

Fate, Free Will, and Vedic Astrology

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My husband's horoscope showed an imminent health crisis. I had only recently begun studying Vedic astrology (a system for predicting the future developed by the yoga masters of India) and I still wasn't sure how seriously to take it. Given how scary Johnathan's upcoming planetary cycle looked. I certainly hoped there was nothing to it! The thing that made me most uncomfortable, though, was that during the same time Johnathan's horoscope showed him undergoing a major disease or accident, my horoscope showed me undergoing an emotional trauma on account of my husband.

I marked on my calendar the day this ordeal was supposed to begin, but didn't say anything to Johnathan. I felt pretty foolish worrying about a hypothetical event suggested in a horoscope. Still, when Johnathan arrived home safely on the fateful day I was secretly relieved. Then he sat me down at the kitchen table and told me he'd had a call from his doctor earlier that afternoon. The routine test he'd had a few days earlier had revealed a malignant tumor. Johnathan had cancer.

No matter how long you've been practicing yoga unless you're completely enlightened, dealing with a life threatening illness is incredibly difficult. But all though Johnathan's treatment and recovery I kept coming back to the fact that it had shown up in both of our Vedic charts, so accurately that you could predict the day it would be diagnosed.

Since I'd started studying Eastern philosophy as a teenager I'd read that everything happens for a reason, and that the major experiences in our lives-positive or negative-are due to our karma. But until Johnathan's illness that had all been theoretical. Now for the first time I experienced with certainty that karma is real, that it's an actual force shaping our future. Our Vedic birth charts are maps of karma, showing a schedule of events that will unfold throughout of our lives.

Planetary Yoga

The first time I heard of Vedic astrology was when I read Paramahansa Yogananda's spiritual classic, *Autobiography of a Yogi*. "The stars are about to take an unfriendly interest in you," his guru, Sri Yukteswar, told Yogananda one day. In India Yukteswar was famous both as a Kriya Yoga master and an expert astrologer. "A child is born on that day and at that hour when the celestial rays are in mathematical harmony with his individual karma. His horoscope is a challenging portrait, revealing his unalterable past and its probable future results," the master explained.

Yukteswar predicted that Yogananda would contract a liver disease which would last for six months. But by doing certain practices and wearing a protective bangle that had

been blessed by his teacher, he could reduce the period of illness to twenty-four days. Sure enough, a few weeks later Yogananda became seriously ill. He was in excruciating pain for three weeks. Then the pangs in his liver mysteriously vanished.

I hadn't known that Vedic astrology was an honored part of the yoga tradition-but in fact it's one of the six sacred sciences of ancient India. According to legend, it is immeasurably old, but it was **codified by the sage Parashara** at the beginning of the Kali Yuga, over five thousand years ago. Why, I wondered, would yoga adepts concern themselves with astrology?

Tradition says that with the passage of time fewer and fewer people devoted themselves to advanced spiritual practices, and consequently they could no longer remember the karmas they had set in motion in their past lives. So they were unable to understand why they were born with particular talents and disabilities, or why some people never meet with success no matter how hard they work while others are propelled seemingly effortlessly to fame and fortune.

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The sages created Vedic astrology to help human beings understand the cycles of their lives based on karma they'd created in previous incarnations. The horoscope was designed as a kind of report card for the soul that summarized their level of accomplishment up to the moment they were born. It revealed the karmic status of different areas in their life such as family, romance, career, finances, and spiritual growth. It also showed when particular karmas from the past were most likely to manifest in the course of their life. And because Vedic astrology helped people see into blind spots in the past and future, it was called **Jyotir Vidya** in Sanskrit, meaning "**the science of light,**" or simply Jyotish ("light").

The Sages on Destiny & Awareness

Fate and free will are equally powerful forces. Yet I consider free will to be more important, because it is our conscious choices which create our destiny - Veda Vyasa (Mahabharata). The message boldly blazoned across the heavens at the moment of birth is not meant to emphasize fate-the result of past good and evil-but to arouse man's will to escape from his universal thralldom. What he has done, he can undo. - Sri Yukteswar (Autobiography of a Yogi)

Divine awareness manifests in many forms. It appears as the planets in order to bestow on everyone the results of their previous actions. In this way it teaches them to renounce their evil tendencies and do only good. - Parashara (Brihat Parashara Hora Shastra)

Karmic factors in Vedic Astrology

Type of Karma	Definition	Astrological Indication
Sanchita	The total karma accrued as a result of our planetary actions in previous lives.	Shown by the placements in our birth chart (janma kundali).
Prarabdha	Karma from past lives destined to play out in our present incarnation.	Shown by the cycles (dashas/bhuktis) based on the moon's position at our birth and by transits (gochara) to our natal planets.
Kriyamana	Karma we've generated through our actions in this lifetime.	May be seen in a chart for the present moment (prashna).
Agama	Karma we are setting in motion through our current plans.	Revealed in a chart for the beginning of a new project (muhurta).

Karmic Consciousness

We in the West like to believe we're in control of our own destiny. My yoga teacher, Swami Rama of the Himalayas, would constantly tell us, "You are the architect of your life." And Vedic astrology vividly demonstrates that this belief is absolutely true. The word karma comes from the root kri, which means, "to do." Through our thoughts, words, and actions we shape our own future in this life and the next. By studying Vedic astrology we begin to understand how this process actually works.

Our Vedic birth chart sketches a quick picture of our sanchita karma, the karma we've accumulated during our numerous past births. (Subcharts called amshas reveal these karmas in more detail.) Planetary cycle called amshas reveal our prarabdha karma, the fraction of our total karma that will play out in our present lifetime. For example, the first Vedic astrologer I went to was able to merely glance at my horoscope and planetary cycles and correctly tell me my primary interests in life, my career path, when I'd gotten married, and that in the early 1980s I'd lived in an ashram.

But few astrologers are more than seventy percent accurate. The very best might be eighty percent correct on a good day. The reason is kriyamana karma, the karma we're creating now. The horoscope only reveals our karmic status up to the moment of our birth. The chart also reveals the samskaras or tendencies we carry in our karmashaya, the repository of karma in our causal body. But from the moment of birth our attitudes and behaviors in this life modify the future course of our karma, for better or worse. By living with full awareness, making wise choices, and acting effectively and

compassionately, we can to a large extent override the vectors of destiny that were set in motion when we took our first breath. Vedic astrology does not tell us what will happen in our future. It tells us what might happen unless we consciously act to prevent or modify it.

Your destiny isn't written in stone; it is a living thing that changes subtly as your level of consciousness changes,

According to the yoga tradition, karma comes in three strengths. First, there's the karma that's easy to change. For example, if you sign up for a course in vegetarian cooking but then decide you'd rather take a meditation class, you can switch courses quite easily. Second, there's karma that can be altered only with substantial effort. If you graduate with a degree in law, but then decide you'd rather be a doctor instead, you can go back to college and get a medical degree, but it will cost you a lot of time and money. The vast majority of karma playing out in our lives falls into these two categories.

The third type is fixed karma. These are the lessons we can't get out of the experiences we must undergo for the sake of our spiritual growth. Some individuals are born to fame (the children of royalty, for example) or to wealth. They have to deal with the issues this karma brings with it, whether they like it or not. Others may inevitably have to go through a traumatic event like the loss of a loved one or a serious accident or illness. Only a small portion of our total karma is unalterable, however.

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There is also a completely different kind of karma that can impact our lives drastically: collective karma. If someone who is running a cycle that is signaling physical danger happens to live in a peace-loving culture, for example, she may fall and break her leg on the fateful day. Someone else, however, running the same cycle but living in a culture with a high tolerance for violence, may be the victim of a mugging or assault. It is absolutely wrong to claim that the victim of a crime karmically "deserved it." Just as individuals generate karma, so do neighborhoods, organizations, and nations. Group karma can override or strongly modify individual karma, particularly during collective experiences like war. This shows that we are responsible not only for our own actions but for the attitudes and acts of the communities of which we are members.

Write Your Own Horoscope

In Vedic astrology the planets merely signal the time when our karmic debits and credits come due, they don't actually cause any event to take place. Think of a traffic light: it signals when it's time for us to stop or go. But it's our stepping on the brake or accelerator that makes the car move. The choice to act and the act itself come from us, not from the stars. A horoscope is, in fact, just a symbolic representation of forces at

play in our unconscious. But because the universe was projected out of a limitless cosmic mind, yogis say that thoughts and symbols are in a sense as real as physical things. **(This is why not only actions but also thoughts produce karma.)** A symbolic representation like a horoscope can be helpful in the same way a road map is helpful. And because horoscopes were designed by illumined sages, they can act much like a yantra (a device for focusing, clarifying, and directing consciousness).

I've been working with my Vedic chart for some years now, and seeing how events in my life are mirrored in the horoscope has been a sobering experience. It's taught me to be much more conscious about the karma I'm generating: I know for a fact that sooner or later the energy of my thoughts and actions will return to me. I recognize the need to take control of my karma if I want to avert or alleviate some of the difficult times I see coming, or take full advantage of the more auspicious cycles down the road, or create a better horoscope for my next birth.

Karmic Potency

Karmic Strength	Definition
Adridha	Flexible karma we can easily change with a little effort.
Dridhadridha	Karma we can change if we use considerable self-effort.
Dridha	Karma which cannot be changed by human effort. Only God can alter fixed karma.

Our Bodies & our Stars

Body	Definition	Astrological Status
Sthula Upadhi	Physical Body and Vital Force	Mortal. Begins dissolving at death. Subject to planetary influences.
Sukshma Upadhi	Subtle Body (Mind)	Mortal. Dissolves at rebirth. Subject to planetary influences. but capable of freedom through self-knowledge and selfless love.
Karana Upadhi	Causal Body (Soul)	Semi-immortal. Dissolves at liberation. This "higher self" carries karmas from its previous physical body to a new one at the moment of reincarnation.
Atman	Pure Eternal Consciousness (Spirit)	Unaffected by karma. On the contrary, planetary energies are subject to Spirit.

The horoscope is a starting point for spiritual practice, a platform to work from, not a judge's sentence that leaves no chance for an appeal. Your destiny isn't written in stone; it is a living thing that changes subtly as your level of consciousness changes. Many deep-rooted problems shown in the chart can vanish completely if sincere and consistent effort is applied. One of my friend's Vedic horoscope shows delays and serious obstacles both in finding a husband and having children. Today she's a happily

married mother of healthy twins. She was well into her forties before she married and approaching fifty when her children were born, but her determination to find a partner and her willingness to work through the relationship issues indicated in her chart invoked a fulfilling outcome.

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Parashara, the father of Vedic astrology, recommended a number of methods for rewriting your horoscope if you're not comfortable with the one you have. He taught that the challenging karma you see there can be partially or wholly erased from your karmic balance sheet through consistent, heartfelt spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, ritual worship, the chanting of mantras, charitable donations, and selfless service.

Traditionally in India astrologers were priests who rose before dawn, spent several hours in prayer and meditation, and then devoted the rest of the day to serving their community with astrological advice. Until just recently there was no set fee. Clients might offer a bag of gold or a handful of rice, and part of the astrologer's discipline was to be content with whatever he was paid. The science of astrology had been offered to humanity as a free gift by spiritual masters like Parashara, Bhrigu, and Jaimini. Its sanctity as a tool for helping people find their way in life was respected. Astrology, in fact, was such an important part of Hindu culture that children were given a name based on which of the constellations the moon was in when they were born!

Today it's not difficult to find a Vedic astrologer even in the West, but locating one who spends hours a day doing the spiritual practice necessary to illuminate their readings is extremely difficult, even in the East. Now it seems as if many astrologers are most interested in selling you expensive gems (a practice not sanctioned by Parashara) than in teaching you how to work with mantras. Still, when I did manage to connect with a genuinely skilled Vedic astrologer, the experience was amazing. It helped me see how even horrible experiences, like my husband's illness, were part of the course curriculum I signed up for when I was born.

This physical body we cherish so much is the least of what we are. In reality we're multidimensional beings who have lived before and will live again to suffer-or enjoy-the results of the action we're performing right now. We are not the victims of fate we're the creators of it. Through noble thoughts and deeds we can shape a more auspicious destiny. So when we read our future in the stars, we need to remember that we ourselves are the authors.

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