SACRED TEXTS

Karma Yoga: Action Without Attachment

The Bhagavad Gita read as a manual of action, Vivekananda's lectures of 1896, service in the ashrams, and thirty days of offered action at work and at home



कर्म

karma

YOGIDE

Free sample

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Before you begin

In the kitchen of an ashram on the Ganga, an hour before lunch, a dozen people are cutting vegetables. Nobody talks much. One is a retired engineer from Pune, one a student from Lyon, one a monk who has lived there for thirty years. The task is small, repeated, and nobody will thank them for it. If you ask what they are doing, some will answer "karma yoga". They are not taking a break from yoga. For many in India, this is yoga: the same act you would do anyway, done with another intention.

This book is about that intention. It does five things.

First, it says what karma really means. The Sanskrit word karman (कर्मन्), karma in its usual form, means action. It became the name of a moral law, and then, in English, a synonym for fate. Chapter 1 goes back to the texts.

Second, it reads the Bhagavad Gita as a manual of action: the famous verse 2.47, the argument of chapter 3 step by step, the idea of the offered act (yajña), word by word, in Sanskrit with our own translation.

Third, it gives the modern history honestly: Swami Vivekananda's lectures Karma-Yoga (published in New York in 1896, in the public domain, quoted in his own words), the readings of Tilak and Gandhi, and the service (sevā) of today's ashrams, with published facts only.

Fourth, it gives a practice you can begin tonight: six exercises for work, six for family life, and a thirty-day journal of offered action.

Fifth, it says what karma yoga is not: not passivity, not fatalism, not a reason to accept injustice or to exhaust yourself for others.

About the translations.

All translations of Sanskrit verses in this book were written for Yogide from the Sanskrit. They are not copied or adapted from any modern published translation. Swami Vivekananda's Karma-Yoga (1896) is quoted word for word in its original English: it is in the public domain. Mahatma Gandhi is quoted only in a few short phrases, with the reference; the rest is our summary.

Service is not self-neglect.

Karma yoga asks for no physical ability and carries no physical risk of its own. But it can be misread as "give everything, ask nothing". If you are a carer, a health worker or a parent under strain, if you feel exhausted, hopeless or unable to rest, talk to your doctor or to someone you trust: that is part of acting well, not a failure of the practice. If you have thoughts of harming yourself, call your local emergency number now: 911 (US, Canada), 999 or 112 (UK), 112 (EU, India), 000 (Australia); or a crisis line: 988 (US), 116 123 (Samaritans, UK and Ireland).

How the texts are numbered

- **Bhagavad Gītā (BG)**: we follow the critical edition of the Mahābhārata prepared at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), Poona, in the electronic text of GRETIL (Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages), where the Gita is chapters 23 to 40 of the Bhīṣmaparvan. Its numbering (700 verses) is the same as in most popular editions for every verse quoted here; only chapter 13, which we do not quote, differs in editions that add a question of Arjuna at its start. The critical text sometimes writes as two words what popular editions write as one: kadā cana (2.47), kaś cit (3.5). We keep the critical spelling.
- **Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BU)**: GRETIL text of the Kāṇva recension, with Śaṅkara's commentary, numbered by chapter, section and paragraph (4.4.5).
- **Yoga Sūtra (YS)**: GRETIL text of the Yogasūtra with Vyāsa's commentary.
- **Vivekananda**: Karma-Yoga, 1896, as reprinted in volume 1 of The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda; we name the lecture each quotation comes from.

How to use this book

Read Chapters 1 to 4 slowly: they are the teaching. Read Chapter 6 before you start, because karma yoga is easy to misunderstand in ways that can hurt you or others. Then choose: Chapter 8 if your work is where you need the practice most, Chapter 9 if it is your home. Chapter 10 is a thirty-day journal: one short practice a day, a box to tick, a few lines to write. You need nothing else: no mat, no special time, no teacher. You need your next action.

Chapter 1. Karma: action, not destiny

The word

Karma comes from the verbal root kṛ (कृ), "to do, to make". Its first meaning is plain: an act, a deed, a piece of work. In the Vedas, karma above all meant the ritual act, the sacrifice performed correctly. Vivekananda opens his lectures with the same definition:

> "The word Karma is derived from the Sanskrit Kri, to do; all action is Karma. Technically, this word also means the effects of actions." (Vivekananda, Karma-Yoga, 1896, "Karma in its Effect on Character")

Two meanings, then. The act, and what the act leaves behind. When people say "that's karma" in English, they mean only the second, and usually as a kind of cosmic punishment. The texts are both simpler and more demanding.

The first statement: as you act, so you become

One of the earliest clear teachings on karma as moral consequence is in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, one of the oldest Upanishads. Here is the passage, from the GRETIL text:

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.4.5 (extract)

यथाकारी यथाचारी तथा भवति । साधुकारी साधुर्भवति । पापकारी पापो भवति ।

yathākārī yathācārī tathā bhavati / sādhukārī sādhur bhavati / pāpakārī pāpo bhavati

Translation. As one acts, as one behaves, so one becomes. One who does good becomes good; one who does evil becomes evil. (Our translation.)

Notice the verb: bhavati, "becomes". Nothing here is about a judge or a punishment. The act shapes the actor. The same paragraph then traces the chain back to its source:

स यथाकामो भवति तत्क्रतुर्भवति । यत्क्रतुर्भवति तत्कर्म कुरुते । यत्कर्म कुरुते तदभिसंपद्यते ।

sa yathākāmo bhavati tatkratur bhavati / yatkratur bhavati tat karma kurute / yat karma kurute tad abhisaṃpadyate

Translation. As is a person's desire, so is the resolve; as is the resolve, so is the act one does; and whatever act one does, that one attains. (Our translation.)

Desire, resolve, act, result. This is the whole problem of karma yoga in four words. If action begins in desire, every action ties us a little more to the next desire. The question every path of yoga answers in its own way is: where can the chain be cut?

Karma in the Yoga Sutras

Patañjali gives the same idea a technical vocabulary. Every intentional act leaves a deposit, the karmāśaya, "the resting place of action", rooted in the afflictions (kleśa): ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, clinging to life (YS 2.3, 2.12). In his last chapter he describes the action of the accomplished yogi in one line:

Yoga Sūtra 4.7

कर्माशुक्लाकृष्णं योगिनस्त्रिविधमितरेषाम् ॥

karmāśuklākṛṣṇaṃ yoginas trividham itareṣām

Translation. The action of the yogi is neither white nor black; that of others is of three kinds. (Our translation.)

Vyāsa's commentary explains the three kinds: black (harmful), white and black mixed (most of our actions, which help some and harm others), white (discipline, study, meditation). The yogi's action is "neither": done without the afflictions and without seeking a return, it does not lay down a new deposit. That is exactly what the Gita will call action without attachment.

Karma is not fate

Three common confusions, and what the texts say.

- **"Karma means everything is decided."** No. Karma is what you did, and what you do now shapes what comes. Patañjali says that suffering not yet come can be avoided (heyaṃ duḥkham anāgatam, YS 2.16). The Gita's whole argument is a call to act.
- **"Karma explains why people suffer."** The texts do not ask you to read the suffering of others. The Gita says the ways of action are "deep" (gahanā karmaṇo gatiḥ, BG 4.17): too subtle for us to judge in another person's life. Using karma to blame the poor, the sick or the victims of violence contradicts the first rule of every yoga: non-harming.
- **"Karma yoga is about having good karma."** Not quite. Good actions still bind, in this view, if they are done for a reward (even a spiritual one). Karma yoga is not about collecting good karma; it is about acting without collecting at all.

Later Vedānta, following Śaṅkara's commentary on the Brahmasūtra (4.1.13-15), distinguishes three stocks of karma: the accumulated past (sañcita), the part already ripening in this life (prārabdha), and the karma being made now (āgāmin). The practical point for a practitioner is the third: it is the only one you are making today.

Practise: watch the chain once

Tonight, take one small desire of the day (a second helping, a message you wanted to send, a purchase) and trace it back on paper, as the Upaniṣad does.

Step	What happened
Desire (kāma)	
Resolve (kratu)	
Act (karma)	
Result	
What I would change, and where	

There is no right answer. The exercise trains you to see that an action has a history before it happens. That seeing is where karma yoga starts.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 42 pages.

Get it here: https://yogide.com/books/karma-yoga-action-without-attachment/

One-time payment, instant PDF.