is the correct term for punishment originating from any of these three. However, in the present context, we shall explore only punishment that is self-inflicted, in consultation with one's guru or religious guide and guided by the scriptures. Societies recognize that self-correction is the best correction. It has been, for example, relatively fruitless to jail a few wife-beaters for their crimes, because there has been little impact upon the large number of such men whose transgressions remain unknown to the law. When wife-beating reaches epidemic levels, as it has, then law enforcement is powerless, and other methods must be employed to educate, raise awareness and provide the means for individuals to convince themselves to stop their wrong behavior and make amends.

Mitigating circumstances: Just as in modern law, due consideration is given to the circumstances of

any transgression of dharma. The penance differs first between an act intentionally committed and the one committed through ignorance (or unaware, as with our Taco Bell incident), and between an act done only once and one done repeatedly. Consideration is given to who instigated the act, who approved of it and who committed it. If these are different people, the most responsibility lies with he who performs it, according to Apastamba Dharma Shastras 2.11.19. Prayaschittas are of two kinds, action committed secretly and those committed openly. Manu and others hold that if a man's act is known only to himself, then he may perform secret expiation. If more than a year is allowed to pass, the penances would have to be double. Caste is also a factor, and the Vishnu Samhita states that the prayaschitta for a kshatriya (warrior), vaishya (businessman) and sudra (worker) should be three-quarters, one-half and one-quarter, respectively, of what is prescribed for the brahmin priest. Several texts provide for lesser punishments for the very old, the young and the ill. For a child below five, no punishment is suggested for any wrongdoing. For a child between five and eleven, his father, brother, relative or friend has to undergo the prayaschitta

for him, an ancient acknowledgement of modern rediscoveries that families are responsible for children's behavior, even legally.

Administration of prayaschitta: The sage Angiras writes, "Having committed a sin, one should not hide. If one hides, the sin increases. Controlled in speech, one should approach the parishad." The steps were then fourfold: confessing before the parishad, declaration by the parishad of the appropriate prayaschitta, actual performance of the penance, and the announcing by the parishad of the transgressor's freedom from crime or taint. The parishad was advised not to reduce penance through affection, greed, fear or ignorance, lest they themselves incur papa.

According to the shastras, one should follow the prayaschitta therein recommended to erase the papa incurred by an act. At first glance, some of these penances appear either too severe or too lenient, or not logically connected to the transgression. But it must be kept in mind that confession and repentance are required prerequisites to prayaschitta. From the Hindu

point of view, the critical act is to repent and resolve to not repeat the transgression, thus to transform one's behavior, change one's ways permanently. The prayaschitta is only sometimes to make full amends for the crime. Principally it is to subvert the future karma which would otherwise result by forestalling the thoughts, words and deeds which create negative karma. Prayaschitta is not an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" proposition. The penance serves both to assuage the guilty conscience by suffering some punishment, and in a subtle way, to thwart the future karma of one's act. The objective is repentance, not retribution.

Some of the prayaschittas given in the old texts were extremely severe, resulting in the painful death of the person. One can be put off by reading in Manu Dharma Shastras that such and such a sinner should be punished in such and such a horrendous manner. Punishment in all ancient societies tended to be harsh.

Contemporary penances: In modern times, prayaschitta can be placed in nine categories:

confession, repentance, pranayama (breath control), tapas (austerity and sacrifice, such as head shaving), kriya yoga (self study and worship of God), homa (sponsoring of expiating ceremony, especially the fire sacrifice), japa (recitation of scriptures and mantras), danam (gifts, such as to temples and priests), fasting (either complete or by abstaining from certain foods) and pilgrimage. It is likely that even in the early times these were also the most common prayaschittas, as each is described in the ancient scriptures.

Confession and repentance have been explained as prerequisites for any further prayaschitta. By pranayama, certain specific patterns of breath control, one regains control of his mind and emotions. This is applied for lesser offenses. Tapas or austerity includes, according to Gautama, celibacy, sleeping on the ground and bathing thrice daily. Another common austerity is prostrating repeatedly while encircling a temple. Much more arduous are the prostrations around an entire city, such as Vrindaban, or a mountain, such as Kailas. The carrying of kavadi, a kind of portable shrine on an arch, while having the skin pierced by numerous small spears is a popular

austerity among South Indians today. Austerity is a frequent aspect of certain famous pilgrimages, especially those undertaken barefoot. The sponsoring of religious ceremonies, particularly the homa or fire sacrifice, as a prayaschitta is mentioned in the Taittiriya Aranyaka, a section of the Krishna Yajur Veda. Japa includes both the repetition of simple mantras, such as "Om" and the recitation of various Upanishads, or even the entire Vedas. Dana (gifting) is frequently mentioned, even as atonement for serious crimes. The gift of a cow to a priest or a temple is commonly required. As of April, 2000, a good milk cow in America sold for us$2,050, so one could translate these ancient fines given in number of cows to dollars. The construction by Lord Rama of the Rameswaram Temple in South India as penance for the killing of his enemy Ravana, a brahmin, is an example of penance by religious gift. The later shastras even prescribed bathing in the 22 wells of Rameswaram as prayaschitta for killing a brahmin. Fasting is also a very common prayaschitta--it costs nothing to fulfill, and it even saves money! There are many kinds of whole and partial fasts described in the texts, some of which appear to be ayurvedic or medicinal remedies. Finally, pilgrimage is an especially favored

prayaschitta, though the texts warn that a mere physical act of pilgrimage and a bath in holy waters without a change of heart would not be enough. Nor is anything to be gained, they warn, by abandoning one's duties and fleeing on pilgrimage. Certain pilgrimage destinations, especially Banaras, are renowned as places to rid oneself of papa.

In a list provided by Swami Paramananda Bharati, the prayaschitta for stealing food is atoned for by fasting and Sun worship, of temple funds by fasting and gifts of gold, silver and clothes. Making false claims for a medicine can be eased by fasting and public feedings. An act of ingratitude should be countered by fasting and the feeding of fifty persons, of backbiting by worship and gift of ghee.

Swami's insights: Swami Paramananda

Bharati states, "All sin originates from the love for the body and the ego. Otherwise, the jivatma, the individual soul, is by nature very pure. In this sense the real culprits in sin are only the body and the ego. So the cleansing process consists in punishing the body and the ego. That is, indeed, the logic unconsciously followed by the state when it punishes offenders. But the state does not understand the complexities of the soul and its progress. Therefore, it cannot decide the quality or the quantity of punishment, which differs from person to person for the same crime. It is only the shastra that can decide it. If the state gives punishment according to the shastra, the offender is fully redeemed. But we can never expect the state to be spiritual and follow the shastra. So this is to be done by the offender himself. When one inflicts punishment to oneself according to the shastra, it is called prayaschitta. In the

absence of prayaschitta, the offender is bound to receive punishment either in the same life or in ensuing lives in the form of disease and other types of grief." In practice, one should consult one's guru, spiritual guide or a scholar of the shastras to receive recommendations for penance for a specific act.

What about Sin?

Papa is often translated as sin. As far as the specific meaning of sin, "a transgression of religious or moral law, especially when deliberate," the translation is accurate. However, the concept of sin in the West carries certain theological baggage which does not reflect Hindu philosophy. For example, there is the idea of "original" or "inherent" sin, a result of Adam's disobedience to God in the Garden of Eden. This is,

according to Christian theology, shared by all people, and can only be removed by faith in Jesus. Hinduism does not hold to this doctrine of original sin.

Western theologies tend to consider sin a crime against God, whereas Hinduism views it as an act against dharma, moral order and one's own self. The absence of reincarnation or karma in Christian thinking makes their understanding of sin far different from the Hindu.

What to do about sin created in the present life--known as "actual sin" as contrasted with original sin--created the great division between the Catholics and the Protestants. The Protestants said that faith in Jesus is the only way to remove that sin too, while the Catholics adhered

to a complex system of confession and penance. In the Middle Ages, there were "penitential books" in Europe listing sins and penances, plus the more dubious system of "indulgences" whereby one could escape bodily penances such as fasting by an appropriate donation to the church's building program. In the 17th century, Martin Luther declared that faith alone, not penance and especially not indulgences, was efficacious in absolving sin.

Hindu writers educated in Christian schools tend to mix in these Christian concepts of sin while discussing papa, or undesirable karma. At times, the idea of an original sin creeps in, one that cannot be erased or evolved out of. At other times, the Protestant scorn for penance appears, and doubt is thrown by the

writer upon the whole concept of prayaschitta. Occasionally one will find Hindu priests or gurus disparagingly cast as akin to Catholic priests, somehow ordained to "forgive" sins, when they serve no such function.

Pennance as Practiced Today

Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, has been administrating penance to devotees since 1958. Here are his insights on the subject based on forty-plus years of experience.

The guru has to know the devotee and his family karma over a long period of time before prayaschitta is given. Otherwise, it may have the wrong effect. Penance is for religious people, people who practice daily, know the philosophy and have a

spiritual head of their family, people who genuinely want to reach a state of purity and grace. It is not for nonreligious people. Just as in the Catholic Church, penance is given to you by the spiritual preceptor. It is not a "do it yourself," New Age kind of thing. Those who try to do it themselves may overdo it. It takes a certain amount of talking and counseling to gain an understanding of what is involved. Before doing any of the physical prayaschittas, I have devotees do the Maha Vasana Daha Tantra--"great purification of the subconscious by fire"--writing down and then burning ten pages of memories, good and bad, for each year of their life to the present day. This may automatically clear up events of the past. Also, I've experienced that sometimes just telling the confession to the guru is sufficient prayaschitta and nothing else is necessary. What they thought was bad was not bad at all, just

normal happenings, but the conscience suffers until that fact is known.

This prayaschitta article [on the preceding five pages] we've done with great difficulty, the blessings of the Shankaracharya of Sringeri Mutt and the help of Swami Paramananda Bharati and Mrs. B.G. Sreelakshmi. It is just enough to know about prayaschitta. There is a lot in Manu Dharma Shastras which absolutely does not apply at this time.

Anger, I have observed, is the most difficult fault for people to overcome, because it comes in so many different forms--pouting, long silences, shouting, yelling, swearing. Some people are just angry all the time because they live in the lower nature, constantly engaged in

mental criticism and arguments. Anger can eventually be controlled by putting a sum of money--$5.00, for example--in a jar each time one becomes angry and then donating that money to an orphanage or other charity. It soon gets too expensive to get angry. However, for devotees who are wealthy, that doesn't work. For them, I've found the penance of fasting for the next meal after they get angry works.

The "flower penance" has proven useful, especially to young people who have been beaten and abused by their parents. They put a picture of the person who beat them--father, mother or teacher--and every day for 31 days place a flower in front of the picture and while doing so sincerely forgive the person in heart and mind. Some are able to see the

experience as their own karma. They forgive their parents and experience a great deal of freedom. Others have so much hatred and resentment toward their parents they can't do it at all. This has also worked for someone who has a mental conflict with their employer. There is a severe penance, too, for he who beats his children, involving private self-punishment and public lectures against corporal punishment.

For wife-beating, I advise kavadi, putting small spears in the body and circumabulating the temple 108 times. This is a very serious matter, one which has broken up the home, created a rotten birth in the next life. To atone for that is very difficult. Without resolve and remorse, no penance will work.