

UNIVERSAL APPLICATION OF KARMA YOGA

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The year 1896 was an eventful period in the life of Swami Vivekananda. It was during this year that the four small books of his on the four Yogas were published in England and USA. After the wonderful retreat with his disciples in the Thousand Island Park between June 18 and August 6 of 1895, Swamiji paid his first visit to England. He returned to New York on December 6 of the same year and immediately plunged himself into intense lecturing activities. He commenced a series of lectures on the four Yogas on December 9 and ended them on December 23. During this period, he gave in all thirty lectures which formed the nucleus of his great works, Karma Yoga, Jnâna Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. He also dictated partly his commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, which has come down to us as his fourth book, Râja Yoga.

Each of these books is great in its own way; but the one on Karma Yoga is probably the most relevant to the modern context. It is the objective of the present article to justify the statement. But before that, let us cast a brief look at the other three books.


Jnâna Yoga of Swamiji is based upon the Upanishads, which had been for a long time the prerogative of only a small section of Indian society. It was Swamiji who brought it out of the cloisters of ashramas and presented it to the general reader in an easily understandable manner.

In recent days, with the intensification of conflicts among nations and also between individuals, human life has become highly stressful, leading to situations where living itself is becoming impossible. Hence, the attention of humanity is now turning to Bhakti Yoga and Râja Yoga. Devotion to a Supreme Being, who is the controller

of all, is replacing gradually the existing cynicism about the very existence of the Divine. The impasse into which Modern Physics has been driven through its investigations at the sub-atomic and sub-nuclear level of matter, has prompted scientists to recognise the role of consciousness as a vital factor in unravelling the mystery of matter. At the more mundane level, the proliferation of temples around the country and their renovation have turned the mind of modern Indians to the practice of Bhakti.

In the last half-century, there has been a resurgence of interest in Râja Yoga, mainly because of its therapeutic value. Every year, new schools of Râja Yoga are springing up, and even Universities dedicated to this subject are springing up.

But it is when we turn to Karma Yoga that we face a peculiar situation. There are many individuals and organizations all over the world practising Karma Yoga, but there is hardly any institution which trains a band of workers to become Karma Yogis, except for some like Ramakrishna Mission. One has to take recourse under these circumstances to the study of scriptures to learn what Karma Yoga is all about. Even here, except for the *Bhagavad Gita* there is hardly any scripture which deals with this subject in a systematic way. The *Gita* is certainly the best textbook on Yoga. But all the four Yogas are dealt with in this book in an interactive way, so that a novice approaching the book for the first time tends to get confused as to which *slokas* refer to which Yoga. Commentaries also add to this confusion by emphasising one yoga at the cost of others. It goes to the credit of Swami Vivekananda that he has been able to extract the essentials of these Yogas from the *Gita* and present them in an easily understandable language.

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Swamiji's book *Karma Yoga* in about 80 pages contains eight chapters. We will give here a brief summary of this book to set the stage for our study. The first chapter is about the nature of Karma itself and the ideal of work. The second deals with the question of whether there is anything like superiority or inferiority in work itself. Swamiji's conclusion is that it is the way one does Karma that makes one great or small, not the work itself. The third chapter talks of detachment and the concept of *Yajna*. The fourth is about duty and its meaning in human life. It is in this chapter that one finds the famous story from the *Mahâbhârata*, the *Vyâdha Gita*.

The fifth chapter gives the real objective of Karma Yoga. It is not that the world is in need of our help, nor is it that we are indispensable to the world. It is an opportunity given to us to serve others and the people most benefited are ourselves. The sixth chapter is on non-attachment and self-control. The seventh is about the sense of freedom which one enjoys through the practice of Karma Yoga. The book closes with the description of the ideals that Karma Yoga stands for.

It is indeed remarkable that Swamiji has been able to compress into eight lectures so many aspects of Karma Yoga. The book has been an inspiration to generations of people and still continues to motivate many people towards selfless action.

Swamiji's book was published more than a century ago. Meanwhile, the world has changed a lot. Humanity has made enormous 'progress'. Are Swamiji's ideas still valid today or have they become obsolete? In my opinion, they are more relevant today than ever before. Let us see how!

Karma Yoga can be practised at three levels: individual, societal and global. At the individual level it gets restricted to a small circle around us; at the societal level it includes a society or nation; and at the global level, it extends beyond humanity to include all living species. It is the remarkable genius of Sri Krishna that he is able to incorporate all these levels in the *Gita*.

Karma Yoga at the individual level can be summed up as follows. From the moment of our birth till our death, we are involved in some

action or other, either by the body or by speech or by the mind. Action is inevitable. Then why not do it the best way so that we can benefit by it? But where is the guarantee of success? Nobody can surely claim that his effort will always be crowned with success. This is a fact of life, which we see demonstrated practically every day. So, what do we do then? Fold our arms and say that we will not do any work at all? This is not possible, because Sri Krishna says that action is inevitable. Therefore, He says, 'You have only the right to do your duty, but not to the results thereof. Hence, do not become attached to the result.'

Any action we do is done in relation to others. There is a constant interaction between us and the surrounding world. 'No man is an island', says the poet John Donne. Hence, the success or other-wise of any task we perform does not only depend upon our exertions, but also on the cooperation of many others. Karma Yoga reminds us that we cannot claim the entire credit for our success, but must remember at the time of savouring our success all those who helped us in one way or another.

A friend of mine once gave me an advice which sums up elegantly this aspect of individual Karma Yoga. Ram is in trouble and Shyam helps him. How does Ram show his gratitude? By thanking Shyam, of course. However, if Ram stops at that, it becomes a matter of 'quid pro quo'. On the other hand, Ram should not forget the help he got from Shyam. Suppose Ram sees Govind in trouble and helps him. If Govind now thanks Ram, he should transfer these thanks mentally to Shyam. Thus Ram links up the help he gave Govind to the help he received from Shyam and withdraws himself. This is precisely what Sri Krishna is driving at. You have the right or duty to help others, but you do not have exclusive claim on the credit, because it belongs to innumerable people who have helped you earlier.

So much for individual Karma Yoga. There is a social dimension also to Karma Yoga. What is our responsibility to society? Since we take so much from it, should we not give something in return? The ills our country is suffering from

today are mainly due to the fact that we have become expert 'takers', but have forgotten that we should be 'givers' too. We have forgotten John F. Kennedy's famous dictum—'Ask not what the country can do for you, ask instead what you can do for the country.' No nation can become great unless its citizens are prepared to place 'giving' above 'receiving'. The several scandals or scams we have been witnessing since Independence are an eloquent testimony to this fact. Unless and until we become conscious of this fact and practise Karma Yoga at the societal level, our country will continue to wallow in these scams and be an object of pity and ridicule by other countries.

Last but not the least is the responsibility of the human race towards the planet itself. Is there Karma Yoga involved here also? Sri Krishna says 'yes'. In the third chapter, verses 10 to 13, of the *Gita*, Sri Krishna talks to us about global Karma Yoga. 'At the beginning of time, the creator created all creatures along with the concept of *Yajna* or sacrifice, and told them that this *Yajna* would be their celestial cow yielding whatever they wanted. They have to take care of the Devas and the Devas will take care of them. Thus mutually protecting each other, both will prosper. The Devas satisfied by their sacrifices will yield them all they want. But if they enjoy these benefits without giving something in return, they will verily become thieves. This sacrifice will make them pure, but those who care only for themselves incur sin.'

One can read a narrow meaning into this passage and infer that Sri Krishna is here referring to vedic sacrifices. This would be inappropriate, because Sri Krishna himself has earlier condemned vedic *Karma Kânda* and advised Arjuna to go beyond it. He has also given a new interpretation to the very concept of *Yajna* as mutual help and cooperation. What is then the meaning of this passage in the modern context?

First of all, who are these Devas? Are they the celestial beings in the heavens as described in mythology? Vedic culture recognised them as providers, sustainers and protectors of life. Anything which is bright, pure and life-giving is a Deva. For example, the pure air we need is Deva, Vayu; the

pure water we need is a Deva, Varuna; the pure unpolluting fire we need is a Deva, Agni; the thunder, the lightning and rain which rejuvenate life on this planet is a Deva, Indra. Do we not receive so much from these elemental forces? What about the Sun, Surya, without which life itself would not be possible? It is the recognition of this fact leading to a sense of gratitude that Sri Krishna is talking about. He also advises us that if we desire to benefit from these, we need to nourish them.

Are we doing it? A survey of the global situation today would hardly provide a positive answer. If there is so much concern today about ecological disasters, environmental degradation etc., are we not ourselves responsible? Even those who, because of their greed and avarice, hope to benefit by these disasters, forget the fact that they themselves will be victims of this phenomenon. Is it not high time that we wake up to the clarion call of the *Gita* that our very survival depends upon our harmonious living with nature?

Karma Yoga has several dimensions. At the individual level, it leads to one's spiritual evolution. At the societal level, it brings a sense of stability to society, making it possible for humanity to progress spiritually. At the global level, it leads to the preservation of the only piece of habitable real estate in the entire cosmos. All the three dimensions are equally important. We start at the individual level, progressing gradually to the societal and the global level. All world leaders whom we respect and revere have followed this path and that is why we respect them.

The best illustration of this practice is Swami Vivekananda. His very life is an example of how to practise Karma Yoga at all levels. If one really wants to appreciate the role of Karma Yoga in modern life, one cannot do better than studying the book 'Karma Yoga' of Swamiji which talks of the *Siddhânta*, and studying his life which illustrates the *Sâdhanâ*. In this sense, one can truly claim that Swamiji has given us a new Smriti-Grantha relevant to modern context, in the form of his life and works. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* is a treasure of universal ideas for us to imbibe for our survival.

