



# Karma accountability

*What goes around comes around, as the saying goes. We have made the word karma a byword for universal justice or cosmic payback in modern times. But is karma as simple as that? Or have we reduced it to an overused saying to make us feel better in a world that often doesn't play fair or make sense?*

Words MARIE ROWLAND

When something bad happens, we believe that karma will come back on our behalf to hurt the offender as retribution. Conversely, when good fortune comes our way, we like to think we are cashing in on our karma as payment for our good deeds in this or a past life. But is it that simple?

## Payback or payout?

Karma is a small word that packs a punch. But it has nothing to do with punishment or retribution. There is no inbuilt reward system. It is all about cause and effect. The common misapprehension is that the universe works energetically to dispense justice. And while karma is a spiritual or ethical law, the only protagonist in the karmic cycle is you. It's not an invisible force acting for or against you to balance the scales. The misconception of karma is that it's out of your hands. In fact, the opposite is true. It is in your control to create your version of karma rather than regarding it as some cosmic cash out/cash in system.

A more fitting description of karma is the hardworking aphorism of "You reap what you sow." However, even if you do good in the world, it is not about the world offering some energetic payout to boost your karmic bank balance. Karma is an intrinsic behaviour or attitude where the individual does all the heavy lifting without expecting to receive an external reward for the hard work. Our reward is simply doing or being good. The premise is that when we act with good intentions, we become

more whole and not attached or bound by the ego or the self. We also open ourselves to deeper bonds with others.

So what happens to someone who behaves immorally or with evil intent? Life is unfair, and people do get away with murder. Bad actors in life, like corrupt politicians or immoral corporate players, often appear to live the good life where seemingly no harm befalls them. But karma doesn't work on a superficial reward or punishment system. One of the

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laws of karma is suffering. Perpetrators of harmful or evil acts endure the suffering of never being able to trust anyone, having people leave them, not living in harmony within themselves, eaten up by being bitter. The retribution they face comes from within, not without.

This might not be enough to satisfy our thirst for justice, but perhaps there is some comfort from Buddha, who said: "No harm comes to him who does harm. If you harm a pure and innocent person, you harm yourself, as dust thrown against the wind comes back to the thrower." Sure, this is not the conventional justice we may seek,

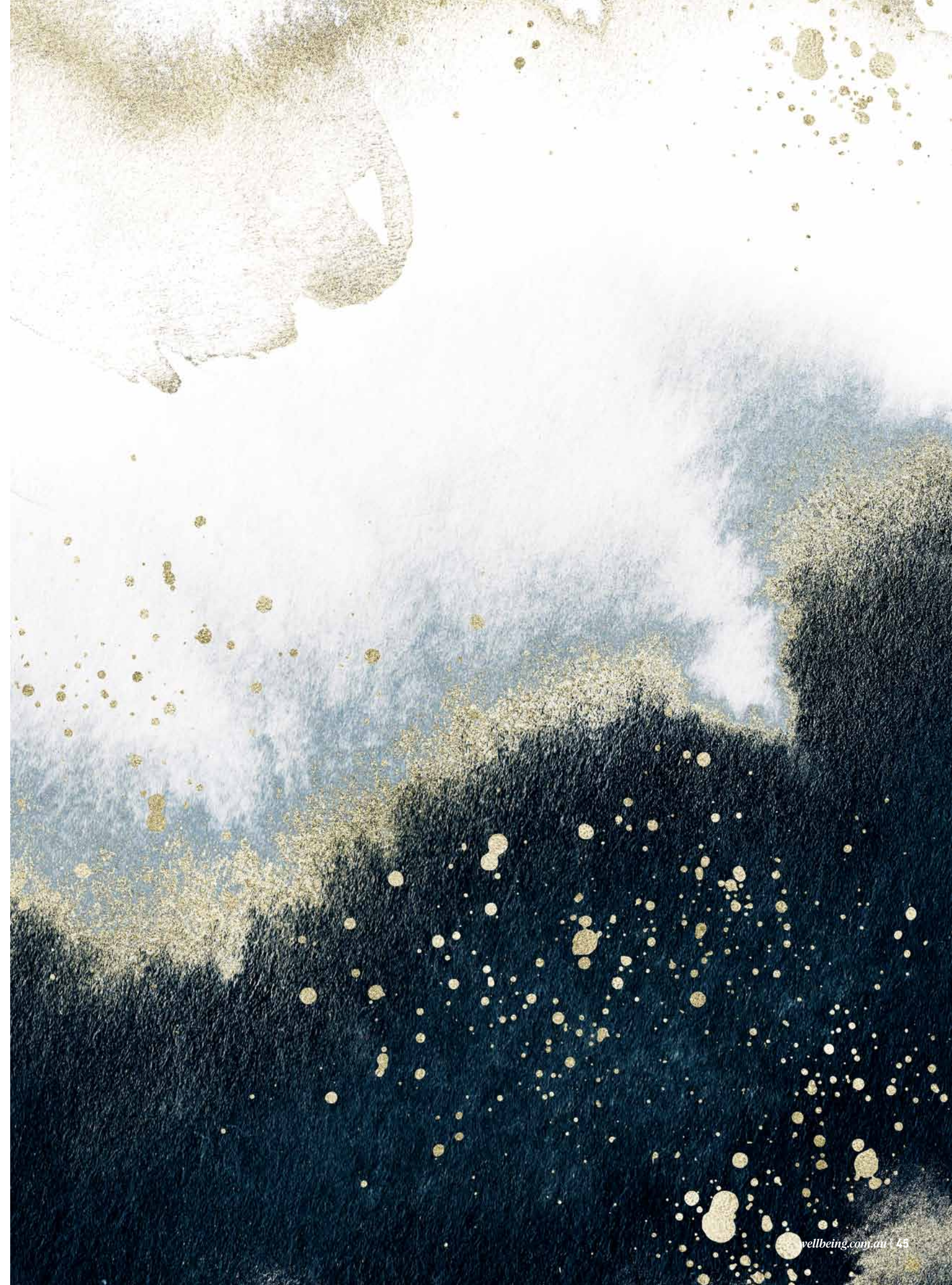
but karma is inescapable as it resides in the soul of every person.

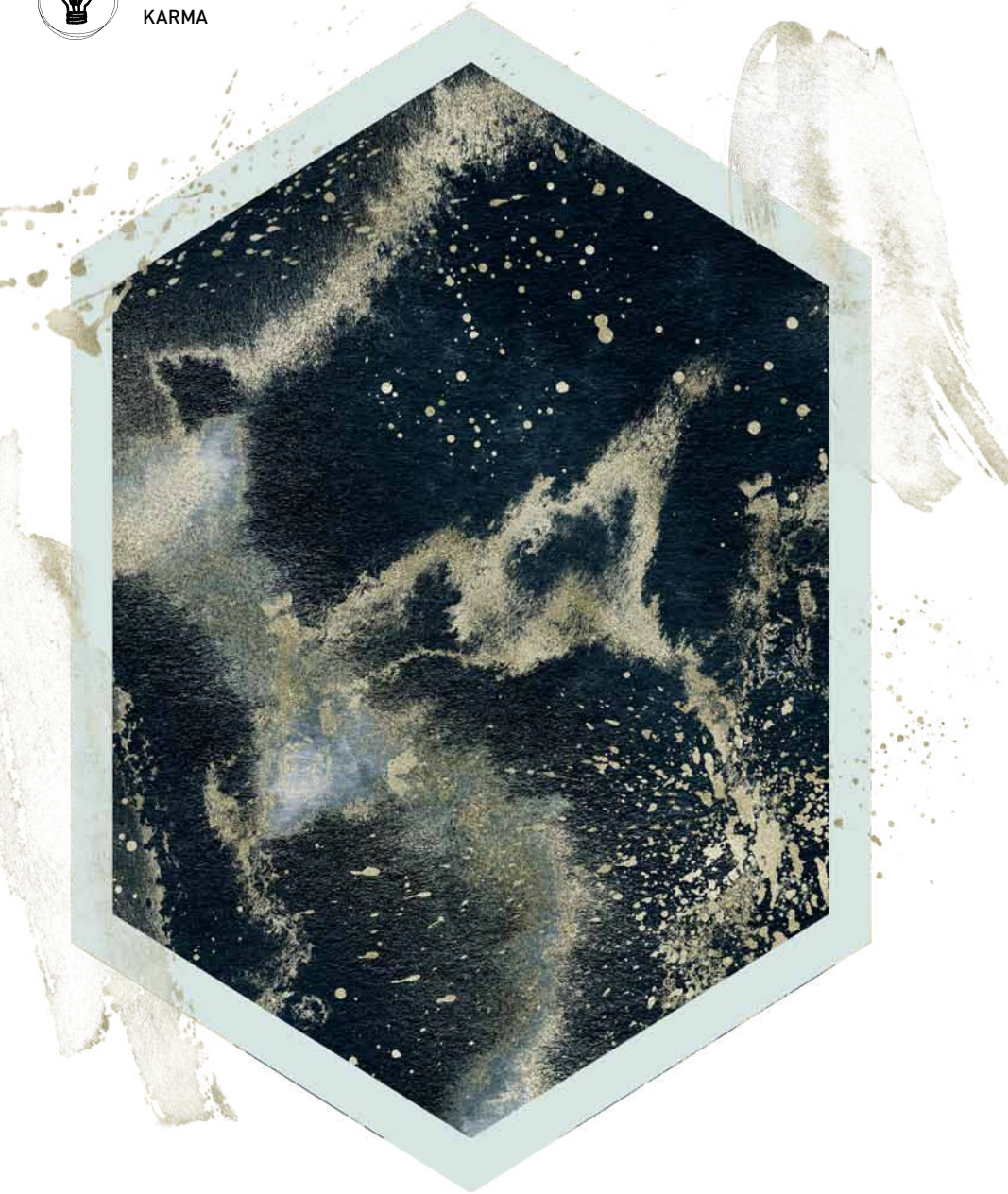
You may not believe it or even acknowledge karma as a real proposition. You don't need to recognise it as a spiritual principle to live truthfully in the world. Still, as a theoretical concept, it contains validity and efficacy. You don't need to believe in the law of karma, just as you don't need to believe in the law of gravity to know that you will go splat if you fall from a great height. The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus, who was far removed from the Eastern mystics, also espoused the karmic approach. "In the long run, every man will pay the penalty for his misdeeds," he says. "The man who remembers this will be angry with no one, indignant with no one, revile no one, blame no one, offend no one, hate no one." This is a man after Buddha's heart, singing from his song sheet.

## Karma is a verb, not a noun

When we use the word "karma", we use it as the name of a philosophical notion of universal precept. Therefore, in grammatical terms, it is a noun. But in fact, it would be more useful to think of it as a doing word — a verb. From Sanskrit, karma means "action" and features heavily in Buddhist and Hindu teachings. It is all about our thoughts, intentions and actions and their consequences. So, effectively we are responsible for these behaviours, and they sit at the centre of our sense of selves and govern our inner balance and equilibrium. Good deeds bring about a healthy sense of self. Conversely, bad deeds bring disharmony to our being.

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We have no control over outcomes as the laws of nature, other people's interference, luck and circumstance all impact every eventuality. But we do have control over our intention, approach and process. Therefore, we must act of our own volition and in good conscience no matter how others use their karma to harm or help us. The manifestation and management of our karma are contingent on our deep sense of right and wrong. It is not what they do but how we respond.

The spiritual aspect of karma denotes that actions in past lives or previous states of existence determine our fateful predicament in present or future lives. Still, we are nevertheless always in the cosmic driver's seat.

From a secular point of view, as we live in the present we are responsible for how we engage in all aspects of our lives here and now. The misuse of the term karma is convenient as a part of us wants to leave things to a higher god or a fatalistic outcome. We hold onto this notion as

a coping mechanism to make us feel better. It is a form of false rationalisation or emotional compensation.

Karma is not about shirking responsibility but rather accepting the consequences of our actions. This dovetails into many modern philosophies, such as existentialism which espouses accountability where seeking purpose and meaning in life serves our higher good. In this instance, we are the architects of our lives as we build a network of love and bonds of generosity. Our actions and deeds define who we are, not the outcomes, but we may achieve the desired effect with a bit of luck.

Karma has become the ultimate coping mechanism when bad things happen. We live in the hope that there will be some cosmic justice sometime, somewhere.

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Karma is an antidote to our helplessness and disempowerment. Whether we are looking on at world events witnessing those perpetrating crimes against humanity or those wilfully harming our planet, we need to believe that they will get their comeuppance. When we know we can't control an outcome or an injustice is served, we can mitigate our anger or powerlessness by feeling reassured that karma will work. But real karma is us taking action by doing what we can in our way. Karma is not about blindly accepting bad things and relinquishing control but doing what we can to effect positive change, one act at a time.

### Karmic recycling

Modern-day karma works on the misconception that there is an equal and opposite reaction in the universe for every action. So if I hurt you today, I will get what's coming to me tomorrow. Of course, karma doesn't operate on this simplistic premise, and it is our motivations or intentions that come back to serve or undermine us. We effectively recycle our actions in the emotional repercussions that we experience internally. The moral or spiritual law of karma means that we are the beneficiaries or unfortunate recipients of what we put into the universe. The universe is not in the business of payback or payout. We are. This spiritual recycling is the energy that flows out and then back into us. If goodness flows out, we feel the effects of that goodness. We also suffer when harmful thoughts or acts are perpetrated.

The basis of karma has nothing to do with giving to receive. If we give to get, it defies nature's spiritual and ethical laws. Karma works on the premise that the selfless act of giving inevitably brings abundance to us. The 20th-century activist, philosopher and devotee of Hinduism, Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, said, "When you plant a seed of love, it is you who blossom." This is the distillation of karma thinking and practice. In many ways, this is the basis of many spiritual teachings.

### Good karma, bad karma

Karma is about the self and how we view and act upon our values. There is good karma — where people use it to create mindful and thoughtful outcomes — and there is bad karma, but not as

we understand it. Bad karma is not the universe having the last laugh, but rather the cruel joke we play on ourselves when we think, feel or do bad acts. An ancient Indian story or morality tale beautifully illustrates the way karma works:

*In a time before mobile phones, a benevolent and wise king in a mythical kingdom summoned three of his most senior ministers and ordered each of them to go into the forest and fill up a sack with fruits. The first minister collected the very best fruit he could find, which was what the king ordered. Assuming the king would be too busy to inspect the contents, the second minister filled the bag with any fruit, varying in quality from good to rotten. The third minister figured that the king would only want to see how big the bag was, so instead of even sourcing fruit, he just filled the bag with dried leaves and dirt.*

*Upon returning to the palace, the king waived inspecting the bags altogether and instead ordered the ministers to spend three months in jail, having to survive on the contents of their bags. The first minister did fine as he had good-quality fruit to snack on for his stay. The second one survived but only just. By his release, he was dreadfully unwell after eating rotten fruit. However, the third minister perished, experiencing a pitiful death after only a few weeks in jail.*

This simple morality tale speaks about the consequences of our actions. It was never about what the king thought or saw. It was what the ministers valued and acted on. We will either suffer from or be sustained by the karma we perform. Karma comes back to bite or boost the person who has created the action. An act or even a thought of harm, deception, manipulation or evil, while it may hurt another, results in the karmic flow of negative energy or suffering to be endured by the perpetrator.

Our thoughts and actions define us. As Buddha said, "I am the owner of my actions." When we act morally, we move to our higher self, which can lead to reaching a transcendental or deeply meditative state, known as the dharma state. But in daily terms, we feel more connected with others and experience joy thanks to our selfless motivations.

### Keep karma

The notion that karma exists outside our acting unilaterally is not the case. Karma gives us agency as it is our choice how we think, act and behave. It is intentional,

mindful and ultimately liberating. It doesn't deliver justice in the way we comprehend it, but it is an internal reckoning that is even more powerful in some ways.

As the theme in the major movie franchise *Star Wars*, karma is a force to be reckoned with as it resides in the ethical realm. It does not happen to us or others, but rather works within us all as a dynamic force for good if used for good. As in the movie, there is a dark side to karma. While an ancient belief system, it is an entirely modern and relevant concept that implores us to be both accountable and selfless. The

light sabre of pure goodness empowers us to live in a conscious, open-hearted way.

Karma is one of those words like "zen" that has been over-simplified by reductionist thinking, and the meaning has been lost or distorted over time. The irony of the statement "what goes around, comes around" is that what comes around is you.

Now that's good karma. 🍀

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