

ALL-DAY YOGA
(KARMA-YOGA)

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I

Introduction

The Yoga we shall be considering here is what Hindus call Karma-Yoga; it is one of the four great classical Yogas (1). As in the case of all other yogas, its essential and final (or sole) aim is to facilitate spiritual growth. It differs however from other yogas in that from the very start it can be practiced all day long and applied to every form of human activity, whereas for an overwhelming majority of people, Bhakti-Yoga can be followed throughout the day only at a very advanced stage, and Jnâna-Yoga and Râja-Yoga (including Hatha-Yoga) only during a very small part of the day. That is why it may be called a "full-time Yoga", an "all-day Yoga".

Karma-Yoga was given a number of different definitions. The most common, as well as one of the best, although far from covering the whole field, is "The yoga of disinterested action".

It starts from the easily observable fact that at every single moment of our daily life, even when we feel absolutely compelled to do one thing or another, we are always free to make our own choice (2) and we must accept full responsibility for that choice.

The fundamental question which has to be answered is: How should we make our choice, and with what motivations, between two or more possibilities available at a given moment? Moreover, however unexpected that may sound to Westerners, this ever existing possibility of choosing means **freedom**.

Many modern Hindu sages, from Sñi Râmakrishna to Sñi Aurobindo have repeatedly stressed that Karma-Yoga is the **Yoga best suited to our times**. More so than Bhakti-Yoga which appeals only to religiously inclined persons (and those are getting fewer and fewer), and more so than Râja-Yoga and Jnâna-Yoga which require respectively an intellectual performance beyond our mental capabilities (with extremely rare exceptions), and an extraordinary power of concentration and introspection very rarely to be found in modern man.

It may be added that Karma-Yoga is **particularly well suited to Westerners** who feel under a permanent obligation to be active (3), and who tend to be rather sceptical about the value, at least for the community, of any discipline which distracts us from practical daily life in this world.

It should also be stressed that Karma-Yoga in no way excludes the simultaneous practice of one or more of the other Yogas, which merely adds greater efficiency, but such a combination is purely optional. Karma-Yoga is self-sufficient.

Karma-Yoga has one more important advantage which is not to be found in other Yogas. When carried beyond their early stages Bhakti-Yoga, Râja-Yoga, Hatha-Yoga, and even Jnâna-Yoga present very serious dangers, both physical and moral, and also spiritual if practiced without the constant supervision and guidance of a technically, ethically and spiritually competent teacher (4). In contradistinction to all other yogas, Karma-Yoga presents no risk whatsoever, however far it may be carried, and can be practised **without any teacher** with the mere help of a book.

It should be added that at no stage are any physical exercises or particularly **diet** required — although of course the **karma-yogin** should do his or her best to remain in good health.

Finally, it is in no way linked to any philosophical or religious **beliefs**.

Swâmi Vivekânanda wrote “The **karma-yogin** need not believe in any doctrine whatever. He may not believe even in God, may not ask what his soul is, nor think of any metaphysical speculation.” (5).

(1) Some Western historians of Hinduism have been holding the view that this Yoga came into being later than Jnâna-Yoga and Râja-Yoga. The fact that it provides both the starting-point and an essential part of the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gîtâ seems a sufficiently convincing proof of its authenticity.

(2) The decision to engage in any spiritual discipline, e.g. yoga, implies the exercise, and therefore the possession of a certain amount of free will, as regards both choice of the final aim and selection of the path to be followed. When we believe — or claim — that we are not free to choose, this simply means that we refuse to face whatever consequences would follow our acting according to what we think is right.

(3) To a child sitting motionless for a while, we often say: “Why don’t you do something?” And when we remain idle, we keep thinking of all we have to do and we have a bad conscience.

(4) Swâmi Vivekânanda wrote: “There are, however, certain great dangers in the way of Bhakti Yoga. There is, for instance, the danger to the receiving soul of its

mistaking momentary emotions for real religious yearning.” (**Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, 1933, p.25)

About Râja-Yoga, he stressed in his Preface to his book on that particular yoga: “. . . with few exceptions, Yoga can only be safely learned by direct contact with a teacher.” (**Raja-Yoga**, New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, 1933, p.iii).

Srî Râmakrishna said: “The Jnâna-Yogi says, ‘I am He’. But so long as one has the idea of the Self as body, this egotism is injurious. It does not help one’s progress, and it brings about one’s ruin.” (**Sayings of Sri Râmakrishna**, Madras, Sri Râmakrishna Math, fourth edition, n.d. p.229).

Swâmi Brahmânanda, who encouraged novices in his order to practice some **âsanas** and **prânâyâma** after they had been sufficiently purified ethically, used to tell them later: “As regards the practice of Hatha-Yoga, you must keep yourself aloof from it or you will feel the consequences. It is a most dangerous path without the help of a competent guide.” (**Spiritual Teachings**, Madras, Sri Râmakrishna Math, 1932, pp.103, 117 ff. 206).

(5) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga** (op. cit.). p.113.

II

Aim and purpose

As a matter of fact, the ultimate aim of yoga in general — what Hinduism calls “liberation” (**moksha**) — may be taken to be either communion with God, or the level of consciousness of the Absolute, or the awareness of one’s own real being (as distinct from “appearances”) or even greater freedom in life.

Nevertheless, since all great Hindu sages whose teachings have reached us are deeply religious, it is not surprising that they should view Karma-Yoga in a theistic perspective. Srî Râmakrishna for instance used to say: “Karma-Yoga is communion with God by means of Work . . . Work is a means, if done unattached, but the end of life is to see God.” (6). But he meant this both in the light of Bhakti-Yoga (quest of personal God) and of Jnâna-Yoga (quest of the consciousness of non-duality): “The end of Karma Yoga is the same (as that of other Yogas), namely, the realisation of God, impersonal or personal or both.” (7).

Similarly, Srî Aurobindo wrote: “The work is only the necessary instrumentation for the union with the Master of works” (8) and “To do works in a close union and

deep communion with the Divine in us, the Universal around us and the Transcendent above us, not to be shut up any longer in the imprisoned and separative human mind, the slave of its ignorant dictates and narrow suggestions, this is Karma-Yoga." (9).

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- (6) **Sayings of Srî Râmakrishna**, (op. cit.), p.258.
 - (7) **Ibid.** p.253.
 - (8) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Second Series)**, Bombay, Srî Aurobindo Circle. 1949, p.8.
 - (9) **The Hour of God**, Pondicherry, Srî Aurobindo Ashram, 1959, p.101.

III

Effectiveness

In whatever way the aim of Yoga may be understood and sought for, Karma-Yoga leads to it just as well as any other form of yoga, and often much more easily. Swâmi Sivânanda Sarasvatî noted with surprise that some people view it as an inferior brand of yoga, and said that was a great mistake.

Rabindranath Tagore dwelt on this point at great length: "There are many in our country who imagine action to be opposed to freedom." "It will never do the least good to attempt the realisation of the infinite apart from the world of action". He added "If we say that we would realise him (Brahma) in introspection alone and leave him out of our external activity, that we would enjoy him by the love in our heart, but not worship him by outward ministrations; or if we say the opposite, and overweight ourselves on one side in the journey of our life's quest, we shall alike totter to our downfall." (10).

According to Swâmi Vivekânanda "by work alone men may get to where Buddha got by meditation or Christ by prayer." (11). The wording may not prove palatable to some Christians, but it simply meant to the Swâmi that Karma-Yoga is just as effective as Râja-Yoga or Bhakti-Yoga carried to their ultimate level.

Mâ Ananda Moyî confirms that "he who practices Karma-Yoga will realize the Brahman as consciousness or receive the grace of the World-mother". (12) which is a direct reference to the finality of Jnâna-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga respectively.

Swâmi Râmdâs, who was as exclusive a **bhakta** as can anywhere be found, stated explicitly: "without any external change of activity . . . we can realise the highest state of bliss and liberation" (13) and Swâmi Brahmânanda, the "spiritual son" of Srî Râmakrishna and the first Abbot of the Râmakrishna Order, explained to the monks in his care: "One can attain knowledge merely through the discipline of work." (14).

Râmana Maharshi, the absolutely strict **jnâna-yogin**, stated "Action without desire is superior to knowledge with practice." (15).

It must therefore be recognised that if carried out in the spirit of Karma-Yoga, any action (in the widest sense of the term), however insignificant, may carry us a step forward on the way to that "liberation".

- (10) **Sâdhanâ**, London, Macmillan and Co., 1930, pp. 120, 122, 125.
- (11) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit.**, p.39.
- (12) **Ananda Varta**, Vol.XIV, No.1. Varanasi, Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha, 1966, pp.6 ff.
- (13) **Letters**, Ramnagar, 1940, p.22.
- (14) **Spiritual Teachings, op. cit.**, p.22.
- (15) **Talks with Srî Ramana Maharshi**, Tiruvannamalai, Srî Ramanasramam, 1963, p.135.

IV Technique

Although not presented in the logical order which a Westerner would expect (16) the main lines of the theory and practice of Karma-Yoga are very clearly expounded by Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gîtâ. They may be summarised as follows:

1. No one stands even for a moment not doing work.
2. Inaction should therefore not be our aim.
3. Some actions certainly must be done.
4. We cannot choose or decide what the "fruits" of our action will be and should therefore entertain neither desire for them nor fear of them.
5. There should be no attachment to the action as such.
6. In whatever action, we are not the "doer" of the action.
7. Action performed in such a spirit does not "bind" its author.
8. Incidentally, Karma-Yoga is skill in works.

- (16) This derogatory remark may unfortunately be applied to the whole of the Bhagavad-Gîtâ. I have tried to remedy this disadvantage by supplying an Analytical Table to the Gîtâ (Cambridge, Wheel of Yoga, 1978). See also, in French, my "Réflexions sur la Bhagavad-Gîtâ vue dans son contexte" (Paris, Dervy-livres, 1976).

V

We cannot live for a moment without work⁽¹⁷⁾

The first principle: "We cannot live for a moment without work" is a mere statement of fact, the purpose of which is to prepare for the second principle: "Inaction should not be our aim", which is of a practical nature and is of less importance to Westerners than to Hindus (18). It should nevertheless be examined carefully.

Krishna stresses it in three different verses, two of which in one of the opening chapters, and one as part of his final conclusions: "Verily, no one can remain, even for a moment, without doing work, . . . every one is made to act, in spite of himself." (19). "Even the bare maintenance of your body will not be possible if you remain inactive." (20) And finally, "It is indeed impossible for an embodied being to renounce action entirely." (21).

In other parts of the Mahâbhârata (of which it should be remembered the Bhagavad-Gîtâ is only one chapter), Krishna repeats the statement. For instance, he quotes with unqualified approval what a brahmin tells his wife: "Freedom from acts, again, is incapable of being attained in this world for even a moment." (22). This is said repeatedly by other sages in every age, more particularly in recent times.

Thus Sîrî Râmakrishna said: "No one, however, can avoid work . . . The consciousness, 'I feel' or 'I think', involves work." And "You cannot get rid of work, because Nature will lead you on to it." (23) Swâmi Vivekânanda sounded the same note when he remarked "We cannot live a minute without work" (24) And Swâmi Brahmânanda came to the same conclusion "Without **karma** (work) your very existence would be impossible" (25).

Swâmi Râmdâs wrote: "Work is the nature of our being, just as the giving out of perfume is the nature of a flower . . . Active we must be, and cannot but be. . . . Even when man remains motionless and apparently inactive, his internal organs, his mind and his intellect are still active. Complete cessation of all action is a sheer impossibility." (26).

Indeed no great discernment is required to make us aware of this fact. Even while in the most perfect state of immobility, thinking goes on, and even if it can actually be stopped — which seldom occurs, since in most cases it is mere illusion — natural body-functions (breathing, circulation of the blood, etc.) still carry on. Srî Aurobindo goes further to state that even in the absence of any mental activity of which we can be conscious, there are still "vibrations" within the brain.

However that may be, our most complete and total inactivity could not prevent us from influencing our environment in a different way from what it would have been if we had "acted". Besides, people watching us may be either irritated or anxious, or else envious and wanting to imitate us.

- (17) Swâmi Vivekânanda, **Karma Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga** (op. cit.), p.12.
- (18) See footnote 3.
- (19) III, 5.
- (20) III, 8.
- (21) XVIII, 11.
- (22) **Ashvamedhika P.**, XX.
- (23) **Sayings of Srî Râmakrishna**, op. cit., pp. 254, 258.
- (24) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, op. cit., p.12.
- (25) **Spiritual Teachings**, op. cit., p.133.
- (26) **Letters**, op. cit., pp. 31, etc.

VI

Inactivity should not be our aim

Since inactivity is a sheer impossibility, it would evidently be unreasonable to make it our goal in any yoga whatsoever. Krishna states it most clearly when he tells Arjuna: "Let there be in thee no attachment to inactivity." (27). And just in case those words might not have been perfectly clear to his disciple, he adds later: "Not by abstention from works does a man enjoy actionlessness, not by mere renunciation

(of works) does he attain to his perfection.” (28) And again “Action is greater than inaction.” (29).

In Krishna’s time, this teaching was certainly aimed at fairly widespread schools of Jñāna-Yoga and Rāja-Yoga for which the ultimate aim, or at least a necessary stage in spiritual discipline was as complete as possible a cessation of all physical and even mental activity. Nowadays, this is only genuinely attempted by a few small groups on the basis of a certain interpretation of the teachings of Shankara or Patanjali. Many people are nevertheless inclined to think that “work” is only a second- or third-best to which only a minimum of time should be devoted, so that more should remain available for introspection, meditation, worship, etc.

That is why great modern sages have felt it necessary to confirm what Krishna said so explicitly. So Tagore wrote, from a practical point of view: “. . . to live we must work; life and activity are inseparably connected.” (30) and from a religious point of view: “Who can be so foolish as to run away from the gladsome throng and seek Him in the listlessness of inaction?” (31). Swāmi Rāmdās explained: “Yoga does not mean abandoning action; it raises action to its highest spiritual value.” (32).

Swāmi Brahmānanda, although requiring his monks to devote many hours to meditation every day, told them repeatedly: “I wonder why you are so much afraid of work . . . If you truly desire to realise God, then work steadily and wait. . . . As regards **karma** (work), you must never give it up wholly.” (33).

Srī Aurobindo often struck the same note: “Works are of primary importance”, “works are necessary, Yoga in action is indispensable.” “The idea of giving up physical work for mental self-development is a creation of the mental ego.” (34) “To keep up work helps to keep up the balance between the internal experience and the external development” (35).

As recognised by many sages, it must however be admitted that the obligation to act — at least visibly — no longer applies to those who have reached a point where it is objectively impossible for them to submit to it. For Srī Rāmakrishna, only those: “who are not endowed with the quality of **sattva** have to attend to all worldly duties.” (36) But the **purely** sattvic individuals, in whom no trace is left of **rajas** or **tamas** are those who have reached a really superhuman level. Swāmi Vivekānanda evidently had them in mind when he wrote: “There are no doubt exceptional beings who are perfectly satisfied with the Self, whose desired do not go beyond the Self, whose mind never strays out the Self, to whom the Self is all in all, only those do not work . . . but the rest of mankind have to go slowly through the world of work; Karma-Yoga shows the process, the secret and the method of doing it to the best advantage.” (37). Mā

Ananda Moyî is just as explicit when she says: "One cannot possibly remain without action until the state of Pure Being comes." (38).

It should be further observed that even those who have reached the highest stage attainable by man in fact still go on acting.

As a conclusion, we may quote Indra, the "King of Gods", who says in the Mahâbhârata: "Those men that censure action . . . incur sin." (39).

- (27) II, 47.
- (28) III, 4.
- (29) III, 8.
- (30) **Sâdhanâ, op. cit.** p.124.
- (31) **Ibid.**, p.130.
- (32) **Présence de Râm**, Paris, Albin Michel, 1956, p.61.
- (33) **Spiritual Teachings, op. cit.**, pp.101, 133, 162.
- (34) **Letters (Second Series), op. cit.**, pp. 9, 6, 447.
- (35) **Lights on Yoga**, Sidpur, Howrah, Srî Aurobindo Library, 1935, p.85.
- (36) **Sayings of Srî Râmakrishna, op. cit.**, p.254.
- (37) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit.**, pp. 97sq.
- (38) **Words of Srî Anandamayi Ma**, Varanasi, Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha, 1961, p.74.
- (39) Shânti P., XI.

VII

Some actions must be performed

This negative injunction is complemented in the Gîtâ by another one, of a positive nature, which concerns us more directly. In one of the opening chapters Krishna says: "Do your allotted action . . ." (40). And in the last chapter he again says: "The renunciation of obligatory action is not proper." (41).

What is then “the work you have to do”? (42) Although the whole context of the Bhagavad-Gîtâ makes it most unlikely, it may be suggested that at the time Krishna had in mind rituals, sacrifices, details of one yoga or another, these actions “which must not be given up” for they “purify the wise” (43). Nowadays, however, the principle evidently takes on a different meaning, and if we want to know what it is, we must turn to modern sages.

For those of us who are so fortunate as to be guided by a **real** guru — not by any of those who impudently claim to be such — there is no great problem, as they may leave it to him to decide.

Others might do well to turn to the greatest **karma-yogin** of our times, the Mahâtmâ Gandhi. He leaves us in no doubt: “The law of life is the law of work.” (44) And we know that for him the “law of life” was the dictates of his own conscience. He made it perfectly clear that for him “God created man so that he should earn his food by his work. He said that he who eats and does not work is a thief.” (45).

Even Srî Aurobindo states that we should act in conformity with “social duties”, but adds that they should be considered as “a field for the practice of Karma-Yoga” (46) And any work whatsoever is profitable to him who carries it out in the right spirit: “work must be done with the right attitude and in the right consciousness, then it is as fruitful as any meditation can be.” (47). For him “Work by itself is only a preparation, so is meditation by itself . . .” (48).

This Swâmi Râmdâs confirms from a more metaphysical angle: “Action undertaken in a state of total absorption in the eternal center of the universe is what is called yogic action” (49) The particular kind of work undertaken is comparatively unimportant. To quote Srî Aurobindo again: “Any work can be done as a field for the practice of the spirit of the Gita.” (50)

Swâmi Vivekânanda had already said “Even the lowest forms of work are not to be despised.” (51) A point which Srî Aurobindo stresses: “. . . it is not true that physical work is of an inferior value to mental culture, it is the arrogance of the intellect that makes the claim. All work done for the Divine is equally divine, manual labour done for the Divine is more divine than mental culture done for one’s own development, fame or mental satisfaction.” (52)

According to the Hindu tradition of Karma-Yoga, the choice of “the work that is to be done” by one particular individual is determined by what India calls his **svadharma**. Whereas in the West religion, ethics and law proceed by injunctions and

prohibitions expressed in absolute terms, which makes it necessary to accept whole cascades of exceptions, in Hinduism the rights and duties for each individual depend on the group to which he belongs, and may be totally different, let alone contradictory.

To take only one case, we have in the West an absolute rule, taught by the Churches and applied by the courts: "Thou shalt not kill", so absolute indeed that many of the best of men are unqualifiedly opposed both to euthanasia and abortion, under any circumstances whatsoever. But the rule suffers one important exception: In time of war, you should do your very best to kill as many enemies as you can. Which requires an exception to that exception: You should not kill an enemy who has laid down his arms, or has surrendered, or has been taken prisoner. Many other such cases could be quoted.

The Hindu approach is different. It is admitted that duty (**dharma**) is not the same for everybody, and varies considerably according to age, sex, family status, caste, etc. Everyone of us has his or her own special brand of duty, his **svadharma**. We shall mention only three instances.

Members of the brahmin caste are expected to be strictly non-violent, so much so that in most areas — with exceptions in Bengal and on the coast of Malabar — they are vegetarians. On the other hand, it is incumbent on every male member of the **kshatriya** caste (warrior) to resort to the most extreme kind of violence in the defence of what he believes to be right.

The head of a family should work to earn a living both for himself and for his dependents, whereas he who has heard the "Call" and has become a **sannyâsin**, — and also, according to a now largely obsolete custom, he who has raised a family and whose children are married — has no right to do so and must live exclusively on alms.

Similarly the duty of man at a certain age is to marry and beget children on his wife, whereas before and after that period of life, sexual chastity is considered a strict obligation.

Swâmi Sivânanda wrote that "all men should carry out their duty according to what is required by the caste and the **âshrama** (stage of life) to which they belong." (53).

Of course the Hindu concept of individualised ethics could not be applied as such in the West, were it only because castes are an intrinsic factor of it. But many of our ethical problems and doubts could find an easier solution if we did not insist on

blindly following much too general and absolute a rule and ignoring its possible counterpart.

It may here be worthwhile mentioning a warning of Hindu sages about what we too often complacently term a duty, although this may well be a purely egoistic desire in disguise. Swâmi Vivekânanda said: “. . . when an attachment has become established, we call it duty . . . When attachment becomes chronic, we baptise it with the high-sounding name of duty . . . Those who want to be Karma-Yogis must throw this idea of duty overboard.” (54)

Many Hindu sages stress the need for us to give priority to what Swâmi Vivekânanda called “the duty next to us” (55). Mahâtmâ Gandhi explained it at great length within the framework of his doctrine of **svadeshi**: “A votary of **svadeshi** will, as a first duty, dedicate himself to the service of his immediate neighbours. This involves exclusion or even sacrifice of the interests of the rest, but the exclusion or the sacrifice would be only in appearance. Pure service of one’s neighbours can never, from its very nature, result in disservice to those who are far away, but rather the contrary. ‘As with the individual, so with the universe’ is an unflinching principle, which we would do well to lay to heart. On the other hand, a man who allows himself to be lured by ‘the distant scene’, and runs to the ends of the earth for service, is not only foiled in his ambition, but also fails in his duty towards his neighbours.” (56).

He admits however that there must be exceptions: “There may arise occasions, when a votary of **svadeshi** may be called upon to sacrifice his family at the altar of universal service. Such an act of willing immolation will then constitute the highest service rendered to the family.” (57).

“The work which is to be done” may even on occasion require the use of violence for anybody. Swâmi Vivekânanda said: “The **karma-yogin** is the man who understands that the highest ideal is non-resistance, and who also knows that this non-resistance is the highest manifestation of power in actual possession, and also what is called the resisting of evil is but a step on the way towards the manifestation of non-resistance. Before reaching this highest ideal, man’s duty is to resist evil.” (58).

Even Mahâtmâ Gandhi, the great apostle of non-violence (**ahimsâ**), stated that: “He who is a passive spectator of crime is really, and in law an active participator in it.” (59).

To sum up, we can understand why Srî Aurobindo could write to one of his disciples: "You need not have qualms about the time you give to action and creative work" (60). Swâmi Sivânanda used to say: "Disinterested action is the keystone of Karma-Yoga." (61).

- (40) III, 8.
- (41) XVIII, 7.
- (42) III, 19.
- (43) XVIII, 5f.
- (44) **Discours aux Unions chrétiennes de Madras**, 16 February 1918.
- (45) **Young India**, 13 October 1921.
- (46) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Fourth Series)**, Bombay, Srî Aurobindo Circle, 1951, p.57.
- (47) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Second Series)**, *op. cit.*, p.9.
- (48) **Ibid.**, p.10.
- (49) **Présence de Râm**, *op. cit.*, pp. 60f.
- (50) **Letters (Fourth Series)**, *op. cit.*, p.604.
- (51) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, *op. cit.*, p.11.
- (52) **Letters (Second Series)**, *op. cit.*, p.446.
- (53) **Spiritual Teachings**, *op. cit.*, p.73.
- (54) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, *op. cit.*, pp. 103f.
- (55) **Ibid.**, p.56
- (56) **From Yeravda Mandir, Ashram Observances**, Ahmedabad, Jivanji Desai, 1935, pp.88f.
- (57) **Ibid.**, pp. 91f.
- (58) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, *op. cit.*, p.18.
- (59) 8 October 1927. Quoted by Mahadev Desai in **The Epic of Travancore**, Ahmedabad, 1937, p.94.
- (60) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Fourth Series)**, *op. cit.*, p.605.
- (61) **L'enseignement de Sivânanda**, *op. cit.*, p.348.

VIII

The fruits of action should be neither desired nor feared

We now come to what is the basic principle and central secret of Karma-Yoga: We have no right to the "fruits" of our actions and therefore our motivation should never be a **desire** to enjoy their good consequences nor a **fear** to suffer their bad consequences. Such is the principle of "disinterested action" (**nishkâmya karma**).

Krishna expresses it forcefully at the very beginning of the Gîtâ: "Thou hast a right to action, but only to action, never to its fruits; let not the fruits of thy works be thy motive." (62) "Poor and wretched souls are they who make the fruit of their works the object of their thoughts and activities"; (63). "The sages who have united their reason and will with the Divine renounce the fruit which action yields." (64).

Somewhat later, he explains the results of the attitude he advocates: "A selfless man who has renounced the fruits of works attains to peace born of steadfastness." (65). And he sums it up in the last chapter: the **tyâgin**, i.e. he who has perfectly renounced, he of whom "it may be said" that he has reached "the peace founded in Brahman in perfect felicity" is "verily he who gives up the fruit of action." (66).

That statement is constantly confirmed by other sages throughout the Mahâbhârata. Thus Manu: "For acquiring the supreme state there is no other means than abandonment of fruits by the mind." (67) Similarly Bhîshma: "Only that Righteousness is eternal which is not prompted by the desire of fruit or reward." (68) King Yudhishthira used even stronger terms: "The man who wisheth to reap the fruits of virtue is a trader in virtue." (69).

All modern Hindu sages repeat it tirelessly. Swâmi Râmdâs says quite plainly: "Karma-Yoga is renunciation of the fruits of our actions." (70) Swâmi Vivekânanda comes back to it again and again: "Leave the fruits alone. Why care for results?" (71) "Give up all fruits of work" (72); "Seek no praise, no reward, for anything you do." (73). 'All thought of obtaining return for the work we do hinders our spiritual progress; nay, in the end it brings misery.'" (74). Swâmi Brahmânanda used to tell his young monks: "If you desire to do work in the right manner, you must hold these two great principles in view. In the first place you must possess a profound regard for the work undertaken, and secondly you must be quite indifferent to the fruits thereof. . . . This is called the secret of Karma-Yoga." (75).

Mâ Ananda Moyî explains: "As long as a desire to distinguish oneself is lurking, it is **karma-bhoga** (working for one's own satisfaction). One does the work and enjoys its fruit, because of the sense of prestige it brings. Whereas, by relinquishing the fruit, it becomes Karma-Yoga." (76).

Her interpretation of the yearning for the fruits of our actions seems therefore to go somewhat further than what was said by Srî Râmakrishna: "Work for the sake of one's own worldly good — riches, honour, fame — is degrading." (77) But in fact to aspire to enjoy the "fruits", even indirectly, is a sign of egoism, and, as Swâmi Sivânanda asked: "How could an egoist practice Karma-Yoga???" (78).

The same statements are naturally also to be found in the writing of Srî Aurobindo: "There can be no Karma-Yoga without the will to get rid of ego, **rajas** and desire, which are the seals of ignorance . . . Works done in this spirit are quite as effective as **bhakti** or contemplation." (79) In order to practise Karma-Yoga, one must "be free from all egoistic motive . . ." (80). And he goes into details about the conditions to be fulfilled: "The only work that spiritually purifies is that which is done without personal motives, without desire for fame or public recognition or worldly greatness, without insistence on one's own mental motives or vital lusts and demands or physical preferences, without vanity or crude self-assertion or claim for position or prestige, done for the sake of the Divine alone and at the command of the Divine. All work done in an egoistic spirit, however good for people in the world of the Ignorance, is of no avail to the seeker of the Yoga." (81). "Any work, done well and carefully as a sacrifice to the Divine, without desire or egoism, with equality of mind and calm tranquillity in good or bad fortune for the sake of the Divine and not for the sake of any personal gain, reward or result, with the consciousness that it is the Divine Power to which all work belongs, is a means of self dedication through **karma**." (82).

As was to be expected, Mahâtma Gandhi sounds the same note, but he presents the problem in a somewhat different light: "Satisfaction should be sought in the work done, not in its outcome" (83). As usual, he quotes his own experience as the most convincing illustration: "It was only very imperfectly that I could fulfil my keen desire to lose myself in the Eternal, to become a mere lump of clay in the Divine hands of the Potter, so as to be able to serve more securely, without any interruption from my inner self." (84).

Of his attitude he supplies a metaphysical justification which is worth thinking over: "We do not decide what the results of our action will be; that is God's prerogative." (85).

First of all, when we act in order to bring about a certain result — which is practically always the case — we think mostly, even exclusively in a great majority of cases, of the short term consequences which we try to predict, an early advantage or enjoyment for ourselves or for those in whom we are interested. None of us need strain their memory to recall many cases in which the actual result was not what we had expected, indeed turned out to be just the opposite.

We also think at times of medium-term consequences. When enjoying a meal that is delicious, but perhaps too rich and heavy, or when giving sweets to a child, the possibility of stomach trouble may cross our mind. When giving somebody a book to read, it is in the hope that it may make the reader think, learn or understand something, and possibly alter his views to a certain extent. But there again, our forecasts are far from falling always true.

As regards long-term consequences, we always remain totally unable to know what these may turn out to be. With whatever care, love and attention we bring up a child, we never know what he will become, to what use he may put the weapons we have provided him with for life, the faculties we have cultivated in him, the knowledge we have imparted to him.

Indeed, as Swâmi Vivekânanda rightly pointed out: “We cannot do any work which will not do some good somewhere; there cannot be any work which will not cause some harm somewhere . . . There is no action which does not bear good and evil fruits at the same time.” (86).

However farsighted we may be — or think we are — sheer common sense forces us to recognize that our expectations are always partial as well as uncertain. According to our nature and/or our upbringing, we may say that the “fruits” of our actions are in the last resort in the hands of God, or fate, or **karma**, but never determined by our intentions or our will-power.

It may therefore be concluded that as a motivation the desire to enjoy the “fruits” of whatever we do may not be quite as satisfactory as we are generally inclined to think and that the rule offered by the Gîtâ may not be as fanciful as it might appear at first sight. We may be led to look for other and better motivations.

The wish to reap the expected “fruits” of our action, it must be noted, is only one kind of **desire**. Like all other religions Hinduism considers desire in general as the most dangerous obstacle on the road to spiritual growth. In the Bhagavad-Gîtâ, Krishna refers to it in no less than forty-two different verses scattered in eleven different chapters. He pities those “souls of desire” (87), “slaves of desire and ego”

(88) and repeatedly stresses the need to be "free from desire" (89). For him, desire is one of the "doors of Hell, destructive of the soul" (90). And he doubtlessly means the desire to enjoy the fruits of our actions when he speaks of those "asuric" souls who "Bound by a hundred bonds, devoured by wrath and lust, unweariedly occupied in amassing unjust gains which may serve their enjoyment and the satisfaction of their craving, always they think, "To-day I have gained this object of desire, tomorrow I shall have that other; to-day I have so much wealth, more I will get to-morrow." (91). He also speaks of "this eternal enemy of knowledge in the form of desire which is an insatiable fire." (92). For him again, only he who has "completely given up desire . . . is fit to become the Brahman" (93). That is why he insists that his disciple must abandon "without exception or residue all the desires born of the desire-will." (94) He does not deny however that the task is difficult to "slay . . . this enemy in the form of desire, who is so hard to assail." (95).

In another chapter of the Mahâbhârata, Krishna explains to King Yudhishtira: ". . . if . . . a man . . . has a craving for the good things of the world, and is addicted to them, he may be said to bear Mritya (death) in his mouth . . . the repression of the desires is at the root of all true virtue." (96) Needless to say that all other sages express the same view (97). In modern times as well; to quote only a few: According to Râmana Maharshi, "The state of no-desire is **moksha** (liberation)." (98) Srî Râmakrishna said: "The heart that has been burnt in the fire of worldly desires cannot be acted upon by any higher sentiment . . ." (99), and also: "So, if thou wishest to concentrate thy mind and heart on God, be meek, humble and poor in spirit, and remove all the spreading filaments of desire." (100) Srî Aurobindo devoted an important part of his letters to his disciples to the need of getting rid of "ego and desire" and also to the appropriate techniques. For instance he wrote: ". . . blows fall on all human beings because they are full of desire for things that cannot last and they lose them or, even if they get them, it brings disappointment and cannot satisfy them." (101) He added: "If desire is not mastered, how can there be any straight walking on the straight path?" (102) Because "liberation comes by loss of ego and desire." (103).

Mâ Ananda Moyî, it is true, notes that "You attempt to appease want by want: hence want does not disappear, and neither does the sense of want." (104). But of course the desires which she says should and could be substituted for worldly ones are of an altogether different kind. She also says: "By one's own doing want is created and by one's own doing this want will again be removed." (105).

This lack of concern for what the results of our action will actually be strikes us as unnatural, to say the least, because whenever we act, it is normally in order to produce a certain result which we deem pleasant to us or to our advantage. Even

when we honestly believe that we act in a disinterested way, it is very rare indeed that we should not expect something in return. If we give a present to a child or come to the help of somebody in need and we do not get even a word of thanks, we are to say the least surprised. And if we are told that we should never expect anything in return, we feel there is no longer any reason why we should act at all. This would certainly not be Karma-Yoga. (106) What other type of motivation can we turn to?

Of course there is “the work that is to be done” (107), but it could cover only part of our activity. The performance of **svadharma** (108) opens up a vista, somewhat wider but still insufficient.

Our best guide in the matter can only be Mahâtmâ Gandhi, who always endeavoured to do what he thought right in the light of his highest ideal of the moment. Which did not make things easy for his British counterparts in their negotiations with him. When they warned him: “If you do what you say, the consequences will be disastrous both for India and for you” he simply answered: “That is not for me to decide”.

This leads us therefore to the concept of the “highest ideal of the moment” (109), which may be a mental view of what is right, or a sense of duty, or the “small inner voice” of our conscience, or a wish to be “a good servant” or an intuition — when one can be sure that it comes from the right source, which is far from always being the case. When taken up in a religiously-oriented state of mind, any one of the above attitudes are made easier — as Krishna himself repeatedly states — if our actions are offered to the Divine (110).

It is important to stress “at the moment”. Contrary to what we are usually taught, our ideal must change — and recede — as we advance in life and progress. We should therefore not judge our past actions by our present ideal (which is the main source of regret and remorse). It would be just as absurd as to try to judge our present actions by a future ideal which must needs be unknown to us. Let us start from where we are.

Mâ Ananda Moyî goes further: “To long ‘let my heart be free from craving for results’ is still a desire for a result. Nevertheless, by thus aspiring after selfless action there is hope of its coming to pass. A knot means resistance. Hence, so long as the ego persists, there will be clashes at times, even when impersonal work is attempted, because one is bound and therefore pulled in a certain direction.” (111).

- (62) II, 47.
- (63) II, 49.
- (64) II, 51.
- (65) V, 12.
- (66) XVIII, 11.
- (67) **Shânti P.**, CCI.
- (68) **Anushâsana P.**, CLXIV.
- (69) **Vana P.**, XXXI.
- (70) **Letters**, *op. cit.*, p.104.
- (71) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, *op. cit.*, p.12.
- (72) **Ibid.**, p.108.
- (73) **Ibid.**, p.105.
- (74) **Ibid.**, p.45.
- (75) **Spiritual Teachings**, *op. cit.*, pp. 163sq.
- (76) **Words of Sri Anandamayi Ma**, *op. cit.*, p.69.
- (77) **Gospel of Sri Râmakrishna**, Vol.1, Madras, Srî Râmakrishna Math, 1930, p.249.
- (78) **Spiritual Teachings**, *op. cit.*, p.204.
- (79) **Lights on Yoga**, *op. cit.*, p.97.
- (80) **Letters (Fourth Series)**, *op. cit.*, p.608.
- (81) **Lights on Yoga**, *op. cit.*, p.88.
- (82) **Ibid.**, pp.89f.
- (83) **Ethical Religion**, Madras, Ganesh, 1924, p.41.
- (84) **Young India**, 17 November 1921.
- (85) Quoted by Mahadev Desai in **Gandhiji in Indian Villages**, Madras, Ganesh, 1927, p.86.
- (86) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga**, *op. cit.*, pp.37 and 75.
- (87) II, 42.
- (88) XVIII, 12.
- (89) III, 30.

- (90) XVI, 21.
- (91) XVI, 12f.
- (92) III, 39.
- (93) XVIII, 52f.
- (94) VI, 24.
- (95) III, 43.
- (96) **Ashvamedhika P.**, XIII.
- (97) Thus through very eloquent parables Vyâsa in **Shânti P.**, CCLIV and Manki in **Shânti P.**, CLXXVII.
- (98) **Talks with Srî Râmana Maharshi**, Tiruvannamalai, Sri Ramanasramam, 1963, p.585.
- (99) **Sayings of Srî Râmakrishna**, *op. cit.*, pp.79 ff.
- (100) **Ibid.**, pp.138 ff.
- (101) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo**, Bombay, Srî Aurobindo Circle, 1947, p.102.
- (102) **Letters** (Fourth Series), *op. cit.*, p.438.
- (103) **Ibid.**, p.430.
- (104) **Words of Sri Anandamayi Ma**, *op. cit.*, p.140.
- (105) **Ananda Varta**, Vol. XV, No.2, Varanasi, Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha, 1967, p.55.
- (106) Cf. Ch.VIII above.
- (107) **Bhagavad-Gîtâ**, III, 19.
- (108) Ch.VII above.
- (109) In point of fact, we very illogically claim merit for the good consequences of what we have done, while for the evil consequences we blame "circumstances"!
- (110) **Bhagavad-Gîtâ**, III, 30 and XII, 6. Swâmi Râmâtâs used to say: "Ours is to discover Him within us. This can be done if we dedicate all our actions to Him." (**Letters**, *op. cit.*, p.95).
- (111) **Words of Srî Anandamayee Ma**, *op. cit.*, p.76.

IX

There should be no attachment to action

Even if our motivation is not to enjoy the fruits of our action as we picture them to ourselves, may we at least be allowed to be attached to the action itself once we have decided to embark on it? The Bhagavad-Gîtâ leaves us in no doubt: "As those who know not act with attachment to the action, he who knows should act without attachment." (112).

The advice which Srî Râmakrishna gave to a very pious visitor deeply attached to important social work was to pray: "As for the little work that is left for my share . . . do Thou grant that I may have strength to do it without attachment." (113) And when told by one of his disciples returning from the West about the situation which was then prevalent, he did not hesitate to say "The attachment to work that is observable in England and America — an attachment leading to spiritual degradation — is to be condemned." (114).

Mâ Ananda Moyî supplies us with a full account: "Even in the midst of work, at all times and under all circumstances, one must be prepared to obey any kind of order. Imagine you are hungry, and just as you are raising your hand to put food into your mouth, you are asked to go elsewhere. At that very instant you should gladly let fall the food you were about to eat, and obey the call. Such an attitude is an indication of one's becoming established in a happiness that is not of this world. When one is nearing effortless being, whether one is blamed or not for some shortcoming in one's work, leaves one quite indifferent. Then only does one become an instrument in His hands. The body moves like a tool, and one watches it in the nature of a spectator. Then one observes what a great variety of work gets done by such a body, and in how very smooth and efficient a manner. Egoless work is full of beauty, for it is not prompted by a desire for self-gratification. So long as the knots that constitute the ego are not unravelled, even though you intend to act impersonally, you will get hurt, and this will produce a change in the expression of your eyes and face, and be apparent in your whole manner." (115).

Just as a desire to enjoy the fruits of our actions is only one particular brand of desire — even if one of the most difficult to dispose of — attachment to our actions as such is also one of many kinds of attachment, one of the most subtle ones. In the Bhagavad-Gîtâ, Krishna deals with attachment to things of this world in general (116), not only to action, but also to "thing, place or home", and even to

“understanding” (117)! He stresses that only when he has given up all attachments man “is not stained by sin” (118) and “. . . finds the happiness that exists in the Self”. (119).

Srî Aurobindo notes that “. . . any attachment . . . comes in the way of a spiritual working.” (120) And he insists: “If a Yoga of works alone is chosen as the path, then one may remain in the **samsâra**, but it will be freely, as a field of action and not from any sense of obligation: for the yogin must be free inwardly from all ties and attachments.” (121).

As regards Swâmi Vivekânanda, he remarks that in an overwhelming majority of cases, and even when we are blissfully unaware of it, “attachment comes only where we expect a return.” (122) Which takes us back to the desire or fear of the consequences of whatever we do.

- (112) III, 25.
- (113) **Gospel of Srî Râmakrishna, op. cit., p.278.**
- (114) **Ibid., p.249.**
- (115) **Words of Sri Anandamayee Ma, op. cit., pp.75 ff.**
- (116) XV, 5.
- (117) XII, 19.
- (118) V, 10.
- (119) V, 21.
- (120) **Letters (Fourth Series), op. cit., p.447.**
- (121) **Letters (Second Series), op. cit., p.480.**
- (122) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit., p.45.**

X

Man should not regard himself as the doer of the action.

Karma-Yoga goes even further. In the following stage, we should no longer consider ourselves as the author or doer of our own actions. But as to who the actual "actor" is, we have no unanimity.

In the Gîtâ, Krishna explains: "While the actions are being entirely done by the **gunas**, he whose self is bewildered by egoism thinks that it is his "I" which is doing them." (123) And in the last chapter he goes into details:

"The five causes . . . for the accomplishment of all works . . . are the body, the doer, the various instruments, the many kinds of efforts, and last, the Fate. These five elements make up among them all the efficient causes, **karana**, that determine the shaping and outcome of whatever work man undertakes with mind and speech and body." (124).

For Swâmi Râmdâs this is perfectly clear. He often said: ". . . the thought . . . "I" as the doer is utterly false" (125).

In the Mahâbhârata, other sages are far less affirmative than Krishna as to what the real causes of our actions may be. Thus to Indra Prahlâda says simply: "He who regards himself as the doer of acts good or bad, possesses a wisdom that is vitiated. Such a person is according to my judgment, unacquainted with the truth." (126) Similarly with Bhîshma, who links this attitude to the practice of repeating the greatest **mantra** of the Rig-Veda: "He who repeats it does not regard himself as the actor nor as the enjoyer or sufferer of the consequences of his acts." (127).

To Bali, the real "actor" is the highest Divine; he tells Indra: "That thou, O Shakra, regardest thyself as the actor lies at the root of all sorrow . . . I am not the actor. Thou art not the actor. He is the actor who, indeed, is omnipotent." (128).

The same theme was taken up again by Swâmi Râmdâs: "The Lord is the doer of all things." (129) He specifies: "The prompter of action is He; the doer also is He." (130).

Also Srî Aurobindo: "That is a great secret of **sâdhanâ**, to know how to get things done by the Power behind or above instead of doing all by the mind's effort." (131). He repeatedly warned his disciples against the temptation to think that in action they are anything but a mere instrument: ". . . make yourself an instrument for a work to be done . . ." (132). They should ". . . make themselves an instrument for a work to be done . . ." (133) More than that, they should beware of ". . . the pride of the instrument . . ." (134).

Swâmi Vivekânanda words it forcefully: "You are the porter that carried the money or other kind of gift . . ." (135).

In this connection, it is interesting to note what Swâmi Brahmânanda told his monks: "Before you begin to work, remember the Lord and offer your salutations to Him. Do the same at intervals in the course of the work, and also after you finish it." (136). And the offering to the **guru** is tantamount to an offering to God; he said: "Know that all the work you have to do is Srî Râmakrishna's and Swâmi Vivekânanda's. If you can work with this idea your work will not bind you." (137).

This idea of not considering oneself as the doer of the action may be linked with another concept according to which even while acting we do not act, i.e. the permanent and eternal in us (what India calls **purusha** or **âtman**) observes as a witness and without taking part in it, the action carried out by what in us is active. That is what Krishna refers to in a famous verse of the Gîtâ: "He who in action can see inaction and can see action still continuing in cessation from works, is the man of true reason and discernment among men; he is in Yoga and a many-sided universal worker" (138).

This is how Swâmi Vivekânanda describes the ideal of Karma-Yoga: "The ideal man is he who, in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert." (139).

But here a warning is called for. It not infrequently happens that we feel or imagine that we are "inspired" to do something or that we are "guided" in some work or other; in which case we may conclude with more or less sincerity that we are not really "the doer of the action" in the sense of the Gîtâ. This is a most dangerous pitfall which is often met on the path. In order to avoid it, we should question ourselves as ruthlessly as we can to ascertain whether this feeling — which we are inclined to call very complacently intuition — is not in fact a disguise for something quite different, for instance some personal desire — however praiseworthy it may be. An incomplete but useful criterion is whether for the action contemplated we feel some of the "attachment" we discussed in the previous section.

- (123) III, 27.
- (124) XVIII, 13—15.
- (125) **Letters, op. cit.**, pp.31, 54, 58, 105, 169.
- (126) **Shânti P.**, CCXXII.
- (127) **Ibid.**, CXCVI.
- (128) **Ibid.**, CCXXVII.
- (129) **Letters, op. cit.**, p.161.
- (130) **Ibid.**, p.16.
- (131) **Lights on Yoga, op. cit.**, p.96.
- (132) **Letters (Fourth Series), op. cit.**, p.604.
- (133) **Ibid.**, p.604.
- (134) **Ibid.**, p.612.
- (135) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit.**, p.85.
- (136) **Spiritual Teachings, op. cit.**, p.27.
- (137) **Ibid.**, p.22.
- (138) IV, 18.
- (139) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit.**, p.12.

XI

The action thus undertaken does not bind its author.

In the Gîtâ, Krishna says: “He who is in Yoga (i.e. the perfect **karma-yogin**) . . . even though he does works, he is not involved in them.” (140) Swâmi Vivekânanda repeats it in his own words: “. . . if we do not attach ourselves to the work we do, it will not have any binding effect on our soul.” (141) Like many others, Swâmi Sivânanda used to explain that “if undertaken without attachment, in the right mental attitude, without the hope of deriving from it any advantage, in total indifference to success or failure, no action can add a link to the existing chain” (142) This is also what was meant by Srî Râmakrishna when he said: “. . . a jnânin may work unattached, and then work would not do any harm to him.” (143).

In order to grasp the literal meaning of this basic principle of Karma-Yoga we should view it in the context of Hindu metaphysics, where the theory of “successive lives” and the law of **karma** are taken to be self-evident truths.

If we want to sum it up in a few lines, we may say that the life which every one of us is now living is not for him or her a unique event, but only a link in a long chain of successive lives for each one of which the permanent element in us (**jīvâtman**) has incarnated or shall incarnate in the course of its evolution.

The law of **karma** is nothing more than what we call the law of causality: every fact or entity has both causes and effects; but instead of applying to the short period between one birth and the following death, it applies throughout the chain of successive lives. Accordingly, any action in anyone of our successive lives must carry consequences, if not all during the course of the same life, the remaining ones in lives to follow. As to the consequences, whether good or bad which man has still to bear for whatever he has done, these are his **karma** the unexhausted part of which he carries into following lives. Now, the whole aim and purpose of evolution is to reach the point where there is no **karma** left. That is “liberation”, when the permanent element in us need no longer create new bodies, again to be born and again to die.

In all ages, all Hindu sages have stated that what creates **karma** for us is not action as such, but the spirit in which the action is undertaken, i.e., with or without a desire to enjoy — or fear to suffer — its consequences. This is how Swâmi Vivekânanda explains it: “Any action that you do for yourself will bring its effect to bear upon you . . . But any action that is not done for your own sake, whatever it be, will have no effect on you.” (144). By practising Karma-Yoga, one may act without creating new karma. As Sṛî Aurobindo puts it: “It is not the form of the work itself or mere activity but the consciousness and Godward will behind it that are the essence of Karma-Yoga.” (145).

In Karma-Yoga therefore we must distinguish between three elements which generally we do not think of taking up separately (1) The intention with which the action is undertaken. For it we must accept full responsibility; it may create **karma**; (2) The action which by itself cannot create **karma**; (3) The consequences of our action, for which we are incapable of deciding whatever our expectations may have been and which therefore cannot create **karma** either.

What can this concept mean to those who, like most Westerners, do not accept the theory of successive lives?

If we apply the technique of Karma-Yoga, we do not feel morally responsible for the consequences of our actions since they occur independently from our own will. This automatically removes all possibility of remorse, or even regret, in connection with them. With one very important corollary: we are not entitled to claim any merit for whatever good consequences these actions may have had.

But we are fully responsible for our intentions, or motivations, and their accumulation in successive actions in fact creates in us habits and trends and therefore moulds our character and nature. That is what may be said to correspond to **karma** in the hypothesis of a single life. **A fortiori** if we believe — as the adepts of most religions do — that after death we shall be judged and chastised or recompensed for whatever we have done in life.

- (140) V, 7.
- (141) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit., p.37.**
- (142) **L'Enseignement de Sivânanda** (Paris, Albin Michel, 1958), p.350.
- (143) **Sayings of Sri Râmakrishna, op. cit., p.255.**
- (144) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit., p.82.**
- (145) **Letters (Second Series), op. cit., p.8.**

XII

Karma is skill in works

With his usual remarkable clarity, Swâmi Vivekânanda explained that the practice of Karma-Yoga actually makes one free. He went as far as saying: "Karma-Yoga, therefore, is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness, and by good works." (146) To him: "Karma-Yoga is the attaining through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature." (147) He even added: "The **karma-yogin** asks why you require any motive to work other than the inborn love of freedom." (148) And he explains: "It is a very hard thing to understand, but you will come to learn in time that nothing in the universe has power over you until you allow it to exercise such a power . . . By Non-exercise attachment, you overcome and deny the power of anything to act upon you." (149).

In fact, not to fear possible evil consequences of what we do, not to be attached to whatever good effects we may expect or hope for is conducive to a great inner peace and a remarkable freedom of mind which enable us to act in total objectivity on the exclusive basis of whatever criteria we have chosen. Swâmi Vivekânanda calls it working "through freedom!" (150)

That explains why in the Bhagavad-Gîtâ Krishna could make this rather startling statement: "Yoga is skill in works." (151) He takes up the same idea again when he says: "He who desires nothing, is pure, skilful in all actions, indifferent to whatever comes, not pained or afflicted by any result or happening, who has given up all initiative of action, he, My devotee, is dear to Me." (152).

Swâmi Vivekânanda comes to the same conclusion: "Karma-Yoga makes a science of work; you learn by it how best to utilise all the workings of this world." (153) and also "Karma-Yoga is the knowledge of the secret of work." (154) The same idea he expressed again in different words: "Our best work is done, our greatest influence is exerted when we are without thought of self." (155).

Swâmi Râmdâs seems to go even further: "Work done in Karma-Yoga goes far and lasts long. It has a permanent and beneficent influence on the world." (156)

- (146) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit., p.113.**
- (147) **Ibid., p.111.**
- (148) **Ibid., p.119.**
- (149) **Ibid., p.85.**
- (150) **Ibid., p.42.**
- (151) **II, 50.**
- (152) **XII, 16.**
- (153) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit., p.98.**
- (154) **Ibid., p.97.**
- (155) **Inspired Talks, Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1938, p.54.**
- (156) **Présence de Râm, op. cit., p.61.**

XIII

Karma-Yoga and Responsibility

We see that Karma-Yoga may be summed up in four principles which after all are negations:

- 1) Not to consider any action as unimportant, negligible as compared to or incompatible with, the part we believe should be ours to play in this world.
- 2) Not to desire or fear the consequences of what we are about to do.

- 3) Not to be attached to the action while acting.
- 4) Not to consider oneself as the doer of the action.

If not properly understood the last three principles might lead to a total loss of interest in the action, which could just be performed anyhow, since we are not responsible for it. In fact, it is just the opposite. Karma-Yoga makes him who practices it much more responsible. And this in a dual way:

- 1) The heavy responsibility — which cannot be evaded by invoking any law or creed — to **choose** from among all available possibilities the one which best accords with our highest ideal of the moment.
- 2) An obligation to carry out an action, whatever that may be, as perfectly as one can possibly do.

Incidentally, this implies that between visibly active periods, however short and frequent, time should be allowed to rest and think, so that the above two conditions may be fulfilled. Srî Aurobindo wrote to one of his disciples: “The idleness must of course go — but sometimes I think you have pulled too much the other way. To be able to work with full energy is necessary — but to be able not to work is also necessary.” (157) And also: “If too much work is done the quality of the work deteriorates in spite of the zest of the worker.” (158)

(157) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Fourth Series), op. cit., p.622.**

(158) **Ibid., p.619.**

XIV

Is Karma-Yoga difficult?

Perfection in the practice of Karma-Yoga should not be thought as easily attainable. Even a merely intellectual apprehension of its rules is difficult. In the Gîtâ Krishna says: “What is action and what is inaction, as to this even the sages are perplexed and deluded . . . One has to understand about action as well as to understand about wrong action, and about inaction one has to understand; hard to understand is the way of works.” (159)

Srî Râmakrishna often speaks of it: “**Nishkâma karma** (work without motive) is very difficult.”(160) “Work without attachment, however, is exceedingly difficult, especially in this age.” (161) Swâmi Vivekânanda regretfully observes: “. . . a man who can work for five days, or even for five minutes, without any selfish motive whatever, without thinking of future, of heaven, of punishment, or anything of the kind, has in him the capacity to become a powerful moral giant.” (162)

And this is how Srî Râmakrishna advised his disciples to pray: “I think I do my duties remaining unattached to the world, but I know not how I deceive myself and do them through attachment instead. I do my alms and behold! I seek for fame . . .” (163)

Nevertheless, according to Srî Aurobindo “**Karma** is a much simpler road — than meditation — provided one’s mind is not fixed on the **karma** to the exclusion of the Divine.” (164)

For Mâ Ananda Moyî: “action dedicated to God is not of the same order as work prompted by desire. The one is for the sake of union, which leads to Enlightenment, the other for the sake of enjoyment, which leads to further worldly experience. What alone is worthy to be called ‘action’ is that action by which man’s eternal union with God becomes revealed; all the rest is useless, unworthy of the name of action, no action at all.” (165)

(159) IV, 16 f.

(160) **Sayings of Srî Râmakrishna, op. cit.**, p.259.

(161) **Ibid.**, p.254. Cf. also **Gospel of Srî Râmakrishna, op. cit.**, p.277.

(162) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit.**, p.10.

(163) **Gospel of Srî Râmakrishna, op. cit.**, p.193.

(164) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo, (Second Series), op. cit.**, p.13.

(165) **Words of Srî Anandamayee Ma, op. cit.**, p.80.

XV

Combination with other yogas

As Srî Râmakrishna implies and although he is in no way making it a condition the practice of Karma-Yoga can be made considerably easier if combined with other yogas, more particularly Bhakti-Yoga (166). In fact this is one of the main themes of what Krishna teaches in the Bhagavâd-Gîtâ “Giving up thy works to Me” (167) “Whatever thou doest, . . . make it an offering unto Me. Thus shalt thou be liberated from good and evil results which constitute the bonds of action.” (168) “Do all actions

for My sake" (169) "He from whom all beings originate, by whom all this universe is pervaded, by worshipping Him by his own work, a man reacheth perfection." (170)

According to Swâmi Vivekânanda, to "give up the fruits of work unto the Lord, . . . is a way which is much less difficult." (171) And for Srî Aurobindo the most effective **karma-yogin** is he who "gives up his own will and desires to the will of the Divine." (172) As could be expected, Srî Râmakrishna expresses the same view, for instance when he tells his visitors: ". . . pray to the Lord . . . for His grace, and for strength to do your duties without expectation of any reward or fear of punishment in this world or the next." (173)

Krishna also stresses the important part which knowledge and intelligence, i.e. Jnâna-Yoga, can play in the practice of Karma-Yoga: "Such is the intelligence declared to thee in the Sânkhya, hear now this in the Yoga, for if thou art in Yoga by this intelligence, O son of Prithâ, thou shalt cast away the bondage of works." (174)

It goes without saying that Karma-Yoga can prove extremely useful help to the practice of any other yoga taken as a main road to freedom, including Râja-Yoga, Hatha-Yoga, etc. Srî Aurobindo states that "work done as **sâdhanâ** . . . is a powerful means" (175) to be used in any yoga.

In even much stronger terms, Swâmi Râmdâs said: "**Jnâna** or **bhakti**, without **karma**, is a spiritually magnified selfishness." (176).

(166) See Section II above.

(167) III, 30.

(168) IX, 27f.

(169) XII, 10.

(170) XVIII, 46.

(171) **Karma-Yoga and Bhakti-Yoga, op. cit., p. 101.**

(172) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Second Series) op. cit., p. 224.**

(173) **Sayings of Srî Râmakrishna, op. cit., p. 258.**

(174) II, 39.

(175) **Letters of Srî Aurobindo (Second Series) op. cit., p. 16.**

(176) **Letters, op. cit., p. 57.**

