

Skill in Action

By Swami Jyotirmayananda

YOGA IS SKILL in action. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says, “*Yogah karmasu kaushalam.*” Action cannot be avoided because everyone is placed in this world in such a way that a stream of activity always flows through them. Everyone has certain actions to perform, or certain projects to complete; no one can escape the tasks they have to do.

The art of Yogic action implies that you perform your duties in such a way that you achieve success in a given project and evolve spiritually at the same time. If you do not know this art while you perform your duties and engage yourself in various projects, you will continue creating karmas. This results in repeated cycles of reincarnation.

To help you understand this art of action, Lord Krishna, in the 18th chapter of the Gita, points out the five factors involved in the performance of any task one might initiate: the field (*adhithana*), the actor (*karta*), the various instruments (*karana*), the effort (*chesta*) and Divine support (*Daivam*).

For example, if farming is to be successful, there must be five factors in operation. First,

you must have a field to farm. Then, second, you must be a farmer with the knowledge of farming. Third, you must have the necessary instruments so that you can work the land and plant the seeds. These include machines and devices for planting and sowing as well as the right type of seeds. The fourth is effort and the fifth is Divine support.

SUPPOSE that you had the instruments, the field, and the knowledge, but you were lazy. Every day you might say, “I’ll do that portion of the field tomorrow. I’ve already done enough plowing for today. Everything will be alright. It’ll just take me a day to finish it.”

And suppose you go on wasting your time. Then, suddenly one day, you wake up and see the sky filled with rain-laden clouds. At that point, you will remember your days of laziness and procrastination with bitterness, and you will lament that you should have worked at the appropriate time. The rains pour down and drench your fields, washing away the seeds you planted, or just causing them to rot in the wet earth. Thus, as a farmer, you must know how to exert effort in a skillful way, using the appropriate method at the right time.

Now, let us say that you had the first four ingredients: the field, the knowledgeable farmer, the implements, and the necessary effort. There is yet another factor you would need. In Sanskrit that is known as *Daivam* or the “Divine factor.” Although you may have all the other factors at hand, you may still fail at your project because the Divine factor did not operate in your favor. Suppose that you worked hard every day and did everything you possibly could; but all of a sudden, a gigantic storm floods your land, or an earthquake divides your field into two sections. How would you succeed then?

The fact is that real success, from a philosophical point of view, is internal, not external. It is based on your connection with the Divine Self. If a disaster occurred and you were a Yogi, you would not feel miserable. On the contrary, you would feel fulfilled that you had done your duty. You would know that you had not really failed because you had utilized all your faculties to do everything humanly possible. By maintaining a relaxed mind and trust in Divine Plan while performing your duty, you have promoted an inner sense of poise—an inner sense of fulfillment—that transforms your project into a success from a spiritual point of view.

From a physical point of view, it is normal and practical to expect to succeed. But at the same time, do not become cemented to the idea that if you do not succeed you will be ruined. In other words, do not develop attachment to the fruit of action.

The secret to real success is performing a task with great quality and efficiency, while at the same time, remaining relaxed, as if you had done nothing. When you work in this fashion, you become a Karma Yogi, and your actions lead to purity of heart and thus promote your movement towards Self-realization.

Qualities of a Satwic Doer

The Gita teaches that when you perform an action, you should be a satwic performer. This

implies that your mind should be balanced in success and failure. Suppose you planted a tree. After expending several years’ worth of hard work in caring for it, you notice one day with great joy that blossoms have appeared and that the tree is ready to bear fruit. Suddenly, a lightning bolt strikes and splits the tree in half. Would you consider your whole project to have been a failure? From a practical point of view, it was. But if you have spiritual insight, you will not think that you failed; rather, you will understand that success and failure in this world are not controlled by ego’s expectations.

The successful execution of a duty or work does not entirely depend upon your ego. For example, a farmer might have profound knowledge about farming, but he must have a field and the necessary instruments before he can exercise his effort—and those things are not entirely under his egoistic control. The fifth factor—*Daivam*—is absolutely not within the control of a human being—although God can always be trusted.

Therefore, it is important to feel secure in doing whatever you do to the best of your ability regardless of the outcome. View the actual performance of a duty as a fulfilling process through your inner spiritual attitude. Be more spiritually fulfilled in performing the duty than in seeing the result of the work that you put forth. Because actions are performed for the love of God, not for the ego, your happiness and fulfillment are not determined by the worldly result of your action. This idea is new to most people because they only consider the end result. All they want is to pluck the fruit of their action; they do not care about the spiritual process that brings forth the fruit. Such an attitude creates imbalance in their lives, and they become *bhogis*: those who simply want enjoyment.

Most people are interested only in the aftermath of their hard work. They dream of the time after the tasks are performed when they can just stretch out, relax and enjoy luxurious vacations. This is the philosophy of a *bhogi*. A *bhogi* lives for worldly enjoyment, not spiritual fulfillment.

When you live like this, frustrations and sorrows are bound to come your way. But when you live your life with philosophical insight, with devotion to God, there will be no frustrations because the very fact that you performed your duty to the best of your ability gives you a sense of internal fulfillment.

THE GITA MENTIONS certain qualities of a *satwic* doer:

Muktasanga—detachment: If you possess this quality, you work without attachment to the fruit of action. The idea that the fruit may not manifest does not discourage you from doing what you have to do.

Anahamvadi—egolessness: You develop the sense that it is not you who perform actions, but God who works through you; you are simply an instrument. If you have been instrumental in helping others, it is not you, but God within you that has enabled you to reach out to them. No one is an independent entity; everyone is like a wave

in the ocean of existence. It is God that is the Reality within everyone, just as the ocean is the reality within every wave. Thus, in performing actions, do not give credit to your ego.

You may recall the story of a villager who visits a friend living in the city. The man shows the villager all the comforts that city life affords. He shows him all the latest technology, such as computers, air conditioners and elevators. At every turn, the amazement of the villager grows.

One day, the man takes him to visit the tallest building in the city. As they ascend in one of the modern elevators, the power suddenly fails and the elevator jars to a halt. All is dark and silent. There they are, trapped.

The villager tells his friend, “Please, why should we just stand here? Let’s do something.” The man answers, “I can’t do anything because the electricity has failed. In the city, when there is no electricity, everything comes to a standstill.” “But,” said the villager, “You have been telling me the whole time I’ve been here that you can do this and you can do that at the flick of a switch. But what happens in a situation like this? Why can’t you get us out of this mess? We are locked up in here like prisoners.”

Much in the same way, you must understand that there is Divine electricity flowing through everything and it can be shut down at any time. Therefore, your ego should not take credit for the works that you do—whether they are a success or a failure. What could you do without that Divine energy? Absolutely nothing. Therefore, develop the sense that you are not the doer and train your mind to remain balanced.

If a project you’ve been working on is a success, that is wonderful; but you shouldn’t become elated, for it was God’s Divine plan behind it. If you do not succeed at a project, do not become frustrated because it was the Divine plan that it did not succeed. You cannot always experience success the way your ego envisions it, because you do not succeed or fail because of your ego.

By maintaining a relaxed mind and trust in God while performing your duty, you have promoted an inner sense of poise and fulfillment that transforms your project into a success from a spiritual point of view.



Remember that true success is internal. If you have done your duty well, that's all that is important. It doesn't matter if you succeed or fail because it's all part of the Divine plan and through reflection you will come to understand that circumstances ultimately work out.

If everyone were to get what he wanted, the world would be tremendously chaotic; yet people must perform their duties, and naturally they are going to expect a certain result. If you have philosophical insight, however, you do not have to become attached to your expectation. Whatever develops, be it success or failure, you remain balanced.

A person who performs actions in this way is called *satwic*, and his actions are also called *satwic*. When you balance your personality, the duties that gravitate towards you are automatically *satwic*. Actions that you perform will neither create vanity nor agitation in your mind—rather, you will be promoting your own spiritual Liberation in whatever you do. Work that is done with a tense and complex mind, burdened with ego's expectations, will be defective and will lack quality. On the other hand, work performed by a *satwic* person will be highly qualitative and intense.

GIVING FURTHER insight into the qualities of a *satwic* doer, Lord Krishna says:

“Dhriti-utsaaha-samanvitah”— A *satwic* doer does not become bored or downhearted because he is backed up by *dhriti*, a persistent patience or firmness. Firmness means that although your body normally becomes exhausted during a task, you sustain its vigor by tapping the reservoir of spiritual energy deep within yourself. The quality of sustaining your mind's energy is called *dhriti*.

Utsaha implies a sustained sense of joyousness. Although your work may require a great deal of effort, and you may have to face many impediments and discouraging situations, yet deep within, you have the ability to sustain your-

self, to conquer the sense of boredom, and to forge ahead with the project.

Self-Realization Is Your Real Project

FROM AN ADVANCED point of view, Self-realization is the real project for every individual, and the same five factors that we considered earlier pertain to it as well. In this context, **the field** refers to your physical embodiment as a psycho-physical personality. From a more detailed standpoint, it refers to the physical, astral, and causal bodies. The composite of these three is the basis for your becoming liberated. In other words, you will accomplish the project of Self-realization while you are embodied—in and through your embodiment.

The next factor is you—**the actor**. How much insight have you developed into the goal of Self-realization? To what extent are you qualified

**Work that is done
with a tense and complex mind,
burdened with ego's expectations,
will be defective and
will lack quality.
On the other hand,
work performed by a
satwic person will be highly
qualitative and skillful.**

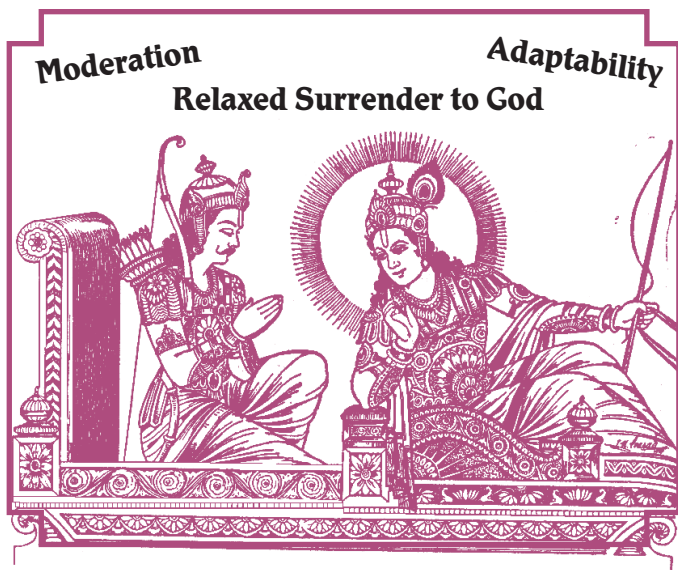


for Liberation? If you are qualified, it has developed from good karmas that have been carried on from many lives. Because of this, your soul is eager to attain Liberation. To enhance that qualification, take recourse to *satsanga* (good association) and the study of scriptures.

The third factor (*karana*) relates to **the instruments**, which in this case include mind, senses, intellect and vital forces (*pranas*). These are given by God to every soul. The individual soul can either use them to attain Enlightenment or abuse them and remain a prisoner of the world-process.

Enter deep within yourself and observe the wondrous instruments that God has bestowed upon you. Realize that there is nothing in the world like the mind, senses, and *pranas* that operate through your body. If the vital forces are not there, your physical body becomes inert, dead. All these instruments are at the disposal of the soul, and you can utilize them; however, using them correctly is a tremendous art.

For example, if you want to use complicated devices such as computers or printing presses, it is necessary to have the proper guidance and instruction first. To fully utilize what you have in any field, you must have a teacher in that field who can guide you. Similarly, in the spiritual field a teacher is necessary for guidance in handling your mind, controlling the changing moods, integrating your personality and discovering those internal resources that remain unexplored.



This process is an all-consuming task, and your interest becomes increasingly intense as you forge ahead with the project. With the help of a spiritual teacher, you learn how to channel your energies into the best possible self-effort. This gradually stops the dissipation of energy through misuse of the mind, senses, and *pranas*.

Bring Moderation and Harmony into Your Life

WHILE YOU ARE LEARNING how to apply your energy effectively, it is important to bring moderation into your life. As you attend to the realities of each day, perform your duties moderately so you avoid going to extremes. For example, eat, sleep and exercise in moderation. Live in such a way that you attend to all the important things skillfully so that your mind can rise above your body and worldly circumstances and wing its way towards transcendence. Thus, the task before every aspirant is to learn how to direct that marvelous piece of equipment—the mind—towards God.

Thinking of God requires a mind that can rise above the daily problems, the stress, the worries, the musings of the past, and the plans for the future. Granted, these things have practical aspects that cannot just be discarded recklessly. So, develop the great and subtle art of balancing yourself as you perform your daily duties so that your mind can remain unaffected by the world. What does this imply?

Let me give you a simple illustration. Suppose, for example, you developed the positive habit of taking a walk early in the morning. As you walk along a familiar path in the pre-dawn darkness, you are observing the beauty of nature. Your mind relaxes and your body moves spontaneously along the path you have adopted. You are able to enjoy repeating your mantra, thinking about meditation, or beholding the glory of God in all that surrounds you. You can take a philosophical thought and grasp its subtlety with ease.

Now suppose that you take a different path every day. On Monday, you take a path leading to the east, and on Tuesday, you take another path that leads to the west. If you continue doing this, your mind will soon be more concerned with avoiding the obstacles around you as you walk. If you adopt one particular path and stick to it every day, you will have a greater possibility to transcend everything. Your mind will be free to relax, because you know exactly what lies on that path. If you adopt an unfamiliar path, you won't know where the pitfalls on the pathway are, or if there will be dogs along the way that might bother you. Thus, on each new path, you have to remain highly alert about the happenings on the physical plane.

Similarly, your life is like a walk along a path. It is up to you to choose a pattern that you can adopt and adhere to day by day. If you are spiritually sensitive, you will not need to bring constant variations to your external life, although a certain amount of variation is needed. If you are easily bored, you crave external variations, and pursuing such variations will continue to cause distraction from spiritual reflection. If you are dependent upon external happenings, your mind will have no chance to soar beyond the world.

IT IS IMPORTANT, therefore, in your practice of Yoga or in the sincere pursuit of any philosophy or religion, to plan your life in such a harmonious manner that the moment you are not involved in work, your mind can transcend the world. Aspire to the ideal that even when you are performing your duties, your mind is above such situations.

Reading this, you may suddenly develop the idea of what the perfect balanced plan would entail in your life: when you would awaken, when you would meditate, exercise, perform your duties—and this is wonderful. Unfortunately, when you become attached to a schedule that you have devised, you sometimes encounter interruptions. If you are not flexible and certain unexpected duties appear that compel you to break your schedule, you experience great frustration.

It is important to have a harmonious schedule, but if the Divine Plan decrees that this is not possible, then there is another ingredient within you that can harmonize with situations. Although circumstances in life are sometimes not according to plan, develop the ability to adapt and adjust to such an extent that you do not allow the world to dwell heavily upon your mind. When you are inflexible and unable to adapt, the world becomes a burden. You are always hankering for that perfect situation when you will get to do exactly what you planned—and of course, such a situation will never come.

On the other hand, when you know the art of skillful action, you never have to ask yourself when that perfect situation will arise, for every day becomes a new opportunity to enjoy perfection in whatever situation unfolds. God in His infinite wisdom creates the events and situations of each day to be perfect for your spiritual advancement.

These insights into the Yogic art of performing action are the secrets to success—external success in the world of relativity and true internal success in the project leading to Self-realization. If you continue to subjugate the ego by applying the right type of effort, if you perform all your actions with a sense of relaxed surrender to God, and if you pursue your spiritual practice with sincerity under the guidance of a spiritual preceptor, God will guide you to the state of Liberation in His own mysterious way.

