

Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga: Action in life

A king came to a Yogi living in solitude to learn about Karma Yoga. They sat together under a tree and the Yogi began to recite the verses of the holy scriptures. High up in the tree two birds had built their nest. As darkness began to fall and the two men had not finished their talk, the male bird said to his female companion: "We have guests and I must see to it that they are made comfortable. As it is getting cold I shall gather some wood and start a fire." Thus speaking it flew off and gathered some dry twigs. Soon a bright fire flared up and their host's content, but after a little while the male bird said to his wife: "The men must be hungry. Let's see if we can't get them something to eat." "Alas, we have nothing fit for them to eat," said the female, "but we cannot let them go hungry." The male said: "It is our duty as hosts to feed them. If there really isn't anything else, then I shall sacrifice myself." Thus saying, the bird threw himself into the fire. The female, however, said to herself: "How can two big men possibly eat their fill on such a little bird? I shall follow my husband's example and sacrifice myself also." And she too threw herself into the flames.

The two men below understood too late what the birds were trying to do and cooed not save them. The Yogi rose and said to the king: "Now I do not have to tell you anything further regarding Karma Yoga, O king. An example is worth more than all the words in all the books. Whosoever does his duty in such a way that he is willing to give up even his own life to it, he is a true Karma Yogi."

Karma Yoga basically consists of entirely selfless service, in which the ego is given up for the desire to serve, be it man, animal or plant.

Dharma: Purpose in life

The word dharma implies a fulfilment of honour and recognition according to one's inherent purpose. Dharma is the law of our existence, the path of our destiny. The Vedas, the ancient spiritual scripture of India, speak of this: *"There is nothing higher than dharma. Verily, that which is dharma is truth."*

Karma Yoga is also the path of doing the right thing, of following ones' personal Dharma and accepting destiny as it comes. If the Karma Yogi is a householder, he will accept that role as much as he would accept the role of a servant to any in need, without seeking any remuneration in the shape of wealth, satisfaction, name or fame.

Karma means action, including all acts done by the individual from birth to death. One who is not attached to his actions and performs actions because they are unavoidable, performs Karma with a disinterested interest and does not adopt wrong means.



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Karma performed by right means does not harm anybody and is in accordance with the law of dharma. That is Karma Yoga.

Dharma is our wisdom-full interaction with the world around us; how we relate to people, our friends, relatives and others we come into contact with directly or indirectly. Our most immediate dharma towards them is to help each and every one to evolve, and everything else is a part of this dharma. When we find ourselves in a position in which we must help others by supporting, nourishing or nurturing them, and when this position manifests in all areas of our life, we understand that this is our dharma, duty, commitment or obligation. The three foundations of dharma, in this regard, are right thinking, right behaviour and right action.

The ten signs of Dharma in one's life:

1. Active presence of truth,
2. prudence,
3. self-restraint,
4. sense of responsibility,
5. discipline,
6. determination for moral elevation,
7. serene love,
8. compassion,
9. courage
10. co-operating with others and altruist attitude.

The adoption of the above ten virtues is, according to Yoga, the true adoption of religion in human life.

It is better to follow one's own Dharma, even though imperfectly, than to follow the Dharma of others in a perfect manner.

According to Indian thought, no one has the right to devote himself exclusively to the development of his inner self until he has paid his tribute to life. Traditionally the Indian knows four distinct periods of life. Shakespeare divided life into "seven ages". In India, human life is believed to comprise four stages. These are called "ashramas" and every man should ideally go through each of these stages:

- The First *Ashrama* - "Brahmacharya" or the Student Stage
- The Second *Ashrama* - "Grihastha" or the Householder Stage
- The Third *Ashrama* - "Vanaprastha" or the Hermit Stage
- The Fourth *Ashrama* - "Sannyasa" or the Wandering Ascetic Stage



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Karma means action and Karma Yoga takes action as the way to salvation. The ideal here is the active life as praised by the Bhagavad Gita, the most beautiful and deepest of Indian holy books.

"Action alone concerns you, never its fruit. Stability in success or failure, this balance is called Yoga."

The teaching of the Bhagavad Gita closely resembles that of Buddha who was adverse to any kind of metaphysical speculation, repeating over and over: *"Be good and do good."*

Indian literature, and especially the Gita, is full of references to the active life, without attachment to the fruits of action. There is, for instance, the story of Narada, the holy man who passed his days in praising God in prayer. Vishnu was very pleased with his zeal, but at the same time he wanted to point out to him the weaker side of his conduct and so he said to him: "Go to the first house of the next village. There you will find a man even more pious than you." Narada immediately set out to find so holy a man. But what he found was only a peasant who told him that he called upon the name of God once in the morning before going to work and once in the evening before going to bed. Narada returned to Vishnu and reproachfully remarked: "I cannot see much piousness in that man. Twice a day he calls upon Thy exalted name and apart from that attends to his worldly affairs." Thereupon Vishnu bade him take a pail of water and carry it through the village without spilling a drop. Narada did as he was told and on his return proudly exhibited the full pail from which not a drop had been spilled. Vishnu, however, asked him: "And how many times in carrying the pail did you call upon my name?" "Not once," Narada had to admit, "I was too busy watching the pail." And so Vishnu said to him: "During your small task you have not given me a single thought. How much more pious is the peasant who, with his hard day-long work finds time to call upon me twice."

Men work for the most varied reasons. But we should learn how to work without any special motive and without regard for the fruits of work. One works for glory, another for money, yet another for power. Many hope that their actions will find their reward in heaven. But who works selflessly? Perhaps an artist who works for his art, whether recognized or not, or a scientist who only lives in and for his research, sometimes at the risk of his life. Such men are the real "elite" of humanity.

The Indian ideal is not an ascetic idea. In opposition to Christianity, Indian thought is of the opinion that wealth is not necessarily a curse. What matters is whether the rich man is at every moment ready to abandon his riches, if necessary, the point being that no man should attach himself to his earthly possessions, which is the secret of real liberty. A

beggar possessing only a few rags can be more attached than a wealthy prince like Buddha, who from one day to the next abandoned kingdom, wealth and family as soon as he recognized that this was necessary for his inner liberty. *"He who acts in dedicating all his actions to the Eternal One, abandoning all attachment, is not troubled by sin, the*



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same as a lotus leaf is not touched by the water." Thus the Karma Yogi can go through life and enjoy life; he can enjoy it, but shall not attach himself to it. Nothing is really yours except your good works. He who learns to abandon his egotistical desires develops immense power. To deny oneself is often a more heroic deed than a victory on the battlefield of war or of sport.

On the other hand, the Yogi despises him who makes duty a mania. Many of us are only slaves of duty where we have no time to eat in peace, no time to enjoy nature, no time to take stock of ourselves, no time to live. We are foolish to let duty rob us of our inner freedom. The mechanism of the world is a dangerous machine; once we are in its clutches we are in danger of being crushed by it.

Indian thought refers here, as always, to the law of Sattwa, the law of the pendulum which is everywhere characteristic of life. Inspiration is followed by expiration, work by play, and extraversion by introversion. Every faithful Yogi begins and closes his day with meditation; what he has expended in the extravert activity of the day he takes back again in the introversion of meditation. To be stable, a tower, a skyscraper needs a deep foundation. Our generation is superficial and always in danger of losing its balance. Former generations, grounded in faith and mystical introversion had/have more stability. A man who combines the two poles in himself through religion or Yoga remains tranquilly serene in the midst of the turbulence of modern life as though he lived in solitude.

With our work we help only ourselves. It is a gathering of experiences. Those who believe that we work in order to help improve the world, to "make the world a better place to live in" etc., are in error. The world cannot be helped. The same needs and cares it had a thousand years ago it has today and will still have a thousand years from now. All we do, in this respect, is to move the problems from one plane to another, that is all. When the waves rise in one place, they fall in another. And as with waves, so with fortune and misfortune, divided in the world, but their sum is always in balance.

"What do you want to do with the world? It is made. The Lord of Creation has thought of everything."

It has been said that the world resembles a spiral which we continually seek to straighten out. But as soon as we let go at an end, the spiral forms again. An Indian legend tells of a man who was tired of his daily work. He called upon a magician and asked him for a jinn, a demon, who could do his work for him. The magician warned him that a jinn was a powerful spirit who needs work all the time. "If you cannot keep him busy at all times he will devour you." The man laughed and said: "Please do not worry about that; I have

plenty of work for the strongest jinn!" And so the magician gave him a Mantra, an incantation which would get him a jinn. The man did as he was told and behold, a towering powerful spirit stood before him and asked in a resounding voice: "What do you



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want from me?" At first the man was a little scared, but took heart and ordered: "Build me a palace at once!" - "Here it is." - "Cut down yon forest!" - "It is done." - "Bring me gold!" - "Here it is." - "Build me a city!" - "There it stands." Every wish was fulfilled almost before the man had time to express it. In despair, he ran to the magician and begged him on his knees to help him once more. "I do not know what to order anymore and the jinn threaten to devour me." The magician smiled and said: "In truth you scarcely deserve a better fate, but nevertheless I shall help you once more. See the dog over there, the one with the curly tail? Go cut it off and tell the jinn to straighten it out. He will be busy with the job as long as the world lasts." The man did as he was told and the Jinn is still busy with his task. Every time he lets go, the tail curls again. Every generation tries to change and reform the world, but it remains as inadequate as ever.

When once we have recognized that our actions serve only the gathering of experiences and thus our own salvation, we realize how important it is consciously to live every day of our life. To live consciously is to live in the present. Many people in their thoughts are constantly a day, a week, a year ahead. Do they really know if they will still be alive next year? In our dreaming about the future we are apt to miss the experiences which the present offers us for our edification. Let the day take care of the day.

Western thought says: *"By their fruits shall you know them."* Eastern wisdom replies: *"All created beings are owners of their works, heirs of their works, children and slaves of their works."* Karma is Law of Consequence. To escape Karma is possible only if we change what we are to what we would be. Everything that happened to us today is conditioned by previous actions and desires. Unconditioned, however, is our inner attitude towards our self-made destiny, whether we say yes or no to it, whether we learn from it or deny it. Unconditioned also is the determination to new aspiration, to new endeavour which will lead us further on the path of liberation.

Here is a test to find out whether your mission in life is complete. If you're alive, it isn't.

Richard Bach

