

Karma

# Karma

– take responsibility, now

Ever wondered what karma is and how it affects you? Or maybe you've dismissed karma as a fatalistic religious belief that conflicts with a rational western outlook. Yet perhaps, as Greg Wythes suggests, the Law of Karma offers insight to even secular western yogis, reminding us to be present in the moment and accept responsibility for our lives.

The concept of karma has come from the religions that developed over the last three to four thousand years in India. Each of these religious traditions – whether Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism – has developed a slightly different interpretation of karma, and even within each tradition there are variations in understanding. For the modern westerner trying to find a definitive explanation, there is also the range of New Age teachings that have come to popularity in the last few decades, teachings that usually borrow from the Indian traditions but often bring a new perspective.

Karma is gaining currency and acceptance in mainstream thought and popular culture, and many westerners now use the term in day-to-day conversation. The concept of karma seems to offer a sense of deep and abiding justice in the laws of the universe, something that we do not always see reflected in our own social systems. Given the breadth and variety of its sources, it's not surprising that there is no single clear understanding of what karma actually stands for.

#### **Karma and Newton's Third Law**

Karma is to all intents and purposes the law of cause and effect. "Karma comes from the Sanskrit word 'kri' which means 'to act'. Karma is 'the law of

causality' or the 'law of cause and effect'," says Swami Kriyatma, Director of Education for Satyananda Yoga at Mangrove Mountain. "It is important to remember that action is two-way; it implies both cause and effect. Simply stated, action has consequences. You perform an action and it has an effect and that effect is the cause of another action ad infinitum."

In western science this is described in Newton's Third Law of Motion: "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." Like Newton, the Indian understanding of karma is that of a natural law, like the law of gravity. There are no overtones of punishment. There is no god pronouncing judgments on anyone's actions. It is a law that operates independently of ideology, philosophy or religion. The difference is in the interpretation of what is considered action. To the Indian mind, thoughts and words are as much the cause of future effects as are physical actions.

"Karma is mechanistic, not moralistic," says Gregor Maehle, director of 8Limbs Ashtanga Yoga in Perth, and author of *Ashtanga Yoga: Practice and Philosophy*. "Who I am today is a result of my former actions, and in this case actions include thought, words and deeds. Karma is about taking responsibility. Through my behaviour today I determine who I will be in the future."

#### **Karma in the past, present and future**

The yogic understanding of karma is based in the teachings of Hinduism. It is part of a broad spiritual and philosophical heritage of India and is often associated with the idea of reincarnation. In both Hinduism and Buddhism there is a common belief that the circumstances of one's present life are the results of actions performed in previous lives, and that the actions of *this* life will influence *future* lives. In this sense karma and reincarnation have very close philosophical links. Reincarnation can be viewed as the medium that enables karma to operate beyond one lifetime. It should be remembered that both karma and reincarnation are beliefs. They can neither be proved nor disproved in any rational way. They are laws that operate within a religious and spiritual framework, though karma does have an analogue with Newton's Third Law in the physical world, and offers a moral and ethical symmetry that is particularly attractive.

But even for modern westerners brought up in a secular or Judeo-Christian culture, who may find the concept of reincarnation unpalatable, an understanding of karma can still be advantageous in facing everyday existence. In *The Law of Karma and Reincarnation*, Sri Swami Chidananda

links the actions of an individual to the state of mind they produce now, in the present moment, as much as in the future. “The effect ... action produces on the mind is instantaneous. The mind immediately receives an impression of the nature of the action that is done. If a harsh or cruel act is committed, the impression of harshness and cruelty is immediately etched upon the mind. Repeated impressions contribute towards the formation of distinct tendencies in the mind and they build up and impart to the mind a particular quality.”

This is something that each of us can test in our own experience. It does not require a religion, a philosophy, an ideology – or even a belief in reincarnation. It is a practical tool for living a healthier, more balanced and responsible life.

Intention is a strong aspect of the Buddhist understanding of karma. It is not the external expression of any particular action that determines its karmic effect but rather the internal quality of the intention behind it. If an apparently good action is motivated by

If there is no self then what does karma attach to? And what is reborn? The different traditions advance quite complex arguments to solve this apparent paradox.

#### **Hindu views of karma**

Hinduism differs from Buddhism in that it holds the belief that there is a ‘self’, or soul, or *jiva* – a permanent entity that carries karma through the present life, and from former, and into future, lives. Traditional Hindu or yogic texts, including Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, describe three different facets of karma, each defining a subtly different function. Swami Kriyatma sets out the three aspects or types of karma:

1. *Sanchita*: amassed actions/effects (karma that is dormant)
2. *Prarabdha*: launched actions/effects (karma that is active now)
3. *Kriyamana*: the effects of current actions including impending karma that is already set into action and that will manifest in the future (karma that is potential)

From one’s *sanchita*, or accumulated karma, an amount is taken out for each lifetime. Then, as it comes into operation in one’s life, it becomes *prarabdha* karma. *Kriyamana* karma is the karma one creates in the present life and it is added to *sanchita* karma at the end of one’s life to be carried forward into future lives. Once all the *sanchita* karma is expended, then the *jiva*, the individual soul, is free from rebirth. Whether or not your belief system accepts this typology of karmas, recognising the effects of current actions is certainly something that any yogi can usefully adopt as part of their lifestyle.

Sri Jani Baker, from the Australian College of Classical Yoga, says, “In yoga it is generally understood that, when a person is enlightened, i.e. a *jivanmukti* – ‘free while still in the personal self’ – no further karma will be generated by the person. You might think that this harks back to ideas of reward and punishment, but the sense of the ego as doer is gone. There’s no ego to participate in ideas of past and future or to be attached to desires and aversions – no ego to enjoy rewards or suffer punishment.”

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#### **Buddhist views of karma**

Stephen Batchelor author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Buddhist scholar and former Zen and Tibetan monk, has a very similar view. While accepting that various Buddhist schools have developed the concept of karma into an established article of faith, he does not think it is essential to the practice of Buddhism. “When questioned on the issue of karma, the Buddha tended to emphasise its psychological rather than its cosmological implications. ‘Karma,’ he often said, ‘is intention’: i.e. a movement of the mind that occurs each time we think, speak or act. By being mindful of this process, we come to understand how intentions lead to habitual patterns of behaviour, which in turn affect the quality of our experience.” From this perspective, our actions, words and thoughts create our internal reality, and the psychological states we experience are entirely and immediately dependent on what we do, say, think and feel, i.e. on our karma.

selfish, or in any way negative, motivations then the effect of that action will necessarily be unhappy.

Though the Buddha wrote nothing down in his own lifetime, later texts and commentaries discuss and debate the more subtle and esoteric aspects of karma. There appear to be relative levels of understanding, some for the lay practitioner, some for the religious devotee, some for the monk or the philosopher. At one level karma is an ethical principle concerned with performing virtuous deeds in the hope of accruing merit that will lead to a better life or a better rebirth. At another level it is focused on responsible action and on not blaming anyone else for the circumstances of one’s life. At a philosophical level, one difficulty that arises for Buddhism is reconciling the core Buddhist concept of non-self – where the person is understood as impermanent, a continuation of energy that is constantly changing, with no fixed or central self – with karma and rebirth.

### Western views of karma

The everyday western understanding of karma is influenced by a number of other factors. The first and possibly the most important of these is the Judeo-Christian foundation of western culture. This brings with it preconceptions associated with sin and punishment that are inherently different from the beliefs of Indian religions. The concept of original sin and the feelings of guilt which commonly afflict the western psyche are two further aspects of this cultural foundation that can colour one's understanding of karma.

Secondly, there is the influence of New Age teachings – from Astrology through Theosophy to Deepak Chopra – many of which are based on an interpretation of Indian concepts and ideas. Here karma is viewed as a law that can be used to take more responsibility for one's actions, or that can be used in various ways to influence one's future. A person does good deeds and there will be a future consequence that will be beneficial to the individual. A reward is the expectation for a good action and often this reward is seen in materialistic terms. This is roughly the premise for the current channel seven TV comedy *My Name is Earl*. This show is just one indication of just how far the karma concept has penetrated into popular culture. In general terms the western understanding is centred on the individual, and is concerned with relatively short-term results. 🍏

A third major factor at play in a western understanding is an interpretation of karma as a kind of destiny or fatalism. Whatever happens to a person is happening because it is his or her karma and there is nothing that they can do about it. From this perspective things happen because they were meant to happen and free will plays no role at all. However, the law of karma in no way negates or diminishes the free will of the individual. Free will is an inherent part of karma and it is this facet that emphasises personal responsibility for the actions one takes.

“One common misunderstanding of karma is that it represents one's unchangeable destiny or fate,” says Baker. “Because any action inevitably

cartoon to come in.

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has a consequence, this inevitability is mistaken for a fate written in the sands. It is seen this way because of the perception that the actions related to the present may have happened at a time earlier than birth. But this is a silly fatalism, because the whole point about karma is that your own actions give rise to your experience, and your present and your future are mediated by the choices you make.”

### Acceptance and responsibility

The concept of reincarnation – whether one believes in it or not – will influence how individuals approach the law of karma and how they accommodate it into their life. Life shows us every day that people are not born into equal circumstances and that birth is not a level

playing field. Inequality is one of life's constants. Most of the earth's population is born into a life of poverty and hardship. A simplistic or reductionist view of karma cannot account for the present circumstances of the peoples of Africa, or indeed those of most of the indigenous peoples of the world; nor can it explain the suffering of the poor and oppressed throughout history. And India, the birthplace of Hinduism, as a nation is more than familiar with oppression, suffering and inequality, some of which has been imposed from external sources like colonial powers, and some of which is a product of its own cultural practices like the caste system.

“Patanjali is quite clear on this issue,” says Gregor Maehle. “The

individual has to accept their birth and the circumstances that accompany it. Acceptance is the key factor. These birth circumstances are based on past karma and there are no rational means for evaluating the reasons behind them. I have created the person I am. However, Patanjali also suggests that the individual has a responsibility to stop accumulating negative karma so that future circumstances will be more beneficial. Future pain has to be avoided. As well, stored karma can be intercepted. For this Patanjali recommends the eight-limbed path of yoga, or the practice of either Bhakti or Jnana yoga, whichever path is most suited to the individual. Conversely, for those people whose life circumstances are beneficial there is the suggestion that they do not waste their karmic merit by abusing a position of power or privilege. In the contemporary world we have the example of Bill Gates as someone who uses his own good karma to help others.”

Ekchart Tolle, author of *The Power of Now*, gives a practical and modern approach to karma in his recent book

*A New Earth*. “The end and the means are one,” Tolle writes. “And if the means did not contribute to human happiness, neither will the end. The outcome, which is inseparable from the actions that led to it, is already contaminated by those actions and so will create further unhappiness. This is karmic action, which is the unconscious perpetuation of unhappiness ... Realise that your entire life journey ultimately consists of the step you are taking at this moment. There is always only this one step and so you give it your fullest attention ... And what you encounter at your destination once you get there depends on the quality of this one step. Another way of putting it: What the future holds for you depends on your state of consciousness now.”

The Law of Karma is predicated on the view that everything in the universe is connected: events are not random and without meaning but connected as a whole, even though the cause or the meaning of any event may not necessarily be understood rationally or intellectually. With an understanding of karma, events are no longer seen as

either good or bad – as they may seem to the personal ego or the self – but as part of a purpose that the mind cannot understand. Karma ultimately asks us to drop our limited, illusory, personal view of events and accept them without judgment or reaction. It asks us to take responsibility for whatever happens to us without blaming someone or something else, and not to complain about the circumstances of our individual life. It means acceptance of what is, now, in the present moment.

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