

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF KARMA

Yoga is a spiritual science, and yogis are mystical scientists. Their laboratory is life, which is the interaction of spirit and matter, the matrix of consciousness where the knower encounters the known, and the forces of free will and self-awareness meet with the momentum and resistance of the law of karma.

The doctrine of karma is central to yoga philosophy. It is a principle that impacts every arena of our lives, and yet is surprisingly misunderstood in both the East and West. This short article is offered as an overview to stimulate further study. For a more comprehensive understanding of how karma operates, we recommend *The Laws of Karma* by Goswami Kriyananda. It is an excellent text which provides deeper insights into the esoteric teachings on karma and Kriya Yoga.

Karma is often referred to as a law — the law of causation. It is not a law created by mankind, but a law of physics and metaphysics that describes and defines the cause and effect relationship of our actions: physically, mentally, and emotionally — whether they are conscious or unconscious. It is not a moral or ethical doctrine, nor a mechanism of reward and punishment. It is a natural and mathematical principle that governs our human experience, like the law of gravity. The more we understand the mechanism of karma, the more effectively we can apply this knowledge to improve our life and the lives of those around us.

Life is a school for the soul. The purpose of karma is to awaken all sentient beings to greater self-awareness, and a realization of their creative potential. It is a mechanism by which Spirit comes to know itself in the mirror of existence. The law of karma is the law of equilibrium, revealing that which is, has been, and will be. As we deepen our understanding of the law of karma and consciously live in harmony with it, we begin to free ourselves from the confining effects of our actions — past, present, and future.

Remember the watch words of the yogi, the great mantra *Aham Brahmasmi*: “I am the creative principle.” It constantly reminds us to acknowledge that we are creating the experience of our life. By recognizing that we have generated the circumstances of our life, and thus only we can dissolve or change them, we come to understand that if we are not content with our karma, we can change it. How we respond to life, our attitude, and our interpretation of events, is within our control. Accepting responsibility for our actions and their effects, which is our karma, is the first step towards true freedom. This



begins as we recognize that karma is not a punishment or a painful experience — it is simply the law of cause and effect.

### **Understanding Cause and Effect**

In yoga cosmology, nothing is random. There are no accidents. There is only karma, the law of cause and effect. For every action, whether it is physical, mental or emotional, there is an equal and balancing reaction. The physicists and the mystics agree that everything is caused. They point out that we may not always be capable of perceiving the cause of an event, but it exists.

There is a concept in physics called “the order of chaos.” This theory proposes that what we perceive as random events are not random at all. They are just a part of an order or pattern that is so large or complex that it is beyond the ability of our everyday consciousness to recognize it. Another way to express this would be to say that because we are accustomed to interpreting and evaluating our experiences within a relatively short time frame (rarely more than a few years or decades), we do not see the causes of the events in our life, nor the effects that our actions will have in the future. We do not see our karma.

We have spent a great deal of time in this program talking about the biases of our body and mind and how these biases affect our experience of life, producing limitations in our bodies as well as our perceptions. These biases are our karma — the effects of our past actions. If we expand the horizon of our awareness even a little, we will begin to perceive cause and effect relationships in our life that we were previously unaware of.

The timing, intensity, and nature of karma is symbolically and mathematically studied in yoga. The karma of each soul is unique and creates a particular pattern of experience. This is called an individual’s karmic pattern. The timing mechanism of any specific piece of karma, or when a particular cause or effect will take place, is unique for each individual and can be calculated mathematically. The Vedic text that deals with this subject is called the *Hora Shastra*, known in the West as the science of esoteric astrology.

The samskaras, which produce the karmic effects, are stored in the various compartments of the unconscious mind — the chakras. Whether we are aware of them or not, these samskaras are seeds waiting for the right condition or stimulus to become active. Karma is a samskara whose time to germinate has come. Esoteric astrology, properly understood, reveals when a particular karmic force will activate. The karma stored within the chakras are the biases that affect the way we create our experience of the world. Their



cumulative momentum is the causal force within our life, unless we apply the intensity of our self-awareness with enough duration to change it.

There are three primary types of karma in yoga. The first type is called *san-chitta* karma. It is the sum total of all your karma from all of your past lives. It is referred to as tank karma. Only a small part of this karma has the potential to activate in this lifetime. The second type of karma is called *pralabdha* karma. It is karma that will only be activated in this lifetime. The third type of karma is called *kriya-mana-karma*. It is the karma which you are generating right now. It is created by the action (kriya) of your mind (manas).

### Physical Karma

Let's start by looking at the mechanism of karma on its most conspicuous level, the physical karma of having a physical body. As we said, karma is a mathematical principle. Because it describes the law of cause and effect, it has everything to do with inertia and momentum, and with action and resistance. (You can see how this can be applied to asana practice.)

The physical universe, like our body, is in a continuous state of change. Any force that we exert upon our physical environment is a karmic or causal action; it produces an effect. It requires wisdom and conscious intent to act in a way that will maintain a balance in our relationship to the ecosystem. For example, if we pollute the rivers, lakes and ground waters, we will have no clean water to drink. This is not a punishment, it is simply a karmic pattern of cause and effect. To live in harmony with our universe, we need to be conscious of our actions and live in such a way that we do not produce any destructive effects that imbalance us or the life around us — now or in the future. A wise man once said: "That which we do unto another, we do more so unto ourselves, but at another time and place." Though this is true, the effect of karma can also be immediate.

The physical body is also dynamic; it constantly requires various forms of care and attention in order to sustain equilibrium. This too is a karmic pattern, a cause and effect relationship. The quality of the care we give our body determines how well it will function. The majority of the challenges we experience within our body are not caused by trauma or accident, but by the subtle, habitual way that we live in it. The practice of Hatha Yoga quickly reveals how we have created the condition of our body by our behavioral patterns.



In asana practice we often refer to various parts of the body as being predisposed to particular functional patterns. We say things like: “the leg may not want to straighten” or “the tongue and throat may want to harden when a hip opening proves challenging.” The ways that our neurological pathways have been educated is a physical karmic pattern which gives various parts of our body an intelligence of their own. These patterns are the result of how we live and/or have lived in our body, what we feed it, how much rest it gets, and how we use or misuse it. All of this, together with our attitude, is the karma of our body — the causal forces of past actions which create momentum, inertia, and resistance.

Simply being right or left-handed creates a bias in the body. By favoring one arm, the other one becomes underused and its musculature is often weaker and less educated. This becomes quite apparent during asana practice. The predisposition of being left or right-handed is a neurological bias, not really a musculo-skeletal one. This means that we have built a specific karma or biased pattern in the pathways of the nervous system. “Handedness” creates a bias in the nervous system in the same way that typing or playing a musical instrument requires reeducating neurological pathways for specific functions. If we use our body in an asymmetrical way, our nervous system is also used asymmetrically. This pattern then affects how we use our body for related functions, which over time can create chronic misalignments that are experienced as tightness, instability, or even pain.

There do seem to be things about our body that we have little control over: genetic qualities, for example, and environmental forces. Although this may be true within the context of a single incarnation, the doctrine of karma teaches that even these conditions are part of a larger pattern. According to yoga philosophy, we have chosen the conditions of our birth, consciously and unconsciously, by our past actions and desires.

In the same way that there are karmic patterns in our relationship to the physical world and in our body, there are also karmic patterns in our mind. Here again the effects are not arbitrary. They are not rewards or punishments, but opportunities to become more conscious of our actions, and to recognize the creative potential of our mind.

### **Our Mind and the Subjective Nature of Karma**

When we experience events in our life, it is common to categorize them in terms of good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant, desirable and undesirable. This is normal within the social and cultural environments that we live. But regardless of how we categorize



an experience, the question remains: What caused or created the event? For every action there is an opposite and balancing reaction. This is the law of karma. But whether a cause or effect is good or bad is really quite subjective. Sometimes an event that seemed unpleasant at first, in time, turns out to be a great blessing. Sometimes when we get what we thought we wanted, we wish we could get rid of it. The smallest and seemingly insignificant action can sometimes result in unexpected, and even transformative, events. There is an old saying: “Be careful what you pray for. You might get it!”

Karma is not good or bad, it simply is. Our subjective interpretation of it creates an impression (samskara) that has the potential to create more karma. The problem is the way we qualify or judge an experience; it is based largely on the preexisting karmic patterns in our consciousness. There is momentum behind our thoughts, just as there is momentum behind the patterns of our physical body. Our loyalties and prejudices, our hopes, fears, desires, and values all color our perception. The emotional/mental patterns we repeatedly experience are the ones that have the greatest intensity and therefore the greatest influence over us. The more frequently these fluctuations of the mind are experienced, the more momentum there is behind them. The more momentum there is behind a pattern, physically, mentally or emotionally, the more difficult it is to control, and consequently the less freedom we have.

This is the confining nature of karma. Karmic momentum holds us within a limited field of experience. It limits the horizon of our awareness, producing an inertia that makes it difficult to think a new thought. Karma is the inability to think a thought we have not thought before, or to stop thinking a thought that we are locked into. This is the real meaning of the *wheel of samsara* that the yogis talk about. When we can break the pattern of our mental karma, we will solve the repetitious problems that we encounter in our life, what Patanjali would call the source of our pain and suffering.

This brings us back to our magical formula,  $I \times D = F$ . This formula is especially applicable to working with karma. The law of self-awareness can and does override the law of karma. One of the most important ways to measure intensity is by awareness. For example, due to our lack of awareness we may activate an unhealthy and potentially destructive karmic pattern, such as improper diet or smoking. The force or resulting effect of this karma will be determined by how long the habit exists — its duration. The great secret is this: it will require a conscious force of at least equal intensity and/or duration to counteract the karmic effect of the behavior. We are the result of all that we have thought, said, and done. The practice of yoga weakens the force of our karma by producing greater intensity and duration of self-awareness. This allows us to make healthier, more conscious choices which lead to conscious actions (Kriya Yoga).



### **Spirit and Matter (Purusha and Prakriti)**

We can use our mind to free ourselves or to imprison ourselves. Our mind is capable of the most noble aspirations as well as the most destructive. We can use it to serve others or we can use it to serve ourselves. It is a wonderful servant, but unless it is self-disciplined, it is a lousy master. Like electricity, the mind is an energy or force that can be permuted into different forms for different purposes. For example, electricity can take the form of light from a lamp, or it can become the heat of the oven, or the cutting power of an electric saw. These are all manifestations of one substance.

The Shankya school of yoga philosophy, to which Kriya Yoga adheres, teaches that there are two factors in this creation — spirit (*purusha*) and matter (*prakriti*). Both are considered to be eternal. It is said that matter is blind and spirit is lame, or that matter has no self-awareness and spirit has no form. It is the interaction or yoking (*yoga*) of these two that creates the physical and mental structures which we inhabit as self-conscious entities. There is a theory in modern physics which recognizes a part of this five thousand year old yogic philosophy. It states that matter is not created or destroyed, but only changes form.

In yoga philosophy, matter (*prakriti*) is given three classifications: gross, subtle, and super subtle. Everything that is not spirit, such as our body and the physical objects around us, as well as our thoughts and emotions, are recognized as one of these three forms of matter. Being eternal, the subtle matter of which our mind is composed is not created or destroyed, it just eternally changes form. Even a casual observation of the mind reveals this truth. Just because the mind continually takes on new thought-forms does not mean that there is not a momentum behind its creations.

In the same way that there is a momentum behind the patterns of our nervous system and physical body, there is also a karmic momentum behind our mental processes. Everything about our experience of ourselves is part of a continuing dynamic that is without beginning or end. However, very few people have real continuity of consciousness. Most of us cannot remember what we had for lunch sixteen years ago, and most of us certainly do not remember being born. Yet these memories are stored in the subconscious mind. Although it is possible to consciously remember the details of our previous lives, it is unlikely that most people can do so. We are having enough trouble with this lifetime. This is partly because of the *klesas* which create attachments to our current physical and mental forms. It is also because we define ourselves mostly by our physical body and our conscious mind — which is the textbook definition of *avidya*.



The surface mind is the most short-term aspect of our consciousness. The predisposition or bias of the physical, mental, and emotional patterns we exist within, which collectively are our karma, have their genesis in our past. These memories of past experiences, thoughts, and emotions, together with the proclivities they produce (samskaras), are stored in the subconscious and unconscious mind. Mystically, they are stored in the chakras, where they still play a part in our present experience of ourselves and of life. One of the goals of yoga is to expand the horizon of our awareness, to perceive how we create and sustain the circumstances of our life, and to learn how to dissolve and recreate them wisely, if we so choose.

### **Good and Bad Karma**

Although in yoga it could be said that there is no such thing as a good habit (because habit implies a lack of self-awareness and not being free to consciously choose) we rely on the momentum of very specific unconscious habits for our physical existence. If we had to rely on breathing volitionally, most of us would not survive the morning. The formula  $I \times D = F$  can be utilized to create positive karmic momentum. What we want to do is to cultivate physical and mental habits that are productive of greater balance and contentment in our life. This could be referred to as creating positive momentum, or actions productive of “good karma.” Though there will be effects from these actions, which is the nature of karma, they will be productive of contentment, harmony and balance.

On the other side of the scale are actions which produce imbalancing effects. These actions can also occur at any level. We have already given examples of physical and mental habits; however the same is true of our emotions. If there is such a thing as bad karma, it is any experience or behavior that confines or limits us, creates fear or confusion, closes down our consciousness, or produces an inability to control our lives. When we react to life instead of respond to it, we are locked into our karma. This is why yama and niyama are important techniques. They assist us in generating a lifestyle that encourages and feeds positive karmic patterns and softens or neutralizes negative ones.

Self-awareness, as we said, is the regulating factor that determines or modifies the intensity and duration of karma. The intensity and duration of any action is what determines its force — the depth and breadth of the karmic effect. In the mental and emotional sphere, intensity can be measured by our attitude and our intention. For example, a soldier can kill someone in battle without producing a heavy negative karmic force if he honestly believes (consciously and unconsciously) that he is serving a noble cause,



such as protecting the lives and liberty of women and children. In fact, if he did not do his duty he might generate even heavier negative karma. However, the same act committed by someone who believes that war is unjust or immoral will create a strong negative karmic force. If someone who is not a soldier takes a life, he is considered a murderer, producing even more serious and confining karmic consequences, physically and emotionally. It is not only our intent that contributes to the karmic effect of any action, but our position in life (dharma) and our horizon of awareness. If a soldier feels that for him killing is not a permissible act, then the karmic weight of his conduct is felt in his consciousness even if a government sanctions his actions.

This is why it is helpful to see karma from a mathematical and symbolic perspective. Self-judgment, which often leads to repression, is one of the most destructive forces within us because it distorts our experience. This world is a school for the soul; it is a garden. Some of us are planting trees, while others are picking the fruits. This does not make one soul more evolved than another. Everyone has their own unique timing mechanism and needs to learn different things, in different ways, at different times. It is our self-image which predisposes us to seeing something as “good” or “bad.” If we feel that our actions deserve punishment or reward, then that will be our experience. The force of the samskaras within us is our karma.

### **How Karma is Activated**

Karma is activated by people, places, and events. But ultimately karma is triggered by our response to life, by our interpretation of events, by our actions, and by our attitudes. Our emotional reactions trigger thoughts that dictate our words and actions. Anything that causes us to become emotional will trigger karma. Anything that removes our emotionality will soften it.

The law of karma is universal and operates on multiple levels. Life is a matrix of consciousness which we are part of, not apart from. As Ezekiel said, “There are wheels within wheels.” Our bodies, our minds, families, races, religions, cities, countries, planets, and solar systems all carry karmic patterns. All of these patterns affect one another. The more we identify with any of them, the more we take on the karma of anything that happens within that sphere. For example, if your primary sense of self is as an American, then anything that happens to any American, anywhere, will tend to affect you personally. In contrast, if your primary sense of self is that of a timeless being who happens to be functioning through a human body, then the things that influence a specific country or religious group will not have as intense of an effect on you.



## How Karma Can Be Softened

Being aware of the larger karmic patterns around us, expanding our sense of self, and detachment (not indifference) from cultural insanity are all ways that we can begin to soften the effects of karma in our life. Karma is softened by our attitude. It is softened by removing unhealthy physical and emotional patterns. It is softened by self-discipline and the use of mystical techniques. But ultimately, karma is softened and balanced by self-awareness.

In the Yoga Sutras (Book II: Sutra XVI) it says: *Heyam duhkham anagatam*. This translates as: "Pain and suffering that have not yet occurred can and are to be avoided." We do things in life that are not always in our best interest. Often they are subtle and will not yield problems for years. Because of this, we somehow rationalize doing them. The simplest choices that we make each day can have profound effects upon us in the future, whether that future is tomorrow, next year, next lifetime, or the next breath.

As we discussed last month, when prana enters the chakric system, it provides the potential energy to activate the karma that resides in the five lower chakras. Therefore, simply breathing creates momentum behind the mental and emotional patterns of our consciousness. If we can change our breathing pattern, we can change the intensity with which the karma will activate. Therefore, pranayama is also an important technique for softening the effects of karma.

The best time to work on softening or neutralizing karma is before it manifests. Once it is active, it is very difficult to control. However, if we have any control at all in our life, we have attitudinal control. When we change our attitude, we change our karma. This requires continual self-discipline (tapas) and self-awareness (svadhyaya). We need to be aware of how different people, places, and circumstances affect us. We need to weaken their influence over us. But most importantly, we need to be conscious of how the thoughts we think and the emotions behind those thoughts, consciously or unconsciously, together with the actions they engender, create our karma.

The practice of the first seven limbs of yoga, especially sense-withdrawal (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), and meditation (dhyana) weakens the karmic forces within us by producing a greater intensity of self-awareness. The karma can then be neutralized and completely dissolved by the use of the eighth mystical method, Samadhi.



## GUNAS - THE QUALITIES OF ACTION

Because karma describes the cause and effect relationship of our actions, no discussion about karma would be complete without considering the three primary qualities of action. In Sanskrit, these modes of action are called *gunas*. Each of the *gunas* is a necessary part of the dynamic of action. Although none of them are considered to be categorically better than the others, two of the three *gunas*, *tamas* and *rajas*, are inherently imbalanced and consequently create karma. The third *guna*, *sattva*, is an action that seeks to sustain equilibrium and therefore tends to respond to a karmic force without creating more karma.

### Tamas

The first *guna* is called *tamas*. Literally translated, *tamas* means *darkness*. *Tamas* relates to the quality of inertia. It is associated with the mental states of apathy, laziness and unawareness. It is symbolically considered cold and dark. The law of inertia declares that an object at rest will tend to remain at rest. *Tamas* is the state in which things exist prior to action and which they return to after the action is taken. If *tamas* fits into the natural order, then all will be well. Rest will be taken only when rest is needed, to balance action. However, if something becomes excessively *tamasic*, it becomes fixed and too rigid.

Life is dynamic and requires volitional action to maintain some degree of balance. This means that if anything, especially our mind or body, remains in a *tamasic* state of rest too long, it will begin to lose the fluidity that is required by the changing dynamics of life. It will begin to atrophy. It will resist the flow of life and become out of synch with the order of nature (*rita*). The greater the duration of inertia, the greater will be the amount of force that is required to move an object. This is true of our thoughts and emotions as well as our physical body.

### Rajas

The quality of action required to overcome inertia is called *rajas*. Literally translated, *rajas* means *to be excited or affected*. *Rajas* is considered to be warm, emotional and restless. Symbolically, it represents light with heat, in contrast to the cool darkness of *tamas*. It is also referred to as passionate activity — activity born from desire.

Most of the time, desire is the primary motivation for what we do. Without the quality of *rajas*, we would not be motivated to even feed our body. There is a reason why

hunger is so uncomfortable; it creates a desire for food. We would eventually starve to death without some desire. Desire in and of itself is not a bad thing. It is our attachment to our desires and our inability to control them that is the problem. The greater the intensity and duration of a desire, the greater will be its momentum (force) and consequently the greater the attachment becomes.

Developing an attachment to a desire is like an adhesive bandage on a wound. The desire is a mechanism to fulfill a perceived need, which should reestablish a balance. But when it has outlived its usefulness, the desire, like the bandage, needs to be removed. Unfortunately, there is usually a bit of discomfort in removing it. So when you have a desire, evaluate its wisdom and, if you deem it to be appropriate, fulfill the desire. But when it has outlived its relevance, let it go.

### **Sattva**

There is no single English word that is the equivalent of sattva. It literally translates as something like *beingness*. It is compassionate activity in contrast to the passionate activity of rajas and the inactivity of tamas. Whereas tamas is referred to as dark and cold, and rajas as light with heat, sattva is seen as light without heat. It is symbolically associated with light, wisdom, and balance. Sattva is still a quality of action, but without momentum (rajas) or inertia (tamas). Perhaps better words to describe sattvic action would be mindful, clear, or perceptive. It is purity of intent, the ability to do that which needs to be done simply because one is aware that it needs to be done, with no desire, aversion, or attachment to the action or its outcome.

Sattvic actions produce order and balance, not the extremes of inertia or momentum. The action of sattva can be seen as an attitude of “just enough.” Sattvic actions can respond to a karmic circumstance without creating additional causal forces. For example, if we go for a period of time without eating (tamas), we will at some point be motivated by the desire to engage in the action of eating (rajas). As the result of eating we will have created the karmic effect of dirty dishes. Now, if we react in a tamasic way to this karma (swinging like a pendulum back to tamas, rather than seeking the balance of sattva) we will end up with a sink overflowing with “karma” by the end of the week. This in turn will require a great deal of rajas in the dish washing department to bring the kitchen back into a state of balance. If, however, we simply wash the dishes when we are done eating, we complete the karma without the need for rajistic emotional motivation. This would be considered a sattvic action, creating no future karma, no future cause or effect.



## DHARMA

Dharma has many meanings. It is sometimes translated as “that which sustains and upholds.” It symbolizes the nature or order of things, whether it is the nature of a person or a system. It means universal law and universal order. When all three of the gunas are in a state of balance, one begins to live the dharma.

Dharma could be described as the result of sattvic action. The example of a tree or a flower is often used to communicate the spirit of dharma. The tree creates shade, not because it volitionally chooses to do so, but because that is its dharma. Shade is an effortless expression of its nature. In the same way, it is not the compulsion of the flower to smell good, but its nature or dharma.

Dharma is also translated as duty — duty to one’s civilization, as well as to oneself. Though this is true, people often have an unfortunate emotional reaction to it in our culture. Duty often implies something that we are obliged to do, whether we want to or not. This attitude of begrudging obligation is not dharma. Dharma is embodying an expression of our nature without emotional involvement or karmic motivations. It is a code of conduct that keeps us in harmony with the circumstances within which we find ourselves. The dharma of the mother is to nurture her children to independence. The dharma of the teacher is to teach. In our earlier example, it is simply washing the dishes.

At one time or another, we have all probably had someone tell us to “just be yourself.” This is really a very complicated request. Who are we? If we see ourselves as our body and mind, which are the cumulative expressions of our karma, we are embodying the attributes of something we have, rather than what we truly are. To live the dharma is to embody our true nature; however the momentum behind our karma needs to become minimal in order to have enough self-awareness to do this. If all of our actions become an expression of dharma, then when we create karma, it will tend to be a creation that is productive of greater freedom, contentment, and wisdom.

All of us leave karmic trails behind us. The best thing we can do is to strive to keep our actions as sattvic as possible. In this way, we will leave a trail of “good karma.” But remember, good and bad are subjective perceptions. Eventually, all karma needs to be neutralized in order for us to find *moksha*, the spirit’s final liberation from the confinements of matter — gross, subtle, and super subtle.

In this state, free of all momentum and inertia, we rest in pure being (balanced self-awareness). The seemingly infinite and varied expressions of life are reduced to just two



things, the perceiver and the perceived (purusha and prakriti). Then, realizing that this is all that there has ever been, with a last expression of detachment, purusha releases its identification with prakriti. The perceiver and the perceived melt into oneness. There is no longer you perceiving life; there is only Life beholding itself.

