

## ix. Basic concept of karma and its classification

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# Introduction to Karma in Ayurveda

- ullet Etymologically, "Karma" (from the root  $k \underline{r}$ ) means "that which is done" or "action."
- In Ayurvedic pharmacology (*dravyaguṇa vijñāna*), **Karma** denotes the **physiological or therapeutic action** produced by a dravya (substance) on the human body or mind.
- In therapeutic procedures (e.g., pañcakarma), Karma refers to the purificatory or corrective actions undertaken for disease management.

### Relation to Dravya and Guṇa

- According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeşika view, a dravya (substance) is the locus for both guṇa (quality) and karma
  (action).
- Ayurveda adopts a similar stance: every therapeutic substance has identifiable qualities (guṇas) and actions (karmas) that manifest when used in the body.

### **Importance in Treatment**

 By knowing a dravya's karma—e.g., whether it is dīpana (appetizer), pacana (digestive), or bhedana (strong purgative)—an Ayurvedic practitioner can select the right intervention for a specific doṣa imbalance or disease condition.

# **Basic Concept of Karma**

### **Action as an Outcome of Potency**

• Ayurveda teaches that no action can occur without "vīrya" (potency). Hence, a dravya's karma is ultimately fueled by its vīrya and shaped by its rasa, guṇa, and vipāka as well.

## Therapeutic vs. Pathological

- In a healthy context, karma may denote the normal actions of bodily substances or physiological processes.
- In disease contexts, karma references how medicinal or dietary interventions *correct, manage,* or *alleviate* pathological conditions.

### Scope

• Karmas range from **local actions** (e.g., healing a wound, reducing local inflammation) to **systemic actions** (e.g., regulating metabolism, improving immunity, or clearing blocked channels).

### Classification of Karma

Ayurvedic texts present  ${\bf multiple}\ {\bf ways}$  to classify karma, depending on whether we focus on:

- 1. **Pharmacological/Herbal Karmas** (actions of drugs or remedies).
- 2. Therapeutic Procedures (actions of certain interventions like pañcakarma).
- 3. **Broad Categorization** (like "cleansing" vs. "palliative" or "increasing" vs. "decreasing" doṣas).

Below are some important classifications:

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### Samshodhana vs. Samshamana

A high-level classification often cited in Ayurveda:

- 1. Samshodhana (Eliminative/Purificatory Actions)
  - These karmas expel or remove aggravated doşas from the body, e.g., vamana (therapeutic emesis), virecana (purgation), basti (enema).
  - o Commonly referred to as part of **pañcakarma** therapies.
- 2. Samshamana (Palliative/Pacifying Actions)
  - o These karmas pacify or suppress the aggravated dosas without forcibly expelling them.
  - Examples: dīpana (enhancing digestive fire), pacana (digesting toxins), or śamana (balancing doṣas through diet, drugs, or lifestyle).

## Sushruta's Eighteen-Karma Model

Suśruta Saṃhitā (Sūtrasthāna) details 18 major therapeutic actions of dravyas:

- 1. **Śodhana** (purification)
- 2. Samgraha (absorption or retention)
- 3. **Śamana** (pacification)
- 4. **Agnidīpana** (digestive fire stimulation)
- 5. Pīdana (compression or constriction)
- 6. **Lekhana** (scraping, reducing excess tissue)
- 7. **Bṛṃhaṇa** (nourishment, bulk promotion)
- 8. Rasāyana (rejuvenation)
- 9. Vājīkaraņa (aphrodisiac)
- 10. Svedana (sweating or fomentation) sometimes included in expansions
- 11. Madana (inebriation) or sedation
- 12. Prāṇa-ghna (highly toxic or life-threatening) cautionary
- 13. Vişa-prasamana (antitoxic)
- 14. **Ūrdhva-bhaga-hara** (acting on upper pathways, e.g., emesis)
- 15. Adho-bhaga-hara (acting on lower pathways, e.g., purgation)
- 16. **Ubhaya-bhaga-hara** (acting on both upper & lower pathways)
- 17. **Saṃśodhana** (broad purification, also in other contexts)
- 18. Samgrahika (supporting or retaining fluid/tissue)

## Other Commonly Used Terms (Pharmacological Karmas)

In Ayurvedic classics, one frequently encounters terminologies for specific pharmacological actions, for example:

- Dīpana-Pācana (appetizer-digestive)
- Vatanulomana (correcting vāta flow downward)
- Stambhana (checking or arresting flow, e.g., anti-diarrheal)
- Vedanāsthāpana (analgesic)
- Hrdya (cardiac tonic)
- Chedana (extracting or cutting property, e.g., expectorant)
- Bhedana (strong laxative effect)
- Lekhana (reducing fat or excess tissue)
- Pramāthi (scraping out toxins, typically from channels)

These highlight the range of actions herbs and formulations can exhibit.

### Specific Procedural Karmas (Pañcakarma)

When describing karmas related to **therapeutic procedures**, Ayurveda lists five "karmas" primarily for internal cleansing:

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- 1. Vamana Emesis
- 2. Virecana Purgation
- 3. **Āsthāpana/Basti** Decoction enema
- 4. Anuvasana/Basti Oil enema
- 5. Nasya Nasal instillation

Each is considered a distinct "karma" or action to eliminate specific doșic accumulations.

# **Factors Influencing Karma**

Several factors modulate how and to what extent a karma manifests:

### 1. Dravya's Rasa, Guṇa, Vīrya, Vipāka

 The synergy of taste (rasa), quality (guṇa), potency (vīrya), and post-digestive effect (vipāka) strongly dictates how a dravya acts.

### 2. Doșa Status

• The baseline condition of vāta, pitta, kapha influences the direction or intensity of the action.

### 3. Route of Administration

 For instance, nasya (nasal) administration affects head and sensory organs prominently, while oral intake influences the digestive tract first.

### 4. Quantity and Timing

o Dose, frequency, and the time of day or season can shift a dravya's predominant karma.

### 5. Individual's Constitution (Prakṛti)

 Each body constitution responds differently, so the same dravya might exhibit varied karmas in different individuals.

# **Clinical and Practical Significance**

### 1. Therapeutic Precision

 Knowing which karma a herb or therapy performs helps in tailoring treatment for each patient, ensuring the correct approach (e.g., cleansing vs. nourishing).

### 2. Poly-Drug Formulations

 In complex formulations, multiple dravyas are combined so their karmas synergize or balance out side effects.

# 3. Preventive Healthcare

 Using mild karmas (like dīpana-pācana or rasāyana) on a daily basis or seasonally can prevent disease and maintain homeostasis.

### 4. Avoiding Errors

Misunderstanding a dravya's karma can lead to aggravated doşas, adverse effects, or therapeutic failure.

## **Key Takeaways**

- 1. Karma in Ayurveda = the action, effect, or therapeutic outcome arising from substances or procedures.
- 2. There are **various classification systems**—from simple "samshodhana vs. samshamana" to more detailed enumerations (18 karmas in Suśruta, specific karmas like dīpana, lekhana, etc.).
- 3. **Pharmacological karmas** describe how individual herbs/formulations act; **procedural karmas** (pañcakarma) detail major cleansing interventions.
- 4. **Clinical application** of karma demands understanding of doṣa status, dravya properties (rasa, guṇa, vīrya, vipāka), route of administration, and the patient's prakṛti.
- 5. Correctly identifying and harnessing a dravya's or therapy's karma ensures **effective**, **personalized** Ayurvedic treatment.

## Conclusion

In Ayurveda, **Karma** is the cornerstone of therapeutic decision-making—what a substance or procedure does is just as important as what it is. Whether viewed as broad categories like **samshodhana** and **samshamana** or through detailed

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listings of specific actions (e.g., dīpana, pacana, bṛṃhaṇa, lekhana), the concept of Karma **bridges** pharmacology and clinical practice. Mastering Karma allows Ayurvedic practitioners to **select, combine, and apply** interventions that restore and maintain the delicate doṣa equilibrium, ultimately fostering health and well-being.

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