



Karma Yoga

Swami Vivekananda

All the great systems of ethics preach absolute selflessness as the goal. Supposing perfect unselfishness can be reached by a person, what becomes of him? He is no more the little Mr. So-and-So; he has acquired infinite expansion. That little personality that he had before is now lost to him forever. He has become infinite; and the attainment of this infinite expansion is indeed the goal of all religions and of all moral and philosophical teachings.

Karma Yoga is the attaining through unselfish work of that blissful freedom which is the goal of all human nature. Every selfish action, therefore, retards our reaching the goal, and every unselfish action takes us towards the goal. That is why the only definition that can be given of morality is this: That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral.

The goal of all nature is freedom, and freedom is to be attained only by perfect unselfishness; every thought, word, or deed that is unselfish takes us towards the goal, and as such is called moral. That definition, you will find, holds good in every religion and every system of ethics. And yet some persons, in spite of professing this high ethical ideal, are frightened at the thought of having to give up their little personalities. We may ask those who cling to the idea of little personalities to consider the case of the person who has become perfectly unselfish, who has no thought for himself, who speaks no word for himself—and then to ask where his “himself” is. That “himself” is known to him only so long as he thinks, acts, or speaks about himself. If he is only conscious of others, of the universe, and of the all, where is “himself”? It is gone forever.

Karma Yoga, therefore, is a system of disciplining aimed at the attainment of freedom through unselfishness and good works. The Karma Yogi need not believe in any religious doctrine whatsoever. He need not even believe in God or ask what his soul is or think of any metaphysical speculation. He has his own special aim of realizing selflessness, and has to work it out himself. Every moment of his life must be realization, because he has to solve by mere work and without any help of spiritual doctrine or theory the very problem to which the Jnani applies reason and the Bhakta applies love.

We can train ourselves, says the Karma Yogi. When the idea of doing good becomes part of our very being, then we will not seek any motive from the outside. Let us do good because it is good to do good; those who do good work even in order to get to heaven bind themselves down, says the Karma Yogi. Any work that is done with selfish motive, instead of making us free, forges one more chain for our feet. On the other hand, every good work we do without any ulterior motive, instead of forging a new link, will break one of the links on the existing chain. Every good thought we send to the world, without thinking of any return, will be stored up and make us purer and purer, until we become the purest of mortals.

Swami Vivekananda. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. 1907.

© SophiaOmni, 2001. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission for copying is granted

for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use. If you reproduce this text, be sure to include the copyright.