

KARMA: The Law of Order and Opportunity

Theosophy holds that order pervades the manifested universe because everything exists according to the laws of nature. Natural law operates in the material realm as well as in the subtler fields of thought and feeling.

Law of Spiritual Dynamics

Karma is the law of spiritual dynamics related to every act in daily life. The word *karma* is Sanskrit, meaning literally “action,” but it implies the entire cycle of a cause and its effects. Ralph Waldo Emerson called it the “law of compensation.” Every thought, desire, or action affects in some measure the equilibrium of the universe. Once its harmony has been disturbed, the universe seeks to return to balance; the process of seeking to restore equilibrium is what we call karma.

Karma, according to H. P. Blavatsky (one of the founders of the Theosophical Society), is “the *Ultimate Law* of the Universe, the source, origin and fount of all other laws which exist throughout Nature. Karma is the unerring law which adjusts effect to cause, on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being.” It “adjusts *wisely, intelligently and equitably* each effect to its cause.” All laws of science and all moral laws are expressions of this tendency to restore harmony, which we call karma.

We Choose Our Destiny

We ourselves create our own future destinies by the choices we make each minute. By ignorant action, we bind ourselves through selfish deeds, feelings, and thoughts. To find happiness and peace, we must stop the flow of such selfish action. When we know this, we will begin to use the law of karma consciously for our liberation from the effects of our past ignorance.

Death does not settle old scores, any more than moving to a new town cancels the debts and credits made in an old one. We carry over effects from one life to the next and must expect to meet the consequences of our past.

Each of us is born with an inherited character, in an environment and family that seem either to help or block our progress. In reality, all circumstances are opportunities for us, for they are the natural results of our past living and are stepping-stones for our future growth. Our destiny is not imposed upon us. We create it as we daily weave the threads of our future.

Karma is the law that dynamically adjusts effects to causes. It is the law of harmony or equilibrium that balances all things. But it is also the law of opportunity, which

allows us to change our past for a better future. We have made ourselves what we are. And we can remake ourselves.

Cause and Effect

Because the working out of the law is complex, we may not always see how causes and their effects are related. Sometimes we see only a result, which appears unaccountable. Or we witness a cause but cannot see ahead to its result, which therefore seems not to exist. When we first hear about reincarnation and karma, we may feel resentful that we have to bear the results of causes set in motion by “somebody else.” But when we recognize that the “real” us is imperishable and lives through many successive lives, we can understand that everything we experience has its cause in this or a past life and that every action will have its inevitable consequence now or in a future life.

If we understand karma as the law of spiritual dynamics, of order and opportunity, we will become self-reliant. We will realize that we cannot escape responsibility—and should not want to. Instead we can become self-conscious shapers of our environment. Only by understanding and working with it can we use natural law, as an aviator can fly by understanding gravity and neutralizing it with other natural principles.

Similarly, in the moral world we transcend the inevitability of consequences by understanding karma and setting in motion causes that will produce desirable effects and neutralize undesirable ones. In the inviolability of law lies freedom, for it enables us to remake our present character—which is the outcome of past living—and to create our future character as we would have it.

Karma is Not Predestination

Karma is neither predestination nor fatalism. Fatalism and predestination imply that individuals are so bound by circumstances or by some external power that no effort of their own can free them. That is the opposite of karma. Because of karma, we who generate causes can modify or neutralize the resulting forces. We may be temporarily bound, but that is the result of our own binding. We can influence the course of our lives by pouring in new energies in new directions.

Basic Principles

While the law works in very complex ways, with infinite permutations and combinations in human life, anyone can grasp and employ certain basic principles immediately.

We live in three worlds—physical, emotional, and mental. We generate energies or forces as we act in each world. These energies bring about a corresponding result in their respective spheres. Physical acts create physical environment; desires determine family and social links with other individuals; and thoughts result in mental abilities and tendencies. The sum of all these is what we call character.

Action on the Physical Level

If our actions bring happiness to others, we will sooner or later find ourselves in a fortunate environment, with an increased opportunity for spreading happiness and good will. If, on the other hand, we cause pain to others by our actions or our failure to act, we will find ourselves eventually in unhappy surroundings until we learn, by experience, a greater wisdom in living.

The law of karma itself is impersonal, neither good nor bad. From the viewpoint of evolution, however, good is all that furthers evolution, and evil is whatever opposes progress toward greater perfection. Karma does not function to punish those who do evil, but to teach them. When the lesson is learned, nature's purpose is accomplished.

Action on the Emotional Level

The force generated on the emotional level is that of desire or feeling. To pursue desire aids in our development by binding us to the objects of desire. We may judge the wisdom of our desires by experiencing their results. Through the fruits of unwise desires, we learn to focus on higher ones and finally to be free from all desire. Through the happiness enjoyed from wise desires, we become illuminated and eventually learn to be happy in all circumstances.

Desire also makes opportunities. Once this principle is realized, we will understand that to have opportunities of any particular kind in the future, we need only cultivate desire along that line and put that desire into action now.

Action on the Mental Level

The third force is that of thought. The force generated by thinking increases our ability to think clearly. Devoting some time every day to thinking deliberately and in a controlled way will increase the power of our mind as an instrument. Thoughts are things, quite literally. They are modifications of the mental energy that is all around us.

Many thoughts are strongly associated with emotion and therefore bring the thinker into contact with other persons, in relationships that are either pleasant or

unpleasant. Job said, “The thing I greatly feared is come upon me.” That happens. But so does the opposite: The thing we greatly love comes also upon us. We make it happen.

This is our key to power. Knowing that we become what we think, we can deliberately set ourselves to think of qualities we desire to develop. Bit by bit, the molding power of thought creates these qualities. The process is as natural and reliable as developing muscles by exercise.

Reincarnation, a Necessary Means

Obviously harmony and equilibrium are not always achieved in one lifetime. That is why we are reborn—not just to experience life again, but to become harmonious beings. The cycles of reincarnation provide the necessary extension in time for the law of karma to operate.

Motive and deeds are both important, and each has its own consequences. Deeds react upon the environment, but motive reacts on character. When faced with an unpleasant karmic result, we must seek to meet it constructively and to modify it, remembering that it is really an opportunity to build new qualities of character. Courage and serenity in meeting misfortune, and a persistent effort to eradicate all feeling of ill-will and resentment towards those who seem to be responsible for our unhappiness, will do much to improve both our present and our future.

New Opportunities

Sometimes we have an opportunity that we think is impossible for us to take. But it would not be there unless karmic law had brought it to us as a result of our past desire and effort. Such opportunities should be seized bravely. If we can nearly do a thing, we have worked for it in the past. By extending ourselves now, we may be taking the final step to bring a latent power into active expression.

Often the result of karma is not seen immediately. It is like a seed that lies dormant, seemingly dead. But eventually it sprouts, matures, and the harvest is reaped. In the fertile soil of our physical, emotional, and mental natures, we plant the seeds of our future, and we carry with us the rich harvest of many past sowings. If the harvest seems to be poor and unfruitful, it can be improved by planting better seeds. We are never without the opportunity to plant again, to sow the seeds of love, kindness, and generosity, that we may reap the harvest of wisdom, understanding, and peace.

Character is our record of the past and our promise for the future. The capacities of today are the results of our yesterdays and the rungs on a ladder stretching to greater tomorrows. As we climb, we reshape the present into the future, and

thereby change the past. What were failures become steps up the ladder to perfection.

The beauty and majesty of the law of karma are summed up in these words by Mabel Collins:

We are each our own absolute law-giver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to ourselves; the decreer of our life, our reward, our punishment. (*Idyll of the White Lotus*)

Desire to sow no seed for your own harvesting; desire only to sow that seed, the fruit of which shall feed the world. ("Karma")



For Further Reading

Karma, by Annie Besant. An explanation of the universal law of balance.

Karma: Rhythmic Return to Harmony, edited by Virginia Hanson, Rosemary Stewart, and Shirley Nicholson. An anthology exploring karma from many viewpoints, including kabbalah, yoga, and astrology.

A Study in Karma, by Annie Besant. An examination of the cosmic scope of the law of action and reaction.