

What is Karma?

Karma is a term that you may have heard before. It probably brings to mind the idea of “what goes around, comes around.” To some extent, this is accurate, but the Sanskrit word “*karma*” simply means “action” or “deed.”

According to Hindu philosophy, every action (*karma*) has a reaction or outcome. When an individual’s actions are positive or selfless, and righteous (dharmic), they will experience positive effects or rewards. If their actions, on the other hand, are negative (i.e. lying, stealing, hurting, etc.), the results will be negative. The *karma* of an individual’s actions, positive or negative, may be experienced immediately, later in their present life, or possibly in a future life or lives. It is important to remember that an individual’s *karma* is based on their thoughts, words, and actions and the choices they make.



In Hinduism, the lotus symbolizes a person’s duty to work selflessly and without attachment in the way a lotus remains untouched and high above the mud and water in which it grows.

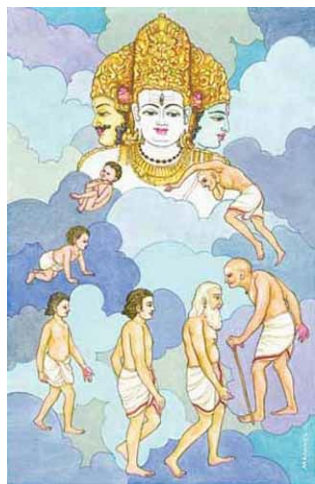
There are three types of *karma*:

- *Kriyaman karma* - These are actions performed in the current life that may produce results in the same or subsequent life. Some forms of current *karma* are also known as *agami karma*.
- *Prarabdha karma* - This is *karma* whose effects have already begun. It takes longer to manifest, but occurs at some point in an individual’s present lifetime.
- *Sanchita karma* - This is accumulation of all past *karma*, and the results of this usually occur in a future lifetime.

What is Reincarnation?

Hindu teachings state that every birth is the result of an individual’s unique karmic circumstances. Thus, when a person or living thing dies, their soul is attracted to circumstances that will help balance out their karmic needs and debt in order to advance spiritually. People may be born into circumstances where they suffer in order to reap the consequences of bad decisions from this and previous lives. Others might be born into circumstances in which their suffering is minimal as the reward for following their dharma well in this and previous lives. Hindus also believe that people can be reincarnated as other living things based on their previous actions. This process of reincarnation and the presence of souls in all living things is the basis for respect that Hindus are encouraged to show for all people and forms of life.

Suffering, as understood in Hinduism, is not necessarily just physical or material; it also refers to an individual's state of mind. For example, a woman might be born into a wealthy family, but she may have a disposition that never allows her to fully enjoy her prosperity. On the other hand, a kind man who finds himself handicapped after an accident could remain kind, caring, and helpful in spite of his physical limitations. The woman's wealth, but inability to enjoy it, and the man's ability to endure physical difficulty, yet continue to live joyfully are both understood to be results of their past and present *karma*. In other words, karmic needs and debts manifest not only as an individual's life



A pictorial representation of the cycle of birth and rebirth.

circumstances, but the way in which they deal with them. On the other hand, it's also said that the response to circumstances is always open to choice -- *karma* generates an outcome, but not the response to that outcome. According to Hindu teachings, a person's response to suffering should be informed by wisdom. Hindus hold that a key component to *karma* and spiritual advancement is acting in ways to alleviate the suffering - be it physical, material, or mental - of other living things.

The cycle of reincarnation (birth, death, and rebirth) is called *samsara*. While the concept of *karma* acts as a positive motivator for leading a spiritual life, *samsara* is, in some ways, a negative reinforcer, and Hindus strive to be free of this cycle.

Many Hindus believe that *samsara* is a feature of life based on the individual's deluded belief (*maya*) that one's existence is independent of everything and everyone else. With this understanding of *maya*, the individual forgets not only his or her own Divine nature, but the presence of that same divine nature in the rest of existence. The mistaken belief in an individual's own autonomy from the rest of existence is what drives them to act selfishly or in a fashion that generates *karma*, and this *karma*, in turn, keeps the individual tied to the cycle of *samsara*. Others define *maya* as the state of forgetfulness of the complete dependence of existence on the Divine, and as a result, also forgetting the need for all actions to be selfless and in loving devotion of God.

What is Moksha?

Most schools of Hindu philosophy conclude that the ultimate goal is for the individual to work through their reservoir of *karma* in order to attain *moksha*. Hindus typically believe that when a soul completely balances its "karmic bank account," by reaping the consequences of all actions, good and bad, it is ready to attain *moksha* (though there are situations in which *moksha* can be attained before this balance). *Moksha* is, therefore, liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*).

For many Hindus, this translates to the perfected ability to live in the present moment, detached from desire and the fruits of action (consequences or rewards), and experience absolute peace and the awakening of pure compassion towards all. As such, *moksha* can be achieved in this lifetime through self-realization (*atma-jnana*) or realization of an individual's true, divine nature. In this state, the soul

stops creating the *karma* that binds it to the physical world, and finds liberation.

For others, the path to *moksha* is one that is paved by loving devotion to God and selfless service, where every action is viewed as an offering to God. *Moksha*, in this view, can only be attained upon physical death. It is described as experiencing bliss and closeness to God, the depth of which is dependent on the innate nature of the individual soul and their *karma*.



Compassion towards all encompasses not only people, but all of existence.

Since Hindus believe in *karma* and reincarnation, the concept of heaven and hell as worlds of eternal glory or damnation do not exist for them. Hindus also do not ascribe to the concept of Satan or a devil that is in eternal opposition to God. Some Hindus may believe in what is described in Hindu scriptures as two planes of existence called *svarga* and *naraka* that can be likened to heaven and hell, respectively. Neither *svarga* nor *naraka*, however, are either permanent or eternal. Both are intermediary planes of existence in which the soul might exhaust a portion of its karmic debt or surplus before taking physical birth once again to strive for *moksha*.

Key Takeaways

- *Samsara* is the cycle of birth and rebirth and *moksha* is the liberation from it
- Some Hindus believe *moksha* can be attained in this lifetime, while others believe it can only be attained upon physical death