

# Analyzing Karma: Fate or Free Will?



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## **An Age Old Question**

Since ages – since, likely, the moment when the first human asked the question “Why”, our species has wondered about why what occurs in our world, happens. Do effects proceed from causes, or is all random? In India, at least dubiety in this regard has long been minimized, with the ascendancy of the concept of the Law of Karma, which Newton restated in his third law of physics: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The moment of inception of the cosmos, the so-called “big bang”, was the first action, from which all other actions and reactions have proceeded.

What has not been settled, in India or elsewhere, is the vexing question of whether we who perform actions, and who appear to be doing so inspired by our own volition, are in fact actually doing so, i.e. are acting from our own “free will”, or whether in fact we are merely being swept along in powerful karmic currents that induce us to act, i.e. we are the pawns of “fate”.

Volumes have been written on this subject, in the East and the West, and though this question of fate and free will has exercised subtle minds over much of the course of human history, it is a question that has no answer. Or rather, it has no general answer, although some have been able to elucidate a solution to this conundrum as it applies to their own lives. As it transpires, most of those who do find answers become very attached to their individual perspectives on whether fate

or free will predominates, and seek to convey those views to others. In each culture, in each age, a strong preference for a particular perspective tends to develop, fueled by the inborn human tendency to exaggerate, which when presented with the option to choose moderation or extremism pushes a majority of humans to veer towards extremism, when truth in our world is never black or white, but always some shade or shades of grey.

Karma itself inhabits that amorphous grey zone. Though the Sanskrit word karma can be used to mean any action, when applied to human activity it commonly indicates those actions that one performs while identifying oneself as the performer of that action. In other words, whenever you employ your ego to identify yourself as the doer of an action, that action becomes a karma for you, and you will have to experience whatever reaction that action initiates.

Nowadays many who inhabit the world of “self-improvement” have convinced themselves that they possess such substantial free will that they can change nearly anything in their lives merely by identifying themselves as the agent of change and deciding to make the change. Change is usually possible, true; but how much can be changed and to what degree will differ from person to person, and even those whose free will seems abundant (or limitless) will still likely find it scarce at one or more moments in their lives. This brings us to another unanswerable question: if we have the desire to change and actually follow through on that desire, does that change happen because we had the free will to effect it, or rather because we were fated to make the effort, and the change simply happened to appear in the wake of our effort?

Those people who are most fated to go through life with narrowed minds can be described with the fine Sanskrit term *kūpamaṇḍūka*. *Kūpa* means a well and *maṇḍūka*, a frog; to a frog that lives at the

bottom of a well the sky is a small circle that seems far, far away. So long as the frog remains at the bottom of its well, its misapprehension will remain; should, however, fate step in, in for example the form of a bucket dropping down into which the frog can hop, or should the frog exert free will, which it might be able to do if by chance the well's sides are not entirely slick but display protuberances on which the frog can choose to climb, the frog may emerge at the top of the well. And when it does so, and suddenly the vast panoply of the heavens are revealed to it, only then as it stares amazedly at the celestial regions will it realize how limited, how inaccurate, how wrong its earlier, narrower perspective had been.





## **Fate, Free Will and Our Health**

The further down you find yourself in the well of your own preconceptions, the greater the degree to which your conditioning will restrict your ability to perceive possibilities other than those that present themselves to your small, circular vision. Go down far enough and your views become extreme, like the view expressed by some “alternative” health consultants and “positive thinkers” that those who fail to get well do so because they wish to be sick. Sometimes this is undoubtedly the case; I have myself seen many people who are unwell because they believe themselves to have a good reason to be sick. Illness may get them sympathy from other family members, or permit them to avoid work, or housework, or whatever.

It is however also very much the case that not every sick person is sick because they want to be sick. Sometimes illness is a matter of free will, and sometimes it is a matter of fate. To assume that sickness is always due to a desire to be sick, and that every patient could swiftly get well by simply willing to be well, is to me a dramatic misreading of the Law of Karma. Dramatic misreadings of the admittedly-difficult-to-comprehend Law of Karma come easily to human beings, who find it difficult to resist biases in perception, due to the extraordinarily dense realm of reality where we find ourselves, and the considerable density of the karmas that cause us to be born here.

Bias fashions vary with the times; “modernized” people may pooh-pooh the thought of fate, “traditional” people remain convinced that

all is fated. Some ancient texts even suggested that those who fall ill should never consult a physician, arguing that since people who become unwell do so because they are repaying previous deplorable karmas, to seek medical care is to merely postpone the misery that those karmas must deliver. Better therefore to be brave about it, stiffen your upper lip, and plow through that misery without attempting to ameliorate it.

This view, which regarded the very idea of doctoring as being somehow un-dharmic, immoral, and anti-religious, was countered by the Ayurvedists of ancient times, who argued that if it is indeed your fate to be unwell, and if you happen to be able to locate a physician, is that not also your fate to do so? Why accept a conjectural belief that directs you to endure an undesirable fate that might somehow benefit you in the future when you could just as easily, and far more reasonably, respect the fact that Providence has fatefully provided you an opportunity to assist your healing process? Only an opportunity, no doubt; cures might or might not work, and should you sicken further or even die after the physicians have striven to cure you they may well maintain that it was your fate not to survive. Despite all this, aren't you still better off trying out a cure (assuming of course that you have some reasonably competent physician available to you) instead of simply sitting back quietly and accepting your fate?

Of course, if you do go to a doctor and take the proffered medicine and do get well, you will never really know what would have happened had you not done so. You will never know if you got well because of or in spite of the doctor (except in those cases where malpractice was indisputably the cause of your demise). Similarly, if you consult an Indian astrologer who tells you to feed crows on Saturday, and you do so and your problem with Saturn is solved, how will you know if it was



solved because you fed the crows or in spite of your feeding them?  
You can never really know.





## Being in the Unknown

And if it is difficult or impossible to know whether something is fated or not, it is also not easy to know if a particular event, however fated, will prove to be good or bad for you in the end; consider the old Chinese story of the stray horse who wanders into a farmer's yard. When the neighbors compliment the farmer on his good fortune in obtaining a free horse, the farmer replies, "Let's see." Next, as the farmer's son tries to mount the horse he falls off and breaks his leg. The neighbors commiserate with the farmer, who still replies, "Let's see." And when a few days later the emperor's troops come through dragooning men into the army for a suicide attack against barbarians, and the son can't go because he is laid up with a broken leg, and the neighbors again proclaim that to be a happy fate, the farmer's response is yet again, "Let's see."

We can rarely know for certain in advance the ultimate result of any single action. Suppose you finally do decide to visit a doctor: you may happen to fall into the hands of the local quack, or into the hands of an expert who is having an off day. Or you may run into an expert who succeeds with 99.9% of his patients but you happen to be one among the 0.1% of patients with whom he is destined to fail. Every human, however perfected, has a blind spot, however small, a blind spot being an area of life in which you can be sure that you will not always be able to see things accurately. Events that fall within that area of life are likely to be "fated" for you, because try as you may you will be unable to see how to shift them. You will be moving blind, which means that

most any action you take will cause you to end up wherever it is that chaos theory, or Nature, or Providence, or God, or the theory of causation, wants to take you.

This being the case, how can you assume that you will get an immediate and positive result merely by expressing your intention to act and then acting? Nor is it generally wise to assume that no change will result even when you attempt to change. Some sects for instance believe in predestination, the concept that only certain humans are destined for the celestial realms, and all others are destined to head elsewhere. It is tempting for me to suspect that, were I to believe myself predestined for heaven, I might neither worry about performing good works while on Earth, nor worry overmuch about the fate of others, particularly since those others would appear to have been preselected by the Creator for a grimmer fate than mine. At most I might perhaps offer such souls some compassion, and the hope that God would eventually change His mind and send everyone to a pleasant location.





## Fate vs. Free Will

Predestinators aside, it appears to me that the peoples of the East subscribe more to fatedness than those of the West, particularly with regard to the major events of their lives. To a certain extent this is doubtless due to what my mentor called “karmic gravity”: the astral force of the location in which a person lives and thinks, a force that influences or even guides the thoughts that arise. My mentor, the Aghori Vimalananda, used to call India the world's "karmic deposit counter”; he averred that people ended up in India when they had a large pile of bad karmas that needed to be worked off, and a deficit of good deeds that needed to be addressed. Vimalananda used to term the West, the United States in particular, as the world's "karmic withdrawal counter," the place where you go when you have a load of good karmas that you want to enjoy.

I suspect that this once was substantially true; during the ten years that I lived in India, and over the past thirty or more years that I've spent three months of each year there, I've had plenty of opportunity to observe that there things move according to rules that are not at all evident on its surface. It is a place that requires great patience to navigate, all because of its very peculiar underlying karmic pathways. Until recently it was indeed far easier in India to enjoy pain – the usual result of bad karmas – rather than pleasure – a common result of good karmas. But now that a middle class is forming, a substantial fraction of people there are beginning to enjoy a relatively comfortable life.

Until recently it was easy for the majority of residents of the USA to enjoy their good karmas; and a large number of people continue to try to live in the manner in which they have become accustomed even after they have run out of the money to do so. We as a nation are now using our free will to borrow money to support our extravagant (as compared to the remainder of the world) lifestyles; this is a collective karma that will eventually bankrupt us. We, individuals and corporations and government alike, are spending trillions of dollars more than we have, every year. Economists tell us not to worry, because of the size of our economy, when we should in fact all be very worried, because what gets borrowed must eventually be repaid. The free will we're so blithely using now to go into debt will turn at some point into the fate of being unable to get out of debt.

My Jyotisha guru likes to use an automotive analogy to describe the difference between fate and free will. Suppose you decide to take a drive. The very act of getting into your car and driving it onto the highway establishes for you a certain degree of fate, because you have elected to put yourself, to some extent, at the mercy of that road's circumstances, including particularly the other drivers currently on that thoroughfare. You retain however the free will to steer, and to accelerate or decelerate. Your final cruising speed will however strongly influence how much maneuvering room – how much “driving” free will – you will have available to deal with any eventualities that may present themselves. Should, for example, someone suddenly cut you off, how much you are “fated” to collide with that person will be determined in large part by how fast you are going. If you have elected to use up a big part of your available free will by accelerating to a high speed, you may have insufficient accessible time and space to be able to evade a collision. We could then describe that collision as the “fate” that your previously performed action (acceleration) has generated for you. If, on the other hand, you have preserved some of your “acceleration free will”

by keeping your speed lower, your available "evasive action free will" will be greater, sufficient perhaps to be able to avoid a collision.

Extending this analogy we can assert that those people whose lives seem totally fated are people who have, in the past, accelerated themselves along a particular path that they are now obliged to continue on, even if ready to get off; and those people who seem to be able to do as they please in life are people who have refrained in the past from over-acceleration. Most people though live lives that are only relatively fated, and can usually find some avenue via which they can make changes in their conditions. In what life realm and to what extent we have the ability to evade fate and employ free will differs from person to person, and is a lifelong study that no being will ever master; the gods themselves, it is said, cannot fathom the full implications of the Law of Karma.





## The Nature of Karma and the Three Gunas

Whenever you employ your ego to identify yourself as the doer of an action, that action becomes a karma for you. Sankhya, the philosophical system that underpins Ayurveda, Yoga, Jyotisha, Vastu, Tantra, and similar sciences, terms the force that generates self *ahamkara*. Ahamkara permits individuals to exist by creating individuation; it is thanks to ahamkara that we are able to identify ourselves as being separate from our external environment, an environment that particularly includes other individuals. It is ahamkara that allows the immune system to distinguish between “me” and “not-me”, what is beneficial for us and what is not. At every moment ahamkara, the faculty of I-ness, strives to maintain that stable sense of self that is essential for the continued existence of the body-mind-spirit complex.

Ahamkara acts via the three forces that evolve from it, the Three Gunas: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Sattva, the principle of equilibrium, is activated in you when the various parts of you are in a state of (relative) harmonious stability, and when you as a whole are in relative equilibrium with the outer world. Whenever outside conditions shift you will be called upon shift along with them, and you will have to decide either to make the effort to change yourself, which will require the mobilization of *rajas*, the principle of activity, or to remain as you are and wait for change to arrive, for which you will employ *tamas*, the

principle of inertia. Sometimes there is wisdom in using tamas to resist change, and sometimes wisdom lies in using rajas to actively seek change; sattva is what gives you the wisdom to manage change. Ample sattva clarifies your awareness, permitting you to know what to do and when and how to do it; act according to what sattva proposes and you will usually find yourself employing your free will constructively by adapting to your environment. You may well find your free will increasing, enhancing your ability to adapt. To whatever extent your mind is overwhelmed by rajas, tamas, or both, to that extent free will will be unavailable to you; even if you have it you may be unable to make use of it.

Despite the fact that the natural state of the thinking mind is sattva, most of the time, in most people, the thinking mind is overwhelmed by rajas or tamas. Why? Partly because of diet, in other words what one chooses to eat (if they have free will available in the comestible sphere) or has no alternative but to eat (if fate is acting upon them). Modern post-industrial humans have abundant choice in foodstuffs; for instance, should I desire tender coconut water I can now in many locales obtain it in at least three forms: in a juice box or a can, or inside a whole tender coconut. Those who are of the pitta body type nature, or who have become significantly pitta provoked, become easily overheated, mentally or physically, or otherwise. Coconut water, which is very cooling, very pitta-calming, and which until very recently available only in certain climes, has now become generally available. What was once almost impossible to obtain by anyone not fated to live in the tropics is now available to large numbers of temperate-climate dwellers who elect to use their free will to take advantage of this new development.

Sadly, though our free will to choose our food and drink has become extreme, most of us continue to choose, as if by fate, food that disagrees with us, immediately or later, food that with every bite



brings us closer to experiencing the fate of becoming unwell. For example, the habitual consumption of large quantities of excessively hot, spicy, salty, sour, fatty, proteinaceous foods, particularly during the hot season, in the middle of the day, and in the middle of your lifespan, will send your pitta through the roof. Then, when you are on the freeway in a pitta-accelerated state, you become road rage ready to happen; the free will that you spent feeding yourself with fiery food now nudges you toward a hot fate. In such a condition even if you find yourself in a situation where you could employ your remaining free will to remain calm and act rationally you may not be able to do so because your metabolic imbalance will not permit you to think straight. What use is your "free will" to you if you are not "free" to make use of it?

The knowledge of whether at any moment one needs to remain at equilibrium, change, or resist change is garnered via intuition. The question is always the same: "Shall I change my current self-definition, hold on to it tenaciously, or permit the course of events to decide?" Though, your thinking mind may assist you to narrow down possibilities, and can be used once you have come to a conclusion to test that conclusion's validity, intuition alone actually "knows" the right choice.

When even intuition becomes corrupted, and what you "know" to be right is actually wrong, the results can be terrible. Some years ago I read that ten percent of the American population has reached a stage where they're seriously considering becoming so fanatic about a celebrity that they would do themselves or others harm if that celebrity was disturbed in some way. Alternatively, they might do harm to the celebrity; John Lennon was gunned down by a disturbed fan ("fan" being short for "fanatic"); Tejano singer Selena was shot dead by the head of her fan club. And this is just the United States; the same situation prevails in many other countries as well, including especially India.

More than a decade ago one percent of the American population declared themselves ready to resort to violence should something happen to whomever or whatever they are fanatic about. That percentage may now be even higher, but it is safe to assume that it has not dropped below one percent. The population of the US is now about 320 million, and one percent of that number is 3.2 million, which to be conservative we can round down to three. Three million Americans thus exist today in a homicidal state of fanaticism. The rest of us would have nothing to worry about if they all lived in a single avoidable large city; instead they are scattered everywhere. And many of them are armed: in 2013 33,000 people were killed by gun violence in the US; there were also 20,000 suicide victims by guns and more than 500 accidental gun deaths that year. Even if you live in a smallish town of say 10,000 people, you can be confident that about a hundred of these fanatic fellow citizens of yours are strolling about freely on your streets. Some may wander past your very home.





## Three Inheritances

Why would such rabid humans employ their free will, freely, to create for themselves such a fanatic fate? How do they come to choose to so self-identify on a single person, place or thing that is not actually in their self-interest to focus on? Much depends on what they have inherited. Every human being possesses three different sorts of inheritance; a lucky few enjoy a fourth as well. Your first inheritance is your genetic inheritance, which you become heir to from your forebears: your parents, grandparents and great-grandparents in particular, but influence is said to persist as far back as seven generations. This makes mathematical sense, as it takes seven generations to dilute the influence of an ancestor to less than one percent (each of your parents contributes 50% of your DNA, each grandparent 25%, and so on). In the equine world a non-thoroughbred line of horses requires seven cross-breedings with thoroughbreds until, on the eighth cross, the foal can be registered a thoroughbred.

For ten years I was involved in thoroughbred racing in Bombay, during which time I more than once read the stud book through cover to cover, tracing bloodlines; it's a fascinating study. No matter who you are, human, horse, dog or cat, donkey or mule, the genes and chromosomes donated to you from your parents will so strongly determine certain aspects of your organism that those characteristics will be, for you, utterly fated. Take my own skin: despite being born in the semi-tropical climate of south Texas, and growing up in the semi-tropical climates of east Texas and south Louisiana until I was a teenager, and then

proceeding to Oklahoma (which is very sunny and feels semi-tropical, at least in the summer), and then moving to tropical India, where I remained for a decade, and then spending at least three months of each year since in India, and other tropical locales, I have never tanned deeply. This is for me quite unfortunate, but it is my fate. On occasion I have been exceptionally displeased with this particular aspect of my fate, particularly when I've inadvertently fried my hide, but all my complaining might as well be throwing rocks at the sun, rocks that will only land on my own head. Had I had offspring, and had those children been light-skinned, and had they insisted upon inhabiting sun-drenched districts, the bodies of their descendants would eventually adapt – but only after several more generations, not nearly so fast as they might prefer. In this regard my and their effective free will is negligible, at least until medical science discovers how to alter the skin's response to sunlight.

Like skin color, other portions of your organism's basic physiology are fated, and in yet other areas you have but limited free will. Should you like many Native Americans and South Sea Islanders possess genetics that encourages you to become diabetic, diabetes will probably develop if you eat incessantly twelve months out of the year (which, sadly, most people worldwide nowadays do); were you instead to eat incessantly for only three or four months of the year, subsisting on a subsistence diet for the other months, your potential diabetes would likely remain dormant. This “feast or famine” genetic pattern evolved in regions where food was only available in certain seasons, where humans needed to seriously build up their body mass when food was present so that they could consume that body mass when food was scarce. This was a good adaptation for those environments.

With the coming of the white man, however – and we should note that very few tribes worldwide ever expressed a desire, ever used their free will, to invite European explorers and colonists to interfere with their lives – natives were dragged away from their land and their traditional diets. In the USA in the late nineteenth century most Native Americans

were put forcibly onto a diet of what was basically fried dough. Since then they have "adapted" to their new "diet", with the result some groups of Native Americans have the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in the country, all because their organisms continue inappropriately to do what they were engineered to do by thousands of years of evolution. My own skin similarly continues to accept light almost indiscriminately, as it did for my long-dead northern European ancestors who so desperately mopped up each precious stray ray, even though their skin now graces a body for which the sun has never been a stranger.

Of course, when young, I could have elected to stay out of the sun; but I had no reason to do so as, back then, little was known about how much damage the sun can do to skin. So, though I then had the free will to avoid the sun, I failed to use it. And I don't even particularly like to sun bathe; but where I grew up, everyone was out in the sun all the time, and so was I, and now sun-damaged skin has become my fate.

Similarly, at birth a Native American child theoretically possesses the free will to avoid diabetes by eating a good diet from the start; practically, however, if the child grows up in a family where the knowledge of how to eat a traditional diet has been lost, and fry bread has become an institution because that's what people had to eat for generations, then the child will probably grow up on fry bread, as well as (like so many children today in the USA) on fast food, and that child may find it very difficult ever to graduate to a healthier nutritional regime, even now that fry bread has been a staple for a century and a half. Genetic patterns that developed over a hundred generations or more are not likely to disappear after a mere seven. In this case the child's family and society encourage it to move toward imbalance. The child's free will may remain intact, but the influence of other people's free wills employed long before makes that child subject to a type of fate. Free will is not very free when it cannot operate. This is an example of the second sort of inheritance, the socio-economic cultural inheritance.

And please don't think that this is a problem only down on the rez. Back in 1998 Mike Cameron was suspended for one day from his school in Evans, GA, for wearing a Pepsi shirt to school on Coke Day. Schools had by that time become the front line in the War of the Soft Drinks, and in tit-for-tat attacks Pepsi would buy a library for one school only to have Coke counterattack by buying a gymnasium for another. Until recently, each corporation only required that the recipient school should carry their products alone, in the cafeteria and the vending machines. Long, long ago, when I was in school, we did not, even in high school, have vending machines; and had we had vending machines neither Coke nor Pepsi, nor Dr. Pepper nor any other brand of soda pop, would have been found in them. School administrators were well aware even then that soft drinks do not promote attentiveness and good study habits (and, if sugary, they rot your teeth). Now almost every school has vending machines; schools are desperate for money, so they prostitute themselves to corporations, as a result of which you have to wear their colors or you get suspended. Wear your street gang colors to school and you will get suspended; fail to wear the colors of the economic gang that has taken over your school and you also get suspended. What a world we live in.

In any event, few children today are encouraged to express their free will, for which you require the ability to think for yourself, and the ability to visualize the implications of potential actions. Instead, we now start kids off in life by training them not to visualize, by means of using media to raise them. Nowadays, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 19% of one-year-olds have a TV in their bedroom. One out of five! Wait, you may object, what portion of that number shares a bedroom with TV-watching parents or siblings? To which I reply, 14% of children aged 6 to 23 months watch 2 or more hours/day of media, and since children of this age sleep (or should be sleeping) more than eight hours nightly, this is a substantial fraction of their waking lives surrendered to the "idiot box".

Before electricity children were told stories, which forced them to visualize the events being described to them; often these stories were told at night, before the fire, which itself promoted visualization (the fire rules the sense of sight). Even after radio was invented and stories could be plucked from the airwaves, any accompanying images had to be generated by the listener. Now, all images are provided pre-digested to viewers; worse, the images so provided pass by so quickly that the child has just barely begun to concentrate on one when it disappears and the next materializes. When such a child, who is trained not to concentrate and not to visualize, goes to school and is inveigled to drink Coke or Pepsi, depending on which corporate gang has "bought" the school, it is no surprise that the child cannot study, cannot focus on his or her lessons. Then, instead of acknowledging the root cause of the problem the concerned parents are advised to go in for Ritalin or some similar drug; and so, just at a time when the child's nervous system is developing, we get the child hooked on pharmaceuticals, to make sure that the drug companies can also make money.

There are doubtless children for whom Ritalin is appropriate; but they are substantially outnumbered by kids who are taking it for the wrong reason, kids who first became unbalanced by overexposure to media, then were fattened up on fast food, and are now being medicated so that they will be less likely to annoy the teacher, and disturb that minority of children who actually can focus. Such a child may well emerge from school better able to serve as a pliant adult consumer, an adult whose free will may have been reduced to decisions about buying Coke or Pepsi; but it is not to the benefit of the elites that run our society for such individuals to realize that realistically they have no free will. It is in fact crucial for the masses to believe that they actually possess the free will to determine the outcome of elections via their votes, when what determines today's elections is the careful psychological manipulation of interest groups by means of unlimited campaign budgets. We citizens of the USA congratulate ourselves for being so much more enlightened, and freer, than Asians and Africans and South

Americans who live under authoritarian, often brutally repressive, regimes, and indeed we do theoretically have far more potential choices than do they. All too often, however, our socio-economic, politico-environmental heritage prevents this free will from operating.

Our third inheritance comes to us from previous incarnations. If you've been a thief in your past several existences there is a good chance that you will become focused on thievery from the very beginning of this embodiment. Conversely, if you've been a holy person for the past several lifetimes you'll show at least some interest in spirituality in this one as well, how much being determined by how your “incarnational” inheritance is supported by or inhibited by the inheritance from your (family's) genes and chromosomes, and the influence of the society in which you are reared. In such circumstances your previous spiritual practices may make you more philosophical about karmic reactions that may come your way; Dharmarakshita offers cogent advice on this subject in his instructional poem [\*The Wheel of Sharp Weapons\*](#)







## The Fourth Inheritance

In India people try to attenuate the influence of ancestral inheritance by performing *pitr karma* (ancestor rituals), using our free will as descendants to attempt to lessen the fate that our forebears have created for us. Up to the seventh generation each ancestor, dead or alive, continues to associate, to some degree, with the genetic material that created the body that he or she was inhabiting while alive. Some affinity remains between that spirit and its previous genes and chromosomes, an affinity that permits that ancestor to live, to whatever extent, through those who inherit those genetic patterns. Most people have one or more of their ancestors living through them much of the time; most people never notice, because ancestor influences are internal, and subtle, and almost everyone today focus their awareness outwardly, trying to decide what to purchase next.

You may be able, by such methods, to distance yourself from the strongest influence of your ancestors; and you may be able to distance yourself, to some degree or other, from your culture, though this may mean that you have spent some time out of it, which is what I did. Ten years in India was adequate for this purpose for me: during my first six years there I visited the USA only once, for not quite three months. During my next four years there I started spending more time abroad, and now I am mainly out of India, though for the past thirty years I have stayed there annually for three months, on the average. Those three months provide me needed perspective on my homeland, and

my time in the USA and in other countries provides me needed perspective on India.

However, even if you can both placate your ancestors and minimize your socio-cultural limitations, you will still need to address your karmic inheritance, which will accompany you wherever you go; and dealing with your karmas is best done with the assistance of a karmic guide.

Your fourth inheritance, which is applicable to but not necessarily available to all, is the inheritance you get from your guru. Everyone has a guru, but not everyone has an incarnated guru; for many, the available guru is the unmanifest Supreme Reality, the formless, nameless, limitless consciousness; for some, those lucky enough to have developed an association with a particular tradition, that Reality gains personal attributes.

The Sanskrit word for tradition is *paramparā*. In this context *parā* means beyond, and *paramparā* means "beyond, then beyond again," indicating something that passes from one generation to the next, and then the next, and so on, if not ad infinitum, then certainly beyond the normal human genealogical horizon. Those who have succeeded at aligning themselves with such a tradition are possessed by a current of awareness that directs their personal growth, in large part by mitigating or compensating for many of the deficiencies engendered by their other three inheritances. This fourth inheritance actually makes it possible for an individual to employ free will, in those situations where it is actually employable. But even here the degree to which you can benefit from your guru and his or her tradition will depend, to a certain extent, on your fate.

The first of the *Brahma Sūtras*, a group of pithy aphorisms on the Supreme Reality, is *athā'to brahma jijñāsā*: "Now, therefore, there is

the sincere desire for the Supreme Reality." *Atha* means "now," but not in the mundanely temporal sense. *Atha* is rather "now indeed," the "now" that happens whenever your curiosity about Reality turns into a burning desperation to know it, which happens only when your karmas have matured sufficiently to make you ready to know it. The test of whether or not you are ready to study the Brahma Sūtras is not whether you have the free time to study them "now," but whether your awareness is ready to comprehend them now. For some *atha* will apply to the moment that they actually open the book; others might have to wait five hundred years for their *atha* to arrive. Only when you have become so permeated with the craving to know that the marrow of your bones begins to ache with that desire will you be able to enter into the reality space that this text defines.

This is true for any subject of true value. Quincy Jones has said that the first time he sat down at a piano and touched its keys he knew, in every cell of his body, that this is what he would be doing for the rest of his life. Perhaps you have had a similar response to some branch of learning, maybe to *Jyotisha*, Indian astrology. *Jyotisha* is an exceptionally intricate study; unless you are relentless you will never succeed at learning it. This is why your desire must be sincere; not casual and curious, but earnest and determined. A firm desire sets wheels into motion; make a firm decision to follow your star and study your subject, come what may, and that moment of decision will serve as the "initiatory" karma that starts you on your path.

But even after your moment of decision, there is still no guarantee that you'll succeed at your quest. In addition to the desire to study and practice you will also need the free time to do so, which you may not have available to you if you have to work many hours a day to make both ends meet. Even if you have the time you may not have the space, and even with time and space available you will still need decent

health; if you have to spend all your spare time and energy on avoiding illness you will have neither time nor energy to invest in study.

You will also require a genuine teacher: plenty of people claim they are ready and able to teach, but few can really deliver. And even if you locate a veritable mentor, you'll need to have the time and space to be taught by that person, which will be difficult if he or she lives in India, or Peru, or Australia, and you do not. Now, of course, you can connect via the internet; but even if you have time, money, and reliable internet access your teacher's schedule still has to mesh with yours; it will do no good if you and he inhabit the same city, but you work nights and he works days.

And – even if you have time, space and proximity, what if your personalities do not mesh? Even if you are a good student and she is a good teacher what if whenever you communicate you are at daggers drawn and all you can do is argue? In fact, the list of necessary concurrences is effectively limitless, which is sufficient reason for us to conclude that it is only through the grace of Providence that human culture has been able to persist and be transferred via *paramparā*, succession "beyond the beyond"; the grace of Providence, and the momentum that has been generated by thousands of years of ongoing teaching and learning.





## Types of Karma

Teaching and learning are karmas like any others; and as with any other avenue of life, the opportunities to teach and/or learn that will be forthcoming in this incarnation will be significantly determined by what sort of fate you have created for yourself in this lifetime as a result of the exertion of your free will in previous lifetimes.

Various Indian authorities have classified karmas in various ways over the centuries. For example, the Brahmasūtras, (4.1.13 – 19), Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Brahmasūtras (on BrSū 3.3.29 - 32) and the Chāndogya Upanishad (6.14.2) all discuss *sañcita*, *āgamī*, and *prārabdha* karma. *Sañcita karma* can be absolved, *āgamī karma* can be prevented, but *prārabdha karma* has to be experienced until it is exhausted. A few sources state that even the *mukta* (enlightened one) must suffer (or enjoy) *prārabdha*.

According to the classification that I personally prefer, the sum of all the karmas that you have performed over all your many incarnations (karmas being defined as actions with which you have identified yourself as the doer) is called your *sañcita karma* (*sañcita* means “accumulated”). It is far easier to identify yourself with your actions as a human than as an animal or plant; because of this you can, as a human, proceed a lot faster in either a good direction or a bad direction. (To complicate the situation, some of your *sañcita karma* is shared with your kin, clan, fellow townspeople, fellow citizens of your country, and with all humans who have ever walked this planet.)

Sañcita karma, which accumulates in your *kāraṇa śarīra*, or causal body, directs your reincarnation by serving as a greenhouse in which each of the karmic seeds that you plant ripens and produces fruit. The karmic fruits that ripen at a certain moment determine the environment in which you will find yourself, as that environment will deliver your ripened karmic fruit for you to nosh on, each fruit offering you flavors – sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent or astringent – to match the karmic reactions that your karmas have produced.

The group of karmas that has ripened just before a child is born determine how, where and when that child will appear in the world, and which flavors that child will enjoy at each moment in its life; this is *prārabdha karma*. Prarabdha means “begun,” so *prārabdha karma* is a kind of fate, karma which has already “begun” to influence you, which has limited you to your birth time and place. The degree to which you can hope to display free will while you are on earth is strongly influenced by all the pre-existing karmas that make up your *prārabdha*, in particular by the degree of “fixedness” of those karmas.

The Sanskrit word *ḍṛḍha* means firm, unyielding, unchanging. *Ḍṛḍha karma* is karma that is firm, fixed, unyielding, that will cause you to experience a particular result in some particular area of life no matter what you may do to try to change those results. *Ḍṛḍha karma* is what will appear to you as fate, for no matter how much you may try to do things differently in that realm of existence you will still be rewarded with the same result, for good or for not so good. We've all known people who even when they do things wrong end up with good results, and other people for whom things never seem to go right even when they try their best. This can happen in any area of life, including for example, marriage. Elizabeth Taylor went through eight marriages, twice to the same man. Though I have never been married, it does seem to me that after three failed marriages you might be tempted to

conclude that marriage itself just might not be for you. After five marriages you should definitely be thinking seriously that maybe this is a direction in which you should no longer go. Liz has herself likely suspected that she should retire her marriage license, but apparently, when the opportunity to get re-hitched arises, her *dr̥ḍha* karma in the matter of matrimony overshadows her awareness, and causes her to try, try again.

We can compare being ensnared by *dr̥ḍha* karma to being captured within a large, speedy river. Should you find yourself midstream in a swiftly flowing, turbulent stream, your chances of emerging from it on your own are slim to none. The current will take you wherever it wants you to go. Where it will take you depends on where it is going, and similarly, where *dr̥ḍha* karma will take a person depends on which areas of life that karma activates. Astrology helps us determine these areas of life; one good way to perform this evaluation is to use *bhāva vicāra*, or house analysis. First, as always, we look for astrological yogas (combinations or conjunctions of planets) that pertain to the house we want to analyze. Then we examine the conditions of that house, of its lord, and of its significator, then factor in *daśās* and transits. We are looking for confluence, for the same message to be delivered to us from different examining angles; the greater the degree of confluence, good or bad, the more fixed the results of that house.

The opposite of *dr̥ḍha* karma is *adr̥ḍha karma* (*adr̥ḍha* means “not fixed”). *Adr̥ḍha* karma positions you on the river's bank, close enough to jump in if you so desire, and far enough to be able to avoid getting wet if you'd prefer. While in practice *dr̥ḍha* karma immobilizes your free will, *adr̥ḍha* karma enables you to use your free will fairly freely.

*Dr̥ḍhādr̥ḍha karma* is fixed, but not completely fixed. The paint has been applied but is not yet dry; the concrete has been poured but has

not yet set. With a good can of paint remover and abundant elbow grease, or a good shovel and a willing back, you may be able to get the paint off or the cement out before they bond indestructibly to your life. Dṛḍhāḍṛḍha karma tosses you into the river, but offers you a dangling root, or a rope, or an intrepid dog, or some attentive person on shore, to help you get out again. There's still a danger that you'll miss the root, drop the rope, or fail to impress the human or dog, but you have at least a fighting chance of emerging. What permits you to emerge from dṛḍhāḍṛḍha karma are astrological remedies; we call them *upāya*.







## Remedial Measures

Astrological remedies are designed to help you steer your ride through the karmic rapids. If you want to redirect your trajectory so that you veer away from your "fated" direction in one area of life, you will need to focus all of your energy on that area in an extreme, extraordinary, laser-like way. Often only a slight change in the karmic current will produce a dramatic result. After all, an inch is as good as a mile. If you are fated to be mown down by a truck, and the truck misses you by an inch, it misses you; that's what's important. That one inch is the difference between moving on with your life – albeit a bit shaken by the experience – and getting shredded completely, or at the least losing a limb. An upaya provides sufficient improved karma to be able to improve bad scenarios; though we may not be able to evade the problem altogether, we may still be able to use our free will to reduce the intensity of the problem so it does not materially influence us too substantially.

An upāya can be general or specific. Your personal sādhana, done sincerely, will act as an upāya that will improve your entire life, generally; but when you require a specific results, it is often more efficient to use a specific upaya. One consideration: you will never be able to know whether or not your upaya has actually worked. It might be that the upaya made an actual change, or it might be that what you feared was not fated to happen anyway, and the upāya had no influence on the outcome. And it might also be that it was your fate to have found the astrologer who gave you the advice that made you

believe you were making a change, when in fact all you had to do was to express and maintain the intention by going through the motions of performing the remedy in order for the situation to unfold as it had to unfold anyway. At least the upaya will help you focus your intention, and that focus can itself benefit you.

We must draw a distinction between the actual karmic reaction and its intensity. Even when an upāya succeeds it may only alter, not change, the specific karmic reaction that you will have to experience. Here is Vimalananda's favorite analogy on this topic: if in your prārabdha karma it is written that a rock must fall onto your head, then a rock will fall onto your head. The only way you can get out of experiencing the rock's impact altogether is to have someone elect to take that karma from you, and have the rock fall on his or her head instead. If not, then the rock will almost certainly fall on you. But it will make a tremendous difference to you if the rock weighs one gram, one kilo, or one ton. You may not even notice the impact of the one gram rock, and if you are wearing an upāya helmet, the one kilo rock is likely only to make your ears ring. Very few human skulls can however withstand the impact of a one-ton rock. Given adequate available free will it is often possible to minimize a karma's intensity; it is far easier to change intensity than it is to change the karma itself.

In special cases saints have taken onto themselves the karmas of their devotees; and sometimes parents take on the karmas of their children and vice versa. One famous historical case involved Babar, the first of the Mughal emperors, and his son Humayun, who became the second emperor in the Mughal line. Humayun had become deathly ill; all the doctors had given up hope. Babar was of course devastated; he had become emperor not for himself alone, but to bequeath his empire to his descendants: "beyond, and then beyond again." Babar wanted to form a dynasty, which meant that his son and heir needed to survive him. He could think of only one way out of this situation, so he went

to his son's sickbed, circumambulated it, then prayed to Allah: "Clearly it is Your will to take one of the lives in my family. I hereby offer You my life in exchange for the life of my son." Whether Humayun was destined to survive and his father was destined to die, or whether something else was destined and Babar's prayer was answered, we cannot know; the fact remains that Humayun survived, and his father died.

If Babar's prayer did make a change, it probably happened mainly because the situation was so serious, with Humayun in extremis, and because Babar was so very, very serious about wanting to save his son. Practicing your sādhana with this degree of intensity improves the likelihood that you will notice results from it. As Jesus so sagely commented, the best of all possible prayers is, "Thy will be done." When you pray this prayer you say to the Supreme Reality, "O Supreme Reality, thank You for permitting me to incarnate in a human form, for giving me this precious opportunity to serve as a vehicle for Your awareness. I want very much to be the best possible mirror of the Supreme that I can be; I will do that as best I can. Please assist me in this endeavor."





## Relating to the Supreme

Human beings have evolved for the express purpose of acting as bridges between the terrestrial and the celestial, as individual mirrors for Indivisible Consciousness. It has been said that the universe was created in order to permit the Supreme to perceive itself in that universe, as in a mirror. Humans are microcosms of the great macrocosm, and in our world it is only the human being who can experience the full implications of the "All in One, One in All" conundrum, the experience of unity within duality, and duality within unity.

Now, this is a big job; and clearly it is easier to perform this job if you are healthy, not impoverished, with a roof over your head. So when you pray, you are free to make helpful suggestions to the Supreme. The Supreme is, after all, supreme; it is very busy managing the multiplicity of multiverses; and you, though far from being supreme, are after all doing it a favor by serving as its vehicle. Never try to blackmail the Supreme Reality – that will always end badly – but do consider proposing a mutually equitable arrangement. As Vimalananda liked to put it, a fair exchange is no robbery. You could for example explain to the Supreme Reality, "From my previous karmas has arisen a karmic current that is dragging me along in a less-than-salubrious direction. I possess a sincere desire to act as a vehicle for your awareness, to reflect Your Reality on this plane. Helping me out might thus benefit you as well." And you need not apply to the Supreme Unmanifest directly; your personal deity may also suffice.

The gods and goddesses require us as much as we require them; we just have to approach them in the right way.

One good way not to approach Reality is as the Europeans did when they first came to India. They came, of course, from their own cold, wet, dark environment, which they had evolved a method (albeit imperfect) of coping with: wear heavy dark clothes and consume ample protein, washed down with alcohol. While this was ultimately unhealthy for them even in their own homeland, it rarely killed them quickly, and so had persisted for generations. When they first reached India – hot, dry, dusty – they elected to live there as if they were still living in Europe, importing their clothes, their food, even their beer. They walked around in beaver hats and frock coats, and their life expectancies were reckoned to be one monsoon; two monsoons at the most. The monsoon is the unhealthiest of India's seasons. It is preceded by two months of heat hell, during which all water dries up; then, all of a sudden, rain begins to pour. You might think that this would be good, since now everything dry will rehydrate. But no; everything gets wet and stays wet; then the mildew appears, which will be your companion until the rains end. All the pathogens that you accumulated during the dry season, microbes that found it difficult to grow while you were desiccated, now have their opportunity to grow like weeds. Stagnant pools also promote the growth of parasite vectors, like the malaria-bearing mosquito.

The all-knowing Europeans, looking down on the "wogs" who wore almost nothing and ate unfamiliar nutrients, continued to consume food and drink that heated up their bodies, held that heat in with their heavy clothes, and self-medicated with rivers of booze their depression at being so far from home. Their bodies heated up, their blood heated up, their livers heated up. The malaria parasites found themselves in heaven in such bodies; they would proceed immediately to the liver where they would breed and eat with great joy. If not

malaria it would be something else; non-specific fevers have always been terrible diseases in India. These fevers possessed the aliens and killed them off like flies, continuing to do so until the survivors realized that they would do better to wear short pants, eat curry and rice, and generally live more like the despised natives did. Those palefaces who did survive this Darwinian culling process did so because they realized that they could not in fact command the environment to adapt for their convenience, but had in fact to adapt themselves to the environment.

We humans of the modern world, all of us, including the affluent among the Indians and Africans and other peoples of the tropics, have come to believe that we can in fact control our environments, with air conditioning in the summer and central heat in the winter, and the rerouting of troublesome rivers, and whatnot. Though we may succeed in the short run we need to realize that in the long run we too will be forced to adapt, using whatever free will remains to us to align ourselves with our environments. Like those Europeans of earlier centuries who, in Kipling's felicitous phrase, "tried to hustle the East," we have been misusing our free will, "trying to hustle Nature". Very soon we will have to repent, or die.

As it is, human beings learn by experimentation; often they learn most when their experiments go wrong. In fact, "the best way to learn is to beat your head against the wall" (a proverb that sounds better in the original Italian). After beating your head against the wall long enough you know precisely how that actions feels; you will never forget it, particularly if the wall was hard enough, and you beat your head against it firmly enough. In English, we say that experience is the best teacher and a fool will learn from no other. Generally speaking it's always better, after obtaining a certain amount of your own experience, to take advantage of other people's experiences. This is why my Jyotisha mentor says when you are studying astrology you

should always look at someone else's horoscope and make someone else miserable. Why miserable? Because if you look long enough at any horoscope you will find plenty of undesirable influences. How could it be otherwise? We are not born down here to live trouble-free lives; we are born down here to deal with sticky karmas. Very, very few people live trouble-free lives.

Even God incarnate has had miseries to deal with. Consider Lord Ramacandra, Vishnu's seventh incarnation. Things started out for him really well: born a prince, he enjoyed three devoted brothers, a devoted father and three devoted mothers, and the two great rishis Vasishtha and Vishwamitra as his gurus. He married Sita, daughter of the Earth goddess and of the great sage King Janaka. But the very next day after he was anointed king he was forced to leave his kingdom to wander in exile for fourteen years, Sita and his brother Laksmana accompanying him until Sita was abducted by an invincible demon. Then Rama had to raise an army of monkeys and bears, build a bridge across the sea, invade and conquer the demon's island and slay the demon in order to retrieve his wife.

Everything looked very good in Rama's life – until it did not look good anymore. And this was the condition of Vishnu incarnate on Earth. Other incarnations of Vishnu also had their problems; and the prophets and saints, the men and women of God? Tremendous difficulties. The humans who have really good destinies are truly few and far between, because it usually takes substantially disturbed karma in order to appear on this planet, at this level of density of consciousness. Better karmas tend to propel people in more subtle directions.





## Looking at Our Karmic Maps

Indian astrologers, or jyotishis, have long used the patterns formed by the *Nine Grahas* to evaluate degrees of karma. The Sanskrit word *graha* doesn't mean planet, rather it is a thing that grasps, grabs, grips or gropes your awareness. A graha seizes you and forces you to behave in a certain way; it possesses you and causes you to move in a certain direction. So long as you are possessed by that thing you are under its control and will behave as that graha wishes you to behave. You may well believe that you are acting according to your own free will when you are in fact being directed by the influences that that graha symbolizes. Do the grahas actually run your life by forcing you to consume your karmic fruits, or do they just symbolize the karmas that have taken you over and the fruits that you are bound to eat? Or both? Or neither? No one knows for sure. What we do know is that most people are possessed by something most of the time. The more your awareness is outward pointed, the less you will pay attention to how you are being possessed, to what is actually driving you. The more you are possessed, by the grahas, by toxins, emotions, obsessive thoughts or disembodied beings, the less your own free will will be able to operate; and if the possession is sufficiently strong, you will believe that you are acting out of your own free will when you are actually a mere automaton.

Often we can get some useful information about the degree of fate versus the potential for free will in a person's life by examining the patterns created by these Nine Grahas in that person's *kundali*, or



horoscope. Your birth chart is a map of your karmas, expressed in terms of these Nine Grahas, providing you with suggestions for how to navigate the terrain of your life: where pitfalls or opportunities may lie, where fate may get you stuck, where there is likely to be less obstruction to your ability to exert your free will.

Only five of the Nine Grahas are actually planets, the five planets that are visible to the naked eye: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Two more are luminaries: the sun and the moon. And then we have Rahu and Ketu, the so-called north and south nodes of the moon, which are the points where the orbit of the earth around the sun intersects the orbit of the moon around the earth. These are the points where eclipses take place; Rahu and Ketu are shadows in the sky, shadows that eclipse both the sun and moon in the sky, and their reflections in the individual, the spirit and the mind.

Only two of the Nine Grahas are true benefics: Jupiter and Venus. And even these are not entirely good for everybody. They are generally good for those people in whose horoscopes they own either the ascendant (the rising sign, which is the sign on the horizon at the time of birth), the fifth house or the ninth house. If they fail to own any one of the first, fifth or ninth houses in a birth chart, they cannot be relied upon to deliver benefic results, and can sometimes themselves become killers. But even when they do not act in utterly benefic ways we still appreciate Jupiter and Venus, because they are more likely than are the other grahas to encourage us to think in intelligent, rational, even-handed ways.

Two grahas are benefic part of the time: Moon and Mercury. Moon is good when it is bright, especially when it is waxing; Mercury is good when associated with a good graha. A waning dark moon and a Mercury who consorts with bad grahas become malefic. Next in line,

after the two good grahas and the two okay grahas, comes Sun. Sun is called a "cruel" graha because it burns all the juice out of life; stand outside at midday under a tropical sun and you will know from personal experience just how cruel the sun can be.

Finally come the four malefic grahas, which tend to lessen satisfaction in life. These are, in ascending order of malice, Ketu, Rahu, Mars and Saturn. My Jyotisha mentor asserts that, practically speaking, there is but one graha in Indian astrology, and that is Saturn, the graha of *anubhava*, experience.

Mythologically, Sun is Saturn's father. Saturn's mother is actually the shadow of Sun's wife. After bearing him three children Sun's wife could no longer withstand her husband's brilliance, so she brought her own shadow to life, and went off to do penance. Sun was so bright that he did not actually notice his wife was gone. Instead he sired three more children on his wife's shadow before he discovered his mistake – but by then Saturn had been created.

The sun archetypically represents the soul or spirit, and Saturn the shadow that is the ego. The ego always has a blind spot, which distorts accurate perception of reality. Combine spirit and ego together and you get experience, which will teach you what you need to know – sometimes by making you beat your head against the wall. Saturn represents all those experiences that you would like to but cannot avoid – all of those things that really are fated in your life. Even when you try to move in the right direction, all of the karmas that want you to be flung into the middle of the river and carried down over the waterfall will continue to tug at you. In order to get to a place where you can even consider employing your free will, you really must identify how to get out of your current karmic stream, how to avoid

continuing to make the same mistakes that generated that stream in the first place.

Vimalananda was always fond of saying. "Don't imagine that you will never make any mistakes. You are a human being, you will make plenty of mistakes; humans are born to make mistakes. What you should do is each time make different mistakes." Novel experiments offer opportunities to change; making the same mistakes over and over again deepens the rut you are already in, reducing your possibilities of escape.

Novel mistakes are likely to be useful to you, though, only insofar as they do no permanent damage. For example, should you elect to drive in Naples one very important thing to know is that drivers there regard traffic lights only as general indications, not directions to be followed. The Neapolitans say, "A red light is not a command, just a suggestion, a invitation to consider stopping." This is how the Neapolitans employ their free will when on the road; when behind the wheel on roads there you need to act accordingly. But don't export the attitude of Naples to Germany, where traffic signals must be obeyed, even when no one else is at the intersection. Always tailor the exercise of your free will to the specific time and space in which you find yourself; and when you do make a mistake always adjust, to try to prevent future mistakes.

An Italian friend of mine, a very clever guy, drove down to Naples on business some years back. He had heard that Naples was full of car thieves, but thought "Well, I will stop for just a moment on the street, run up to the room where I have my appointment, and ask my friend there where is the right place to park." As soon as he got into the room his friend asked, "Where's your car?" When he heard, "Down on the street," the guy jumped up and immediately dragged my friend back downstairs. By the time they reached the car only five minutes had

elapsed – but in that five minutes all four of the car's wheels had been stolen. In five minutes. This was a useful head-banging experience; my friend will never do that again. Nowadays, when he goes to Naples, he usually flies or takes the train. When he does drive, he parks only in garages patrolled by uniformed guards. One unpleasant experience provided the perspective he needed to ensure that he would employ his free will in this regard more wisely in the future.

Here's another example of free will gone wrong: Hawaii's sugar cane planters once thought that they could control the plague of rats in their fields by importing the mongoose. But somehow they forgot, or more likely didn't bother to try to find out, that rats are nocturnal and mongoose are diurnal. Now there are two plagues: one of rats and another of mongeese. The planters got what they asked for, and hated the results – and now can do nothing to alter those results. Of course, if snakes were to ever get to Maui the mongeese would be there to eradicate them, so who knows? Benefit from that import may yet be had.

Always remember that often the only thing worse than not getting what you want is actually getting what you want. Look at all the seriously affluent people – nouveau riche and trust fund brats alike – who sit on major piles of money and are utterly miserable, unable to do anything lifelong other than create problems for themselves and for others. For many of them the more they possess the more miserable they become; they may be “beautiful people” on the outside, but on the inside, they are wretches.

In Jyotisha we distinguish between *bhāva* and *rasa*. A *bhāva* is a state or condition; in astrological parlance, it is one of the twelve "houses" of the horoscope. Each *bhāva* indicates the state or the condition of some of the things in your life. The sixth *bhāva*, for example, signifies the state or condition of your debt, enemies, and diseases; it also

represents your maternal uncle(s). The fourth bhāva indicates the water in your life; water in every sense, including emotion. It also represents your home, vehicles, and mother. Whenever you study anyone's horoscope you always take a look at both the natal chart and the horary chart, the horoscope taken at the time of the reading. The birth chart is a map of the individual's prarabdha, the karmas that caused that baby to be born; the horary chart tells you whether, how, and to what degree those karmas have changed since birth. Where the natal horoscope indicates drdha karma in one area of a person's life, the horary chart will almost always show drdha karma, good or bad, in that same area. Even if other areas of that person's life have changed, the change will not have happened to any great degree in that one area of life. This is dr̥dha karma – seriously stuck karma, literally fated.

A look at a horoscope's bhāvas will give you an idea of that individual's natural life circumstances, without necessarily letting you in on what kind of direct life experiences will flow from those conditions. We express the experience of life in terms of *rasa*. Some people who begin life with major difficulties are unafraid of tackling those challenges; they find difficulties and the possibility of overcoming them exhilarating, and can sometimes distill superior results even from adversities. Nelson Mandela is an excellent example: a man who languished for a quarter-century in a prison controlled by fanatic racists who would have killed him if they thought they could have gotten away with it. Despite thus losing more than a quarter of his life to incarceration Mandela left jail still able to take an evenhanded approach to politics, still able to encourage his country by example to move in a healthier direction without bitterness. Though his bhāvas fated him to be locked away from society, he extracted from that life experience a *rasa* that transformation, and happiness, to millions in his country and around the world.

Nelson Mandela took the extremely limited free will offered to him and used it in an exceptionally positive way; so many others take bhāvas that offer good external results but then use their free will to move themselves in the wrong direction. As Voltaire used to say, you may not be able to alter the cards dealt you in the game of life, but you certainly have control over how you play them. Even if your free will does not extend to changing your fate, it may extend to being able to manipulate your life in such a way that you minimize one area of fate that is not so desirable, and maximize one area of fate that is.





## Fruits of Our Actions

Despite all these factors, and all our analysis of them, fate ultimately remains baffling, even to eminent astral beings like deities. Once upon a time there was, in the heaven of Indra, king of the gods, a parrot; Indra's pet parrot. His name has not been recorded; let's call him Fluffy. Fluffy the parrot had a good relationship with Indra and, this being heaven, everything always looked good: the gardens weeded themselves, dust never accumulated, disease and old age never intruded, and death was a distant, if still distasteful, eventuality.

Everything was going along very well until one day the realization came to Indra that his parrot would in fact eventually die. Not wanting that transition to catch him off guard, Indra decided to try to find out when the parrot was fated to die; so Indra took the parrot to Brahmā, the creator of the universe, who had also created the parrot. Indra asked his question, and Brahmā replied, "I just create things. It's not my job to decide how long they last; my job is just to create. But you've asked a good question, and now I'd like to know the answer. Vishnu preserves things; let's ask him how long he is going to preserve the parrot's life."

Brahma, Indra and the parrot accordingly all trooped over to Vishnu's residence, where they saw the Blessed Vishnu lying peaceably on Śeṣa, his thousand-headed snake who floats in the Ocean of Milk. They asked their question, and Vishnu replied, "My job is only to preserve. Lord Śiva is in charge of ending life, you should ask him. But now that

you mention it, this is a good question. I'll come with you to Lord Śiva, to hear the answer."

Indra, the parrot, Brahma, and Visnu proceeded to Lord Śiva's abode, where they asked the great god their question. He replied, "It is true that I end the lives of living beings, but I kill according to the dictates of Vidhātā (Fate), who decides who needs to die, and when. But now that you bring it up, I too would like to know when the parrot is going to die. The only thing to do is to visit Fate. Vidhātā will be able to tell us."

Soon Brahma, Vishnu, Śiva, Indra and the parrot were knocking on Fate's door. When Vidhātā opened the door and invited them in they started to ask their question, but Vidhātā interrupted: "Take a look at the parrot." And there was Fluffy, lying on his back in his cage, his little claws straight up in the air, stone dead. Indra's curiosity overcame his grief. Deciding to mourn later and ask questions first, he was just opening his mouth when Vidhātā said, "Before you arrived I already knew that you wanted to know when the parrot was going to die. As it turns out, it was written in the parrot's fate that it would die when it, Indra, Brahma, Vishnu and Śiva all appeared in front of me; and as you can see the parrot died the moment you all arrived here. None of this would have happened had Indra never had the idea to ask when the parrot was going to die; the parrot would have stayed alive indefinitely. It was because it was time for the parrot to die that the parrot's karmas goaded Indra to ask his question." And that was that; there was nothing more to say. Everyone went home to contemplate the lesson they had learned.

Vidhātā doesn't do anything himself, of course; all he does is to distill the influences of all the karmas that impact an individual. This distillation establishes the sequencing of the impending karmic reactions, which are then delivered with the help of the Nine Grahas.



Before we think of altering our fate, first we need to learn how to live up to the fate that is already written for us. And the best way to do that is to heed the words of Sri Krishna: "Perform all the activities that are appropriate for you to perform, with no concern for the fruits thereof. I will determine what fruit is appropriate for you, and see that you receive it."

Mahatma Gandhi used to say that after God created the Law of Karma, he was able to retire. From that moment the mechanism of karma began to work, and hasn't stopped for a moment since. We have no alternative but to respect the Law of Karma, because as long as we exist we are its subjects. We also have no real alternative to respecting Saturn, because if we respect Saturn warmly enough, despite his lack of humor, and even though he is dour to the extreme, he may be willing to cut us some slack. A good way to influence Saturn positively is to revere Śiva; and a good way to do that is to sing songs dedicated to Hanumān. Hanumān, or Āñjeneya as Vimalananda preferred to call him, is an incarnation of Śiva, and has a positive influence over Saturn. When Hanumān is happy he will intercede with Saturn on our behalf, and then something good may happen. Maybe it will be that one inch, or one millimeter, or one quark that will swerve us away from colliding with whatever is hurtling towards us, saving us for another day of sādhana, another day of moving towards becoming the people that we were created to be.

**Jaya Hanumānjī!**



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