

The Practice of Yoga: Part 4 Karma Yoga

By Reverend Jaganath Carrera

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Bhagavad Gita, 2:47

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Most people who practice Hatha Yoga or meditation know how peaceful, refreshed, and inspired these practices make you feel. What can be very difficult is finding a way to carry these experiences into our daily life. The ancient yogis, leaving no stone unturned in their quest for lives that were easeful, peaceful, and useful, thoroughly explored this question by asking:

Is there some way that we can take care of all our daily duties without disturbing our peace, and even enhancing it?

The answer is Karma Yoga, the Yoga of selfless action or dedicated service. The word *karma* means both action and the result of an action. Karma is the universal law of cause and effect; action and reaction. The Bible gives the same teaching as “*You reap what you sow.*” (Galatians 6:7). The more obvious meaning of this principle is that when we sow selfless, loving seeds, we will reap the sweet fruits of life. On the face of it, it sounds like a great life goal. As nice as this seems, this goal has at its root a thorny problem. Even if we are skilled spiritual gardeners, sowing sweet loving seeds all day every day, we remained bound by the limitations of ignorance. How?

The law of karma forces us to face the reactions – good and bad – of all that we think, say and do. This wheel of endless action and reaction revolves over many lifetimes, keeping us enmeshed in relativity. All the while, the peace and joy that is our True Nature lies outside the comfort that “good” karma brings as well as the suffering brought by “bad” karma. Our goal as yogis – Self-realization – lies beyond what is pleasant or painful, even beyond what we call good and bad.

If we could free ourselves from the relentless wheel of cause and effect, we could be truly free. What ties us to the wheel of karma? Selfish attachments.

The Problem with Attachments

Anything that we think, say, or do that is motivated by self-interest, is an attachment. Attachments pervert how we understand who we are and how we respond to life. They mistakenly place the individual at the center of the universe. Every experience, thought, and decision is assessed from that narrow, limited point of view.

Attachments generate misguided attempts at finding happiness because they goad us to look outside ourselves for happiness. The conscious or subconscious formula we cling to under the influence of attachments is: *If I only had (you fill in the blank), then I'd be happy.* When we are successful in attaining whatever it is we want, we usually do experience a rush of satisfaction and happiness. The problem is that it doesn't last very long. Things change, situations change, *we* change. The result is that very soon, we are on the prowl again, lead by craving for something new or better. Satisfying cravings is like scratching a fleabite. Scratching only makes it itchier.

True wisdom is born of an expansive, nonjudgmental, non-ego centered view of people, experiences, and events. When we shift away from acts based on attachments, our concern is not, “*What’s best for me?*” but, “*What’s needed at this place and time to bring the greatest benefit and harmony?*” In other words, nonattachment is the same as objectivity.

Objectivity, the ability to perceive things as they are without any expectations or fears, is a valuable tool in the yogic toolbox. It gives room for creativity, releases us from unnecessary worries, and arms us with knowledge that we can count on to use for guidance.

Karma Yoga is the science of putting nonattachment into practice until it is perfected. It is learning to perform all acts without selfish motive or expectations. In its highest form, nonattachment is the same as unconditional love, unshakable peace, and joy.

There are two essential approaches in the practice of Karma Yoga: the Jnana Yoga approach, and the Bhakti Yoga approach.

Jnana Yoga Approach

Through life experience, the Jnani has become convinced of the folly of trying to control every aspect of every act in order to find happiness. They have learned that no matter how well they plan, or how meticulously they perform any act, they cannot guarantee success or predict that the outcome will be pleasurable. With this firm understanding in mind, they let go of selfish expectations. Their actions are for the welfare of others, for the welfare of all beings, and everything in creation. Those that practice Karma Yoga in this way discover something astounding: there is a joy *in* serving. Not *from* serving, but *in* it. When we are able to let go of the anxieties, fears, expectations, and cravings that attend most acts, our minds are free and our heart soars.

The Bhagavad Gita has a lot to offer regarding karma and Karma Yoga. Here are three verses that apply here:

Equanimity of mind is Yoga. Do everything centered in that equanimity. Renouncing all attachments, you’ll enjoy an undisturbed mind in success or failure. (2:48)

Therefore, always do your duty without attachment. If you do things without desiring results for yourself, you will experience the highest state. (4:19)

If you dedicate all your actions so your work becomes Karma Yoga, all remaining doubts will be destroyed in the fire of your awakening. At this point all bondage falls away and you remain poised in the true Self. (4:41)

Bhakti Yoga Approach

Love for, and devotion to God guides this approach. Acts are performed in the name of God, or with the fruits of the actions dedicated to God or humanity. From the Bhagavad Gita:

The devotees nearest to me are those who renounce attachment to the fruits of their actions and instead offer them all to me; who desire me above everything else; and who, through yogic practices, meditate on me with a one-pointed mind. (12:6)

Because you take refuge in me, all your actions – whatever they may be – are serving me. Thus, you are graced to realize the imperishable state of immortality. (18:56)

An advantage of this approach to Karma Yoga is that it is based on love. Love naturally fosters one-pointedness and well as selflessness. We lose ourselves in loving service. And in losing ourselves, we find our Self.

The Big Obstacle to Selfless Service: The Doer

Who or what is the doer? The doer is anyone who has the feeling that he or she is the agent of action. It is the sense that you are in total control; that you are making it all happen: envisioning, planning, and executing the different aspects of your life. The doer is that part of the ego that takes (or won't accept) credit for accomplishments, blames others (or laments) for failures.

One major drawback of carrying the feeling that you are the doer is that you are then stuck with blame when things go wrong. You can't just take credit for success and then shun blame. They are two sides of the same coin. Once you accept one, you get the other. One result of this is that you're life becomes a rollercoaster ride of emotions, an endless and often harsh ride of ups and downs. In an attempt to avoid this unpleasantness, the mind clings to the highs in order to avoid the lows. We succumb to the fear of losing what we've gained. Clinging is, by its very nature, stress. If we succeed in gaining what we strive for, we are susceptible to renewed craving to repeat or increase the experience.

The Cure. The feeling of doership is based on a misperception: that we *are* the body and mind. Even our daily language indicates that this is false. We say *my* body; *my* mind. We are not the body and mind, but the owner of them both. That part of us that never changes, that constantly is aware of all changes, that is Awareness itself, is who we are. That is what we refer to as Cosmic Consciousness or God, the one Self that illumines animates, and creates everything.

When we let go of the feeling that we are the body/mind, we also let go of the feeling of doership. We experience a growing realization that we are vessels for the Higher Self to work through. We understand that we are instruments for the Divine Will, not the creators of it. Having experienced the eternal stable point beyond all limitations, we are free from the rollercoaster ride. If something wonderful happens, we pass on the praise to the Higher Self. If something unpleasant happens, we also pass that on to the same Self. We experience an indescribable peace and joy that can only come from true freedom, from letting go of limiting attachments.

The Perfect Act

The one who has trained the mind to stay centered in equanimity in life has cast aside both good and evil karma. Therefore, by all means practice Yoga; perfection in action is Yoga.

Bhagavad Gita 2:50

This definition of Yoga is one of the most quoted and important. It gives us a guideline for living happy, productive, useful lives. The question that often pops up is, what is a perfect act?

My master, Sri Swami Satchidananda, often quoted this verse and defined a perfect act as, “*One that brings some benefit to at least someone, and no harm to anyone.*” Not as simple as it may sound. It requires knowledge, patience, clarity, and mindfulness to determine whether an act brings benefit or harm. Sometimes, the immediate results can be distressing, but not harmful, like when we discipline a naughty puppy who then whines, trying to get its own way. On the flip side, our child may praise us for offering her a plate of sweets for dinner, but the long-term effect is harmful.

It’s important to remember that the principle of not doing harm includes not harming yourself. One of our main responsibilities is to take good care of our bodies and minds – so that we can serve others. Being selfless doesn’t mean that you can’t take a day off, go to the movies, or have a nice vacation. It’s not the action alone that determines whether it is Karma Yoga or not. It is the intent. When you are run down and frazzled, a vacation can renew you and provide you with a fresh perspective that can enliven and expand your service to others.

Karma Yoga: The Greatest Yoga?

You can make a good argument in support of Karma Yoga as the greatest of all branches of Yoga. It incorporates the mindful attentiveness of Raja Yoga, the discriminative and analytic capacity of Jnana Yoga, and the heartfelt devotion of Bhakti Yoga. All of which you are engaged in this practice.

Another great advantage of Karma Yoga is that it serves to refine and test our progress in all the other branches of Yoga. It is easy to think you are having a deep meditation experience, when in fact you are really experiencing the relaxation from being half asleep. You may believe that your study and self-analysis has brought you to a subtle and deep perspective of life, but your understanding may still only be on the level of the intellect. In a similar way, what may seem like devotion may instead be overindulgence in emotion or sentiment. When we go out to serve others, our growth is tested. We face disappointment, unexpected twists and turns, and frustration. It is in serving others that we really know how well our Yoga practice is really progressing.

When we understand the law of Karma and the greatness of Karma Yoga, we will fully experience that fact that our destiny is in our hands. If we sow selfish seeds, we face suffering. If we sow sweet seeds, we will know comfort and success. If we cultivate a selfless, loving life, we will know complete liberation from all suffering and limitations. It’s up to you which path you walk.

How to Practice Karma Yoga

Engage in your normal activities, and watch and wait. Sooner or later, you will face anxiety, disappointment, or some other disruptive emotion. When that happens, know for certain that your motive behind your action was not purely selfless. It had a little selfish expectation mixed in. Congratulations. You are ready for real, solid growth. Now that the hidden selfish motive has surfaced, you can address it by analysis, prayer, or both.

For your analysis, you can ask yourself, “What is it that I wanted, but didn’t get?” This simple question can usher you to the very gateway of Self-realization. Don’t settle for the first answer your mind brings up. Keep asking why. Probe. It may take weeks or longer for the real answer to reveal itself, but it will come.

At the same time, you can open your heart to God and ask for strength, clarity, and guidance. Tap into that limitless Divine resource. You will certainly receive the help you need. Just keep in mind that God’s answer may not be what you expect, or it may take a while for it to manifest. Keep praying and keep alert for the response.

Hints

Along with doing something for your health and peace everyday, do something for the welfare of others everyday. Never let a day go by without serving others. It could be a humble act: picking a cigarette butt off the sidewalk, donating to a charity, calling on a sick friend, or praying for the welfare of those who are suffering. Dramatic act, or quiet hidden one, it doesn’t matter, as long as it is done mindfully and without any personal expectation attached to it.

Another very powerful hint is that you should never miss an opportunity to serve. Keep an eye out for anyway you can serve other people, the environment, and even your possessions. Make every act an offering to God or humanity.

Cultivate the sense of adventure and enthusiasm needed to be a good servant to humanity. Leave this world a better place. Let others see the greatness of the Yoga life in you. Let your life flow abundantly and without fear.

Karma Yoga alone is sufficient to achieve the goal of Yoga.

Summary

To realize the goal of Yoga, union with the Self, you don’t need a Yoga studio, special mat, the grasp of subtle points of philosophy, or an unbending will. Just live your life and lovingly, without selfish expectations or motives, fulfill your responsibilities. Do what is needful while cherishing the intent of the welfare of others (including yourself). With your mind intent on good, and a heart ready to offer the fruits of actions to others, you will experience the secret of life – how to live without suffering. Your mind will become your best friend and you will be a source of comfort and joy to others. You can’t lose.

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