

Karma Yoga Only Works with Total Commitment

Ram (James Swartz)

2014-12-10

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1950>

(James: This is such an excellent *karma yoga* document that Sundari wrote that I decided to post it with mine in case you don't read her *satsangs*.)

Larissa: Thank you very much, Sundari.

I have to read and reread this a few more times before it sinks in. Or not. "Or not" because I've read similar paragraphs in other *satsangs* and it seems that the difficulty is in bringing it home to Larissa, to this *jiva-Isvara* relationship. I read it, I hear you, it makes sense, it's totally in line with "what I know"... and yet "at times" it doesn't. All I can think is that there are, as you say, very deep *samskaras* at play and that they'll be seen through when *Isvara* deems it appropriate.

Sundari: Hello, Larissa. I love your writing and the intelligence that comes through your words. I understand completely how you feel and how difficult it is for self-knowledge to break down and remove ignorance from the mind. Self-inquiry is the most difficult thing you will ever do as it involves training the mind to think in harmony with the truth. It is normal for most inquirers to go through this stage of "on and off" assimilation before self-knowledge obtains permanently. We call it the firefly stage. It passes with committed and dedicated allegiance to your *sadhana* and faith in the scripture.

However, for the knowledge to become firm, all the qualifications have to be present. I know you have put so much into your *sadhana* but what one can never be too clear about are the qualifications required for *moksa* – and what they mean. They are a non-negotiable requirement for self-inquiry. Make a list of all of them. Track yourself on a moment-to-moment basis. If the knowledge is not sticking it is always about the absence of one or more of the qualifications. There are no other reasons because it is never a problem with the means of knowledge. The bottom line is the mind needs to be purified and prepared or knowledge will not stick.

We all have deep *samskaras*. It comes with the territory of being "in" human form. They are no more than endless ignorance playing out and they are not personal, even though they feel so very much so. This is why we say *moksa* is not about perfecting the person or becoming a better person. *Moksa* is about discriminating the person from awareness and understanding that your primary identity is awareness, not the person. The person will always be limited but as the essence of the person is unlimited awareness, you can live as the self while appearing as a person if self-knowledge has removed ignorance of your true nature.

It is all very well to know this intellectually, as you say. But to make a difference the knowledge has to fully obtain in the mind and translate into your day-to-day life in order to render the binding *vasanas* non-binding and negate the doer. Until it does, the only thing you can do is steadfastly keep on exposing the mind to the scripture; make it your main focus, never waver. Ignorance is hardwired and tenaciously aggressive so you will have to do whatever it takes if you are sick of the mind it produces, which clearly you are.

Larissa: The bit about following *dharma* at all times leaves me wondering. *Dharma* is a difficult topic. What is “my” *dharma*? What *Isvara* is asking from Larissa? As what? As a mother? As a daughter? As a wife? As a *moksa*-seeker?

Sundari: As I said before, *dharma* is a very difficult topic and impossible for one person to tell another what their personal *dharma* is. Ultimately, the highest *dharma* is to commit to self-inquiry into your true nature using the scripture as your means of knowledge. There is no other purpose to life than to know who you are and so live not as someone identified with being a person or someone who knows about the self – but AS the self.

There are specific *dharmas* for all the roles you mention above. If you are a mother, you need to take care of the psychological and physical well-being of the children you brought into this world. This is the *dharma* and duty of a parent and to shirk it will not bring peace of mind. As a daughter/wife and *moksa*-seeker there are specific *dharmas* involved as well. You have a duty to honour and respect the people who gave life to you – though not at the expense of your own freedom and the *dharma* of your inborn nature. As a wife, you have a duty to uphold the contract you made with your husband, whatever that is. If that contract no longer speaks the truth about you, then it is your *dharma* to end it or renegotiate it. To continue in an *adharmic* relationship will not be conducive to self-inquiry or peace of mind. If *moksa* is more important to you than anything else, then the *dharma* of a *moksa*-seeker is to trust the scripture and take “I am awareness” as your identity, until such time as there is no doubt about it.

There are three stages to self-inquiry:

1. *Sravana*, listening or hearing the scripture. This requires that you leave everything you previously believed or thought you knew on the shelf, temporarily. You can take your beliefs back if self-knowledge does not work for you. But for now leave them on the shelf. This is very important. If you keep comparing Vedanta to all your beliefs and opinions and try to make it comply with them, forget about self-inquiry. Vedanta is a radical teaching, it is counterintuitive; expect it to challenge everything you thought you knew.
2. *Manana*, reasoning, contemplation. This is thinking about what the scripture is saying, examining the unexamined logic of your own experience. At this point, you look at your beliefs and opinions in the light of what the scripture says, NOT the other way around.
3. *Nididhyasana*, applying the knowledge to your day-to-day life, taking a stand in awareness as awareness, self-actualisation.

You are in between the *manana/nididhyasana* phase of inquiry, so at this point it is the duty of the inquirer to sacrifice what you think is true about who you are in favour of what scripture says is true – if there is a conflict between the two. If there is not sufficient confidence or faith (*shraddha*) in the knowledge “I am awareness,” then you need to live as awareness until the confidence comes and practice the opposite thought every time a thought to the contrary arises. The confidence will eventually develop because when your idea of who you are is in harmony with who you really are, experience confirms it because this is the truth.

I do not get the impression that you are waiting for some kind of “special” experience to prove that you are awareness. Your problem is with Larissa. Perhaps there is a lack of congruency between who you know Larissa actually is and her life. Or there are, as you say, deep-seated *samskaras*

that need to be understood and dissolved. We are all made up from the same forces that have shaped and governed the creation of the environment we find ourselves in. The problem lies in our identification with these forces and our environment, microcosmically and macrocosmically.

We all know that there are certain givens when it comes to the values that underpin life as we know it. This is why I suggested that you take a fearless moral inventory and that you should read *The Value of Values* by Swami Dayananda in our last exchange.

These laws or *dharma*s are built into the nature of the field of existence and cannot be avoided or contravened without consequence. The results of all actions, whether through appropriate action (*dharma*) or inappropriate action (*adharma*), are called *karma*s. On a macrocosmic level, gravity and electricity are examples of universal *dharma*s. No matter what religious or non-religious views one enjoys, these laws or *dharma*s operate the same way for everyone. On a personal or microcosmic level, the laws of universal *dharma* apply to the *dharma*s of proper conduct, such as the law of non-injury, for instance, the highest human value. This is an expectation we all hold and if it is contravened we feel unpleasant effects. It is our experience that “as you sow, so shall you will reap.”

Whether or not we abide by these laws or know what they are, they are built into the very fabric of our being. Even though how *dharma* plays out is different for everyone, the fundamental laws apply to everyone. Although *dharma* is one, because reality is non-dual, it can be understood in three ways. I gave them to you in our last exchange but here they are in a little more detail:

1: *Samanya dharma*, or universal values, are (a) moral laws governing the field of existence that apply to everyone personally, like non-injury, honesty, fairness, etc. and (b) the macrocosmic laws of physics, like gravity and thermodynamics, etc.

2: *Visesa dharma* is how the individual interprets the universal rules and applies them to their lives in the apparent reality with regards to everything: lifestyle, diet, money, work, family, sex, marriage, how one relates to people and the environment one lives in, etc.

3: *Svadharna* with a small “s” is an individual’s conditioning. This is the nature and the predisposition with which each person is born. To be happy the individual needs to act in accordance with his or her inborn nature or he or she will not be following *dharma*. For instance, if it is an individual’s nature to be an artist, it will not work for him or her to take up accounting.

All *dharma*s are based on common sense and logic. Our personal *svadharna*, of course, also includes our conditioning, our *vasana* load, which will be governing how we see and act on all levels. The binding *vasanas* must be seen and dissolved for peace of mind to be experienced. Still, we will have a particular kind of nature that we need to be in harmony with, so unless one understands what our *dharma* is we can make decisions that cause great agitation, suffering and discomfort to the mind and body, making peace of mind impossible.

It is possible that on the personal level, in order to be true to our *svadharna*, we must sometimes take actions that cause agitation and distress to ourselves or “others.” For instance, if we are in a marriage we know does not support who we are, but we are afraid to hurt people by leaving, like our children, for instance. I have been there. These are tough decisions and ones we have to make ourselves. Our lives have to conform to the truth or we will not have peace of mind, so if we are in a situation like this and faced with such choices, following the truth will always work out for the best even though it may turn your life upside down. It may take time, but it will work out. It is

far more damaging to all concerned in an *adharmic* situation to remain in it than face the consequences of ending it.

If, on the other hand, we are duty-bound and cannot change our circumstance, then we have to accept that this is *prarabdha karma* playing out and we attend to it as best we can with the *karma yoga* attitude. You know the beautiful prayer: “Lord give me the courage to change what needs to be changed, the strength to accept what cannot be changed and the wisdom to know the difference between the two.”

I was faced with a choice long ago that I knew if not made it would destroy both me and my daughter. I also knew that if I did make it, it could destroy both of us. But I knew I had to make it and trusted my self and the knowledge. I made the hard choice and the results were catastrophic for her and me at first. I was severely judged by many for my choice and the only two people who really understood my choice were my daughter and me. But years later the results were and continue to be astonishing, and we are both free of each other and all *karma* associated with our “past.” It takes self-confidence, total trust, a means of knowledge we know is valid and have faith in – and courage to make the right choices.

Larissa: According to what I hear James and you talk about, it is about doing everything possible to have a peaceful mind. I have work to do on this. I’ve become better at listening to the nagging voice in the head and recognizing the “roles” that speak (my mother, my father, etc.)... oftentimes dismissing it altogether and focusing on what is right there in front of me.

Sundari: Yes, peace of mind is the main aim if *moksa* is what you are after. The nagging voice in your head is probably guilt and not self-knowledge. I call it “the voice of diminishment” and it is not your friend. You would be well-served to recognise the role-playing demanded by *samsara* and dismiss that voice. All the same, if we are not feeling good about ourselves it is because we are most likely contravening *dharma* on some level – either by what we do or don’t do – because ignorance is present in the mind, i.e. *rajas* and *tamas* are at play.

Many spiritual seekers believe that self-knowledge is going to fix their lives and fix them. It will not because Vedanta assumes that the mind is qualified and purified to receive self-knowledge. If the mind is not purified, then yes, you have some work to do on the psychological level to clean up Larissa’s stuff. Our “stuff” may not be ours but it sticks like you know what until we resolve it by dissolving it in self-knowledge.

Vedanta, or self-realisation, is not going to fix your life but it can give you the tools to help you deal with it, which is *karma yoga*. *Karma yoga*, when practiced properly, is really *dharma yoga* because every action you take is dedicated to *Isvara*; it is a consecration. It is understood that peace of mind only comes with the realisation that you are not in control of the *dharma* field, yet in taking the appropriate steps to act according to *dharma* and then relinquishing the results, peace of mind is produced. If you are not experiencing peace of mind by relinquishing results you are not relinquishing results. It’s that simple – the doer is still there, afraid and small, still wanting a particular result, frustrated and afraid because it believes it needs the result to be safe or whole and is not getting what it wants.

Also, don’t confuse peace of mind with always feeling blissful. This is another enlightenment myth. What *moksa* gives you is the bliss of self-knowledge, which is very different from

experiential bliss. When *moksa* has obtained in the mind one may and usually does feel experiential bliss regularly, but one does not depend on it because you know you are the bliss. Experiential bliss is an object known to you but you are always blissful, whether or not experiential bliss is present. In fact, you could be sick, in pain and half-dead, broke, jobless or stuck in a situation you do not enjoy but cannot change – and be totally blissful because who you are is not influenced by what is or is not going on around you.

Life in *samsara* is a zero-sum game. It is often brutal. We need to be able to be true and faithful to ourselves no matter what, even if in doing so we are called faithless, cruel, indifferent, uncaring – among many things. The world does not like it when we change the status quo. Ignorance rears up and strikes even harder and will try to bring us down. People around you who do not have self-knowledge will make you wrong if you go against the flow of what makes them comfortable. Fear runs deep and its roots entangle us all until we have self-knowledge.

Larissa: It's not always easy to ignore it though. Sometimes the choices I'm faced with "go either way" or seem to in terms of the "collateral damage" (i.e. peace of mind because I'm doing what I believe is the right thing to do, and yet no peace of mind because there are other consequences – though, yes, not under my control – yet what is exactly under "my" control?).

Sundari: Who is asking about wanting to be in control here...? Awareness does not need control and the *jivanmukta* trusts *Isvara* to run the show.

Everything we ever need to know about any situation is always present but unless the mind is *sattvic* we will not be able to see clearly because *rajas* and *tamas* will be obscuring the truth. It is a hit-and-miss situation making choices without self-knowledge; usually it is a miss. Some people believe that their intuition will guide them but intuition is based on your conditioning and not constant, so it cannot be trusted.

In all situations and choices (other than when one is after *moksa*) when strong likes and dislikes are pushing for a particular result, there are only ever two valid questions to ask yourself: (1) "Who wants what it wants the way it wants it and why?" (2) "If I am really awareness will it make any difference to me if I get the result I want or not?" The answer to the first question will always be "the doer wants what it wants because it believes it is incomplete and the solution to its problem is in the object; awareness has no wants." The second answer will always be "no" for the same reason. The answer to both questions if it is *moksa* we are seeking depends on who is asking because, in truth, as awareness you are already free. *Moksa* only makes a difference to the *jiva*.

If you understand what *karma yoga* really is you will know it always works no matter what result you get. This is because life is not about getting what you want, remember? It is about the one who does not want. If control is what you are after, you do not understand this.

As far as the doer goes, there are appropriate actions you can take that are pretty likely (but not guaranteed) to give you what you want. We do have relative free will in that we can make choices to succeed. If this were not possible, it would not be possible to achieve anything in the apparent reality. The point about *karma yoga* is not about action or no action, it is about renouncing the idea of doership. Even though you may want a particular result and do not get it, one accepts that this is for the best because *Isvara* is always taking care of the total, not just our

personal needs. If we act taking the *karma yoga* attitude halfheartedly, but really we know that deep down the *vasanas* are making the choices, well, then there is no escape from ignorance and there will be no peace of mind. There is no fooling *Isvara*. For *karma yoga* to work you have to be totally committed and convinced that if you could have solved your problems, you would have done so by now. Clearly, you are not getting it right. So the only solution is self-inquiry and *karma yoga*.

Larissa: Time/fear is a tricky issue.

Sundari: Time has no objective reality. It is the distance between a memory of an event and another memory or current experience. Time is an illusion. Yet as the *jiva* we cannot step “out of time” because we do not stop experiencing as long as the body is alive. The essence of the experience of events (time) is stored in the causal body by *Isvara*, the *vasanas*, enlightened or not. How we relate to experience is determined by the level of self-knowledge, or the lack of it, in the mind.

Larissa: I like the “nothing can go wrong” thought. I often see both sides. I see the “nothing can, won’t and never has gone wrong.”

Sundari: The important thing to see is who knows the “nothing can go wrong” thought. To you, awareness, there is no possibility of anything ever going wrong so no results are good or bad because all is one and all is you.

Larissa: At the same time I feel the stickiness of the thought “so what?” For Larissa (her conditioning) and for this or that it is wrong, it has already gone wrong, so what if it’s in a different order of reality? It still has consequences...”

Sundari: What has gone wrong and for whom? “So what?” is indeed the correct attitude from awareness’ point of view. “So what?” is also appropriate from Larissa’s point of view. If things have not worked out and gone wrong for the person, the solution is to assess the situation in light of self-knowledge and what is *dharmic* for Larissa. Having done so once again one takes the appropriate action (even if that is no action) to change the situation, do what can be done to make reparations or amends, or to live with it, all with the *karma yoga* attitude. Nothing can go wrong or ever does go wrong because you are whole and complete, non-dual, actionless, unchanging, unlimited awareness. All is well, no matter what result you get, even a so-called “bad” one.

The apparent reality is in a different order of reality to you, awareness, because it is not real. You are. The reflection is you but you are not the reflection. The consequences, good or bad, belong to the field of experience and not to you. If you are still identified with Larissa, then the “bad” or wrong results belong to her and so does the suffering that comes with it.

Larissa: In the meantime, I can only practice *karma yoga* as often as I can remember to and remind myself that *Isvara* seems to work in mysterious ways.

Sundari: I don't think you really understand *karma yoga*. The right attitude is not a path. It is a commitment. *Karma yoga* is not a path. It is a life committed 100% to performing action as *yoga*. It takes skill to perform action with the right attitude, which is doing what is to be done whether you like it or not. Thus likes and dislikes – how I feel about the situation – do not come into play. Your likes and dislikes often prompt you to perform an action which is not conducive to peace of mind so a *karma yogi* refrains from performing it because it is not proper for them. So performing actions in harmony with the natural order (*dharmic* actions) and avoiding actions that disturb the order (*adharmic* actions) is *karma yoga*.

Karma yoga is keeping one's attention on the motivation behind one's actions and adjusting one's attitude when it is found to be *vasana*-producing. As I told you in my last email to you, when *rajas* is strong, the mind cannot observe itself. It is caught up in the future, the thought that things need to be different, so the mind acts to correct the situation, usually in negative ways; it does not act to correct itself because *sattva* is obscured by *rajas* and *tamas*. When *tamas* predominates, the mind is too dull to discriminate; it is prone to denial and avoidance. *Rajas* and *tamas* always work together. Where you find projection (*rajas*) you will find denial (*tamas*).

Sameness of mind towards success and failure with respect to action is another definition of *yoga*. When a result is looked upon as a success, attachment arises, and when it is looked upon as failure, aversion arises. In fact, there is no such thing as success and failure. Every result is in accordance with the laws of action. Laws are not made by anybody, they are made by the *dharma* field, or *Isvara*, so they can never go wrong.

This is very important for you to hear and understand: every result is a right result. The more you appreciate the laws, the more you are in harmony with the things around and you can find your place in the scheme of things. Action never really fails, it only produces results. A given expectation may be said to have failed but the one with the expectation has not failed. That "I have failed" or that "the action has failed" is the wrong conclusion – only the expectation is the problem. So nobody fails. It is only a matter of wrong judgment because we are not omniscient and we cannot have the knowledge of all the factors that shape the results of the actions. Only *Isvara* has all knowledge of these factors.

Another definition of *karma yoga* is an attitude of gratitude, a loving consecration of one's actions based on the understanding that life is a great gift that requires reciprocation. We must remember that we have the freedom in choosing and performing an action and whatever result comes is in accordance with the laws governing the action. This attitude of taking the result as it is, maintaining equanimity of the mind both in success and failure, is *yoga*.

Failure to appreciate this fact results in low-self esteem, the feeling that "I am a failure." You are familiar with this. The solution to low self-esteem is the understanding that one's knowledge of all the variables in the field that produce results is and always will be limited. Therefore the results of one's actions can never be known. This is why *karma yoga* is common-sense logic!

Action can produce likes and dislikes (*vasanas*) only if the result is looked upon as a success or failure. When the result is looked upon as a function of the invariable laws of action, or what is even better, if it is looked upon as the grace of the *dharma* field, no new likes and dislikes are created. The existing likes and dislikes will no doubt create desires and produce actions but new likes and dislikes are avoided. With this attitude towards the result, actions born of likes and dislikes become the means of eliminating the very likes and dislikes themselves. The mind

becomes free from the agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*).

Such a mind is tranquil and contemplative. Contemplation is not something you do. It is the nature of *sattva*. It is not that the mind “becomes” *sattvic*, it is that self-knowledge removes the excess *rajas* and *tamas* which cause the agitation which prevents you from experiencing your true nature, which is *sat chit ananda*, existence, consciousness, bliss. When the mind is *sattvic*, you automatically think dispassionately about things and discrimination comes naturally from such a mind. *Karma yoga* produces a *sattvic* mind.

A person who has been on the spiritual path for a long time but whose mind is still *rajasic* does not understand the value of *karma yoga*. As Krishna says, “A little *karma yoga* removes a lot of agitation.”

The ego that is identified with the doer will hate the idea of *karma yoga* because it has nothing to gain from it except its own demise. When self-knowledge makes it clear that it is awareness apparently experiencing the ego and not the ego experiencing awareness, the ego gets on board with the idea of *moksa*. *Moksa* is not about denying the existence of the ego, perfecting the ego or banishing the ego, it is about understanding that the ego or the *jiva* is not real. You still get to be the apparent person you are “after” *moksa*, and this person, of course, will have a certain inborn nature and be doing things a certain way until the day the body dies, but the sense of doership will be negated and the binding *vasanas* rendered non-binding. So the suffering that is created by the *vasanas* no longer obtains.

Larissa: I hope everything is fine with your daughter and that you’re all enjoying the new addition to the family.

~ Lots of love, Larissa

Sundari: Thank you, Larissa, life is beautiful and all is well.