

Karma: Clouding of the Soul

Summary: The word karma means “action,” but in Jainism it acts as a material substance that clouds the purity of the soul. The path to liberation requires one to cease the production of new karma, and to work to burn away the karma accumulated in previous lives.

The word *karma* literally means “action” and, also, “the results of action.” In the Jain view, actions of thought, speech, and deed are recorded on the soul as *karma*, understood as a kind of matter, a material stain upon the luminous soul. Thus accumulated, the influx of *karma* begins to cover and discolor the luminous soul. The thickening and clouding of the *karma* each person produces obscures the purity of the soul and its natural power of knowledge, vision, and bliss.

The path to liberation must arrest the influx of fresh *karma* and begin the process of stripping away the accumulated karma of many lives. The goal is to free oneself from all karma and win the liberation of the soul. This is accomplished through meditation, self-reflection, and the careful observance of Jain vows, and may take many lives. Those who become monks and nuns, however, may accelerate the process through very strict religious observance. An ascetic life of *ahimsa*, or non-harming, will stop the influx of additional *karma* and, eventually, begin to scrub off what is already there. It is not only the effects of wicked actions that cloud the soul, but also the effects of virtuous actions when these are done with attachment. Both will need to be exhausted in order to attain final liberation.