

Understanding of Punya (Meritorious) and Pāp (Sinful) Karma

In Jain philosophy karma are classified in many different ways. They are classified as Ghāti or Aghāti karma depending upon whether they subdue the qualities of the soul (Ghāti) or create physical environment (Aghāti) of a living being. The same karma are also classified in a different way into Punya and Pāp categories.

The Ghāti karma subdue the quality of soul namely; infinite knowledge, infinite perception or vision, infinite happiness, and infinite power. Hence all Ghāti karma are classified as Pāp or sinful karma.

The Aghāti karma are responsible for physical body, life span, mind, and social environment. These karma are classified as either Punya (Meritorious) or Pāp (Sinful) Karma depending upon the type of physical body and social environment of a person.

Pāp Karma

The bondage of karma due to sinful or evil activities of the mind, body, and speech with the potential of producing unpleasant sensations is called Pāp or sin. Activities such as violence, dishonesty, stealing, and unchastity, attachment to worldly objects, anger, conceit, deceit, and lust result in producing Pāp karma.

Since Ghāti karma subdue the qualities of the soul, all four Ghāti karma namely; Mohaniya karma, Jñānavarāniya karma, Darshanāvarāniya karma, and Antarāya karma are classified as Pāp karma. No Ghāti karma are classified as Punya karma.

Only Aghāti karma which creates physical environment of a living being are classified between Punya (Meritorious) and Pāp (Sinful) Karma. The Aghāti karma which produce an unhealthy body, a shorter life span, low social status, poverty, birth in hell, animal, insect, vegetative or similar categories are considered Pāp or sinful.

Hence under normal circumstances, the Pāp or sinful karma are not conducive to spiritual progress and hence liberation.

Punya Karma

The bondage of karma due to good activities of the mind, body, and speech with the potential of producing pleasant sensations is called Punya or merit. Activities, such as offering food, water, shelter, protection of environment, charity, purifying thoughts, physical and mental state of true happiness, result in Punya karma.

The Punya or meritorious karma produce a healthy body, high social status, human birth, and a longer life span. The environment created by these karma, if used properly are very conducive to our spiritual progress. Hence under normal circumstances, Punya karma is essential in our spiritual progress and hence for the attainment of Keval-jñān and liberation.

A Word of Caution with Regards to Punya Karma

While doing virtuous activities, many a times due to ignorance or due to our ego, a person feels that because of his effort and action many people are being helped or he is a big donor to build a temple. He receives a high social status and he takes a great pride of this status.

Due to this type of reflection one also acquires Pāp or Ghāti karma namely Mohaniya karma in addition to acquiring Punya karma for his good deeds. The Mohaniya karma is the single most dangerous karma because only due to this karma one cannot attain the state of equanimity (Vitarāga state - beyond attachment and aversion state) and hence no Keval-jñān and no liberation.

In summary, Punya karma provide human life and healthy body which are conducive to attain Keval-jñān and hence liberation but at the same time due to our ego we also acquire Mohaniya karma that hinders our spiritual progress.

Hence one can conclude that in order to attain liberation, Jain philosophy teaches us that we continuously need to do virtuous activities like helping others, compassionate to all beings, and protecting our environment. However while doing virtuous activities, one should remain very alert and should not get trapped by fame, power, high social status or frustration of not accomplishing the result. This alertness will avoid Mohaniya karma while acquiring Punya karma.

Thus under normal circumstances Punya karma will provide a proper environment for our spiritual progress such as human life and healthy body for the attainment of Keval-jñān and hence liberation.

Never think that Jainism teaches that Punya is a karma and all karma hinder the soul to attain liberation. Only Ghāti karma and in particular Mohaniya karma hinders the soul to acquire Keval-jñān and liberation. All Punya karma are Aghāti karma and they do not hinder the soul to attain Keval-jñān and hence liberation.

From individual spirituality point of view, if one truly removes ignorance (Mithyātva) and Kashāya (which are the Mohaniya Karma) one attains liberation. This can easily be achieved with the help of Punya karma because Punya karma provide proper environment.

Four Fold Classifications of Punya and Pāp Karma

The fruits of both Punya and Pāp karma are manifested in the future in ways that the soul perceives as pleasure or reward and pain or punishment respectively. Jain literature defines the four fold combination of our reflection or tendency known as Anubandh while we go through the fruits of Punya and Pāp karma. If our tendency is towards attainment of liberation, then it creates pious reflection (Punya-anubandhas). If our tendency is towards the worldly pleasures and non-virtuous then it generates sinful reflection (Pāpa-anubandhas).

1. Punyānubandhi Punya

While enjoying the fruits of the past virtuous or Punya Karma, one uses one's wealth, health, and power to help other living beings without any expectation of fame and power. This acquires further virtuous Karma. This is known as Punyānubandhi Punya. Very few people endeavor to earn Punya karma when they are infatuated by happiness and comforts.

2. Pāpānubandhi Punya

While enjoying the fruits of Punya Karma, one uses wealth, health, and power for one's own enjoyment and indulges in non-virtuous activities. This action acquires Pāp Karma. This is known as Pāpānubandhi Punya. Most people when infatuated by happiness and comforts indulge in their own enjoyment. Thus in the end misery is destined for them.

3. Punyānubandhi Pāp

While suffering the consequences of Pāp or non-virtuous Karma, a person reflects that his miseries are the consequence of his past actions and he bears the miseries calmly and with a sense of detachment and objectivity. This attitude earns him new Punya karma and involves oneself virtuous activities. This is known as Punyānubandhi Pāp. Rarely one endeavors to earn Punya karma while suffering.

4. Pāpānubandhi Pāp

While suffering the consequences of previous Pāp Karma, one blames some one else for causing his miseries. This way one indulges in anger, jealousy, and animosity. Thus, one acquires new non-virtuous Karma or Pāp Karma. Most of the people if they are infatuated in misery indulge in anger, jealousy, and animosity. Thus misery is destined for them in the end.

Jainism states that in happy or miserable situation our attitude should be such that we continuously acquire Punya karma as explained in items 1 and 3.

Summary

In summary Jainism teaches us that in the initial stage of spiritual progress, one should eliminate sinful activities as much as possible and put maximum effort in virtuous activities such as charity, helping others, improving the environment, and one's own spirituality. In general get involved in the social and spiritual upliftment of the society and self. The Punya karma acquired by these virtuous activities will provide positive or favorable circumstances such as human life, healthy body, good social status, long life, environment, and spiritual teachers to enhance the spiritual growth further.

Using favorable environment one should continue to do virtuous activities with full awareness of one's true nature of the soul. This awareness will reduce or eliminate ego (Kartā Bhāva) and other vices like attachments and aversions. Once the ego is eliminated, a person does not acquire any new karma but eliminates old karma through Nirjarā and ultimately attains Keval-jñān and hence liberation.

Hence, one can conclude that Jainism does not negate virtuous activities because it acquires Punya karma but encourages one to continue to do virtuous activities all our life with caution against acting with ego and for personal gain of power and social status.

With the elimination of ego, one does not have any desire for the result of his virtuous activities nonetheless accepts the outcome as it is. This is a true nature of a spiritually advanced person.

In summary, on the path of a spiritual progress, one eliminates sinful activities and adopts virtuous activities in the initial stage. Later one continues doing virtuous activities but eliminates ego and expectations. Without the presence of ego or desire a person can not acquire new Mohaniya karma but continues to eliminate old karma and ultimately attains the liberation.

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