CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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KARMA

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India is renowned for its diversity. Dissimilitude abounds in every sphere—from the physical elements of its land and people to the intangible workings of its beliefs and practices. Indeed, given this variety, India itself appears to be not a single entity but an amalgamation, a "construct," arising from the conjoining of innumerable, discrete parts. Modern scholarship has, quite properly, tended to explore these elements in isolation. (In part, this trend represents the conscious reversal of the stance taken by an earlier generation of scholars whose work reified India into a monolithic entity—a critical element in the much maligned "Orientalist" enterprise.) Nonetheless, the representation of India as a singular "whole" is not an entirely capricious enterprise; for India is an identifiable entity, united by—if not born out of—certain deep and pervasive structures. Thus, for example, the Hindu tradition has long maintained a body of mythology that weaves the disparate temples, gods, even geographic landscapes that exist throughout the subcontinent into a unified, albeit syncretic, whole.

In the realm of thought, there is no more pervasive, unifying structure than *karma*. It is the "doctrine" or "law" that ties actions to results and creates a determinant link between an individual's status in this life and his or her fate in future lives. Following what is considered to be its earliest appearances in the Upaniṣads, the doctrine reaches into nearly every corner of Hindu thought. Indeed, its dominance is such in the Hindu worldview that *karma* encompasses, at the same time, life-affirming and life-negating functions; for just as it defines the world in terms of the "positive" function of delineating a doctrine of rewards and punishments, so too it defines the world through its "negative" representation of action as an all but inescapable trap, an unremitting cycle of death and rebirth.

Despite—or perhaps because of—*karma*'s ubiquity, the doctrine is not easily defined. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty reports of a scholarly conference devoted to the study of *karma* that although the participants admitted to a general sense of the doctrine's parameters, considerable time was consumed in a "lively but ultimately vain attempt to define . . . karma and rebirth" (1980b: xi). The base meaning of the term "*karma*" (or, more precisely, in its Sanskrit stem form, *karman*, a neuter substantive) is "action." As a doctrine, *karma* encompasses a number of quasi-independent concepts: rebirth (*punarjanman*); consequence (*phala*, literally "fruit," a term that suggests the "ripening" of actions into consequences); and the valuation or "ethicization" of acts, qualifying them as either "good" (*puṇya* or *sukarman*) or "bad" (*pāpman* or *duṣkarman*) (O'Flaherty 1980b: xi). In a general way,

however, for at least the past two thousand years, the following (from the well-known text, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*) has held true as representing the principal elements of the *karma* doctrine: "The same person enjoys the fruit of the same sinful or a meritorious act in the next world in the same manner and to the same extent according to the manner and extent to which that (sinful or meritorious) act has been done by him in this world" (6.1.45; Tagare 1993: 779). Nevertheless, depending on the doctrine's context, which itself ranges from its appearance in a vast number of literary sources to its usage on the popular level, not all these elements may be present (though in a general way they may be implicit).

How the elements underlying the *karma* doctrine coalesce, or, alternately, how they diverge in context is treated in detail in a collection of essays—the fruit of two "*karma* conferences"—published in 1980 (O'Flaherty 1980d). This collection advances considerably the study of the *karma* doctrine; yet, because the published findings tend to be highly specialized, it is neither possible nor desirable to restate them here. Rather, in the following pages the *karma* doctrine will be sought out on general grounds, from its ancient Hindu origins, to its development as a central element in Hindu thought, and, finally, to its continuing existence as a defining element of the Hindu world.

THE HISTORY OF KARMA: THE PROBLEM OF THE SOURCES

Despite *karma*'s dominance in Hindu thought, a detailed knowledge of its history long eluded scholars. As W. D. Whitney, the eminent American Indologist, noted more than a century ago: "one of the most difficult questions in the religious history of India, [is] how that doctrine arose, out of what it developed, to what feature of the ancient faith it attached itself" (1873: 61). The difficulty scholars encountered in seeking out *karma*'s roots may be attributed to some degree to the arcane nature of India's ancient textual tradition, the vast corpus known collectively as the Veda. This body of texts is divided into several layers: Saṃhitās, consisting chiefly of paeans to the god, invoking them to share in the sacrifice; Brāhmaṇas, in which the sacrificial rites are described and discussed in detailed, though highly idiosyncratic fashion; and Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads, texts which purport to expound a "secret" knowledge (presaged in the Brāhmaṇas) that frequently begins with the metaphysics of the sacrifice and extends into sophisticated inquiries into the nature of reality and the possibility of its direct perception through some form of transformative knowledge (gnosis).[1]

The Vedic texts were composed over an enormous period of time, a period generally agreed to have begun—albeit on somewhat speculative grounds—roughly 1500 BCE and ending about 500 BCE. At the outset of this period, Vedic culture was situated in the northwest corner of the Indian subcontinent and had already shed its overt connections to its Indo-Āryan past. Over the next thousand years of its development, Vedic culture penetrated deeply into the eastern portion of the subcontinent, to modern Bengal, and at least as far south as the Narmadā River (Majumdar 1951: 222, 246, 266). This movement into the subcontinent undoubtedly influenced the Vedic tradition's development, as the Vedic people encountered and commingled with other settled ancient Indic populations. However, it is impossible to judge with any precision how this commingling may have affected the course of the Vedic religion's development. On the one hand, the Vedic texts

do not disclose clear lines revealing the origins of specific beliefs; on the other hand, there is no extant textual record from the ancient non-Vedic cultures. (Substantial archaeological remains have been recovered from the Indus Valley civilization, which clearly predates the rise of Vedic culture; yet this civilization's writing remains indecipherable.)

Because the *karma* doctrine has no obvious, clear antecedents in the earliest layers of the Vedic literature, some scholars have suggested that *karma*'s origins lie outside the sphere of ancient Vedic culture. The prominence of agricultural themes in the doctrine's early presentations—in particular those relating to rice cultivation—has been cited as evidence of the doctrine's non-Vedic, "tribal" origin (O'Flaherty 1980b: xvi–xvii). The anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere (1980) has investigated the possibility of *karma*'s non-Vedic origin by looking to the beliefs of modern Indian (and non-Indian) tribal populations and then extrapolating from them a model of belief that may have existed among the ancient Indian populations. According to Obeyesekere, nearly all primitive and preliterate societies possess simple theories of rebirth, theories that through a simple transformation can evolve into a karmic eschatology. This transformation occurs with the introduction of a link between the nature of actions in one life to either a state of retribution or reward in the next life, a transformation that Obeyesekere refers to as the "ethicization" of the simple rebirth eschatology.

Obeyesekere's supposition that the non-Vedic stream made a significant contribution to the *karma* doctrine is likely correct. Moreover, his developmental paradigm opens up what may be the most significant question in understanding the history of *karma*; that is, where (and how) does the systematic ethicization of actions occur? Obeyesekere and others have argued that the ethicization of actions cannot be seen in the Brāhmaṇic-Upaniṣadic milieu (Keith 1925, 2: 468, 584; Obeyesekere 1980: 161). However, within the context of the ritual performance, the Brāhmaṇic authors do distinguish between good and bad (ritual) acts, and, as in other ethical systems, this valuation is based on the consequences of actions (Mackie 1977: 59). Thus a typical Brāhmaṇic passage declares: "When the *agnihotra* is being offered, what he does mistakenly, either by word or deed, that cuts off his vigor, his own self, or his children" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.3.4.18, see also 1.5.2.15). In other words, within the narrow confines of the Vedic ritual system a rudimentary ethical system does indeed exist.

The supposition that such an ethical system is part of Vedic culture is an important one. The Hindu tradition, for at least the last two thousand years of its development, has looked to the Veda as a model of cultural prestige and the legitimizing force for all sorts of religious behavior. Vedic culture however is not a monolithic entity; the texts, as well as the beliefs and ritual practices contained in them, admit to significant variations. Moreover, because these texts were created not by individual authors but represent the thoughts, directives, and observations of communities of inspired sages as they were recorded over successive decades or perhaps even centuries, they are not highly systematized. As a result, as they now stand and as they have stood for perhaps the past 2,500 years, the Vedic texts contain multiple, and sometimes contradictory, teachings on the same subject (a situation that does not differ markedly from the textual traditions of other great religions).

This fluidity however is not without limits; for at the core of the Vedic tradition certain key values exist. Foremost are those relating to the act of sacrifice. Despite the changes in thought and practice that may have occurred over the millennium or so of the Vedic texts' composition and compilation, this core remains clearly discernible; the act of sacrifice—though variously enacted and variously interpreted by the Vedic religionists—stands *always* at the center of the Vedic tradition.

Karma is a critical component of this core. In the early Vedic texts, the term "*karman*" typically denotes the action or performance of the sacrificial ritual; a usage that is so common that the term "*karman*" is there synonymous with the Vedic rites (this meaning is retained in later Hinduism, where it stands along with *karma*'s other connotations). By the end of this period, as reflected in the Upaniṣads, *karma* emerges as a *doctrine*; that is, in a formulation that has a definite and extensive meaning and is reified above and beyond its ordinary connotations. To understand *karma*'s history, it is first necessary to examine these early doctrinal formulations, a point that leads back to the action of the Vedic sacrifice.

THE FORMULATION OF KARMA IN THE UPANIṢADS

The term "*karman*" occurs frequently in the Vedic texts. As such, *karma* is not understood here as a doctrine but simply as a term denoting action, in particular, the action of the sacrificial ritual. However, by the end of the Brāhmaṇa period, which is synchronous with the composition of the early Upaniṣads, *karma is* presented as a doctrine, one in particular that expresses the notion that actions in one life directly affect the conditions of a future life.

In its first formulation in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the doctrine appears as part of a discussion between two well-known sages, Ārtabhāga and Yājñavalkya, regarding the fate of the individual after death. Ārtabhāga first describes the dissolution of the dead person on the funeral pyre, drawing on an image deeply embedded in Vedic thought: upon cremation the deceased's speech enters into the air, his eye into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters (*Ṛg Veda* 10.16.3, see also 10.90.13–14; *Atharva Veda* 18.2.7). He then asks his companion Yājñavalkya, "What becomes next of this person?" Yājñavalkya, however, prefers not to discuss this in public, as he states: "My dear Ārtabhāga, take my hand. We two alone shall know of this, this is not for us two to speak of among [other] people." The text then continues in the third person: "Having gone aside, they entered into a discussion. That which they spoke about was action (*karman*) and that which they praised was action: one indeed becomes good by good action, bad by bad [action]" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.13).

To many scholars this passage appears to present the fundamental premise of the *karma* doctrine as it dominates later Hindu thought; that is, that an individual attains a state after death that is a direct result of the ethical quality ("good" or "bad") of his activities before death (Deussen 1906: 329–30; Farquhar 1920: 34; Keith 1925, 2: 573; Oldenberg 1915: 109; Rao 1987: 28). Although the central idea presented here "that one becomes good by good action, bad by bad" does evoke later formulations of the *karma* doctrine, the passage fails to explicate several key elements that would tie it with certainty to the later *karma* doctrine. In particular, the questions of what constitutes "good" and "bad" action (is it action in general or a special form of activity such as that of the sacrificial ritual?) and what is the precise nature of the individual's postdeath existence (is it a new birth in a human or animal form in this world or a movement into an otherworldly existence?) stand unanswered here.

Karma, as a doctrine, appears again in another *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* passage (4.4.1–7). This passage also begins with a discussion of the fate of the individual upon the event of his death. Unlike the previous passage, however, which relates an individual's

component parts (hearing, breath, and so forth) to the numerous spheres of the cosmos, this second passage notes that the individual approaching death "becomes one," as the vital energies together enter the individual's heart. Gathered in the heart, these elements then depart through one of the body's orifices, an event signifying the end of the individual's current existence. At this moment, at what appears to be the brink of dissolution, the "deeds (*karman*) and knowledge and memory take hold of him [the deceased]." This "taking hold of" apparently leads to the acquisition of a new body, as the passage continues: "Just as a goldsmith takes a piece of gold and turns it into another . . . so the self [of the individual] makes another new and more beautiful shape, like that of the ancestors, *gandharva*s, gods, Prajāpati, Brahmā, or other beings." (Another recension of this text adds "men" to the list.) The passage ends recapitulating the notion that: "How one acts and how one behaves so that one becomes: the doer of good becomes good, the doer of bad becomes bad" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5).

Although this passage does refer to the acquisition of a new body after death, it does not refer specifically to rebirth in this world—a critical component of the later *karma* doctrine—but to some sort of otherworldly afterlife existence (the beings listed here are all denizens of the various Vedic heavens). Immediately following this description of the acquisition of a new body, however, the authors or compilers of the text include a verse that describes the possibility of returning to this world: "That one together with his action, he goes where his inner mind is attached. When he reaches the end of that action (*karman*) which he did in this world here, then he comes back to this world, back to action." Not everyone returns to this world: "the man who does not desire . . . his breaths do not depart; Brahmā he is, to Brahmā he goes" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.6). Although these final passages are quite possibly an interpolation—evidenced by their verse form and the fact that they follow a passage that itself expresses a terminal thought—it is the sort of accretion typically found in the early Upaniṣads, texts in which contiguous passages, though perhaps unrelated in origin, reiterate specific concepts. Thus, although the teachings presented in these two passages—the one that proposes actions lead to a rebirth only in the next world, the other that actions lead to a new birth in this world—are nominally distinct, in juxtaposition they emphasize a common message; namely, that actions affect the conditions of the afterlife.

The intimation here that the individual, on the basis of the deeds performed in life, may be reborn in this world, or alternatively attain the world of Brahmā, appears again in an extensive discussion found in another *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* passage (6.2), a passage that is repeated with variations in detail in another early Upaniṣad text, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (5.3–10). The passage begins with an intriguing set of questions posed by an ancient king, Jaivali Pravāhaṇa, to the young sage Śvetaketu: "Do you know how people, when they die, go by different paths? Do you know how they return to this world? Do you know how the world beyond is not filled up, even as more and more people continuously go there?" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.2). Śvetaketu professes ignorance to each successive question (as well as to a number of other related questions) and returns home to report his encounter with the king to his father, the sage Gautama. Gautama, intrigued by his son's encounter, approaches the king and asks him to take him on as his pupil. King Jaivali Pravāhaṇa accedes to this request and then states enigmatically that the answers to these questions have never before been in the possession of Brāhmaṇs. Although considerable scholarly ink has been spilled over the representation of a sage entreating a king for

knowledge, where one would expect the reverse (see, e.g. Keith 1925, 2: 492–97), scholars tend now to view this situation as part of the broadening intellectualization of the warrior class that occurred at this time in several contemporary Indian movements (Buddhism, Jainism) (Olivelle 1996: xxxiv–xxxv). The more significant point here is that knowledge of this doctrine is represented as a secret—a point that echoes Yājñavalkya's declaration (cited above) that *karma* should not be spoken of in public; for the representation of a teaching as secret strikes to the center of the Upaniṣadic mission of explicating the mysteries of existence and so underscores the significance of *karma* as a key element of Upaniṣadic thought.

In the ensuing narrative, the king describes creation—in each of several planes of existence: the world above, the clouds, this world, and man himself—as being based on and homologous to the elements of the Vedic sacrificial fire, its flames, its fuel, and its smoke: "That other world is a fire, O Gautama. The sun is its fuel; the rays its smoke; the day its flame. . . ." The last of these creations occurs in the fire of the cremation. Here the homology ends, for this fire symbolizes nothing more than itself: "the fire is the fire, the fuel is the fuel; the smoke is the smoke. . . ." The material of the offering of this last creation is the body of the deceased, from which, placed in the sacrificial fires, a "shining" or "radiant" man emerges. The radiant man follows one of two paths: the path of the gods (*devayāna*), which leads to a final existence in the world of Brahmā (those who attain it are said not to return), or the path of the fathers (*pitṛyana*), which leads to the moon and eventually to another birth in this world. The attainment of one or the other of these paths is based on the *type* (though, significantly, not the *quality*—for example, "good" or "bad") of activity performed before death. Whereas the one who meditates in the forest and possesses an understanding of the homology of the elements of the cosmos and the elements of the Vedic sacrificial fire (as described previously in this passage) attains the path of the gods, the one who sacrifices and gives gifts to the priests attains the path of the fathers (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.9–16).

The description of rebirth for the one who follows the path of the fathers is distinctive for its representation of the physical aspects of this process (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.16). Through the flames of the cremation fires, the deceased individual is first transformed into smoke and then successively joins with the various worlds and elements that make up the Vedic cosmos. Reaching finally the moon, the deceased individual becomes the food of the gods; when this comes to an end (suggesting the depletion of his store of merit, built through a lifetime of sacrificial performances), the deceased individual passes into the sky, then into the wind, then into the rain, then to the earth and rebirth in this world. The progression has obvious agricultural connotations: for once the rain falls on the earth it generates plants, which are in turn eaten by living beings and thus contribute to the formation of semen, impregnation, gestation, and birth. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* version of this description alone adds that "people whose conduct is pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb, like that of a priest, warrior, or common woman; but they who are of stinking conduct can expect to enter a stinking womb, that of a dog, pig, or an outcaste" (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7). (It is interesting to note that the term used here is "conduct," *caraṇa*, and not "action," *karman*.) Both passages refer to a third path, that of the worms, insects, and other small creatures that revolve ceaselessly through birth and death. Neither a type of action nor a quality of action is specified for the creatures that follow this third path.

The *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*, also considered an early Upaniṣad, contains a description of the fate of individuals after death that reiterates the themes found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. According to the *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*, when people depart from this world they go to the moon. The moon is the door to the heavenly worlds; to pass beyond the moon to the other worlds, the deceased must answer the moon's question: "Who are you?" The one who fails to correctly answer this question (the answer is, "I am you," a statement that typifies the Upaniṣadic notion that man and the cosmos are in essence homologous) becomes rain, thus leading to rebirth in this world "as a worm, an insect, a fish, a bird, a lion, . . . a man, or some other creature, in accordance with his actions (*karman*) and his knowledge." The one who correctly answers the moon's question continues his journey through the heavenly worlds, eventually reaching the world of Brahmā. At this point, the deceased shakes off his good and bad deeds (literally, "that which he has done well" and "that which he has done badly," *sukṛta* and *duṣkṛta*), passing them on respectively to the relatives he holds dear and to the ones he despises. The deceased passes no further but sojourns eternally in the world of Brahmā (*Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad* 1.2).

If a single, clear representation of the *karma* doctrine does not emerge from these Upaniṣad texts, it is important to consider that the early Upaniṣads were composed as anthologies, with portions of their texts built out of stock narratives (Olivelle 1996: xxxiv). In the case of the *karma* doctrine, the fundamental elements of these stock narratives—the recurring themes of the journey to the other world (frequently bifurcated into two paths, the path of the gods and the path of the fathers) and the physical nature of the rebirth process (from smoke to clouds, to rain, to plants, to semen, and to rebirth in this world)—have clear antecedents in other Vedic texts. Thus, for example, the homology of the cosmos and the sacrificial fire is found in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (45–46); the journey of the deceased to the moon and sun occurs in the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* (3.20–28); the representation of the process of rebirth as a cycle of generation (smoke, rain, the generation of plants, semen, birth) is found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (7.4.2.22); and the two paths to the other world are intimated in the funeral hymns found in the *Ṛg Veda* (10.14, 10.16). The question that now arises is why is the *karma* doctrine—that is, as it is presented in these several Upaniṣadic passages, a specific rule relating action or conduct to the conditions of the afterlife—grafted onto these stock teachings? This question, however, cannot be broached without a clear understanding of the import of these teachings within their "original" context; that is, the Brāhmaṇic milieu, a milieu dominated by the ideology and performance of the Vedic sacrificial ritual (the "original" *karma*).

KARMA AND THE VEDIC SACRIFICE

In its basic form, the Vedic sacrifice may be characterized simply as "the offering of a cow to win more cows" (see *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.7.1.1; Heesterman 1978: 87). Even at this fundamental level, the sacrifice is an event fraught with extraordinary danger, dominated by death and destruction, as the sacrificer gives up a life in the attempt to win renewed life, if only in the form of increased cattle, crops, and so forth. Adding to the dire nature of the sacrificial event, as the Vedic religionists implicitly recognized, is that the animal victims do not necessarily die willingly (see *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.7.3.3) but that in effect are

innocent victims, their fate a thinly veiled murder. At a deeper level, the logic of the Vedic sacrifice, which demands an offering of a life for renewed life, implies that the death that occurs in the sacrifice should be that of the sacrificer, for it is he and not the victim that is the beneficiary of the sacrificial largesse. The Vedic religionists acknowledged this point, as the authors of the Brāhmaṇas observed: "Now the sacrificial fires become determined for the flesh of the sacrificer when he sacrifices; they think about the sacrificer; they desire the sacrificer" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.7.1.2). Self-sacrifice however is self-defeating; though its ideology is pervasive, in practice its occurrence is limited to the exceptional circumstances of the "final sacrifice" (*antyeṣṭi*), the cremation rite, in which the body of the sacrificer forms the material of the oblation.[2]

The Vedic sacrifice is not a spontaneous event but a replication of the primeval acts that created the cosmos; as the Brāhmaṇic authors frequently declare: "This [sacrifice] done now is that which the gods did then [in the beginning]" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.2.1.4, 9.2.3.4; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1.5.9.4). What the gods did then was to dismember a primordial being (*puruṣa*/Prajāpati), whose body parts, mind, and senses gave rise to specific elements of the cosmos: "The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. . . . From his navel the atmosphere arose; from his head the heavens; from his two feet the earth; from his ear the quarters" (*Ṛg Veda* 10.90.13–14; see also *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.1.1.1–3.20). As a replication of this primordial event, the Vedic sacrifice holds enormous creative potential; each ritual performance holding out the promise of creating new worlds that the sacrificer might inhabit (Gonda 1966: 49).

That the sacrifice is a replication also means that to be effective, its performance must not deviate from its underlying model. One widespread Brāhmaṇic myth thus presents a cautionary tale about a sacrifice enacted by Aditi, a divine antediluvian being, for the sake of obtaining progeny. Following the proper form of first offering an oblation to the gods and then eating the remainder, Aditi is rewarded with healthy offspring. With the same goal in mind, Aditi sacrifices again but decides this time to partake directly of the gods' portion, reasoning that: "If I eat first, then stronger ones will be born from me." This act results not in a healthy issue but in a miscarriage; that is, the wrongly enacted sacrifice leads to wrongly formed offspring (*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 6.5.6). The message here is simple: the power of the sacrifice lies not in any quality inherent in the oblation but in the *process* of its performance; properly enacted the sacrifice yields the desired result.[3]

The ideology of the Vedic ritual complex did not stop with the notion that the sacrificial performance wins from the gods only the "goods of life" for the sacrificer (the "do ut des" principle) but further attributes to the Vedic ritual the power to grant renewed life to the sacrificer. To indicate the element of rebirth, the sacrificial performance is replete with symbols of birth and death—a necessary prerequisite and concomitant to new birth. Thus, in entering the sacrificial arena, the sacrificer prepares himself for the new birth; here, he assumes several attributes of an embryo, restricting his movement, remaining in a womb-like enclosure, and keeping his hands closed, "since embryos have their hands in a closed manner" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.3.1.3, 3.1.3.28, 3.2.1.6; *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 1.3). That the sacrificer dies, at least symbolically, in the ritual performance is indicated through his intimate association with the victim. The Vedic religionists described this ritual death and birth as part of a continuum, a middle point standing between the sacrificer's natural birth and natural death (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.2.1.1; *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* 3.11.2–4).

The mechanism of the sacrificer's rebirth in the ritual is a journey to the world of the gods. Here, the intimate identification between sacrificer and oblation is critical; for the sending forth of the oblation to the world of the gods—through the vehicle of the sacrificial fire's smoke—effectively carries the sacrificer to the other world: "Now it is to the world of the gods that the sacrifice went, and thereby it leads the sacrificer" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.8.3.11, see also 4.3.4.6, 1.9.3.1).

Though the sacrifice entails a journey to the other world, it is incumbent upon the sacrificer to return to this world. Vedic mythology makes it clear that the gods do not want men in their world and long ago sought to make it inaccessible to them (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.4.3, 1.6.2.1). Moreover, there is the simple fact that if the sacrificer were to remain in the other world, his real death would ensue; accordingly, the authors of the Brāhmaṇas point out that the sacrificer's journey to the other world is one fraught with danger (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.3.4.7; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 2.5.6). The Vedic religionists clearly sought to avoid this possibility; indeed, the ritual system itself seems to have been designed to entice the sacrificer to return to this world, to live, and to sacrifice again another day.[4]

The sacrificer's death and rebirth in the sacrifice, effected through the journey to and return from the other world, is a necessary element in the sacrificer's acquisition of the rewards of the sacrificial performance. Journeying to the other worlds, the sacrificer is said to become one with the world of the god to whom the sacrifice is directed (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.6.4.8). The unification of deity and man is further expressed in the notion that in the other world the sacrificer becomes the "food" of the gods (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.6.3.19), which suggests an element of transubstantiation but also underlines the precarious nature of the journey to the other world. The sacrificer returns to this world utterly transformed by this experience; "reborn" in the sacrifice, he is now in a condition to acquire the sacrificial largesse, the results of his sacrificial work (*karman*).

The lifelong process of sacrificing—of journeying to and returning from the other world and of acquiring the sacrificial largesse—ends with the sacrificer's death and the "final sacrifice" (*antyeṣṭi*), as the cremation rite is known. Here, the sacrificer's body forms the material of the offering (which incidentally effectively allows the sacrificer to attain the core ritual ideology of self-sacrifice). The journey to the other world and the subsequent rebirth that was realized in symbolic terms within the ritual arena is, in the event of the cremation, actualized in real terms. And here, the sacrificer's experience in performing the great Vedic rites may be said to represent the "empirical" evidence for the attainments which he will then experience again at the end of his lifetime; for just as the type of sacrifices that the sacrificer performed in life led to the attainment of specific other worldly realms, so too these performances clearly affect the conditions attained in the sacrificer's final journey.

The early formulations of the Upaniṣadic *karma* doctrine draw heavily on the Vedic ritual substratum. First and foremost, the mechanism of the sacrifice—that the action of the ritual performance necessarily yields a corresponding result, that the sacrifice entails a journey to the other world and a return to this one, and that through the sacrifice the sacrificer acquires a new birth (and so too implicitly must die)—is a fundamental premise to the Upaniṣadic presentations of the *karma* doctrine. Yet, whereas in the Brāhmaṇas this mechanism is applied to the sacrifices performed through the course of a lifetime, in the Upaniṣads, in discussions of the *karma* doctrine, it is applied directly to the individual's

fate after death. That the Brāhmaṇic thinkers do not directly confront the problem of the sacrificer's fate after death is not surprising, for such thoughts rarely intrude into the Brāhmaṇic discussions. Although death and destruction—of the victim and implicitly of the sacrificer—stand at the center of the Vedic sacrifice, the Brāhmaṇic ritual itself was constituted to circumvent the reality of the sacrificer's death. The Brāhmaṇic ritualists achieved this through ceaselessly employing complex sets of symbolic identifications that effectively conceal the brutal facts of the sacrificial performance, creating, as more than one scholar has observed, a "dream" world in which the ritualists appear to have "left realities far behind them" (see, e.g. Farquhar 1920: 27). However, as J. C. Heesterman has noted, as a result of this, "the ritualists found themselves confronted with the problem of meaning; that is, they had to construct a way back to the lived in world of mundane reality" (1983: 6).

The Upaniṣadic confrontation with the sacrificer's real death—expressed clearly in the simple questions asked of the fate of the individual that frame the early presentations of the *karma* doctrine—suggests just such a return to the "lived in world." Yet, the mechanism of the sacrifice—the nearly automatic acquisition of the results of the sacrificial acts and the journey to and return from the other world through which the sacrificer is reborn and thus prepared to acquire these goods—cannot be left behind. These elements re-emerge in the Upaniṣadic formulation of the *karma* doctrine, the principles of which are no longer limited to the actions performed in the ritual world but are now extended outward to the lived-in world and so encompasses *all* acts.

KARMA AS A MODEL OF ACTION

The post-Upaniṣadic history of the *karma* doctrine is that of near universal pervasiveness; for, at least implicitly, *karma* penetrates even the furthest corners of Hindu thought. Here, it stands along with a handful of other doctrines that, following the Upaniṣad period, are consistently presented as "presuppositions" of Hindu thought, such as the doctrines of an underlying ego element (*ātman*/*puruṣa*) and its relationship to a cosmic ground of being (*brahman*), of illusion (*māyā*), and of liberation (*mokṣa*) (Eliade 1969: 3). Even the so-called Indian materialists, the Cārvākas, who deny references to all immaterial categories, and therefore repudiate the existence of *karma*, call attention to its dominance by placing the doctrine prominently among their disavowals (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957: 235; Stcherbatsky 1978: 32).

Given its ubiquity, the doctrine is frequently defined by default; in the post-Upaniṣadic period, *karma* means, quite simply, that actions lead inevitably to certain results and that these results are realized after death (O'Flaherty 1980b: xi; Rao 1987: 23). These two components—the effectiveness of action and its realization in a future birth—emerge from the pattern of ritual action deeply embedded in the doctrine's Vedic past; that is, that an action performed in the work of the sacrifice necessarily generates a result and that death and rebirth—even if realized only symbolically—are necessary prerequisites to the realization or acquisition of that result. In the post-Upaniṣadic period, this relationship between act, death, rebirth, and consequence leads to the notion that the nature of the existence into which the individual is reborn—whether measured by form (human or nonhuman), or by class ("caste," a nonindigenous and somewhat misleading substitute for the

general Indic term "*jāti*," literally "birth"), or by circumstance (wealthy, poor, and so on), or alternatively by no rebirth whatsoever—results directly from the deeds performed in a former life.

Although these principles stand as the *karma* doctrine's recognizable core and can be deduced from discussions of *karma* that appear in a wide range of Hindu texts, the doctrine is in application an entity of considerable complexity. In particular, lurking beneath the general depiction of *karma* is the question of what precisely is the nature of action; how is it constituted and how is it qualified. In the Brāhmaṇic-Upaniṣadic milieu actions are qualified on two bases, neither of which excludes the other: by the nature of the action, in and of itself; and by the way in which the action is actually performed. In the first instance, actions are valued on the basis of a general morality; for example, murder may be considered in a general way to represent a "bad" act and hence generates a bad result: "A man who steals gold, drinks liquor, takes to the bed of his teacher, or kills a priest; these four fall, and also the fifth who follows them" (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.9). On the other hand, actions that are "good" in a general way, such as feeding a guest or rewarding a priest for his work in undertaking the sacrificial rituals, clearly leads to a good result (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.23.1). The values associated with these sort of acts—murder, feeding the poor—reflect general mores or values that cross cultural and chronological boundaries; for nearly all cultures at all times have spurned such actions as murder, adultery, and thievery, while they laud acts of charity and munificence.

Along with this notion that certain acts may in and of themselves be qualified as either "good" or "bad" exists the notion of placing a value on actions on the basis of *how* they are performed; that is, whether an action is performed correctly (represented as "good") or incorrectly ("bad"). The principle underlying this valuation is that of a correspondence to an established model of action. In the case of the sacrifice, the model is presented as one of divine provenance: "This [sacrifice] done now is that which the gods did then [in the beginning]" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.2.1.4, 9.2.3.4; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1.5.9.4). Whereas precise imitation—in symbolic if not in actual terms—leads to rich rewards, imprecision leads invariably to disaster (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.3.4.18; see also Keith 1925, 2: 463).

In the Brāhmaṇas, this second model of action is clearly the primary one. Herein, where the action of the sacrifice is the only action contemplated and the actors themselves are defined by their roles (either as priest or as patron) in the ritual performance, the question of the value of actions in and of themselves is not raised. Indeed, within the narrowly defined ethic of the ritual system any act insofar as it fulfills the demands of the ritual, is morally "good"; as the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi observed, "le bien est l'exactitude rituelle" (1966: 10). In the Upaniṣads, however, the limitations of the Brāhmaṇic world begin to yield to a broader set of concerns. Among the signature developments seen in these texts is the movement away from traditional sacrificial forms and toward a pattern of activity in which the sacrifice is "interiorized," as meditative states and the quest for a transformative gnosis replace the physical performance of the sacrifice. One of the early Upaniṣadic presentations of the *karma* doctrine thus draws a distinction between individuals who meditate in the forest and those who sacrifice and give gifts to the priests. Each sort of activity garners its own result; whereas meditation in the forest leads to the acquisition of a certain esoteric knowledge and thus eventually to the path of the gods and freedom from rebirth and sacrifice, giving gifts to the priests leads to the attainment of the path of the fathers and rebirth in this world (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.9–15).

The distinction between these two paths, and the distinct types of activities that lead to them, becomes a leitmotif in the Upaniṣads (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.9–15; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.1–6; *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.1–12; *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.7–11; *Praśna Upaniṣad* 1.9–10, 5.3–4). In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*s, texts with evident connections to the Brāhmaṇas and thus counted among the earliest Upaniṣads, the two paths are described as simple alternatives: meditation in the forest leads the individual after death to a heavenly path that carries him through the sun and eventually to a permanent sojourn in the worlds of Brahmā (the path of the gods); sacrifices, on the other hand, lead the deceased on a path that carries him to the moon and eventually back to rebirth in this world (the path of the fathers). As described here, one path is not elevated above the other, and there is no explicit suggestion that one path is more desirable than the other.

In other Upaniṣadic presentations of these two paths, however, the activity of the sacrifice and the subsequent attainment of the path of the fathers is harshly depreciated: "The fools that consider sacrifices and gifts to be the best, they who know nothing better; having lived in joy in the heavens [after death], enter again this inferior world" (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.10; see also *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.5–6). This denigration of the sacrifice signals a profound change in the ancient Indian worldview, leading eventually to the expression of a deep antipathy to the Vedic ritual tradition (seen in particular in the rise of the heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism). To a great degree, this antipathy develops from the *karma* doctrine's success; that actions inevitably generate results, and that these results are an organic element in an unremitting process of rebirth, weighed heavily as a vast burden, if not sorrow (the Buddhist *dukkha*), on the Indian psyche. Taken to its logical conclusion, this position leads to a paralysis in all actions. And, indeed, numerous ancient Indian traditions seem to have adopted this notion of seeking the cessation of all activity, a position that in practice leads to the dissolution of society if not culture. These traditions are widely represented: Hindu texts describe *yogin*s who practice "inactivity" (Eliade 1969: 140–42); the Buddhist texts refer to seemingly well-known teachers who decry the utility of all activity (E. Thomas 1927: 129); and the Buddha himself, before finding the path to enlightenment, attempts to abandon the world of action (*Buddhacarita* 12.92).

Neither Hinduism nor Buddhism, in the mainstream, adopted the extreme position of abandoning activity for inactivity. Both Hindu and Buddhist texts invariably describe the path of inactivity to exemplify a "wrong" path (Eliade 1969: 140–42; E. Thomas 1927: 129–30). Even the Upaniṣadic depreciation of the sacrifice is not a call to turn to a life of complete stasis; for meditation in the forest is still a form of activity. Moreover, it is an activity built on the framework of the ancient Vedic sacrifices, albeit in a "contemplative, cognitive, and interiorized" fashion; for the Upaniṣadic path of meditation takes the activity of the Vedic sacrifice and internalizes it (Kaelber 1989: 96). Here, the Vedic offerings to the gods are absorbed in the activity of "an 'inner sacrifice,' in which physiological functions take the place of libations and ritual objects" (Eliade 1969: 111). Given this assimilation, it appears that the Upaniṣadic sages direct their disparagement not at the ideology of the sacrifice but at the nature of its performance; in particular, taking an unfavorable view of the corporate and cooperative nature of the traditional Vedic sacrifice.

The traditional sacrificial format is an act of social cooperation with assorted priests working in consort: one priest chants the prayers, another performs certain ritual actions, yet another watches for errors, all at the behest of another actor, the patron who stands at

the edge of the ritual arena but is also intimately identified with the victim, the focal point of the sacrifice. In expressing the intimate association of this group of actors, the Brāhmaṇic authors liken them to a single being, "the patron is the body of the sacrifice and the officiants the limbs" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 9.5.2.16).

The communal performance of the sacrifice engendered its own peculiar set of problems regarding the benefits of the sacrifice; for the deep involvement of the priests, who actually perform the sacrifice and take its inherent danger upon themselves, suggests it is they and not the sacificer who should be the recipients of the sacrificial largesse (Lévi 1966: 113; Tull 1989: 77). To some degree, a resolution to this problem was found in the giving of gifts (*dakṣiṇā*) that closely approximate the offerings to the officiants, thereby allowing the sacrificer to "ransom" the benefits of the sacrifice for his own use (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4.3.4.5–6). Nevertheless, the problematic nature of the "karmic web" created by the traditional sacrificial format remains a troubling factor, as reflected in a number of Brāhmaṇic-Upaniṣadic notions regarding the dispensation of an individual's merit (and demerit) after death; that is, that it is "eaten" or given to the gods and ancestors; or it is passed on to the relatives he holds dear and to the ones he despises; or it is given directly to his offspring (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.16; *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 1.46, 1.50; *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad* 1.2, 2.15).

Against this background, the Upaniṣadic representation of "meditation in the forest" as an acceptable, if not superior, alternative to the traditional sacrificial performances indicates a significant sociological and soteriological shift in the ancient Hindu way of life. For, unlike the traditional sacrificial format with its complex web of actors, meditation in the forest is clearly a path of individual attainment, a point underscored by the fact that it is undertaken beyond the pale of the ordinary social life of village and town. Although the model of action underlying meditation in the forest is still the sacrifice—albeit in an internalized form—the rigid social web necessary for the traditional sacrificial performances is collapsed, and these circumstances are mirrored in the conditions of the afterlife. On one level, this collapse eliminates the need to disperse the sacrifice's consequences (in this world and after death); for just as the path of meditation is an individual path, so too the acquisition of its consequences belongs wholly to the individual. On another level, by removing themselves from normal social intercourse, those who follow this path remain even after death outside the ordinary world; accordingly, after death there is "no return" for them (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.15).

In the post-Upaniṣadic period, the practice of *yoga* is the direct successor to "meditation in the forest." The fundamental purpose of *yoga* is the suppression of the body's and mind's involvement in the ordinary, everyday world of existence. To achieve this goal, the *yogin* disciplines his mind and body using highly developed techniques of breath control, concentration, and body postures. Through this discipline, the *yogin* no longer confuses the "noneternal with the eternal" (*Yogasūtra* 2.5) and eventually gains a state of "ultimate freedom," in which his inner being (*ātman*/*jīva*/*puruṣa*) is liberated from all material existence (Radhakrishnan 1931: 351, 363).

Among the explicit concerns of those who follow this discipline is the breaking of the karmic process. This process begins with desire and continues to build up through attachment to the things of this world. Acting on these desires creates good and bad results, the realization of which then carries the individual through an unremitting cycle of birth and rebirth (*Yogasūtra* 2.12–14). These notions clearly represent *karma* in a pejorative light; for

it is the link between act and results that keeps the actor in a state of nescience. Awareness, and with it freedom from rebirth, is won only when this cycle is broken. Nevertheless, the discipline of *yoga* is not built on a model of inaction but on one of "right action," a path that leads ultimately to the cessation of action. Thus, initially, the *yogin* adopts a set of precepts or "restraints" (*yama*) that have broad moral implications: nonviolence, truthfulness, not-stealing, chastity, and the renunciation of material objects. The ethical tenor of these restraints is a universal one, focusing on the nature of action in and of itself. At first, the purpose of these restraints is to push the individual toward the "good" and thus to generate "good *karma*." However, as the discipline proceeds, the *yogin* seeks to generate no *karma* whatsoever (*Yogasūtra* 4.7). However, since this is accomplished in the ordinary world of existence, the *yogin*'s "awakening" occurs while there is still a karmic residue, a state known as "liberated-in-this-life" (*jīvanmukti*). When this residue is consumed, freedom from ordinary existence is won and no further rebirths occur (Eliade 1969: 30).

Like the Upaniṣadic meditator, the *yogin* eventually must remove himself from the ordinary world of everyday existence, engaging in a discipline that necessarily leaves aside all familial and societal relationships. Although by the first century CE, the practice of *yoga* attained considerable cultural prestige in India (Eliade 1969: 143), the demands of this discipline put it out of reach for all but a few religious specialists. Nevertheless, its existence as an ideal serves as a constant reminder that a significant segment of the Hindu population viewed the *karma* doctrine as an oppressive structure. The path leading to its escape, however, is one that necessarily leads away from society and ordinary existence; for fundamental to the *karma* doctrine is the proposition that the conditions of an individual's existence are invariably mirrored in the conditions of future lives. In other worlds, involvement in the ordinary world of everyday existence necessarily means a return after death to that same world of existence. Its negation, though it leads to personal freedom, necessarily requires individuals to remove themselves from the world of mundane affairs, participation in which is a natural element of human existence. In the end, it also leads to the dissolution of the social fabric.

KARMA AND SOCIETY

The Hindu texts reflect a clear awareness that the elevation of "meditation in the forest" and the path of *yoga* which succeed it as a viable means of life lead to the demise of society; for they promote a way of life that nullifies an individual's need as well as ability to meet his or her social responsibilities, from raising a family to undertaking the sort of labor—farming, trade, soldiering—that allows for society's continued existence. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, perhaps the most widely disseminated and certainly the single most influential Hindu text in India, contains among its deeply layered teachings what is clearly a direct response to this problem. Here, in a position that became the dominant one in the orthodox tradition, action is enjoined with the significant caveat that an individual should do the work ordained by his or her nature (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.8). This last notion refers to the underlying Hindu ideology of "caste" or class (*jāti*); that is, that individuals possess inherent qualities that constitute them into specific sorts of social beings. These are defined as four types that, in accord with their inherent qualities, are possessed of a signature set of duties: priest (Brāhmaṇ), warrior (Kṣatriya), commoner (Vaiśya), and servant (Śūdra).

The discussion of Hindu society as composed of four component classes and the duties and activities assigned to each class is the chief topic of a class of texts collectively known as the Hindu law books or Dharmaśāstras. These texts became authoritative sometime in the early centuries CE but encompass directives that reach back to the Vedic period. (The ideology of caste is extant in the Vedic period [see *Ṛg Veda* 10.90], though given the limited concerns of the Brāhmaṇic-Upaniṣadic milieu, it is rarely discussed.) The *Manusmṛti*, which stands out among the texts in this class as a work of singular authority (Doniger 1991: xviii), expresses from its outset that its purpose is to explicate the duties associated with each of the classes (*Manusmṛti* 1.2). These duties are:

> For priests, he [the lord] ordained teaching and learning, sacrificing for themselves and sacrificing for others, giving and receiving. Protecting his subjects, giving, having sacrifices performed, studying and remaining unaddicted to the sensory objects are, in summary, for a ruler. Protecting his livestock, giving, having sacrifices performed, studying, trading, lending money, and farming the land are for a commoner. The lord assigned only one activity to a servant: serving these [other] classes without resentment.
>
> (*Manusmṛti* 1.88–91)

Following closely on this idea that each class possesses a unique and definitive set of duties is the notion that certain *actions* are either incumbent upon or prohibited to the members of each social class. On one level, these notions redefine the *karma* doctrine; for they place a value on actions in accord with the parameters set forth by the duties of each social class. In concrete terms, this means that, for example, killing an enemy is for a warrior a "good" act, whereas for a priest it is a "bad" act. On another level, however, these notions may be seen as a return to the dominant Brāhmaṇic-Upaniṣadic pattern of valuing actions on the basis of their conformity to an established model (which, as the *Manusmṛti* expresses, is a divine one); for, insofar as individuals perform actions that replicate those ordained for the class to which they belong, those actions are "good" and so generate a good result: "Tirelessly he should engage in the good conduct appropriate for his own activities" (*Manusmṛti* 5.155).

An individual does not choose to become a member of a particular class but is by birth constituted as a member of a class. This is not a random process but occurs as a result of the deeds (*karman*) of a previous lifetime. As described in the *Manusmṛti*, the process that carries these deeds through successive rebirth begins at death, as the individual's material body returns to the five elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Following this, another material body, to be used in a temporary otherworldly existence, is formed from the five elements. Those whose deeds were "lawful" (*dharma*) or "good" now enjoy a temporary sojourn in heaven, whereas those whose deeds were "unlawful" (*adharma*) or "bad" go forth to suffer the tortures of hell (*Manusmṛti* 12.16–21). It is important to point out that the terms used here, "*dharma*" and "*adharma*," suggest a valuation of deeds based on their conformity to or violation of specific class rules of behavior, such as performing a sacrifice for a priest, fighting in war for a warrior, and engaging in trade for a merchant.

Following this temporary period of reward or punishment, the body again returns to the five elements. The three qualities of lucidity, energy, and darkness now play a determinant role leading up to the individual's next birth. The authors of the *Manusmṛti* first describe

this process in brief: "people of lucidity become gods, people of energy become humans, and people of darkness always become animals" (*Manusmṛti* 12.40). To accommodate the full breadth of individual behaviors, which variously mixes good with bad actions, each of these three types admits to three orders, low, medium, and high; thus, rebirth as a god (for those in whom lucidity prevails) ranges from priests and gods who fly on chariots all the way to the supreme godhead, Brahmā; rebirth as a human (for those in whom energy prevails) ranges from wrestlers and kings to the celestial nymphs; and rebirth as an animal (for those in whom darkness prevails) ranges from worms and horses to ogres.

Having set out this general theory of how actions in one life lead to the conditions of a future life, the authors of the *Manusmṛti* present a detailed list of specific acts and their specific results. The list begins with the fruits of bad actions: "A priest killer gets the womb of a dog, a pig, a donkey, a camel, a goat. . . . A priest who drinks liquor enters the womb of a worm. . . . For stealing grain, a man becomes a rat. . . . For meat, a vulture. . . . Whenever a man has forcibly taken away another man's property . . . he inevitably becomes an animal" (*Manusmṛti* 12.55–68). Here, the underlying mechanism of the *karma* doctrine appears to be a concrete relationship between cause and effect; in essence the punishment fits the crime. The authors of the text thus declare: "a man reaps the appropriate fruit in a body that has the qualities of mind in which he committed that act" (*Manusmṛti* 12.81). Once again, the acts described here—adultery, being disrespectful to elders and teachers—and the negative consequences they engender, perhaps indicate a valuation of actions based on the type of action performed. However, the authors of the text note specifically that the nature of the actor—as defined by class (priest, warrior, and so forth)—is a critical factor in determining the valuation of these acts, as they declare that priests, rulers, commoners, or servants who "slip from their own duty" suffer as ghosts after death (*Manusmṛti* 12.71–72).

The notion that the value of actions lies in the performance of class-specific duties is deeply embedded in the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This text, composed around the second century BCE, integrates and offers fresh interpretations of a number of significant trends from Hinduism's formative period, among them sacrifice, meditation and *yoga*, the relationship of the individual to the cosmos, the nature of the godhead, and, of course, the nature of action (*karman*) and duty (*dharma*), the subject presented as the ostensible concern of the text's opening scenes.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* begins with a description of the warrior Arjuna standing amidst the great warriors of his day, nearly all of whom are either kinsmen or friends, arrayed into battle formations. As a fighter without peer, Arjuna foresees the immense carnage and destruction that will ensue from his involvement in the battle and suddenly realizes the purposelessness of "winning" on these grounds. In what stands among the most poignant scenes in all Hindu literature, Arjuna's eyes fill with tears, his bow and arrows slip from his hands. He turns to his charioteer, Kṛṣṇa (the supreme divinity, though as yet unknown to Arjuna in this form), and declares that the forthcoming war is nothing more than a monstrous evil, even suggesting that a life of mendicancy is preferable to engaging in all out warfare. Kṛṣṇa, however, responds to Arjuna's despondency with contempt, observing that Arjuna's reasoning is that of a coward, unmanly, and inappropriate for a warrior. Kṛṣṇa then declares (after first delivering a lengthy discourse on the nature of the underlying ego element and its relationship to the phenomenal world) that: "It is better to do one's own duty, though ineffectively, than to perform another's duty as it should be

done; it is better to die in following one's own duty; dangerous is the duty of other men" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.35). At the end of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, this statement is again repeated, albeit with the added caveat that an individual, by doing the work (*karman*) appropriate to his or her class, can never be defiled.

Arjuna's dilemma arises from the coexistence of the two models of action within the *karma* doctrine. The first model, that of valuing actions in and of themselves, suggests Arjuna's actions are "bad"; for, in a general way, killing represents a "bad" action and thus can only have a bad outcome. The second model, that of valuing action based on the degree to which it replicates a preordained pattern of activity, suggests Arjuna's actions are "good" insofar as killing is the model behavior for a warrior on the battlefield; as Kṛṣṇa tells him, not to perform these prescribed actions is "dangerous."

Here again, this second model of action hearkens back to the doctrine's origins in the Vedic sacrificial performance. Just as the Vedic sacrificers won the goods of life through following a particular model of action, so too the *karma* doctrine demands that to achieve the good, actors must follow the model of action inherent to their class. Yet, there is an obvious conflict between this model of action and the general ethical precept regarding killing. This conflict was a troubling fact for the Vedic religionists who sought, through the artifice of ritualization, to avoid the killing demanded by the act of sacrifice. In Upaniṣadic thought and its successor the discipline of *yoga*, this conflict is subsumed through the internalization of action, effectively removing the individual from the world of physical performance. That this conflict appears again as an underlying theme in the *Bhagavad Gītā* clearly indicates that over the centuries it persisted unresolved in Hindu thought.[5]

The authors of the *Bhagavad Gītā* propose a unique solution to this problem of what might be termed "necessary evil" actions by uniting the two streams of yogic practice and sacrificial action. Yogic practice, on the one hand, seeks the renunciation of desire as a means of breaking away from attachment to things of this world, thereby breaking the cycle of rebirth. The path of the sacrifice, on the other hand, enjoins individuals to perform the ritual acts and to enjoy their fruits, thereby keeping them in the cycle of rebirth. Kṛṣṇa, whose teachings constitute the bulk of the narrative of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, recognizes both positions, declaring, on the one hand, that sacrifice leads to "highest good" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.11) while, on the other hand, noting that the "man who, having abandoned desires, goes about free from desires . . . attains a state of peace" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.71). Kṛṣṇa then brings the two paths together, proclaiming that a man should act in the world—for this is mandated by human nature (which in India is further defined by an individual's class: priest, warrior, and so forth)—but that he should take no interest in the results of his actions: "Thus detached, carry out the actions that must be done; for the man who carries out actions unattached, gains the highest goal" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.19).

The path recommended here is inherently contradictory. For, in essence, it recommends that an individual remain in society, perform the duties incumbent upon him, while at the same time it demands that he act like the *yogin* who has removed himself from the attachments of ordinary existence. To overcome this contradiction, the authors of the *Bhagavad Gītā* introduce a novel understanding of the *karma* doctrine, separating actions from the results that, according to the doctrine, they necessarily generate: "Action (*karman*) alone is your primary concern, not the consequences (*phala*)" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.47). Taking this one step further, the fruits are to be offered up—in effect, renounced—and given over to

the deity (*Bhagavad Gītā* 9.26), who accepts them as a concrete manifestation of man's love and devotion (*bhakti*) to him (4.11).

These teachings do not negate the *karma* doctrine's fundamental premise that certain actions generate certain results. Rather, they promote the notion that these results need not bind the individual actor to a karmic chain in which "bad" actions such as killing necessarily lead to a "bad" result. Through offering up the results to the deity (in effect, a sacrifice, itself a defining element in the constitution of the *karma* doctrine), actors win the same type of freedom as that won by those who follow the path of renunciation. In this way, the conflict of action is resolved; and the authors of the *Bhagavad Gītā* can unaffectedly recommend that individuals "perform the actions [they] are bound to do [by their inherent nature]" (3.8).

KARMA AND THE HINDU WORLD

In separate studies, Ursula Sharma (1973) and C. J. Fuller (1992) have noted that although the classical formulation of the *karma* doctrine is well known in popular Hinduism, ideas about *karma* on this level sometimes exhibit significant variations. This is not surprising given that in practice, as Sharma notes, "the individual receives the concept of *karma* as part of a living folk tradition" (1973: 359). This living tradition is built up out of both textual and nontextual sources; the textual generally represented by the epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*c.*200 BCE to 200 CE), and a class of texts known as Purāṇas (*c.*400–1000 CE), which are amalgamations of devotional, social, and quasihistorical material, and the nontextual by innumerable parochial traditions localized throughout the Indian subcontinent. On this level, *karma* is not an isolated concept but is frequently joined with other concepts that suggest different types of causes for an individual's circumstances. These include fate, the will of the deity, and sorcery (Sharma 1973: 355).

Perhaps the most significant divergence between the popular and textual renditions of the *karma* doctrine is that in practice Hindus tend to see events—in particular those that contain elements of misfortune or are in some sense tragic—as being the karmic results of deeds performed in *this* lifetime. Though on this level Hindus do not deny the connection between *karma* and rebirth, they seemingly pay scant attention to it (Fuller 1992: 246–48; U. Sharma 1973: 351, 353, 356; see also M. Srinivas 1976: 317–18). At the very least, as U. Sharma notes, in village Hinduism, Hindus "seem to feel immediate responsibility only for offenses committed in the present incarnation"; offenses from past incarnations belong to "a rather remote kind of self" (1973: 356). Although in its classical formulations the doctrine is nearly always presented as linking actions performed in one life with consequences to be realized in future births, there are textual references to the notion that actions might generate immediately realized consequences. Thus, in the *Manusmṛti* (4.156–57) it is said that good conduct (*caraṇa*), such as maintaining habits of cleanliness and showing respect to teachers and guests, leads to longevity, progeny, and wealth, whereas bad conduct results in illness and a short life. Although the term used here is "conduct" (*caraṇa*) rather than "action" (*karman*), the determinative relationship between act and consequence is in essence that of the *karma* doctrine.

The notion of the "transfer" or sharing of *karma* is another peculiar aspect of the *karma* doctrine that appears with some frequency on the popular level. In evidence of this, Fuller

cites a village's general response to a devastating fire. Overall, the villagers perceived the fire to be a result of the recent sins of the village leaders. However, they also saw the fire as retribution for the villagers' accumulated sins, a proposition suggestive of a group enactment of *karma*; "the fruits of the sins of some especially evil people had been visited on others, just as a boatload of passengers can all drown if one awful sinner is on board" (Fuller 1992: 247). In a similar vein, U. Sharma cites an example in which a villager claims he was unhurt in a truck accident because "someone among the company must have had a very good *karma* to counteract the danger of the situation" (1973: 353). Both Fuller (1992: 248) and U. Sharma (1973: 352) observe that this idea of transference is especially effective among kin groups; in particular between a husband and wife—though a man's good and bad *karma* accrues to his wife, while none of the wife's *karma* accrues to the husband.

The transference of merit between family members recalls the Upaniṣadic notion that the deceased disperses his good and bad deeds to his kin (those he likes and those he dislikes, respectively). In the Purāṇas, the transfer of merit and demerit is represented with some regularity; the mistreatment of a guest, for example, is said to result in the guest taking the good *karma* of the host and giving his bad *karma* in return (O'Flaherty1980c: 29; cf. *Manusmṛti* 3.100). In a similar vein, the authors of the *Manusmṛti* (8.308) declare that a king who unjustly taxes his subjects acquires as a result their collective demerit. These representations stand as an emphatic reminder of the doctrine's origins in the Vedic sacrifice, which is enacted as a corporate event and so garners results for all the participants (the patron and the officiants). Indeed, on a larger scale, the good results of the correctly performed Vedic rites—that is, "the offering of a cow to win more cows"—benefits not just those who perform the sacrifice but is also shared among the larger community of family and settlement.

On its surface, however, this idea of a sharing or transfer of *karma* appears to contradict the doctrine's fundamental premises; as E. Hopkins observed: "Obviously such a view as this is inconsistent with the doctrine of Karma. If a man's sin is inherited it cannot be the fruit of his own actions" (1906: 589). That the idea of transferring *karma* was problematic, as E. Hopkins suggests, can be seen in the negative references to it in the epics. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.27.4–5), a husband and wife alone are said to share *karma* and all other kinsmen are specifically excluded; in the *Mahābhārata* (12.291.22), it is said that it is impossible for anyone to enjoy the good and bad acts of another. (However, the *Mahābhārata* [1(7)87] also contains a reference to a sage who offers to transfer to a king all the worlds he has won through his own meritorious acts.) The negative view of *karma* transference in these texts may reflect the influence of the general yogic philosophy that isolates the individual as he strives to perfect and eventually conquer his *karma*. In both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, yogic activity is frequently portrayed as an ideal behavior, providing a sharp counterpoint to the worldly concerns of the warrior kings whose stories form the backbone of the epics.

In a general way, the reliance on *karma* allows Hindus to account for their existential circumstances. The relationship between act and result, however, ranges from the obvious to instances of sheer opacity. An example of the latter case can be seen in a tale recounted in the *Mahābhārata* of the grisly punishment meted out to a certain sage. The narrative begins by describing a sage who unknowingly has his hermitage occupied by a group of thieves. The king's guards, having followed the thieves to the hermitage, seize both

thieves and sage. Failing to receive any answers from the sage, who has taken a vow of silence, the guards take the entire group before the king who sentences them to be impaled on stakes. Though impaled, the sage remains alive for a long period of time. Eventually, the king realizes his error and begs forgiveness from the sage. The stake however is irremovable, and the sage is forced to spend the rest of his days wandering about with it still inside him. After many years of suffering in this condition, the sage approaches the lord Dharma and asks him why he had been punished so harshly. Dharma responds by informing him that in a former life "You had stuck blades of grass in the tails of little flies, and this was the punishment you received for that deed" (*Mahābhārata* 1[7]101; van Buitenen 1973–78, 1: 238). Though eventually the god Dharma is punished for meting out this penalty that it is so far in excess of the sin ("hurting a fly") that led to it, the tale indicates that no simple equations exist to determine an individual's karmic fate. Here, the apparent severity of the punishment may hearken back to the notion expressed in the Dharma texts and in the *Bhagavad Gītā* regarding the importance of each individual performing the actions appropriate to his class. The sage, who is undoubtedly a member of the Brāhmaṇ class, receives this severe punishment for hurting flies because it so deeply violates the general prohibition against violence for Brāhmaṇs. A member of the warrior class would perhaps not receive the same punishment, for this act would not violate his class duties as it does a priest's.

On the other hand, in the Purāṇas, texts that generally exhibit a nearly manic concern with *karma* and its effects on future lives, the relationship between deed and effect is quite direct; a typical passage from one text thus depicts the servants of the king of the underworld as meting out punishments that are correlated precisely to the nature of the deed: "Pierce the ears of him who has given false evidence. . . . Cut off the tongue of the man who has offended anyone by his words. . . . Cut off the . . . [genitals] of the man who has committed adultery" (*Vāraha Purāṇa* 202.10–13; Iyer 1993: 619). Passages such as this seem to occur ad infinitum in these texts, for there are "hundreds and hundreds" of hells (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.26.37), each one with its punishments correlated to specific wrong acts. This pattern continues as the individual attains another birth; thus, for example, dealers in flesh, after suffering the torments of the underworld, "take birth as human beings again, but with mutilated limbs and immersed in injury. Because of their actions, they meet with injuries in the ear, nose, hands and feet" (*Vāraha Purāṇa* 203.13–15; Iyer 1993: 623–24).

Despite the dire conditions depicted here, the *karma* doctrine is not seen in the Purāṇas as an overwhelmingly oppressive structure. On one level, the Purāṇic authors recognize that good deeds lead to good and just rewards and that those who follow this path attain "happiness in heaven and other pleasures" and that these can be enjoyed through numerous lifetimes (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 6.1.2). On another level, the authors of these texts look to the gods for the alleviation of human suffering, even though that suffering is generated by unworthy deeds. In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a story is told of a certain Brāhmaṇ, said to be well versed in the Vedic lore, who becomes infatuated with a low-class prostitute. The Brāhmaṇ eventually abandons his wife and family, sells his ancestral property, and leads "a licentious life censured by noble persons . . . in an impure condition and eating dirty (polluted by a harlot's touch) food" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 6.1.67–68; Tagare 1993: 782). After many years of living in this state, the fallen Brāhmaṇ approaches his death, while the servants of Yama (the god of death) wait anxiously for their chance to drag him to hell. However, with his last breath the fallen Brāhmaṇ utters, in evidence of his deep

devotion, the name of the god Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu, in turn, rescues him from Yama's servants, granting him not only expiation for his sins but also declaring that he has atoned for his sins from thousands of past lifetimes (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 6.2.7). According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (6.2.5), the god's intervention here is not only a reward for his devotion but also reflects the god's assurance that the common man who "does not understand, of his own accord, what is righteousness and unrighteousness" is not punished undeservedly.

On the popular level, too, the interweaving of *karma* with notions of fate and divine intervention temper for ordinary Hindus the oppressiveness suggested by the doctrine's supposition of the inevitable and inescapable retributive effects of actions (Fuller 1992: 249; U. Sharma 1973: 357). Although, as Fuller notes, on this level, *karma* is rarely denied, its acceptance as the one and only cause of an individual's circumstances tends to reflect certain societal factors as much as it does deeply embedded structures of belief. Thus, women, members of low castes, the poor, and the uneducated tend not to explain misfortune in terms of *karma*; rather, belief in the absolute efficacy of *karma* dominates that segment of society, the "socioreligious elite," who have at least some understanding of its textual validity (Fuller 1992: 250). Fuller suggests that given the complex of causal agents ordinary Hindus rely on to explain their circumstances, "in popular Hinduism, *karma* does not enjoy the currency that its fame might suggest" (1992: 250). However, it may also be the case that the doctrine's fame may have caused it, over the centuries, to become embedded—though certainly not lost—within this larger complex of causality. Given its extraordinarily deep roots in the Hindu world, the doctrine may have been, and almost certainly still remains, the defining factor for a worldview that sees causal links—karmic or otherwise—as a central tenet of existence.

CONCLUSION

A well-known Vedic myth recounts how the ancient sacrificer Bhṛgu journeyed to the other worlds, where he observes the horrifying sight of men eating men. Returning to this world, he seeks out his father for an explanation. Bhṛgu learns from his father that the men who eat other men in these worlds are the trees, animals, and plants that are eaten in this world; and the men who are eaten there are the men that ate and used these things in this world (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.6.1.1–13; *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 1.42–44; O'Flaherty 1985: 32–37). This tale, which almost certainly predates the articulation of the *karma* doctrine, is reminiscent of Western depictions of the punishments of hell, where blasphemers hang by their tongues or eat fiery coals; adulterers hang by their genitals; and those who defiled their bodies in life are maimed even in death as they are repeatedly cast from a precipice (*Apocalypse* of Peter 22–32; Gaster 1893: 602–3). In both cases, the Hindu and the non-Hindu, these images appear to be simple effects that reverse and punish actions performed in this world. Yet, there is a critical difference between these depictions, in particular, in the understanding of action and its valuation. On the one hand, the non-Hindu representation of sinners being punished for defiling the body, blasphemy, and adultery suggests a clear-cut valuation of certain actions based on specific ethical mores; thus, not all sexual relations but a certain type of sexual relationship, adultery; not all types of speech but a particular type of speech, blasphemy, are reviled here. On the other hand, the

Hindu representation of punishments being meted out for eating meat and for the use of plants and wood suggests a broad characterization that values actions without regard to their context; that these acts are necessary for survival does not mitigate for the Hindu thinkers the violence and killing they entail and the potential consequences they engender. Herein lies the potential to indict all acts and, along with it, the establishment of an unbearable psychic burden. Taken to its extremes, this burden cannot be relieved until the cessation of all activity is achieved, a goal that is as unattainable in practical terms as it is undesirable.

The Hindu *karma* doctrine removes at least to some degree the onus of action by valuing acts not in and of themselves but in relationship to the actor who performs them. Accordingly, despite the burdens it places on the individual, the Hindu thinkers enjoined action; as the authors of the *Bhagavad Gītā* long ago declared: "even though it is tainted, a man should never abandon the work (*karman*) to which he is born" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.48). This relationship between act and actor—carried through an unremitting process of rebirth—lies at the heart of the Hindu *karma* doctrine: "That which they spoke about was action (*karman*) and that which they praised was action: one indeed becomes good by good action, bad by bad [action]" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.13).

NOTES

1 Although the Brāhmaṇas stand as the conceptual as well as the chronological center of the Vedic texts, the first generation of Western scholars to examine them had an unfortunate tendency to view their richly symbolic (and often abstruse) language as evidence of intellectual degeneracy, if not debility (E. Hopkins 1895: 199; Müller 1926: 228; Whitney 1873: 69); a situation that spelled certain doom for the fruitful investigation of these texts as the source of the Hindu doctrine of *karma* (Tull 1989: 14–19). Thus, Müller famously characterized the Brāhmaṇas as "simply twaddle, and what is worse, theological twaddle" (1867: 116); a characterization repeated ad infinitum by a number of great Indologists: "puerile, arid, [and] inane" (Lanman 1884: 357); "monuments of tediousness and intrinsic stupidity" (Bloomfield 1908: 44); "[unequaled] for wearisome prolixity of expression . . . rather than by serious reasoning" (Eggeling 1882: ix).

2 To circumvent the death of the sacrificer in the sacrifice, the Vedic religionists employed a substitute, frequently an animal, with whom the sacrificer was identified through various ritual subterfuges. One means of achieving this was through correlating the implements used in the sacrifice to the sacrificer's physical proportions; the Brāhmaṇic authors thus asserted that: "the man arranges the sacrifice to the same extent as a man; therefore the sacrifice is a man" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.3.2.1, 3.5.3.1). This process of identification is problematic, however. In one instance it leads the Brāhmaṇic authors to forbid the sacrificer from eating the offering; for, through the symbolic connection of sacrificer and victim, such a meal implicitly suggests autophagy (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2.3; *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 10.3; *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 6.1.11.6). In another instance, the Brāhmaṇic authors express uncertainty over whether or not the sacrificer should touch the victim who stands in his place. Whereas distance may indemnify the sacrificer from the killing of the victim, proximity is needed to ensure the establishment of a firm identification between sacrificer and victim: "Now they say: 'There [should] be no touching [of the victim] by the sacrificer; for they lead it to death. Thus he should not touch it!' But he should touch it; for what they lead by the sacrifice they do not lead to death. Thus he should touch it. For indeed when it is not touched he excludes his own self from the sacrifice; therefore he should touch it" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.8.1.10).

3 This emphasis on process underlies the development of the Vedic sacrifice into a complex system of strict ritual forms—into what Staal has called, "the richest, most elaborate and most complete

among the rituals of mankind" (1980: 122)—a development that stands as the driving force of the Brāhmaṇa period. On one level, ritualization ameliorates the danger of the sacrifice; for the ritual sphere represents a world unto itself (indeed, the Vedic sacrifice takes place within a specific arena, a physically established ritual space), thereby granting the ritualists freedom to attribute new meanings to their actions. For example, the killing that occurs as the central element in the sacrifice becomes in the ritual world not a killing at all, as the Brāhmaṇic authors assert: "That which they lead to the sacrifice they do not lead to death" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.8.1.10; see also *Ṛg Veda* 1.162.21) or that "One does not say: 'He strikes [the victim], he kills it' . . . but that [the victim] 'went away' " (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.8.1.15). On another level, ritualization—insofar as the ritual events are correctly enacted—ensures that the sacrifice will yield its desired goal; just as the primordial model yielded a certain result, so too every sacrifice that follows it yields its reward. As evidence of the workings of the ritual, the Brāhmaṇic authors frequently refer to ancient sacrificers who benefited from the sacrifice and present lists of the goods of life that can be acquired "automatically" through its performance (see *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.6.2.7; Keith 1925, 2: 463). However, that the sacrifice—once ritualized—guarantees a result is, as already noted, a double-edged sword; for the failure to properly enact it leads potentially to disaster.

4 In the Vedic ritual system, the sacrifices are ordered according to the complexity of their performance, each succeeding ritual presupposes elements from—and the performance of—its antecedents (see Staal 1980: 125). Those who lived to the greatest age thus performed sacrifices of the greatest complexity and thereby won the greatest rewards (see *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.2.6.8, 10.1.5.4).

5 The general confusion and lack of resolution that long dogged this conflict in Hindu India can be seen in a discussion of meat eating and sacrifice that occurs in the *Manusmṛti*. The authors of this text note first that: "A twice-born person who knows the true meaning of the Vedas and injures sacrificial animals for these [correct] purposes causes both himself and the animal to go to the highest level of existence"; and then, a few stanzas later, appear to reverse this position as they observe that the "killing of creatures with the breath of life does not get you to heaven" (*Manusmṛti* 5.42, 5.45). Finally, rather than take a hard stance indicating a preference for one model of action over the other, the authors of the text state that the rewards gained by the man who performs a horse sacrifice every year for a hundred years are the same as that gained by the man who abstains from meat eating (*Manusmṛti* 5.53).