

Karma Yoga: An Insight

Abstract

Indian ethos has numerous concepts, philosophies and models that can appropriately guide human thought and action in all walks of life, but the irony is that either this wisdom has not been deciphered to its correct meaning and spirit, or where it has been understood, it has not been popularized; nor a bold initiative has been taken even by Indian professionals to apply them in their respective fields. In the classical Indian thought, the individual - the basic unit of any family, group, society, culture, country and nation, had been analyzed and comprehended to such depth, and with such precision as probably no other thought system has done. The doctrine of the Karma Yoga given in the Shrimad Bhagvad Geeta is one such model which discusses the right attitude towards work and work ethics, so that whatever the consequences of sincere efforts be, the individual is always focused, enthusiastic and motivated towards his work thus fulfilling his professional and social responsibilities. This paper aims at understanding the concept of Karma Yoga qualitatively so as to facilitate the applicability of the concept in relevant disciplines.

Keywords : Work, Karma Yoga, Srimad Bhagvad Geeta

Introduction

Karma Yoga and the doctrine of Karma, find mention in many ancient Indian scriptures, but in the Srimad Bhagvad Geeta the concept is explained as Nishkam Karma Yoga. It discusses at length the ideal attitude an individual should strive to attain towards the performance of any kind of work. Passage of time has not diminished the relevance of the perspective of Karma Yoga in building a right attitude towards work; rather the need for a fresh understanding has never been greater. Action or work can be of two types: firstly, those that are obligatory in nature, i.e., one is duty-bound by virtue of existing in a specific time and space with power and possession: physical, intellectual, social, professional, economic, etc., that have come naturally to him. This is svadharma. The decision of how to discharge these duties or decisively choosing courses of action has to be taken by an individual guided by his conscience and rationality. Non-performance of actions in accordance with one's svadharma is equivalent to not discharging one's duties, and is a sin. Secondly, are those actions that are proactively initiated by individuals as a means to an end. These actions and the motive behind them are like a good or bad investment that yield consequent results on maturity. The Karma Yoga is applicable to both types of actions.

Premise of the Sermon of Karma Yoga

Any reader of the Srimad Bhagvad Geeta is aware of the pretext and premise of the 'song-celestial' which was to inspire, motivate and direct Arjun to discharge his dutiful actions in the battlefield by Shri Krishna when he was in a state of absolute dilemma, anxiety, grief and utter despair facing a situation where he had to defeat the army of Duryodhan to win the kingdom of Kurukshetra, and in the process would have to kill his elders, cousins and teachers who were a part of the latter's army. It was then that Shri Krishna revealed unto him the mystery of man as a component of the cosmic creation and the importance of work done by him in his lifetime that decides and designs his later forms. Here, this philosophy has been built on a belief that the essence of every mortal being is an energy (atman) which is a part of the greater cosmic energy (brahman), hence it can neither be created nor destroyed, it just changes forms or bodies; when one form perishes, the accrual of its deeds designs its next form; when no accrual is left it unifies with the cosmic energy.

An Ideal Attitude towards Work

The ideal attitude that one should have towards his work is given in the Geeta as:

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*Sukhaduhkhe same kritvaa
laabhaalaabhau jayaajayau Tato
yuddhaaya yujyasva naivam
paapamvaapsyasi (Geeta: II/39)*

In the above verse, Shri Krishna advises Arjun that, even if you do not desire for kingdom or heaven, consider success and failure, joy and sorrow to be the same and then prepare yourself for the battle; if you take such a stand, and fight in the battlefield with such a frame of mind (or with such a motive), you would not be committing a sin. This is the right attitude or frame of mind one should cultivate towards work so that one can detach himself from the fruits i.e. results or consequences of the actions and the desires that would born out of it. When desires creep in, our motive for any action is fulfillment of the particular desire and one is attached to the results. This gives rise to a vicious cycle of working for the fulfillment of the desire; and if the desire is not fulfilled, one is bound to be attached to more desire-driven actions. Desires have their seeds in the individual and he works for his own benefit and the satiety of his desires rather than the benefit or betterment of the society in a greater sense.

According to Karma Yoga, the seed of action i.e. the motive of an action is never destroyed until it generates results. Similarly, the fruits or results of action also, cannot be nullified or destroyed. Thus every seed will bear a fruit i.e., every action will have a result. This is the nature of karma; hence the Geeta advises that one should be cautious of all actions of thought speech and conduct. Knowing the nature of karma, one who practices Karma Yoga strives to develop a fixed frame of mind that is conditioned to treat success and failure, profit and loss, sorrow and grief in the same manner. Such a person regards the extremities of emotions given in the Geeta as duality or dwandwa sportingly, without being overwhelmed or engulfed by them completely, and does not allow emotions to rule on his ability to reason and perform consequent and subsequent actions. Since such a yogi does not allow himself to be possessed by such extreme emotions, he is saved from being driven to initiate more actions towards desire gratification, thus engaging himself in a never-ending cycle of action and its results.

The Geeta Says

*Vyavasaayatmik buddhirekeh kurunandana
Bahushaakhaa hyanantashcha
buddhyavyavasaayinaam (Geeta: II/41)*

Here vyavasaayatmika buddhi means an intellect which can reason and has been conditioned to react or not react to specific stimuli. A Karma Yogi has a conditioned intellect that is focused hence, he can attain a frame of mind that does not deviate; since it is focused, it is strong; as opposed to an unconditioned intellect that is possessed by infinite desires and these desires act as the motive and end result of the individual's actions. The Geeta further says:

*Traigunyavishaya veda nistraigunyo
bhavaarjun Nirdwandwo nityasattvastho
niryogakshema aatmavaan (Geeta: II/45)*

Shri Krishna advises that rather than striving for the satiety of pleasures of the senses, governed by the three gunas of one's nature, one should strive to refrain from them, be unaddicted to them. Arjun is advised not to involve in the dilemma of the dual extremes of joy and sorrow, instead, concentrate towards the ultimate reality that things will be as they are : nityasatvastha and become a person of free will and free being, not one who gathers and conserves for materialistic (worldly) fulfillment and is bound by it.

*Karmanyevaadhikaaraste maa
phaleshu kadaachana Maa
karmaphalaheturburmaa te
sangostvakarmane (Geeta: II/47)*

This verse of Srimad Bhagvad Geeta carries the essence of the Karma philosophy. It means that one has control only on the efforts that he puts into any work, but does not have any control over its outcome, i.e. one does not have unconditional control over his/her actions and hence over the results of actions, because there are other factors that influence actions. These factors that govern the accomplishment of karma are the determinants of action. They are:

*Panchaitaani mahaabaahau kaaranaani
nibodha me Sankhye kritaante siddhaye
sarvakarmanaam (Geeta: XVIII/13)
Adhishthaanam tathaa kartaa karanam cha
prithagvidham Vividhaanshch prithakcheshta
daivam chaivaatra panchamam (Geeta:
XVIII/14)*

These factors are Adhishthan

Adhishthan broadly implies two things: First, the area or the physical domain in which work is being done, which is the ambience of the physical space, the immediate surroundings or the institution. Second, the knowledge domain or discipline under which the work is done. The intellectual faculty which governs and supports the work should be in accordance with the intellectual capabilities of the karta i.e. the doer of the act or agent and the body as well as the mind, comprising of the buddhi, chitta, manas of the karta. A properly chosen adhishthana will prove favorable by acting as a facilitator towards the effective completion of any work.

Karta

Karta implies the doer, the performer of an act or work. Here again, there are various determining factors relating to the karta that are: the karta's objective behind performing the action, i.e., why he is doing what he is doing; the karta's eligibility to perform the action; the karta's ability to focus on the objective, his level of concentration, sincerity, resolution, dedication; the karta's personality i.e., his basic being or essence of nature ruled by the predominant guna. Any karta acts under the influence of three gunas that decide his stand in any situation, to act or react, his discriminative faculty and motivating factor as explained by the guna doctrine in Sankhya philosophy. The major influences of these three gunas also govern his personality type and basic nature (Totala and Chatterjee, 2014).

Karan

Karan implies two things, firstly, the stimulus-response mechanism both sensory and ideomotor, and thus, the cognitive and conative organs, viz., gyanendriya and karmendriya involved, that provide the apparatus of voluntary action (Srinivasachari, 1966); secondly, the instruments, tools, aids and resources, both human and material that the karta utilizes for performing any work.

Cheyshta

Cheyshta implies the efforts i.e., functions of different agents that are manifold towards an action, this includes primarily the voluntary efforts put in by the karta; secondarily the voluntary and involuntary forces in the environment in which the action is performed. Cheyshta of agents other than the karta also have a determinative effect on the implementation of the act and hence its consequences.

Daivam

Daivam implies three things, viz. the divine scheme of things that is, the phenomena or factors that are inexplicable through normal rationality of an average intellect; the gathered resultant of karmas done in the past i.e., prarabdhi; it may also mean the presiding divinity of the senses. Each of the senses has its own god who presides over it, and by whose aid it discharges its own functions, e.g. Aditya i.e. the sun is the presiding divinity of the eye, by whose aid it sees and acts (Swarupanand, 1909).

Thus, considering the Doctrine of Karma and the five determinants of Karma, it can logically be derived that the karta does not enjoy total and unconditional control over the results of his own actions as is also mentioned in the verse (XVIII/16) of the Geeta. The karta is not the sole agent in action (Chinmayand, 2008). According to the verse (II/47) of the Geeta one has authority only on his own actions but never on their results i.e., karmaneyvadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana.

Laws of Karma (Karmasiddhant)

Hence work should not be performed just for its outcomes as per the desires of the karta (ma phaleshu), because one's performance does not wholly and solely decide the outcome of one's actions. The outcome should be accepted as it is; the karta should rather be focused whole heartedly for the best outcome and not be crippled by inaction ever. Karma Yoga's brief philosophical meaning is 'detached involvement', i.e. being involved as long as one has a role to play and being detached as the outcome occurs; performing any action with a balanced mind, not too happy or too sad, and giving one's hundred percent; whatever the circumstances of the outcome be, it should be accepted as a prasada: a gift from the almighty.

Thus, the principles of Karma or karmasiddhant can be summarized as:

1. Every action produces a result (fruit of action).
2. The result (karmaphal) ultimately returns to the doer. Karma catches its Karta.
3. Good deeds will produce good results and bad deeds will produce bad results.
4. No cancellation or waiver applies in Karma and its results; thus a wrong deed cannot be nullified

by a good deed. One will get the result of good work and bad work simultaneously.

One mysterious aspect of Karma and their results is: which actions will bring what results and when, cannot be fathomed; some actions may bring instantaneous results and some, decades later thus, it is stated in the verse IV/17 of the Geeta that 'gahana karmano gatih'.

Hence, it is advised in the Bhagvad Geeta, *Yogastha kuru karmaani sangam tyaktva dhananjaya Siddhasiddhaya samo bhootvaa samatvam yoga uchyate (Geeta: II/48)*

(Dhananjaya), be steadfast in practicing (yogasthah) the abandoning of attachment in the success and failure of actions that are obligatory or actions that are worth performing, with an evenness and balance of mind. This evenness of being unconcerned with regard to success and failure is Karma Yoga (Swami Swarupanand, 1909).

Doorena hyavaram karma buddhiyogaddhananjaya Buddhau sharanamanviccha kripanaah phalahetava (Geeta: II/49)

Buddhiyukto jahaateeh ubhe sukritadushkriteh Tasmadyogaaya yujyasva yogah karmasukaushalam (Geeta: II/50)

(Dhananjaya), desire-led actions belong to a very low category, therefore seek refuge in conditioning your intellect (the power to reason : buddhiyukta), with evenness towards results, cause working for a desire-driven result (phalahetavah) is very lowly. Such a conditioned intellect (endued with evenness) is able to free itself from virtues and vices (sukritadushkriteh), therefore, be devoted to this practice (yoga).

Karmayoga is the very dexterity of work. A follower of Karma Yoga can have no personal (desire) motive for any action; hence he would be working for the work's sake, without resulting in a virtue or a vice. Karma Yoga is the dexterity of work because its practice robs the work /action from the power to bind (as it is desireless : nivritti), hence produces no bondage, rather serves as a means of freedom from a cyclical loop of desire-actions-results (Swami Swarupanand, 1909).

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