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Unraveling Karma: An Introduction

It happened.

On a certain day, Shankaran Pillai purchased a boat—a forty-foot ultra-luxurious yacht—for ten million dollars. He decided to take his new Puerto Rican bride out on the ocean for a romantic cruise.

On the way, misfortune struck. The yacht hit a rock and was wrecked.

As the brand-new boat sank into the ocean, Shankaran Pillai and his wife managed to extricate themselves. They swam for their lives and finally made their way to the shores of a nearby islet—a sandy sliver of land floating in the middle of nowhere, completely devoid of vegetation.

Shankaran Pillai and his wife had a few tins of canned food. They knew these would last them only a couple of days. They were in a fix.

Unperturbed, Shankaran Pillai settled down in a yogic posture and assumed a serenely spiritual expression. His wife, however, was of a more volatile disposition.

“We’re marooned!” she wept. “There’s no human habitation in sight, no sign of any life here—no animals, no plants, nothing. What will we live on? How will we get out? What a terrible end to our dreams of marital bliss! What a terrible end to our lives!”

Shankaran Pillai continued to sit in his yogic posture, unruffled.

His wife was bewildered. “How can you sit like this? Don’t you

realize we're doomed? Can't you see we're going to die?"

Shankaran Pillai looked at her with calm compassion. "My dear, don't distress yourself," he said. "What I did not tell you before our wedding is that I have a history. I had previously availed myself of a student loan when I was studying in Tennessee. After my studies, I went to New York without repaying the loan. I was caught by my creditors three months later.

"But I managed to elude them and went away to California. There I got myself a car. Since I got myself a car loan, I said, why settle for a small car? I decided to get myself a Rolls-Royce with pure-gold trimmings, and I took a two-million-dollar loan to purchase the vehicle. Since I thought life would be somewhat difficult for me there, I took the car to Oregon.

"But they followed me there, too. After that episode, I took a home loan for five million dollars. I then happened to go to Mexico. But they followed me there six months later.

"After that, as you know, I married you and bought this yacht in Texas for ten million dollars. I haven't paid the first installment yet. So don't worry. Stay calm. Don't panic. They'll find us. They always do."

Shankaran Pillai's faith that he would be "found" (or more accurately, his realization that he could never escape his creditors!) is a phenomenon that the rest of the world knows by another name.

Karma.

The inescapable basis of our lives. The mechanism that decrees that we cannot evade the consequences of our own actions. The cycle that appears to follow us grimly and inexorably wherever we go.

Although the word is Indian in origin, *karma* is now a term that has invaded every dictionary. It is not merely the stuff of metaphysical tomes and academic treatises. It is instead a term that has pervaded lexicons across the world, from the esoteric to the pop.

How did this Sanskrit term enter every single language in the world? How do we account for its extraordinary popularity, its capacity to endure across the centuries?

There are many possible ways to explain this. But perhaps the primary explanation is just this: karma is the only concept in the

world that addresses human perplexity in the face of suffering. It is the only logic that explains the seeming arbitrariness of the world we live in.

How else do we understand the pervasiveness of human anguish? How do we explain the horrors of war and terminal illness, the mute agony on the faces of starving children and traumatized prisoners? The unending catalog of savagery and conflict that has been the human experience for as long as we can remember?

Moreover, how do we answer these ancient questions: Why do terrible things happen to good people? Why does fortune so often favor those who seem cruel or unkind or the morally compromised? Why do life circumstances seem so random and capricious? Why does it feel sometimes that God—if one exists—must be playing marbles with the world? Why does the universe so often seem such a hostile, lawless, ungoverned place?

Perhaps no other word answers that bewildered human Why? as well as *karma* has.

Or can.

For far too long, the word has been either grotesquely oversimplified or needlessly mystified. It is time to explore the concept more deeply. It is time to unpack the most overused, abused, and yet indispensable word in the spiritual vocabulary of the world. It is time to examine how karma is connected to some of the most vital areas of human inquiry: the meaning of life and, above all, how to live it.

This book hopes to be both an exploration and a guide, offering the reader keys to living intelligently and joyfully in a challenging world. In the process, it seeks to restore the word *karma* to its original transformational potential. It hopes to peel off accretions of misunderstanding and look at karma in all its pristine power and with all its explosive resonance.

Throughout the book, I will outline a series of sutras to help you navigate the world of karma. *Sutra* literally means thread. Nobody wears a necklace for the sake of the thread, but without a thread there can be no necklace! In the yogic culture, a guru traditionally offered students a spare thread of guidance to navigate their way through life. But this volume hopes to provide readers both guidance and a detailed

exposition of the subject of karma. It offers both pointers and the big picture—in other words, hopefully, both thread and necklace.

The book is divided into three parts. The first explores karma as a source of entanglement; the second explores the possibilities of freedom from this entanglement; and the third addresses frequent questions about the subject.

Part One examines the intricate workings of the karmic mechanism—one that is far more complex than most people realize. Part Two introduces the notion of karma yoga—ways to address and handle karma, as well as to liberate oneself from it. There is a pragmatic orientation to this section, but yoga is a science that cannot be imparted in its profundity by a book. It requires commitment and training under a spiritual master to be truly transformative. A book can, however, illuminate and inspire a potential path, and this is what this section hopes to do.

A word of caution: You may find, as you journey deeper into this book, that you encounter various technical terms. But don't lose heart. Karma is not a poetic subject. It is a complex domain—one that involves precise, even clinical, concepts and distinctions. Yet neither is karma a sterile theme. It is the basis of human existence—a life-and-death issue, in fact. There can be nothing narrowly academic about such a discussion.

Several chapters in Parts One and Two are interspersed with sections called *sadhanas*. In Sanskrit, *sadhana* means a device or tool. These tools offer you an opportunity to put into practice some of the insights you encounter in each chapter and to test them in the laboratory of your experience.

Part Three is devoted to questions. These are searching, heartfelt questions. Questions that I have been asked in programs and conversations over three and a half decades. Questions that recur simply because human curiosity about karma is lingering, persistent, frequently urgent. The confusion about this subject is genuine, the longing for clarity equally authentic.

Perhaps some of these questions will resonate with you. Others may actually sound like your very own questions. Very few questions, since the dawn of time, have been truly new. The contexts and specifics may change, but the need to make sense of a world of pain

and injustice continues to stay relevant, while the human thirst to fathom the mysteries of life will endure until the end of time.

Let us unravel karma.

PART ONE





A Note to the Reader

The word *sadhguru*, as I often point out, means an uneducated guru. An uneducated guru does not come from accumulated scriptural information, but from a moment-to-moment inner knowing. I come, therefore, from a place of direct experience, not secondhand knowledge.

My approach to karma, therefore, is not—and has never been—that of a scholar. When I speak of karma, I am not drawing on doctrine. I am drawing on perception. Conceptual knowledge is the way of the academic. Perceptual knowing is the way of the yogi.

Part One of this book explains karma—in all its complexity and multidimensionality. It may seem to deal with pure concepts, sometimes challenging ones. But I want to emphasize that these are not abstruse theories but, rather, direct insights into the actual workings of karma.

This is a section for the thirsty. It is for those who have nursed questions over the years, questions such as What is karma? How does it accumulate? What makes the machinery work? When did this whole complicated and crazy cycle begin? It is for those who aren't looking for mere user manuals, but for a glimpse into the very mechanism of the karmic wheel.

This section examines how the wheel comes into being and gains momentum. It leads you step by step into the subject of karma—what it is; how it accumulates; the many ways in which human personality is shaped; the incredibly vast reservoir of memory that every individual carries; the role of volition; the subtle ways in which karma adheres to

us even when we seek to free ourselves of it.

Spiritual seekers usually want to shed their karma, but it is important to remember that karma is *not* our enemy. It is not necessary to eliminate all karma to lead a life of well-being. Indeed, we would not be able to live without karma, for human life is sustained by it. At the same time, karma can become wounding and deeply entangling if we do not learn how to handle it.

The yogic system gives no commandments whatsoever. It leaves you free to choose whether you want to generate positive karma for the future, distance yourself from your karmic package, or dissolve it altogether. Even as this book explores and outlines these various possibilities, the choice is yours.

If you find your foot recurrently crushed under a wheel, the problem is not with the wheel. The problem is that you have no clue how to ride it. The aim of this book is not to reinvent the wheel but to suggest ways to ride it joyfully toward the destination of your choice, secure in the knowledge that you are in control of your own journey.



ONE

Karma: The Eternal Enigma

SUTRA #1

Karma is about becoming the source of one's own creation. In shifting responsibility from heaven to oneself, one becomes the very maker of one's destiny.

In the Driver's Seat

It happened.

Once the pope went to the United States. His schedule was a busy one, with engagements in various cities. One day, he happened to be in Louisiana in a chauffeur-driven stretch limo—the vehicle that demonstrates the quintessentially American ability to stretch a limousine to its limits.

The pope was excited because he had never driven a car like this. He told the chauffeur, “I would like to drive.”

How could the chauffeur refuse the pope? He said, “Of course, Holy Father.”

So the pope took the wheel and the chauffeur took the backseat. The pope started enjoying the car and his foot got heavy on the gas pedal. He hit ninety and then a hundred miles an hour. He did not realize how fast he was going.

Now, the Louisiana police, known to be sticklers when it comes

to speed breaking, swung into action. When the pope in the zooming limo saw the flashing light behind him, he pulled over to the shoulder of the road.

The cop got out and, carefully, with his hand on his gun, slowly approached the car. He looked in. He saw it was the pope himself driving! He peered into the back seat and saw somebody else sitting there.

“Wait,” he said.

He went back to his car, took out the radio, and called the police chief. He said, “Captain, I’ve got a real big fish.”

“Oh, come on. Who is it? Bonnie and Clyde?”

“No, somebody much bigger than that.”

“Sweet Jesus, have you got Al Capone?”

“Oh no, somebody much, much bigger.”

“What, you think you’ve got the president of the United States of America himself?”

“No, somebody far bigger than that!”

“Come on, who the hell can be bigger than the president of the United States? What have you got on your hands?”

The cop replied, “I don’t know, but he’s got the pope as his chauffeur!”

And that brings us to the crux of the matter: most people don’t have a clue who is driving their car!

Look around you. Ask yourself how many people you know are living with any real understanding of the crazy locomotive called life. Most people are passive pawns in the ride, clueless about how the machinery works, the source of its octane, how to manage its direction or its velocity, or, above all, who their chauffeur is. They talk of free will, liberty, and independence. But they have little or no control over their lives. Their destiny is something they create unconsciously.

Welcome to karma, a dimension that puts you squarely back where you belong, where you were meant to belong all along: in the driver’s seat.

Demystifying Karma

With that we come to the central question of this book: What *is* karma?

Literally, the word means action.

Unfortunately, most people have understood action in terms of good and bad deeds. They see karma as a balance sheet of merits and demerits, virtues and sins. A life audit of sorts. To others, it is a ledger maintained by some divine chartered accountant who assigns some people to celestial bliss and consigns others to a nether world or into the maw of some recycling machine that spews them back into this world to suffer some more.

This is not merely false and absurd. It is tragic.

This notion has created generations of puzzled and fearful human beings who use the term indiscriminately, without a clue of what it means. It has spawned a brand of fatalism that has paralyzed vast segments of people and has been used to validate social injustices and political tyrannies of various kinds. It has also led to much spurious philosophizing and empty academic debate and has, of course, boosted the fortune-telling industry!

Let us shatter the first myth.

In actual fact, karma has *nothing* to do with reward and punishment. It has nothing to do with some despotic life auditor up in the sky, working with primitive devices of carrot and stick. It has nothing to do with a benign god up in the heavens. Nothing to do with divine retribution. Nothing to do with virtue and sin, good and evil, God and Mr. Lucifer.

Karma simply means we have created the blueprint for our lives. It means we are the makers of our own fate. When we say “This is my karma,” we are actually saying “I am responsible for my life.”

Karma is about becoming the source of one’s own creation. In shifting responsibility from heaven to oneself, one becomes the very maker of one’s destiny.

Karma is the natural basis of all existence. It is not a law that is imposed from above. It does not allow us to outsource our responsibility anywhere else; it does not allow us to blame our parents,

our teachers, our countries, our politicians, our gods, or our fates. It makes each one of us squarely responsible for our own destinies and, above all, the nature of our experience of life.

So the only relevant question here is, Are you *ready* for karma?

Are you ready to hear about a dimension that is so empowering that it tells you that you are fully capable of taking the reins of your life into your own hands?

If not, read no further.

If you are willing, and if you are curious to find out more about how this mechanism works, this book could be your key. All you need to do after this is to fire up your engine and set off on your new life journey. Once you are at the wheel, your experience of the ride will never be the same again.

It is important to remember one thing, however. Karma is not a doctrine. You do not get any brownie points for subscribing to it. You do not get any negative marks for disbelieving it. Karma is not a creed, a scripture, an ideology, a philosophy, or a theory. It is simply the way things are. It is an existential mechanism. Like the sun, it operates whether you acknowledge it or not, whether you pay obeisance to it or ignore it. It is not looking for a fan club.

It simply turns you from a white-knuckled, terror-struck passenger in the backseat into a confident driver, in charge of the wheel, joyfully navigating the course of your own destiny.

The Karmic Cycle

To turn driver instead of passenger, however, you need to start by knowing a few basic rules about how the karmic mechanism works.

Let us start by addressing a fundamental misunderstanding. Although karma means action, it does not necessarily refer to *physical* deeds. It does not necessarily refer to what you do in the outside world—whether it be acts of charity or acts of villainy.

Instead, karma is action on three levels: *body*, *mind*, and *energy*. Whatever you do on these three levels leaves a certain residue or imprint upon you.

What does this mean?

It is quite simple. Your five senses are collecting data from the outside world every moment of your life. You are literally being bombarded with stimuli at every instant. Over time, this enormous volume of sense impressions begins to assume a certain distinctive pattern within you. This pattern slowly shapes itself into behavioral tendencies. A cluster of tendencies hardens over time into what you call your personality, or what you claim to be your true nature.

It works in the reverse as well: Your mind shapes the way you experience the world around you. This becomes your karma—an orientation to life that you have created for yourself in relative unawareness. You are not aware of how these tendencies develop. But what you consider to be “myself” is just an accumulation of habits, predispositions, and tendencies you have acquired over time without being conscious of the process.

Take a simple example. Some people may have been joyful children but are now unhappy adults. There may have been life events that triggered that unhappiness. But in most cases, people have no clue how and when they acquired this persona. If they had created their personality consciously, they would have crafted themselves quite differently. But somewhere along the way, by following the diktats of their unexamined reactions and tendencies, chronic unhappiness became their defining characteristic.

In other words, karma is like old software that you have written for yourself *unconsciously*.

And, of course, you’re updating it on a daily basis!

Depending on the type of physical, mental, and energetic actions you perform, you write your software. Once that software is written, your whole system functions accordingly. Based on the information from the past, certain memory patterns keep recurring. Now your life turns habitual, repetitive, and cyclical. Over time, you become ensnared by your patterns. Like so many people, you probably don’t know why certain situations keep recurring in your inner and outer life. This is because these patterns are unconscious. As time goes on, you turn into a puppet of your accumulated past.

The lives of many people, for instance, are dominated by food or substance abuse. Chemical addiction certainly plays a role here, but

the primary problem is that they have set up a recurrent pattern in their life. However hard they try to emerge from it, they keep falling back into the trap. If one does not consciously rewrite one's karmic software, the regularity of the pattern can feel like it is being imposed from without, rather than initiated from within. But this software is not a fate to be endured. It *can* be rewritten, dropped, or distanced, as we will see later in this book.

The karmic mechanism is ceaseless. Every mental fluctuation in you creates a chemical reaction, which then proceeds to provoke a physical sensation. This sensation, in turn, reinforces the chemical reaction, which then strengthens the mental fluctuation. Over time, your very chemistry is determined by a series of unconscious reactions to sensory and mental stimuli.

Now, if you simply think about something that excites you, you can actually feel certain sensations in your body. This can be empirically verified. We now know that the human being is a psychosomatic organism—that whatever happens in the mind immediately imprints itself on the body as a chemical process. If you think of mountains, for instance, your chemistry will react in one way; if you think of tigers, it reacts in another. So for every minute mental fluctuation, there is a certain type of chemical reaction and sensation. You may not even be aware of it unless the sensations become acute. All these sensations register and over time become the blueprint of your unconscious mind. You are therefore a living repository of karmic memory on levels you are not aware of.

Today, research has shown that psychological and emotional traumas can contribute to your risk for mental and physical health problems. We are told that mental distress can lead to cardiac problems. None of this is new. People always knew that if you go through psychological upheavals, your heart will break! All this happens because your body chemistry changes over a period of time as a result of constant mental and emotional fluctuation.

This is a vicious cycle. If you touch the firmament of your mind just once, the resulting ripples are enough to keep going for lifetimes. The mind is a process that picks up momentum without any assistance from you. You may have noticed that when you were eighteen, you were generally able to shrug off difficulties and move

on. That ability was more challenged by thirty. By forty-five, many things seemed to bother you. And, by sixty, you find it almost impossible to pick yourself up, adapt, and move on.

This mentality is pervasive—you can see it all around you. At eighteen, people are often anxious about their future. At seventy, when most of their life is behind them, they are still worried! They have become such veterans at the business that they worry for no reason at all. This is because the cycle from mental fluctuation to chemical reaction to sensation (which then, in turn, produces a chemical reaction that leads again to a mental fluctuation) has gathered momentum. Over time, this has a cumulative impact on cellular and genetic memory, as well as on the energy system.

The unconscious mind is therefore a tremendous library of karmic memory. You would find this information very useful if you were approaching it consciously. The problem is that it manifests all the time, without your permission! You feel like one big mess because you are punching your psychological keyboard randomly all the time.

Think of a CD on which music is recorded. The disk is like your body—whether physical, mental, or energetic. The music is analogous to the impression recorded upon your body. Now, the music is just a small impression on a compact disk. But when you play the CD, you do not experience the disk; you experience the music. Karma is similar. You are not actively experiencing your energetic or mental or physical body. You are only facing the music! And you cannot stop it. You are experiencing your karmic impressions and imprints all the time. And you cannot bring these to a halt.

The Tedium and Tyranny of Karma

The level at which the compulsiveness of karma operates may surprise you. When you walk into an auditorium or conference room, the seat you choose may seem like a decision you made freely. But often a level of karmic compulsion is involved. If you attend the same conference or class for the next five days, you may notice that you are likely to sit in the same place each day.

Many years ago, when I was training teachers to impart my Inner

Engineering program in different places, the new trainee teachers would often ask, “Sadhguru, what kind of questions are students likely to ask? What can we expect and how do we deal with it?” So I made a chart for them of the arrangement of the class and told them, “See, if a person comes and settles down *here*, this is the kind of question they are going to ask. If a participant settles down *there*, that is what they are going to ask.” Now, of course, there were exceptions: a latecomer might choose a place based only on the seat that is available. But ninety percent of the time it happened exactly the way I said it would! That is how predictable karma is.

So karma is *not some external system of crime and punishment*. It is an internal cycle generated by you. These patterns are not oppressing you from without, but from *within*. Externally, it may be a new day. You may have a new job, a new home, a new life partner, a new baby. You may even be in a new country. But, internally, you are experiencing the same cycles—the same internal oscillations, the same behavioral shifts, the same mental reactions, the same psychological tendencies.

Everything has changed except for your experience. You can keep modifying the outer environment, but nothing will work because you haven't figured out how to change *your karma*. Something else seems to be pushing your buttons. Someone else seems to be driving your car.

For every other creature on this planet, the struggles are essentially physical. If they eat well, they are just fine. But human beings are different. For humans, when the stomach is empty, there is only one problem; but when the stomach is full, there are one hundred problems! You may talk freedom, but you are gold-plating your limitations all the time in absolute unawareness. Even as you extol the values of independence, everything about you—not just the way you look or feel or think, but even the way you sit or stand or walk—is determined by your past patterns.

Do not forget that in addition to being unconscious and compulsive, karma is also deeply cyclical. The karmic information within your system is encoded in different kinds of cycles. The largest cycle is the solar cycle, because everything—animate and inanimate—in this solar system is deeply influenced by the sun. Our planet is no

exception. The solar cycle is a period of 4,356 days (nearly 12 years). Someone who lives according to the solar cycle leads a life of great health, well-being, alignment, and minimal friction.

As the length of a karmic cycle decreases, life becomes progressively more unbalanced. If your life runs in three- or six-month cycles, you are in a serious state of psychological imbalance. The same inner upheavals or life situations will keep recurring every few months. If your life is determined by a twenty-eight-day cycle—the lunar cycle, which is also the shortest one—you could well be considered deranged or psychotic. The word *loony*, as you know, is linked to the word *lunar*, and this is no coincidence. It should be remembered, however, that the karmic cycle has nothing to do with the reproductive cycles of the female body.

Now, if we do not break these internal and external patterns, nothing new will ever happen. You might have noticed that the more successful you become, the more frustrated you get, because somewhere unconsciously you sense that you are simply going around in circles. You may have learned to ride the cycle, but you are not free from it.

With yogic practices, the aspiration is to move toward the solar cycle so your balance and stability are assured. You may not be able to change your past action and the mental and emotional karma you accumulated, but you no longer slide into short-spin cycles. You no longer wear your karma as a skin-tight garment; you learn to wear it loosely. You hold it at a distance.

The problem is that people do not realize just how tenacious karma is. You could meet with an accident and die, but your karma is not destroyed. You could break your head and blow all your brains out, but the karma continues! That is how resilient, how relentless, how subtle the karmic mechanism is. And that is why freedom from the cycle so often seems like such a remote possibility.

The yogic tradition tells us that in addition to the physical body (the *annamayakosha*), each human being has a mental body (*manomayakosha*) and an energy body (*pranamayakosha*). There are subtler bodies as well, known as the etheric body (*vignanamayakosha*) and the bliss body (*anandamayakosha*). But the accumulation of karma essentially happens on the levels of the first three bodies: physical,

will ensure you land up in certain places at certain times. If you exude another type of vasana, existence will make sure you land up in certain other places. So what moves toward you and also what moves away from you are determined by the smell that emanates from you. Your vasana depends, of course, entirely on the kind of residual memory or karmic content you carry.

This works in subtle ways. You may not be aware of it, but in wakefulness and sleep, you are performing karma. A simple thought pattern could make you function in specific ways. If you keep thinking about the movies, or perhaps a particular movie star, for instance, you are very likely to see a particular person in a crowd who shares your passion. You might miss the others: those who love books, or meditation, or something else. If you see a thousand faces before you, your vasana is likely to draw you toward someone who is similarly inclined.

It happened.

At a certain point as a teenager, I got myself a huge cobra—a marvelous twelve-foot-long specimen. It had made its way into a local tube-light factory, and I caught it, much to the relief of the factory workers. I hid it under my bed in a large glass container. Somehow, one day it managed to escape.

When my father heard a loud hiss from my room, he went down on his knees to find out what the matter was. When he saw the cobra, he absolutely freaked out. He ran out of the room crying “Cobra, cobra!” When I entered the scene, everyone at home was literally standing on chairs and sofas. On the other hand, I ran into the room to protect my snake, anxious that my companion would be thrown out! My parents’ vasana produced aversion; my vasana produced attraction.

I managed to smuggle the same snake back and housed it later on the rooftop of my home in a large cage. On another occasion, it managed to escape again. I happened to be out at the time. As I came riding back on my bicycle, I saw my parents standing outside the house, consternation written large upon their faces. The school adjacent to the house had just let up at four in the afternoon. A huge crowd had gathered around the snake. Everyone was terrified. As I drew close, I realized what was going on. I knew I could not go home.

There would be too much drama. I simply zoomed by, scooped up my cobra by the middle with one hand, and rode away!

This story exemplifies *vasanas* at work. What provoked terror for my parents and others produced a very different response in me. I have never felt any aversion to snakes. My sense of kinship with them is an ancient *vasana* that I carry. I have always been comfortable around these exotic creatures. Ever since childhood, I have been able to intuitively track their presence in the wild. If I simply followed my sense of smell, I would know under exactly which rock the snake could be found. I developed quite a reputation in my neighborhood as a snake catcher.

There are many reasons for my attraction to snakes. The connection between yogis and snakes is an old one. Both exude a *vasana* that draws them to each other. The snake is an incredibly perceptive creature and is instinctively drawn to higher levels of energy. This is why *Adiyogi* (*Shiva*), the first yogi, is always depicted in traditional iconography with a snake around his throat. In all those cultures in which people have delved into extrasensory perception, the snake plays a pivotal role. The traditional veneration of snakes, cows, and crows in India is based on the awareness that these creatures represent an advanced stage of existential development.

Since yogis constantly aspire to enhance their perception, the snake is a particularly important presence in the yogic tradition. The cobra is revered as the only creature that can perceive the subtle etheric dimension, even in the daytime. Not surprisingly, it plays a significant role in several creation myths as well, even if it has sometimes been disparaged by those who feared its capabilities.

Yet another reason for this *vasana* is the connection between the snake and the *kundalini*, the coiled energy that lies at the base of the human spine (which yoga consciously harnesses for spiritual development). The *kundalini* energy has been described as “serpent energy” because of its similarity to the snake in terms of a shared pattern of movement and stillness.

In the early days of my work as a guru, when I wanted to consecrate a powerful energy form called the *Dhyanalina* (a unique structure in which all seven *chakras*, or energy centers, are operating at their optimal capacity), I needed to draw very fierce and intense

disciples around me to assist with this project. Now that this mission is complete, I have altered my vasana completely. Because the need for that kind of concentrated energy work is over, I draw other kinds of people to me. I am probably unrecognizable to the people who knew me then, because I *am* a different person. Depending on the nature of the work, I adjust the tone of my vasana. This may be puzzling to some. But this is the way every spiritual master operates.

However, the capacity to adjust one's vasana is not an option reserved only for the spiritually adept. It is possible for each individual to choose not to be a victim of their vasana to a great extent. All it takes is a certain awareness. With a little awareness, every human being can begin to transform habit into choice, compulsion into consciousness.

It is important to see that whatever seems determined in your life has been determined by you unconsciously. You have written your own software. Depending on the way you have written your software, that is the way you think, that is the way you feel, that is the way you act, and that is what you invite into your life. Depending on the kind of "fragrance" you emit, you attract life situations. Some people seem to constantly attract pleasant situations; others seem to constantly attract unpleasant ones. Or perhaps you see this in different phases in your life. In some phases, wonderful things seem to keep happening; in others, adverse circumstances keep recurring. Now, this simply depends on what you have in your karmic reservoir. Today you have rotten fish, so you attract some terrible situations; tomorrow you have flowers, so you attract better situations. One thing that we are trying to change through yoga (and hopefully, this book) is the kind of fragrance you throw out into the world.

Many people talk freedom but they secretly fear it. They feel secure in bondage. Other people opt for bondage because identification with an ideology, a religion, a relationship, or even a gadget enhances their identity in some way. Consider something as simple as your cell phone. If it is used to enhance activity, it can be a source of empowerment. But if it is used to enhance identity, it becomes a source of bondage. In this way, people acquire vasanas unconsciously, often believing they are choosing freedom when they are actually choosing enslavement.

It happened.

Some years ago, when conducting a yoga program in southern India, I stayed in a village called Velayudhampalayam. My lodging was opposite a hill. I was told that Jain monks had lived and meditated in these hill caves more than nineteen hundred years ago. This antiquity piqued my interest, because it meant these monks had lived only a few centuries after the great Jain teacher and guru Mahavira.

One afternoon, I climbed up, with a few volunteers, to a beautiful cave located like a bird's perch in the rocks. The inside was filthy, strewn with bottles and graffiti. In India, every second rock and monument has the initials of tourists and visiting lovers scrawled upon it. These caves were no different; they were liberally scratched with the usual "KPT loves SRM" type of stuff. So we cleaned up the place.

Now, there were rough indentations in the rock floor, which clearly served as beds for the monks. I sat down on one of these beds. I suddenly found my body beginning to pulsate powerfully. Intrigued, I decided to spend the night there.

It was a night of revelation. I realized that the subtle body of the monk who had been there centuries ago was still incredibly alive. I could tell, for instance, that he had no left leg; it had been amputated just below the knee.

Now, these monks led quiet, isolated lives and had done nothing of consequence in the outside world. But they had left behind such a profound imprint that I could tell everything about their lives and their spiritual practices. The great rulers of those times are more or less forgotten. The richest folk and the most learned men and women of those times are erased from our memory. But these simple monks are as alive today as they were nineteen hundred years ago! Their stories are available to those who are receptive, and they are capable of inspiring us to this very day. This is the nature of the right kind of inner energy work. It is imperishable.

Every individual's energies carry a certain fragrance. The physical body falls back to the Earth; however, the residue of each one of our thoughts, actions, and, above all, our energies lingers on. This imprint can last for millennia after our time. The more conscious the energy

work, the more enduring it is.

It is up to us to decide the nature of our bequest to the planet. This is what the anonymous Jain monks of Velayudhampalayam did. Aware that every action has a consequence, they chose to live consciously. As a result, they achieved a certain kind of immortality that the rich and powerful in the history of the world have seldom managed to attain.

SADHANA

A simple way to become aware of your vasana is to try to stay away for a length of time from that which you like, long for, love, or consider to be most precious. The intensity of the pangs you go through when you stay away tells you something about the nature and depth of your vasana.

Now that you have identified your vasana, you can start working on transformation. If you think your entanglement is related to food, wait a few moments before you have a meal. If you are eagerly awaiting the arrival of a loved one, consciously wait a few moments longer before you meet them. Depending on how deeply entangled you think you are, wait consciously for a few more moments before you engage in that activity or interaction. You will see that your experience of food or love or life generally becomes that much more profound. Gradually, the two minutes of waiting for a meal could be extended for two hours or for an entire day. This deceptively simple exercise can mark the beginning of a tremendous inner shift.

Consciousness is not a matter of behavior. It is the nature of existence. Compulsiveness, however, is behavioral. The moment you wait before you engage in a compulsion, you are aligning yourself

admiration for his friend who had chosen the path to liberation by opting for a spiritual discourse over carnal pleasures.

This story was often related by the great twentieth-century Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He always drew attention to the central paradox: it is the man at the Gita discourse (who kept thinking about what was happening in the prostitute's house) who piled up the adverse karma. It is he who suffered, Sri Ramakrishna pointed out, much more than the man who visited the prostitute.

Why?

Because although karma denotes action of body, mind, and energy, it is *not* about action alone. The man who went to the prostitute did not pile up as much karma as his friend because *he did not make a calculation*. His friend, on the other hand, secretly wished he was with her but believed that by going to the discourse he would get one step closer to heaven. That calculation meant an acquisition of more karma. Ironically, the man who thought about how to shed karma actually ended up accumulating it!

The man with the prostitute, on the other hand, was seized by a sense of the limitation of his experience. That would have impelled him in the future to seek something more. So the experience with the prostitute became a trigger for his personal growth.

This story points to a common mistake. People often assume karma is only about external action. They think performing acts of charity and virtue will earn them good karma. What they never quite realize is that it is about something much subtler.

Karma is much more fundamentally about *volition*.

The reason why religious teachings all over the world are always talking about love is that the moment you become loving, you are naturally at your best in relation to others. The moment you view everyone with love, your intention is automatically inclusive. Regardless of what blunders you may commit in the name of love, the karma still does not accumulate beyond a point.

Your intention makes all the difference. If you say something prompted by love, and another person gets hurt, that is his karma, not yours. But if you say something out of hatred and another person has no problem with it, it is good karma for them and not for you! You