

Principles of Karma Yoga

By Swami Suryadevananda

Karma Yoga is the 'Yoga of Action'. Action is not limited to physical action but includes thought, feeling, communication and physical action. All these are only different forms of *action*. How does yoga fit into action – or, how does action lead to yoga?

Yoga is the discovery of the Divine Omnipresence or God – the only reality or truth. This presents one little difficulty: "If God is the only reality or truth, where does that leave me? How do I get by and live in this world?" A convenient answer would, of course, be to break things up into godly or spiritual things and ungodly or secular things, having two sets of rules governing our conduct in the life spiritual and the life secular. But, yoga, vedanta and the sages declare, "God alone is!" Why then do we create a division in our own minds in an attempt to adjust ourselves with the truth of things? Can this division or unreality ever lead to the discovery of the truth of God's Divine Omnipresence?

The yogi sees that action is inevitable; and since indivisibility is the truth of things, right action can help remove confusion and throw light towards the discovery of unity. Both of these aspects are approached at the same time. In the Upanishads, we have an often quoted story of the rope in the snake. In low-light conditions, a rope on the ground can be mistaken for a snake and result in real experiences of fear. Throwing light on the rope at once dispels the fear and reveals the rope.

Perfection through action is the way of the Karma Yogi. This is a little different from what is commonly known as social service. In social service, attention is usually turned outward on a good cause that one wishes to offer services towards. It is through doing good work that the social worker may hope to bring about an inner transformation. The yogi realizes that all trouble is caused by the ego springing into action and focuses his attention within to detect the movement of this ego and become incapable of harm or wrong action first. One can *do* good but not *be* good – but when one *is* good, only goodness surges forth in the different forms of expression. With this, the yogi has an unblinking eye within, and action – meaning, once again: thought, feeling, communication and physical action – becomes a means of self-perfection.

The ego is very subtle and difficult to detect, but its workings are noticeable in the field of action. Here, the play of ego is seen as motive before and during action, and in its full claim of the fruits of the action. Karma Yoga or the Yoga of Action tackles both of these by first, separating motive from action or action free of motive and second, by not claiming the fruits of the action exclusively.

1. Separating Motive from Action

Selfishness inserts itself as a precursor to action by motives. Various justifications are used and are seen as quite acceptable and often, even laudable. Whatever be the justification, motive requires this little 'I' before all else that is added on. Is it possible to look at each situation and do what needs to be done without the interference of motive – just because it needs to be done? Something needs to be done – do it and with all enthusiasm and attention.

It may be felt that motive can goad action and perhaps get more done, but it really works the other way around. Whenever there is motive, there is this little 'I' that insists on examining everything to see if it suits it and its agendas in some way. This thwarts effort, and though one feels strongly about doing something, the effort can be abandoned midstream or not started at all. The presence of motive is the presence of the entire weight of the ego – all at once or unnoticed gradually. So what could have been seen as perhaps helpful, very soon asserts full control and all the noble and magnanimous initial thoughts are exhausted. When this cycle repeats itself a few times, one becomes hesitant and incapable of doing things, of changing things. The yogi sees this clearly, and intent on ridding himself of all inner turmoil, tackles the ego by focusing on motives – its ambassador.

Motives require attachment in some form; attachments stem from desires and desires are rooted in the ego. Masking the motives with noble thoughts does not change these dynamics, as motives are not only rooted in the ego, they *are* the ego at work.

It is neither easy nor difficult to rid oneself of motives and thin the ego; it all depends on our evaluation of the usefulness or uselessness of the ego and its working in the field of action called motive. If you clearly see the harm the ego does by inserting motive ('what about me, what about my ...') in all that we do, including in our relationships, change becomes easier. The danger seen in anything gives the necessary strength for its avoidance or overcoming. Here lies the key change! – *one must see the danger in staying the course.*

If you have to drive somewhere on a stormy day, you are extra alert because you recognize the danger of not being alert in hazardous conditions, and so extra energy is released to you for the danger felt. The release of deeper sources of energy works on this principle – it is always demand and supply and never the other way around. This demand cannot be an intellectual demand, it has to be something tangible that is felt and at the same time, the need to avoid the danger or overcome it. This double principle of clearly seeing the danger and a whole-souled feeling to avoid or overcome it will release the requisite energy for the task.

The energy released is psychic energy and it turns upon itself in the mind to watch motive right when it rises. Situations arise and we can freely do what needs to be done; and all the while the ongoing inner vigilance itself does not allow the interference of the ego as motive. There is no suppression here at all – unrelenting vigilance watches the rise and subsequent fall of the ego just like the rise and fall of waves, watched by the ocean. The watching is subjective, and since there cannot be two subjects at the same time, keeps by its own nature the rise of ego's waves as the observed or objective.

For vigilance to work, it cannot be selective, it has to be always on, always working or it does not work. Vigilance is not an 'on demand' function *per se*; it has to be unrelenting or eternal. Gradually, the feeling of subjectivity transfers from the rise and fall of ego's moods to a steady, impartial and ongoing awareness – and this is a tremendous step in the thinning of the ego.

2. Separating Thought from Consciousness

Continual action with motive thins the mind, as it does not require memory for interpretation of anything. The only memory used is mechanical memory or data, dynamic

memory or interpretive memory, and is gradually exhausted by disuse. Interpretive memory is conditioning or habit which is always in the past.

The present is always fresh, new and the unconditioned intelligence begins to respond when memory is not used. The need to know without memory awakens the inner intelligence, so to say (it has never been asleep but dormant, since unused) and the yogi continues to do what needs to be done, free of motive.

Memory or the conditioned mind gets lighter, thinner, as vigilance does not allow the past to interfere with the present. This lighter mind takes to meditation naturally as all mental distractions are the interference of memory only.

3. Self-Inquiry

Now the Karma Yogi's practices merge with the other yogas in the mainstream of meditation. He has always been meditating, but as thought is separated from consciousness, the flow of attention can be turned upon itself in self-inquiry.

Action is the Karma Yogi's way of self-purification, thinning the mind, and he sees this as a win-win situation which is most useful to him and others at the same time. He has energy, talent, ability and uses it constructively. Energy that was running in wrong channels is recycled and made to run right, and this benefits others at the same time.

Closing Thoughts

All yogas have different approaches to suit different people. These differences are only in the particular emphasis for self-purification. Anything ignored will become the Achilles heel or soft-spot when challenges arise. A blend of the other yogas is recommended to keep the spirit in spiritual practice and have all-round growth.

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