

## Theory of Karma as enunciated in the Bhagavad Gita (By Saroj Bala)

Eleven divisions of Duryodhana's army and seven divisions of Yudhishtira's army stood face-to-face in the battleground of Kurukshetra. At that time on Arjun's request, Shri Krishna took his chariot between the two armies. When Partha saw grandsire Bhishma, preceptor Drona, and many other venerated elders, he felt unsettled and told Madhava that his body was trembling, his mind was whirling, and Gandiva was slipping from his hand. Arjun then said that he did not wish to fight the war and thus commit the sin of killing those elders and preceptors to get sovereignty.

At this juncture, through Arjun, Lord Krishna passed on to the World the great philosophy of Bhagavad Gita. Besides explaining different aspects of a righteous way of living, Shri Krishna explained Karma Yoga/theory of Karma in great detail. He asked Arjun to do his Karma by fighting the war in order to protect righteousness. He also added that the soul is eternal and indestructible; only the body is perishable. Shri Krishna at that time told Arjun that he need not grieve about the death of relatives and friends as the life of embodied beings had neither any beginning nor any end. The soul is eternal and changes bodies just as we change clothes. Shri Krishna, therefore, advised Arjun to perform his duties without getting attached to their results. The victory or defeat was not in his hands:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।  
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥

Meaning: O Arjun! Your concern is only with actions and not with their fruits. Let not the fruits of actions/karma be your motive; do not feel attached to your actions, but perform these with devotion and sincerity.

Karma, which is a Sanskrit word, means action, work, or deed. It refers to the sum total of all deeds one has done or got done through his mind, speech or body; either in this life or in the previous lives. Karma also refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect, which states that an action is always accompanied by its consequences. The result of a deed is inherent in the deed itself. No one can escape the effects of his actions. The doctrine of Nishkama karma has to be understood in this context. Anything good or bad one does through his thoughts, words or senses creates an equivalent response which comes back to him, sooner or later, in one form or the other. As one sows, so shall he reap. This doctrine known as the karmic cycle governs one's life perpetually.

Lord Krishna further explained that one should work, be steadfast in devotion, abandon attachment, and be equanimous in success and failure. This leads to evenness in success and failure. Action performed with attachment becomes the cause of bondage, while the same action if performed without attachment with evenness of mind,

never becomes the cause of bondage. Being universal in nature, the doctrine of karma is impartial. It is not biased in favour of or against anyone. Not only the outward life, the law of karma applies to the inner being also. Apart from the worldly rewards and punishments, any noble or evil deed produces a corresponding sense of satisfaction or guilt in the mind.

Some of these results are experienced in this very life, and others remain pending. Since the unconsumed fruits of actions must eventually be consumed, the consequences of such pending results are carried along by the soul as it passes from one life to another. The pending results, thus, become the basis on which the quality of one's next life is determined. In that life again, actions produce results and cause yet another birth. Thus, the load of one's karma is carried by the soul from life to life. In other words, man evolves in accordance with his actions; and the cycle of cause and effect does not break even at death. No one can avoid, evade or cheat on karma. Every deed must bear its favourable or unfavourable fruits. One has to face the consequences of his deeds, either in this life or in the future lives.

Bhagavad Gita has provided mankind with the science of spirituality and a way of life by which the doctrine of karma, the natural order of cause and effect, can be transcended. The state of transcendence can be achieved not by any arbitrary interference with the laws of nature but by breaking the chains of karma through the cultivation of an attitude of detachment and unshakable faith in righteousness and the Divine.

In Chapter 3 of the Bhagavad Gita, Madhav has explained the unparalleled and exceptional philosophy of Karma yoga, which is the means of obtaining serenity of mind through selfless performance of actions. It is that path of spiritual evolution which highlights the importance of fulfilling all of one's duties without any attachment to the actions or the results thereof. One has a right to choose noble or evil deeds. But once he has done those deeds, he cannot evade or avoid the fruits of those actions. The result of an action is inherent in the action itself. But how, when and in what shape one obtains those rewards is decided not by one's expectations and desires but by the Supreme Lord.

Gita is a mandate for action. It has cautioned that one should never be attached to inaction. Inertia can never lead to perfection. Even if the duty is arduous, painful or unpleasant, one must not run away from it. Lord Krishna has taught that duty must be performed devotedly and wholeheartedly, but without a sense of attachment. The actions are done by the body, mind and intelligence, not by the soul. The actions of which fruits are not reaped in this life are carried to the next life through the soul. Through karma yoga one can lead a successful life in this world and also create a path to make a way for the other world.

यस्त्विन्द्रियाणि मनसा नियम्यारभतेऽर्जुन ।  
कर्मेन्द्रियैः स विशिष्यते ॥ :कर्मयोगमसक्त :3/7 ॥

Meaning: The person who, by controlling the senses with his mind and without attachment to the fruits of his actions, practices Karma yoga through all his senses, is the best.

Karma yoga is a spiritual practice the aim of which is to gain knowledge of the self, and one's true nature. Not being attached to actions and their results, an aspirant for karma yoga performs his duties with an equanimous mind. Equanimity of the mind helps one in subduing his likes and dislikes; and controlling the incessant desires. Instead of being a slave of his likes and dislikes, and a victim of his impulses; one is constantly guided by his buddhi, the understanding.

Arjun after that enquired if he could instead follow the paths of jnana Yog and Bhakti Yog. Shri Krishna then clarified that there is no contradiction between the path of bhakti and karma as mentioned earlier; there is no contradiction between bhakti and jnana. Both the bhakti and the jnana need shraddha/faith and trust to achieve the goal, and both have to lose their ego to attain the Lord or for self-realization. To be engaged in action is the nature of human beings. The Bhagavad Gita says that all creatures act in accordance with their own nature, but a jnani performs his actions with a sense of detachment, while an ajnani performs his actions with selfish motives and attachment.

Steadfast in inner composure, such a practitioner of karma yoga works with perfect serenity. As a result, his mind becomes more and more pure. A pure and tranquil mind is receptive to learning. It then becomes easier for one to attain the knowledge of the self. That is why it has been stated that all works culminate in wisdom, and knowledge of the self. In other words, Karma yoga ultimately leads to jnana, the realisation of the self. By establishing such a relationship of trust with the Divine, he feels relaxed and free from fear. He becomes one with the Supreme Lord because the truth of the self is not different from the truth of the Supreme Lord.

Endowed with knowledge of the self, one transcends in this very life, both good and evil. One remains ever engaged in doing his assigned work, even while his mind rests in the Supreme. The one who fails to do the work which he ought to do, not only loses his worldly glory but also incurs sin against God. But the one who treats pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike; undertakes the assigned work with an equanimous mind, he does not suffer any adverse consequences. Whatever work one does should be dedicated to the Supreme Lord. And whatever results one gets must be accepted gladly, as blessings from Him alone.

Bhagavad Gita distinguishes between true karma and ritualistic rigmarole. Those who follow the scriptures more in letter than in spirit worry excessively about the acquisition of material rewards in this life and in future lives. Thus, they remain tied with various ritualistic observances. But for a karma yogi, these practices are of little value. He renounces all selfish desires and offers his works to the Supreme, with utmost devotion. He accepts whatever comes his way, with an attitude of gratitude.

Shri Krishna explained that all human beings are expected to perform *yajna* remaining detached. *Yajna* means performance of one's own duties, which include, earning, donating, pilgrimage, studying Vedas and performing all kinds of actions for the well-being of the world.

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसम्भवः ।

यज्ञाद्भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्मसमुद्भवः ॥ 3/14 ॥

कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् ।

तस्मात्सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥ 3/15 ॥

All creatures come into existence from food; rain gives us food; from *yajna* we get rain and *yajna* is performed by discharging one's duties/karma. The origin of karma is from Brahma and Brahma springs from the imperishable. Action is rooted in the imperishable. Therefore, a person who is delighted in self and works only for self, he is not doing his Karma. When one works for the well-being of others without any expectations for the fruits of his action, then he is doing his Karma in the real sense.

Shri Krishna thus explained that if Arjun fights the war to win, such an objective has no relation with Karma as he may or may not win. But the fruit of Karma is inseparable from Karma; by fighting the war to protect Dharma if Arjun wins, he would enjoy the sovereignty of the earth but if he loses, he will achieve the highest heaven. No person can escape the fruits of his action.

Distraction is natural to the human mind. Thoughts of anyone are scattered and endless. But those who traverse the path of karma yoga have firm determination and a clear goal. Having a resolute intellect, they focus on the goal with single-minded attention. Instead of worrying about favourable or unfavourable results, they concentrate only on doing a good and noble job. They put in their best efforts and then leave the results to the will of the Divine.

When one surrenders himself completely to the Supreme Lord, the individual consciousness expands itself to the vastness of the undifferentiated and timeless consciousness. In such a state of being, no one can think of doing any evil deed. Considering himself to be only an instrument in the hands of Ishvara, whatever one does, he does it for the great cosmic purpose of the Divine. Therefore, all actions should be dedicated to the divine, remaining free from desire, reward or ego.

As his sense of separateness gets eradicated, he works without the egoistic will. He surrenders himself to the will of the Supreme. Outwardly his conduct is the same as that of any other person. But inwardly he is fixed in purity, free from the dualities like pleasure and pain. As he has nothing to gain or lose by action or non-action, he works only for the furtherance of the purpose of God. His actions are accompanied by inner joy and peace.

Krishna has specifically urged the learned, men of knowledge, to work in the spirit of karma yoga, for the betterment of the world. Their responsibility is more because common people always follow the great men in their footsteps. Instead of mere preaching, they have been called upon to set high standards of behaviour. It has also been assured that one can certainly attain spiritual perfection by selflessly serving society.

To conclude, Karma yoga is that path of spiritual evolution which exhorts man to work without any attachment to the actions and their results. An aspirant for karma yoga dedicates all his actions to Ishvara and accepts all the results gladly, with a sense of gratitude. Karma yoga purifies the mind and enables one to realise his true nature. As a result, even amidst intense activity, one can experience inner peace and spontaneous joy.

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