

# The Impact of Karma Yoga and Three Gunas on Us.

## The Teaching of The Bhagavad Gita.

Dr Dinesh Bist DProf, SFHEA

### Introduction

This article aims to summarise the teachings of The Bhagavad Gita on the topic of “Karma Yoga” and the “Three Gunas”. The article explores the key difference between karma (कर्म) and karma yoga (कर्म योग), and explains the law of karma that keeps us bound in this world and how we can free our self from that bondage. The article further analyses the three Gunas; Sattva, Rajas and Tamas, their nature and implications on our life, and how by practicing Buddhi Yoga we can attain Sattva and then transcend all three Gunas to gained liberation through realised knowledge.

### Karma Yoga

The Bhagavad Gita (TBG) provides a clear distinction between karma and karma yoga. It illustrates that karma refers to a selfish desire, where one expect something in return while karma yoga refers to an action in which one performs the action without selfish desire (Das, 2011). In chapter (C2.V47) it is stated that:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन। मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥	Means: You have the right to work only but never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction (Das, 2011).
--	--

As per TBG, when we take any action we should use our intellect (*buddhi*) to detach our self from the selfish desire, thereby transforming our consciousness that motivate us to act (C2.V50-51). The word *buddhi yoga* and *karma yoga* are used interchangeably in the TBG text.

Although *karma* and *karma-yoga* may externally appear to be identical in terms of the action performed but the key difference is in the *buddhi* or consciousness (selfish or without selfish desire) that is the basis for that action (Swami, 2010; Das, 2011). In the battle field of Kurukshetra, both Duryodhna and Arjuna perform an action that appear

to be acting in an identical manner, but the difference between karma and karma-yoga is as dramatic as that between night and day. Duryodhna moves through the world of desire, sensual pleasure and material gain. For Arjuna as a karma-yogin this is night, and he does not operate in this sphere. Arjuna explores the domain of the spirit, seeking to achieve spiritual realisation by renouncing materialistic aspirations. Duryodhna whose life is dedicated to material acquisition, this domain of spiritual pursuits is like night and he is not active there (OCHS, 2010).

Performing action without selfish desire is considered higher than the *Vedic* rituals, as Krishna states (C2.V42-46) that *Vedic* rituals are *karma* and not *karma yoga* because both performer (priest) and the organiser have selfish desire involved in performing *Vedic* rituals (Vivekananda, 2014). When we perform our duty or take actions in a mood of complete detachment, without any desire for a personal gain than we become unmoved by the success or failure of the action (C2.V55-56)

The Law of Karma (LoK) is one of the most important teachings of TBG (Parrinder, 2013). According to the LoK, we accrue karma with every action or non-action of ours (C4.V16-17). Our karmas not only shape our life but helps us attaining moksha, a state of being that can be attained whilst still undergoing bodily existence and dictate our next birth. TBG states that only when we take action without selfish desire than we will not accrue any karma. Hence when we take action in the renounce state of consciousness (C4.V20 -“*tyaktva karma-phala-sangam*”), then there will be no future karma generated and in reality, “we perform no action at all”. Krishna explains (C3.V22) although he do not need to perform any action but yet he is engaged without selfish desire in karma and therefore he is not affected by the LoK because it is not the physical action but the state of mind that motivates his action. On the other hand, action with selfish motivation produce implications and future rebirth. If we purposely, selfishly and maliciously refrain from taking action than this will be akarma, but it is defined as karma and we will still accrue karma because we consciously did not take action (Sastri, 1901).

The karma yoga takes us beyond the teaching of *Shruti*'s and *Vedas* because *buddhi yoga* gives us the knowledge (*jñanakanda*) that makes us free from virtue and sin (*sukrita and diskrita*) and enable us to break free from the control of the LoK that keeps us bound in this world (C2.V50-51). Once we free ourselves from the domain of karma

then we may attain (C3.V59 -*padam anamayam*), a position that is free from any blemish or contamination, and it will lead us to *moksha*, liberation from rebirth (C3.V52-53). Whilst living in the society and with family, we do not need to renounce the society or family as monks and sadhu's do, we should practice renouncing our material desire or sensual pleasures (Das, 2011). This will enable us to remain undisturbed by the vicissitudes of fortune; we will not be elated when things go well and not downcast over the misfortunes that inevitably befall us in life (C2.V56-59 & C14V22-25).

The *buddhi yoga* will enable us to control over our senses and we can become master of our own being. This will make us free from passion, fear and anger. Although our senses remain active and desire will still arise in our heart but we will gain strength to resist those desires and we will be able to act on the basis of higher consciousness (Easwaran, 2007; Das, 2011). However this is only possible when we will have an understanding or perception that there is something higher than this world "*param drishtva* (C3.V59)", then only we will start to experience the joy of spiritual realisation.

In the verse (C3.V61), Lord Krishna explains that those who practice *buddhi yoga* dedicate (*mat-parah*) themselves to Krishna and they achieve absolute tranquillity, absolute peace of mind (C3.V71- *sa shantim adhigacchati*) and they will reach *Brahma-Nirvana* (C3.V72 *brahmanirvanam ricchati*). However if we remain active in the material domain of gain and loss then we will suffer constant anxieties.

### **The Three Gunas**

In order for us to become a *karma yogi*, it is important that we understand three gunas; *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* and their influence on our life. These gunas are born out of *Prakriti* (C14.V5) and all three prevails in us since we are also born out of *Prakriti*. All three gunas subjugate one another in us due to several actions that we take. A deeper understanding of the nature of gunas and their implications can guide us to cultivate and cleave appropriate gunas in our life.

*Sattva* relates to good conduct, enlightened understanding, purity and detachment from worldly pleasure or things, cleanliness, wisdom, kindness and the good life of a contented existence. *Rajas* relates to passion, activity, endeavour to achieve material gain that leads to anxiety and frustration. If we are predominated with this guna then we will be impelled with our desire and ambitions towards a life of tense action and hard work. However *Tamas* which is considered as lowest, the people with this guna

are considered as foolish and they lack the wisdom to see higher truth and also lack the ardour to endeavour to improve the situation. There is no intensity in these type of people but rather indolence, laziness and folly prevails in them (C14.V5-13).

These gunas influence and shape our life, the particular guna with which we becomes predominately associates dictate our next birth - moving upwards, staying in the same position or slipping downwards. Adhering to *sattva* helps attaining the highest destination in the next life, in which the god resides, or possibly a birth amongst pure-hearted, prosperous, enlightened people in this world (Easwaran, 2007; Swami, 2010). However those associated with *rajas* remain in the worldly action in which people strive for wealth, pleasure and material goal. *Tamsic* people fall even from their current position and come to exist amongst the lowest of humanity or even in the animal form of life (C14.V14-18).

TBG states that moksha only be attained by the realised knowledge and to become *Jivan-Muktha* one must transcend all three gunas. This realised knowledge and transcending gunas transforms the practitioners into a wholly different person who witness the event of life or world, and remain completely detached from them. These events or fluctuating fortunes will not disturb the practitioners because they understand that, it is gunas that constitute *Prakriti* that are active here and our true identity is *Pursha*, and as such they are not involved in the action or events (Sastri, 1901; Swami, 2000). This indifference to the world will only come from the realised knowledge (C3.V27-35 & C14.V21-25). Therefore when one act as *Pursha* and exist only at a witnessing level than their indifference will be apparent in relation to pleasure and pain, to wealth, to other people, to praise and blame and to friends and enemies.

Karma yoga and *sattva* are closely associated and in order to become karma yogi we need to cultivate and cleave *sattva* guna in our life (Das, 2011). It is advised that we should consume food that are fresh, whole grains and light which prolongs our life (C17.V7-10), we must perform *yajna* without selfish desire (C17.V11-13) and help people without expecting anything in return (C17.V20-22). However consuming strong tasting food, performing *yajna* for personal gain and helping people with personal motivation will increase *rajasic* guna in us (C17.V7-10). A person with *tamsaic* guna will not mind eating food that is unfit for consumption, will not perform *yajna* and will help a non-deserving person or institution, with expectation to get something in return.

Furthermore as a karma yogi we must perceive an identical atman in every being (C18.V19-22). If we do not perceive the spiritual reality existing within each being but sees only the external mundane world than *rajasic* guna will prevail in us.

As a human being we cannot renounce physical action (C3.V5; C18.V11) but we must practice renunciation at a consciousness level, which is an internal state. If *tamas* prevails in us than our renunciation may occur as a result of laziness, stupidity or confusion; and if *rajas* prevails in us than we may follow the path of renunciation because we finds our *dharmic* duty difficult or painful. However when we perform action purely as a matter of duty without any selfish intent then this will be our *sattvic* form of renunciation (C18.V9-10). And if we attains this state of renounced consciousness whilst continuing to perform action than we will not be afflicted by the effects of action in accordance with the LoK (C5.V12).

Adhering to *sattva* will give us clear understanding of the world that will help us to distinguish between *dharma and adharma* (good and bad conduct). We will gain spiritual insight to determine how liberation can be attained and understand the root cause of our bondage in this world (Swami, 2000). However *rajasic* guna will obscure our intellect to distinguish between *dharma and adharma* because we will be self-centred or will have selfish desire, and it is this ardour for personal gain that will obscure our understanding of *dharma*. And if our intellect is under the sway of *tamas* than we will regard wickedness as virtue and virtue as wickedness (C18.V29-32).

Happiness attained through *sattva* is the true happiness (C18.V36-39) because that relates to spiritual joy (*sukhan atyantikam*) which is beyond the grasps of the senses (C6.V21) and can only be achieved after extensive practice and the renunciation of sensual pleasure. The *rajasic* happiness, by contrast, is the pleasure we enjoy through satisfaction of the senses. Here the pleasure is immediate, but in the long term it leads only to distress as old age, death and disease bring us to a state of sensory deprivation and despair. And finally, the happiness shaped by *tamas* comes from the fulfilment of neither spiritual nor material goals. It is a form of happiness based on foolishness, indolence and intoxication (Easwaran, 2007; Swami, 2000; OCHS, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

It is concluded that although karma and karma-yoga may externally appear to be identical in terms of the action performed but the key difference is the use of

consciousness that motivate us to take an action that may have a selfish or without selfish desire. Actions without selfish desire are considered higher than any Vedic rituals and purposefully non-action is an *akarm* that brings implication in the future.

It is summarised that gunas effect the life of all living being and knowledge related to *sattva* is equated with spiritual insight while *rajasic* is confined to that which can be perceived through senses. It is evident the karma yoga is directly associated with *sattva* and one cannot become a karma yogi without attaining *sattva*. It is concluded that practicing buddhi yoga can help us attain *sattva* and we can become Jivan Mukta and gain liberation through realised knowledge.

## References:

Vivekananda, S. (2014) *Bhagavad Gita Chapter 2, Verse 47; Karmanye Vadhikaraste Ma Phaleshu Kadachana*, Available at-

<http://www.swamivivekanandaquotes.org/2014/05/bhagavad-gita-chapter-2-verse-47.html>,

Swami, G. (2000) *Madhusudana Saraswati Bhagavad-Gita*, 1<sup>st</sup> reprint, Trio Process, Calcutta, India.

Easwaran, E. (2007) *The Bhagavad Gita (Easwaran's Classics of Indian Spirituality)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, The Blue mountain centre of Meditation, Canada.

Swami, P. (2010) *The Bhagavad Gita*, Pacific Publishing Studio, US.

Das, S. (2011) *Bhagavad Gita, A simple and concise overview of the Bhagavad-Gita*, Vision Printers, London.

The Oxford centre for Hindu Studies (2010) *The Bhagavad Gita*, The continuing education department, Oxford University.

Sastri, M., A. (1901) *The Bhagavad- Gita with the commentary of Sri Sankaracharya*, Mysore, India, Available at-

[http://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/book\\_archive/196174216674\\_101529925771\\_46675.pdf](http://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/book_archive/196174216674_101529925771_46675.pdf).

Parrinder, G. (2013) *Bhagavad Gita- A Verse Translation*, T J International Padstow, Cornwall, UK.