

Karma Yoga is the Stepping Stone to Dhyāna Yoga

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Abstract

Karma Yoga is the path of action. It implies selfless, concentrated actions with awareness. Being an important technique for growth and progress along the spiritual path it brings peace and equanimity into one's life. Total absorption in any work will gradually train the mind to become steady and lead a meditative attitude. It channels our thoughts and actions to become one-pointed. Then it will become a perfect receiver and reflector of higher awareness. Action is the final import of the Veda which commands us to do certain acts. One can attain the knowledge of the Self through purity of heart by doing *karma* for the sake of *yajña* (sacrifice), *dāna* (charity) and *tapa* (austerity). These are the purifiers of the wise. These actions are considered obligatory and ought to be performed. Because the actions performed skillfully lose their influence to bind the soul with the cycle of birth and death. Even these actions should be performed leaving aside the attachment with the fruit of action. Performance of action with the selfless and witnessing attitude helps spiritual seeker to obtain emancipation. It fills the mind with *sattva* and purity. The spirit of selflessness and discrimination destroy the bonds of *karma* (the law of cause and effect). Just as the lose the power of germination by scorched, so the aspirant burns the fruit-bearing tendency of karma through the renunciation of the fruit of the action. He has no *rāga* (liking) with *kuśala* (agreeable) and *dveṣa* (disliking) with the *akuśala* karma being *sattvasamāviṣṭha* (pervaded by purity), *medhāvī* (intelligent) and free from *saṁśaya* (doubt). He attains devotion to the knowledge of Self.

Keywords: Karma Yoga, Dhyana Yoga, Yoga, Stepping Stone.

Karma comes from the Sanskrit root word 'kr' which means to do or destiny. Karma consists of the fruits of the action for the *kartā* (doer). A person must work and transform its consequences by performing karma yoga to attain ultimate knowledge and freedom from the clutches of birth and death. An important aspect of *karma yoga* is to do the work without being identified with the fruit of the action. It is because wrong identification leads to unhappiness, whereas realistic identification leads to harmony in life. Identification with the fruit of action develops attachment which brings pain and misery, while detachment brings calmness and contentment. Therefore, one should work selflessly in every aspect of his life renouncing the mere attachment. *Niyatam karma* (obligatory action) should be performed which causes no demerit. Because living in life itself involves several natural and unavoidable action like, breathing, eating, blinking the

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eyes etc. It is superior to *akarma* (inaction) as the *śarīrayātrā* (maintenance of the body) would be impossible. However, one should perform action with *yajña-bhāva* (attitude of sacrifice) being free from the attachment. According to Gītā in the beginning if creation Prajāpati has created the mankind with *yajña* (sacrifice) as the *kāmadhuk* (milk cow of desire) for the nourishment of gods and may the gods nourish the mankind. This will bring the highest good, i.e., *Ātma-jñāna* (Self-knowledge).

This is described in the *Īśa Upaniṣad* that,

*kurvanneveha karmāṇi jijīviṣecchatm samā /
evaṁ tvayi nānyatheto 'sti na karma lipyate nare // 2 //*

One should wish to live one hundred years performing *karma* in this world. He should do his duty with selfless service to the humanity with *Ātma-Bhāva*. It will purify his *citta* (*citta-śūddhi*) and *Ātma-jñāna* will down in his heart. By such performance of the work without any motive one will not be bound to works. In 8th verse of *caturtha khanda* (fourth part) of *Kena Upaniṣad* it has been described that *tapa* (Austerity), *dama* (self-restraint) and *karma* (duty) are the foundation of Self-knowledge. Vedas are its limbs and Truth is its abode. The Śmṛti says, ‘knowledge down in men by destruction of evil *karmas*’. The Vedas throw light on the knowledge of *karma* and the Vedāṅgas protect the Vedas. They are called the legs of the knowledge of Brahman.

Regarding this Bhagavad Gītā states,

*labhante brahmanirvāṇamṛṣayaḥ kṣīṇakalmaṣāḥ /
chinnadveidhā yatātmānaḥ sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ // (Gītā 5/25)*

The sages obtain absolute freedom whose sins have been destroyed, whose dualities have been destroyed, whose dualities are turned asunder, who are self-controlled, and who are devoted to the welfare of all beings. He never hurts others in thought, word and deed, whose duties vanish by constant meditation on the non-dual Brahman. They perform obligatory rituals and selfless services without expectation of their fruits. He will feel an inner silence and peace in the intense activity and surrounding. In *Astavakra Gītā* it is described that the enlightened one neither avoids the crowd, nor seeks the forest, being perfectly balanced under all conditions and in any place.

In *Gheraṇḍa Samhitā* sage *Gheraṇḍa* described that the body of living creatures is the result of good or bad actions. The body gives rise to action and in this way the cycle of action goes on like *ghaṭīyantram* (vessels, attached to the water wheel) (*Swami Digambarji & Gharote, 2019 : 4-5*). Just as the *Ghaṭīyantra* keep moving up and down according to the movement of the bullocks, similarly a living being also keeps on revolving in the cycle of birth and death in this universe due to the impression of his past *karmas* (*Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati, 2012 : 20-23*). One gets birth due to good and bad *karmas* performed in the previous life. *Karmas* performed with expectation of fruits brings bondage. Performance of action is the natural as well as an essential tendency of human being. Without *karma* he cannot survive even for a single moment. In *Gītā* Lord *Kṛṣṇa* says,

*nahi kaścitkṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt /
kāryate hyavaśaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijairgunaiḥ // Gītā 3.5 //*

Nobody can ever remain for even a single moment without performing action; for everyone is compelled to act helplessly by the qualities born of nature. Performance of action is the cause of bondage due to the attachment with the fruit of action. The qualities of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* cannot affect a man who has transcended the qualities of nature attaining the knowledge of self. Work with total renunciation is called *niṣkāma karma* or selfless service. Developing the will-power it enhances the ability to motivate, mobilize and harmonize one's activities for the attainment of a definite purpose with maximum efficiency. Using inherent skills and abilities one attempts to achieve maximum efficiency. In Bhagavad Gītā *karma yoga* is defined as 'efficiency in action'. Clinging to the fruits of actions is the cause of rebirth. One attains liberation abandoning the fruits of actions, while performing the action with evenness of mind or *yoga* of wisdom. The knowledge of the self-dawns when the mind is purified by *karma yoga*. It is a means to an end. Because it purifies the heart and prepares the aspirant for supreme knowledge.

Jaimini defines dharma is the supreme duty which impels men to action. According to the followers of *karma kāṇḍa* of the Vedas (*Mimāṃsakas*) define *karma* as the rituals and sacrifices prescribed in the Veda. It signifies the destiny or the storehouse of tendencies which lead to the further embodiment. Mimāṃsā philosophy defines the action is of three kinds – obligatory, optional and prohibited. Obligatory actions must be performed. Their violation results in sin, but their performance leads to no merit. Optional actions may or may not be performed. Their performance leads to merit, but their non-performance does not lead to sin. Prohibited actions must not be performed. Their performance leads to sin, while their non-performance does not lead to merit. Obligatory actions are of two kinds, known as *nitya* and *naimitika*. *Nitya karma* should be performed daily, like evening prayer (*sandhyāvandanā*) or daily bath etc. *Naimitika karma* must be performed on specified occasions, like birthday ceremony, marriage ceremony or funeral ceremony. Optional actions are called *kāmya karma* and their performance leads to merit, e.g., who wants to go to the heaven should perform certain sacrifices (*svargakāmo yajeta*). Prohibited actions are called *pratiṣiddha* and their performance incurs sin and leads to the hell. *Prāyaścitta karma* is the expiatory action which is performed to mitigate the evil effect of the performed prohibited actions.

The soul is chained to saṃsāra on account of its association with the body, mind and senses. As a result of this association the soul becomes a knower, enjoyer and an agent. This is due to *karma* which is the cause of bondage (Chandradhar Sharma, 1987: 236-237). Destruction of karma will break the association of the soul with the body, mind and senses. Then the soul returns to its pure nature which is a state of freedom from all pain and desire. Prabhākara and Kumārila admit that it is the abstention from *kāmya karma* (optional action) and *pratiṣiddha karma* (prohibited action). The performance of the former brings merit and leads to heaven, while that of the latter brings demerit and leads to hell. The seeker for liberation has to rise above merit as well as demerit. On the other hand, one should perform the obligatory actions of *nitya* and *naimitika karma* prescribed by the Veda. These actions must be performed with non-attachment attitude with the fruit of the action, which will lead to realize the ultimate end of liberation.

One has to overcome the past sin and avoid the future sin. Prabhākara believes in the supremacy of action and the knowledge which ultimately leads to liberation. Kumārila emphasizes that action is not an end in itself but only a means to obtain liberation. To him knowledge of self is born of true meditative act which is the immediate cause of liberation.

Through the realization of one's identity with Brahman, all the accumulated actions of the hundred crore of cycles vanish like the actions of the dream-state on awakening. The work which has fashioned this body prior to the dawning of knowledge, is not destroyed by that knowledge without yielding its fruits, like the arrow shot at an object. It is *prārabdha karma* which is certainly very strong and is spent only by the actual experience of its fruit. The *sañcita karma* and the *kriyamāna karma* can be destroyed by the fire of knowledge (Svāmī Mādhavānanda, 2009: 185-188). The sage who lives in his own Self as Brahman, is not affected by the influence of these three types of *karmas*. Following the prescribed methods of Vedas and the Vedāngas one becomes free from all sins in this or in the previous life avoiding the *kāmya karma* and the *niṣiddha karma*. By the performance of *nitya karma* and *naimitika karma* one adopts the four *sādhana*s or means to the attainment of spiritual knowledge. The means to the attainment of knowledge are *nityānityavastuviveka* (discrimination between permanent and transient), *phalabhogavirāga* (renunciation of the fruits of actions in this world and hereafter), *śamādiṣaṭkasampatti* (sama etc. six wealth) and *mumukṣutva* (the yearning for spiritual freedom) (Swami Nikhilananda, 2014: 16-27).

Performance of action with evenness of mind is yoga of wisdom. He is not affected by success and failure. He does not seek the fruit of his action. While action performed with expectation of the fruits of action leads to bondage and is the cause of birth and death. Lord Kṛṣṇa says,

*buddhiyukto jahātīha ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte /
tasmādyogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam // Gītā 2.50 //*

The wise being endowed with the evenness of mind (yoga of wisdom, united with pure reason) performs all the *karmas* for the sake of divine consciousness and abandons the fruits of actions. Being freed from the fetters of birth attains the blissful state of immortal abode. When the mind is purified of *karma yoga* the knowledge of Self or *Ātma Jñāna* dawns. All the desires of mind are casted off and is satisfied in the Self by the Self. This is the state of *sthitaprajña* or a sage of steady wisdom. He is fully satisfied in the Self and the sum-total of all the pleasures of the world seems worthless for him. He neither rejoices nor hates. Like the tortoise which withdraws on all sides its limbs, he withdraws his senses from their respective sense objects and fixes it on the Self like the lamp in the windless place. Restraining the senses and being free from attraction and repulsion, one attains supreme peace of Eternal. All desires enter as waters enter the ocean which, filled from all sides, remains unmoved. This is known as the *brāhmī sthiti* (eternal state). Being established there, even at the end of life, one attains *Brahmanirvāṇa* (Swami Sivananda, 1995: 46-55).

He who has attained the Self-knowledge renounces all actions by the means of Yoga. This is the establishment of the identity of individual soul with the Supreme Soul. The impression of the *karmas* in form of *aniṣṭha* (evil), *iṣṭha* (good) and *mishra* (mixed) are burnt in the fire of wisdom. Total absorption in the work with integrated mind and body leads to a meditative attitude. By this one perceives the one indestructible reality in all beings and obtains supreme devotion by the divine grace. The yogī of controlled mind remains one-pointed to attain the hidden spiritual treasures of the Self as a lamp placed in a windless spot does not flicker. Knowledge of Self culminates in liberation.

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