

Perspective

Karma, Yoga, and Business

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“Instant karma’s gonna get you, gonna knock you off your feet.”
-John Lennon

The idea of *karma*, although seemingly esoteric, permeates our conventional thought and even makes its way easily into pop culture. *Karma*, translated from Sanskrit, simply means “action.” We have popularly come to understand it as a law of action, a concrete rather than abstract construct: for every one of our thoughts, words, or deeds, we will receive a commensurate corresponding one. Say something rude about someone, stub your toe on a door.

As Yogis, we have a firm grasp on the concept of *karma* as a path to Yoga: selfless service of our fellow beings is direct service to God, and helps pave our way to that bliss we seek through our practice and teaching. In Buddhism, the idea of *karma* is slightly different, and is based on the notion of subtle impressions of the mind that we create through our actions. As we generate more positive energy through our thoughts and practices, we reap the benefit of that energy in the forms of good relationships, health, and wealth. Herein lies the basic idea of an abundance mentality.

We understand *karma*, and may even believe in it, but just like so much of our culture, we are much more likely to trust something that works right away. John Lennon was onto something with that idea of “instant” *karma*. Who wants to change their diet to reflect their Ayurvedic constitution for increased health when we could just as easily pop a pill? Why embark on a steady practice of Yoga *āsana* when we could have a simple “in office” procedure to alleviate pain in the body?

But we’re Yoga people; we love to put sesame oil up our nose or churn our abdominal muscles in pursuit of health and happiness. We are used to taking the long route, waiting for nature to take its course, aided by our skillful actions. Why then, do we collectively seem so afraid to trust

the natural course of things, *karma*, in our business choices and practices? If I had a dollar for every Yoga teacher or Yoga therapist who complained of not making enough money, or fear of the future, I would be halfway to rich. Give me another dollar for every Yoga teacher, therapist, or studio owner who believed that the only way to make money was to charge more and not give anything away for free, and I could stop working altogether.

But that’s too easy. I’d simply be profiting from the pervasive poverty mentality of our profession. I love to work, mostly because I love my life; I love Yoga, I love people, and I love God. But I also love to work because I know that from my work come the rich rewards of a life relatively well-lived. I believe in *karma*, and I have seen it work in my business and my life with profound clarity.

Before I was a Yoga studio owner and therapist, I was a speech-language pathologist working for many years in a conventional clinical setting. I wanted to leave the large HMO where I was employed, but I didn’t want to serve only those who could afford what I thought I would have to charge. I wanted to be able to work with anyone I believed I could help. But I had never owned a business before, and I knew I also needed to make money. Those student loans loomed heavily. My very first client offered me \$100 a month for weekly visits. It was a lot less than I was accustomed to being paid, but hey, I really liked her, and I knew I was in for an exploration. I didn’t know for sure if I could give her the best possible service, as I was embarking on a new way of working. After some thought, \$100 seemed like a fair exchange.

Eight years later, I still see this young woman for the same rate. I have gotten to see her grow up and blossom. I have gotten to know her family, and we have even seen her mother for depression in our center. Through my affiliation with this family, I have gotten school contracts, used my

experiences with them as vignettes in trainings, and made countless community contacts. So how much was I really paid? The \$100 a month I could have dismissed as unworthy of my services? Or the totality of the exchange, which included many tangible rewards to my business?

For me, the equation became ridiculously simple: serve everyone I can. Spread as much of my knowledge and experience as possible. Provide as much possible joy as I can to as many people as I can, and I would be rewarded.

This formula became my business model. I began to recognize just how much we withhold from the world because we want to get *paid*. But we also want to spread Yoga, right? Conventional wisdom would tell us we can't have it both ways. Maybe, just maybe, we could offer a single free or low-cost class at our studios, but we would have to quickly absorb that loss by raising our costs for something else. Sure, an abundance mentality sounds good, but it doesn't put food on the table, right?

In January 2007, our studio dropped its class fees to \$8, with specialized classes, like Yoga for Depression and Yoga for Chronic Pain, costing only \$40 for a six-week series. Everyone thought we were crazy. There is more Yoga in Seattle than rain, and we have to be competitive. But I knew that this *was* competitive. We wanted more people to have access to Yoga, and we wanted access to more people. This decision to cut our rates nearly in half would be not just good Yoga, it would be good business.

Less than a year later, we had more than doubled our class sizes and increased our overall revenue by a substantial amount. We were now serving more people and more different types of people. Our Yoga classes became full of all kinds of faces: all colors, all abilities, all genders and transgenders, and all ages. We decided to add on a free class taught completely in Spanish. Boom: our regular (paying) classes now attract the minimally English-speaking Latino community.

Why not add on a scholarship for teacher training for the under-represented demographics in the Yoga community? "*But who will pay for it? We won't have enough to pay ourselves! I'm not taking a cut in my training fee so that someone else can become a Yoga teacher!*" we lament. The poverty mentality returns, and the desire for instant *karma*. "*What will I get? What will I lose?*" In the Buddhist view of *karma*, the long view, we see both an immediate and longer-term positive effect. Props from our community? Sure. Admiration from other Yoga studios, teachers, and students? Definitely. But along with all this come the thoughts about safety: "*They are doing great work, but I can't live like that. I'm glad someone is doing it, but I don't want to live my life in poverty.*" Then comes the BBC news piece. Then the MSNBC coverage,

the NPR story. And suddenly (or not) comes more interest, more attention, and yes, more money.

We could have it both ways. We could spread and live and work Yoga, and also make money. But that old instant *karma* thing keeps popping up. We want it now, and that good deed is not putting another decaf soy latté in my reusable cup. The poverty mentality comes from fear and lack of trust. It manifests as competitiveness, withholding, and a sense that all good things must be (and therefore have been) earned.

My husband often comes to my classes and remarks, "I think you must be the only Yoga studio in town that talks about other Yoga studios and how great they are." Why wouldn't I? It's true. If you have \$16 to spend on a class, and want to try Anusara, here's who I recommend. This is not a competition. I cannot compete with the *karma* of others. I am just practicing Yoga. But I'm not a martyr. This is not an exercise in my own piousness. I am a businesswoman. When I support other Yoga studios, I model generosity and confidence. These are traits people look for in a Yoga teacher. So they choose me, and I have more students, and yes, more money.

But still, it is scary when we have bills to pay, teachers to support, and a career to establish. We have been culturally engrained with a feeling of not having enough, and not being enough. And it didn't start with our culture. If fear of being deprived, denied, and dismissed were not some intrinsic part of being human, we probably wouldn't have the concepts of *aparigrahâ* and *asteya* in a classical text written over 2,000 years ago. Every major world religion speaks to these fears and how these fears cause suffering.

It is part of our practice, then, to observe and overcome these fears, and learn to live in the freedom of trust and perhaps *karma*. And that includes the choices we make in doing business.

So I don't, and likely never will, have as much money as the big-name studios locally or nationally. But I have a great life. And I have the joy of watching the lives of others improve through Yoga. As John Lennon wrote, instant *karma* may get you, but the long view of *karma* will get you bigger, brighter, deeper. Cultivating an abundance mentality, reducing our costs, and working toward community outreach and inclusivity are not just practices of good Yoga. They are good business.

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