

The Power of Karma Yoga in Human Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to focus on Swami Vivekananda's teachings on higher self-development through karma yoga – spiritualizing contemporary life in today's fast-paced world and on evolving a more humane civilization through the service of enlightened citizens. Stressing the essential role of self-development in human progress, Swami Vivekananda taught Vedanta to East and West as a practical dynamic philosophy. With his prophetic vision, he adapted ancient wisdom for modern living in his concept of karma yoga. Extending the idea of “holy” to the whole of human endeavor, whether exploring truths in the world or discovering the light of the soul within, Vivekananda deemed every struggle sacred when pursued with sincere, selfless intent.

Each action taken in the right spirit, Vivekananda taught, can manifest our innate divinity and bring us one step closer to our sublime nature, which acts in the common good. Keywords Ancient wisdom, Harmony of Oneness, Karma yoga, Light of the soul, Selfless intent, Sublime nature of human being, Calm concentration, Attitudinal correction, Alexander technique.

Introduction

Karma yoga is Vedanta in action, and it's a powerful spiritual discipline. With prophetic vision, Vivekananda adapted ancient wisdom for practice in the present age, but the breathtaking scope of his concept was far ahead of its time and was viewed as a bombshell in both East and West. Let's take a look at the karma yoga “bombshell” that Vivekananda, out of his immense spirit and love, bequeathed to humankind.

Vivekananda first started classes on karma yoga in New York in 1895. The notes written down in class by his listeners were later published as a book, karma yoga, considered one his best. He couldn't revise these class notes during his lifetime, so Swami Nikhilananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda Center in New York, published a carefully edited version in 1953 in his compendium *Vivekananda: the Yogas and Other Works*. It included his authoritative biography of Vivekananda, which I will be using in this paper.

Karma yoga wasn't new. It was Sri Krishna's teaching in the Bhagavad Gita which Vivekananda praised as “the best commentary we have on the Vedanta philosophy”. He concurred that the Gita had become the Bible of Hinduism and fully deserved to be so, but he said the personality of Krishna had “become so covered with haze” that it no longer inspired. “Moreover”, he said, “the present age requires new modes of thought and new life”.

In the Indian tradition, eternal truths are refreshed in each era, which is why Vivekananda referred to his own teaching of karma yoga as “old wine in a new bottle”. The “new bottle” was

the unifying concept he formulated for East and West with modern language and dynamic ideas. It would mature into Vivekananda's contemporary version of the Gita's teachings for practitioners worldwide.

Why was it such a shock? For one thing, karma yoga had long been available yet not widely practiced. Vivekananda's concept of karma yoga collided with religious practices of the day: prayer, ritualistic worship, singing God's praises and meditation, along with charitable acts. His sudden spotlight on work as a spiritual discipline went far beyond charitable acts: work done in the spirit of karma yoga, he said, was "a direct and independent means" to Self-realization and was best suited for the present age. Even more shocking, you could practice it even if you didn't believe in God.

None of this pleased traditionalists in the East or the West, but external circumstances never daunted Vivekananda, for he had the power to change them. Through the practice of karma yoga, he was determined to transform India's passive spirit with Western energy and to spiritualize Western energy with India's wisdom.

When he returned to India after his first trip to the West, Vivekananda introduced karma yoga into the newly founded Ramakrishna Mission of his monastic order. However, his doctrine of service was questioned by some of his brother monks who felt that it differed from the teachings of their Master, Sri Ramakrishna. Also, as has been pointed out, monks in India traditionally did not do secular work.

To appreciate what Vivekananda came up against in the West and his accomplishment, we rely on Burke's six-volume masterwork *New Discoveries: Swami Vivekananda in the West*. Vedanta was a completely foreign philosophy, difficult to understand. He met the challenge by integrating Vedanta into Western culture on Western culture's own terms. He respected Western society's contribution to life as a whole. "Vedanta teaches oneness, one life throughout", he insisted. And there was no difference between life in the world and religion; rather, it is the ideal of religion that must enrich life in the world and be put into practice.

His ideal was Truth: "Thou art That" – the direct experience of one's own divinity. The externals of practice never mattered to Vivekananda, no more than he would care if a laboratory scientist seeking truth was wearing trousers or a dhoti.

Vivekananda saw every person as pure consciousness, a living embodiment of God. The purpose of karma yoga was to serve this divine spirit in others with love and reverence, without the pettiness of pity. This was the ideal of service he had learned as the young Naren sitting in Sri Ramakrishna's room – service to the visible God in human form. This ideal became Vivekananda's new ritual for the new age.

What kind of service shall we render unto this visible God? During a lecture Swami Ashokananda, a brilliant interpreter of Vivekananda, said it is the sacrifices we make every day – parents for their children, children in return. "If I think rightly", he said from his lectern, "I am now immersed in an act of worship" speaking to you. We put our hearts and souls into everything we do in daily life, so much concentration, deep meditation, is there, but "we do not

recognize it for what it is. That is our trouble”. Be aware that what we do is an offering, a sacrifice, a great ritual: “nothing need be changed except our feeling about it”.

Vivekananda’s teachings on practice

With this as a general introduction, I’d like to focus on Vivekananda’s teachings on practice, starting with his attitude toward practice itself.

However, he made his instruction on practice very clear: whatever we do must be done perfectly, with our full attention. This is what he taught his monks in India. Whether it was formal worship or sweeping the floor, each little act had to be performed to absolute perfection. His disciple Shukul Maharaj described it: “Swamiji’s sadhana of karma yoga was through choto choto kaj; he who can sweep the floor properly can also meditate with total concentration”.

Total concentration on this level means the exalted yogic consciousness of the supreme self calmly witnessing the body and mind in action. “Intense activity, but in the midst of it, eternal calmness” is the secret of work, Vivekananda said, and it is the goal of karma yoga. Shukul Maharaj was saying that sweeping the floor is equivalent to meditation. The next time we are sweeping a floor – or doing anything at all – is also a good time to remember his exalted state of mind.

We have this transcendent goal to inspire us, but, as Vivekananda reminded us, we have to start practice where we are, in the world. Let it be sacred to us, because, as he said, the world is a grand moral gymnasium where we can exercise to grow stronger and stronger spiritually. Our practice of perfection shouldn’t be compromised by selfishness, vanity and petty ideals.

My first illustration shows a surfer in the midst of a huge whirl of a wave in the Canary Islands, perfectly poised in the moment, calmly in control. His skill is obvious, as is the depth of practice that made it possible. However, he has other lessons for us, too:

- The first lesson is his fitness: Vivekananda said we need a healthy body and mind for spiritual practice – he called for “muscles of iron, nerves of steel, and a mind like a thunderbolt!” We must keep our minds joyful, he said, and “if melancholy thoughts come, kick them out”. We are the custodians of our bodies and minds. This isn’t clear to those who consider body neglect as a spiritual virtue. Someone once asked Swami Ashokananda, “But why should I care about my body?” and he wittily replied, “Do not abuse a horse from which you cannot dismount!” Swami Nikhilananda’s guided meditation made the right attitude clear to his students, too:

Think your body to be pure and strong; it is the fittest temple of God; think your mind to be pure; it is free from anger, passions, jealousy, and hatred.

- The second lesson is his self-confidence: Vivekananda placed a huge value on faith in oneself as an antidote to self-doubt. Self-confidence means we never give up in defeat – we may fail, but if we try again we can summon the strength to succeed. He said faith in oneself is what religion ought to teach, even before faith in God. And if you do not have faith in yourself, you cannot have faith in God.

• And the third lesson is his concentration: Calm concentration can make us feel exhilarated in any situation. And the more we practice karma yoga, the greater will be the power of our minds. When completely absorbed, we lose the consciousness of being “the doer”, so we freely become just part of the flow. We all experience such freedom when immersed in work we love. However, in karma yoga that intensity of concentration is applied to everything we do. We develop the power of mind to excel in any undertaking.

We can change ourselves but not the world, which is like “a dog’s curly tail that can never be straightened”. Society is a training ground that exists to draw out and manifest the individual’s inherent divinity, not as an end in itself.

Conclusion

Vivekananda’s prescription for human development is also the goal of karma yoga: “A time must come”, he prophesied, “when every man will be as intensely practical in the scientific world as in the spiritual, and then that Oneness, the harmony of Oneness, will pervade the whole world”.

There are moments in history when a bombshell of truth becomes a charged spiritual opportunity. This is such a moment. Each one of us, within our own faith tradition, can take advantage of Swami Vivekananda’s spiritual energy to fulfill our own potential.

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