

# Reflections on Chapter III of the *Bhagavad Gita*

Ram (James Swartz)

2013-04-16

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/681>

This document was originally a commentary by Swami Dayananda on the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This excellent rendition of the Chapter III of the *Bhagavad Gita* was written by a friend and professional writer, and improves the readability of the original.

## **To Act or Not to Act Is Not the Question**

As Chapter III opens, Arjuna is confused. Krishna tells him the path to liberation is knowing the self, which is actionless. Then he tells him to fight in the coming battle.

How can he renounce action and seek self-knowledge while fighting a battle?, Arjuna wonders. Aside from the seeming contradiction in Krishna's counsel, Arjuna also has an ethical concern about killing and its consequences.

"If, for liberation, self-knowledge is superior to action, why do you encourage me to fight this war? The action I am asked to perform involves a great deal of destruction and suffering."

Arjuna's concern is understandable, especially in light of what Krishna had said in the previous chapter:

"How can the one who knows the indestructible, changeless, birthless, ever-free unmodified self kill or cause someone else to kill?" (*Bhagavad Gita*, II.21)

But Arjuna's confusion arises not from an inherent contradiction in Krishna's words but because he thinks the self is the individual body-mind. When Krishna counseled Arjuna to pursue self-knowledge he meant that Arjuna should realize his true nature as the awareness in which the body and its actions appear. The *Gita* does not prohibit action nor see action in itself as an impediment to knowledge, it simply demonstrates that we are not limited or defined by our actions. Krishna has already explained to Arjuna that the self can neither kill nor be killed because it is not the body, and that he, Arjuna, is that very self, despite all appearances to the contrary.

But Krishna's exposition is too subtle for Arjuna. He is not yet able to understand that the pursuit of self-knowledge does not bar us from acting, that it gradually shifts our perspective from that of the individual to that of the ever-free awareness in which all apparent actions come and go and leave no mark. Arjuna is a man of action looking for an action-oriented plan. He is ready for renunciation, or so he believes, but he is not ready to abandon his identity as the doer of actions, including the act of renunciation.

Arjuna's confusion is compounded by something else Krishna has said:

"The wise person is one who has abandoned desires and is free from longing."  
(*Bhagavad Gita*, II.71)

So it would seem that we are required to give up desires if we hope to gain self-knowledge. Common sense informs us, as it does Arjuna, that no action is

undertaken without desire: we want something and we do something to get it. No desire, no action.

So far, Arjuna understands that knowledge frees one from bondage while action binds. Action creates a *vasana*, which is the seed of another action. Thus one gets trapped in the chain of action-desire-action. Krishna tells him to act, which creates bondage, and to pursue self-knowledge, which frees one from bondage. So Arjuna says, with a hint of impatience characteristic of action-oriented people:

“With these seemingly contradictory words you are confusing me. Please tell me one path by which I can attain liberation.” (*Bhagavad Gita*, III.2)

Arjuna qualifies his complaint by the word “seemingly” thus allowing the possibility that his confusion may be the result of his inability to understand the teaching. Still, rather than ask Krishna to clarify the teaching, Arjuna requests a simple command, tailored to his personal situation:

“O Krishna, you are praising knowledge and asking me to perform action. Please tell me which one would be the best means for liberation for me.”

Arjuna wants a personal plan of action, revealing that he still thinks of himself as the doer and believes liberation depends upon his own exertions. He wants Krishna to prescribe a path rather than explain the teaching. But Krishna will not oblige him. Instead, he unfolds the teaching in its fullness. Rather than issue an order, which Arjuna wants, he supplies the explanation that will remove the seeming contradiction between action and inaction.

Like many of us, Arjuna wants a shortcut, such as dogmatic religion or autocratic *gurus* supply: “Just tell me what to do. Don’t tell me why.” But Vedanta, which Krishna is unfolding, does not give us specific advice about what to do in a given circumstance. It allows us to see that circumstance from the standpoint of awareness rather than that of the individual we think we are.

Vedanta is a complete teaching that only works when we understand and accept it in its entirety. We cannot choose certain teachings that appeal to us personally and discard others that we dislike. The truth is impersonal. The desire to have “a special path for me” can never be satisfied.

So Krishna answers:

“In the beginning of the creation two lifestyles were laid out by me, the path of knowledge for contemplative renunciants and the path of action for active worldly people.”

Arjuna believes these two paths to be mutually exclusive. He thinks that one must either act or renounce action. As Krishna will explain, the pursuit of knowledge is the end of both paths. Our temperament and circumstances may incline us to favor one approach over another but the goal is always the same: to realize we are pure awareness.

Arjuna’s confusion shows that he has divided the indivisible self into two entities: the doer and the knower. He thinks he must choose which he is going to be. Or rather, he asks Krishna to choose for him.

But the division Arjuna believes Krishna has presented does not exist. Each of us are

both doers and knowers, on the relative plane. Sometimes we must act, sometimes we can rest in contemplation. An individual may be more inclined to one path than the other in general, or in particular instances, or at different stages in his development.

But the very notion that we are individuals is produced by *maya* and does not exist in pure awareness, that is to say, in reality. So Arjuna's perplexity over whether he should be a doer or knower is only a problem from his individual viewpoint, not from the viewpoint of awareness.

It is also important for us to remember that the *Gita* personifies the impersonal teachings of Vedanta, so the apparent contradiction between knowledge and action is formulated by Krishna in terms of two types of people. But we needn't choose which type we are, renunciant or action figure. We are both and neither.

When we find ourselves trying to decide which type we are we are assuming, as Arjuna does, that we must become something, that we must pack another identity into the suitcase of identities we are lugging around with us. But the whole aim of Vedanta is to realize we are free from the one who wants to become something. Ultimately, we must not only renounce the doer, we must renounce the renouncer.

## **The Contemplative and Active Lives**

Although the self is not divided, the human personality has many faces. Some of us are reclusive and reflective by temperament. If we are inclined to pursue spiritual knowledge we will likely choose a lifestyle as far removed from the field of action as possible.

In the West there are still cloistered orders of monks and nuns devoted to contemplation but the tradition is dying. Worldly people consider such a life wasted, as it deprives the individual of the opportunity to act in the world, either for his own good or the good of others, presumably. So our culture is inimical to the renunciant, regarding him as selfish, useless and a possible candidate for corrective therapy.

Indian society remains supportive of those who absent themselves from the world of action, and the institution of *sannyas*, the professional renunciant and pursuer of knowledge, is still respected and provided for.

But the orange robes of the *sannyasi* are no guarantee of self-knowledge, just as the Westerner's proclamation that he is seeking enlightenment is no assurance he is on the right path. The genuine renunciant must abandon the notion "I am the doer." The one seeking enlightenment must give up being the seeker.

The formal renunciant, as Arjuna rightly understands it, is committed to the path of knowledge and is not interested in all the business and bustle of the world. Arjuna has also rightly understood that only knowledge leads to liberation although he does not yet understand why.

As the *Gita* unfolds, it becomes clear that true knowledge, not action, leads to liberation because bondage is merely false knowledge, an illusion. If bondage were real, if it were our nature, neither action nor knowledge could free us from it. As Krishna explains, what is real will never disappear and what is unreal can never exist.

But bondage is neither real nor unreal, which is the definition of *maya*. Bondage becomes a seeming problem due to our ignorance of what is real. The cure for ignorance is knowledge, not action. We are already what we seek. We only have to know it. Such knowledge is called self-knowledge. So long as we desire other things it remains obscured. When we give up other things and desire this knowledge alone it is revealed. So self-knowledge is not possible without renunciation.

But not everyone is ready for renunciation. It is not something that can be imposed upon us, even by our own will. Arjuna mistakenly supposes that he can choose to renounce or pursue action, regardless of his temperament and *karmic* history. He thinks he can be free as an individual. But the individual is never free, he is bound by the field of action and its laws, as Krishna, assuming the role of *Isvara*, the law of the cosmos, explains quite clearly.

The contemplative person realizes this, the active person does not. Action springs from desire, as noted earlier: no desire, no action. The active person wants certain things and does not want other things, he has likes and dislikes. When he gets what he likes his mind is briefly at peace, when he gets what he doesn't like his mind is disturbed. Such a mind, bouncing between likes and dislikes, hasn't the steadiness required for contemplation.

The renunciant is no longer on the see-saw of the mind's likes and dislikes. He can accept what happens as the inevitable result of the invariable laws of the cosmos, i.e. *Isvara*. He does not want things to be different from what they are, for he knows they cannot be different from what they are. The renunciant has a predominantly *sattvic* temperament. *Sattva* is the intelligent ordering principle the nature of which is peace and light. *Isvara* is pure *sattva*, pure intelligence.

Those who are agitated by their likes and dislikes have a predominantly *rajasic* temperament. *Rajas* is desire. It wants what it wants when it wants it. Arjuna is predominantly *rajasic*. *Rajas* is also a prescription for more or less constant dissatisfaction because *Isvara* did not arrange a multitude of worlds, each one designed to accommodate the likes and dislikes of a particular individual. The universal laws operate with complete indifference to our likes and dislikes.

So reason should direct us to accommodate the world rather than insist that the world accommodate us. But *rajas* and reason do not work and play well together. *Rajas* is always picking a fight with the facts. *Rajas* is always expressing itself in the subjunctive: it lives in the plaintive mood of what should be rather than resting contentedly in what is.

But, as the *Gita* teaches, desire leads to anger when we don't get what we want, and anger darkens the understanding. This dullness of mind is *tamas*. Under the influence of *tamas* we cannot see that it is desire, *rajas* itself, that causes our suffering. Unable to let go of our likes and dislikes, we continue to try to change the world to accommodate our preferences, with painful results. People just won't behave as we know they should, and we become infuriated. It never occurs to us that we are not *Isvara* and can never be, no matter how intensely we work at changing people and things to suit our liking.

It is only when we are ready to give up trying to be the boss that we are ready for renunciation. But renunciation does not occur instantly, severing us once and for all from our likes and dislikes and the sense of doership. Most of us can only surrender to *Isvara* gradually, in fits and starts.

A few of us do make a radical act of renunciation and decide to devote ourselves entirely to self-knowledge. Most of us continue to live in the world, letting go of things bit by bit, replacing *rajas* with *sattva* incrementally, until we find ourselves more attracted to contemplation than to action. It is for this majority of renunciants-in-progress that the *Gita* prescribes *karma yoga*.

It may seem easier than radical renunciation but it has its own considerable difficulties. *Rajas* is impatient. It wants results now! It tires quickly of the incremental approach to renunciation and wants to scrap it as a failure for not delivering the goods instantly. *Rajas*, as the doer, wants to manage renunciation and gauge its progress. It does not realize that progress occurs only when it is taken out of the picture. Still, the *Gita* prescribes *karma yoga* as the path that most who aspire to self-knowledge must follow before they become capable of renunciation. And as it is impossible to live in this world without acting, *karma yoga* will always be with us, even as renunciants.

### **So What Is Karma Yoga?**

We all know we should do the right thing, and we have a fairly clear idea of what the right thing is. Doing the right thing – following The Golden Rule – is known as following *dharma*. All cultures recognize *dharma*, and laws and customs exist to encourage compliance with it. But the mature person follows *dharma* willingly, for he understands its rightness and, in some cases, its beauty.

Both the *Vedas* and the *Psalms* resound with praise of how wonderfully the world is ordered by Divine Wisdom. Doing our duty is not regarded as an unwanted burden but as a gift, an opportunity to participate in this glorious manifestation of love and light. But immature people, those dominated by *rajas*, lack this aesthetic appreciation of life.

When we are children, for example, do not readily understand the concept of duty; our desires come first. So we need to be taught. If we are not properly taught, the value of doing our duty (*svadharma*) will be only partly assimilated. We will then grow into adults with a *rajasic* temperament frequently at war with our duty and our environment. Feelings of victimhood (so prevalent in Western society) ensue. We are constantly grumbling to ourselves and to others that we are not being treated right, that is, we are not getting what we want when we want it. We think the world should accommodate our scheme of things, not the other way around.

Maturity is an appreciation of our role in the scheme of things. So long as we remain immature we will find ourselves resenting the natural order. And since we have the faculty of choice we can rebel against this order. Plants and animals cannot rebel because they have no volition; there is always harmony and balance in their lives. To have harmony in our lives we simply have to refrain from disturbing the order that exists in the world. The *Vedas*, the Ten Commandments and much of the religious and ethical literature that finds expression in various cultures prohibit actions that disturb the harmony of life. These precepts have the common aim of curbing *rajas*, which disturbs our environment by disturbing our mind.

As we do our duty we cultivate an attitude toward life that conforms to the pattern and harmony of creation. We become more alive to the beauty of the cosmic order. When our mind becomes clear we are able to see this order. When this vision becomes steady duty becomes natural. We become *karma yogis*.

*Karma yoga* is not a path. It is a life committed to performing action as *yoga*. Action is *yoga* when it is performed with the right attitude. This is what Krishna is explaining to Arjuna. We must always act, for this life is the field of action. Even the renunciant must act. What he renounces is action based on his personal likes and dislikes.

The right attitude is doing what is to be done, whether we like it or not. Our likes and dislikes often prompt us to perform an action that opposes the natural order. So performing actions in harmony with the natural order (*dharmic* actions) and avoiding actions that disturb that order (*adharmic* actions) is *karma yoga*.

To give an example of *dharma* in action, let's consider an important aspect of our lives from which a great deal of disharmony often arises: intimate relationships. The basic value of an intimate relationship is love. The first rule (*dharma*) of love is harmony, a *sattvic* value. *Sattva* reflects awareness and the reflection of awareness is an inner peace in which love grows. But when *rajas* stirs up our likes and dislikes we find it hard, if not impossible, to control our senses, particularly the tongue. We then cannot refrain from directing critical statements toward our loved ones. This is why one of the primary qualifications for pursuing self-knowledge is control of the senses, particularly restraining our speech (*vak tapas*). When we see the value of restraint we become aware of our projected feelings. In this way we can convert *rajas* into *sattva*.

The skill of *yoga* the *Gita* speaks about is mindfulness, keeping our attention on the motivation behind our actions and adjusting our attitude when we recognize it as *rajas*-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 it acts to correct the situation, usually in negative ways, rather than to correct itself.

Since we haven't introduced the word and we have already introduced the *vasanas* as likes and dislikes, let's stick with *rajas*. The Vedanta crowd will get it but new people won't.

Sameness of mind (towards success and failure) with respect to action is another definition of *yoga*. When we look upon a result as success attachment arises, and when we look upon it as failure aversion arises. In this way we form and feed our likes and dislikes. But there is no such thing as success and failure. Every result conforms to the laws of action, to *dharma*. Laws are not made by us, they are made by the *dharma* field, so every result is the right result. The more we appreciate the laws of the field the more we are in harmony with the things around us.

When we are ruled by *rajas* we are obsessed with success. When *tamas* predominates we are afraid of failure. So we become continually stressed and hopelessly active. In our societies stress is almost a badge of honor, indicating a commitment to the value of success measured in terms of wealth, power, fame or pleasure. Peace of mind, conversely, can be seen as a lack of ambition, complacency or laziness. We never see a classified want ad reading: "Applicant must possess strong peace of mind and be indifferent to success and failure." (Good!)

The truth is that action never fails, it only produces a result. A given expectation may fail to be realized but that is not the fault of the one who held the expectation. We never fail. Nobody fails. There are no losers in the field of action. There is only action and its inevitable, entirely impersonal, result.

We are not omniscient and cannot know all the factors that shape the results of

actions. We have the freedom to act but we cannot control the result. Whatever result comes is in accordance with the laws governing the action, and many complex factors are involved in producing that result. Accepting the result as it comes, maintaining equanimity of mind in both apparent success and failure, is the only sensible attitude. It is in fact *karma yoga*.

Because *karma yoga* is not generally practiced in our society, we have an epidemic of low self-esteem, due to perceived personal failures, with no end of bogus prescriptions for promoting high self-esteem, which is merely the flip side of the same coin of misunderstanding: that the results of actions are under our control.

The solution to low self-esteem is the understanding that our knowledge of all the variables in the field that produce the results of actions is and always will be limited. In other words, we can stop beating ourselves up for every bad thing that happens as though it were our fault. There are no bad things and we are not God.

Action will produce likes and dislikes (*vasanas*) only if we see the result as a success or failure. When we see the result as the function of the invariable laws of action, or even better, when we accept the result as the grace of the *dharma* field, no new likes and dislikes are created. With this attitude towards the result actions born of likes and dislikes become the means of eliminating the very likes and dislikes themselves. Our mind becomes free from the agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*) born of attachment to particular results. Such a mind becomes tranquil and contemplative.

Contemplation is not something we do. It is the nature of *sattva*. When the mind is *sattvic* we automatically think dispassionately about things. *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* cannot understand the value of *karma yoga*. As Krishna says, a little *karma yoga* removes a lot of agitation.

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.

### **Is *Bhakti* a Separate Path?**

Some say there are three paths to self-knowledge: (1) *jnana yoga*, or the path of knowledge, for the intellectual, (2) *bhakti yoga*, or the path of devotion, for the emotional and (3) *karma yoga*, or the path of action, for the active extrovert.

Of these, knowledge *yoga* and action *yoga* are clear. A knowledge *yogi*, a *sannyasi*, is committed only to knowledge. An action *yogi* is one who performs actions in the spirit of duty.

What about devotional (*bhakti*) *yoga*? Devotion is not a thing to be done. We cannot say, "I want to do devotion." We can do something with devotion or not. Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "Whoever offers Me with devotion a flower, a fruit or a drop of water..." Offerings are actions performed with devotion, *bhakti*.

According to the Vedic tradition, every seeker of self-knowledge is a devotee. A non-devotee does not become a renunciant or an action *yogi*. Only a devotee takes to the pursuit of self-knowledge or performs actions as *karma yoga*. So *bhakti yoga* is not a separate path.

## Why Not Become a *Sannyasi*?

Let's return to Arjuna and his confusion, which some of us may still share. We may ask ourselves, "Why should I not become a renunciant?" This is what Arjuna asked: "O Krishna, you are praising renunciation of action and also praising the performance of the action. Please tell me decisively which of the two is better." (*Bhagavad Gita*, V.1)

The teacher replies, "He who sees renunciation and action as one really sees." (*Bhagavad Gita*, V.5)

Krishna answers in this way because both paths lead to liberation, so they are one in their aim and result. *Karma* binds but *karma yoga* frees. *Karma yoga* enables the mind to become contemplative. So a *karma yogi* also studies scripture. Arjuna himself was not a *sannyasi*, so if a *sannyasi* alone is qualified to learn the scriptures, why did the Lord teach Arjuna the seventeen chapters of the *Gita*?

And what is taught in the *Gita* is what is taught in the *Upanishads*. The Lord teaches the entire science of consciousness (*brahma vidya*) to Arjuna because Arjuna is fit to listen to it. So knowledge is available to all of us, *karma yogi* and renunciant alike. But how deeply and completely that knowledge penetrates our minds varies. We must continue our practice until knowledge is firm. That is why it is said one must listen to the scriptures after renunciation.

We can understand the self very easily, if we are sufficiently *sattvic*, but even then we may not understand all the nuances of desire and *karma*. When *sattva* predominates and the mind is clear our self-knowledge is firm but when *tamas* and *rajas* take over self-knowledge becomes obscured and we find ourselves disturbed. It is very painful because we know we are awareness but the knowledge is not steady enough to keep our mind tranquil.

So once we have understood who we are we should remain students of Vedanta and think of ourselves as *karma yogis*, we must continue to restrain our senses because just knowing we are awareness does not necessarily purify the mind, particularly if the mind has strong components of *rajas* and *tamas*. We cannot say that we are a wise person (*stithapragna*) unless our mind is tranquil, which it will be if the binding *vasanas* are neutralized by the *karma yoga* attitude.

The *Gita* calls liberation, or enlightenment, "steady wisdom" to distinguish it from experience, a passing realization or merely academic self-knowledge. Wisdom is the practical application of knowledge. Many of us know we are awareness but do not consistently apply that knowledge to our minds. The proof of the enlightenment pudding is in the eating, and only someone with a consistently steady mind can be said to be a person of steady wisdom. Intense vigilance and constant application of self-knowledge are required to steady the mind. There are no shortcuts.

Some of us walk away from our physical *karma* and imagine we are free but an act of renunciation that changes one's circumstances does not clear the *vasanas* nor does it remove the doer. They remain. So the mind goes back to the past and is filled with guilt and regret.

We may leave our spouse and children and our debts and go to Rishikesh but that will not make us a renunciant. We will continue to think about our home and family. How can we then listen to the teaching? That is why Krishna says, "*Sannyasa*, O

mighty armed one, is difficult to accomplish without the disciplines of *yoga*.” (*Bhagavad Gita*, V.6). The Lord does not say that *sannyasa* is impossible but He says it is difficult without *yoga*.

Imagine that we want a fragrant flower to place on an altar. We go to the garden, find a bud and want the bud to blossom right away. We may take the bud and pry it open but there will be no fragrance. It takes time for the bud to blossom into a fragrant flower. Similarly, it takes time for the mind to blossom into *sannyasa*. When we are ready the flower of renunciation will bloom. Then everything will be beautiful, *sannyasa* will be beautiful.

But *sannyasa* is not a romantic spiritual state. It is just indifference to *karma*. If we can still be disturbed by what happens we have yet to become a person of steady wisdom, i.e. the self. Indifference to *karma* means that we are content no matter what happens.

If we ask, “How do I know whether I am ready for *sannyasa* or not?” then we are not ready. It is good to assume we are not ready. While cooking, we sometimes keep the pot on the stove a little longer than necessary, just to make sure the food is cooked. It does not matter if it is a little overcooked but undercooked food can upset the stomach. We lose nothing by remaining a *karma yogi* because everything leads to *sannyasa* at the proper time.

*Sannyasa* should never be a goal. It is enough to be a *karma yogi* because *karma yoga* is knowledge of the nature of reality, and that knowledge produces a happy mind in every circumstance. A happy mind is not concerned with what will happen. *Sannyasa* will happen in its own time. When we board a bus we put our luggage in the space provided and enjoy the ride. We will get to our destination at some point. Why worry?

Does *karma yoga* apply to thoughts as well as actions? Yes, because thoughts are actions. It is quite possible to think intentionally but we generally don't. Thoughts usually appear uninvited, arising from the *vasanas* out of the causal body (we think again what we thought before). In this case, *karma yoga* involves glad acceptance of the thought. By this attitude thoughts are owned, so to speak, not projected.

Although *Isvara*, not the individual, is the author of thoughts it is important that we own the thoughts so that we don't project them into the *dharma* field where they inevitably create unwanted *karma* and return to disturb our mind again. We keep negative thoughts alive by projecting them, meaning we assume they belong to objects. They never do. They belong to us. Even if a person, for example, is expressing negative emotions in our field the negativity that appears in our mind does not belong to that person. It belongs to us.

This does not mean, however, that we should remain in a negative environment. The mind is like a tuning fork: it will vibrate when struck. Negative people may be expressing *rajas* and *tamas*, unaware of what they are doing, but their bad energy awakens our bad energy, which we will then have to process.

## **Yoga Is a Means to *Sannyasa***

There is renunciation of *karmaphala*, or the fruit of action, in *karma yoga* too. It is renunciation of likes and dislikes pertaining to the result of our actions. In true renunciation (*vividisa sannyasa*) the sense of doership (*kartrtva*) is renounced by

understanding that the self is not a doer and that we are the self.

We cannot give up doership, because the one who decides to give up doership is the doer. There is only one self and it is free from action. Either you know this or you don't. This knowledge is the real renunciation. The self is the only renunciant.

A *karma yogi* becomes a *sannyasi* through self-knowledge. That's the way it works. That is the whole point of the *Bhagavad Gita*.