

Karma Yoga

A Practical Guide

As we practice japa yoga, we realize that repeating and listening to the mantra without being distracted is not as easy as we thought. The rise and fall of distraction is not the problem, being distracted certainly is. If we get distracted while doing one thing without any external stimulus, so to say, we can get an idea of what must be happening in our daily life where there is much external stimulus.

Why do we get distracted? We set out to do something of our choice—here, repeating and listening to the mantra. No one is forcing us to do anything at all—it is a totally neutral practice. We select a mantra and sit to repeat it and listen to it, but ... some thoughts seem to arise and very soon, we start thinking them.

Conceptually, we seem to understand the difference between thoughts that rise and fall as something distinct from us, our sense of being, as we are aware of them. But, we still seem to get mixed up with them and then these thoughts start expanding—thinking. These rapidly expanding thoughts assume our being and we become the fuel for their blind, erratic play.

Interference of conditioning

Each day, we are presented with different conditions, these are neither easy nor difficult—they are just conditions. What makes them easy or difficult is the interference of conditioning or dynamic memory. Static memory is just images, particulars and data—it is useful. Dynamic memory is static memory or images and data *charged with value that is not inherent in it*. For example, someone said something rude yesterday while at work and I was hurt. Today, I see this same person coming towards me and ... 'Oh, that person is coming' but, 'that' person is not coming—this person is coming. The 'thatness' is not part of the person but an internal add-on to 'this person' who is coming. He may be coming to apologize for yesterday but this all becomes very difficult if I feel 'that person is coming'.

Our sorrows are largely due to the interference of conditioning with conditions. Conditioning is not part of any condition. Conditioning interferes with the present condition and I experience sorrow which I think has something to do with the outer condition but is the interference of memory or conditioning. Conditioning colors the present by insisting, 'this is what is happening'

when it is not so. So, we have to find a way to live that neither stems from nor adds to conditioning.

Avoiding conditioning

1. Actions, a response to situations, not thought: We must be able to live actively which is to respond to what is *actually* happening instead of being nudged by memory or conditioning. For this, we have to be continually alert so everything can be seen afresh for what it is. This will thin down existing conditioning, as our responses are based on direct perception—which is seeing things as they are without the interference or insistence of memory.

2. Actions sustained by situations, not thought: We have to do what needs to be done without the interference of 'what suits me best'. Each moment is a fresh situation and each situation has one best response. What is the need for the interference of our likes and dislikes in this? Something needs to be done—do it. Something does not need to be done—carry on. Direct perception must go into direct action. I use 'direct' repeatedly to stress the non-interference of dynamic thought, or thought charged with feelings about things.

3. Thoughts end when action ends: When the action completes, thought completes as well and there is no psychological extension. This is necessary to avoid adding additional conditioning to what already exists. Why should the mind think of something that is not just here, right now and in front of you unless thinking is required for some action now? If the mind is allowed to drift, it will be inefficient in the present activity—being elsewhere—and will impose sorrow on you, as the mind would rather be in something other than the present which means the present is not favored. This drifting and abiding in the network of thought is entry into the doorway of sorrow.

Life's stage

Here is where life with all its activity in relationships becomes extremely useful, as it provides continual settings for restoration of the natural state of inner peace. Besides, it is very difficult to meditate when we are continually pulled and pushed by memory into action—be it mental as thinking thought or physical action.

Life is a steady stream of action and we are always doing something, even if it is doing nothing at all—we are then *doing* nothing at all. As we have already seen, heedlessness is the invitation to conditioning to act, and this carelessness brings untold sorrow and misery.

Some are able to see the danger clearly and bring instant transformation of the mind. Clarity of perception can bring about instant change. For the most, the swift inner cut of thought from action is quite a task practically and here is where karma yoga becomes most useful.

Karma yoga: action in the yoga spirit

Karma yoga is usually translated as selfless action, but somehow the emphasis is placed on 'action' instead of 'selfless'. The ego cannot be seen tangibly, but we know its presence by its movement within us as thoughts and impulses that want to act. I recommend a two-pronged approach.

First: Find one aspect or area of your life where feelings are not too involved and that is not rooted too far in the past. Here, act and live consciously or renew yourself by doing what needs to be done, free of motivation from start to finish. Our conditioning is baggage we have picked up in life and life is both opportunity and validation of abandoning conditioning, as it is possible that we could be carrying it unknowingly.

Second: Start a new activity, some work that has little or nothing to do with you personally. This is important because we tend to turn a blind eye to thoughts regarding 'ours' in some way and the eye of scrutiny to those that are 'not ours'. Selecting an environment free of these 'ours' and 'not ours' levels the playing field by making the movement of *all* thought equally suspect. This new field of activity helps as it gives less room for the interference of memory in action; and karma yoga is a way to discover the way to do what needs to be done without the impulse rising from, sustained by, or ending with memory.

This is where karma yoga is very different from social service. Movement towards selflessness, which involves discovery of the ego's wanting to interfere and being able to act, doing what needs to be done without the ego's play is what is important to the yogi—not just the action, however meritorious it may seem socially.

This new activity is actually a new start of activity. With a fresh approach in an older activity and starting a new activity that does not center around yourself, you will find the way to do what needs to be done without action springing from the ego or conditioning or adding new conditioning. This will weaken existing conditioning and show you the way to live without it. You will soon discover that life flows very well without the need for the ego, and you will be very careful not to strengthen it in any way.

Every way shows the way

Everything you contact is also a way to perfection if you are alert. The yogi uses activity to discover and abandon the ego—and not for the output the activity may generate. The focus on the intangible, which is how everything is approached and done, is much more important than the tangible results produced. When the emphasis is on the intangible—which is transformation of the mind—the effects are in one's being and hence not in time process. If action takes precedence, the effects, however helpful to the situation, are tangible and in time

process. Not addressing self-change, the triggers for action and experience remain unchanged and situations will keep reoccurring that need attention again and again.

Practice of karma yoga

Since selflessness is what the yogi strives towards, all activity is an opportunity for its practice. The self or ego has no place in action which is a response to situations. However much we may want to believe otherwise, situations are not personal at all. We are not only part of every situation, but every situation is connected to everything. Can you call a wave or a series of waves personal things in the ocean? Are we not part of this immense fabric of nature that nourishes us each day? We think we are nourished by our ingenuity and smarts—but it is not so. We may have quick wits to seize a larger slice of the pie, but the larger the slice you crave for, the smaller you have to be. Nature feels natural because it is devoid of selfishness. Everything in nature is nourished by nature—by whosoever's hands she does it—and then, she nourishes others in return. This is how nothing ever loses contact with the existing unity. The tomato plant is nourished by nature; and ripened on the vine in its perfect timing, it lives to nourish others. It is taken care of and it takes care of—just where does 'its interests' come into play? In trying to take care of ourselves, we bring smallness, disconnectedness and isolation to our own larger self. Nature does not have that problem, and that is why it is natural—just as it is. We cannot really stand outside things either physically or vitally. Why do we feel the need to take a wrong turn and stand outside things psychologically?

This, then, is the ego's response to situations in which it too does not stand outside. When the ego interferes, it insists on standing outside every situation. The ego's interference in life, which includes all relationships and action or response, is the cause of our sorrows—and so we must find a way to live and do whatever needs to be done without it. This includes all stages of action—from seeing what needs to be done to the act itself, and our fixation on the fruit of action. We think being obsessed with the results of action is the way to get the most—let's get into this a little. In order to watch the play of your interests, you have to stand *outside* the action. When you stand outside the action, even a little, you cannot give yourself to the action completely and hence, results cannot be the best possible. You will often second guess, compare with others or with the past and not only thwart the effort but fail to tap its potential. Scientists who have made important discoveries have only done so by giving themselves wholly to the task on hand, as they have had to enter into the very substance of the thing and this cannot happen when you insist on watching from outside so as to 'protect your interests'. How can anything be 'yours' if you stand outside it?

When something needs to be done, do it with all of your heart and being and then let go—not just when the action is completed, but not having clung to the act itself. Karma yoga affords psychological disentanglement and freedom at every stage.

As we discussed earlier, all may not be able to bring about this inner transformation at one stroke and hence, areas of activity are to be selected that will be like nurseries for plants, giving one room to experiment.

Now, the key is to do what needs to be done with all your heart and soul. Initially, the going is good as you take joy in this doing or that, and perhaps the work is also appreciated. But, soon enough, the work gets tedious—same old thing, with people taking you for granted—and so appreciation dims. Politics and the new people at work get the attention and you toil in the background with decreased enthusiasm, as you are not given the same attention you once were.

All this has to be seen not at the later stage, but at the very beginning where the mind is watched continually. There is no suppression or the other extreme of self-condemnation either. The focus is on selflessness; and as you clearly see the rise of ego's urges and promptings and continue to do what needs to be done—you are in each moment bringing about a transformation of the mind.

Life in all its vicissitudes is action, and when you learn how to do what needs to be done without the interference of thought as a spring to action, sustainer of action and the end of action, you learn how to keep thought or conditioning *out of* action. This is very important not only for your peace of mind but for meditation to follow.

Karma yoga, an aid to meditation

We will go into meditation later, but consider that the challenge in meditating is being distracted, not distraction. Let distractions be there. Why should I get distracted if I set out to do something by my own choice. The practice of japa shows one the chaos of the mind, and karma yoga becomes a means for bringing some order into the mind by discovering how to keep thought out of action. When we come to meditation, you will see that this is an excellent foundation for meditation which can move forward to the next step of understanding the relationship between awareness and thought.

The purpose of work is to be worked on. Practice is not *for* something, it is *the thing in itself*, but since we are not able to jump across the river in a single leap and actualize the truth—it is called practice. Practice diligently!

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