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## **Karma-Yoga: Philosophy of Moral Development and Work Motivation**

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### **Abstract**

Karma-Yoga is the technique of intelligently performing actions and forms the basis of deciding the moral worth of an action. It explains a distinct motivation for action, based on one's duty towards others. In this chapter, we describe the philosophy of karma-yoga, the beliefs which sustain and explain karma-yoga, detail the operationalization of karma-yoga, and locate this variable in relationship with other work-related correlates and outcomes. Finally, we highlight the practical implications of karma-yoga to individuals and present day organizations.

### **Introduction**

*Upaniṣadic* worldview on which karma-yoga is based has always been distinct from that of other worldviews, and has influenced Indian psychology and ethics. One of the distinguishing features of Upaniṣadic thought is its holistic understanding of a person consisting of the physical body (*sthūla śarīra*), subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*) that includes *manas* (sensory processing faculty) and *buddhi* (discriminative faculty), and *ātman* or the real self (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016, p. 5). Corresponding to these three levels of personhood are three corresponding ways of being aware—the physical body through the five senses observes the external world, the subtle body feels and understands the world of objects, and the *ātman* is capable of realization (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016, p. 6). Each of these three levels of personhood also imposes various limitations on the individual. While the physical body being made up of gross matter is restricted in time and space, the subtle body being more subtle, though relatively unrestricted in time and space, is limited by various identities—individual and social. The *ātman* being completely unconstrained by time and space is infinite and hence unitary across all beings. It is the realization of this *ātman*, the one universal consciousness, that is the goal of human life. Various methods have been advocated to achieve this realization. Karma-Yoga is one such method.

This chapter comprises five sections. The first section on the philosophy of karma-yoga summarizes the beliefs that form its foundations. It defines karma-yoga as the technique of intelligent action or the way of performing actions without being tainted. It also outlines the four categories of actions that may be performed without being tainted. The second section on operationalizing karma-yoga describes how karma-yoga can be measured and how its relationship with other variables can be studied. The third section on antecedents and consequents of karma-yoga summarizes the various studies that have looked at the

relationship between karma-yoga and other variables. The last two sections provide an overview of the implications for global management theory and practice.

## 1. Philosophy of Karma-Yoga

Karma-Yoga may be seen as a system of ethics, morality, and work (Vivekananda, 1972, Vol. 1, p. 109), which is described in the Bhagavad-Gītā. The Bhagavad-Gītā is the most popular work among the śāstras or texts of India, and it has influenced Indian life through the generations (Prabhavananda, 1960). The philosophy of karma-yoga is based on some fundamental beliefs.

The foundation of karma-yoga is characterized by three fundamental beliefs (Dasgupta, 1922/1991; Prabhavananda, 1960). The first belief is in the existence of a permanent reality, the ātman, which is our true nature, pure and untouched by the impurities of our ordinary life. The second belief is the law of karma that requires every action to have its consequence, which suggests that the world is a just place and that justice may be served over several lifetimes of birth and death. The third is that of mukti or liberation from the cycle of birth and death (and the law of karma) possible through multiple ways.

### Ātman

There are two types of knowledge—physical science and non-physical science. Physical science is the study of the world of objects. Physical or positivistic science, also known as materialism or behaviorism, provides an understanding of ‘things’ including nature and our physical bodies. It treats only what the senses reveal to be valid. It ignores that the knowledge of sensory data is only a part and not the whole of knowledge. Non-physical science is the study of the subject, the one who studies the world of objects. It is an investigation into a realm that sense organs cannot reveal. It is an inquiry into the inner world, the subject, the real self, the ātman (Ranganathananda, 2005: 11-20).

In the Rg-Veda, the word ātman is used to describe breath or vital essence (Radhakrishnan, 1940), and gradually it has been used to mean the real self of every being (Ghanananda, 1958). The ātman is the eternal subject, which is free from all impurities like sin, old age, death, grief, hunger, and thirst. The ātman is not born, and it does not die when the physical body dies. The real self or ātman is complete and hence, it is free from all forms of desires (Radhakrishnan, 1940).

The indestructible element in us has gotten mixed with the condition of change which permeates everything that is finite. We are imbued with the world of finites, of the bodily individuality of ours, and even the psychic isolation of ours is a character of our finitude. The finite struggles to align itself with the Infinite, to which it really belongs, and this struggle of the finite to move towards the Infinite is the whole story of evolution (Krishnananda, 1991: 42).

When we go beyond and penetrate the root of our ahaṁkāra (sense of I), when we enquire who we really are, we reach the infinite self, the ātman. The ātman in us is one with all. The attitude that this is *my* work, and everything belongs to *me* is based on ignorance. Realizing the ātman requires detachment from the ahaṁkāra, the little self that is centered in our genetic system. Until this little ‘I’ is overcome and a larger ‘I’ manifests in us, we remain stunted individuals. When this little ‘I’ expands, it becomes the ripe expanded self, which alone can experience its oneness with everyone else. The self that is contained in the organic system is only a convenient provisional delusion. When that is set aside, our concept of self begins to expand, and we feel oneness with others. Therefore, whatever work we do, the

fruits of it are not for us alone; they belong to everyone. This losing ourselves in the universal is the goal of existence (Ranganathananda, 2001, Vol. 1, pp 177-186).

## **Law of Karma**

The second of the three beliefs that comprise the foundation of karma-yoga is the belief in the law of karma, i.e., all actions that are done have the power to ordain for their doers joy or sorrow in the future depending on whether the action is good or bad. Often, individuals may be required to take birth in another body to experience fully the joy or suffering that is due to them because of their past actions.

The law of *karma* is perhaps one of the most widely known and misunderstood beliefs (Mahadevan, 1958). It is equivalent to the belief in a just world (Connors & Heaven, 1990; Hafer & Begue, 2005) plus transmigration. It states that individuals get what they deserve (Connors & Heaven, 1990). Law of karma extends the concept of justice to other worlds and other births, thereby implying that all good and bad deeds of all of one's previous lives are accounted for cumulatively. Accordingly, in every life one reaps what one has sown in one's previous lives (Radhakrishnan, 1926). The law of karma provides a parsimonious explanation of the inequality that exists in the world. Belief in law of karma reaffirms one's faith in natural justice and makes every person responsible for his or her own well-being and suffering. Thus, positive deeds are believed to lead to good outcomes, while tragic happenings are explained as an outcome of negative deeds done in the past (Agrawal & Dalal, 1993; Dalal & Pande, 1988). The law of karma is not a blind mechanical framework in which a human being is trapped for eternity, but provides a mechanism for explaining the circumstances that one finds oneself in, until one is completely free of the cycle of birth and death.

## **Mukti or Mokṣa (Freedom or Liberation)**

The third of the three beliefs that comprise the foundation of karma-yoga is about mukti or mokṣa (freedom or liberation). While the pursuit of artha (wealth) and kāma (pleasure) is a legitimate human aspiration, they should be gained in ways of dharma (righteousness), if they are to lead ultimately to mokṣa (Radhakrishnan, 1926: 80). These four comprise the puruṣārthas (life goals). Freedom of the individual from the cycle of births and deaths is possible and is the ultimate goal and destiny of every being (Mahadevan, 1958). This freedom from the cycle of birth and death is termed as mokṣa. It is not selfish individual salvation as it is sometimes wrongly understood, but it is the expansion of one's self towards the universal Self, resulting in oneness with all beings. Mokṣa is the state of oneness with all. It results when the bonds of ignorance have been broken and is a state which is free from all imperfections and limitations (Prabhavananda, 1960). Since actions lead us through the endless cycle of birth and death, if we could be free of all such emotions or desires that lead us to action, there would be no fuel (in the form of joys or sorrows to be experienced) to propel us into another birth and we would be free of this cycle.

## **Karma-Yoga: The Technique of Intelligent Action**

Derived from the root, *yuj* (to bind together, or to join), yoga means binding one's potential, balancing, and enhancing it. By yoking together and harnessing our energies, we force the passage from the limited individual self (jīvātman) to the supreme unlimited self (paramātman). The way the finite moves towards the Infinite is called yoga. The limited individual self tears itself away from its prison house, stands out of it, and reaches its own innermost being. Yoga is a method or discipline that leads to the liberation of the individual

and a new understanding of the unity of all beings (Radhakrishnan, 1971: 50). When one is convinced of the law of universal cause and effect, the existence of an eternal ātman, and the objective of life as liberation of the individual from the cycle of birth and death, one seeks opportunities for mokṣa (realizing one's oneness with all beings). The yoga (path or technique) to be selected for mokṣa must be suited to the temperament and disposition of the seeker.

According to Swami Vivekananda (2009: 102-103), until we give up the strong attachment to this our transient conditioned existence, we have no hope of catching even a glimpse of that infinite freedom beyond. There are two ways to give up our attachment to this little universe of the senses or of the mind, and to get out of this complex world. One is called the “*neti, neti*” (not this, not this), the other is called “*iti*” (this); the former is the negative, and the latter is the positive way. Bhagavad-Gītā (śloka 3.3) says, “In the beginning (of creation), O sinless one, the two-fold path was given by Me to this world—jñāna-yoga (the path of knowledge) for the people of contemplation, and karma-yoga (the path of action) for the active people.”

The negative way—jñāna-yoga—is to give up all concerns with the world, to let it go and stand aside, to give up our desires. It constitutes the denial of all attributes of the self (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). It comprises the three steps of *śravaṇa* (listening), *manana*, (reflecting), and *nididhyāsana* (contemplating). It involves the pursuit of knowledge and truth through the process of reflection and examination of the nature of the self through mental effort (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). It is only possible to people with gigantic wills who simply stand up and say, “No, I will not have this,” and the mind and body obey their will, and they come out successful. However, such people are very rare (Vivekananda, 2009: 102-103).

The other way is to plunge into the world and learn the secret of work, and that is the way of karma-yoga. It requires not giving up the world, but living in the world and learning the secret of work. Most people choose this positive way, the way through the world, making use of all the bondages themselves to break those very bondages. However, really speaking, this is also a kind of giving up; only it is done slowly and gradually, by knowing things, enjoying things and thus obtaining experience, and knowing the nature of things until the mind lets them all go at last and becomes unattached. In karma-yoga, there is no cessation from work. Karma-Yoga is the means for active people to realize their true nature. Through working in the world, with the proper attitude, it is possible to go beyond this world (Vivekananda, 2009: 128).

Karma-Yoga provides a path for freedom from the cycle of birth and death, which is suited for people with an active temperament who have chosen to remain in the world and aspire for liberation. In other words, the process of discovering one's true self through work is karma-yoga. That is the development of thought in the Bhagavad-Gītā, that, by a certain spiritual technique, you can convert action into inaction: you get the fruit of inaction through action itself (Ranganathananda, 2001, p. 259)

The word karma comes from the Sanskrit root *kri*, which means doing, affairs, or activity and includes all actions that a person performs whether they are of body, speech, manas, or buddhi. In other words, karma consists of all deliberate human actions. In the Bhagavad-Gītā, the word yoga is used in three ways: as a special skill, device, intelligent method, or graceful way of performing actions (Chapter 2, Verse 50); as equability of mind towards success and failure (Chapter 2, Verse 48); and as the device for eliminating the natural tendency of law of karma to create bondage (Chapter 2, Verse 50). Since these meanings of yoga speak of the relationship of yoga with action, the terms “yoga” and “karma-yoga” are used interchangeably at various instances in the Bhagavad-Gītā (Tilak,

1915/2000). Tilak defines the word “yoga” to mean “device” or “intelligent method” and hence the term “karma-yoga” means “a technique for intelligently performing actions.”

Here the word “intelligent” is used by Tilak in a specific sense to denote an action which is conducive to one’s end goals and since the ultimate goal of all beings is to free the individual from the cycle of birth and death, any method that enables release from this perpetual cycle is preferable to any other method that is likely to bind the human being to the cycle. Hence, whether karma-yoga is defined as “a technique for intelligently performing actions” or as “a technique for performing actions in a manner that the individual is not bound by the effects of the action,” it means the same thing (Tilak, 1915/2000).

Karma-yoga may be simply defined as a path towards mokṣa through performing actions without being tainted (Īśa Upaniṣad, Śloka 2). Ranganathananda (2000: 93), commenting on Īśa Upaniṣad Śloka 2, says that all our life, we are engaged in so many activities, but we find that, instead of releasing us from bondage, they have merely increased our bondage. The way to come to grips with life, therefore, is to use every action as a means for freeing ourselves from that bondage.

Another explanation for karma-yoga being the technique of intelligent action deals with the nature of action and its outcomes. According to the Bhagavad-Gītā (Chapter 18, Verse 14), there are five factors which together determine the accomplishment of actions—the body, the agent of action, the sense organs, the specific activities involved in the action, and the divinity. The first factor, “body” can also be explained as the “historical, geographical, ecological, and social context in which the action takes place” (Rao & Paranje, 2016, p. 199). Hence, it is quite clear that the agent of action is only one of the many factors that determine the outcome of an action. Given this reasoning, a subsequent verse in the Bhagavad-Gītā (Chapter 18, Verse 16) suggests that perceiving oneself as the sole cause of one’s actions is being unintelligent.

Karma-yoga should not be confused with mere work. To work like a bullock, or to work in any way one likes, is not karma-yoga. The work that most people do is nothing but a semi-conscious, passion-driven, aimless rat race for name, fame, and sense enjoyment, and to call it karma-yoga is an insult to the great teachers of karma-yoga (Bhajananda, 2006: 8-9). The goal of karma-yoga is not worldly success. Karma-yoga is a spiritual discipline that aims at liberation—mukti. The aim of karma-yoga is not to change the world, but to change oneself by transcending the material part (Bhajananda, 2006: 8-9).

Karma-Yoga is a path toward mokṣa, through performing actions without being tainted. Four categories of actions may be performed without being tainted—unselfish actions, actions without attachment, actions originated by svadharma, and actions permeated by sattva guṇa (Vivekananda, 2009). According to karma-yoga, unselfishness is considered as the highest virtue. An individual practicing karma-yoga performs actions without a sense of attachment to the individual outcomes that he or she expects to receive from the action. Performing actions without being tainted is easily achieved when an individual pursues his or her natural duty or svadharma. Finally, guṇas are the three building blocks of all elements in the universe, which can explain how to perform actions intelligently.

### **Niṣkāma Karma (Unselfishness or Self-Abnegation)**

“Karma-yoga is the attaining through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature” (Vivekananda, 2009: 120). Selfish actions reinforce our identification with the body and the mind, which limits us and retards our realizing our goal i.e., the one universal consciousness. On the other hand, unselfish actions help us to get closer to our goal

of realizing the underlying unity in all beings. Hence, the only definition that can be given of morality is this: “That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral” (Vivekananda, 2009: 120). Karma-Yoga, therefore, is a system of ethics intended to attain freedom through unselfishness, and by good work. Karma-Yoga does not require belief in a personal god (Vivekananda, 2009: 121), though it requires a belief in the ātman, mokṣa, and the law of karma.

According to Bhawuk (2011: 153-155), the doctrine of niṣkāma karma also focuses on self-interest, but proposes that in one’s own interest one should not chase the fruits of his or her endeavor. It is not only possible but also preferable to live for the well-being of others in the society. Those who work hard to serve others pursue a path of spiritual self-development through their work itself.

Bhagavad-Gītā (śloka 5.7) says: “With the mind purified by devotion to karma-yoga, and the body conquered, and sense organs subdued, one who realizes one’s self, as the Self in all beings, though acting, is not tainted” (Swarupananda, 1909). With the development of spirituality, one feels one’s oneness with others, and feels the desire to serve others. The sufferings and joys of all others become one’s own sufferings and joys. There is only one infinite ātman; one realizes that truth. Even though he or she is constantly performing actions, he or she will never be tainted. Such a person is not subject to the law of karma. Performing actions like this, without being tainted, is called karma-yoga (Ranganathananda, 2001, Volume 2, pp 32-33).

Ranganathananda (2001, vol.1, p. 285) wrote: “Suppose you have no desires of your own. You don’t need to work at all. Still you must work, because there are others who are in need; you are there to help. That is called lokasaṅgraha or ensuring the stability of the human society.” Bhagavad-Gītā (śloka 3.20-3.21) says: “Verily, through action alone, Janaka and others attained perfection; even with the view to ensure lokasaṅgraha, the stability of human society, you should perform action. Whatsoever the superior person does, that is followed by others. What he demonstrates by action, that people follow”.

The most important question is: “How is it possible to do work without *expecting any result*? How can teachers teach without expecting their students to pass examinations creditably? How can doctors treat patients without expecting them to be cured?” The answer is, what one is asked to give up is not the result, but the selfish expectations about it. Teachers should strive their utmost to teach their students well, but they should do it for their students’ own welfare, and not to earn money, or name and fame. Doctors should strive their best to treat their patients, but they should do it for the patients’ welfare only, and not to get money or name and fame. Working without selfish desires is what is known as nishkāma karma or unselfish work or *work for work’s sake*. This is karma-yoga (Bhajananda, 2006: 30-31).

### **Anāsakti (Non-Attachment)**

Giving up all attachment to work, while working incessantly, is a way to perform actions without being tainted. Attachment means expecting returns for oneself. It requires not identifying oneself with anything. It requires that we recognize that all our pains and miseries exist at the level of the physical body and the subtle body and not at the level of the ātman which is our true self. Vivekananda (2009) explains how ahaṅkāra and mamatva (sense of I and mine) are the causes of attachment, with the help of an example:

If a beautiful picture belonging to another is burnt, a man does not generally become miserable; but when his own picture is burnt, how

miserable he feels! Both were beautiful pictures, perhaps copies of the same original; but in one case very much more misery is felt than in the other. It is because in one case he identifies himself with the picture, and not in the other (p. 105-112).

According to Bhawuk (2011: 150-151), if work is done without attachment, then it frees one of all bondage. Thus, work is couched in a spiritual worldview as a path leading to self-realization if done properly without pursuing their outcomes. Whatever actions an unattached person performs is for the sake of yajña (sacrifice), and the karma, its fruits, and the accompanying bondage are destroyed. When one so performs his or her work without attachment, it becomes yajña and frees the person of kārmic bondage.

Gandhi (1980) considered the central teaching of the Bhagavad-Gītā to be detachment—abandonment of the fruit of action. He used the phrase ‘anāsakti yoga’ (yoga of non-attachment) to refer to karma-yoga, and considered Bhagavad-Gītā to be a text on anāsakti yoga. He exhorted that non-attachment should be a part of all our actions. Gandhi was emphatic that we should do no work with attachment. Even attachment to good work is wrong. Gandhi gave the example that if we are attached to our goal of winning liberty, we shall not hesitate to adopt bad means. Hence, we should not be attached even to a good cause. Only then will our means remain pure and our actions, too.

There are two ways of giving up all attachments. The one is for those who do not believe in a personal god, or in any outside help. They are left to their own devices; they have simply to work with their own will, with the powers of their mind and discrimination, saying, “I must be non-attached”. For those who believe in a personal god, there is another way, which is much less difficult. They give up the fruits of work unto the Lord; they work and are never attached to the results (Vivekananda, 2009: 108-109).

### **Svadharmā (natural duty)**

Svadharmā means one’s own dharma, or an individual’s innate nature, way of life, natural duty, the purpose of living. Svadharmā is that activity which fits one the best. The test of svadharmā is to see if while doing one’s svadharmā, the sense of time vanishes. Svadharmā changes from person to person and for the same person, it changes from time to time. As one’s mind grows and develops through reflection and experience, one’s old svadharmā drops off and a new svadharmā comes in its place (Bhave, 2005: 22-23). Hence, different rules of conduct are applicable to different types of beings depending on their state of growth (Prabhavananda, 1960: 105).

Individuals will not be tainted by the actions they perform, when work is done by considering it as svadharmā. For individuals pursuing karma-yoga, the work indeed helps them earn a means of livelihood, but their purpose for working is not just to earn livelihood but to earn enough and keep their body healthy to be able to perform their svadharmā. Hence, the end is svadharmā and earning is a means for that. For individuals who are not pursuing karma-yoga, the work is a means for earning. These are two opposite attitudes to work. Karma-Yogis performing svadharmā link their work to the welfare of the society (Bhave, 2005: 48-50).

Svadharmā is an individual’s duty in a context and as a member of a group (e.g., family, community, or nation; Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). This is the duty that arises most naturally to an individual based on the time and context in which he or she is located. Since svadharmā arises as a natural consequence of one’s position in life and society, one does not need to put in extra efforts in order to plan or contemplate this and hence it is easiest to

cultivate an attitude of service to the collective and to give up the expectation of a personal reward (Bhave, 2005).

It is necessary in the study of karma-yoga to know what duty is. Since environments change the nature of our duties, doing the duty, which is ours at any particular time, is the best thing to do. It is work through the sense of duty that leads us gradually to work being done for its own sake. The objective of fulfilling duties is the attenuating of the lower self, so that the real higher Self may shine forth—the lessening of the frittering away of energies on the lower plane of existence, so that the self may manifest itself on the higher ones. Hence, the only way to rise is by doing the duty next to us, and thus gathering strength to go on until we reach the highest state (Vivekananda, 2009: 52-60).

### **Guṇas (ultimate entities)**

Knowledge-complexes that exist in living beings are different from those that exist in external inanimate objects in that they are far subtler and have a preponderance of a special quality of plasticity and translucence (sattva). The fundamental characteristic of external gross matter or an inanimate object is its mass (tamas). Energy (rajas) is common to both gross matter and the subtle thought-stuff that is unique to living beings. However, mass is at its lowest minimum in thought-stuff, whereas the capacity of translucence or intelligence-stuff is at its highest in thought-stuff (Dasgupta, 1991: 241).

Thus, both thought and gross matter are made up of three elements—a plasticity of intelligence-stuff (sattva), energy-stuff (rajas), and mass-stuff (tamas) or the factor of obstruction. Of these, the last two are predominant in gross matter and the first two in thought (Dasgupta, 1991: 242).

These three types of ultimate subtle entities are called guṇas. These subtle guṇa substances are united in different proportions, and because of this, different substances with different qualities come into being. For example, a larger number of sattva substances may unite with a lesser number of rajas or tamas substances, or a larger number of tamas substances may unite with a smaller number of rajas and sattva substances, and so on in varying proportions. (Dasgupta, 1991: 243-244).

Another way to look at guṇas is to view them as three forces that are manifested in the physical world as inertness or inactivity (tamas), activity, expressed as attraction or repulsion (rajas), and the equilibrium between activity and inactivity (sattva). When tamas is predominant, we become lazy and dull, when rajas dominates us, we engage in feverish activity, and when sattva dominates, we engage in calm activity. Karma-Yoga has specially to deal with these three factors (Vivekananda, 2009: 13).

For those who are predominantly tamasic (highest on tamas and comparatively low on rajas and sattva), performing any action is difficult, leave alone unattached action or karma-yoga. Once they increase their levels of rajas, they will start doing some action. However, karma-yoga is possible only if they reduce their levels of rajas and increase sattva. Changing oneself from being tamasic to being rajasic to being sattvic is a simple way to start performing actions without being tainted. Sāttvic performers will not be tainted by their actions.

According to our mental constitution or the different planes of existence in which we are, duty and morality may vary. For individuals who are passive, dull, and dormant, performing at least some action (even violence) is prescribed as svadharma. On the other hand, for someone who has courage and ability to fight, svadharma may involve resisting violence or fighting only for the welfare of the world. The important thing is to know that

there are gradations of duty and of morality—that the duty of one state of life, in one set of circumstances, will not and cannot be that of another (Vivekananda, 2009: 15-18).

### **Absence of Doership**

The four categories of action listed above, that can be performed without tainting oneself, all have one thing in common: they all lead to an absence of a sense of doership. It is the sense of doership that results in bondage and accumulation of further karma. In unselfishness, the sense of self does not exist at all. In non-attachment, not expecting outcomes for oneself is equivalent to not performing the action itself. When people are discharging their svadharma, they are so involved in the action that they are not even aware that they are doing anything. And finally, the sāttvic performer of action sees every action as a result of only guṇas acting on guṇas, and does not identify with them.

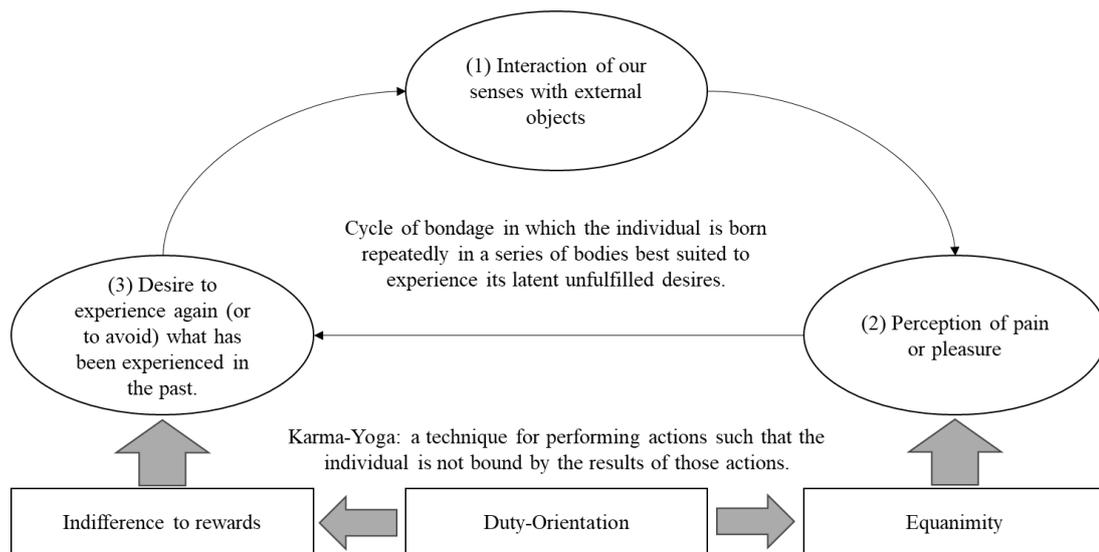
## **2. Operationalizing Karma-Yoga**

Karma-Yoga may be operationalized in organizations as detached involvement. It means gradual detachment from exclusive or dominating personal interests, and progressive attachment to concerns and causes more and more transcending oneself, like the family, the organization, the country, and the world at large. Attachment to higher order concerns demands detachment from lower order concerns. Increasing concern for results for the organization or the nation is dependent on lessening concern for results for one's own sake (Chakraborty, 1998: 94).

The essence of karma-yoga is given in the Bhagavad-Gītā (Radhakrishnan, 1948/1993) Chapter 2, Verse 47, which says, “To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.” This verse of the Bhagavad-Gītā is also mentioned by Tilak (1915/2000 p. 895) as giving the entire import of karma-yoga in a short and beautiful form. Later in the Bhagavad-Gītā (Radhakrishnan, 1971, Chapter 3, Verses 12, 13, and 16), Arjuna is told that persons who survive on this earth and use its resources without working are living in sin, and hence human beings are obliged to work selflessly in order to fulfill their duty towards the world. Hence, based on the results of Mulla and Krishnan's (2006) content analysis and the interpretation of the Bhagavad-Gītā verses, karma-yoga could be operationalized as made up of three dimensions: duty-orientation, indifference to rewards, and equanimity.

The metaphysical explanation of karma-yoga is presented in Figure 5.1. The eternal cycle of birth and death driven by reincarnation and the law of karma is defined in the form of a three-step procedure (Tilak, 1915/2000). The first step is the interaction of the five senses with external objects; this in turn leads to a perception of pain or happiness in the mind of the agent of the action (Bhagavad-Gītā Chapter 2, Verse 14). Perceiving pleasure or pain further leads to a desire to experience again what has been experienced (in the case of happiness) or a desire to avoid what has been experienced (in the case of pain). The presence of an unfulfilled desire to experience or avoid a certain experience is the essential fuel, which drives individuals to being reborn again in a body most suited to their experiencing their latent unfulfilled desires. In this manner, the cycle of birth and death is repeated to eternity. The cycle can be broken in three ways. First, an individual may choose to avoid all interaction of his or her senses with external objects. However, in the case of an active person, this path is not suitable. Hence, the only two ways of breaking the cycle of birth and death are to be endure pleasure and pain with equanimity and to be indifferent to the rewards (and punishments) of one's actions (Tilak, 1915/2000).

**Figure 5.1. Metaphysical Explanation of Karma-Yoga**



### **Breaking the Cycle of Birth and Death through Equanimity and Indifference to Rewards**

One way out of this perpetual cycle of desire is to be able to control in one’s mind the experience of pain and happiness i.e., being neutral to the experiences of our senses (Tilak, 1915/2000). When one does what one has to do, with perfect mental control and after giving up the desire for the result, and with a frame of mind that is equal towards pain and happiness, there remains no fear or possibility of experiencing the unhappiness of actions. If one can perform actions with such a spirit, it does not become necessary to give up actions. Hence, karma-yoga requires that we keep our organs under control and allow them to perform the various activities, not for a selfish purpose, but for the welfare of others (Tilak, 1915/2000).

In addition, since the outcomes of one’s actions are dependent on an elaborate chain of cause and effect, all that is in the individual’s control is performance of that action. Hence, one ceases to have a feeling of ownership towards one’s actions and believes that the actions happen naturally, and the bodily organs are just an instrument for their execution. This lack of ownership for actions coupled with the sense of obligation to others creates a complete disinterest in the mind of the seeker for any form of material or social rewards (Tilak, 1915/2000).

### **Duty-Orientation as a Precursor to Developing Equanimity and Indifference to Rewards**

A question that is often asked is: how is it possible for an individual to maintain equanimity to pleasure and pain, and be indifferent to rewards? By developing duty-orientation, it is possible to develop equanimity and indifference to rewards.

The belief in the law of karma makes us realize that we are placed in a situation because of unfulfilled past obligations on our part and we develop a sense of connectedness with all beings. In other words, irrespective of the situation that we are placed in, we can look upon those around us as our creditors in our past lives to whom we are obliged to discharge

certain obligations (which were unfulfilled earlier). The belief in the law of karma coupled with the belief in mokṣa (realization of oneness with all beings) as goal, makes us strive to discharge our obligations to those around us. In this manner, all actions become a repayment of a debt and the actor is free of any motive for the actions.

### **Alternative Conceptualizations**

There have been several alternative conceptualizations of karma-yoga. An early conceptualization by an eminent social worker described karma-yoga as “attainment of God through work” (p. 230) and acting with evenness of mind and performing duties as an instrument of God (Banerjee, 1964). Other similar definitions of karma-yoga were transcending nature and doing one’s duty in a dedicated manner (Menon & Krishnan, 2004), treating work as worship (Madhu & Krishnan, 2005), and “doing one’s duty and not being attached to outcomes” (Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003, p. 3).

Rastogi and Pati (2015) employed a qualitative method to identify the distinct dimensions of the karma-yoga construct, and offer an alternative conceptualization of the construct. Accordingly, they defined karma-yoga as a persistent positive state of mind that is characterized by absorption and service consciousness. They also identified sense control and equanimity as the necessary prerequisites for individuals to practice karma-yoga.

Navare (2019) proposed a five-factor model of karma-yoga. The five factors were: *manonigraha* (controlling the mind and refraining oneself from the over-indulgence in the sensual desires); *samabuddhi* (keeping the intellect steadfast in extreme life situations and preserving rational decision-making ability); *phalāśā tyāga* (renunciation of attachment to external reward and remaining anchored in duty-bound actions); *svadharma* (performing actions in accordance with one’s innate nature); and *lokasamgraha* (developing the sense of belonging and responsibility toward larger social and natural system). Navare (2019) found that karma-yoga had positive impact on mindfulness, self-transcendence, thriving, flourishing and psychological capital, and negative impact on job burnout.

### **3. Antecedents and Consequents of Karma-Yoga**

Studies have been done to understand the profile of karma-yogis or persons high on karma-yoga. Mulla and Krishnan (2006) studied the impact of karma-yoga on two facets of the personality trait of conscientiousness, viz. dutifulness and achievement striving. Karma-Yoga was operationalized in terms of two dimensions—sense of duty and absence of desire for rewards. Belief in Indian philosophy was significantly related to sense of duty. There was moderate support for their hypothesis that dutifulness was more strongly related to karma-yoga when achievement striving was low than when it was high.

People who scored high on karma-yoga showed a distinct value system from those who were low on karma-yoga scale. Those high on karma-yoga gave significant preference to other-oriented values in case of terminal values and greater preference to moral values as far as instrumental values are concerned. Individuals’ scores on karma-yoga were also found to be highly correlated with emotional intelligence (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007).

People who scored high on karma-yoga also showed a distinct value system with respect to the two values of being “ambitious” and being “hardworking”. The word “ambitious” refers to having a desire to achieve a goal. Clearly, the focus is on the motives of a person’s actions. On the other hand, the word “hardworking” implies being industrious or diligent. It focuses on the visible behaviors and not the motives. Individuals who were high on karma-yoga gave higher importance to being “hardworking” as compared to being

“ambitious,” whereas individuals who were low on karma-yoga gave higher importance to being “ambitious” as compared to being “hardworking” (Mulla & Krishnan, 2011). Similarly, rajas guna (characterized by ambition driven feverish activity) was negatively related to karma-yoga (Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003).

Moreover, karma-yoga was stronger for individuals who were high on empathic concern and this relationship was strengthened when personal distress was low (Mulla & Krishnan, 2008). In other words, this meant that those who scored high on karma-yoga were more likely to help others due to their genuine concern for others’ well-being rather than to relieve their own distress.

Individuals who scored high on karma-yoga had more social identities in their self-concept (Mulla, Krishnan, & Kumar, 2018). Karma-Yoga is a means for achieving self-expansion or oneness with others, and self-expansion can be seen as increasing the proportion of social part of self-concept.

Another important area of study has been to see if karma-yogis will be transformational leaders. Mulla and Krishnan (2009) studied whether the karma-yoga of a leader and the follower’s belief in Indian philosophy enhanced transformational leadership. Karma-Yoga was conceptualized as made up of three dimensions: duty orientation, indifference to rewards and equanimity. Only the duty-orientation aspect of karma-yoga was found to affect three dimensions of transformational leadership, viz. charisma (attributed), charisma (behavior) and inspirational motivation. They also found that a leader’s karma-yoga was more strongly related to charisma, when a follower’s belief in Indian philosophy was high as compared to when the follower’s belief was low. They concluded that the relationship of belief in Indian philosophy is strongest with duty-orientation because sense of duty constitutes the core of the philosophy of karma-yoga. The other two dimensions are perhaps the consequences of duty-orientation, which manifest over time.

Efforts have also been made to understand whether transformational leadership can enhance the duty orientation and spirituality of followers and help to increase their commitment towards the organization. Krishnan (2007) found that transformational leadership enhances duty-orientation and spirituality (oneness with all beings) of followers. Krishnan (2008) studied the relationship of transformational leadership with followers’ karma-yoga, spirituality, organizational identification, and normative organizational commitment. The karma-yoga of followers was significantly enhanced by the transformational leadership exhibited by their superiors. This study thus showed that transformational leaders, by enhancing the karma-yoga and oneness of followers, increase their organizational identification and normative commitment and help to address the goals of the organization. However, Menon and Krishnan (2004) showed that follower’s karma-yoga was positively related to leader’s transformational leadership for male followers but not for female followers.

Mulla and Krishnan (2012) found that transformational leadership was positively related to two of the three dimensions of karma-yoga (viz., duty-orientation and indifference to rewards). Analysis of split samples of high/low duration of leader-follower relationship and high/low frequency of leader-follower interaction showed that the duration of leader-follower relationship and frequency of leader-follower interaction moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and follower's karma-yoga such that high duration of leader-follower relationship and high frequency of leader-follower interaction enhanced the impact of transformational leadership on follower's karma-yoga.

The Bhagavad-Gītā (Radhakrishnan, 1971) predicts several positive states which arise as a result of karma-yoga such as – the end of sorrow (Chapter 2, Verse 65), peace (Chapter 2, Verses 66, 70, & 71); happiness (Chapter 2, Verse 66), bliss (Chapter 2, Verse 72), and satisfaction (Chapter 3, Verse 17). A karma-yogi is described as one who is completely satisfied with his or her current state and is not hankering after any other state of existence (Mulla & Krishnan, 2006).

Several studies have identified the beneficial outcomes of karma-yoga in the organizational context. Karma-Yoga was found to be positively related to spirituality, normative commitment (Krishnan, 2008), life satisfaction (Mulla & Krishnan, 2006; Rastogi, Pati, & Kumar, 2015), happiness (Pati, Rastogi, & Kumar, 2017; Rastogi, Pati, & Kumar, 2015), conscientiousness, self-efficacy (Rastogi, Pati, & Kumar, 2015), mindfulness, self-transcendence, thriving, flourishing, and psychological capital (Navare, 2019).

When faced with circumstances that are unfavorable to us, our interpretation of those events trigger emotions and distress. A “commitment to some higher goal in life enables people to meaningfully reconstruct difficult experiences” (Pande & Naidu, 1992, p. 92). It was found that those high on non-attachment experienced less distress and exhibited fewer symptoms of strain when faced with stressful life events (Pande & Naidu, 1992). Also, individuals who scored high on the ‘absence of desire for rewards’ dimension of karma-yoga had enhanced life satisfaction (Mulla & Krishnan, 2006). Karma-Yoga was also found to be negatively related to depression (Rastogi, Pati, & Kumar, 2015) and burnout (Navare, 2019; Pati, Rastogi, & Kumar, 2017).

Karma-Yoga can also enhance the positive effect of transformational leadership. Madhu and Krishnan (2005) showed that karma-yoga and transformational leadership had an enhanced effect on altruism, conscientiousness, and courtesy. Courtesy was enhanced only when there was an interplay between transformational leadership and karma-yoga. This study thus showed that the transformational leadership of a manager will lead to higher display of organizational citizenship behavior, if it is combined with karma-yoga.

Joshi and Krishnan (2015) showed that leader’s svadharma-orientation mediated the positive relationship that leaders’ need for power and activity inhibition had with each of the five factors of transformational leadership. Mehra and Krishnan (2005) found that svadharma-orientation was positively related to transformational leadership.

Agarwalla, Seshadri and Krishnan (2015) used an experimental study to examine whether transformational leadership would be affected by the predominance of a particular *guṇa* (*sattva*, *rajas*, & *tamas*) in a leader and his or her karma-yoga. They found that leader’s karma-yoga enhanced his or her transformational leadership when the leader was high on *sattva*, but did not enhance transformational leadership when the leader was high on *rajas*.

Mulla and Krishnan (2014) showed that karma-yoga constitutes a holistic model for moral development. Karma-Yoga or the technique of intelligent action was described in the form of three interrelated constructs viz. duty-orientation, indifference to rewards, and equanimity. Each of these dimensions of karma-yoga was related to moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character. Even though constructs like conscientiousness have some commonality with one of three crucial dimensions of karma-yoga (duty-orientation, indifference to rewards, and equanimity), none of those constructs is like the composite construct of karma-yoga. Karma-Yoga's uniqueness is about merging those three dimensions into a composite whole.

#### **4. Implications for Global Management Theory**

The traditional models of motivation have a bias towards assuming that all individuals are self-interested and take up activities only based on self-interested, hedonistic, and cost-benefit calculations (Shamir, 1991). These traditional models of motivation fail to explain actions of individuals when there are no tangible rewards for action, such as when actions are inspired by charismatic leaders or when individuals act due to their values or moral obligations (Shamir, 1991; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). In Indian context, studies have shown that self-sacrifice and altruistic behaviors are extremely effective leadership behaviors (Singh & Krishnan, 2005). The philosophy of karma-yoga if properly understood provides fortitude in times of difficulty and lays the foundation for self-determination – a firm understanding that one's actions today form the basis of one's outcomes tomorrow (Banerjee, 1964). Karma-Yoga constitutes the Indian work ideal and can be harnessed by leaders to motivate their team (Mulla & Krishnan, 2007) to be sensitive to their obligations and thereby serve customers with devotion.

#### **5. Implications for Global Management Practice**

Indian culture is made up of traditionally idealized values as well as operative values (Sinha, 1997). Some of the operative values, formed because of historical and social factors may be contrary to the values of a contemporary organization. Several of India's traditionally idealized values are highly relevant to the needs of contemporary organizations. The philosophy of karma-yoga is one of these idealized values which provides a strong framework for developing efficient and humane organizations as well as a professional and fulfilled workforce (Banerjee, 1964; Mulla & Krishnan, 2006).

Over the years, several prominent Indians such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Vinoba Bhave have practiced and propagated the philosophy of karma-yoga. Even in the business world, there have been several successful business professionals such as Gurcharan Das (1993), Indra Nooyi (*Indian Express*, 2007) and Satya Nadella (Stampler, 2014) who attribute their success to practicing karma-yoga. Karma-Yoga has several applications to issues faced by organizations today.

#### **Refining Leadership Behavior**

Moral development of the leader is an essential element of transformational leadership which inspires and motivates teams to perform far beyond expectations (Burns, 1978). In fact, merely executing the behaviors of transformational leadership does not have any positive follower outcomes unless followers perceive that leaders also have self-transcendent (other-oriented) values (Fu, Tsui, Jun, & Lan, 2011). Visualizing the leader's role as that of a servant who seeks to meet the needs of his or her team (Hunter, 1998) automatically incorporates other-oriented values. The need for leadership to be rooted in values is essential not only to inspire followers (Burns, 1978), but also to prevent the abuse of power by those in high office (Keltner, 2016). Leaders who practice karma-yoga consider themselves as debtors to their team. They recognize that they find themselves in a position of responsibility with respect to others due to some past debt which they are obligated to repay. This development of a collective identity in the place of an individual identity is an important predictor of positive leadership behavior (Johnson, Venus, Lanaj, Mao, & Chang, 2012). Hence, instead of exploiting others for their own benefit, karma-yogi leaders are more likely to serve their team members selflessly and thereby enhance team outcomes.

## Dealing with Crucible Experiences

One of the biggest sources of development of leadership ability is when managers go through intense, often traumatic, and unplanned experiences (called crucibles), which help them to discover their best capabilities (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). The personal strengths that help an individual to make sense of and deal with these crucibles include taking responsibility for one's life and the ability to find meaning in negative events (Thomas, 2008). The ability to find meaning in negative events is an important predictor of psychological well-being (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). The belief in the law of cause and effect (karma) helps individuals to make sense of negative events, stop blaming others, and take charge of their life; and thereby overcome personal crises (Agrawal & Dalal, 1993; Dalal & Pande, 1988). Moreover, karma-yoga was negatively related to depression (Rastogi, Pati, & Kumar, 2015) and burnout (Navare, 2019; Pati, Rastogi, & Kumar, 2017).

## Model of Moral Development

Karma-Yoga constitutes a holistic model of moral development (Mulla & Krishnan, 2014). It emphasizes taking into account an individual's unique circumstances and context while making a decision regarding the appropriate ethical action. This is especially true for managers making decisions in a real-world context where abstract and lofty principles such as utilitarianism and deontology are often useless and what really matters is a nuanced understanding of the details of each situation and one's personal circumstances (Badaracco, 1997). Karma-Yoga provides a framework for moral decision making by taking into account the needs of others and following the principles of unselfishness, non-attachment, and svadharma (Vivekananda, 2009).

## Conclusion

According to Sumantra Ghoshal (2005, p. 76) "By propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories, business schools have actively freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility". Hence, management educators must develop theories which would help build moral/ethical organizations (Ghoshal, 2005). Another requirement for management theories is that they must be culturally relevant and rooted in indigenous insights (Gupta, 1992; 2011). Karma-yoga is a response to Ghoshal (2005) and Gupta (1992; 2011). It is an excellent solution to address the problem of increasing greed and selfishness in modern society by making people focus on their duties toward others.

When individuals focus on their duties toward others, they will not be hankering after the personal outcomes of their actions; thereby enhancing the quality of the process and outcomes. Being duty-oriented and not hankering after personal outcomes will make the individuals calmer, resulting in a higher quality of life. Empirical studies (e.g., Pati, Rastogi, & Kumar, 2017 and Navare, 2019) have shown the positive effects of karma-yoga in the work context. As organizations strive to enhance workplace happiness and reduce stress and burnout, karma-yoga provides a way out.

Individuals are likely to benefit by learning this philosophy of karma-yoga. Swami Vivekananda's (2009) book "*Karma-Yoga: The Yoga of action*" is an edited version of eight lectures he delivered during December 1895 to January 1896 and is an excellent summary. For a more technical understanding of karma-yoga, Tilak's (2000) *Gita Rahasya* is an excellent source. Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave were two foremost teachers of karma-yoga in modern times (Bhajananda, 2006: 8). Studying their lives and writings would help in getting a deeper understanding of karma-yoga.

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