

Karma, Memory, Freedom and Justice

INTRODUCTION

At the start of the session, if you are following the one that challenged students to keep an 'honest diary', ask them how successful they think they have been, and to offer some reflections on the experience.

This session builds on the idea of 'memory' and introduces a new idea, that of 'karma'. It makes connections with the desire to contribute to a better life for people who suffer, and to two linked questions that you can share with students:

- *Do we need to remember the past honestly, in order to avoid making the same mistakes over and over again?*
- *What can be done to build a fairer, more just world?*

Explain to students that for many people, particularly members of 'eastern' religions, 'karma' has an important part to play in issues of freedom and justice. Karma may be thought of as 'the law of cause and effect'. For many this means that one's intentional actions will affect one's circumstances in this and future lives.

ACTIVITY

If you have the 1982 Richard Attenborough film, *Gandhi*, show students the clip where Gandhi's famous 'fast unto death' in 1947 is depicted: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXtZytG9EA4> ['Gandhi end of fasting']

Explain this excerpt from the film:

At the time of Indian partition and independence in 1947, some Hindus and Muslims start to take 'revenge' on each other for perceived injustices and murders done against their people. Gandhi begins a hunger fast, as an illustration of the pain being caused by such attacks. When Gandhi is near death, some Hindu men come in and surrender their weapons. Then another man comes into the room and throws his chapatti (Indian bread) down before Gandhi. 'Here! Eat!' he shouts, 'I am going to hell; but I do not wish to have your death on my soul!' Gandhi softly replies, 'Only God decides who goes to hell. Tell me, why do you say you are going to hell?' 'I killed a small child! I dashed his head against the wall because they [the Muslims] killed my little one.' Gandhi says, 'I will tell you a way out of hell: You find a child whose parents have been killed. Then you and your wife bring him up as your own. Only, make sure the

child is a Muslim and raise him in the Muslim faith.' The man hesitates, astonished. Then realisation comes. He bends down, touches Gandhi's feet with his forehead, and silently departs.

Ask the students to talk in pairs or small groups about this scene, especially thinking about the ideas of *memory* and *karma*. After some time exchanging views, get some feedback from the groups and encourage an exchange of views. In particular bring out some of their thinking on such ideas as:

- *Assuming that both Gandhi and the man who threw down his chapatti both believed in karma, how did their views about cause and effect appear to differ?*
- *What part do you think memory played in the story of Gandhi's hunger fast?*

ACTIVITY

Explain that, in 1947 India was 'partitioned' into two countries: India and Pakistan. Countries are far from being fixed entities. New countries are formed, old ones break up. Sometimes new countries emerge after a period of violent revolution; sometimes through the ballot box. Old alliances end and new ones are formed.

Ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- *Why might people want to separate off into their 'own' new country rather than the existing one they find themselves in?*
- *What part does the idea of freedom play in such changes, do you think?*
- *John Lennon imagined a world where there were 'no countries' – what do you think of this idea?*

CONCLUSION

Ask students to reflect on their conversations about memory, karma, mind, freedom and justice over the past few sessions, and to say what they think is the most important thing they have discovered, learnt or realised.