

Karma Yoga

by Swami Sivananda

Half-hearted service is no service at all. Give your whole heart, mind and soul when you serve. This is very important when you practise Karma Yoga.

Some people have their body in one place, mind in another place, and soul in another place. That is the reason why they do not realise any substantial progress in the path.

Forget not the goal of life amidst selfish activities. The goal of life is Self-realisation. Are you attempting to reach the end and aim of life? Are you doing Japa, Pranayama and Meditation? Have you kept up the ideal before the mind's eye? That day in which you do not practise any spiritual Sadhana is wasted. Give the mind to God and the hands to work. You will have to analyse and scrutinise your motives. It is the selfish motive and not the work itself that binds a man to Samsara. Prepare the mind for Karma Yoga. Mere selfish work cannot be taken as Yogic activity. The mind is so framed that it always expects something for a small piece of work. When you smile you expect a return of smile from your friend. When you raise your hand in salutation, you will expect a salute from other people. Even when you give a cup of water to another man, you expect him to be grateful to you. When such is the case, how can you perform Nishkama Karma Yoga?

Life is very precious. Live in the spirit of the Gita teaching and work without expectation of fruits and egoism. Think you are Nimitta in the hands of Lord Narayana. If you work with this mental attitude you will become a Yogi soon. Work never degrades a man. Unselfish work is Puja of Narayana. Work is worship. All works are sacred. There is no menial work from the highest view-point of the absolute, from the view-point of Karma Yoga. Even scavenging when done with the right spirit and mental attitude is Yogic action. Even a scavenger can realise God in his own station of life by service. The famous butcher-Sadhaka of the Mahabharata realised God in his meat-shop (through serving his parents). You have got inside all materials for wisdom. There is a vast magazine of power and knowledge within you. It wants kindling. Now wake up, O Saumya!

When you work disinterestedly without any agency and when you surrender the works and fruits as Ishvararpana, all Karmas are transformed into Yogic Kriyas. Walking, eating, sleeping, answering the calls of nature, talking, etc., become offering unto the Lord. Every bit of work is Yoga for you. Think that Lord Siva is working through your hands, and is eating through your mouth. Think that your hands are the hands of Lord Siva. In the beginning some of your actions may be selfish and some may be unselfish. In the long run you can do all actions in an unselfish manner. Scrutinise your motives always. This is the key-note for Nishkama Karma Yoga. Every act can be spiritualised when the motive becomes pure. Work is meditation. Serve everyone with intense love, without any idea of agency, without expectation of fruits or reward. If you adopt the path of Jnana, feel you are a silent Sakshi and the Prakriti does everything.

It is selfishness that has deplorably contracted your heart. Selfishness is the bane of society. Selfishness clouds understanding.

Selfishness is petty-mindedness. Bhoga increases selfishness and selfish Pravritti. It is the root-cause for human sufferings. Real spiritual progress starts in selfless service. Serve the Sadhus, Sannyasins, Bhaktas and poor and sick persons with Bhava, Prema and Bhakti. The Lord is seated in the hearts of all.

The spirit of service must deeply enter into your very bones, cells, tissues, nerves, etc. The reward is invaluable. Practise and feel the cosmic expansion and infinite Ananda. Tall tales and idle gossip will not do, my dear friends! Evince intense zeal and enthusiasm in work. Be fiery in the spirit of service.

Have Nishtha with God and Cheshta with hands like the Bahurupi who has the Nishtha of a male and the Cheshta of a female. You will be able to do two things at a time by practice. The manual work will become automatic, mechanical or intuitive. You will have two minds. A portion of the mind will be at work; three quarters of the mind will be in the service of the Lord, in meditation, in Japa. Karma Yoga is generally combined with Bhakti Yoga. A Karma Yogin offers to the Lord as an oblation whatever he does through the Karma-Indriyas. This is Ishvara Pranidhana.

Training of Karma Yoga

A raw untrained aspirant feels, "My preceptor is treating me like a servant or a peon. He is using me for petty jobs." He who has understood the right significance of Karma Yoga will take every work as Yogic activity or worship of the Lord. There is no menial work in his vision. Every work is Puja of Narayana. In the light of Karma Yoga all actions are sacred. That aspirant who always takes immense delight in doing works which are considered by the worldly man as menial services, and who always does willingly such acts only will become a dynamic Yogi. He will be absolutely free from conceit and egoism. He will have no downfall. The canker of pride cannot touch him.

Study the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhiji. He never made any difference between menial service and dignified work. Scavenging and cleaning of the latrine was the highest Yoga for him. This was the highest Puja for him. He himself did the cleaning of latrines. He annihilated the illusory little 'I' through service of various sorts. Many highly educated persons joined his Ashram for learning Yoga under him. They thought that Gandhiji would teach them Yoga in some mysterious manner in a private room and would give lessons on Pranayama, meditation, abstraction, awakening of Kundalini, etc. They were disappointed when they were asked to clean the latrine first. They left the Ashram immediately. Gandhiji himself repaired his shoes. He himself used to grind flour and take upon his shoulders the work of others also when they were unable to do their allotted portion of work for the day in the Ashram. When an educated person, a new Ashramite, felt shy to do the grinding work, Gandhiji himself would do his work in front of him and then the man would do the work himself from the next day willingly.

In the West, cobblers and peasants have risen to a very great position in society. Every work is a respectable work for them. A boy applies polish to the boots in the streets of London for a penny, carries newspapers and journals in the afternoon for sale and works as an apprentice under a journalist during his leisure hours at night. He studies books, works hard, never wastes a minute and in a few years becomes a journalist of great repute and international fame. In Punjab some graduates have taken to hair-dressing work. They have understood the dignity of labour.

A real Yogi does not make any difference between menial and respectable work. It is only an ignorant man who makes such a difference. Some aspirants are humble in the beginning of their spiritual career. When they get some name and fame, some followers, admirers, devotees and disciples, they become victims to pride.

They cannot do any service. They cannot carry anything on their heads or hands. That Yogi who carries the trunk on his head without the slightest feeling in the railway platform amidst a multitude of his admirers, disciples and devotees, without making any outward show of humility must be adored. Sage Jada Bharata carried the palanquin of King Rahugana on his shoulders without murmuring. Lord Krishna shampooed the legs of a Raja when his barber devotee was on leave. Sri Rama carried a pot of water for the ablution of one of his devotees. Sri Krishna took the form of a menial servant as Vithoo and paid the money to the Nawab on behalf of his devotee, Dhamaji. If you really want to grow in the spiritual path you must do all sorts of service daily till the end of life. Then only you are safe. Do not stop doing service when you have become a famous Yogi. The spirit of service must enter every nerve, cell, tissue and bone of your body. It must be ingrained in you. Then only you will become a real fullblown practical Vedantin.

Is there any greater Vedantin or Karma Yogi than Lord Buddha? He still lives in our hearts, because the spirit of service was ingrained in him and he spent his whole life in serving others in a variety of ways. A magnanimous soul, one without a second! You can also become a Buddha if you apply yourself diligently to selfless service with the right mental attitude.

Attain Nirlipta State

Lord Krishna says in His Gita: 'Tasmat Sarveshu kaleshu mam anusmara yudhya cha'. "Therefore at all times think of Me and fight." Give the mind to God and the hand to work. The typist works at the machine and talks with his friends. The player on the harmonium plays on the organ and talks and jokes with his friends. The lady knits and talks with her comrades. The mind of the girl who has a water-pot on her head is on the water-pot, though she is talking and joking with her companions while she is walking on the road. A nurse while she is nursing the baby of another lady has her mind rivetted on her own baby. A cowherd while he is looking after the cows of other people has his mind fixed on his own cow. Even so, have your mind fixed at the lotus feet of the Lord, while you are doing your household duties and office work. You will realise Self-consciousness quickly. Just as the water remains unaffected in the lotus leaf, just as the oil floats upon the surface of the water without being affected in any way, so also you should remain in the world amidst troubles, pleasures and difficulties.

Just as the tongue is not affected by taking ghee, so also you should remain unaffected even amidst worldly activities and troubles. You must keep up the Nirlipta state. This is Jnana. This is balance (Samata). You may fail to keep the balance and Nirlipta state in thousand and one times. But in the long run you are bound to succeed if you persist in your practice and if you discipline the mind properly. Every failure is a pillar for future success. Remember this point well.

A Karma Yogin should not expect even return of love, appreciation, gratitude, and admiration from the people whom he is serving.

Only he who has reduced his wants and controlled the Indriyas can do Karma Yoga. How can a luxurious man with revolting Indriyas serve others?

He wants everything for himself and wants to exploit and domineer others.

Another qualification is that you must be balanced in success or failure, gain or loss, victory or defeat. You must be free from Raga and Dvesha. "An action which is ordained, done by one undesirous of fruit, devoid of attachment, without love or hate, is called pure". (Gita XVIII-23).

What is Karma

Karma means work or action. According to Jaimini, rituals like Agnihotra, Yajnas, etc., are termed Karmas. There is a hidden power in Karma termed Adrishta which brings in fruits of Karmas for the individual. Karma is all for Jaimini. Karma is everything for a student of Mimamsa school of thought. Jaimini is the founder of Purva Mimamsa. He was a student of Maharshi Vyasa, the founder of Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta. The Mimamsa school denies the existence of Ishvara who awards the fruits of works.

According to the Gita, any action is Karma. Charity, sacrifice, Tapas are all Karmas. In a philosophical sense, breathing, seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, smelling, walking, talking, etc., are all Karmas. Thinking is the real Karma. Raga-Dvesha constitute the real Karma.

How to Find Right or Wrong Action

Have right thinking. Use your reason and commonsense. Follow the injunctions of the Sastras. Consult the code of Manu or Yajnavalkya Smriti whenever you have doubts. You will be able to find out whether you are doing right or wrong action. If you say, 'Sastras are countless. They are like ocean. I can hardly understand the truths that are inculcated. I cannot fathom and gauge their depths. There are contradictions. I am puzzled and bewildered.' Then strictly follow the words of a Guru on whom you have absolute faith and confidence. The third way is: Have fear in God. Consult your conscience. The shrill, inner voice will guide you. As soon as you hear the voice, do not delay even a moment. Start the action diligently without consulting anybody. Practise to hear the inner voice in the morning at four. If there is fear, shame, doubt or pricking of conscience, know that you are doing a wrong action. If there is joy, exhilaration or satisfaction, understand that you are doing the right action.

Inner Voice

When the diverse, confining sheaths of the Atma have been dissolved by Sadhana, when the different Vrittis of the mind have been controlled by mental drill or gymnastic, when the conscious mind is not active, you enter the realm of spirit life, the super-conscious mind where Buddhi and pure reason and intuition, the faculty of direct cognition of Truth, manifest. You pass into the kingdom of peace where there is none to speak, you will hear the voice of God which is very clear and pure and has an upward tendency. Listen to the voice with attention and interest. It will guide you. It is the voice of God.

Prayer for a Karma Yogin

(By Sri Sankaracharya)

Atma tvam girija mitih sahacharah pranah sareeram griham.

Puja te vishyopabhogarachana nidra samadhisthitih,

Sancharah padoyoh pradakshinavidhih stotrani sarva giro;

Yadyat karma karomi tat tad akhilam sambhotavaradhanam.

Repeat the Sloka at the end of your meditation.

"Thou art Atma: Buddhi is thy consort, Parvati (who is born of mountain); the Pranas are thy attendants; this body is thy house; the action of sensual enjoyment is thy worship; deep sleep is the establishment of Samadhi; walking by my feet is the perambulation around Thee; all my speeches are thy praises; whatever actions I perform, are all Thy worship; Oh Sambho!"