

## Karma vs. Destiny – What Determines My Future?

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Many people are confused about the role that both effort and destiny have in determining our futures. Having been asked about this many times over the years, I came to realize that a major source of confusion is the way we define and understand the word “destiny.”

What exactly does the word destiny mean? The dictionary gives several meanings, further complicating the matter. Also, the way you happen to define the term may or may not be consistent with the dictionary’s meanings. It will be much easier to understand this topic if we temporarily set aside that confusing English word. Let us turn instead to traditional Sanskrit terminology and teachings about the doctrine of karma.

There is no specific scripture dedicated to explaining the doctrine of karma. However, we find lucid teachings on this topic scattered throughout the scriptures, including the Mahabharata. In the third book of the Mahabharata (Vana Parva), Yudhishtira and his wife, Draupadi, while exiled to the forest for twelve years, engage in an extended discourse about karma.

In Chapter 31, Draupadi complains to Yudhishtira, “You are always righteous, yet *you* were banished to the forest. On the other hand, Duryodhana ignores righteousness (dharma), yet *he* now revels in the comforts of the palace. This is unfair and I blame Ishvara (God) for this unfairness!”

In the next chapter, Yudhishtira responds by explaining the doctrine of karma and the laws according to which Ishvara dispenses

the results of our past karmas, good and bad. But unknown to Yudhishtira is the fact that Draupadi, when still a child, had learned about the doctrine of karma from a great scholar. So in Chapter 33, Draupadi apologizes for her earlier complaint and proceeds to explain how Ishvara's apparent unfairness can be properly understood. Here is an abridged version of her explanation to Yudhishtira.

Draupadi said to Yudhishtira:

आर्ताहं प्रलपामीदम् इति मां विद्धि भारत |  
भूयश्च विलपिष्यामि सुमनास्तन्निबोध मे ||

ārtāhaṁ pralapām īdam  
iti mām viddhi bhārata  
bhūyaś ca vilapiṣyāmi  
sumanās tan nibodha me (33.2)

O Yudhishtira, I was overcome by misery when I complained before. And I will probably complain some more. But now, please listen to me carefully.

उत्थानमभिजानन्ति सर्वभूतानि भारत |  
प्रत्यक्षं फलमश्नन्ति कर्मणां लोकसाक्षिकम् ||

utthānam abhijānanti  
sarva-bhūtāni bhārata  
pratyakṣaṁ phalam aśnanti  
karmaṇām loka-sākṣikam (33.6)

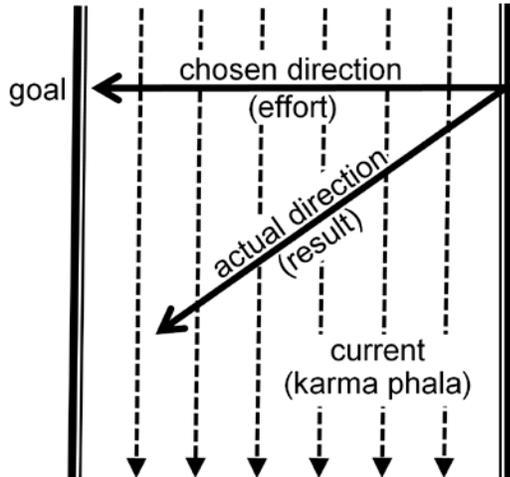
Everyone knows that past karmas yield later results because everyone experiences those results. We all observe this.

The doctrine of karma is confirmed by our day-to-day experiences. Whenever we try to do something and fail to get the result we expect, the hidden force of karma is revealed. Even when we do everything right, the outcome of our efforts sometimes goes

wrong due to the presence of unseen, unpredictable factors. Scientists call these factors “hidden variables.” We call it “karma,” more accurately, *karma phala*, the deferred results of our past actions.

According to the doctrine of karma, every action yields two results, one immediate, and the other deferred. The immediate, visible result of an action is called *drishta phala*—seen result. The other result does not take place immediately; it remains in abeyance until fructifying at a later time. That is called *adrishta phala*—unseen result—because it does not occur at the time of the action. This two-fold result constitutes the fundamental principle upon which the entire doctrine of karma is based.

It is *adrishta phala* that accounts for the unseen, unpredictable factors in our lives. The unseen force of karma is often illustrated by the example of swimming across a river. In spite of swimming directly towards the destination, the swimmer's path can be diverted by the current of the river.



In this example, the swimmer's chosen direction represents our efforts to achieve a goal. The Sanskrit word for effort is *prayatna*. Even when our efforts are appro-

priately directed towards our goals, the outcomes are sometimes different than what we expect. Just as the swimmer's path is diverted by the force of the river's current, similarly, the outcome of our efforts is diverted by the force of karma. This so-called karmic current exists due to the fructification of our past karmas.

The path of the swimmer is determined by two factors: the swimmer's effort and the river's current. In the same way, the outcome of every action is due to two factors: our effort, *prayatna*, and the deferred results of our past karmas, *adrishta phala*.

The karma that affects us in this life is called *prārabdha* karma, literally, those karmas which have started to fructify. And those *prārabdha* karmas bear their fruits according to the laws of karma. The laws of karma, like all laws of nature, are part of Ishvara's creation. All such laws are manifestations of Ishvara's intelligence, the intelligent order of the universe. And since the laws of karma are Ishvara's laws, we say that Ishvara is the giver of the fruits of action, the *karma phala dātā*, the one from whom we receive the results of karmas we committed in the past.

That which comes from Ishvara (who is also called *deva*) is indicated by the word, *daiva*. Since *prārabdha karma* comes from Ishvara, it is often called *daiva*. Thus the word *daiva* means the results of our past actions which are given by Ishvara, as Draupadi explains:

यच्चापि किञ्चित्पुरुषो दिष्टं नाम लभत्युत |  
दैवेन विधिना पार्थ तद्दैवमिति निश्चितम् ॥

yac cāpi kiñcit puruṣo  
diṣṭam nāma labhaty uta  
daivena vidhinā pārtha  
tad daivam iti niścitam (33.15)

Whatever (results) a person obtains, being ordained by Ishvara, that is known as *daiva*. When Draupadi says, “ordained by Ishvara,” we must understand that Ishvara is not like an impulsive business owner who treats his employees nicely when he’s in a good mood, and poorly when he’s in a bad mood. Ishvara is the God of the cosmos, not an anthropomorphic being with superhuman powers and a quirky personality who lives in a heavenly domain somewhere. Unlike a capricious boss, Ishvara ordains everything according to universal laws and not according to some whim or fancy. Ishvara, as *karma phala dātā*, the giver of the fruits of actions, is impartial – giving us desirable results for our past good deeds, and undesirable results for our past sinful deeds.

After describing *daiva*, the second of the two factors that determine the outcome of an action, Draupadi now turns to the first factor, *prayatna*, effort.

यत्स्वयं कर्मणा किञ्चित् फलमाप्नोति पूरुषः |  
प्रत्यक्षं चक्षुषा दृष्टं तत्पौरुषमिति स्मृतम् ॥  
yat svayaṃ karmaṇā kiñcit  
phalam āpnoti pūruṣaḥ  
pratyakṣaṃ cakṣuṣā dṛṣṭaṃ  
tat pauruṣam iti smṛtam (33.16)

Whatever result a person obtains through one's own actions – results seen with one's own eyes – is called *paurusa*.

*Paurusa* means born from personal effort; it is synonymous with *prayatna*. With our *prayatna*, we perform various actions which produce both *drishta phala*, immediate results, and *adrishta phala*, deferred results.

Next, Draupadi elaborates on Ishvara's role as *karma phala dātā*, the giver of the fruits of our actions:

धातापि हि स्वकर्मैव तैस्तैर्हेतुभिरीश्वरः |  
विदधाति विभज्येह फलं पूर्वकृतं नृणाम् ॥  
dhātāpi hi svakarmaiva  
tais tair hetubhir īśvaraḥ  
vidadhāti vibhajyeha  
phalaṃ pūrva-kṛtaṃ nṛṇām (33.19)

Ishvara, the giver of the results of action, gives the result of each deed according to the action previously done by a person.

Ishvara is manifest in creation as the intelligence of the universe, as the cosmic order. Ishvara's intelligent, cosmic order includes the laws of nature according to which karmas bear their fruits. Through these laws, Ishvara ensures that the *adrishta phala* resulting from every act we commit eventually fructifies in our lives, either later in the present life, or in a future life.

यद्ययं पुरुषः किञ्चित् कुरुते वै शुभाशुभम् |  
तद्भातृविहितं विद्धि पूर्वकर्मफलोदयम् ॥  
yad dhyayaṃ puruṣaḥ kiñcit  
kurute vai śubhāśubham  
tad dhātr-vihitaṃ viddhi  
pūrva-karma-phalodayam (33.20)

According to each action a person does, good or bad, the result of that action is given by Ishvara.

As noted before, Ishvara does not act capriciously, but instead, impartially gives the results of each action according to the laws of the universe. But exactly how do the laws that govern karma work? When will the deferred result of a particular good karma fructify in life? And precisely when will we receive the undesirable result of a particular sinful action committed in the past?

The subtle, complex laws of nature that govern karma appear to be beyond human scrutiny. Scientific inquiry is useless because

science can only study what is observable, not something unobservable like *adrishta phala*. Fortunately, a general understanding of these laws can be gained through scripture and simple reasoning, as this chapter shows. But detailed knowledge about when and where our past karmas will fructify is known only to Ishvara. The laws of nature that govern karma are a manifestation of Ishvara's intelligence; they are a product of Ishvara's mind so-to-speak. And who among us can truly know the mind of God?

Draupadi explains Ishvara's intelligent order:

तेषु तेषु हि कृत्येषु विनियोक्ता महेश्वरः ।  
सर्वभूतानि कौन्तेय कारयत्यवशान्यपि ॥

teṣu teṣu hi kṛtyeṣu  
viniyoktā maheśvaraḥ  
sarva-bhūtāni kaunteya  
kārayaty avaśāny api (33.22)

According to each individual action, Ishvara determines the results. Thus all beings are helpless, under Ishvara's control.

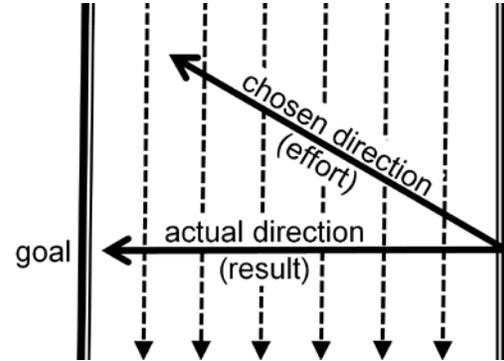
We are helpless to the extent that we have no choice over which past karmas will yield their results in the present moment. The fructification of our past karma is metaphorically in Ishvara's hands, not ours. But even though Ishvara establishes the so-called karmic current we encounter each day, we still have the ability to use *prayatna*, effort. Even though we have no choice over situations born due to past karmas, we are always free to respond to those situations in any way we choose, using our free will and *prayatna*.

We are not mere puppets behaving as Ishvara commands when he “pulls our strings”. Ishvara has endowed each of us

with free will. And with that free will, we can exercise effort, *prayatna*.

Some people try to deny the existence of free will, claiming that we are completely powerless and that Ishvara controls everything without exception. But the entire doctrine of karma depends on the existence of free will. Without free will, we cannot act. If we cannot act, how can we accrue karma? Free will is a prerequisite for action. The existence of free will is supported scripture and by our daily experience. After all, we experience ourselves as having free will, not as being “puppets on strings.”

To explore the role of free will and *prayatna* further, let us return to the example of swimming across a river. A skillful swimmer can compensate for the river's current by swimming at the correct upstream angle.



In spite of the current, the swimmer can reach the destination directly by adjusting his direction to offset the force of the current. In the same way, we can compensate for the so-called karmic current in our lives by making skillful adjustments in the efforts we make. You actually do this every day without even thinking about it. If traffic is heavy on one road, you take another route. If you are running late for an appointment, you eliminate something from your schedule.

We are all masters of this art of compensation; we instinctively respond and adjust to the karmic current in our lives.

We can exert a wide range of efforts. To understand the maximum and minimum limits of effort, consider the following two examples. When swimming across a river, if the current is weak and the swimmer is strong enough, he could even swim directly upstream. In the same way, if the karmic current in our lives is weak and our effort, *prayatna*, is strong enough, we can directly oppose the effects of our past karmas in a given situation.

On the other hand, suppose a weak swimmer confronts a river whose current is tremendously strong. If the swimmer tries to cross the river, he would certainly be doomed to failure. But even then, the swimmer is not completely helpless. He can choose to wait and not jump in! In the same way, when the karmic current is so strong that we cannot overcome or compensate for it, we are nevertheless free to change our plans. We can choose not to commit ourselves to a doomed effort. We commonly respond like this when we encounter strong karmic currents in life. For example, someone with weak math skills will probably choose a profession other than engineering.

Thus we are never completely helpless. Regardless of the situations our past karmas produce, we can always use our effort, *prayanta*, to respond to each situation intelligently and effectively. Draupadi affirms this fact:

मनसार्थान्विनिश्चित्य पश्चात्प्राप्नोति कर्मणा |  
बुद्धिपूर्वं स्वयं धीरः पुरुषस्तत्र कारणम् ||  
manasārthān viniścitya

paścāt prāpnoti karmaṇā  
buddhi-pūrvam svayaṁ dhīraḥ  
puruṣas tatra kāraṇam (33.23)

Having mentally chosen a goal, it is then obtained through action. In this case, the person causes the result.

Ishvara has endowed all of us with free will. Because of this free will, we can exercise *prayatna* in every situation, even when past karmas are bearing their fruits. By employing *prayatna*, we can compensate for the force of those past karmas.

But *prayatna* is not all-powerful. Our physical strength is limited. Our mental capacities are limited. Our time, money, and other resources are limited. So when we find ourselves frustrated by obstacles born of past karmas, and we lack the capacity to overcome those obstacles, what can we do? Of course, we can always seek the help of others. And in addition to that, we can seek Ishvara's help. We can pray.

But then, how does prayer help? If everything depends on just two factors – *prayatna* and the results of our past karmas (*daiva*) – then what is the purpose of prayer? First of all, we must recognize the fact that every prayer is a karma. Prayer can be a mental act (*mānasa karma*), an oral act (*vācika karma*) or a physical act (*kāyika karma*) like ritual worship. Since prayer is a karma, it must produce an effect, *phala*. And that effect, like for every other karma, is twofold: *driṣṭa phala*, the immediately experienced result, and *adriṣṭa phala*, the result that will fructify sometime in the future.

The *driṣṭa phala* of prayer is the calmness, inner peace, and comfort we usually feel as a result of praying. Anxiety and agitation

can be major obstacles to accomplishing our goals. Prayer helps remove obstacles like anxiety, thereby helping us reach our goals.

Returning to the river example, suppose a swimmer jumps in the river and suddenly realizes the presence of a powerful current. The swimmer might start to panic and thrash about in the water. But if the swimmer takes a few moments to calm down, he can figure out the direction and strength of the current and make the necessary adjustments to reach his goal. In a similar way, the *drishta phala* of prayer can help us. It can prevent us from being overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, thereby empowering us to respond to a challenging situation in the best possible manner.

Like any other karma, prayer also has *adrishta phala*, the deferred result, which will bring a blessing into our lives sometime in the future. There is no guarantee that the *adrishta phala* of our prayers will fructify when and where we want. Prayer is not a magic incantation. Prayer cannot coerce Ishvara into fulfilling our desires. Prayer simply invokes Ishvara's grace. And we can use all the grace we can get!

Next, Draupadi explains how people misunderstand the doctrine of karma:

सर्वमेव हठेनैके दिष्टेनैके वदन्त्युत |  
पुरुषप्रयत्नजं केचिद् त्रैधमेतन्निरुच्यते ||  
sarvam eva haṭhenaike  
diṣṭhenaike vadanty uta  
puruṣa-prayatnajaṁ kecit  
traidham etan nirucyate (33.30)

Some people say, "Everything happens by chance." Others say, "Everything is ordained (ie. due to *daiva*)." Others say, "Eve-

rything is due to effort (*prayatna*)." In three ways the results of action are explained.

We have seen before that the outcome of every action is determined by the combination of *prayatna* together with the results of past karmas given by Ishvara (*daiva*). These two factors were depicted by the river example.

In this verse, Draupadi describes three kinds of people who fail to properly understand the doctrine of karma. The first group claims that everything happens by chance, that is to say, the result of every action is completely random. When you toss a coin, it will land on one side or the other randomly. But is a random outcome like this true of all our actions? Certainly not.

An element of randomness in the outcome of our efforts can occur because randomness is part of nature, as in the toss a coin. But to claim that the outcome of every action is completely random implies there is no cause-effect relationship whatsoever between our actions and the results they produce. And that is contrary to our experience, to common sense, and to science.

The second group of people Draupadi describes believe that everything is ordained by Ishvara, that is, everything is due to *daiva* alone. But this belief denies the existence of *prayatna*, the other of the two factors we have examined in detail. Just as the river's current is one of two determining factors, so too, what Ishvara ordains is just one of the two factors that determine the outcome of an action.

The third group believes that the outcome of every action is completely and solely under a person's control. They believe that

*prayatna* alone determines the outcome. But these people deny the existence of *daiva*, the results of past actions given by Ishvara. By ignoring *daiva*, they delude themselves about the complex reality of the world by failing to appreciate that there are many unseen and unpredictable factors that affect the outcome of every action.

Suppose you were swimming across a river and you falsely believed that your effort alone was decisive. Because of this false belief, you would ignore the river's current. And as a result, you could never reach your goal. On the other hand, suppose you observed the river's current and wrongly concluded that your efforts would be useless because the current alone was decisive. In that case, you would not even try to swim towards the far side and be swept directly downstream (towards a dangerous waterfall).

These scenarios illustrate the danger of misinterpreting the doctrine of karma. If you assume that everything is under your personal control, you will fail to appreciate and adjust for the unknown, unpredictable factors due to the fructification of your past karmas. And if you assume that everything will be determined by your past karmas alone, you will fail to exert the effort needed to compensate for the karmic currents in life. In both cases, you would fail to achieve your goals. On the other hand, an intelligent person acknowledges and accepts all the factors that can affect the outcome of an action, as Draupadi explains:

किञ्चिद्देवाद्धठात्किञ्चित् किञ्चिदेव स्वकर्मतः |  
पुरुषः फलमाप्नोति चतुर्थं नात्र कारणम् ||  
kiñcid daivād dhathāt

kiñcit kiñcid eva svakarmataḥ  
puruṣaḥ phalam āpnoti  
caturthaṁ nātra kāraṇam (33.32)

One receives results partly due to what is ordained (*daiva*), partly due to chance, and partly due to effort (*prayatna*). There is no fourth cause.

Here, Draupadi summarizes what has been taught throughout this chapter. The results of our actions are not pre-ordained, nor are they random, nor are they completely under our control. It is the confluence of these factors that determine the outcome. To deny any of these factors is to be willfully blind to the complexity of life. And that blindness, like any disability, would make us less effective in reaching our goals.

To be skillful and effective in life requires that we be flexible enough to make adjustments when things go wrong. But some people are less than skillful when they declare, "This is my destiny. There is nothing I can do about it." This kind of self-defeating attitude arises due to the misinterpretation of the doctrine of karma. And this misinterpretation can be traced to confusion about the word, "destiny." We set this thorny word aside before; let us consider its meaning now.

The dictionary defines destiny as: (1) the events that will *necessarily happen* to a person in the future, (2) the *hidden power* believed to control what will happen in the future; fate.

Neither of these definitions are consistent with the teachings in this chapter. Contrary to the first definition, the results of our past karmas do not predetermine or predestine any particular event in our lives. Our past

karmas certainly affect our lives, but because we are always free to exert effort, *prayatna*, those past karmas alone cannot determine our futures.

The second meaning of destiny—a hidden power that controls the future—is also inconsistent with Draupadi’s teachings. Past karma does not have exclusive control over our lives. It is but one of the factors involved, as the verse above says. The basic problem with the word “destiny” is that it implies predetermination or predestination of specific events that will happen in life. There is nothing in the doctrine of karma to support this view.

Then why do so many Hindus use the word, destiny? I believe its use is rooted in Indian history and culture. Muslims have dwelled in India for centuries. Their religion, culture, and language have become interwoven to some degree into the dominant Hindu society. As a result, it is not uncommon for Hindus to use words like *kismet* and *nasīb* when talking about their karma. These two words explicitly mean destiny. They indicate events that are predetermined or a power of predestination.

These words belong to the Urdu language and are of Persian or Arabic origin. They are not derived from Sanskrit, the language of Hindu scriptures. Therefore, it is safe to assume that these words reflect Islamic culture and religion, not Hindu.

There is no Sanskrit word that means destiny as it is defined by the dictionary. Yet, some Sanskrit words are often translated as destiny. There are two reasons for this imprecise translation. One, the influence of Islamic culture and religion in India. And two,

because Sanskrit words can indicate complex ideas that cannot be conveniently translated by a single English word. Consider the complex meanings of the following Sanskrit words which are often imprecisely translated as destiny:

*bhāgya*: Derived from *bhaga* which means prosperity or glory. It often means blessings.

*daiva*: That which comes from *deva*, Ishvara, specifically, the fruits of our past actions given by Ishvara.

*niyati*, *vidhi*, *dishta*: Ordained, that which has been ordained by Ishvara, the *karma phala dātā* (giver of the fruits of action.)

None of these Sanskrit words mean destiny in the sense of predetermination or predestination. Indeed, such concepts are foreign to Hindu culture and religion.

Draupadi then concludes:

कुर्वतो नार्थसिद्धिर्मे भवतीति ह भारत |  
निर्वेदो नात्र गन्तव्यो द्वावेतौ ह्यस्य कर्मणः ||  
kurvato nārtha-siddhir me  
bhavatīti ha bhārata  
nirvedo nātra gantavyo  
dvāvetau hyasya karmaṇaḥ (33.47)

One should not despair, thinking, “In spite of effort, my goal cannot be reached,” because there are two other causes for every result (*daiva* and chance in addition to *prayatna*).

Here, Draupadi shows us the benefit of understanding the doctrine of karma—it helps us cope with the unpredictable ups and downs of life due to factors we can neither foresee nor control. A proper understanding of the doctrine of karma empowers us to answer questions like, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The Biblical religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam –

constantly struggle with this question. They presume the existence of a power of evil (Satan) that causes all misfortune. But then the question must be asked, “Why would an all-good and all-powerful God allow the power of evil to afflict us so unfairly?”

According to the doctrine of karma, everyone, no matter how pious they are, has committed sinful acts in past lives. So, even pious people are subject to suffering the consequences of those past sinful acts in the present life. Thus the doctrine of karma easily answers this vexing question (Why do bad things happen to good people?) without needing to introduce dubious and undesirable ideas like a power of evil.

How did Draupadi come to understand the doctrine of karma so thoroughly? Her knowledge seems to surpass that which Yudhishtira shared with her earlier. Here, at the end of this chapter, Draupadi finally reveals the source of her wisdom:

ब्राह्मणं मे पिता पूर्वं वासयामास पण्डितम् ।  
सोऽस्मा अर्थमिमं प्राह पित्रे मे भरतर्षभ ॥

brāhmaṇaṁ me pitā pūrvaṁ  
vāsayāmāsa paṇḍitam  
so 'smā artham imaṁ prāha  
pitre me bharatarṣabha (33.56)

Long ago, a learned brahmin once lived with my father. He taught all this to my father and to me, O Yudhishtira.

Thus it is that Draupadi attained thorough knowledge of the doctrine of karma. With such a deep understanding, she had much to teach not only to Yudhishtira, but to all of us who study the Mahabharata.