

Karma Yoga Is Dharma Yoga

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Steven: Hi, Sundari. I have another question, if you don't mind, that I have been wrestling with. The basic question is: how to deal with complex decisions that have major consequences in our "apparent reality"? For most these situations are very stressful. However, based on the teachings of Vedanta, I am now less bothered by them. That said, I am still a bit torn on how to handle them. On the one hand, I feel like it is my duty to handle them carefully and do my best to make the right decision, while on the other hand, my mind says, why labor over such a thing when you know the nature of the world is *mithya* and you are unchanging awareness? I also know when I take an action *Isvara* will deliver the result, but my question here is about how to think about the decision-making process itself.

I feel like I am rambling a bit so I hope this makes sense... Like, should I leave my company and find a new job or stay put and see where things go? The decision could impact my family quite a bit. I want to make the right decision but I feel like to do so I have to brood over it and stress about it. Let me know what you think if you have a chance. I'm just not sure how to apply *karma yoga* and other ideas in a situation like this. I hope all is well.

~ Regards, Steven

Sundari: Hello, Steven. Applying self-knowledge to your day-to-day life is where the rubber meets the road, to quote the great Ramji! It is impossible for another person (or Vedanta teacher) to tell you what is right for your personal life. The aim of Vedanta is to negate the idea of personhood, but this does not make the person disappear. You are still stuck with the person, in a manner of speaking – and the person as a person is always limited, even when it knows that it is not the person but the self. This is a common enlightenment myth, that enlightenment somehow changes the person. All *jivas* have their particular nature (conditioning) which they are born with (*vasana* load) and particular life situation. If *moksa* is the most important aim for you, then everything the *jiva* does needs to be what produces peace of mind. If you have a family, then you have a duty to them in the apparent reality, even though you know that "family" is just a thought in your mind. If you run away from this or make decisions that do not benefit your life situation, you will have to live with the *karma* from that, positive or negative. Everything we do or don't do produces *karma*. The fact that you know it is all *mithya* is good, but remember that *moksa* or freedom is from the *jiva*, and for the *jiva*, who lives in the apparent reality. Knowing that the apparent reality is not real will not magically change or fix things for the *jiva*. To be free of the *jiva* and to maintain peace of mind, the *jiva* has to take care of its *karma* appropriately, following its own personal *dharma* as well as the universal *dharma* of the field, *Isvara*. The most important *dharma* of all is non-injury to yourself or others. Vedanta, or self-realisation, may not fix your life but it will 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. *Karma yoga* means fully dedicating your every thought word and action – before they are performed, on a moment-to-

moment basis – to the whole, or to *Isvara*, with an attitude of gratitude, knowing that the results are not up to you.

Even though as a *jiva* one cannot not take action (even no action is an action), *karma yoga* is an attitude towards action. *Karma yoga* is performing one's duty, cultivating the right attitude toward life, thus one is conforming to the pattern and harmony of creation and one becomes alive to the beauty of the cosmic order. When *sattya* predominates (which is the true nature of the mind), the mind becomes clear and one is able to see the natural order of creation. In the beginning of one's spiritual practice, duty is an attitude but eventually it becomes natural. The right attitude is not a path. It is a commitment. *Karma yoga* is not a path. It is a life committed to performing action as *yoga*, and 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. 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. 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. 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." 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. 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*).

Having said that, we advise people in difficult life situations that, if they want self-knowledge to work for them, their life has to serve THE truth and not the other way around, i.e. you cannot make self-knowledge work in an unworkable situation, no matter how much *karma yoga* you apply to it. Sometimes the only course of action to take is that which is the hardest and will produce great agitation on the emotional/mental level for a while, maybe even seemingly injure others. But it might be a necessary course of action in order to be true to your own *dharma*. In which case, again, one does this with the *karma yoga* attitude. We do not advise people what decisions to make, we only teach self-knowledge. I hope this helps!

~ *Namaste*, Sundari