

# **Karma Yoga and Interpreting Isvara**

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

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**Thomas:** Hi, Sundari. I met Ram the last time he came to visit Amsterdam in 2013. I bought my ticket and climbed aboard the Vedanta bus. As per the website I will give you some personal back ground to put things in context. I had an epiphany when I was 19 and was under the assumption that I had to live a Christ-like or messianic-like life. I sought out becoming a Franciscan friar (a Catholic religious order) which I let go of and ended up marrying my high school sweetheart. I then joined a very strict Christian church which was very strong in Bible study. I left after about 10 years and went back to Catholicism for a while, always dabbling in Eastern thought, read various books/authors, i.e. Osho, *Be Here Now* and others, until I happened upon a website that eventually taught me to chant, "*Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.*" I work outside and by myself quite often, so I would chant this either out loud or to myself sometimes three or four hours a day for about three years. Anyway, one fine day a googled "enlightenment," and to make a long story short found our beloved Ram. I am now 55. I have been practicing *karma yoga* for about a year, and have enjoyed its many benefits. All the "things" that would bother me like money problems and so on do not carry the same degree of concern. They still pop their heads up now and again, but I can dissolve them down to a comfortable level. I recently had surgery that caused me to take a pause from my busy life, which consists of one full-time job, a side business and seeing one patient (I am a retired chiropractor), being a father (three kids) and a husband. Somehow all is fine. I finally sat down and started watching the Vedanta set which I purchased in the US; and that very quickly brings you up to the present.

I laugh with joy at how beautifully orchestrated this life is and marvel at how Vedanta removes the ignorance about our true nature. It's as if the self was playing "hide-and-seek," and in my case I just became too weary of the apparent separation, and the self finally decided it was time to be found. Amen.

**Sundari:** Hello, Thomas, thank you for writing and telling us your life story. We love to hear from inquirers, and having some background information really does help to put things in context for us so that we can respond appropriately to any doubts. It is so interesting for us to have these insights into the lives of the amazing people that write to us – and in truth we see over and over again that there is really only one story and we all share it. It is the story of the self seeking itself, only to find that it is in fact that which it has been seeking all along. Without the good grace to come upon Vedanta and a qualified teacher to unfold a valid and independent means of knowledge, however, the self-realisation that ensues from epiphanies or any other means often remains a purely experiential awakening. And as we so often point out, all experiences take place in time so are subject to change. What the mind needs is a means of knowledge capable of revealing what self-realisation really means, which is Vedanta. You are blessed to have found James and ShiningWorld, as a better teacher of Vedanta you will not find. It is grace and grace is earned. Well done to you for applying the teachings to the *jiva's* life; this is where the "rubber meets the road," as James is fond of saying. ☺

Although Vedanta is not theory in practice, because the subject matter is you,

awareness – unless the teachings translate into the life of the *jiva*, *moksa* is highly unlikely to obtain in the mind. As you have found out, *karma yoga* is indeed the “place” to start, as without it one will not negate the doer.

*Moksa* very simply is the ability to discriminate you, awareness, from the objects that appear in you – i.e. the doer and “their” conditioning – 24/7. Freedom from the doer and freedom for the doer is what one is after if *moksa* is what you desire more than anything else.

It is clear from your email that you have the qualifications for *moksa*; you have both dispassion and discrimination – the most important being that you have seen that there is nothing to be gained through objects; as you are the sought, you are the source of the joy.

**Thomas:** So finally, a question, when a situation presents itself, and if initially the proper *dharmic* response (course of action) is not known, is it just a matter of time for it to be revealed? And if so, should no action be the response to the specific situation until the proper response is revealed? Can I then relax (put my faith) in knowing that *Isvara* will reveal the proper response? Is it *Isvara*’s responsibility to reveal the proper course of action in the *dharma* field?

**Sundari:** Yes, indeed putting your faith in *Isvara* is the wisest and sanest approach to any life situation. This is the essence of *karma yoga*. James always says that *Isvara* does his life (as a *jiva*) better than he could – meaning of course renouncing the idea of doership. You could say it is *Isvara*’s “responsibility” to reveal the proper action, even though *Isvara* is not a person, a doer, or a *samsari*. *Isvara* (awareness plus *maya*) is both the intelligent cause, that which shapes the materials into form (without ever losing or modifying its own nature) and the material substance, meaning the effect from which the forms are created. *Isvara* is an impersonal force appearing in the life of the *jiva* as its environment, which is made up of and acts as three energies, the *gunas*: *sattva* (peace, clarity), *rajas* (desire, action, extroversion) and *tamas* (material substance, dullness, denial).

There is no escape from these energies as long as one is identified with being the *jiva*, or doer. In order to render one’s conditioning (likes or dislikes, *vasanas*) non-binding, one has to understand these three forces and how they condition the mind, i.e. the subtle body, or *jiva*.

When one does understand the *gunas*, you see that everything playing out in one’s environment is a product of the *gunas* and one takes appropriate action (or inaction as the case may be) in order to maintain peace of mind, which is the primary objective. *Sattva* is the *guna* springboard for *moksa*; without it, self-inquiry and the application of self-knowledge is very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain.

Whatever situation presents itself to you, ask yourself: Am I responding to this as the *jiva* identified with being a person (doer), am I responding as the *jiva* that knows about awareness – or am I responding as the *jiva* that knows it IS awareness? In all three cases, you might have a different answer as to how to respond to a given situation. The *jiva* identified with being a *jiva* will react without thinking and strive to change the situation, not to adjust its thinking; the *jiva* that knows about awareness but is not firm in the knowledge that it is awareness will tend to lack self-confidence, be uncertain how to respond, second-guess itself or respond incorrectly by

interpreting *Isvara* according to its conditioning; the *jiva* that knows it is awareness will respond with self-knowledge thus following *dharma* automatically and very simply choosing peace of mind at all times, without doubt or lack of self-confidence. That is because the self-aware self knows it is beyond the *gunas* and beyond *Isvara* (being awareness – and as long as it appears a *jiva*, it desires peace of mind above all. To achieve this, the *jivanmukta* (the *jiva* that is firm in the knowledge that it is really the self) nonetheless always responds appropriately to *Isvara*.

If one is not quite there because self-knowledge is not yet firm, this is where the value of *karma yoga* really comes in. It is an essential spiritual practice. But as one of our writers, Vishnudeva, says, “The point of *karma yoga* is not to destroy the doer or in some cases even its sense of doership. *Karma yoga* is meant to clear the mind of enough likes and dislikes until it becomes composed enough to do sustained inquiry. Only inquiry removes the problem of doership because it shows that you, the self, cannot be the ego (doer) that is known to you. When that is clear, the doer can appear in you, even with a trace of doership, but you do not identify with it.”

If we are not feeling good about ourselves, uncertain or lacking in confidence about action or inaction, 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.

*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 (whether you take action or not) 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. Or as the case may be, the doer is there uncertain what action to take or not take because it does not trust itself or self-knowledge.

*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. This applies whether one is sure of what the right action is or not. Even though as a *jiva* one cannot not take action (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 *satya* (which is the true nature of the mind) dominates in the mind, it 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. For instance, we make take the appropriate action, but get a result we do not want or vice versa. 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 or I have failed." Or it results in the inability to trust or have confidence in how to respond to what life brings our way. 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 in truth, the answer to your questions, "Can I then relax (put my faith) in knowing that *Isvara* will reveal the proper response? Is it *Isvara's* responsibility to reveal the proper course of action in the *dharma* field?" is definitely yes - and possibly no. It depends who you think you are. As stated above, when the mind is still clouded by ignorance it interprets *Isvara* incorrectly, according to its conditioning. Remember that *Isvara* is *karma phala datta*: the one in charge of all results. These include *dharma* and *adharma*. This is why in some situations one can say no to *Isvara* - and indeed it behoves one to do so, even though the fruits of the action are nonetheless still up to *Isvara*. This is where confidence in one's true identity as awareness comes in.

*Isvara* is impersonal and has no preferences, because *Isvara* is taking care of the total, not individuals. How the "individual" mind responds to objects (any

experience) is of no importance in the grand scheme of things for *Isvara*. The *dharma* field, or Total Mind (*Isvara*), remains unchanged if one is “enlightened” or not; which means *prarabdha karma* will play out according to the laws of the *dharma* field – and those laws are impersonal. *Prarabdha karma* is the momentum of past actions that fructify as “your” life experiences in this life, but this does not make them personal, because they are not.

How one responds (i.e. action or inaction) produces 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 toward results actions born of likes and dislikes become the means of eliminating the very likes and dislikes. The mind becomes free from the agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*).

Such a mind is tranquil and contemplative, irrespective of action or inaction. 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. When the mind is *sattvic*, you automatically think dispassionately about things and discrimination comes naturally from such a mind. Such a mind automatically understands what is happening in the environment (read: *Isvara*) and responds appropriately – meaning in accordance with what is *dharmic* for them.

**Thomas:** Thank you for your time in answering.

PS: I look forward to meeting Ram again this April in Princeton.

**Sundari:** We are looking forward to seeing again too, Thomas. You are on the right path; I hope this helps to clear up your doubt. Please do not hesitate to write if you need further clarification.

~ *Om* and *prem*, Sundari