

# Defining Karma

By Aaron Schlosser

The concept of Karma is a tool we use in the Tao Practice to help us try to understand the way the universe works in regards to our willful actions and their consequences. Successfully applied, the concept of Karma can help inform us how to approach difficulties in our lives. However, how we define Karma will impact the effectiveness of the concept as a tool. Therefore, our definition should not only represent the reality of the force we call Karma, but it must also put Karma into a perspective that helps us learn how to face it.

Merriam-Webster defines Karma as “the force generated by a person's actions...to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of the person's next existence.” We can boil down this wordy definition to this simple message: our actions have consequences that extend beyond this life. This concept is not alien to Western religions. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all teach that a person's actions in this life might determine whether they go to heaven or hell in the afterlife. The additional layers of this concept that are implied with the belief in transmigration are two fold:

1. The circumstances of our present life are determined by our actions in a previous existence.
2. Karma “perpetuates transmigration,” meaning that our souls are destined to reincarnate again and again unless we straighten out our Karma.

Digging deeper, we might ask why such a force would exist. Why must a soul face the Karma it has sown before it can move on to the next plane of existence? More importantly, how should knowledge of Karma affect how we live our lives?

One possible explanation for Karma is that the universe acts with its own cosmic justice: Sinners must face the penalty for their sins in order to bring balance back to the universe. If we limit the definition of Karma to this, there can be problems with our attitude towards Karma. For example:

1. If we define the universe as a merciless place, we fail to recognize the power of forgiveness that we possess.
  2. Through this limited definition we might come to the conclusion that sinning is to be avoided out of fear of retribution, instead of out of compassion and understanding. We might learn what not to do, though not necessarily for the right reasons.
  3. According to this definition, we are left to face our Karma like a prison sentence with no chance of early parole; fated to pay the price for crimes we probably do not remember committing or do not recognize as wrongful acts. This can lead to a fatalist, victimized attitude, with an undercurrent of resentment because we might not fully acknowledge our guilt.
  4. If we feel victimized and helpless in the face of Karma, we forget that we have the power and responsibility to change the world for the better.
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Karma's negative effects can be felt everywhere, and it is generated by our negative actions; therefore, we must recognize that our positive actions also have a far reaching effects in transforming the nature of our existence. It is in our hands to change things.

So what is missing in the definition of Karma? What's the point? Is justice the point? Ultimately, what is important is how this concept affects how we live. So if we put the idea of Karma into the perspective of the Tao Practice we can start to see what aspect of Karma most deserves our attention.

In the Tao Practice, our spiritual goal is to reconnect with our True Self: the part of us that is in perfect harmony with Tao. Our lack of perfect understanding is the ultimate obstacle we need to overcome before we can follow Tao as naturally as the sunflower follows the sun. This lack of understanding is the root cause of the actions that in turn create, fortify, and perpetuate the cycles of Karma. So what purpose does Karma serve in our spiritual development to perfect harmony with Tao? It serves as a reminder of the lessons we have yet to fully learn. Karma presents us with the challenges we need to grow and develop spiritually. From this perspective, Karma is not punishment; it is our exams in the school of life, exams that we must face again and again if we do not properly prepare and deal with them. This definition of Karma can yield a fruitful attitude and lead to appropriate action. When we view Karma as an exam we take on the role of a student. All the aspects that make a good student are also effective in facing Karma: discipline, diligence, trust in one's teachers, wise use of one's time and energy, etc.

With a fundamental definition from which to build our understanding, we can look at all the ways Karma can manifest and try to understand them. We encounter Karma in practically every aspect of our lives, including

- Fears and phobias (such as my fear of flying, which has kept me from having many mind-broadening experiences.)
- Likes and dislikes (For example, I used to love dark, angry music which would just feed the anger in me.)
- Relationships with family, friends, etc. (For example, I consistently struggle not to be aloof among my co-workers.)
- Habits and the stubbornness with which we cling to them (Eating habits, smoking, drinking, being wasteful, etc.)
- Behavioral and circumstantial patterns (For example, job after job seems to have similar problems. Could it be me?)
- Physical and mental health. (Maybe if I stopped slouching, my back would not hurt as often.)

Karma can manifest in so many different ways that it is not always easy to recognize the lesson we need to learn in order to transcend it. It is important to point out that Karma might be the exam, but it is not necessarily the teacher. This is why we use the Tao Practice.

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The Tao Practice can help us understand karmic situations and develop strategies through which we can learn the lessons necessary to face these challenges successfully, even when the lessons we need to learn are not plainly evident within the challenges. Through the Tao Practice, we learn methods that can help us maintain or regain our calm in otherwise overwhelming situations. A calm state of mind will help us see the situation more clearly and help us make better decisions. Furthermore, within the community of Tao practitioners there are teachers and peers we can turn to for invaluable wisdom and an outside perspective on our struggle. When we humbly seek the assistance of our Tao community, and use the tools to put our issues into perspective and keep our calm while facing them, we can tackle challenges that are otherwise insurmountable for us.

In the Tao Practice we learn that Karma typically manifests itself in a pattern. The same problems occur over and over in the same or similar forms until we learn the lessons we need to learn. To use the exam analogy, when we fail the exam, we have to repeat the grade. When we look deeply into our lives, we can see that many of the problems we face now and have faced in the past are parts of the same pattern of Karma, though on the surface they might not seem connected. I mentioned before that I have gone from job to job and faced similar issues at each one. My pattern of being aloof with my co-workers would not change even when the co-workers are different people. I finally learned that unless I break the pattern in myself, changing the surroundings will not help. So now instead of looking to a new job to solve my problems, I need to look at changing my pattern of being aloof. Looking at habits, routines, and other repeated cycles of our lives, we can start to recognize the karmic issues we need to face.

Unfortunately, if we do not live our lives as good students, the exams get harder and harder until we find them completely overwhelming. For example, if we do not learn to break a smoking habit, we might one day be faced with lung cancer. Both are manifestations of Karma, but one is easier to deal with than the other. So depending on how we live our lives, we can get closer to passing the exam or further away. When we give in to the patterns of Karma, our actions make them stronger. When the patterns of Karma are very strong, they can distort our perceptions and reasoning and make it difficult to keep our thoughts, emotions, and actions under our conscious control. We might have a behavioral pattern such as possessiveness, arrogance, or laziness, and it has been our pattern for so long we've lost the ability to detect these characteristics in ourselves, just as a seasoned smoker ceases to smell cigarette smoke as a non-smoker would. We fall into our routines on auto-pilot, scarcely conscious of what we are doing. We can become so deeply entrenched in our patterns that we lose perspective on our own lives, become more disconnected with our True Selves, and it becomes harder and harder to change.

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Facing our Karma can therefore be quite difficult, and it is necessary to apply a strategy to deal with it successfully. Part of that strategy is to learn about how Karma works and what it means to our personal development. The Tao Practice provides tools and insight to help us successfully face, understand, and ultimately transcend our Karma. For example, I wanted to leave an old job I had, because I felt the job was making me miserable. I asked my Tao teacher about it, and he told me that I shouldn't leave that job unless my co-workers would throw me a going-away party. My relationship with my co-workers at the time was not good, in part due to my habit of being aloof around them, so if I had left at that time they certainly wouldn't have thrown me a party. So my strategy became to view each day as a day closer to that going-away party. I became more positively engaged with my job and with my co-workers. I accepted assignments that before I would have tried to delegate to someone else (including agreeing to business trips that required me to \*gasp\* fly). It was difficult, and I frequently relied on tools I had learned in the Tao Practice to keep me calm, clear, and centered, and within six months of applying this strategy my relationship with my job and my co-workers was completely transformed. When a new job was offered to me out of the blue, not only did my co-workers throw me a going-away party, they offered me a lot more money to try and get me to stay. In my new job I have been able to avoid falling into some of the same routines that made things difficult for me at the previous job, but only because I actively faced those patterns before I switched jobs. This is just one example that has led me to believe that if we engage the Tao Practice with courage, discipline, and perseverance, we can truly transform our lives.

In my experience the perspective on Karma provided by the Tao Practice has been an effective tool for informing my actions when facing difficulties. Though this definition of Karma might not be a perfectly accurate description of how the universe works, it puts my experience into a framework that makes it easier to make better decisions and act on them. Through action I gain a deeper understanding of the reality of Karma that lies behind the concept. A well defined concept can be a useful tool, but it is not a substitute for experience. For example, if you have never seen the Mona Lisa, no amount of words will perfectly recreate that image in your mind; you have to see it for yourself. When it comes to spiritual phenomena, sometimes humans have to resort to filling the gaps of our understanding with concepts and metaphors like the exam/student metaphor. When we acknowledge the limitations of the concepts and metaphors we use to try to understand the universe, we can remind ourselves that they are simply tools to lead us to a direct experience. Understanding the concept of Karma is not a substitute for having the experience of facing our Karma. It is through experience that we really start to fill those gaps of understanding and get closer to our True Selves.

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