

5. Karma and Moral Agency

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quick read

- The [Padma Purana](#) (Srsti-khanda 36.7-8) teaches there are 84 lakh (8.4 million) [yonis](#) (forms of birth): 9 lakh aquatic species, 20 lakh plants, 11 lakh insects, 10 lakh birds, 30 lakh animals, and 4 lakh human forms. The soul wanders through all of them before reaching human birth.
- Human birth is treated as uniquely privileged – the [Srimad Bhagavatam 11.9.29](#) says sense gratification is available in all species, but [Krishna consciousness](#) is possible only for humans. [Vivekacudamani 3](#) (attributed to Adi Shankaracharya) says: "Of all creatures, human birth is rare; rarer still is desire for liberation; rarest is the company of a realised soul."
- The problem: if non-human births cannot choose between good and bad, most of the karma cycle is morally empty. And if even humans lack true free will – [Bhagavad Gita 3.27](#) says the [gunas](#) (the three fundamental qualities of material nature – goodness, passion, ignorance) perform all actions while the soul merely witnesses – the whole system becomes a machine without moral accountability.

The karma and rebirth framework is not a decorative doctrine. It is the engine of Hindu ethics. Every action produces a result. Those results accumulate across lifetimes. Your current birth – your family, your caste, your body,

your fortune — is the fruit of past-life karma. Your current actions determine your next birth. The system is vast, detailed, and internally coherent on its own terms.

But there is a crack in the foundation, and it is the question of moral agency.

The traditional teaching lists the number of life forms. The [Padma Purana](#) (Srsti-khanda 36.7-8) catalogues them: 9 lakh aquatic species, 20 lakh plants, 11 lakh insects, 10 lakh birds, 30 lakh animals, and 4 lakh human forms. That is 8.4 million yonis total. The soul wanders through all of them before reaching human birth. The [Srimad Bhagavatam 11.9.29](#) puts it vividly: "After many, many births and deaths one achieves the rare human form of life, which, although temporary, affords one the opportunity to attain the highest perfection. Thus a sober human being should quickly endeavor for the ultimate perfection of life... After all, sense gratification is available even in the most abominable species of life, whereas Krishna consciousness is possible only for a human being."

So human birth is privileged. Human birth is the window. But what are the other 8.4 million life forms doing?

The honest answer, supported by expositions drawn from the [Narada Purana](#) and [Garuda Purana](#), is that in non-human births the soul largely "exhausts" previous karma. The animal does not generate new significant karma. It cannot choose between [dharma](#) (righteous duty) and [adharma](#) (unrighteousness). It just lives, suffers, enjoys, and dies. The [swadharma](#) (personalised duty — one's natural role) of a tree is to grow. It cannot commit a crime. It cannot pray. It cannot choose.

That raises an uncomfortable question. If the karma cycle is a moral system — if birth as a dog or a pig is a punishment for past bad karma — then the punishment is inflicted on a being that cannot understand why it is being punished. The animal cannot learn from the punishment. It cannot reform. It cannot improve. It simply endures. That is not morality in any recognisable sense. That is process without purpose.

The free will problem goes deeper. [Bhagavad Gita 3.27](#) says: "All actions are carried out by the three modes of material nature. But in ignorance, the soul, deluded by false identification with the body, thinks itself the doer." [Gita 14.19](#) reinforces this: "When a man of insight beholds no agent other than the gunas, and also knows Him who is beyond the gunas, he attains My being." The message is consistent: the [atman](#) (individual soul) does not act. [Prakriti](#) (material nature) acts. The soul watches.

[Bhagavad Gita 18.14](#) adds a nuance: five factors produce any action — the body, the doer, the senses, the effort, and the divine ([daiva](#)). Individual will is one of five, not the sole cause. That is closer to what philosophers call [compatibilism](#) — the view that free will and determinism can coexist because "free will" just means acting according to one's nature, not acting without any prior cause.

But even compatibilism requires some moral agency. And the Upanishadic "two birds on one tree" metaphor — found in the [Rig Veda 1.164.20](#) , [Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.1-2](#) , and [Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.6-7](#) — shows the tension clearly. One bird eats the fruit. The other merely watches. The eating bird is the [jiva](#) (the individual self bound by karma). The watching bird is [Ishvara](#) (the Lord, the higher Self). If the eating bird eats, it acts. If it acts, it has agency. But Gita 3.27 says the soul is not the doer. The tension is real.

The practical consequence is this. A moral universe is easier to defend when moral agency is available to all beings in the cycle. If only humans have agency, then the vast majority of the cycle is morally empty. And if even humans do not truly have free will, then the whole system becomes a machine producing outcomes without genuine choice — which makes the concept of "deserving" your birth position meaningless.