

HINDU CONCEPTS OF TIME

I am time grown old to destroy the world,
Embarked on the course of world annihilation:
Except for yourself none of these will survive,
Of these warriors arrayed in opposite armies.

Raise yourself now and reap rich fame,
Rule the plentiful realm by defeating your foes!
I myself have doomed them ages ago:
Be merely my hand in this, Left-handed Archer!

*God speaking to Arjuna
The Bhagavad Gita*

I start with the simple and intuitive notion that the past determines the present and the present determines the future. This is true in Hinduism as it is in psychoanalysis. Time in Hinduism is considered to be cyclical rather than linear. Time is viewed as vast cycles that repeat infinitely. Four fundamental concepts of Hinduism—*Samsara*, *Karma*, *Dharma* and *Moksha*—introduce us to the concept of time in Hinduism. These concepts outline the Hindu existential position and draw the trajectory of an individual life through the vast cycles of time.

The Story of Indra and the Parade of the Ants¹

Indra, king of the gods, slew the great demon. By killing the demon, Indra reestablished the power of the gods in heaven. To commemorate his victory, he employed the divine architect

¹ As retold by Heinrich Zimmer in *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Princeton University Press, 1974.

Vishvakarman to build a city worthy of the gods in heaven. Vishvakarman applied himself and built a beautiful city. Yet Indra was not satisfied. He wanted more splendor and grandeur. Indra's demands increased to the point that Vishvakarman, exhausted and frustrated by Indra's demands, sought help from the supreme deity, Vishnu. Having heard the architect's plight, Vishnu nodded, indicating that he would take care of the situation.

The next day, Vishnu, in the form of a young boy, came to visit Indra. The boy admired his palace and the new city Indra was building. He sang praises to Indra and his accomplishments in heaven. He then asked Indra how much longer it would take to finish the task. He told him that no other Indra before him had built such a magnificent city.

Full of the wine of triumph, the king of the gods was entertained by the mere boy's pretension to knowledge of Indras earlier than himself. With a fatherly smile, he put the question: 'Tell me, Child! Are they then so very many, the Indras and Vishvakarmans whom you have seen-or at least, whom you have heard of?' The wonderful guest calmly nodded. 'Yes, indeed, many have I seen...O King of Gods, I have known the dreadful dissolution of the universe. I have seen all perish, again and again, at the end of every cycle. At that terrible time, every single atom dissolves into the primal, pure waters of eternity, whence originally all arose. Everything then goes back into the fathomless, wild infinity of the ocean, which is covered with utter darkness and is empty of every sign of animate being. Ah, who will count the universes that have passed away, or the creations that have risen afresh, again and again, from the formless abyss of the vast waters? Who will number the passing ages of the world, as they follow each other endlessly? And who will search through the wide infinities of space to count the universes side by side, each containing its Brahma, its Vishnu and its Shiva? Who will count the Indras in them all-those Indras side by side, who reign at once in all the innumerable worlds; those others who passed away before them; or even the Indras who succeed each other in any given line, ascending to godly kingship, one by one, and one by one, passing away. King of Gods, there are among your servants certain who maintain that it may be possible to number the grains of sand on earth and the drops of rain that fall from the sky, but no

one will ever number all those Indras. This is what the Knowers know.

The life and kingship of an Indra endure seventy-one eons, and when twenty-eight Indras have expired, one Day and night of Brahma has elapsed. But the existence of one Brahma, measured in such Brahma Days and Nights, is only one hundred and eight years. Brahma follows Brahma; one sinks and the next arises; the endless series cannot be told. There is no end to the number of those Brahmas-to say nothing of Indras.

Zimmer 1974: 5-6

Having said this, the young Brahmin boy broke into laughter. He saw a parade of ants marching through the palace. Indra, frightened and bewildered asked the boy why he was laughing. The boy said that he laughed because of the ants.

I saw the ants, O Indra, filing in long parade. Each was once an Indra. Like you, each by virtue of pious deeds once ascended to the rank of the gods. But now, through many rebirths, each has become again an ant.

Zimmer 1974: 7

Disguised as a boy, Vishnu's comments served to modulate Indra's hubris and his ego. By placing Indra into the context of the many Indras that came before him and that will come after him in the vast cycles of time, Indra was reminded of the Hindu perspective that one is born, dies, and is reborn: the doctrine of *Samsara*, or reincarnation. The boy also told Indra that his individuality and ego were not immaterial, for what one does now and how one acts, determine what the person will do and become in the future-in this life and the next. This is the doctrine of *Karma*: the Hindu law of causation, retribution and psychic determinism. Acting morally, according to *Dharma* (*one's duty in life*), will determine whether one becomes an ant or a god.

Hindu Concepts of Time

Hindu concepts of time revolve around the periodic and infinite repetition of the creation and dissolution of the universe.

This aspect of repetition distinguishes the Hindu cosmogony from that of the monotheistic/Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), wherein the creation and the destruction of the world is strictly linear (i.e., from Genesis to the Last Judgment). Central to the cycle of the creation and destruction of the universe are the notions of *Kalpas* and *Yugas*. A *Kalpa* is 10,000 divine years, or ten million human years.

According to the mythologies of Hinduism, each world cycle is subdivided into four *Yugas* or world ages. These are comparable to the four ages of the Greco-Roman tradition, and like the latter decline in moral excellence as the round proceeds. The classical ages took their names from the metals-gold, silver, brass and iron-the Hindu from the four throws of the Hindu dice game-*Krita*, *Treta*, *Dvapara*, and *Kali*. In both cases the appellations suggest the relative virtues of the periods, as they succeed each other in a slow, irreversible procession.

Zimmer 1974: 13

A trinity of gods retains the responsibility for the periodic creation, destruction and maintenance of the universe. Brahma is the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. In the Hindu cosmogony, each *Kalpa* represents one day and night in the hundred-year life span of the god Brahma. Thus, one day and night of Brahma corresponds to 4,320,000 human years! These years are divided into the 4 *Yugas*, each successive *Yuga* declining in “moral excellence,” as reflected by the behavior of human beings who are less spiritual, more materialistic, and more self-interested by the last *Yuga*, *Kaliyuga*. According to Indian mathematical calculations, our current age, *Kaliyuga*, began on February 18, 3102 B.C. It is important to keep in mind that there have been an infinite number of such *Kaliyugas* in the past, and that there will be an infinite number of *Kaliyugas* to come.

Every *Kalpa* lasts a thousand great ages of the world (*mahayuga*), corresponding to 12,000 god years or 4,320,000 human years, which are divided into the four ages of the world (*yuga*), and each of them has a tenth long dawn and dusk, in which Brahma (or Vishnu) rests. The whole thing is repeated a thousand-fold, a hundred Brahma years or 311

billion and forty million human years. When the epoch (*para*) is over, the world declines. The coarse material will again become subtle primeval material, in which the constituents are in balance, until they are shaken-either by themselves or by a divine impulse-and the cycle of the emergence and passing away of the worlds (*samsara*) continues.

Michaels 2004: 300 (see chart below)

Such a conception of time is indeed extraordinary-not only because of magnitude but also because of the precision of the mathematics involved. Years are related to humans, gods and the “super” divinities (i.e., Brahma and Vishnu), indicating that not only humans, but also gods and super gods are subject to the laws of *karma* and *samsara*. They, too, are endlessly created and pass away:

Behind this is a deeply rooted cyclical awareness of time, which holds that life consists of an eternal return, of an eternally new expansion and contraction of the world. Thus, the *Yuga* doctrine is also known as the doctrine of the world cycle (*samsara*). Everything passes away according to these ideas; only change itself is lasting, but only the condition beyond this change brings salvation (Michaels 2004: 303).

For the individual, this view of time places a particular individual life in perspective. Rather than rendering any one life meaningless, it implies the importance of doing one’s duty and acting morally in this life. If our actions are not “good”, the *Karma* from these actions will make us transmigrate eternally. It is this scary and horrifying scenario-known as *Samsara*-and the need to escape it that motivates Hindu religious thinking and life.²

The Yuga Calculation of Time ³

Creation (*srsti*)

² See Madeline Biardeau, M. (1989). *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* (trans.) R. Nice. Oxfrd: Oxford University Press.

³ From Michaels 2004: 301.

1 age of the world (*mahāyuga*) = 12,000 god years = 4,320,000 human years

divided into four ages (*yuga*) with the following features:

Age (<i>yuga</i>)	Kṛta	Tretā	Dvāpara	Kali
God years (including Twilight Epochs)	4,800	3,600	2,400	1,200
Human years	1,728,000	1,296,000	864,000	432,000
Metal	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Iron
Guna	<i>sattva</i>	<i>rajas</i>	<i>rajas and tamas</i>	<i>tamas</i>
Color	White	Red	Yellow	Black
Dharma	4/4	3/4	1/2	1/4

x 1,000 years = 1 day of Brahmā (= 12,000,000 god years);

World Dissolution (*pralaya*)

+ 1 night of Brahmā (= 12,000,000 god years): world rests folded up

= 1 age of the world (*kalpa*) (= 24,000,000 god years)

Creation (*pratisarga*)

Samsara

Samsara refers to the Hindu concept of reincarnation or transmigration. In Sanskrit, it means “to wander.” *Samsara* is accepted in all Hindu philosophical systems of thought, with the singular exception of the *Carvaka* school of Indian materialism which denies the existence of a soul.⁴ It is fair to say that the goal of Hinduism is to escape *samsara*, and to ultimately exit the endless cycle of birth and rebirth.

⁴ See *Carvaka/Lokayata*, edited by Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, Indian Council of Philosophical research, New Delhi, 1990. The Carvaka School, as such, also denies the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. Their view of time is linear and as such, is uniquely more western.

To understand *samsara*, a brief discussion of the Hindu view of the Soul or Self is necessary. The Hindu notion of “Self” differs fundamentally and radically from the psychoanalytic concept of the “self” or “ego”. This point cannot be emphasized strongly enough, as it is precisely the identification of the “ego” with the “Self” that is the bedrock problem for Hindu philosophy and psychology. According to Hinduism, it is the confusion (*avidya*) of “Self” with “ego” that leads to human suffering.

Hinduism postulates a fundamental distinction between “matter” and “soul” (here, “Soul,” “Self,” and “Spirit” are considered identical and used interchangeably). In *Samkhya* philosophy, the oldest Hindu philosophical system, a distinction is made between the Soul (*purusha*) and matter (*prakti*). The Soul is conceptualized as contentless consciousness, which becomes entangled with matter throughout its life.⁵ The reason for this entanglement is not explained; it is simply given and stated. The association is considered to exceed the grasp of human comprehension.

Interestingly, and perhaps surprising to some schooled in western traditions, *Samkhya* postulates that the mind, including intellect, consciousness, emotions and psychological states are ultimately a derivative and function of matter (*prakti*). This position is in concordance with contemporary neuroscientific theories of mind. Thus, what we would view in psychoanalysis as conscious and unconscious psychic structures are, according to *Samkhya*, evolutes of matter. In distinction, *purusha* (Soul/Self) is independent of matter (*prakti*). It is unconditioned, timeless, and has always existed. To say that *purusha* is timeless has subtle connotations. It is strictly true only when *purusha* is not entangled with matter. When it is involved with matter, it functions in time and attains karmic residue but is not altered by it. This is similar to Freud’s assertion that the unconscious is timeless—that is, not changed or altered by time. This is not to equate *purusha* to the Freudian unconscious, but rather to point out an interesting dichotomous parallel.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of Samkhya philosophy, see *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies-Samkhya*, edited by G.J.Larson & R.S. Bhattacharya, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1987

From all eternity, Spirit has found itself drawn into this illusory relation with psycho-mental life (that is, with ‘matter’). This is owing to ignorance (*avidya*), and as long as *avidya* persists, existence is present (by virtue of *karma*), and with it suffering. Let us dwell on this point a little. Illusion or ignorance consists with confusing the motionless and eternal *purusha* with the flux of psycho-mental life. To say ‘I suffer’, ‘I want’, ‘I hate’, ‘I know’ and to think that this ‘I’ refers to Spirit, is to live in illusion and prolong it; for all our acts and intentions, by the simple fact that they are dependent upon *prakti*, upon ‘matter’, are conditioned and governed by *karma*.

Eliade 1969: 28

In Hinduism, there are complex traditions that view the soul theistically and atheistically. The *Samkhya* postulation of the soul is strictly atheistic. It is purely descriptive and involves neither god nor divinity. “This true and absolute knowledge-which must not be confused with intellectual activity, which is psychological in essence-is not obtained by experience but by a revelation. Nothing divine plays a part here, for *Samkhya* denies the existence of god” (Eliade 1969: 29). Revelation is not to be understood as conveyed by the divine, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but as achieved through self-knowledge and self-exploration.⁶ In Hinduism, one road to self-revelation, or self-knowledge, is *via* the instruction of a pupil by a guru. The parallel to the analytic situation where self-knowledge occurs through an interaction between an analyst and an analysand is striking and worth noting.⁷ Sudhir Kakar, in his work, *The Analyst and the Mystic*, in the chapter “The Guru as Healer” discusses this point in detail.⁸

For the Hindu, this life is one of many lives we live. What then transmigrates when we die? It is the Soul-*purusha*-contentless consciousness. After the death of a person, the Soul moves to another body. Its new destination (i.e., an ant, god etc.) is predetermined by the law of *karma*. *Karma* dictates that the

⁶ See S.Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1939.

⁷ See Reddy, S., “Psychoanalytic Process in the Sacred Hindu Text, The Bhagavad Gita”, in *Freud on the Ganges*, Other Press, New York, 2005.

⁸ Sudhir Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

nature of actions committed by a particular combination of *purusha* and *prakti* determine where the *purusha*, with its karmic residue, will go after death to once more become entangled with matter (*prakti*). This cycle repeats infinitely until the Soul no longer attains karmic residue. It can exit the cycle of *samsara* to become pure contentless consciousness again. As the god Krishna explains to Arjuna, his pupil and devotee, in the sacred Hindu text “The *Bhagavad Gita*”:

Never was there a time when I did not exist, or you, or these kings, nor shall any of us cease to exist hereafter. Just as creatures with bodies pass through childhood, youth and old age in their bodies, so there is a passage to another body, and a wise man is not confused about it...There is no becoming of what did not exist, there is no unbecoming of what does exist: those who see the principles see the boundary between the two...As a man discards his worn-out clothes and puts on different ones that are new, So the one in the body discards aged bodies and joins with other ones that are new.

Bhagavad Gita Chap 2, Verses 11-22⁹

The central concept of *samsara* is that actions determine one’s fate. The specifics of a person’s reincarnation after death are determined by the actions of that person in this life. It is a fair and profound question to ask, then, to what extent does fate (or biology or circumstance or pure chance) determine one’s actions. Essentially, Hindu teachings hold that human acts arise from a combination of given circumstances and free will. An individual acting under those circumstances is responsible for their actions. These actions produce karmic residues. This notion remains controversial and represents the Hindu contextualization of the conflict between free will and determinism.

The state reached when one is not reborn, after exiting *samsara*, is termed *moksha*—in Buddhism, *nirvana*. What, then, does it mean to exit *samsara*? Is to exit time? Is it to withdraw from life? No. It is to be in this life and to act without attaining karmic residue. Is this not a contradiction? For if we act, we attain

⁹ All references to the *Bhagavad Gita* are from J.A.B.van Buitenen’s translation.

karma. How then is it possible to act without attaining *karma*? The Hindu solution to this dilemma is *Karmayoga*: desireless action as enumerated in the *Bhagavad Gita* by Krishna to Arjuna:

A person does not avoid incurring *karman* just by not performing acts, nor does he achieve success by giving up acts. For no one lives even for a moment without doing some act, for the three forces of nature cause everyone to act. He who, while curbing the faculties of action, yet in his mind indulges his memories of sense objects is called a self-deceiving hypocrite. But he who curbs his senses with his mind, Arjuna, and then disinterestedly undertakes the discipline of action with his action faculties, stands out...All the world is in bondage to the *karman* of action, except for action for the purposes of sacrifice: therefore, engage in action for that purpose, disinterestedly, Kaunteya.

Bhagavad Gita, Chap 3, verses 5-9

Karma

Karma literally means action. The law of *karma* is that every action has a reaction or consequence. It is a law of cause and effect. The action may be intentional, conscious or unconscious. Regardless, it has a consequence. Every action is modulated and determined by previous actions and future actions are similarly modulated and determined by present actions. The concept of *karma* links an individual's past, present and future and presents the continuum or context in which a person, more specifically the "ego" (*ahamkara*) exists and functions. When an action is performed, it is performed by the "ego" and the karmic residue of the action stays with the "ego". This is psychic determinism in Hinduism. We are psycho-physically conditioned by actions we perform and the *karma* accumulated from these actions determines individual behavior, both in this life and the next. The concept of *karma* is very similar and analogous to the psychoanalytic notion of psychic determinism: "The sense of this principle is that in the mind as in physical nature about us nothing happens by chance or in a random way. Each psychic event is determined by the ones that preceded it. Events in our mental lives that may seem to be random and unrelated to what went on

before are only apparently so. In fact, mental phenomena are no more capable of such a lack of causal connection with what preceded them than are physical ones. Discontinuity in this sense does not exist in mental life” (Waelder 1963).

What is the “Ego” in Hindu psychology that performs actions and attains karmic residue? It is not the same as the concept of “ego” in psychoanalysis. Heinrich Zimmer explains:

Ahamkara, the ego function, causes us to believe that we feel like acting, that we are suffering, etc.; whereas actually our real being, the *Purusha*, is devoid of such modifications. *Ahamkara* is the center and prime motivating force of ‘delusion’. *Ahamkara* is the misconception, conceit, supposition, or belief that refers all objects and acts of consciousness to an ‘I’ (*aham*). *Ahamkara*-the making (*kara*) of the utterance ‘I’ (*aham*)- accomplishes all psychic processes, producing the misleading notion ‘I am hearing; I am seeing; I am rich and mighty; I am enjoying; I am about to suffer.’ It is thus the primal cause of the critical ‘wrong conception’ that dogs all phenomenal experience; the idea, namely, that the life-monad (*purusha*) is implicated in, nay is identical with, the processes of living matter (*prakti*). One is continually appropriating to oneself, as a result of the *Ahamkara*, everything that comes to pass in the realms of the physique and psyche, superimposing perpetually the false notion (and apparent experience) of a subject (an ‘I’) of all the deeds and sorrows.

Zimmer 1989: 319

This notion of the Hindu ego, *ahamkara*, is important to understand because it is the temporal construction of a person, one that defines an individual’s personality-their tastes, wishes, predispositions, habits and actions. *Ahamkara* exists and functions in present time, and it and the physical body are what die at death. The Hindu “ego” (*ahamkara*) is a function of matter or *prakti*-not of the *purusha* or “Self”. The Self is unconditioned and timeless as previously explained. It is the association of the Self with matter that gives rise to the “ego”. It is precisely the identification of the Self as “ego” (*ahamkara*) that is the fundamental existential

error (ignorance or *avidya*) which leads actions to attain *karma* and make the Self transmigrate indefinitely.

The doctrine of *karma* is both a psychology and philosophy of action. It is a theory of motivation—a conceptual schema to explain why we do what we do. Importantly, it is also a moral and ethical concept. The moral and ethical dimension of *karma* is an important differentiating factor between psychic determinism in Hinduism versus psychoanalysis. On a descriptive level, *karma* describes and explains human behavior. On the moral level, each action has a moral valence—actions are “good” or “bad” based upon the individual’s *dharma* (their particular moral duty—not absolute, Kantian style, moral duty, but individual duty). The moral valence of one’s actions determines an individual’s life trajectory, temporally in this life and trans-temporally in future lives. Even if we disallow future lives (i.e. reincarnation), we are still left with a powerful concept—that actions are predetermined, that they have a moral value and that the moral value is based on *dharma* or one’s specific moral duty in society. I take this point up in more detail in the next section on *dharma*. As Sudhir Kakar explains: “*Karma* influences the Hindu world image in two fundamental ways: in the Hindu’s experience of time, and in the formation of his cosmology. The way in which a culture estimates and elaborates ideas of time and destiny provides insight into the psychological organization of its individual members” (Kakar 1981: 45).

Is *karma* fate? Does *karma* annul free will? If all acts are predetermined, where does free will come into play? The question may be asked of human behavior viewed through the psychoanalytic lens of psychic determinism. Does psychic determinism mean that we act without free will? If our actions are produced by psychic structures and forces that inexorably drive us to act in a particular way, where does that leave an individual’s freedom to act? Intuitively and from common sense, we act as if we have free will. *Karma* is in part fate. But a basic tenet of *karma* is also the presence of free will. Indeed, this is where *dharma* and the moral valence of actions come into play. We may be “driven” to act based on our past *karma*, but we have a choice to do otherwise. It is precisely the exercising of our free will—in the face of competing karmic residues—that underlies the moral basis of *karma*.

For the Hindu, *karma* has profound psychological import. If something bad occurs, a Hindu is apt to blame it on his previous *karma*. Resorting to *karma* to explain one's actions does not absolve the act from its moral value. How one navigates between a given set of circumstances and the options available for action are determined by *karma* and determine *karma*. This is a profoundly complex and subtle theory of action where karmic forces are multi-directional and actions are "over determined". Free will exists and operates with responsibility for the actions done.

Dharma

Derived from the Sanskrit "*dhr*, which means "to hold", the concept of *dharma* is complex. It can be, and is, variously and simultaneously translated as duty, law, correct moral action, and acting in accordance with one's nature. *Dharma* refers both to individual moral duty and social responsibility. Acting according to one's *dharma* refers to actions contextualized by one's position in society (*caste*) and stage of life (*asrama*). Thus, the *dharma* or correct action for a Brahmin is different from the *dharma* of a Kshatriya (kings and warriors). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says to Arjuna: "It is better to carry out your own law (*swadharma*) poorly, than another's (*para-dharma*) well; it is better to die in your own law than to prosper in another's." (*Bhagavad Gita*, 3, 35). Sudhir Kakar explains how *swadharma* is simultaneously specifiable and subjective:

... how does the individual acquire knowledge of his *swadharma*, and thus of 'right actions'? This is a complicated matter, and, as it happens, a relative one. Hindu philosophy and ethics teach us that 'right action' for an individual depends on *desa*, the culture in which he is born; on *kala*, the period of historical time in which he lives; on *srama*, the efforts required of him at different stages of life; and on *gunas*, the innate psychobiological traits which are the heritage of an individual's previous lives. 'Right' and 'wrong' are relative; they emerge as clear distinctions only out of the total configuration of the four 'co-ordinates' of action.

Psychoanalytically, we may see *dharma* as analogous to the “ego ideal”. *Dharma* is also the force, or principle, that maintains social order by regulating and modulating interactions between individuals within and between different castes. When each individual performs his duty according to his nature, state and stage in his life, order and equilibrium is maintained in the individual and in society. *Dharma* is traditionally depicted as a wheel (*charkha*): the wheel can be seen to rotate properly when its spokes (individuals) are properly aligned and functioning.

While *dharma* refers to duty based on caste and stage of life, it also, and more subtly, refers to acting according to one’s nature. In *Yoga* psychology¹⁰, the term *vasana* refers to the compelling deep urges in us, gathered from past fields of action that now determine our present emotional profile. *Vasana* derives from the Sanskrit root *vas*, which means “to dwell in, to abide”. Note the striking resemblance of *vasana* to the psychoanalytic notion of an “instinct”. The difference between a *vasana* and an “instinct” may be that *vasanas* are conditioned (and, to some extent, determined) by our prior actions (i.e. *karma*), unlike instincts which are not conditioned by experience or time. *Vasanas* determine the specific nature of an individual. Eliade explains:

‘The *vasanas* have their origin in memory’, Vyasa writes, thus emphasizing their subliminal nature...The *vasanas* condition the specific character of each individual; and this conditioning is in accordance both with his heredity and with his karmic situation. Indeed, everything that defines the intransmissible specificity of the individual, as well as the structure of the human instincts, is produced by the *vasanas*, by the subconscious. The subconscious is transmitted either ‘impersonally’, from generation to generation (through language, mores, civilization-ethnic and historical transmission), or directly through karmic transmigration.

Eliade 1969: 42

¹⁰ For a concise and excellent introduction to *Yoga* psychology, see *Yoga Philosophy*, by S.N. Dasgupta, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1930
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When *dharma* is referred to as acting according to one's nature, it may be more accurately described as acting despite one's nature or overcoming one's instinctual impulses. For example, my *vasanas* may propel me towards a certain act. But if this act is not in accordance with my *dharma*, then I must not do it. To not do something that I am inclined to do requires self-control and restraint. This produces "good *karma*" which in turn modulates and modifies my *vasanas*. This circuit repeats indefinitely and multidirectionally until *moksha* is achieved. *Dharma* may be seen as adjudication between the demands of one's mental structure and the demands of society. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, this is analogous to the ego's action based on the demands of the pleasure principle and the constraints of the reality principle, as manifest in societal constraints, and enforced by the superego.

When we act according to our *dharma*, our actions are "good" in so far that they attain less karmic residue and take us closer to the possibility of exiting *samsara* and attaining *moksha*. Drawing a circle around social order, moral order and divine order, *dharma* links the concepts of *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha*.

Moksha

Moksha means release—spiritual release—and freedom from the endless circuit of life-death-rebirth cycle, *samsara*. The attainment of *moksha* is the *paramartha*, or highest goal of Hinduism. *Moksha* is considered the fourth aim of life, the other three being *artha* (material wealth), *kama* (love and sensual/sexual pleasure) and *dharma* (religious, moral, family and social duties). Hinduism considers each of these aims important and necessary for an individual. And each aim should be pursued and enjoyed according to the timetable prescribed by the Hindu scriptures. The time frame of pursuing these aims is provided by the Hindu life cycle, known as *asramas*. Sudhir Kakar explains:

Like modern theories of personality, the Hindu model of *asramadharm*a conceptualizes human development in a succession of stages. It holds that development proceeds not at a steady pace with a smooth continuum, but in discontinuous steps, with marked changes as the individual moves into a new phase of life: proper developmental progress requires the meeting and surmounting of the critical task of each phase in the proper sequence and at the proper

time. Essentially, *asramadharm*a is the Hindu counterpart to man’s development in relation to his society and, as I have shown in detail elsewhere, it is very similar to Erickson’s well-known theory of psychosocial stages of growth. Contrasting with Erickson’s model, which is clinical and developmental, the Hindu view proposes ‘ideal’ images in the Platonic sense. In outlining the stages of life and the specific tasks of each stage, the Hindu model does not chart the implications for mental health if the tasks remain unfulfilled, but emphasizes the importance of scrupulous progression from task to task and from stage to stage in the ultimate realization of *moksha*.

Kakar 1981: 42-3

The Hindu *asrama* or stages of life prescribe when each aim should be pursued. It is not appropriate, for example, for a Hindu man in the householder stage of life (*garhasthya*) to give up his duties to his family and move to the forest to meditate on the nature of god.¹¹ Below is a chart, taken from Kakar’s book, comparing the Hindu stages of life with Erickson’s psychosocial scheme.

<i>Erikson’s Scheme</i>		<i>Hindu Scheme</i>	
Stage	Specific Task and “Virtue”	Stage	Specific Task and “Virtue”
1. Infancy	Basic Trust vs. Mistrust: Hope	Individual’s pre- history’ not expli- citly considered	Preparation of the capa- city to comprehend <i>dharma</i>
2. Early Childhood	Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt: Willpower		
3. Play Age	Initiative vs. Guilt: Purpose		

¹¹ It is provocative to consider if the Buddha, from the Hindu point of view, was guilty of abdicating his family and royal duties (*garhasthya* stage) to pursue the withdrawal (*vanprastha*) and renunciation (*sanyasa*) stages before the prescribed timetable.

4. School Age	Industry vs. Inferiority: Competence	1. Apprenticeship Knowledge of <i>dharma</i> : (<i>brahmacharya</i>)	Competence and Fidelity
5. Adolescence	Identity vs. Identity Diffusion: Fidelity		
6. Young Adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation: Love	2. Householder (<i>garhasthya</i>)	Practice of <i>dharma</i> : Love and Care
7. Adulthood	Generativity vs. Stagnation: Care	3. Withdrawal (<i>vanaprastha</i>)	Teaching of <i>dharma</i> : Extended Care
8. Old Age	Integrity vs. Despair: Wisdom	4. Renunciation (<i>sanyasa</i>)	Realization of <i>dharma</i> : Wisdom

Moksha derives from the Sanskrit root “muc”, which means “to release”, “set free”, “let go”. Philosophically and psychologically, *moksha* is seen as the *purusha* (“Soul”, “Self”, “Spirit”) disentangling itself from *prakti* (primordial matter), and returning to a state of contentless consciousness.

What exits in *moksha*? It is the Soul (*purusha*). When the Soul exits time, it no longer exists in time. It can be said to be *timeless*. A subtlety must be noted here. *Timelessness* can imply something not being conditioned or changed by time: for instance, Freud’s notion of the timelessness of the unconscious. *Timelessness* can also refer to an emotional experience, some times referred to as *nunc stans*, or “the abiding instant”, in which, as described by Loewald,

...there is no division of past, present, and future, no remembering, no wish, no anticipation, merely the complete absorption in being, or in that which is...the experience of eternity does not include everlastingness. Time as something which, in its modes of past, present, and future, articulates

experience and conveys such concepts as succession, simultaneity, and duration is suspended in such a state. In as much as this experience, however, can be remembered, it tends to be described retrospectively in temporal terms which seem to approximate or be similar to such a state.

Loewald 1972: 405

The notion of *moksha* has been understood in psychoanalysis broadly within the concept of fusion states. A sizeable psychoanalytic literature has been devoted to understanding and explaining these states, going back to Romain Rolland's¹² correspondence with Freud regarding the Hindu saint Ramakrishna and the states of *samadhi* or timeless bliss he accessed¹³. Freud considered this an *affect*, one he named the "oceanic feeling," and conceptualized it as a fusion state, or a narcissistic regression to a symbiotic connection to the primordial mother. It is important to point out the difficulty—indeed, the impossibility—of understanding *moksha* through psychoanalysis, in part because *moksha* can not be properly understood as an *affect*, which is within Hindu thought necessarily material, i.e., issuing from the body, and thus essentially not only physically, but *temporally* finite. To exit *samsara*, and to attain *moksha*, is to literally leave the cycle and circuit of time. The experience of timelessness of the "oceanic feeling" is fundamentally different from the notion of actually exiting time. *Moksha* is an ontological condition—not an emotional or psychological state. *Moksha* cannot be said to be experienced at all. *Moksha*, simply put, is a state of not existing in time.

Another reason *moksha* cannot be understood within psychoanalysis is because as a theory, psychoanalysis rejects the Cartesian mind-body dualism required to admit the presence of a "Soul" or "Self" in as much as the Hindu understands it; that is, as separate from matter. In psychoanalysis, the mind is essentially and *only* material. There is no "Soul" or "Self" as in Hinduism. Hence, psychoanalytic attempts to understand the notion of *moksha* tend to be reductionistic, simplistic, and ultimately of

¹² Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1984.

¹³ For an extensive discussion of the "oceanic feeling", see William Parsons' book, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

little use and relevance. However, there is significant potential for cross-fertilization of ideas between psychoanalysis and Hindu thought, specifically, the Hindu systems of *Samkhya* and *Yoga*, which developed theories of the mind long before psychoanalysis. For example, one interesting and fascinating area for future exploration is the *Samkhya* notion that mind, intellect, emotions and even consciousness are all evolutes and derivatives of matter.

Conclusion

The notion of time in Hinduism, while fascinating, can be overwhelming and frightening. The Hindu view of the eternal recurrence of the cosmos and the vastness of the time cycles involved makes one question the value of any individual human existence.¹⁴ In discussing the Hindu concepts of *samsara*, *karma*, *dharma* and *moksha*, I hope the reader has come to understand, that for the Hindu, it is precisely the suffering inherent to human existence and the need to escape it that emotionally motivates and drives Hindu philosophy and religion. While the Hindu conception of time can be frightening, the notion of cyclical time and eternal recurrence of the Self is also strangely reassuring and edifying. Man's place within the ages is assigned and understood, and his behavior at each stage in life can be guided according to his *dharma*. And by recapitulating the cycle of ages in microscopic form within each man's own tiny and finite life, a connection to the incomprehensibly immense macrocosmos is maintained, assuring that all individual lives retain relevance and meaning. Through eternal recurrence, the Self has the possibility of discarding its karmic residue and attaining freedom-no ordinary freedom-but the freedom to exist as unconditioned contentless consciousness-pure being which exists both in time and outside of it. In the *Maitri Upanishad*¹⁵, it is said that there are two forms of *Brahman*-time and the timeless.

“Time cooks all things,
Indeed, in the great self.
He who knows in what time is cooked
He is the knower of the Veda”.

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¹⁴ See Mircea Eliade's work, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton University Press, 1954.

¹⁵ *The Principal Upanishads* edited by S. Radhakrishnan, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1953.

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