

KARMA AS AN EXPRESSION OF PSYCHOLOGY

“If somebody had to live my life, why did it have to be me?” quips Buddhist comedian Wes Nisker. When I was a young woman, I felt both intrigued and bothered by the concept of karma. Everyone I knew who remembered their past lives were at some point a princess in Egypt or a medieval European king (and never a village woman in Indonesia or a South American shepherd). It irritated me when people claimed they must have done something terrible in a past life because they were currently suffering—not being able to get pregnant, or suffering from continuous relationship problems, or getting cancer or some other type of terminal illness. The deeper principles of karma spoke to me, but most of the explanations I heard seemed superficial and overly linear. So I did what any diligent young spiritual student and writer would do—I approached each spiritual teacher or yogi I met on my travels and asked them: What is karma?

I resonate with the views of the yogic scholar [Robert Svoboda](#). He says that even the greatest yogis understand but a sliver of the totality of the mystery of karma. However, the concept didn't become user-friendly and practical to me until I linked it with modern psychology. Doing so has opened up much more self-compassion for how challenging it can be to work through some of our psychological material, in addition to helping me develop more patience for how long the process can take. I also understand karma now through the lens of multigenerational patterns and family lineages, all of which are experienced within our own psychological makeup.

Our personal psychology is how our karmic patterns show up in this lifetime. A general yogic perspective on karma suggests that the individual soul moves through consciousness lifetime after lifetime, incarnating again and again in the school of life in order to complete various tasks and lessons and release contractions of consciousness. The conditions and circumstances of each incarnation are based on forces far vaster and more complicated than most of us can conceive. These forces determine the quality of consciousness we receive, the cultures and families we are born into, the bodies we obtain, and the significant experiences and relationships we encounter. “The accumulated imprints of past lives, rooted in afflictions, will be experienced in present and future lives,” writes [Patanjali](#).

Accordingly, if we want to unravel the karma we have accumulated in past lives, we need look no further than our present life circumstances. Whatever we experience in the present moment is both the fruition of our previous karma and the planting of seeds for future karma. The circumstances we encounter *are* our karma—the expression of our consciousness and the seeds of our future. It is as if we live in an incredible hologram of karma. Our lives reflect the intersection of our family or genealogical karma, the collective karma of our culture, the karma of the earth, and—in some cases—a particular set of karmas expressed through the teachers and communities we encounter on the spiritual journey.

We encounter confrontational moments of bare honesty in life in which we perceive clearly that we are indeed reaping the seeds we have sown. Or maybe we have inherited these seeds through accident, unconsciousness, or misfortune. This most commonly expresses itself in our patterns of intimate relationships and parenting. Although we may try mightily to do otherwise, we tend to enact patterns that were modeled to us, at least until we diligently work to transform them. When people are badly abused as children, whether overtly or subtly, they frequently repeat this abuse in intimate relationships. Perhaps to a lesser degree, they even repeat these patterns as parents,

even when they try to do quite the opposite.

It is possible to trace our current psychological challenges not only to our parents but also to our grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and even further back into ancestral time. With close examination, we can discover that so many of the challenges we face are literally passed down through generations as a result of impersonal and unconscious conditioning. Newer methods of group psychological inquiry such as family constellation work endeavor to reveal these multi-generational patterns. We may be shocked to realize that the essence of some of our powerful experiences and strong choices are influenced in an immediate way by ancestors we never even met. These manifest frequently as depression, relationship patterns, illnesses, the age at which we die, and even daily choices we assume are entirely our own (for example, the number of children we have). For many people, it is easier to understand karma when it is framed in this tangible and practical way rather than through a vague notion of the soul moving across lifetimes.

The implications of this are manifold. On the one hand, we are not at fault for the thoughts, feelings, and challenging circumstances that arise in our lives; however, we are at the same time totally responsible for our lives in the present moment and for the implications of our actions. If we can release shame and self-blame while simultaneously strengthening our personal accountability, we can actually transform the damaging patterns that plague our lives and prevent greater joy.

A number of therapies concern themselves with past-life traumas, and spiritual students are endlessly fascinated by who they might have been or what they might have done in their past lifetimes. However, from a practical perspective, we need look no further than our present circumstances. Whether we were a farmer in Mesopotamia, a slave trader in the American South, or a reincarnated yogi is irrelevant for most of us. What is important is whether we are able to meet our present circumstances with a clear and discerning perspective and refrain from acting in such a way that furthers the endless repetition of unfavorable and limiting aspects of our conditioning. From this perspective, psychology becomes a tool we can use to unlock, work with, and evolve our karma.

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