



Mysterious Are the Ways of Action

Human embodiment exists through a series of actions. Since it is impossible for a human being to be without action even for a single second, karma or action must be studied deeply and profoundly by an aspirant on the path of Yoga.

The human personality consists of three planes: causal, subtle (astral) and physical. The causal plane consists of the unconscious contents of the mind; the astral plane includes the intellect, ego, mind, senses and *pranas* (vital forces); and the physical plane refers to the physical body and its realities. These planes further consist of the three *gunas* (modes of Nature)—*sattwa*

(purity), *rajas* (externalization and activity), and *tamas* (inertia).

Activity continues in every plane of a human personality and is seen as the display of the *gunas* acting among themselves—the higher evolves interacting with the lower. For example, the senses interact with the sense-objects, while in turn, the senses are dominated by the mind, the mind by the intellect, and the intellect by the Cosmic Mind. But ultimately, the Self is the Controller of all that exists. In the final analysis, Nature is a mere illusory projection of the Divine Self.

An aspirant needs to gain an insight into the art of freeing himself from the three *gunas* and their functions. He needs to step beyond the karmas that lead to repeated cycles of birth and death, and enter into the actionless realm of the Self.

Actions are classified into five groups: 1. *Nitya Karma*—obligatory actions or duties pertaining to the body, such as bathing, eating, etc. 2. *Naimittika Karma*—occasional actions such as the *Shraddha* ceremony at the death of a relative, 3. *Kamyā Karma* (also known as *Sakamyā Karma*)—actions based upon *kama* (desire) and *samkalpa* (the ego-thought),

4. *Nishiddha Karma*—actions prohibited by the scriptures such as sinful actions backed up by violence, passion, greed, etc. and 5. *Prayaschitta Karma*—actions performed to nullify the effects of sinful karmas, as, for example, the repetition of mantra, fasting, observing vows of silence and meditation, and similar purificatory austerities.

Swadharma and Paradharma

Sakamyā Karma can be further categorized into *swadharma* and *paradharma*. If actions are in harmony with one's spiritual evolution, they are termed *swadharma*—one's own duty. If they are expressions of mental complexes and cause disintegration in the personality rather than promoting harmony, they are called *paradharma*—another's duty.

Every human being is placed by the Divine Will in a certain situation with a certain type of mental structure, and therefore, a karma or action that suits one person may not necessarily suit another. Various complexes of the mind created by desire, anger, attachment and hatred cause the development of a perverted taste for *paradharma*. *Swadharma*, on the other hand, is action that is in harmony with one's psychological structure. Its performance leads one away from mental complexes and perversions, and towards spiritual integration.

Sakamyā Karma and Niskamyā Karma

In addition to the five groups of karmas, there is another type of karma that is called *Niskamyā Karma* (selfless action or action without desire). When the very same *Kamyā Karma* is performed without depending upon a reward, it is called *Niskamyā Karma*. We have seen that of the five groups of karmas, the first two (*Nitya* and *Naimittika*) are not performed with any desire. Their performance, therefore, does not create any special virtue, but their non-performance becomes harmful. If the same desireless spirit is extended to *Kamyā Karma*, then one becomes the performer of *Niskamyā Karma*. This is the secret by which a Yogi performs his *swadharma* in a desireless manner, thus converting it into *Niskamyā Karma*.

Karma Yoga

An ascetic practicing austerity in a forest, a soldier performing his duties for his country, a philosopher imparting the knowledge of philosophy, a merchant involved in his business, and a clerk busy serving his boss are all doing their duties, their *swadharma*, and such action will lead to spiritual evolution and the formation of virtuous impressions. However, even further integration can be attained through the same action simply by bringing about a change in the mental attitude towards the respective actions. This art is known as Karma Yoga.

If action is performed in the spirit of serving God in humanity, with a sense of surrender to the Divine Self, it becomes a process of Karma Yoga. Through the practice of Karma Yoga, a Yogi learns to dedicate his mind to the purifying light of reason. He learns to control his senses and to surrender his ego to the Divine Self. Karma Yoga purifies the mind and enables a person to discover the detached nature of the Self. Then as his heart is increasingly purified, a Yogi advances on the path of meditation, devotion and wisdom. All actions are soon performed in the spirit of detachment.

In the final stage, as his attitude towards action becomes increasingly purified, he discovers that he is ever detached from all actions, just as the sky is ever detached from all clouds.

As an aspirant ascends the steps of integration, he is automatically inclined to virtuous actions that are in accord with scriptural teachings (*swadharma*). He cannot perform *Nishiddha Karma* or prohibited actions. And further, even while performing virtuous actions, he does not gain the usual rewards in the forms of pleasures in the heavenly world. Rather, he rises beyond the perishable rewards by renouncing his egoistic involvements in karma. Thus, he performs all his actions in the spirit of *Nitya Karma*—duties that must be performed. He has become so integrated that all action is as spontaneous and necessary as bathing, eating and sleeping, and he is so detached that he does not expect any heavenly reward for his actions.

The Bhakti Approach

The process of perfecting the art of selfless action can also be approached from a more devotional perspective. In the beginning, an aspirant adopts the attitude that actions are austerities or sacrifices designed to please God. Gradually, he begins to perform them with a spirit of surrender to God, unconcerned with their results. He learns to perform his duties well, without keeping his mind agitated about the fruits of his actions. He gains the insight that results of action cannot be fully perceived by the limited vision of the ego. He understands that since the world is governed by a Divine Plan, the far-reaching effects of one's actions are universal in nature. Therefore, he does not keep his mind agitated due to his egoistic expectations.

The Jnana Approach

Gradually an aspirant develops an attitude of being a mere witness to his actions in daily life, like the sun that witnesses the various activities of the world. He does not allow his mind to foster

the sense of doership (“I am the doer”) or enjoyership (“I am the enjoyer”). And finally, the world of actions seems to dissolve and vanish before him as he discovers his essential Self.

A Sage, though performing action, is ever established in the inaction of the Self. He is ever free from karmas and their fructifications. His actions will not cause a future embodiment. They are without selfish desire and the egoistic illusion that “I am the performer of action.” He performs them for the sake of universal harmony and the good of humanity. He dispels the darkness of unrighteousness, protects the virtuous inclinations in human beings, and reveals the path that leads to Liberation. He becomes a living commentary on the scriptures.

Mystic Inaction Versus Inertia

An ignorant person remains involved in action even though externally he might refrain from doing anything. An external form of inactivity is the result of *tamas* (inertia), and as a result of this, the desires of the mind continue to be active while a person is physically inactive. These desires eventually lead to various perversions and complexes in the mind and ultimately force the person to engage himself in various activities.

Therefore, it is wise to channelize one's active energy through actions that are elevating and purifying. A person who flows on with activity in the spirit of Karma Yoga is moving towards the cessation of all actions. And in the ultimate state of Self-realization, the fire of knowledge destroys the very basis of all actions—ignorance.

So in brief, the secret of true prosperity, peace and perfection lies in refraining from *Nishiddha Karma* or prohibited action, and turning from *para-dharma* (another's duty) to *swadharma* (one's own duty). Then one can learn to convert *swadharma* into *Niskama Karma* or action without desire, which purifies the mind and converts action into Karma Yoga. Thus one finally rises beyond the realm of karma through Self-realization.