



# **KARMA YOGA**

**THE PATH OF SELFLESS ACTION**

**SWAMI VIVEKANANDA**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Four Paths of Self-Realization	1
I.    The Path of Knowledge	4
II.   The Path of Self-Knowledge	4
III.  The Path of Selfless Action	5
IV.   The Path of Devotion	6
The Path of Selfless Action	9
Chapter I    Karma in its Effect on Character	11
Chapter II   Each is Great in his Own Place	19
Chapter III  The Secret of Work	35
Chapter IV   What is Duty?	45
Chapter V    We Help Ourselves, Not the World	55
Chapter VI   Non-Attachment is Complete Self-Abnegation	65
Chapter VII  Freedom	77
Chapter VIII The Ideal of Karma Yoga	91

# THE FOUR PATHS OF **SELF-REALIZATION**

**F**rom ancient times, people of India have practiced spiritual disciplines designed to clear the mind and support a state of serene, detached awareness. The practices for developing this desired state of balance, purity, wisdom, and peacefulness of mind are known collectively as yoga.

“Yoga” means “yoke” or “union” — referring to union with the true Self, the goal described in the Upanishads.

The sages distinguished four basic types of people and developed practices that are particularly suitable for each type, in order that each man can attain the desired union with the Self.

- For rational people, there is the Path of Knowledge.
- For meditative people, there is the Path of Self-Knowledge.
- For naturally active people, there is the Path of Selfless Action.
- For emotional people, there is the Path of Devotion.

—*Living Religions*, 79

## I. The Path of Knowledge

### —Jnana Yoga

An attempt to realize the Brahman-Atman identity through the study of the Vedas (i.e. the sacred texts of the Hindu tradition) and direct contemplation of the self:

*After negating [one's identity with the body, the senses, and the mind] as "not this," "not this," that Awareness which alone remains — that I am. ...*

*The thought "Who am I?" will destroy all other thoughts, and, like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will itself in the end get destroyed. Then, there will arise Self-realization.*

—*Living Religions*, 81

## II. The Path of Self-knowledge

### —Raja Yoga

Various systems (such as those described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras or the later system known as Kundalini) that focus on the use of techniques (including the adoption of physical postures, breath control, mantras and visualization) to bring the mind to a state of one-pointed concentration, known as samadhi, in which union with the absolute is attained.

*Words and language are imperfect to describe this exalted state. ... Mind, intellect and the senses cease functioning. ... It is a state of eternal Bliss and eternal Wisdom. All dualities vanish in toto. ... All visible merge in the invisible or the Unseen. The individual soul becomes that which he contemplates.*

—*Living Religions*, 80



### III. The Path of Selfless Action

#### —Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga originally focused on varnasrama-dharma — the performance of actions in accordance with the duties (dharma) associated with one's caste (varna) and stage of life (asrama). By acting in accordance with the principles of varnasrama-dharma, one gradually worked through the four stages of life (student, householder, forest-dweller, renunciate) towards ultimate release from the cycle of rebirth (moksha) — though the process might take many lifetimes to complete.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, however, Krishna redefined Karma Yoga by combining it with the fundamental insight of Jnana Yoga — namely the ultimate identity of the individual self (atman) and the Universal Self (Brahman) — leading to the conclusion that “it is the Absolute who performs all actions.” Through this realization, one is able to perform action “without any interest in its fruits and without any personal sense of giving.” By relinquishing one's own attachment to the fruits of one's actions, one attains “liberation from the self in the very midst of work”:

*I pervade the entire universe in my unmanifested form. All creatures find their existence in me, but I am not limited by them. Behold my divine mystery!*

*... The foolish do not look beyond physical appearances to see my true nature as the Lord of all creation. The knowledge of such deluded people is empty; their lives are fraught with disaster and evil and their work and hopes are all in vain.*

*But truly great souls seek my divine nature. They worship me with a one-pointed mind, having realized that I am the eternal source of all. Constantly striving, they make firm their resolve and worship me without wavering. Full of devotion, they sing of my divine glory. ...*

*Whatever I am offered in devotion with a pure heart — a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water — I partake of that love offering. Whatever you do, make it an offering to me — the food you eat, the sacrifices you make, the help*



*you give, even your suffering. In this way you will be freed from the bondage of karma, and from its results both pleasant and painful. Then, firm in renunciation and yoga, with your heart free, you will come to me.*

*I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear. But those who worship me with love live in me, and I come to life in them. ... All those who take refuge in me, whatever their birth, race, sex, or caste, will attain the supreme goal; this realization can be attained even by those whom society scorns. ... Therefore, having been born in this transient and forlorn world, give all your love to me. Fill your mind with me; love me; serve me; worship me always. Seeking me in your heart, you will at last be united with me.*

—*Anthology of Living Religions*, 66–68 (*Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 9); cf. BG/9

#### IV. The Path of Devotion

##### —*Bhakti Yoga*

Bhakti Yoga is closely related to the notion of Karma Yoga as presented in the Bhagavad-Gita, since it is precisely by performing action in a spirit of “devotion” to Krishna (rather than as a means of generating “good” karma that will benefit one either in this or some future life) that one attains release from the cycle of rebirth. This “devotion” is manifest as an intense feeling of love for God that is frequently expressed through poetry and song, such as the following offering from Mirabai:

*Without Krishna I cannot sleep.  
Tortured by longing, I cannot sleep,  
And the fire of love  
Drives me to wander hither and thither.  
Without the light of the Beloved  
My house is dark,  
And lamps do not please me.  
Without the Beloved my bed is uninviting,*

*And I pass the nights awake.  
 When will my Beloved return home ?  
 ... What shall I do ? Where shall I go ?  
 Who can quench my pain ?  
 My body has been bitten  
 By the snake of "absence,"  
 And my life is ebbing away  
 With every beat of the heart.  
 ... My Lord when will you come  
 To meet your Mira ?  
 ... When, my Lord,  
 Will you come to laugh and talk with me ?*

—*Anthology of Living Religions*, 79

Since Bhakti Yoga is more easily pursued than either Raja or Jnana Yoga, it is by far the most common form of Hindu practice. Its appeal is nicely expressed in the following quote from Sri Ramakrishna:

*As long as the I-sense lasts, so long are true knowledge and Liberation impossible. ... [But] how very few can obtain this Union [Samadhi] and free themselves from this "I"? It is very rarely possible. Talk as much as you want, isolate yourself continuously, still this "I" will always return to you. Cut down the poplar tree today, and you will find tomorrow it forms new shoots. When you ultimately find that this "I" cannot be destroyed, let it remain as "I" the servant.*

—*Living Religions*, 83

# **KARMA YOGA**

## **THE PATH OF SELFLESS ACTION**

# Chapter I

## Karma in its Effect on Character

The word Karma is derived from the Kri, to do ; all action is Karma. Technically, this word also means the effects of actions. In connection with metaphysics, it sometimes means the effects, of which our past actions were the causes. But in Karma Yoga we have simply to do with the word Karma as meaning work. The goal of mankind is knowledge ; that is the one ideal placed before us by Eastern philosophy. Pleasure is not the goal of man, but knowledge. Pleasure and happiness come to an end. It is a mistake to suppose that pleasure is the goal ; the cause of all the miseries we have in the world is that men foolishly think pleasure to be the ideal to strive for. After a time man finds that it is not happiness, but knowledge, towards which he is going, and that both pleasure and pain are great teachers, and that he learns as much from evil as from good. As pleasure and pain pass before his soul they leave upon it different pictures, and the result of these combined impressions is what is called man's "character." If you take the character of any man it really is but the aggregate of tendencies, the sum-total of the bent of his mind ; you will find that misery and happiness are equal factors in the formation of that character. Good and evil have an equal share in moulding character, and in some instances misery is a greater teacher than happiness. In studying the great characters the world has produced, I dare say, in the vast majority of cases, it would be found that it was misery that taught more than happiness, it was poverty that taught more than wealth, it was blows that brought out their inner fire more than praise.

Now this knowledge, again, is inherent in man ; no knowledge comes from outside ; it is all inside. 'What we say a man "knows," should, in strict psychological language, be what he "discovers" or "unveils" ; what a man "learns" is really what he "discovers," by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge. We say Newton

discovered gravitation. Was it sitting anywhere in a corner waiting for him? It was in his own mind; the time came and he found it out. All knowledge that the world has ever received comes from the mind; the infinite library of the universe is in your own mind. The external world is simply the suggestion, the occasion, which sets you to study your own mind, but the object of your study is always your own mind. The falling of an apple gave the suggestion to Newton, and he studied his own mind; he rearranged all the previous links of thought in his mind and discovered a new link among them, which we call the law of gravitation. It was not in the apple nor in anything in the centre of the earth. All knowledge therefore, secular or spiritual, is in the human mind. In many cases it is not discovered, but remains covered, and when the covering is being slowly taken off we say “we are learning,” and the advance of knowledge is made by the advance of this process of uncovering. The man from whom this veil is being lifted is the more knowing man; the man upon whom it lies thick is ignorant, and the man from whom it has entirely gone is all-knowing, omniscient. There have been omniscient men, and, I believe, there will be yet; and that there will be myriads of them in the cycles to come. Like fire in a piece of flint, knowledge exists in the mind; suggestion is the friction which brings it out. So with all our feelings and actions — our tears and our smiles, our joys and our griefs, our weeping and our laughter, our curses and our blessings, our praises and our blames — every one of these we may find, if we calmly study our own selves, to have been brought out from within ourselves by so many blows. The result is what we are; all these blows taken together are called Karma, — work, action. Every mental and physical blow that is given to the soul, by which, as it were, fire is struck from it, and by which its own power and knowledge are discovered, is Karma, this word being used in its widest sense; thus we are all doing Karma all the time. I am talking to you: that is Karma. You are listening: that is Karma. We breathe: that is Karma. We walk: Karma. Everything we do, physical or mental, is Karma, and it leaves its marks on us.

There are certain works which are, as it were, the aggregate, the sum-total, of a large number of smaller works. If we stand near the seashore

and hear the waves dashing against the shingle we think it is such a great noise ; and yet we know that one wave is really composed of millions and millions of minute waves : each one of these is making a noise, and yet we do not catch it ; it is only when they become the big aggregate that we hear. Similarly every pulsation of the heart is work ; certain kinds of work we feel and they become tangible to us ; they are, at the same time, the aggregate of a number of small works. If you really want to judge of the character of a man look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions ; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he be.

Karma in its effect on character is the most tremendous power that man has to deal with. Man is, as it were, a centre, and is attracting all the powers of the universe towards himself, and in this centre is fusing them all and again sending them off in a big current. Such a centre is the real man, the almighty, the omniscient, and he draws the whole universe towards him ; good and bad, misery and happiness, all are running towards him and clinging round him ; and out of them he fashions the mighty stream of tendency called character and throws it outwards. As he has the power of drawing in anything, so has he the power of throwing it out.

All the actions that we see in the world, all the movements in human society, all the works that we have around us, are simply the display of thought, the manifestation of the will of man. Machines or instruments, cities, ships, or men-of-war, all these are simply the manifestation of the will of man ; and this will is caused by character and character is manufactured by Karma. As is Karma, so is the manifestation of the will. The men of mighty will the world has produced have all been tremendous workers — gigantic souls, with wills powerful enough to overturn worlds, wills they got by persistent work, through ages and ages. Such a gigantic will as that of a Buddha or a Jesus could not be obtained in one life, for we know who their fathers were. It is not known that their fathers

ever spoke a word for the good of mankind. Millions and millions of carpenters like Joseph had gone; millions are still living. Millions and millions of petty kings like Buddha's father had been in the world. If it was only a case of hereditary transmission, how do you account for this petty prince, who was not, perhaps, obeyed by his own servants, producing this son, whom half a world worships? How do you explain the gulf between the carpenter and his son, whom millions of human beings worship as God? It cannot be solved by the theory of heredity. The gigantic will which Buddha and Jesus threw over the world, whence did it come? Whence came this accumulation of power? It must have been there through ages and ages, continually growing bigger and bigger, until it burst on society in a Buddha or a Jesus, even rolling down to the present day.

All this is determined by Karma, work. No one can get anything unless he earns it; this is an eternal law; we may sometimes think it is not so, but in the long run we become convinced of it. A man may struggle all his life for riches; he may cheat thousands, but he finds at last that he did not deserve to become rich and his life becomes a trouble and a nuisance to him. We may go on accumulating things for our physical enjoyment, but only what we earn is really ours. A fool may buy all the books in the world, and they will be in his library; but he will be able to read only those that he deserves to; and this deserving is produced by Karma. Our Karma determines what we deserve and what we can assimilate. We are responsible for what we are; and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act. You will say, "What is the use of learning how to work? Every one works in some way or other in this world." But there is such a thing as frittering away our energies. With regard to Karma Yoga, the Gita says that it is doing work with cleverness and as a science: by knowing how to work, one can obtain the greatest results. You must remember that all work is simply to bring out the power of the mind which is already there, to wake up the soul.



The power is inside every man, so is knowledge ; the different works are like blows to bring them out, to cause these giants to wake up.

Man works with various motives ; there cannot be work without motive. Some people want to get fame, and they work for fame. Others want money, and they work for money. Others want to have power, and they work for power. Others want to get to heaven, and they work for the same. Others want to leave a name when they die, as they do in China, where no man gets a title until he is dead ; and that is a better way, after all, than with us. When a man does something very good there, they give a title of nobility to his father, who is dead, or to his grandfather. Some people work for that. Some of the followers of certain Mahomedan sects work all their lives to have a big tomb built for them when they die. I know sects among whom as soon as a child is born a tomb is prepared for it ; that is among them the most important work a man has to do, and the bigger and the finer the tomb the better off the man is supposed to be. Others work as a penance : do all sorts of wicked things, then erect a temple, or give something to the priests to buy them off and obtain from them a passport to heaven. They think that this kind of beneficence will clear them and they will go scot-free in spite of their sinfulness. Such are some of the various motives for work.

Work for work's sake. There are some who are really the salt of the earth in every country and who work for work's sake, who do not care for name, or fame, or even to go to heaven. They work just because good will come of it. There are others who do good to the poor and help mankind from still higher motives, because they believe in doing good and love good. The motive for name and fame seldom brings immediate results, as a rule ; they come to us when we are old and have almost done with life. If a man works without any selfish motive in view, does he not gain anything ? Yes, he gains the highest. Unselfishness is more paying, only people have not the patience to practise it. It is more paying from the point of view of health also. Love, truth and unselfishness are not merely moral figures of speech, but they form our highest ideal, because in them lies such a manifestation of power. In the first place, a man who can work for five days, or even for five minutes, without any

selfish motive whatever, without thinking of future, of heaven, of punishment, or anything of the kind, has in him the capacity to become a powerful moral giant. It is hard to do it, but in the heart of our hearts we know its value, and the good it brings. It is the greatest manifestation of power — this tremendous restraint; self-restraint is a manifestation of greater power than all outgoing action. A carriage with four horses may rush down a hill unrestrained, or the coachman may curb the horses. Which is the greater manifestation of power, to let them go or to hold them? A cannon-ball flying through the air goes a long distance and falls. Another is cut short in its flight by striking against a wall, and the impact generates intense heat. All outgoing energy following a selfish motive is frittered away; it will not cause power to return to you, but if restrained it will result in development of power. This self-control will tend to produce a mighty will, a character which makes a Christ or a Buddha. Foolish men do not know this secret; they nevertheless want to rule mankind. Even a fool may rule the whole world if he works and waits. Let him wait a few years, restrain that foolish idea of governing; and when that idea is wholly gone, he will be a power in the world. The majority of us cannot see beyond a few years, just as some animals cannot see beyond a few steps. Just a little narrow circle; that is our world. We have not the patience to look beyond, and thus become immoral and wicked. This is our weakness, our powerlessness.

Even the lowest forms of work are not to be despised. Let the man who knows no better, work for selfish ends, for name and fame; but everyone should always try to get towards higher and higher motives and to understand them. “To work we have the right, but not to the fruits thereof.” Leave the fruits alone. Why care for results? If you wish to help a man, never think what that man’s attitude should be towards you. If you want to do a great or a good work, do not trouble to think what the result will be.

There arises a difficult question in this ideal of work. Intense activity is necessary; we must always work. We cannot live a minute without work. What then becomes of rest? Here is one side of the life-struggle, — work, in which we are whirled rapidly round. And here is the other,

that of calm, retiring renunciation : everything is peaceful around, there is very little of noise and show, only nature with her animals and flowers and mountains. Neither of them is a perfect picture. A man used to solitude, if brought in contact with the surging whirlpool of the world, will be crushed by it ; just as the fish that lives in the deep sea water, as soon as it is brought to the surface, breaks into pieces, deprived of the weight of water on it that had kept it together. Can a man who, has been used to the turmoil and the rush of life live at ease if he comes to a quiet place ? He suffers and perchance may lose his mind. The ideal man is he who, in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert. He has learned the secret of restraint ; he has controlled himself. He goes through the streets of a big city with all its traffic, and his mind is as calm as if he were in a cave, where not a sound could reach him ; and he is intensely working all the time. That is the ideal of Karma Yoga, and if you have attained to that you have really learned the secret of work.

But we have to begin from the beginning, to take up the works as they come to us and slowly make ourselves, more unselfish every day. We must do the work and find out the motive power that prompts us ; and, almost without exception, in the first years, we shall find that our motives are always selfish ; but gradually this selfishness will melt by persistence, till at last will come the time when we shall be able to do really unselfish work. We may all hope that some day or other, as we struggle through the paths of life, there will come a time when we shall become perfectly unselfish ; and the moment we attain to that, all our powers will be concentrated, and the knowledge which is ours will be manifest.

# Chapter II

## Each is Great in his Own Place

According to the Sankhya philosophy, nature is composed of three forces called, in Sanskrit, Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. These as manifested in the physical world are what we may call equilibrium, activity and inertness. Tamas is typified as darkness or inactivity; Rajas is activity, expressed as attraction or repulsion; and Sattva is the equilibrium of the two.

In every man there are these three forces. Sometimes Tamas prevails; we become lazy; we cannot move; we are inactive, bound down by certain ideas or by mere dullness. At other times activity prevails and at still other times that calm balancing of both. Again, in different men, one of these forces is generally predominant. The characteristic of one man is inactivity, dullness and laziness; that of another, activity, power, manifestation of energy; and in still another we find the sweetness, calmness and gentleness, which are due to the balancing of both action and inaction. So in all creation — in animals, plants and men — we find the more or less typical manifestation of all these different forces.

Karma Yoga has specially to deal with these three factors. By teaching what they are and how to employ them it helps us to do our work better. Human society is a graded organisation. We all know about morality, and we all know about duty, but at the same time we find that in different countries the significance of morality varies greatly. What is regarded as moral in one country, may in another be considered perfectly immoral. For instance, in one country cousins may marry; in another, it is thought to be very immoral; in one, men may marry their sisters-in-law; in another, it is regarded as immoral; in one country people may marry only once; in another, many times; and so forth. Similarly in all other departments of morality we find the standard varies greatly; yet we have the idea that there must be a universal standard of morality.

So it is with duty. The idea of duty varies much among different nations: in one country, if a man does not do certain things, people will say he has acted wrongly; while if he does those very things in another country, people will say that he did not act rightly; and yet we know that there must be some universal idea of duty. In the same way, one class of society thinks that certain things are among its duty, while another class thinks quite the opposite and would be horrified if it had to do those things. Two ways are left open to us, — the way of the ignorant, who think that there is only one way to truth and that all the rest are wrong, — and the way of the wise, who admit that, according to our mental constitution or the different planes of existence in which we are, duty and morality may vary. The important thing is to know that there are gradations of duty and of morality — that the duty of one state of life, in one set of circumstances will not and cannot be that of another.

To illustrate: — All great teachers have taught, “Resist not evil,” that non-resistance is the highest moral ideal. We all know that, if a certain number of us attempted to put that maxim fully into practice, the whole social fabric would fall to pieces, the wicked would take possession of our properties and our lives, and would do whatever they liked with us. Even if only one day of such non-resistance were practised it would lead to disaster. Yet, intuitively, in our heart of hearts we feel the truth of the teaching, “Resist not evil.” This seems to us to be the highest ideal; yet to teach this doctrine only would be equivalent to condemning a vast portion of mankind. Not only so, it would be making men feel that they were always doing wrong, cause in them scruples of conscience in all their actions; it would weaken them, and that constant self-disapproval would breed more vice than any other weakness would. To the man who has begun to hate himself the gate to degeneration has already opened; and the same is true of a nation.

Our first duty is not to hate ourselves; because to advance we must have faith in ourselves first and then in God. He who has no faith in himself can never have faith in God. Therefore, the only alternative remaining to us is to recognise that duty and morality vary under different circumstances; not that the man who resists evil is doing what



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# KARMA YOGA

## THE PATH OF SELFLESS ACTION

Karma Yoga, or the path of selfless action, seeks to face the problem of ignorance by eradicating the ego. Swami Vivekananda argues that it is the ego, born of ignorance, that binds us to this world through attachment. The ego creates a dreamland of separative existence that disclaims the rights of others. It wants to achieve the impossible, and it desires the undesirable.

Swami Vivekananda says that our egotistic, selfish actions have created walls around us. These walls not only set us apart from others, but they divide us from our true Self within.

By performing actions in a selfless manner, we can break down the walls that separate us from the Self. The key message of Karma Yoga is: "Beat the inexorable law of karma by Karma Yoga. Release yourself from the chains of attachment by practicing non-attachment to the results of action."



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