

The Problem of Desire

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These are my commentaries on Swami Dayananda's summary of Chapter III of the *Bhagavad Gita*. I tidied up Swamiji's language a bit, removed repetitions and generally improved the readability of the document without changing the meaning. This chapter highlights the problem of *rajas*, desire. Arjuna has a *rajasic* temperament. *Karma yoga* is the means to transform *rajas* into *sattva*.

The Twofold Commitment

Swami Dayananda: The third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* opens with the question of Arjuna, the inquirer, for Krishna, his teacher: "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."

There are reasons why such a question should arise in Arjuna's mind. Krishna unfolded the nature of the self in such verses as "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).

The self is free from the modifications appearing to it, it is free from the limitations of time and space. It is actionless, it neither performs action nor does it cause anyone to perform it. The knower of the self is the self. Therefore a wise person does not perform action in spite of appearing to perform it. The *Gita* does not deny action for liberation, it negates doership caused by identification with the body. A wise person is not identified with the body, he or she knows himself or herself to be the actionless self. So the knowledge of the actionless self as one's identity is freedom from action.

Furthermore, Krishna said a wise person is the one who has given up identification with desires and who is satisfied in the self alone (*Bhagavad Gita*, II.55). He or she is happy for no reason because the self is fullness. The description of the wise person was summed up in this statement: "The wise person is one who has abandoned desires and is free from longing," (*Bhagavad Gita*, II.71). This is generally understood to mean that the one who wants liberation must give up all desires. This causes a problem because action is not undertaken without a desire. So performance of *karma* means entertaining desires and seemingly one can never hope to be a wise man as long as one has to perform actions.

But Arjuna has already been told, "You have a choice in performing action," (*Bhagavad Gita*, II.47). Although this statement applies to everyone the implication is that it specifically applies to Arjuna. Arjuna took it to be an instruction that he was only fit for action and Krishna had asked him to perform action.

Arjuna understands that knowledge releases one from bondage while action binds. Action creates a *vasana*, which is the seed for another action. Thus one gets trapped in the chain of action-desire-action. So Arjuna says, "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 does not accuse the teacher of

confusing him; rather, he admits his inability to understand the purport of the teaching. "O Krishna, you are praising knowledge and asking me to do action. Please tell me which one would be the best means for liberation for me."

Arjuna asks for only one path because knowledge and action cannot be simultaneously pursued by one person. Pursuit of knowledge is the rediscovery of the actionless self and requires renunciation of one's sense of doership. Pursuit of action, on the other hand, involves a sense of doership. So the two pursuits are opposite in nature and are meant for two different types of seekers.

James: Or the same seeker at different stages of his or her journey. Or for two different parts of the same seeker, the ego/doer on the one hand and the intellect on the other, although in reality there is only one self with no parts. However, the desire to act and the desire to know may exist side by side in the same person; you can pursue knowledge and do action.

Swami Dayananda: It is true that some individuals are so action-oriented that they have no respect for knowledge and others are so knowledge-oriented that they have no respect for action but since all people think and act, the verse is about the apparent contradiction between thought and action, knowledge and experience.

The difference between knowledge and action is brought about by *maya*, the power in awareness that makes the self seem to be a doer.

We need to remember that the *Gita* personifies the impersonal teachings of Vedanta, so while the ideas can be expressed differently the apparent contradiction between knowledge and action is formulated here in terms of two types of people. It is important to keep this in mind or you may become confused about what kind of person you are, a doer or a renunciant.

Both powers, renunciation and action, exist in everyone. Individuals constantly act and they constantly let go of things they no longer value. The only issue is the nature of that which is to be renounced. If an individual wants freedom, which Vedanta defines as freedom from dependence on objects, renunciation becomes a problem because individuals value things that conflict with the desire for freedom. And liberation requires a very subtle renunciation, renunciation of the renouncer, the one seeking freedom. So the *Gita* clarifies this issue.

One would also think that since self-knowledge and action are apparently opposite in nature – one involves disengagement and the other involves engagement – they would yield different results. Action gives rise to a result, which becomes the seed for new action and thus the cycle of action-reaction-action is perpetuated.

Self-knowledge, on the other hand, is associated with renunciation and brings about freedom from action. Therefore Arjuna seems to say, "Please ascertain my qualifications for liberation and tell me to do only one thing."

Although Arjuna asks for advice Krishna teaches him about the nature of action and renunciation, because the student must understand the whole Vedanta teaching and then act according to his or her own understanding. And 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."

James: Normally, people want a formula for life, a simple plan of action. But Vedanta does not give advice about what to do. It provides a framework for one's decisions by revealing the logic of existence, a logic or knowledge that is not immediately available to someone whose mind is disturbed by suffering – assuming the individual has a desire for liberation.

Swami Dayananda: Vedanta only works when you understand the whole teaching. The inquirer is not meant to take teachings that appeal to him or her, teachings that inspire, for example, and ignore those that provoke and challenge his or her view of reality.

When Krishna says that the paths of knowledge and action were “laid out by me” we are to understand that Krishna is *Isvara*, the macrocosmic mind – the Creator – insofar as no person invented these paths to liberation. It actually means that since there are only two categories in existence – awareness, which implies knowledge, and the ever-changing objects appearing in awareness – there can only be two ways to the realization of one's nature as awareness. The many so-called “paths” to liberation that claim to be special paths are action-based, not knowledge-based.

Knowledge is object-based, not subject-based. Self-knowledge depends on the nature of the self, not on knowledge gained through personal experience. On the basis of self-knowledge the individual can retain or reject the knowledge gained through his or her personal experience.

The Contemplative Life

Swami Dayananda: For the renunciant, knowledge alone is the means for liberation. Just because someone wears the orange clothes of the order of *sannyas* does not mean he or she has self-knowledge. He does not have the knowledge as long as he has the notion “I am the doer.” In the case of lifestyle renunciants, renunciation means renunciation of action (*karma sannyas*) only, not renunciation of doership.

The renunciant commits to self-knowledge for liberation and is not interested in the things that only come from action such as comfort, security, etc. A person with such a commitment can easily renounce action. There is a provision in our society for such a person. He has been released from social obligations and is supported by the society. The very color of the cloth of a *sannyasi* is the color of the flame. Flame means light. Light means knowledge. He commits himself to the pursuit of knowledge to the exclusion of everything else. That is why, when a *sannyasi* is received, the following *mantra* is usually chanted: “Not by action, progeny or wealth – but only by renunciation – does one reach immortality.”

Knowledge is the only means for liberation because bondage is false and liberation is an accomplished fact. If bondage is real nothing can be done about it. What is real will never disappear and what is unreal does not actually exist. If bondage is real there is no way to get released from it nor would it be a problem if it was unreal because something unreal cannot create an actual problem. But if bondage is neither real nor unreal it must be purely due to ignorance. So knowledge can settle the issue of who you are. You already are what you seek. So there is no choice as far as knowledge is concerned. Therefore renunciation really means by self-knowledge,

and self-knowledge is possible only if the mind is free from desires for something other than self-knowledge.

Commitment to self-knowledge means learning and teaching. These are not really two different things. You pursue knowledge for your own sake and later on, if someone approaches you and seeks to know what it is all about, you can teach. This is the contemplative life.

The Active Life

Swami Dayananda: Suppose a person is not ready for the contemplative life. You cannot become contemplative by will; only if you have a mature, healthy disposition are you contemplative. A contemplative mind is free of the hold of its likes and dislikes. The mind cannot be contemplative when its likes or dislikes are not fulfilled. We all want what we want to happen and we want what we don't want to not happen. But destiny has a knack of providing what we don't want and of denying us what we do want.

It is virtually impossible for a *rajasic* person to change his or her likes to conform to what happens. He or she wants what is happening to conform to his or her likes and dislikes. If you can do that you are already a renunciant.

James: A renunciant wants what he or she has at every moment, which is to say that he or she is free of the desire to have reality different from what it is. Individuals under the influence of *rajas* suffer because they find it difficult to accommodate to what is. This is why the *Gita* emphasizes accommodation as one of the most important values for someone seeking freedom. They will hang onto their preferences at all costs, not realizing (*tamas*) that the preferences, not the situation, are causing the suffering. *Rajas*, the *guna* of passion, manifests emotionally as a sense of dissatisfaction. It extroverts the mind to such a degree that the mind cannot see what it is doing to itself. So it projects the problem onto some object, usually another person. Blame is a symptom of *rajas*: "I would be happy if you were different," for example. The cure for *rajas* is dispassion. Unfortunately, one cannot just become dispassionate. It develops slowly as one recognizes the fact that reality is not designed to cotton to the doer's every whim and fancy.

Swami Dayananda: *Rajas* is an immature energy, inclining individuals to vanity. Immature people have control issues and are regularly frustrated because *Isvara* is actually in control of what happens. The tendency to boss and manipulate is a sign of *rajas* and shows a lack of appreciation of *Isvara*, the real boss.

But you do have likes and dislikes, often what you do not want comes to you and what you want often does not. So the solution is to adopt a means by which the mind is released from the hold of likes and dislikes thus making it contemplative.

It is only a lifestyle question. Are you going to burn all your boats, become a renunciant and pursue self-knowledge exclusively or are you going to pursue knowledge along with what you are doing now?

James: *Karma yoga* is for individuals who are neither in the world nor free of it. It is an idea that results in a change of attitude that transforms an active, *rajasic*

individual into a contemplative, *sattvic* individual. It is difficult because active individuals are fascinated by excitement. Doing makes them feel alive and gives them pleasure. The intense inactive and sustained pleasure produced by *sattva* is unknown to them, so the *rajas* produces a resistance (*tamas*) to the idea of *karma yoga*. Because *rajas* is painful the *rajasic* doer wants immediate results, so it quickly gives up the practice because the results of *karma yoga* are incremental.

Swami Dayananda: The *Vedas* reveal a system of *karma* based on the person's station in life (*asrama*) and his or her disposition (*varna*). The *Vedas* stand for the knowledge that comes along with the creation. From the type of words and the scope of Vedic knowledge we can see that they can only come from the Creator of the world. So we should follow the rules operating in the creation for our own good.

Free Will for the Doer

Swami Dayananda: We are endowed with the faculty of choice as to our direction in life. The *Vedas* provide the direction in the form of enjoined actions. Performance of enjoined actions is our duty. Duty is what one is expected to do and it is only possible to do one's duty if one is mature.

James: Children, for example, do not easily understand the concept of duty because their desires are paramount. They need to be taught. Partial assimilation of the value of doing one's duty (*svadharma*) causes resentment (*rajas*) and a feeling of victimhood. These feelings usually start in childhood because one feels that the world is unfair, that it does not do the right thing by me, when in fact it is my duty to do the right thing for the world insofar as everything that I have – my body and mind and awareness – is given to me by the Creator.

Swami Dayananda: Maturity is an appreciation of one's role in the scheme of things. Until one's place in life is understood one's duty is mandated. Since we have the faculty of choice we can disturb the order of nature. Other beings such as plants and animals cannot because they have no volition, and so there is always harmony and balance in their lives. To have a successful life all we have to do is to not to disturb the harmony that is already there. The *Veda* prohibits actions that disturb the harmony of life.

James: *Rajas* continually disturbs the natural harmony in one's environment by disturbing the mind.

Swami Dayananda: In performing one's duty, cultivating the right attitude toward life, one is conforming to the pattern and harmony of creation and thus one becomes alive to the beauty of the cosmic order. When the mind becomes clear one is able to see the order. In the beginning of our 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*. What makes *karma* a *yoga*? It takes skill to perform action with the right attitude. The right attitude 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 proper, so a *karma yogi* refrains from performing it because it is not proper. So performing actions in harmony with the natural order (*dharmic* actions) and avoiding actions that disturb the order (*adharmic* actions) is *karma yoga*.

James: *Karma yoga* is particularly useful in intimate relationships where the basic value is love. The number one 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* exacerbates one's likes and dislikes it is almost impossible to control one's senses – particularly the tongue – and one unconsciously directs critical statements toward loved ones. This is why one of the primary qualifications for inquiry is sense control, restraining one's speech (*vak tapas*). When you have a value for restraint you become aware of your projections. In this way you convert *rajas* into *sattva*.

Swami Dayananda: The “skill” the *Gita* speaks about is mindfulness, 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 it acts to correct the situation, usually in negative ways, not to correct itself.

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 me, they are made by the *dharma* field, 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.

James: *Rajasic* individuals are generally obsessed with success. Expressed in terms of *tamas*, they are afraid of failing. Hence they are continually stressed and hopelessly active. In our societies stress is almost a badge of honor, indicating a commitment to the value of success either in terms of wealth, power, recognition or pleasure.

Swami Dayananda: 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.

Action can never fail us, it only produces result. 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. 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*.

James: 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.

Swami Dayananda: 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 becomes the means of eliminating the very likes and dislikes themselves. The mind becomes free from the agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*). Such a mind is tranquil and contemplative.

James: Contemplation is not something you do. It is the nature of *sattva*. When the mind is *sattvic* you 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* does not understand the value of *karma yoga*. As Krishna says, “A little *karma yoga* removes a lot of agitation.”

Is *Bhakti* a Separate Path?

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

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

Then what about devotional (*bhakti*) *yoga*? Does a devotee perform actions or not? Devotion is not a thing to be done. You cannot say, “I want to do devotion.” You 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 water...” Offerings are actions to be performed with devotion, *bhakti*.

According to the Vedic tradition, every seeker is a devotee. It is not that a non-devotee becomes 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*?

Then a question naturally arises, “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).

James: Because both lead to liberation.

Swami Dayananda: *Karma* binds but *karma yoga* does not bind. *Karma yoga* gives a contemplative mind, which is required for self-knowledge. So a *karma yogi* also studies scripture. Arjuna himself was not a *sannyasi*, and so if a *sannyasi* alone is supposed to learn the scriptures, why should the Lord teach Arjuna the seventeen chapters of the *Gita*?" And what is taught is no different from what is taught in the *Upanishads*. The Lord teaches the entire science of consciousness (*brahma vidya*) to Arjuna only because Arjuna is fit to listen to it. Therefore knowledge is available for all. The only question is how much a person understands – and that makes a lot of difference. And so it is said, "One must listen to the scriptures after renunciation." One should be able to leave everything and then listen to the scriptures.

James: You can understand the self very easily if you have adequate *sattva* but even then you may not understand desire and *karma* in all its nuances, particularly if you have a *rajasic/tamasic* temperament. When *sattva* predominates and the mind is clear your self-knowledge is firm, but when *tamas* and *rajas* take over the self-knowledge becomes inactive and you find yourself disturbed. It is very painful because you know you are awareness but the knowledge does not keep your mind tranquil.

Swami Dayananda: So once you have understood who you are you should remain a student of Vedanta and think of yourself as a *karma yogi* and restrain your senses because just knowing you are awareness does not purify the mind, particularly if the mind has a strong component of *rajas* and *tamas*. You cannot say that you are a wise person (*stithapragna*) unless the 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 the idea that it is an experience, a realization, or that it is just plain self-knowledge. Wisdom is the practical application of knowledge. Many know they are awareness but do not consistently apply that knowledge to their 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." If the mind is predominantly *sattvic* when self-knowledge takes place wisdom comes very easily because the knowledge itself keeps the mind steady but if there is a strong *rajasic* component to the mind intense vigilance and constant application of self-knowledge to the mind is required to "steady" the knowledge.

But suppose you leave your wife and children and your debts and get on the train to Rishikesh without a ticket, like *sanyassis* do. It is not *sannyasa*. You do not get the benefit of *sannyasa* because you continue to think about your home. You think of the child that must be crying and the wife who must be cursing. You will see all this happening in your mind. How can you be available to 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 the *yoga*.

James: People walk away from their physical *karma* all the time and imagine that

they 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.

Swami Dayananda: Let us say you want a flower because you want to offer one to your deity. You go to the garden, find a bud on a plant and want the bud to blossom right away, which it can't do. You may take the bud and pry it open, but there will be no fragrance. It requires time for the bud to blossom into a fragrant flower. Similarly, it takes time for the mind to blossom into *sannyasa*. When a person is ready everything is beautiful, *sannyasa* is beautiful.

James: *Sannyasa* is not a romantic spiritual state. It is just indifference to *karma*. If you find yourself caring what happens you are still a normal person, not a "person of steady wisdom," i.e. the self. Indifference to *karma* means that whatever happens is okay with you.

Swami Dayananda: Then you may say, "How do I know whether I am ready for *sannyasa* or not?" If you ask such a question you are not ready. It is good to always assume you are not ready. While cooking you sometimes keep the pot on the stove for a little longer than necessary just to make sure that the food is cooked. It does not matter if it is a little overcooked but if the food is undercooked it can create problems in the stomach. You don't lose anything by remaining a *karma yogi* because the culmination of everything is *sannyasa*.

James: *Sannyasa* should not be a goal. It should be enough to be a *karma yogi* because *karma yoga* is knowledge of the nature of reality that 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 you get on a bus you put your luggage in the space provided and enjoy the ride. You will get to your destination at some point. Why worry?

Swami Dayananda: Does *karma yoga* apply to thoughts? Yes, because thoughts are actions. Even though it is quite possible to think consciously, in general we do not do so. Thoughts appear, manifest by the *vasanas* out of the causal body. In this case, *karma yoga* involves glad acceptance of the thought, which is a consequence of previously thinking that same thought. By this attitude thoughts are owned, not projected. Seen from the level of *Isvara* the individual is not the author of the thoughts, but seen from the level of a disturbed individual it is important to own the thoughts so that they are not projected back into the *dharma* field where they inevitably create unwanted *karma* and recycle to disturb the mind again. Negative thoughts are kept alive by projecting them, meaning we assume they belong to the objects. They never do. Even if a person, for example, is expressing negative emotions in your field, the negativity that appears in your mind does not belong to the person. It belongs to you. This does not mean, however, that you should remain in an environment that is essentially negative – for example, associate with negative people even though you know they can't help it because of their *gunas* – because the mind is one and is like a tuning fork; their bad energy awakens your bad energy, which you then have to process. If you remove yourself from an unpleasant situation it means you have adequate self-esteem.

Yoga Is a Means to *Sannyasa*

Swami Dayananda: 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 your actions. In true renunciation (*vividisa sannyasa*) the sense of doership (*kartrtva*) is renounced by understanding that the self is not a doer and that you are the self.

You cannot give up doership because the one who decides to give up the doership is the doer of the renunciation. There is only one self and it is free from action. Either you know this or you don't. This is called *vidvat sannyasa*. It is the real renunciation. So a *sannyasi* has to also become a *sannyasi*!

James: If you think you are a renunciant you are not a renunciant because you still have doership. The self is the only renunciant.

Swami Dayananda: A *karma yogi* becomes a *sannyasi* by self-knowledge. And that is the way it is. That is the whole point of the *Bhagavad Gita*.