

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEFINITIONS

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A recent article in a news magazine, discussing India, makes this statement: “A highly westernized banker talks to you about karma, the Hindu belief which fatalistically accepts man’s destiny through one incarnation after another.”

How sorely has the West distorted the religions and philosophies of the East! Karma is the law of cause and effect, or action and reaction, and has little to do with fatalism, only in so far as one makes his own fate. A man may reap his rewards and debts in the same lifetime, and if this is not possible, then the score is balanced in a future life, but whatever his fate, he has usually earned it. A fatalistic attitude may or may not prevail among the Hindus, but this is not karma. It is quite possible and probable that some Hindus themselves have misunderstood and distorted much of the sacred teachings, and it is also probable that fatalism has crept in where it was not intended, and made the people apathetic.

Before making a criticism of other religions or ideologies, it is well to try to understand them, for what is more unfair than making accusations of something we know almost nothing about? Should one wish to criticize the Bible, let him study it thoroughly first. If one wants to learn about Catholicism he does not go to a Methodist; if he wishes to learn about Buddhism he does not go to a Catholic. Always, he should seek the source itself, the Scriptures or, if possible, the Great Teacher who initiates a great religion. Even the disciples of a great Teacher can misinterpret and distort, each bringing something of his own background and personality, and fusing it with the Teachings. Christ’s disciples each gave his own interpretation and coloring to the Teachings, one with an accent on one principle, another accenting something else. Great misunderstandings can be cleared through coming to a general agreement on the definitions of single words, and it is here that the student should make a start. Much of the important literature demands that the reader make the effort to reach for a dictionary or encyclopedia, or if the terms are apt to be foreign, such as Sanskrit, the student may find a glossary of the terms in many of these books, especially those printed in the West, bearing on metaphysics. How far can one go in understanding, the writings of Sri Aurobindo, for instance, without looking up and learning these terms? And yet, his writings are perhaps as important as any to come out of this century. So also, in many of the articles presented here, especially those of Yogagnani (Dr. Wolff), the reader must acquaint himself with the terms, for the author seeks those words that will give his writings the most exact, clearest meanings. So many of the Sanskrit terms cannot be translated, for they are foreign to Western thought.

A few suggestions may be in order here to help in understanding some of these terms: The prefix “A” or “AN” often means “without”: a-moral is without morals; a-tonal music is without a definite home-tone on which the music comes to rest. Sat is existence, a-sat is non-existence. Atma or atman means self or soul; an-atman would be without self or soul.

Often words are combined, as Maha (great), and atma, to make Mahatma, or Great Soul. We may find similarities of words and roots in the different languages, as in “Yoga,” meaning union, (literally, Union with the Divine), and our word “yoke,” which joins.” Note the similarity in the roots: “gno,” “kno,” “gna,” “jan,” and their uses in such words as: “gnostic,” “gnosis,” “know,” “knowledge,” “gnana,” “jnana” (wisdom). Confusion may arise through transliteration of words, as in “sangsara” (illusion), sometimes written “samsara” or “sansara”; Shankara, the great Brahman teacher, is often seen as “Sankara,” “Sankaracharya.” There were, incidentally, a number of Shankaras, the name having become a title; but it is the first who is outstanding. But Brahma and Brahmin have different levels of meaning, the former being the higher.

The student is referred to the “Theosophical Glossary” by H.P. Blavatsky for a wealth of information on such terms.