

# Does Karma Yoga Destroy Ignorance?

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**Joe:** Dear James, I understand from the ShiningWorld website you have been busy and hope you are getting some rest. Like countless others, I really do appreciate all your efforts in tirelessness swinging the sword of truth.

I'm reading Swami Dayananda's *Bhagavad Gita* slowly and am up to Chapter XI.

I have a couple of "sticking points" and wonder if you can help clarify them for me.

1. The *tamas guna* can be characterised by ignorance (as well as dullness, inertia, doubt, uncertainty, etc.). It is said in the *Bhagavad Gita* that *tamas* (ignorance) must be overcome by *karma yoga*. However, it is also said at a different point that only *jnana yoga* (knowledge) can purify *avidya* (ignorance). I realise a pure mind is essential to develop self-knowledge. I do recognise there is still ignorance operating within my mind, although this is burning up through reflection on the Vedantic teachings. I suppose my perspective has been to favour self-knowledge through reading scripture – how do I know whether there is still a role for an explicitly *karma yoga* approach?

**James:** There is actually no contradiction between the idea that *karma yoga* and *jnana yoga* both burn up ignorance. *Karma yoga* is a practice based on the knowledge that the results of action are not up to the doer of the action. A doer that changes his attitude based on this knowledge will gain the kind of mind in which the teachings will make sense and ultimately set one free. The *karma* does not remove the ignorance directly – only knowledge does that – but it removes the effects of ignorance, the *vasanas* and the *karma* that keeps the mind extroverted and incapable of understanding. It is just as important to remove the effects of ignorance as it is to remove the ignorance itself because unless the effects have been removed, the contemplation on the teachings cannot remove it.

**Joe:** 2. I notice certain conditioned patterns playing out in this body-mind-sense complex. For instance, I have an on-off relationship that is a little one-sided in the sense that "Joe's" habit is to sacrifice his needs and his own *dharma* and focus exclusively on helping my partner achieve whatever her goals are. I have come across teachers who would advocate looking into the belief systems behind this type of conditioned behaviour.

**James:** It is a good pattern to look into, Joe, although it is important to accommodate and sacrifice in relationships. But the danger is that you don't take care of your own *dharma*.

**Joe:** Assuming that self-knowledge is beginning to stabilise in this mind, are examining belief systems necessary or is it simply matter of looking it from consciousness's point of view, i.e. "I am whole, complete, actionless, unborn, ordinary, unchanging awareness"?

**James:** It is not necessarily an either/or. You can examine belief systems and apply self-knowledge, whichever is more effective.

**Joe:** Certain teachers I have come across in the past would say that a continued pattern will continue to play out until the belief underlying it has been dismantled. Is it possible that some patterns will just keep revolving on the *jiva* level through accumulated *karma* and will burn out themselves in the light of self-knowledge?

**James:** These teachers are correct. If you don't want to have to dismiss it as *mithya* whenever it arises, it is good to dissolve it by thinking it through in light of the knowledge and making a resolution to change the pattern. However, if it doesn't bother you to dismiss it as *mithya*, which should destroy the pattern eventually, just know that it is unreal when it comes up and you will not be affected by it.