

Karma

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Karma means action; in Theosophical teaching it also names the universal law of ethical causation. Thought, motive, speech, and deed enter a living order in which causes bear consequences. The doctrine therefore concerns the continuity of life on physical, mental, moral, and spiritual planes. It asks us to become conscious participants in that continuity, learning how present choices may restore harmony within a world already shaped by innumerable choices.

In *The Key to Theosophy*, H.P. Blavatsky describes karma as the source of the laws operating throughout Nature, adjusting effect to cause on every plane of being. Its scope extends from a cosmic disturbance to the movement of a hand. The definition places individual morality within a universal order of relation.

Theosophy also insists that Karma must be understood on all planes. Physical actions matter, but so do thoughts, desires, motives, omissions, fantasies, speech, intentions, and attitudes. A harsh word is not only sound. It is force released into relation. A selfish thought is not merely private. It becomes part of the psychic and moral atmosphere. An act of compassion is not merely a pleasant gesture. It sets causes in motion that strengthen the possibility of harmony. Karma teaches that nothing real is lost and nothing is wholly isolated.

Professor Iyer gives karma its humane and universal dimension when he relates justice to moral interdependence. If every being lives within a network of causes, another person's suffering cannot be reduced to a simple verdict about that person. Our knowledge is too limited, and our involvement too extensive. The teaching directs attention toward the help we can give and the causes we are contributing. Its proper effect is a more exact responsibility joined to a larger compassion.

The Key to Theosophy is especially clear on collective Karma. Individual Karma aggregates into national Karma and world Karma. The evils of society cannot be reduced to neat individual deserts. Every atom is subject to the general law of the body to which it belongs. This collective dimension gives Human Solidarity a basis in shared causation. The conditions into which one is born, the injustices one inherits, the collective tendencies of a nation or civilization, and the suffering of humanity are woven together. Karma is individual, but never merely individual. It is relational through and through.

Reincarnation supplies the wider time scale of this teaching. Causes and tendencies may extend beyond the limits of one embodiment, while the enduring soul learns through successive lives. This is a metaphysical account of continuity, not a claim that we can reconstruct someone else's past. Remembering that distinction protects the doctrine from becoming a ready explanation for every misfortune. The present obligation to relieve suffering remains clear even where its remote causes remain hidden.

The Theosophical Glossary says that Karma neither punishes nor rewards. It is simply the one Universal Law guiding all other laws along their causational grooves. This is deeply important. Punishment and reward imply an external administrator responding emotionally or judicially. Karma is more intimate. The action and its consequence belong to one continuum. In the domain of eternal justice, the offense and the result are not two unrelated events forcibly joined. They are inwardly connected. The consequence is the action returning to its source under law.

The relation between Karma and freedom must be carefully understood. Karma is often mistaken for fatalism. But fatalism says: what will happen must happen, and choice is meaningless. Karma says something subtler and nobler: past causes shape the present field, but present consciousness is always generating causes. One cannot undo yesterday by denial. One can meet its consequences with courage, intelligence, repentance, and service. One cannot escape law. One can learn to cooperate with law. This is the beginning of true freedom.

Professor Iyer's "Karma and Choice" places this at the centre. Human beings are not merely victims of past causes. They are choosers within the field of causation. The field may be constrained by previous choices, collective conditions, bodily tendencies, social structures, and psychic habits, but within that field there are moments of conscious response. A pause before anger, a refusal to indulge resentment, a generous interpretation, a renewed vow, a courageous act of restitution — these are karmic turning-points. They introduce new causation.

Repentance belongs here. In Theosophy, repentance cannot magically erase causes already released. A harmful action, once done, has entered the field. An evil thought sent out cannot be recalled as though it had never existed. But sincere repentance is not useless. It changes the direction of the soul. It prevents repetition. It begins restitution where possible. It alters future causation and purifies the motive-field from which new action arises. Repentance is therefore not self-condemnation; it is the turning of consciousness toward law.

The Buddha's teaching, as Professor Iyer presents it, deepens this further. The whole universe is a manifold expression of one unitary Life Principle working through forms under an omnipresent law of complex causation. Subjects and objects, acts and events, mental processes and physical phenomena are linked in cause-effect-cause sequences. Every effect carries within

itself the potency of further causation. This is a magnificent vision of interdependence. Nothing stands alone. Everything participates in becoming.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception becomes a practical discipline here. The lower mind sees only immediate consequence: my pain, my gain, my grievance, my desire. Karma asks *Manas* to widen the circle. What preceded this? What will follow from it? Who else is affected? What collective patterns are involved? What duty arises now? What response would harmonize rather than perpetuate? The larger circle does not dissolve responsibility; it makes responsibility more exact and more compassionate.

Karma therefore asks for attention at the point where thought becomes intention and intention becomes speech or action. Careless repetition can strengthen a harmful habit; a considered response can begin to loosen it. Such watchfulness is reverent care for causation, exercised without pretending to foresee every result.

The doctrine also gives hope in the face of collective darkness. Since causes are real, healing causes are real. Since destructive patterns can accumulate, constructive patterns can also accumulate. One act of courage may strengthen others. One truthful word may enter the moral field and continue. One life of service may alter unseen lines of possibility. Karma does not promise quick results, but it assures that no genuine cause is wasted. This is exact hope.

Karma, however, should never be simplified into visible success or failure. Some noble acts ripen invisibly. Some suffering is not evidence of wrongdoing in any crude sense. Some apparent good fortune may be the exhaustion of old merit, not present wisdom. Some obstacles may be protective. Some delays may educate. Because Karma is complex, humility is required. One should not pretend to read another's Karma with confidence. The safest use of the doctrine is first upon oneself: to become more responsible, more compassionate, more truthful, and less separative.

Consider a person who passes along an unverified accusation and later discovers the mistake. Regret alone leaves the accusation circulating. A karmically responsible response includes correcting it with those who heard it, acknowledging the injury without excuses, and changing the habit that made repetition easy. Some consequences may remain beyond repair. Yet the correction introduces a fresh cause, and restraint prevents another injury. The incident reveals how an effect can become a new beginning. Thoughtfulness at the next crossing of speech and action changes what is woven into the common life.

Karma may be contemplated as a vast living loom in which every thread moves with every other. Each thought is a strand, each motive a color, each action a crossing of lines. Some knots are ancient; some are newly tied. Some patterns darken the fabric; some begin to restore its

radiance. No thread is separate from the whole. To understand Karma is to learn to weave consciously, with steadier hands, a purer motive, and a heart increasingly loyal to the welfare of all beings.

Glossary

Archetypal — Pertaining to an underlying pattern or model; in quotation ten, the formative order expressed through cycles.

Centripetal and centrifugal — Directed toward a centre and away from it, respectively; quotation eight uses these complementary movements to describe the activity of the One Life.

Climacteric — Marking a decisive turning point; in quotation ten, a moment when accumulated causes and cyclic conditions converge.

Elemental — In Theosophy, a being or living force associated with the elements of Nature, generally below the stage of human self-consciousness.

Eye of Shiva (Third Eye) — The eye of spiritual vision associated with *Shiva*; quotation twelve presents it as an image of wisdom and compassionate protection.

Immortal Triad — The three higher principles in the Theosophical constitution of the human being: *Atma*, universal Spirit; *Buddhi*, spiritual soul; and higher *Manas*, spiritual intelligence.

Karma — Action and the universal law of ethical causation, through which thought, motive and deed bear their corresponding consequences.

Karman — Sanskrit for action. In quotation three, Blavatsky uses this form for action as cause while describing karma as ethical causation and its effects.

Manas — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice, capable of responding to spiritual insight or personal desire.

One Life — The underlying unity of life within all beings and forms; also called the unitary Life Principle in quotation seven.

Personality — The changing bodily, emotional and mental characteristics of a particular lifetime, distinguished from the enduring spiritual individuality.

Planes — Levels or fields of existence and consciousness; the essay distinguishes physical, mental, moral and spiritual dimensions of causation.

Psychic — Pertaining to the soul or inner mental and emotional life; in Theosophical usage, this does not necessarily mean the highest spiritual consciousness.

Pyramid of Initiation — In quotation twelve, an image of the ordered fellowship of spiritually awakened beings whose wisdom and service protect humanity.

Quaternary — The four lower principles of embodied human life: physical body, vitality, astral double and desire. In quotation nine, these form the changing field through which the higher principles work.

Reincarnation — The teaching that the enduring spiritual individuality takes successive human embodiments, carrying forward causes and possibilities for learning.

Seven kingdoms of Nature — In the scheme invoked here, the three elemental kingdoms together with the mineral, vegetable, animal and human kingdoms: seven interconnected orders of evolving life.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy* — p. 113

“As I have said, we consider it as 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. As no cause remains without its due effect from greatest to least, from a cosmic disturbance down to the movement of your hand, and as like produces like, Karma is that unseen and unknown law which adjusts wisely, intelligently and equitably each effect to its cause, tracing the latter back to its producer.”

Meditation thought: Consider one present choice as a cause entering a wider order. What quality of consequence are you helping to begin?

2. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy* — p. 114

“We must not lose sight of the fact that every atom is subject to the general law governing the whole body to which it belongs, and here we come upon the wider track of the Karmic law. Do you not perceive that the aggregate of individual Karma becomes that of the nation to which those individuals belong, and further, that the sum total of National Karma is that of the World? The evils that you speak of are not peculiar to the individual or even to the Nation, they are more or less universal; and it is upon this broad line of Human interdependence that the law of Karma finds its legitimate and equable issue.”

Meditation thought: Let the thought of collective karma widen responsibility. Which shared condition can your own conduct help to improve?

3. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume II — p. 298

“Karma is a word of many meanings, and has a special term for almost every one of its aspects. It means, as a synonym of sin, the performance of some action for the attainment of an object of worldly, hence selfish, desire, which cannot fail to be hurtful to somebody else. *Karman* is action, the Cause; and Karma again is ‘the law of ethical causation’; the effect of an act produced egotistically, when the great law of harmony depends on altruism.”

Meditation thought: Reflect upon the relation between altruism and harmony. A private advantage may carry a cost that becomes visible only through wider attention.

4. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary* — p. 176

“Karma neither punishes nor rewards, it is simply the one Universal LAW which guides unerringly, and, so to say, blindly, all other laws productive of certain effects along the grooves of their respective causations. When Buddhism teaches that ‘Karma is that moral kernel (of any being) which alone survives death and continues in transmigration’ or reincarnation, it simply means that there remains nought after each Personality but the causes produced by it; causes which are undying.”

Meditation thought: The law described here has no personal grievance to satisfy. Contemplate responsibility as a continuing relation between action and consequence.

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Karma and Choice” — p. 215

“Each one could look at any single act that he has done and link it up to the state of mind in which he acted and to the quality or colour of feeling that was present in that act. He could look behind ‘thought’ and ‘feeling,’ in the separative and specific sense in which the words are used here, and attempt to see the act in terms of the totality of his character, in relation to the whole of his life, at least since he became a responsible adult, whenever that was for the individual person. The whole of his life has led to this particular act.”

Meditation thought: Recall one recent action and the habits that prepared it. Where could a more conscious choice begin to change the sequence?

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II — “Karma and Choice” — p. 217

“As long as one strives to be compassionate and merciful, it will be imperatively and inevitably the case that one will come to understand justice better. Through mercy one may come closer to an appreciation of divine justice, cosmic justice, and above all learn what it means to be just to every living being, every elemental, every constituent of the seven kingdoms of nature. Every single human being has also the prerogative of doing justice to his or her true self.”

Meditation thought: Let mercy enlarge the effort to be just. What might you understand more accurately if you approached another being with benevolence?

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “The Message of Buddha” — pp. 224–225

“The whole universe is the manifold and variegated expression of a single, unitary Life Principle. This works through various ever-changing forms on different planes under an omnipresent Law of complex causation. Subjects and objects, acts and events, mental processes and physical phenomena, are related to each other in cause-effect-cause sequences, every effect carrying within itself the potency of further causation, just as it in itself is the product of prior causation.”

Meditation thought: An effect also carries possibilities for further causation. Consider how a difficult event might be met with a constructive response.

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “The Message of Buddha” — p. 225

“The diverse laws which regulate the interrelationship between the innumerable phenomena of the world around us, and of which we are an integral part, are all varied expressions of One Law, which is only the One Life in its ceaseless centripetal and centrifugal action.”

Meditation thought: Hold the many relations of a day within the image of one life. What changes when an apparently isolated act is seen in context?

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Gupta Vidya” — p. 11

“Man is essentially a thinker, and all thoughts initiate causes that generate suffering or bliss. The immortal Triad endures the mistakes and follies of the turbulent quaternary until such time as it can assume its rightful stature and act freely in consonance with cosmic order and natural law. As man is constantly projecting a series of thoughts and images, individual responsibility is irrevocable. Each person is the centre of any disturbance of universal harmony and the ripples of effects must return to him. Thus the law of karma or justice signifies moral interdependence and human solidarity.”

Meditation thought: Thought participates in moral interdependence. Choose one recurring judgement and consider the atmosphere it helps to sustain.

10. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “The Rebirth of Humanity” — p. 15

“In a universe of inexorable law and ceaseless transformation, no two moments in the life of any being are exactly alike. Similarly, in the lifetimes of races the accumulated karma of the past converges with the archetypal logic of cycles to precipitate climacteric moments.”

Meditation thought: Reflect upon the possibilities of a significant moment. Readiness may begin in the faithful performance of an ordinary duty.

11. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “The Rebirth of Humanity” — p. 15

“The readiness to serve is helped by the fusion of an altruistic motive with skill in timely action. These may be gestated through deep meditation on behalf of the good of all beings and an authentic renunciation of earthly concerns for the sake of the many who are lost.”

Meditation thought: Bring goodwill and practical skill together. What preparation would make your willingness to help more useful to another person?

12. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “The Eye of Shiva” — p. 212

“The present time of metamorphosis offers a propitious opportunity for deep meditation upon the boundless ocean of space and upon Karma as a compassionate law that applies to all of Nature and humanity. When one has truly begun to gain an inkling of the law of Karma as the law of one's own being, inseparably binding each to all for the sake of the common good, then one can begin to meditate upon the Third Eye of the highest beings and see the Eye of *Shiva* over the Pyramid of Initiation which protects the whole of humanity.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate the Eye of *Shiva* as the essay's image of spiritual protection. Let that image enlarge responsibility for the common good.