

# PANDEMIC THROUGH THE CANOPY OF KARMA: COLLECTIVE VS. INDIVIDUAL

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## Abstract

When the whole world is going through a deadly turmoil and casualties are happening in one's own family and close surroundings due to the same reason; mankind starts to lose faith in the supreme power. The theory of karma appears to be the sole guide that can take the human race from immense darkness towards light. It may sound harsh, nevertheless it is the only way to decode the pandemic.

There are always plenty of questions which stay unanswered, which perhaps can only be realized either through contemplation (at a personal level) or through research by having a scholarly approach. Some answers are soothing while others are painful. When we try to make sense of why things happened in the way they happened, what went wrong, what was our fault etc., we may find some satisfaction in the philosophical concepts of the theory of karma. The way scientific researches are being done to find the remedy of a disease; for sure philosophical and scholarly researches can be done to find out the reason behind the same issues like untimely death and karma etc.

When a microscopic creature has brought the whole mankind on its knees, to such an extent that one's position, financial richness, power, sources etc., everything has turned out to be worthless, it is high time that we take a different look towards life and start cherishing what is really important.

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

When the universe puts an out of syllabus question in front of us, our minds get boggled. For we, at least at a collective level, have thought and assumed a specific, comfortable curriculum for ourselves which is human centric; whereas the cosmos has her own mysterious plans which are beyond our rationale. We are familiar with the everyday quotes like – ‘what goes around, comes around’, ‘there is an equal and opposite reaction to each action’, ‘whatever happens, happens for a reason’ etc. and we relate these with karma. Life goes on really well with these beliefs. However, the test comes when we encounter an adversity in life and we lose faith in the same slogans for we take that adversity as unfair. At the same time, the same adversity pushes us to analyze them further through a spiritual angle, which works beyond our rational understanding. Throughout the world we have plenty of examples of painful and unfair deaths of the spiritual gurus, honest, religious, ethical people; as well as we have instances of the worst of the criminals, terrorists having an instant death, which seem unfair too. This whole scenario nudges us to have a better comprehension of how birth and death function and to study karma theory through which eventually have an improved understanding of the chaos happening around the world.

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<sup>2</sup> The scholar lost her own father-in-law to Covid, and her husband had a close encounter with the deadly virus with a 90% of lungs involvement. He is still on oxygen support, recovering from its impact.

Ironically, when we listen to the news of many people getting married, many kids being born, many students passing out a specific class together etc. at the same day, we feel happy as these are all the good news and we don't pay heed about the depth of collective karma in these scenarios. On the contrary, when we listen to the news of many people dying at the same day due to the same virus, we feel disturbed and everything seems unfair. We start raising questions on the authenticity of the karma theory. Whereas perhaps this is the suitable time to understand the same. For that we need to take refuge in the ancient philosophical texts which provide subtle and minute details about karma. Let us understand the karma theory in the light of Indian Jain philosophy in the present-day scenario of Covid-19 pandemic around the world, especially in India in April-May 2021. When only in the capital, 'the official Covid-19 toll, according to the government health bulletins, was 11,036 on April 1, 2021, that increased to 24,237 on May 31, 2021 – an addition of 13,201 deaths in two months' (Singh).

### **Karma Udaya (fruition) and Udīraṇā (premature fruition)**

Collective karma is individual too through some perspective just as individual karma is collective. We cannot take the burden of the collective karma. However, we can surely take care of the effect on the individual.

Understanding the workings of the universe through karma, one realizes that in each situation, favorable or adverse, there is joy and peace. For nothing is unjustified in the eyes of the cosmos because only the universe knows the reason behind. As humans we are supposed to put best of our efforts through our mind, speech and action and patiently surrender. More or less, all philosophies talk about the individual journey of a being. A weeping child is forcefully sent to the school, he doesn't want to be separated from his parents, however, the parents know that this separation will eventually be in the child's favor which will help him grow physically, mentally and emotionally. The child takes it as an unjustified gesture, but eventually the same child thanks his parents after growing up for getting him good education for age and experience clear his perception. The same theory can be applied by putting human beings at the place of the child and replacing the parents with the universe or karma.

In *Jainendra Siddhanta Kośa* the definition of *karma bandha* (Karmic Bondage) is given as, 'the unification of space points of karmic matter with the space points of the soul in a way that there is no space left between them' (Varni, "Bandha" 168). It can be understood by a daily life example of milk and water; when we put water in the milk, it becomes milk like only and it becomes impossible to identify water separately. However, we all know that water and milk are separate entities and neither of them can have the attributes of the other. But as soon as we start to boil milk, the water starts to evaporate and what we get eventually is pure milk. The same analogy can be applied on the amalgamation of karma with the consciousness. When the right time comes the karma gets separated from the soul and this separation or shedding is called as fruition or *Udaya*.

In the same book, *Udaya* of karma has been defined in the following way, ‘karma performed by a specific being (soul) in the past keep reflecting on the (abstract) ground of its psyche which keep shedding after giving fruits to the same being at their respective time of maturation. As a rule, the sentiments/emotions/reactions of that being mold at that specific time during the fruition of that specific karma. This way karma keeps the being bind into the cycle of cause and effect’ (Varni, "Udaya" 363). However, this rule is manipulated at the time of premature fruition of the karma (*udīraṇā*); as *udīraṇā* has been defined as, ‘early maturation of karma through some specific actions or rituals’ (ibid, “Udīraṇā” 409). The same book also mentions, ‘just after the premature realisation of karma, the being goes through intense *kaśāya*’ (ibid 410) i.e., either of the four emotions of anger, pride, deceit and greed.

For example<sup>3</sup> – a son visits his Corona struck father admitted into the ICU of a hospital, his intent is to console his father that everything will be alright soon. By mistake, he removes his mask for a few seconds just outside the ICU ward. Now the ICU that is specially meant to keep the Corona patients is like an intense hotspot of the virus. The son, despite taking all the necessary measures to keep himself safe, possibly catches the virus in those few seconds. Unfortunately, he loses his father on the same day. He, too, is found Covid positive within two days of that incident which appears to be the premature manifest of the effect of the *karman*. The premature realisation is caused by the *yoga*, regardless as to whether it (the *yoga*) is with or without *kaśāyas* at the time of ‘*udaya*’ (Glasenapp 38). *Yoga*<sup>4</sup> (or activity) in the philosophy of Jainism is, ‘the operation of the body, speech and mind and the threefold action is the cause of the inflow of karma’ (Tatia 151).

In the son’s example, and in fact for all the Corona patients who lost their lives untimely, it indicates that the same health issue was definitely in their karmic baggage but probably later in life. However, by one mean or the other they invited fruition of those karma ahead of time.

### Collective vs. Individual Karma

Our being born into this specific time zone, on this specific planet, going through the same kind of diseases, having a certain lifespan, taking birth through womb, childhood, youth, old age and eventually dying, appearance, bodily structure etc. are only a few examples of our collective karma. Whereas the way we think and react in specific situations, the people we meet in our lives in different relationships, workplaces or otherwise, are few examples of our individual karma.

On a heavily trafficked road, where there is chaos everywhere and people are run by their minds, cursing the present situation, the government etc., a single or more drivers can be at peace accepting the same situation, taking the same time on introspecting the nature of things, for neither cribbing nor acceptance improve the situation, however the latter at least sustains one’s peace of mind which eventually opens the door of lighter accumulation. The pandemic

<sup>3</sup> Real example of the scholar’s husband, happened on 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2021, on the day of his father’s demise.

<sup>4</sup> “*kāyā-vāñ-manahkarma yogaḥ*” (Tattvārtha Sūtra 6/1).

can be seen as a situation for taking responsibility of one's own life – in the situation of humanitarian disaster which is not in one's control (not to rely on Government or gods) but to take responsibility of what one can do in this case. It is our individual karma to live in such awful time and to endure such pandemic – what we can do is to accept it and try to go through it with dignity, doing our best by trying to help others in whichever way we can and to clean our karmic demerits. We did not choose this reality, time, country and circumstances but we can choose our attitude towards them for the sake of future in this life or lifetimes to come. So according to the karmic theory we have to face this catastrophe in any case and eat this karmic fruit.

When one watches a movie like 'The Stoning of Soraya M' (based on the book with the same name authored by Freidoune Sahebjam) which is based on a true story about the killing of an innocent woman in Iran. Whose husband plots against her with charges of adultery, in order to marry some other woman and to carry out this act of malice he takes help from few of his friends and a counterfeit mullah. They sentence her to death by stoning. In this example, one contemplates about collective karma, where the same karma is performed by a group of people at the same time, at the same place. On the other hand, when a plane crashes and all its travelers die, one raises a question about karma – how can it be possible? This is not fair at all. Leave the heinous crimes, in the routine lives of all people around the world, in every house and at each of the workplaces, there are occurring incidents of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, exploitation (physical or mental) etc., which draws the map of our individual karma in context of performing the specific action individually and collective karma in context of the sameness of that specific action. At the same time, one's intent and intensity while performing that specific action plays a vital role too, in terms of binding the baggage for future which again can give fruits in distant future or within next few minutes, days, months or years.

Imagine a scenario of a classroom where the teacher has gone out for half an hour amidst her subject period for some urgent work instructing the children to not to make noise else she will punish them. Say the number of students is 50, out of which only 10 are creating havoc in the class, disturbing the discipline, breaking the rules, bothering other students as well, who choose to sit peacefully. The teacher comes back and unable to observe which students have caused this chaos; she becomes furious and punishes all 50 with the exact same kind of punishment. This is what exactly happens in the case of a pandemic. Despite being a clear example of collective fruition of karma it is also the example of individual karma; as for sure each of the fifty students would have done something exactly similar in some distant or near past. To understand the same, another example from our routine lives can be taken – one earns money and keeps storing it in one's account or wallet. Sometimes it gets spent as planned, while at the other, some unexpected expenditure arises and one becomes bound to spend it unexpectedly. Sometimes all at once. This happens with the account of karma as well and is known as *udīraṇā* or premature realisation in the karma theory of Jain philosophy.

In an article (About 1.15 lakh people die due to cardiac arrest every day in the world) of The Hindu, we get to know that about 0.115 million people die due to cardiac arrest every day in the world', needless to say that this number has increased immensely by 2019 to 17.9 million

(Cardiovascular Diseases). Besides, ‘in 2019 an estimated 1.21 million (12.1 lakh) people died of TB’ around the world (Kanabus). If we talk about the deaths of children, India reported the most number of deaths of children below five years in 2018, with 8,82,000 deaths due to malnutrition (In India, 8.8 Lakh Children Under five years – Highest in the World – Died in 2018, Says UNICEF). Above are only the very few examples of collective karma in play which is individual too, at the same time. Also, it is not only the extreme examples of death which are happening at the collective level but also small day to day happenings occur at a collective level as well. For example – people stuck in long traffic jams can be seen everywhere around the world, every day at the same time. This, too, is nothing but collective karma. Children being born on the same day, at the same time in different parts of the world share the same collective karma but as they have different parents with different financial statuses, their being born in different countries, in different time-zones, which indicates their individual karma, too.

The lockdown period of the year 2020 stirred many people to peep within to understand the happenings of life and the nature of reality more profoundly. Large number of humans became more spiritual and analyzed what they really want in life and how to move ahead after the pandemic. Be it in their professional lives or personal. Chirag Gupta, Principal Engineering Manager at Microsoft, Seattle, US went through a similar transformation when the routine cycle of busy-ness of work, weekend gatherings, meeting with friends etc. came to an absolute halt and he felt a need to improvise the self. In an online interview with the scholar, he shared (Gupta), ‘life energies across everywhere are connected. Humans have taken over the planet and impacting it in such a way that it may die before its time. According to me, the pandemic is a collective karma in play. Also, this specific disease is showing us how simple things, like oxygen in the air, can impact us’.

When a millennial was asked by the author (of this paper), ‘at a collective level what do you think about the pandemic?’ She replied, ‘as a collective, people are not very close to their spiritual nature, which is simpler, calmer and less demanding. Life works in balances, we must do what we can at our level to bring balance and harmony in our lives and subsequently, to the lives of the people that surround us. The pandemic is an indication that if the excessiveness is not tamed, it will surely tame us’ (Jain).

### **Nimitta (instrumental cause) and Upādāna (substantial cause)**

*The fertile soil enacts as an instrumental cause for the seed to grow efficiently  
However, it is the seed which has the intelligence to convert into a tree  
The potter creates a vessel due to his ability  
Yet, it is the clay that has the skill to be a cutlery*

When everything around us appears to be extremely unfair and even the much thought of karma theory stops making sense, even then it is only the principle of karma which can provide answers, which may seem the most bitter to digest. However, it is the only way to step out of the darkness by having a deep realization that, ‘nothing happens by chance, i.e., nothing is random. Everything happens according to definite universal laws. There is no lawlessness in

this cosmos' (Agrawal 70). We get to see another philosophical gem, in the philosophy of Jainism, in form of instrumental cause and substantial cause or the *nimitta-upādāna* relationship which may help us in understanding the current pandemic scenario a little better. Let us first understand what are *upādāna* and *nimitta*, 'in general, one that gets transformed is known as substantive cause (*upādāna*) for its transformation. However, the list of instrumental causes (*nimitta*) can be very long. For example – 'in transformation of wheat flour into *rotī* (*chapātī*), the wheat flour is called *upādāna* (substantial cause), and the related cooking appliances, cook, etc., are called *nimitta*' (ibid 86). We may find plenty of examples of the same around us. For example – an average student enacts as the substantial cause (*upādāna*) to get transformed into a genius with the help of the following instrumental causes (*nimitta*) – an efficient teacher, a suitable atmosphere at home, stable financial status of his parents, his physical and mental health and so on.

'In *Samayasāra*<sup>5</sup>, Acārya Kundakunda writes, '*Pudgala* (matter/energy) transform into *kārmika* matter by *nimitta* (instrumental cause) of *jīva*'s actions. A *jīva* also undergoes changes by *nimitta* of *pudgala karma*' (Agrawal 85). Hence, we see that the soul and the karmic matter act as the substantial cause and instrumental cause for each other. Only one cannot perform anything alone. In the example of the student and teacher etc., all instrumental causes would have been futile, if the student or the substantial cause would not have been ready to accept the change. Similarly, only the instrumental causes in form of an efficient teacher etc., would have been worthless if the dedication of student as substantial cause would not have been there.

Seeing the same *nimitta-upādāna* relationship in context of the pandemic by observing different examples of Covid-19 patients, who survived and could not survive because of the instrumental causes that work in their favor or against respectively. And at the same time how, those who lost their lives enacted as the substantial causes for their own demise. For example – despite being no absolute cure of the disease, many people found the best possible treatment at the right time which worked as instrumental causes for them to survive, to keep their courage intact and eventually to win over the deadly virus. Whereas, lesser equipped family members or caretakers, inefficient hospitals, catching the virus when there was a huge wave of the same and no hospital beds were available etc., worked as the instrumental causes to delay the right treatment for the patients who lost the battle of life against the virus. We may notice clearly that instrumental cause cannot work unless there is a substantial cause. Those who survived and those who could not, both the situations were due to substantial causes where the instrumental causes only played the role of innocent onlookers.

### **The Infinity of the Journey and Making Peace with What is**

When acceptance is the only way to make peace with one's circumstances. No matter how much time it takes. It's wise to travel within.

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<sup>5</sup> "jīva-pariṇāmahedum kammattam poggalā pariṇamanti/  
poggalakammaṇimittam taheva jīvo vi pariṇamadi/" (Samayasāra 3-12-80).

All Indian philosophies indicate that each soul belongs to the infinity and human/physical dimension is mere a halt to learn some lessons, to clear some karmic accounts. Those who have lost their loved ones to Covid-19 or otherwise, may or may not have seen and cremated their corpses, must have gone through this philosophical contemplation that neither any kind of possessions and relationships travel further with the departed nor even the body. In his book ‘*Soul-Science*’, based on the ancient text *Samayasāra* by Ācārya Kundakunda, Dr. Paras Mal Agrawal writes, ‘A bonded *kārmika* dust particle (*dravya karma*) remains attached with the soul till its maturity time. On maturity, it gives the fruition in the form of *bhāva karma* (psychic dispositions, i.e., feelings, emotions, etc.) and *no-karma* (physical body, food, house, family, friends, etc.) and then gets detached from the soul. At any moment, a living being experiences the pleasure and pain according to his *bhāva karma* and *no-karma* at that moment’ (ibid 52). Whereas death is the detachment of the conscious essence, or soul, from one’s physical body, it brings fruition of psychic frame of mind in form of emotions and feelings for the family of the departed.

When life’s circumstances leave one in such a situation that surrender seems to be the only choice, spiritual author Eckhart Tolle suggests, ‘do not resist the pain. Surrender to the grief, despair, fear, loneliness, or whatever form the suffering takes. Witness it without labelling it mentally. Embrace it. Then see how the miracle of surrender transmutes deep suffering into deep peace’ (Tolle 184). When Corona has left everyone helpless, so much so that in some cases even the timely decisions taken by the family members were unable to save his/her life, in this scenario one often fills up with a feeling of guilt, thinking in one’s mind, the patient would have been saved if I would have done this. He would have been here with us today, if only we would have done that and so on. In these times we can definitely take refuge in the spiritual contemplation. In a way, it is the only way to sustain our peace of mind.

In context of coming over the grief of some near one’s death, spiritual guru Sadhguru advises, ‘if you believe that the person you are grieving for has enriched your life, show that enrichment in how you live. If you are going to cry for the rest of your life, it means this person is now the biggest problem in your life. We have the choice whether to go through these situations gracefully or in a broken way’ (Sadhguru 240). At last, one must come to terms with the near one’s demise as time doesn’t halt. Perhaps this is the reason that time is called the biggest healer. For sure, there is a scared geometry in whatever is happening within and without. One may not be able to decode it as of now but there is definitely a pattern even in this chaos.

In context of shedding the grief of karma and realizing the self, Ācārya Nemicaṇḍra mentions in his text *Dravyasaṃgraha*<sup>6</sup>, ‘do not make bodily movements, nor utter words, nor dilute the focus of mind; remaining engrossed in your pure self is real meditation’ (Jain 200). For adversities push one to have a spiritual approach towards life. Where often realizing the self, and pondering over the nature of things, remain the only options.

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<sup>6</sup> “*mā ciṭṭhaha mā jaṃpaha mā cintaha kiṃvi jeṇa hoi thiro/*  
*appā appammi rao iṇameva paraṃ have jjhāṇama//*” (Dravyasaṃgraha 56).

## Conclusion

*Ponder that the journey belongs to the infinity  
That the departed ones are secured  
Into the divinity  
That we may not see them physically  
Even so we continue to have affinity*

Amidst all chaos around the world; the nature keeps blooming as ever, flourishing, moving at its usual pace. The sun rises at its perfect time, the birds chirp melodiously on its arrival. The inevitable happenings of the nature indicate if not collective, we can surely take care of our individual journey. Which can mainly be divided into worldly and spiritual paths. One can take care of the worldly adversities through giving one's best and of the spiritual, by means of introspecting the self. Birth and death, both are philosophical happenings; which are the reasons for happiness and woe respectively. This thought is soothing for the grieved that just the way one existed before birth, he/she continues to exist even after death. That, 'death is not absolute. The loved one is not lost. The separation is not permanent' (Weiss 141).

Arrival in the world and departing from the same indicate that each of us has an individual journey too. That has nothing to do with the relationships, materialistic possessions, not even with the body one owns. Though we do not get the meaning of collective karma in ancient Indian philosophical texts. As the ancient ācāryas, philosophers and teachers only used to refer to a being's individual journey. But as they behold immense wisdom, which can show us the way especially in worst of adversities like the present pandemic. We are supposed to study the texts to understand and relate the same with our surroundings. For perhaps only the ancient wisdom can soothe the restless souls, who have this misconception that they are now wandered for ever. Also, the philosophical topics like *udaya* and *udīraṇā* and *nimitta* and *upādāna* are open and relative concepts which provide a platform for further discussion. Through this research article only an attempt has been made to solve a few queries which appear unanswerable otherwise.

Through these kinds of researches, we may try to understand the workings of the cosmos, and our place in it, in a better way. We see that each being has two journeys parallelly, one belongs to the collective human race, in form of relationships, financial status, work, etc., and the other is the individual journey, which has little to do with the physical realm. One influences the other without a doubt. However, it is the individual journey to which a specific being belongs. One's taking birth and then leaving this realm in form of death specifies it quite clearly.

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