

Karma Yoga Rahasyam¹

Introduction

The subject matter of the Bhagavad Gītā is both the knowledge of Brahman and yoga śāstra. Yoga śāstra means karma yoga śāstra which includes devotion as well as other disciplines that are means for preparing the mind for the knowledge of Brahman or ātmā, the Self. Self-knowledge is the ultimate purport of Bhagavad Gītā just as in the case of the Vedas. If gaining knowledge, jñāna prāpti, is the goal, then karma yoga gives, jñāna yogyatā prāpti, the preparedness for achieving it. Since any knowledge can take place only in the mind, the preparedness of the mind for Self-knowledge is gained by karma yoga. For this reason, karma yoga is discussed in a significant way throughout the Bhagavad Gītā. Nevertheless, when the topic of karma yoga is introduced in Chapter 2, its full scope is remarkably outlined by Lord Kṛṣṇa in a set of six verses (2.47-2.52). Karma, or action, can become an effective means for Self-knowledge by infusing yoga into it. The fundamentals involved in the process of infusion of yoga into one's life which is the content of the six verses mentioned above constitute the essence of karma yoga.

The law of karma

A uniqueness of the discussion of karma in the Bhagavad Gītā is that it is presented as a law as described by Pūjya Swāmi Dayānanda Saraswati. A karma will invariably produce a result which is governed by the 'law of karma.' As a law it is not different from any other laws that govern the empirical universe. Swāmi Dayānanda depicted the laws as 'orders' such as the physical order, biological order, epistemological order and so on. In the same vein, the law of karma is also an 'order' and is inviolable. In Vedānta the order is presented as that of Īśvara or even better, the order itself as Īśvara. This is, indeed, remarkable as it takes into account of a principle that is all knowing (sarvajña) and all power (sarvaśakti). Swāmi Dayānanda invariably refers to this principle as a 'hidden variable' in determining the result of an action, and something that has to be reckoned with while performing the action. Therefore, an individual performing a karma has connection, (**karmanyevādhikārah**; adhikārah = sambandhaḥ) only to the action (karmani eva) for the law of karma, or, Īśvara, determines the outcome. All the aspects of karma yoga discussed in the Bhagavad Gītā are based on this cardinal principle of the law of karma.

Thus, the outcome of an action, in commensuration with it, is determined by the 'law of karma' and consequently, the doer is decoupled from the outcome. This is not an easily acceptable scenario for the doer. In fact, a natural proclivity for the doer would be not to perform the action at all. But then, Lord Kṛṣṇa advises in emphatic terms in verse 2.47² that one cannot resort to inaction (*te saṅgaḥ akarmani mā astu*). On the one hand there is the Lord's dictum not to resort to inaction and on the other there is the reality of not having control over the outcome of the action. This conundrum will give rise to a resistance in performing the action, especially when it is something one does not like to do in the first place. Therefore, to diffuse this resistance and heed to the advise of Lord Kṛṣṇa to not refrain from action, there must be some guiding principles. Adopting those principles and performing the action accordingly are the process of infusing yoga into action.

¹ The article is penned by Dr. V. Swaminathan based on the Bhagavad Gītā classes taught by Pujya Swami Vidatmanandaji at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA on the 1st and 3rd Sundays during June-August 2018. For most part the content herein is the transcribed and edited version of Swamiji's teachings. The author was inspired by Swamiji's distinctive and clear elucidation of the tenets of karma yoga as revealed in the Bhagavad Gītā through the verses 2.47-2.52.

The concept of duty

Generally, actions are desire driven (sakāma) where a desired end result is kept in view³ Bhagavad Gītā recasts action in a new light, thereby providing some important guiding principles. The first principle is avoiding desire prompted actions and performing actions that are motivated by a higher principle, namely, obligation or duty (kartavya). In this new outlook, karma means doing the right and appropriate thing in a given situation and letting go one's general impulse of doing what is convenient and what one likes to do. What is convenient or what one likes to do is what one believes will bring one a personal reward. This cessation of the desire for a personal reward in action is the first giant step towards karma yoga. Doing action for a personal reward is forsaken and is replaced with one's duty to do what is right and appropriate. The individual has to decide what is right and appropriate. Every one plays different roles according to varying situations. One is a father, mother, son, daughter, teacher, student, employee, employer, citizen and so on. One must play the role according to the script, which is doing what is right and appropriate. It does not matter what the karma is. A Brahmana has his own duty; a Kshatriya has his own duty and so on. Each one's karmas are different. But they are all duties. In that sense, all the karmas are equal. The state of mind with which each one performs the karma is common. All of them are doing what is right and appropriate in their respective situations. The forms of the karmas are different because the people who are performing the karmas are different. But the spirit with which they perform them is the same. The common spirit of duty levels the dissimilarities in actions. This was the idea of equality in Vedic times, where equality was governed by attitude, the spirit, and not by the form of an action.

Giving up the old habit of doing things that are impulsively motivated by one's likes and dislikes requires understanding and alertness. This is not easy, as changing the old habits of the mind is often painful. But there is no gain without pain and the gain is the emotional maturity of the mind required for self knowledge. In the person who gains this emotional maturity, the quality of the doership is transformed from a rājasik kartṛtva to a sātvik kartṛtva. A self-centered action (sakāma karma) is transformed to an other-centered action (niṣkāma karma). The niṣkāma karma helps one to overcome one's insecurity and one is transformed from a consumer to a contributor. One gains the jñāna yogatā (emotional maturity), a prerequisite for ātma jñānam. In this way, the quantum leap towards karma yoga in terms of performing one's duties also takes one towards discovering happiness in action. Obviously, there is uncertainty in the outcome being a source of happiness as one has no control over the outcome, which is determined by the law of karma. Whatever action that life brings to oneself, the performance of that action with love and dignity, is the secret of happiness. Following the right values and enjoying what one does, karma becomes a source of happiness. Karma is in the present and is what one controls. In contrast, karma phala, the outcome of the action, is in the future. One can be in the present only if one enjoys what one does. Why postpone one's happiness to the future? One can love even a monotonous action as long as one has the right mindset, which is the earnestness in performing actions that are required by one's role and circumstances. This mindset or attitude is the secret of happiness that is the key to success and not vice versa.

² कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन । karmaṇyevādhikāraṣte mā phaleṣu kadācana ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ mā karmaphalāheturbhūr te saṅgaḥ aakarmani mā astu ॥ 2.47

³ It is said that even a fool does not engage in action without keeping a result in view - prayojanam anuddīśya mando'pi karmani na pravartate.

Inactivity is not an option

The last quarter of the verse 2.47, मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि (*mā te saṅgo'stvakarmani*) – let your attachment not be to inaction (*niṣkriyatā*), is a direct teaching to Arjuna in the context of the *Gītā*. He had laid down his arms (verse 1.47) and decided not to fight (verse 2.9). Lord *Kṛṣṇa* instructed Arjuna that 'not fighting' or *niṣkriyatā* is not an option for him. In doing so, Lord *Kṛṣṇa* indirectly addressed Arjuna's misapprehension of *naiṣkarmya*, *niṣkriyatā*, and *vividiṣā sannyāsa*. Actionlessness, *naiṣkarmya*, is the nature of *ātmā* and it is what every one seeks. Abiding in the knowledge of the actionlessness Self is *mokṣa*. Action is generally thought to be the cause of bondage and Arjuna, thinking also as such, and wanting *mokṣa*, equated inactivity, *niṣkriyatā*, to *naiṣkarmya*. Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, however, instructed Arjuna that actions performed and not inactivity, will lead to actionlessness, which is the ultimate goal. Actionlessness is not a description of not performing actions but it is a description of the nature of the Self. For understanding this, *sannyāsa* is also considered as a means. The scriptures allow one to give up duties and take the life of a renunciate for the pursuit of knowledge of the Self, if the circumstances are right for that person. This *sannyāsa* is called *vividiṣā sannyāsa*. Arjuna had even considered this option (verse 2.5) based on an incorrect understanding of *vividiṣā sannyāsa* and *naiṣkarmya*. This *vividiṣā sannyāsa* is taken by one who reaches a stage in life where performance of duties is no longer relevant, that all his worldly and other worldly desires have left in the wake of *viveka* and *vairāgya*, and that the only remaining desire is for the pursuit of knowledge of the Self. Renunciation is a compatible way of life for this person as it gives him a certain leisure to pursue knowledge without the guilt of omission of performing his duties. Arjuna was not in that state of mind required for taking *vividiṣā sannyāsa*. He misunderstood the spirit of what is meant by *sannyāsa* and *naiṣkarmya*. He wrongly concluded that simply giving up actions or *niṣkriyatā* is *sannyāsa* and that it is the means for achieving the goal of life, *naiṣkarmya*. Hence Lord *Kṛṣṇa* had to impart to Arjuna that inactivity is not an option for him and that actions performed will lead to abiding in actionlessness. That inactivity is not an option is the second guiding principle in bringing yoga into one's life.

The desire for actionlessness, or *mokṣa*, is a genuine desire. This is what everyone is seeking. But this has to be achieved through action and not inaction, i.e., not by discarding one's duties. Freedom from action is not achieved by not doing action. No one will ever remain, even for a second, without performing action (verse 3.5). Human beings are endowed with a mind, the sense organs, and organs of action. Further, a world is given for interaction. Therefore, one will be doing something or the other. If one is not doing anything, it does not mean one is a renunciate. Inperforming duties, either because of a role or because of certain Vedic injunctions, there can be compulsions and all kinds of pressures. Lord *Kṛṣṇa*'s teaching is to perform actions/duties properly without the pressure. Freedom from action is performing actions without pressure for which one has to create the right frame of mind. One acquires the right frame of mind by living the life intelligently with right values and attitudes and by living a life of *karma yoga*. That is, doing actions with the condition, *mā phaleṣu kadācana*, without the agenda for a personal reward and doing action for others. Further, Lord *Kṛṣṇa* teaches that one may not become the author of the result of the action - *mā karma phala heturbhūḥ*. The understanding is *Īśvara* is the author of *karma phala*. This is not to be construed that one performs an action without a purpose, *prayojana*.

Implementing karma yoga in one's life

Performing *karma* purposefully, dictated by one's duties demanded by one's role and circumstances in life, with a sense of surrender to *Īśvara*'s will and accepting gracefully the outcomes may seem like a tall order.

This is so because of the orientation, born of ignorance, of emphasizing success as a gateway to happiness. One does karma to accomplish what is not accomplished, which seems to be the criterion for self-acceptance. One should slowly come out of this orientation and make karma the means of accomplishing what is already accomplished. Doership, kartṛtva (कर्तृत्व), is a privilege which human beings enjoy. Īśvara has given one the knowledge, the talent and the opportunity to do something where the situation warrants action. One must perform the action with dignity consistent with the commonly sensed values, sāmānya dharma, and particular values, viśeṣa dharma. Action is an expression of life and it is a privilege. Every activity is a cosmic event and as such, is in order. In this cosmic activity so many situations, so many factors and so many people are involved, connected in a complex web of karma network, and one's karma is also included in the network. Being a cosmic activity, successes and failures no longer pertain to individuals, as they are also cosmic events. One may not know all the factors that govern the event but one may accept the inviolable law of karma that connects the activity and the compatible result associated with it. One may look upon that law itself as Īśvara who is sarvajña, and sarvavid, all knowing both generally and in particular. While one may judge a result of one's actions as a failure or success since one may not have knowledge of all the variables involved, from the cosmic perspective, from the perspective of the all knowing, there are no failures and successes.

Īśvara as the order, is fair and benevolent to all creatures. He has no agenda, no likes and dislikes and no axe to grind. One may give the benefit of doubt to Īśvara as the benefactor and with that śraddhā one grows out of the narrow way of thinking and judging the results of actions as success or failure. One delegates to Īśvara the consequences of success or failure and stops identifying with the outcome. Instead, one identifies with Īśvara and let His will to take over. This is bhakti yoga, the other side of the coin of karma yoga. There is no karma yoga without taking into account Īśvara. The implementation of karma yoga in one's life requires performing a purposeful action in such a way that the means are not compromised for the sake of the end. In other words, dharma (values) is not compromised for the sake of a desirable outcome. The outcome, whatever that be, is gracefully accepted. Courage is required in karma, courage to do what is right and appropriate in a given situation that is demanded of the person. For doing so, one has to overcome the impulses and temptations of the mind to compromise. One is motivated to perform the action because it is the right thing to do and not because of the outcome. Let karma be done with the attitude of yoga to get rid of one's likes and dislikes. A mind free from the hold of likes and dislikes is a sātvik mind ready to discover the truth of oneself as happiness. Karma is not the means for creating happiness. Instead, it is the means for tapping into happiness which is oneself. Karma performed with a sense of humility and gratitude, as a devotee of Īśvara without the sense of ownership, as a trustee of the desire and capabilities that one is endowed with to act, makes one an exalted contributor. Such a person is a *yogasthaḥ*⁴, who having become even minded to the outcome even before performing the action, *samo bhūtvā*, performs karma as a sātvik kartā. In due course he gains a cheerful mind ready to absorb the teaching that the truth about oneself is actionlessness, naiṣkarmya. Subsequently, he abides in the happy self.

The equanimity of the mind

Addressing Arjuna Lord Kṛṣṇa says that he should perform actions remaining steadfast in yoga, *yogasthaḥ*, abandoning attachment, *saṅgam tyaktvā*, and remaining the same to success and failure, *samo bhūtvā*.⁴ The Lord further defines the yoga as the evenness of mind which is maintaining the sameness of mind to success (siddhi) and failure (asiddhi), two mutually exclusive things. This is the third guiding principle in adopting a life of yoga.

Due to the attachment to the karma phala, karma phala āsakti, there is a subjective evaluation of the outcome by identifying with the result of the action. The attachment to the karma phala manifests in two ways. One is an insistence that the karma phala should be only such-and-such. In other words, the doer of the action defines what the outcome should be and further labels it as success or failure depending on whether the outcome is in accordance with the expectation or not. There is branding of the outcome as success or failure based on certain subjective viewpoints as arbitrated by the world which we are all obliged to accept. Right from the childhood, this idea of success and failure is so ingrained in our mind and consequently so many complexes are created. Invariably, if the result is 'successful' the world calls the person successful and if the result is a 'failure,' the world ridicules the person as a failure. Based on this world norms, one starts judging oneself as 'I am successful' or 'I am a failure.' This self identification with the outcome is the other manifestation of the karma phala āsakti.

One's reaction to the result of the action is a measure of the person's karma phala āsakti. When the outcome is in line with one's expectations, there is reaction in the form of an elation. This reaction sets off an avalanche of further reactions including the labelling of the outcome as a success, the gratification of the ego and the culmination in proclaiming 'I am successful.' In this way, one keeps on cascading the outcome which eventually leads to pride and arrogance and one loses the sense of propriety. A polar opposite outcome gives rise to another set of reactions, first in the form of depression, which leads to the labeling of oneself as 'I am a failure.' As before, in this kind of cascading, the outcome leads to despondency and self-deprecation. The outcome presents itself before us in the form of an event. Really speaking, there is no event that can be called success and there is no event that can be called failure because the same event is looked upon by different people in different ways. The outcome of a soccer game is considered success by one team and as a failure by the other team. This is understandable as some objective criterion is needed to measure the outcome of an event. One may say that an effort has succeeded or an effort has failed using some objective metrics, if applicable. But unfortunately, the classification of the outcome does not stop at the objective domain but it percolates down to the realm of self judgment.

The subjective branding that 'I am successful,' or that 'I am a failure,' is a greater bondage than declaring the event as a success or failure. Eschewing this harmful self-judgment born of attachment to the outcome of an action requires the appreciation of the fact that the outcome of an action is not solely in one's purview and that it is decided by the law of karma. There are really only karma and karma phala. Karma always produces the appropriate outcome. Whether the outcome is in keeping with one's prediction or not is a different matter. When an expected outcome does not materialize, it only means that one's prediction has failed. This need not be a surprise. One is limited in every way, meaning that one's knowledge is limited and that one does not know the many factors which influence the outcome. While one cannot control fully even the known factors, there are many unknown variables to reckon with. Pūjya Swāmi Dayānanda pointed out that we are bound to fail because of our limited knowledge, power, skills and so forth.

⁴योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय । योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय ।
सिद्धिसिद्धोः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥ 2.48

If things do not happen the way we want them, it is something to be expected. According to Swāmiji, when failure should be the inevitable result, that we succeed once in a while is a great miracle. Both failure and success are simply governed by the law of karma. Just as any other law, this law of karma is a stark reality of life. The law of karma never fails. But we still have the freedom of not branding ourselves as successful or unsuccessful. Exercising this freedom is the fourth guiding principle which solidifies the conviction in karma yoga.

The self judgment, that one is successful or one is a failure based on a reactive response to the outcome of an action, is unhealthy for one's emotional maturity. An uncontrolled response to the outcome when one's freewill is subdued is not in order. When one's values and attitudes have no say and impulses decide one's response, it ceases to be an action and remains as a reaction. Reactions in the form of frustrations, anger, jealousy are all causes of bondage. One's usual tendency is to react towards any outcome like a remote-controlled doll. If the result is what one expected, then one reacts with elation and irrational exuberance. In the opposite case, one gets depressed, gets frustrated, gets angry, blames others – all these reactions are unhealthy. Actions performed alertly, deliberately, consciously in accordance with one's role and circumstances are the means for one's growth. There is expression of freedom in acting with dignity and with the awareness of sāmānya dharma and viśeṣa dharma. If one can create a distance between oneself and the outcome, then the subjective branding will stop. This comes from *sañgam tyaktvā*, giving up the attachment to the outcome.

Lord advises Arjuna to eschew the reaction by maintaining the sameness of mind when one faces the results of one's actions. This does not mean that one is not concerned about the outcome, prayojanam, when one performs the action. One ought to perform a purposeful action only. The purpose may be served or may not be served. One's action is a very important factor in determining the outcome but not the only factor. There are many unknown factors. The yo-yo emotional response can be avoided by maintaining equanimity of the mind to whatever the outcome is, with the understanding that from the point of view of the law of karma there is really no success or failure. Recognizing that the law of karma is nothing but a manifestation of Īśvara, one may gracefully accept the outcome and look upon it as prasāda, a blessing of Īśvara. If the desired outcome did not come, one may still ask 'where is the grace of Īśvara?' However, if one does not see the outcome as a personal achievement, or lack of it, then one may look upon the outcome as something to learn from. It is not that failure is a punishment. With the śraddhā that the all-knowing Īśvara determines the outcome, one may consider that there must be a reason for the failed outcome. The benefit of doubt is given to Īśvara that He is one's well-wisher and therefore, whatever He does is for one's well-being alone. This śraddhā enables one to accept the outcome as the prasāda. With the prasāda buddhi, not only that one may not brand oneself as successful or a failure, but also one recognizes that failure is equally a reality of life as success is. One becomes objective to the realities of life. Only an objective mind can understand things for what they are and then alone vairāgya, dispassion, is possible.

That 'I am a doer - kartā,' is an identification. One cannot perform the action without this identification. A karma yogi has no doubt a sense of doership. However, he is a sātvik kartā, who remains alert not to make further identifications such as 'I am successful,' or 'I am a failure,' when he confronts the outcomes of his actions.

If one makes further identifications with the outcomes, born of habitual and impulsive reactions, one is a rājasika kartā. A sātvik kartā accepts the reality of the outcome with the knowledge that he does not control it. He maintains, samatvam, equanimity, with the outcome and does not superimpose the quality of the outcome on himself. He does not empower the outcome to label himself as 'successful' or 'failure.' The layers of such identifications hinder the progress towards knowing that the Self in reality is free from all identifications. In this sense, a sātvik doership is a freeing doership whereas a rājasika doership is a binding doership. A sātvik kartā accepts the outcome gracefully. If the outcome is successful, it is Īśvara's will; if it is failure that too is Īśvara's will. The sātvik kartā's will is only to do what is right for a given purpose. In spite of one's best efforts if the purpose of the action is not served it is Īśvara's will. Surrendering to Īśvara's will, one does not blame oneself. One is objective and gracefully accepts the outcome without judging oneself.

Lord Kṛṣṇa is teaching the equanimity of the mind for the simple reason that even when everything apparently keeps on changing there is something that does not change. All the change, ultimately, is founded on something that does not change. All changes happen superficially at the level of name and form but then the truth of the name and form which is asti-bhādi-priyam (sat-cit-ananda) doesn't change. Lord Kṛṣṇa tells later on⁵, "*samaṃ sarveṣu bhūteṣu tiṣṭhantaṃ paramēśvaram.*" The Lord is one who obtains *sama*, equal, in all living beings, who is one in many, who is unchanging and changeless, and who is imperishable among perishables. The reality does not change; ātmā does not change. This is the truth of oneself. Bhagavad Gītā teaches this reality. The ignorance of this reality, which is self-ignorance, is the cause of one's all sorrow. Really, there is no cause for sorrow in our lives other than our complexes about ourselves born of self-ignorance. Therefore, sorrow will ultimately go only when the true knowledge of the Self takes place. The sense of lack or want that one feels about oneself is a false notion created by ignorance. As one gives reality to the false notions, they only get perpetuated. When one is fearful, one tries to remove fear; when one feels inadequate, one tries to remove the inadequacy. Alas, these problems become only further pronounced and don't seem to in any way become less. Because the very assumption about the fear, inadequacy etc. is wrong. Vedanta teaches that what separates one from what one is seeking is only ignorance in the form of the wrong perception of oneself. One needs to stop giving reality to the perception that one is a limited, inadequate being. If one performs action to satisfy the ego, that only accentuates the self-ignorance further. Only when one reverses the process, ignorance is given up.

One should let karma become a means for giving up ignorance and not strengthening ignorance, giving up the bondage and not accumulating bondage. A karma yogi should have the clarity that one is ultimately seeking the knowledge of the Self only. One sees oneself as limited even though limitlessness is one's nature. The mind distorts one's perception. The mind is like the mirror and it has to give the true reflection of oneself. A tranquil mind, an objective mind, is such a mirror and it is gained by acquiring and nurturing the attitude of relative sameness (samatva buddhi) of looking upon success and failure as the same. In order for us to own up to the absolute sameness, which is the nature of the Self, the relative sameness of the mind is imperative. A life of karma yoga is the means to achieve the tranquil mind that enjoys the relative sameness.

⁵ Bhagavad Gītā, Chapter 13, verse 28.

to be continued...