

ix. Basic concept of karma and its classification

Table Of Contents

Add a header to begin generating the table of contents

Introduction to Karma in Ayurveda

- Etymologically, “Karma” (from the root *kr*) 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-Vaiśeṣika 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 **multiple 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:



Samshodhana vs. Samshamana

A **high-level** classification often cited in Ayurveda:

1. **Samshodhana** (Eliminative/Purificatory Actions)
 - These karmas expel or remove aggravated doṣas from the body, e.g., **vamana** (therapeutic emesis), **virecana** (purgation), **basti** (enema).
 - Commonly referred to as part of **pañcakarma** therapies.
2. **Samshamana** (Palliative/Pacifying Actions)
 - These karmas pacify or suppress the aggravated doṣas without forcibly expelling them.
 - Examples: *dīpana* (enhancing digestive fire), *pacana* (digesting toxins), or *samana* (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. **Pīḍana** (compression or constriction)
6. **Lekhana** (scraping, reducing excess tissue)
7. **Bṛṃhaṇa** (nourishment, bulk promotion)
8. **Rasāyana** (rejuvenation)
9. **Vājīkaraṇa** (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. **Viṣa-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. **Samśodhana** (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)
- **Hṛdyā** (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:



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 doṣic 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. **Doṣa 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**
 - 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 doṣas, 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



listings of specific actions (e.g., *dīpana*, *pacana*, *bṛ̥ṃhaṇa*, *lekhaṇa*), 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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