

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** The Universal House of Justice

**Date:** 5 September 2006

**From:** Research Department

### **Bahá'í Perspective on the Concept of "Karma"**

The Research Department has studied the email letter dated 5 August 2006 from .... She states that she has been unable to find the Bahá'í view of "karma" using the Bahá'í sources to which she has access, and she wonders whether the term appears in the Bahá'í teachings or whether there is a parallel in the Bahá'í terminology for it. She explains that she has many friends in esoteric and non-esoteric circles who speak of karma as something quite normal and important. If we understand correctly, she would like to be able to relate to her friends better by having an accurate understanding of the Bahá'í perspective on this concept.

We do not have enough information to know how ... and her friends define and use the term "karma". It might be helpful to begin, therefore, by drawing attention to the following explanation of the "law of karma" in Hinduism and Buddhism that appears in Moojan Momen's "The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach":

Whatever suffering falls to a person is the result of past actions by that person. The law of karma in Hinduism and Buddhism is a law of cause and effect. Every event that occurs is caused by previous events. If suffering occurs in the life of a person, then this has been caused by evil deeds done by that person in the past. With the concept of reincarnation or rebirth, "the past" includes past lives.<sup>1</sup>

As it is outlined above, the concept of karma is based upon the view that our present suffering is the result of the evil deeds we have committed in the past. On the other hand, ... is doubtlessly familiar with statements scattered throughout the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of human suffering and its multiple causes. For example,

O SON OF MAN!

If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure? If trials afflict thee not in thy longing to meet Me, how wilt thou attain the light in thy love for My beauty?

The Hidden Words (Arabic), no. 50

O SON OF MAN!

My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an

---

<sup>1</sup> Moojan Momen, "The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach" (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 215.

eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it.

The Hidden Words (Arabic), no. 51

Thou hast questioned concerning ordeals and difficulties and catastrophies: "Are these from God or the result of man's (own) evil deeds?"

Know thou that ordeals are of two kinds: One kind is for trial (to test the soul), and the other is punishment for actions. ("As a man soweth so shall he also reap.") That which is for testing is educational and developmental and that which is the punishment of deeds is severe retribution.

The father and the teacher sometimes humor the children and then again discipline them. This discipline is for educational purposes and is indeed to give them true happiness; it is absolute kindness and true providence. Although in appearance it is wrath yet in reality it is kindness. Although outwardly it is an ordeal yet inwardly it is purifying water.

Verily, in both cases we must supplicate and implore and commune to the divine Threshold in order to be patient in ordeals.

(From a Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to an individual believer, translated 27 July 1909, in "Star of the West", vol. 8, no. 18, p. 235)

Regarding your question about prayer and the fact that some of our problems are not solved through prayer, we must always realize that life brings to us many situations, some of which are tests sent from God to train our characters, some of which are accidental because we live in the world of nature and are subject to the accidents of death, disease, etc., and some of which we bring on ourselves by folly, selfishness or some other weak human trait.

(18 March 1951 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

...there are calamities for testing and for punishment—there are also accidents, plain cause and effect!

(19 March 1946 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

As she may be aware, the concepts of "karma" and "reincarnation" as outlined above are not supported in the Bahá'í teachings, although there is some element of truth to each of them. In the following extract from a letter written on his behalf, for example, Shoghi Effendi illuminates the Bahá'í perspective on the concept of reincarnation by highlighting the "great truth" upon which this ancient belief is based and alluding to erroneous "man-made doctrines" that have grown up around it:

Regarding your question about reincarnation: we Bahá'ís do not believe that one individual soul keeps returning to this earthly life in different bodies. This is a very ancient belief, and based on a great truth—namely that the soul does go on developing and unfolding and returning towards its Creator. But the concept of its returning to this physical world is erroneous, and an outgrowth of man-made

doctrines which have grown up about the fundamental concept of the progress of the soul. It would be like putting the child over and over again back into the world of the womb. It is unnecessary; but from state to state spiritually, after death, the soul does go on and go higher, so to speak.

(26 December 1948 to two individual believers)