



What is Karma?

IN THE WAKE OF THE 1960s, THE PRIMARILY EASTERN CONCEPT OF KARMA BECAME A PART OF WESTERN POPULAR CULTURE. As with many cross-cultural concepts, there is something lost in translation in the process. As Americans, we have come to know the word *Karma* as a casual expression of “what goes around comes around,” with the implication that whatever you put out into the world will return to you. This belief is fundamentally misplaced, and doesn’t really relate to the original definition of karma.

Like most people, before my higher level studies of philosophy, I held the superstitious belief that if I wronged someone, I should fear that the universe would eventually repay me: if not now, then at heaven’s gate or worse, when I was re-born. Honestly, this idea kept me well behaved, and good karma (in terms of grades and behavior) meant being popular at school, getting into a good college and ultimately, approval from my community.

Yoga defines Karma as “action” and then further defines it as the “consequence of all actions.” *Everything we do affects everything else.* It is a powerful law of nature – that all actions create a ripple throughout the universe. But, as with every simple truth, the reality is not as simplistic as it sounds.

A key quote from a version of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Eknath Easwaran, awoke me from my confusion related to karma:

“The Buddha says that we are not punished for our anger; we are punished by our anger.”

Think about this question: when someone yells with anger at another person, who is hit hardest by the angry comments? The yeller is absolutely disturbed by the anger. The angry person’s blood pressure rises, his words are spiteful and his thoughts are intensely negative.

This person is punished by his anger. The listener to the anger has distance between the negative thoughts. The listener can ignore the words or listen with compassion. The listener is free to respond to the anger in a variety of ways. The angry speaker is a prisoner to the anger.

Secondly, the angry person is sowing seeds for his future. Not in the sense that others will yell at him or treat him with anger, but in the sense that he is setting the stage to become angry again. He is trapped by his karma, regardless of what others do. Anger itself is the prison.

Building on this point, karma relates to a series of events. Yoga’s philosophy considers each event as a lesson. From this perspective, karma might be better summarized as the “school of hard knocks.” The key is to learn from your experiences and then alter your experiences as you go through life.

The *Yoga Sutras* explains four types of karma: **Black, Black & White, White, and No Karma.**

Black Karma is negative or destructive acts that are planned and then carried out. These Black Karmas leave a person in an ill state of mind. For example, if you plan to say something mean to a person and then execute the negative interaction, you suffer for the duration of all the negative effects making it a strong event. If you inadvertently say a similar mean statement without planning to say it, you suffer to a lesser degree.

Black and White Karma includes good acts that carried out with selfish intentions. A wealthy person donates money so long as a plaque with his name is hoisted in front of the building. A person plays a great sports game and then boasts about their abilities in front of a crowd.

White Karma is good deeds that are offered for the sake of bettering humanity but with self-awareness. The good person is driven to do good deeds and knows that they are doing good things for others. Their enthusiasm for performing the good deeds motivates them to seek out more ways to continue to do good deeds. There is a slight degree of attachment to the end result of “doing good” so the wheel of karma keeps spinning as the person is ready to act again.

No Karma indicates a deed done without any identification to the deed. The person cares for their body by eating healthy food but does so effortlessly. There is no feeling of missing the junk food, as the person is simply following the rules of health with no resistance. Fulfilling one’s responsibilities is considered normal and not the subject of ‘good’ deeds. They simply act without attachment to their deeds. This leaves the sense of complete freedom because they are not impelled to have to do anything, not even good deeds. Another way of explaining this is that of being one with the flow of life. Having no karma ends the cycle of continued action and sets the doer free.

The beauty within this concept is that the mind can grow and change. There is a chance to alter karma in positive directions by self-understanding, healing, and spiritual practice. The practice of Yoga aims at purification of one’s karma. Yoga classes offer a student time to realign the mind-body relationship. Meditation offers time to instill deeper spiritual intentions. Living in loving and conscious relationships allows patterns of selfish behavior to be replaced by acts of kindness. The entire science of Yoga conditions the mind to behave with purified forms of karma.

It is said that everything in this world is in a state of change, and this is especially true of the mind. This potential for change allows for the possibility of karma to change for the better or the worse. The key to the process is to become aware of your karma by understanding yourself. Once you understand why you think the way you do, you will be free to choose how to act. Eventually, you will gain a larger understanding of yourself and be able to break free of certain karmic patterns in your life. Start with self-awareness and let positive change grow from a pure state of being – find your yogic culture of consciousness! ▲