

How to Be Free: Karma Yoga

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This essay is an excellent Sanskrit-free transcription of an equally excellent talk by Swami Paramarthananda (Chennai), written by a good friend who prefers to remain anonymous.

Every action we perform has the same goal: freedom. We work to get money to free ourselves from poverty. We strive for success to free ourselves from failure. We search for the perfect mate to free ourselves from loneliness. But no matter how wealthy and successful and loved we become we can never free ourselves from insecurity, for everything we gain in time can and eventually will be lost in time. We know this. It makes us worry. It makes us sad.

Every man who's ever lived has faced the same problem of how to be free from his insecurities. It's the one great problem of life. But thousands of years ago the problem was solved. The way to be free is to give up worrying about the results of our actions. Giving up worrying is called *karma yoga*.

But how do we give up worrying? A practical program was worked out in ancient India and passed on through teachers and through writings. One of these writings is called *The Song of God*. It takes place as a huge battle is about to begin.

A great warrior is worried about the results of the battle. It's a civil war, and he will have to kill friends and family. He doesn't want to do this but he has his duty as a soldier and leader. He wants to be free of that duty. He wants to be free of the whole bloody business. He turns to his friend for help. And he receives that help through the teaching of *karma yoga*. He is given a five-point program to put into practice:

1. Remember that freedom is the goal of all your actions.
2. Offer all your actions to God, or the cosmos, or to whatever name or form you give to the force that keeps this world spinning.
3. Drop all expectations about the results of your actions.
4. Remember that you can't really hold onto or completely control anything in this world, you can only use it for a time.
5. Know you can endure anything life throws at you and that everything happens as it should and must happen, according to laws that can never be broken. So there is no reason to fret and pray for things to be different.

This program can free us from our fears. It is time-tested, rooted in plain truths we all recognize, and the only program that works.

The first point is to remember that all our actions have one goal: freedom. If we remember this we will avoid actions that limit us. Freedom is all about overcoming limitations. A limit is a boundary, and boundaries are painful to us.

We hate boundaries because they contradict our nature, which is freedom itself.

When we can't have something or do something it irks us, it feels unnatural. The most painful of all limitations is the feeling that we are small and powerless creatures at the mercy of an often hostile or indifferent world. This is the big limitation from which all the others arise.

Because we feel small and powerless we try to make ourselves big and powerful. All the miseries of the world come from this attempt. *Karma yoga* asks the questions: How do you know you are small and powerless? What evidence do you have that you are just this limited body and mind? Don't we observe the body and mind like we observe other objects?

And we never confuse ourselves with objects. We never think we are the table we see in front of us. Why do we think we are the body we see in front of us, or the thoughts that come and go in the mind? These are things we observe. The big question is: Who is the observer? The answer: I am.

The observer is who we truly are. The body and mind are not who we are. Otherwise, we would disappear when the body disappears in sleep or vanish when a thought vanishes. But we the observer, the awareness, remain. So if we are awareness we are not at the mercy of the world. In fact the world simply comes and goes in our awareness, which never changes.

So we are already free. We simply have to recognize it and remember it. If we know that we are free then we won't strain ourselves in trying to become free by acquiring things that bind us to the fears of an ever-changing and insecure world. We will stop doing things to become free. We will act as free beings.

The realization that we are awareness, pure, simple and free, is radically opposed to our usual way of thinking, that we are the person we see in the mirror. It may take some getting used to, and that is why there are four more points to the program.

The second point in the program is to offer our actions to God, or to whatever we call the force that governs the world. In a way, we do this whether we are conscious of it or not, for there is no escaping this force, which is the very field in which all action takes place.

"God" is a term that comes with a lot of baggage, so much so it would be better not to use it if it were not so difficult to find a replacement for it. To talk about God in a sensible way we have to forget all the childish notions of a big and powerful being in the clouds who watches us, most often with a disapproving eye.

Karma yoga regards God as the intelligent force that maintains this world according to invariable laws. Our bodies and minds are part of this world and fall under the same laws that govern all matter, from the grossest to the most subtle.

Karma is action. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This is as true of those human actions we call moral as it is of physical actions. Everything we do produces a result. We cannot stop the result from happening any more than we can stop the force of gravity from operating. A law is a law.

Some religious people think God acts arbitrarily, giving grace to some, withholding it from others, punishing and rewarding according to some inscrutable will that must forever remain dark to us. Some people pray to this God they have imagined in the hope of influencing his actions. When you think about it, can anything be sillier?

The so-called prayer of petition rests upon the idea that God can be swayed by our groveling and whining. That so irrational a world should be governed by so vain a creator is a conception unworthy of an intelligent being. *Karma yoga* completely rejects such a conception of God.

To offer our daily actions to God is simply to recognize that each of our actions will produce an appropriate and irreversible result. To say that God gives the results of actions is the same as saying that every action contains its own result. God then is simply the field of action to which we all belong, and when we act we plant seeds in that field which will bear fruit, each according to its kind.

Once we realize this we will no longer act in ignorance. And the knowledge that actions produce inevitable results leads us to the third point in the program: drop all expectations about the results of our actions.

We spend so much of our waking life worrying about what will happen. Not only does this worry drain our energy, it draws us into a world of fantasy where we imagine either good or bad things happening to us and suffer accordingly, even though nothing whatsoever is actually happening. We come to believe that if we think intensely enough, torture our imaginations sufficiently, fill ourselves with enough hope or dread, we will be able either to produce or prevent a particular result.

So long as we cling to expectations we will be miserable. We forget that results are irreversible and wholly determined by the nature of the action and by the nature of the field in which the seed of action is planted. We should take a moment to think about the nature of the field.

The law of *karma*, of action/reaction, is simple on the one hand but infinitely complex on the other. To stick with the image of the seed, we know that it is not simply the quality of the seed that will determine the nature of the plant. Many other factors come into play: the makeup of the soil, the weather, interaction with other plants and creatures, etc. Along with our own actions, over which we have some control, there are countless actions over which we have no control. All this goes into producing a particular result.

If we think about it we realize that everything that happens is bound up with every other thing that happens, has happened or will ever happen. Experience is not a series of isolated events but a tightly-woven mesh in which it is impossible to distinguish individual threads. Any single action can only be an infinitesimal part of the immense fabric of life, so what reasonable expectation can we have of a particular result? None.

So *karma yoga* says: give up expectations. If we persist in clinging to the expectation of a particular result we also suffer the disadvantage of not being fully aware of what is happening in the moment. If our mind is preoccupied with fears and desires we may not see what is directly in front of us. We will end up sleepwalking through life, dreaming about the future, which is never real, and missing the present, which is the only reality.

When we cling to expectations we also make a judgment about what is good and evil. We have decided that our desire for a future result represents what is good; any outcome contrary to our expectation we tend to see as evil.

Given the complex nature of the field in which actions take place, most of our expectations will be disappointed. By clinging to expectations we expose ourselves

to the danger of feeling bitter and frustrated, thwarted by life and perhaps by God. We may become cynical. We may come to despise the world as evil, missing its beauty and splendor and seeing only our crushed hopes.

We have to plan our actions, of course. And every rational being acts for a particular end. But once we do whatever appears to be required by the situation we should let go of any expectation about the results of our action. We should regard our action as we would a seed cast into the field. Whether the seed will thrive and what fruit it may produce are no longer our concerns. We should rest content with having done our duty.

But it is hard to let go of an action once we have identified it as “our” action. This brings us to the fourth point in the program: remember that you can’t really hold onto or completely control anything in this world; you can only use it for a time.

When we think we own something we believe we have the right and the power to control it. *Karma yoga* tells us the plain truth: we don’t really own anything and we can’t really control anything. To think otherwise is to live in delusion and invite disaster. How many human tragedies arise from the mistaken notion that one human being can control another?

Western culture is built upon the twin notions of ownership and control. It is not easy for us to realize that no thing and no person belong to us. For a time the law of *karma* gives us custody of certain objects and places us in certain relationships. All of this is temporary, that is, it arises in time and it will fall away in time.

Much of the heartache we experience in life comes from trying to make permanent that which is by nature impermanent. Even those things we manage to hold onto throughout our lives will be taken from us when our body dies. Yet against all the evidence we behave as though certain things are our permanent possession.

And of course when we own something we believe it is ours to control. We think we have something called free will and this free will gives us the power to manipulate people and objects as we see fit. The trouble is people and objects won’t oblige our free will. They seem to have their own free will that cancels our free will. They go their own way, and we then feel impotent and become enraged or saddened.

Karma yoga reminds us that our will is only one of the vast number of factors that determines how things happen in the field of action. And we are part of that field, not the owners of it, nor the controllers of it. As we give up clinging to expectations we must give up clinging to ownership and control. To do otherwise is a fool’s game.

And try this on for size and see how it feels: you don’t own anything. Not a blessed thing. When you rent a place you are not terribly upset when a window gets broken or the roof leaks. It’s the landlord’s problem, not yours. He has to fix it.

We are renting everything in this life. It all belongs to the landlord, not to us. It’s only when we think we own anything that our troubles and worries begin. Let them go.

And let go of the notion that you are responsible for anyone else. You didn’t create anyone. You can’t control anyone. You can’t even control yourself. If you could you would arrange your life as a perfect dream. But you can’t. So give up the illusion and false responsibility of control, and feel the world lift from your shoulders. Then breathe easy. Feel free.

The last point in the five-point program is a counsel of courage: know you can endure anything life throws at you and that everything happens as it should and must happen, according to laws that can never be broken. So there is no reason to fret and pray for things to be different.

The first four points of the *karma yoga* program offer us knowledge. The fifth point helps us to make that knowledge a living reality in our daily lives. Many religious people try to find the courage to confront the uncertainties of life by clinging to beliefs for which they have no evidence. *Karma yoga* gives us the courage to confront the uncertainties of life with proven knowledge.

Courage ultimately comes from confidence. Otherwise, courage becomes foolhardiness, trusting in imaginary strength or ability. Once we recognize the nature of action and its results we are free. We are no longer tormented by the absurd desire to control the world and weakened by our disappointed expectations. We can greet each day with a calm mind and loving heart, accepting all that comes as right and inevitable.

Once we can do this we can begin to love God, that is, the beautiful, intelligent order of which our bodies and minds form a part. We watch life as a shifting pageant, and we play our part with zest and confidence. The world is no longer a threat to our security, no longer an enemy trying to take from us the things that we wish to own and control. We realize we own nothing, not even our own bodies. In that realization lies the ultimate freedom.

Remember the first point of the program: freedom is the goal of all our actions. And that freedom lies in knowing that we are none of the things that we observe but in knowing that we are the observer, the ever-free, changeless awareness, in which all things come and go.