

What Is Karma?

by

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A spiritual blockchain.



The word *karma* has entered everyday language across the Western world, but its meaning is almost always misunderstood. It is commonly taken to mean cosmic tit for tat, as if the universe were keeping score. *Karma* points to something more subtle and far reaching. Here we explore what it truly means and how this ancient idea can reshape how we see ourselves, others, and the events of our lives.

The Sanskrit word *karma* means simply “action.” More broadly, it refers not just to the act but also to its consequences, the moral residue it leaves behind.

Karma is a foundational idea in Hinduism and in all the other Dharmic religions of India, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. It is closely linked to other key concepts: *dharma* (righteous conduct), *ahimsa* (the principle of least harm), and above all, reincarnation. In this view, the soul does not perish with the body. It passes through countless births and deaths (*samsara*), shaped by its own accumulated *karma*, until it attains *moksha*, liberation from the cycle. At that point, it is freed from bondage and returns to *Brahman*, the eternal substratum of existence and consciousness.

Karma unfolds in layers. The portion already ripening in this lifetime is known as *prarabdha karma*. It determines the broad circumstances we are born into, such as our body, family, and life conditions. The rest of the accumulated store that has not yet begun to bear fruit is called *sanchita karma*. This is the backlog gathered over many past lives. Every new choice in thought, word, or deed adds to this reservoir. Nothing is ever lost. The record is exact and continuous.

But *karma* is not the only imprint we carry. Along with it travel the latent tendencies shaped by habit, desire, and experience. These are called *vasanas*. If *karma* is the ledger of actions and consequences, *vasanas* are the deep grooves that shape how we think, feel, and react. Both *karma* and *vasanas* are borne by the subtle body (*sukshma sharira*), which survives physical death and accompanies the soul from one life to the next.

Sometimes *karma* and *vasana* are aligned. Sometimes they are in tension. A person may be born into favourable circumstances yet feel drawn to destructive habits. Another may be born into hardship but carry an inner orientation toward clarity, self-restraint, or truth. The task before us is to refine these tendencies and turn them toward the good.

It is crucial to understand that *karma* does not imply fatalism, nor is it a system of mechanical retribution. It is cause and effect, **shaped by intention and governed by free will.**

Every thought, word, and deed plants a seed. The results may ripen now or in another life, but the imprint is never lost. This is not a doctrine of helplessness. On the contrary, it is a call to personal responsibility. You inherit the effects of past actions, but **retain the power to shape what lies ahead.**

The doctrine helps explain why good people may suffer while the wicked coast through life with seeming impunity. From the *Dharmic* point of view, the ledger of *karma* stretches across lifetimes. A child stricken by cancer, for instance, is not the victim of random cruelty or divine wrath. What unfolds is the consequence of accumulated actions carried forward. This may unsettle modern sensibilities, but it offers a more coherent moral accounting than the alternatives in the

Abrahamic religions, which appeal to inscrutable divine will or inherited guilt. *Karma* affirms that justice is real, even if not immediate.

Once the principle is internalised, the transformation is deep. You begin to live with heightened awareness. You see that those who have wronged you are also bound by the consequences of their actions. This does not absolve them, though it softens the sting of resentment. Their fate will find them. You are no longer trapped by the need for vengeance. Your task is to act rightly, to maintain your compass and its alignment with truth.

More importantly, you come to see that nothing is trivial. Each gesture, each choice leaves a trace. Even the food you eat, how it is sourced, how you treat sentient beings, each of these enters your *karmic* account. They are not things. They are souls on the journey. To harm them needlessly is to incur a moral debt. To choose otherwise is to refine the self. The ancient sages saw the universe as an interconnected web, where no act is isolated and no sentient being insignificant.

The doctrine of *karma* touches everything. It becomes a steady, guiding force in your consciousness. In modern terms, your *karmic* record is a **spiritual blockchain**, updated with each act, invisible yet exacting.

This is no system of blame. It is a framework of consequence. Each of us is both heir and architect of our condition. And in that lies both the insight and the hope this ancient teaching offers.

- RP, Aug 2025

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Glossary

Karma

Action and its consequences. The moral residue of every thought, word, and deed.

Dharma

Right conduct. Living in accordance with truth and moral order.

Ahimsa

The principle of least harm. Choosing non-harming whenever possible.

Moksha

Liberation from the cycle of birth and death. The soul's ultimate release from bondage.

Prarabdha karma

The portion of karma already ripening and shaping the current life.

Sanchita karma

The accumulated store of past karma not yet fructified.

Vasana

Latent tendencies formed by repeated actions and desires. Vasanas shape temperament and inclination.

Sukshma sharira

The subtle body. The non-physical vehicle that carries karma and vasanas from one life to the next.