

## Chapter Two

### Karma

#### 2.1. “Dispositions” (*saṃskāra*)

Despite a widespread interpretation of “karma” as a kind of fatalism, just the opposite is at the heart of the notion: conscious shaping of natural desire, moral responsibility, and freedom. Karma (*karman* in Sanskrit) is a rich conception, having ramifications for ethics, epistemology, philosophical psychology, as well as metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Historically, karma theory is developed by thinkers belonging to almost every Eastern school (here Chinese as well as Indian). For our contemporary Yoga philosophy, the sense of *karma* in “*karma-yoga*,” “the yoga of action,” is particularly important. It is central to the *Gītā* and other texts that proclaim a “supreme personal good” to be accomplished through yoga. Karma yoga is the topic of the third section of the chapter. First, we shall pursue the idea’s causal and cognitive sides in the broad terms of philosophic psychology. The *Yogasūtra*, for one, shows less concern for the ethics of karma than for the psychological underpinnings of karma in “dispositions,” *saṃskāra*, and other yogic texts follow suit.

In section two, we turn to karma’s ethical dimension, looking at karma theory within the context of virtue ethics and a duty of self-development. There is convergence of what some have called ethical push (“What’s in it for me to be moral?”) and ethical pull (“What is it about others that makes them worthy of moral treatment?”) in the duty to take responsibility for one’s future self. In the third section, we take up the karma-yoga teaching of the *Gītā* and its call to disinterested action, and look more closely at the social dimension. In the fourth and final section, karma and rebirth are reviewed as doctrines of moral justice. There we shall also focus on ideas of the peculiar reward of realization of the

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1. In theistic metaphysics, for example, the idea of karma is used to justify God’s goodness, as, conversely, theists argue that the justice of rebirth requires God to secure it. We look at these views in the fourth section of the chapter.

*summum bonum*, the “supreme personal good,” *paramapurūsārtha*, i.e., yogic enlightenment or awakening. In all four sections, we shall concern ourselves with the best presentations of karma theory among Yoga philosophers—and indeed try to improve upon them—not on comic-book ideas about karma prevalent in the mythological literature.<sup>2</sup>

The word *karman* in Sanskrit is used to mean “action,” anything that we do. Ritual action is a narrower usage that is picked up in the *Gītā*’s karma-yoga teaching, as will be explained. For the moment ignoring the *Gītā*’s sense, we have in “habit,” broadly understood, probably the centralmost usage for Yoga. Everything we do creates habits. Our karma is comprised of the habits we have acquired. Habits condition desires. We act in such and such ways with expectations of the normal fruits. Desires may be nature, occurring willy-nilly, but our habits are our own, or our culture’s, which we assimilate, or not, as individuals. Though habits shape future action, we make them through choice. Karma in the sense of the habits we have acquired determine what we are prone to do. We can make new karma, or new bits of karma, in changing what we are prone to do.

Yet as used in Yogic texts, Sanskrit *karman* is not the equivalent of “habit” as used in English. *Karman* is a collective noun, like “water” in English. We can say that there is a sum total around a single soul or person of bits of karma, and speak of someone’s karma as a whole. Unfortunately for translators, we cannot say the same of a person’s habits. (The sum of a person’s habits could be called her *character*.) The words “habits” and “karma” are not synonyms. For, habits necessarily individuate, like rivers or ruts. Thus “habit” is not a perfect translation of *karman*. I propose, then, to use “karma” as an English word. Indeed, “karma” is an English word, long ago anglicized. In our usage, karma can be spoken of as a generalized line of action (“Murder is bad karma”), but, as mentioned, karma can also be summed up. Furthermore, the moral worth of karma is generally thought to aggregate like buckets into a tub. The “moral payback” dimension of the theory that we take up in sections three and four relies on this relationship. But there is also a connection

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2. ref. Karl Potter who makes a big deal (and rightly so!) of the philosophical/popular distinction: Wendy Donovan, ed.

with rebirth that centers on individual lines of karma, i.e., habits, not on an individual's karma as a whole. It is held that some "habits" become so deeply entrenched that they re-emerge in the next birth as talents or deep dispositions, as will be discussed. The soul is not a *tabula rasa*, according to Yoga.

A person's habits are maintained subconsciously—so say Yoga theorists—through things called traces or dispositions, *saṃskāra*, more literally, "that which makes fit," a "being-prepared-ness." These are in part, though not entirely, conditional formula impressed on the mind (or even the brain). Formula shape a generic "mind-stuff," *citta*, which also has a vital side, to constitute *saṃskāra*. In other words, mental dispositions have both a mental and a vital side—the latter an energy vector or coloring characterized as "sattvic," "rajasic," and/or "tamasic," the "modes" or *guṇas* of a much common Yoga psychology. The three words anglicize a traditional theory of natural "strands" of which mind-stuff is composed: *sattva*, "intelligence and clarity," *rajas*, "passion and energy," and *tamas*, "obscurity and inertia." This is a universal and natural inheritance; specific formations of a sattvic nature, etc., are determined by choice and practice. We shall return to the *guṇa* schema, which, as we see, overlaps *saṃskāra* theory, when we take up the topic of desire a little below.

Now not all *saṃskāra* are psychological: the word is used in the sense of "elasticity" as well as "impetus," as, for example, the impetus of a falling rock. Psychological *saṃskāra*, like the kinds that have only physical effects, are not perceived, at least not normally perceived, but rather posited to explain things perceived. They constitute the subconscious vehicles of karma or habits, and are considered causal factors for a range of psychological phenomena including remembering and any activity guided by what we have learned. Thus karma includes "training," and *saṃskāra* the dispositions we acquire by learning how to do all the things we do including speak. Furthermore, laws of karma are principles of mental integration.

According to classical Yoga philosophers, mental dispositions are formed by perceptions and other cognitive occurrences, including intentions and effort to act. Training involves repetition and a kind of circularity, a disposition required to know what to do and the same disposition reinforced by the doing. For example, writing your name requires memory of the name, and the doing of the writing reinforces the memory. The same goes for our ability to recognize something that we

have perceived previously (“This is that Devadatta I saw yesterday” is the stock example in classical texts). Thus *saṃskāra*—which we see are a very broad idea in the Sanskrit philosophical lexicon—function to maintain both cognitive continuity and bodily skills.

Though *saṃskāra* are theoretic entities, the theory is nevertheless broadly empiricist, much like the empiricism of David Hume’s “impressions” in particular.<sup>3</sup> A simple version with respect to cognitive occurrences runs: a perception indicating *a* as *F*—whose objecthood (*viṣayatā*) or intentionality is *Fa*—produces a *saṃskāra* that when aroused helps to bring about a remembering, an effort, or another psychological event whose objecthood is also *Fa*. Perception is the premier cognitive link with the world according to all Yoga traditions, but not everything we know is a matter of the immediately given. Dispositions, *saṃskāra*—mental dispositions, to be sure—make inference and other modes of knowledge possible. As indicated, they are themselves known indirectly (that is, by ordinary folk—some yogis can directly perceive *saṃskāra* according to the *YS* and commentaries<sup>4</sup>), by the knowledge source called postulation (*arthāpatti*); according to others, they are known by inference. Again, they are posited to explain memory, expectation, fulfillment and frustration, and other cognitive continuities. Accordingly, there are many types of mental *saṃskāra*.

Beyond this simple theory, however—and especially concerning the metaphysics of *saṃskāra*—there is quite a lot of diversity of opinion in classical texts. Buddhists conceive of *saṃskāra* as causal continua, whereas Hindus tend to think of them as marks or relational properties, stamps or impressions resting in the self or soul—or in the *citta*—in any case in a substance.<sup>5</sup> But practically all contributors to Yoga philosophy—Patañjali and company, Vedāntins, Buddhists, Nyāya

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3. ref.

4. *YS* xx.

5. When Vasubandhu’s Yogācāra idealists talk of a “storehouse consciousness” they are thinking about things as webs of *saṃskāras*. refs. The Vaiśeṣika notion of *saṃskāra* as one of twenty-four qualities, and falling into three types, *vega* (impetus), *sthiti-something-or-other* (elasticity), and *bhāvanā*, which of course are the mental dispositions in which we are interested but the analogies are interesting, “self-reproduction” (long footnote)

philosophers, Jainas, and others—do theorize about subconscious *saṃskāra*. Some are invariably associated with the physical body, but some are not. They form psychological bridgework. Whether it be something in this lifetime or something in a previous lifetime that is being remembered currently, we are not directly aware of the vehicles of remembering, etc., and we do not constantly hold before our minds information acquired in the past. Yet the information is retrievable. Dispositions, *saṃskāra*, comprise the storage bank. Some *saṃskāra* are stored in the brain, but not all. Otherwise, it would be impossible to remember incidents in previous lifetimes or, indeed, have any kind of karmic continuity from one life to the next. But they are like patterns or programs in a computer.

Such mental dispositions are also considered, by most of the classical theorists, to be vehicles of desire and impulses to act. Our habits have an affectional and motivational side. We are born as beings of hunger and thirst, sexual desire, who want to survive, and so on. Often we endorse these basic drives when we act. Yoga teaches in principle will trumps desire and in fact that a person can commit suicide (i.e., bodily suicide, not elimination of the person) by not eating, to dramatize the point. We shall return later to this side of the theory. First, let us concentrate a little more on merely the cognitive side of *saṃskāra* as central to knowledge and action. Here we turn to Nyāya.<sup>6</sup>

Veridical cognitions shape the mental vehicles that guide unhesitating effort and action, action that we expect to be in accord with our desires. A person can be lucky and get what she wants guided by a false belief, but, generally speaking, success requires knowledge and knowledge beliefs formed by genuine knowledge sources. For example, a perception of a pot forms a disposition to remember it, which, when triggered in an actual

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6. Epistemology is carried out by commentators on the *YS*, and in particular by Vācaspati Mīśra, relying on Nyāya views. Perception is the premier knowledge source, and presupposed in the working of inference and other knowledge sources. Yogic perception is one variety of perception, not normally appealed to by Nyāya philosophers, who did not presume to be yogis, but of course important for Yoga's occult teachings. Vācaspati, we might add, is a treasury of wisdom and sophistication: an eleventh-century philosopher who wrote an important commentary on *YS* but who was also a luminary in Nyāya, as well as, strange to tell (given the disputes with Nyāya), Advaita Vedānta.

remembering, would prompt—given desire to drink—unhesitating effort and action, to pick the thing up. Thus the notion of justified true belief so central to millennia of Western epistemology has much in common with, in classical Indian philosophy, that of *saṃskāra* formed by cognitions that are the results of knowledge sources, perception and the rest.<sup>7</sup> Our habits include our beliefs, which are, then, maintained by *saṃskāra*.

Note, furthermore, the importance of *saṃskāra* to explain perceptual illusion (as well as other types of cognitive error), what it is called pseudo-perception (pseudo-testimony, etc.) by classical Yoga philosophers. For example, a person apparently sees a snake when the thing in front is really a rope. We can imagine that from the subject's own perspective the object does seem to be alive. In other words, that the thing is a snake seems to be given perceptually. But at work would be a *saṃskāra* which under normal conditions would prompt a remembering but in the deviant conditions of perceptual error fuses a snakehood bit of intentionality into the current pseudo-perception. The person's non-veridical cognition has misplaced intentionality (*viśayatā*); it presents something (the rope) not as what it is (a snake).<sup>8</sup> Where does this "objecthood" come from, this misplaced intentionality or content (the seeming to be a *snake*)? From *saṃskāra*.

Similarly, people perceive a piece of distant sandalwood as fragrant, having actual sense data of the smell though the wood is too far away for connection with the olfactory organ of the body which is of course located in the nose.<sup>9</sup> Such phenomena show that the mind can retrieve and project sensory information into current experience. The process is made possible by *saṃskāra*, which make acquired information available at a later time.

In sum, classical Yoga epistemology is dominated by a causal picture, by a view of processes that result in veridical cognition, and *saṃskāras* are important causal factors. Similarly, *saṃskāras* play a role in intentional action. Cognitions informed by *saṃskāras* guide action, and

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7. These ideas are elaborated by me in several publications: refs.

8. Vācapati and others call this the *anyathākhyāti* position. Though it is not universally accepted among Yoga contributors, there is equally a role for *saṃskāra* on alternative views.

9. classical refs. and refs. to Gestalt psychology etc.

conversely we make *saṃskāras* by what we do. This holds in general; it's as though perceptual and action schema get imprinted on our genes; we have a common biological inheritance in the structure and function of the human sensory-motor system. Humans share human karma. But we also build on this inheritance as individuals. We carve out individual selves by choices—by intentions to do, properties residing in the self, according to Nyāya—including choices made in previous lives. We make our own peculiar habits, our peculiar skills and twists of style. Our habits are both good and bad, and include, potentially, dispositions, so Yogic texts emphasize, to practice yoga and, indeed, to maintain the practice into the next lifetime if we do not get to the goal in this one (Nirvana, Self-realization, enlightenment).

Patañjali, moreover, uses the idea of *saṃskāra* to explain the training whereby one becomes capable of sustaining the deepest trance, which is, according to him, from a psychological perspective the ultimate goal of all yoga practice. The idea also explains why after we go to sleep we do the things we do the next morning. Patañjali's yogic ideal is of a person who does not lose consciousness while asleep (this is called *yoga-nidrā*, “yogic sleep”),<sup>10</sup> and who maintains yogic trance, *samādhi*, through having created *samādhi* dispositions (*saṃskāra*) from previous days. These special meditational dispositions are said not only to block other *saṃskāra* firings but also to, so to say, burn themselves up, to self-destruct, leaving no seed.<sup>11</sup> In other passages, the *YS* says that we have to learn not to trigger *saṃskāra* firings as well as not to be distracted by current firings, triggered by whatever cause. This is an important theme throughout the text.<sup>12</sup>

In everyday life, many triggers of projection and memory are ordinarily not under our control. So it is easy to see the logic of Patañjali's teaching. Yoga practices are all about acquiring control, and the *YS* is especially concerned with control of thought and emotion, with

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10. This is widely documented though whether with wide success it is hard to know: Bihar school etc.

11. *YS* 1.51.

12. *YS* xx. Instead of “firing,” the term normally used is “awakening,” and triggers are “awakeners,” *udbodhaka*.

the ability, that is to say, to hold quiet the mind. We shall return to the idea in the last section, below, in connection with a variety of views about an ultimate goal of yoga, the *summum bonum*. But before moving on to the ethical dimensions of karma conception, let us fill out, with respect to *saṃskāra*, the picture in the *YS* of the yogin who has perfect control.

In consonance with his or her learning to hold still all fluctuations of mentality (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, *YS* 1.2), a yogin learns to be able to check the firings of *saṃskāra*. However, the checking itself is a conscious act, creating, or reinforcing, a *saṃskāra* of silence. At some point, a last *saṃskāra* firing, fires at itself, so to say, and burns itself up, freeing the consciousness to attend only to consciousness. Note that all the action occurs—in consonance with the faulty metaphysics of dualism discussed in the previous chapter—on the side of nature, *prakṛti*. It has nothing, ultimately, to do with what we are, with ourselves as the authors of our acts, e.g., our acts of concentration. The *YS*'s mistake is evident in its identification of *kaivalya*, the “aloneness” of the individual consciousness, with the psychological notion of “seedless trance,” *nirbīja-samādhi* (*YS* 1.51 and 3.8), “trance without any seed (of a *saṃskāra* that would force one back to the waking state).” Ultimately, personal effort is not what carries one to *kaivalya*; only *prakṛti* herself, in arising without distorting subliminal “seeds,” has the ability.

A different view is presented in Vedānta and still other views in Buddhism. Let us be brief. On all Yoga philosophies, *saṃskāra* are talked about in connection with being able to sustain concentration and achieve occult powers or *siddhis*. But a school's explanation of a *summum bonum* advanced treat *saṃskāra* in accordance with preconceived ideas about the fundamental nature of reality. Abhinava Gupta, for example, a famous Tantric Vedāntin of the Kashmiri Shaivite movement who lived around 1000, sees the self, the true or highest self, *ātman*, as potentially active, and as acting in fact in the *mudrā*, the syllables uttered, the mantras, facial expressions, gestures, postures of the yogin in identification with Shiva in mystic trance (*samādhi*).<sup>13</sup>

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13. Abhinava's stotra

Abhinava and the *bhāva* of the self matching the ninth *rasa* of *śānti*.

Psychologically, the picture is of a *tabula rasa* upon which Shiva himself writes, a tablet wiped clean of *saṃskāra*, in which Shiva embeds a kind of Divine *saṃskāra*, a “seal” with magical power to bring those who imitate it, repeat it, or otherwise align with it to taste themselves the sweetness of mystic trance. Similarly, in the *Gītā* Krishna teaches that Brahman, the Absolute, is active, making *dharma* (patterns of “right action”) without making karma in some sense, though there is no explicit mention of *saṃskāra* (we shall return to the *Gītā*’s conceptions of karma and *dharma* in section four). Whole traditions of Vedāntins seem to think that *saṃskāra* make up the body, the subtle body, that is, *sūkṣma śarīra*, of the transmigrating soul, even though the relation between self-consciousness, or *ātman*, and the reincarnating individual is conceived very differently by Advaitins and by Vedāntic theists (and the theists themselves hardly agree). Nevertheless, everyone agrees that your acts as well as your experiences make up who you are and who you will be in future births. Dispositions, *saṃskāra*, provide the links, the connections in terms of information and tendencies to act.

Buddhists embrace largely the same views, though, as already mentioned, Buddhist philosophers see *saṃskāra* as causal continua in contrast with Hindu views (i.e., of Vedāntins, Naiyāyikas, etc.) of *saṃskāra* as properties of a self or a substance distinct from the body. Buddhists for their part eschew all notions of enduring substances and thus weave into their psychologies of *saṃskāra* commitments to momentariness and “no-self.” The question of what survives death will be taken up by us in chapter three. There too we shall survey the Buddhist-Nyāya controversy in particular about personal identity (“What makes the present person continuous with the person she was in the past?”).