

# THE BHAGAVAD GITA AND THE CONCEPT OF KARMA

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Chapter Three of the Bhagavad Gita is entitled "**Karma Yoga**". In this chapter the concept of action in the world is contemplated. Whether the spiritual man should withdraw from the world and refrain from action or whether he should remain in the world and perform his duties is an eternal dilemma. This was a burning point of discussion in spiritual circles five thousand years ago at the time of the great Mahabharata war, and remains so even today. "Karmic Law" decrees that for every action there is a reaction. Then, would it not therefore be wise to refrain from action and prevent the accumulation of reactions of Karmic consequences?

Krishna discusses this point in Chapter Three, Verse 4 when he states a paradox.

**Man gains not actionlessness by abstaining from activity, nor does he rise to perfection by mere renunciation.**

In the next verse, Verse Five, furthermore Lord Krishna says it is actually impossible to refrain from action.

**None can ever remain really actionless even for a moment; for everyone is helplessly driven to action by the Gunas, born of Prakriti.**

Krishna answers the dilemma with one word - **Vairagya** - or detachment. He says in Verse 7

**But he excels, O Arjuna, who, restraining the senses by the mind, unattached, directs his organs of action to the path of work.**

Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna that the highest, most sublime form of action is **Yagna** - Yagna means "sacrifice" and can refer in the physical world to a Homa, a fire ceremony. But in the spiritual sense it means self-dedication, offering the best and the most useful in oneself to the welfare of others, without attachment to the results of the action. It thus becomes a "**sacred action**" or in

other words, "a sacrifice". Work performed with a pure, selfless mind becomes a Yagna.

He describes how a self-realized man rises above the Karmic Law. In Verse 17 he says

**But the man who rejoices in the Self, is satisfied with the Self, and is centered in the Self, for him verily there is no obligatory duty.**

The essence of rising above the Law of Karma is described thus

**For him there is in this world no object to acquire by doing an action; nor is there any loss by not doing an action; nor has he to depend on anybody for anything.**

and the eternal advice remains valid even today.

**Therefore, constantly perform your obligatory duty without attachment; for, by doing duty without attachment man verily obtains the Supreme.**

Krishna explains that even He as The Lord of All Worlds, must act incessantly for if He did not work, lesser beings, following his example, world also refrain from action. He explains that the enlightened man should continue to act in the world (In Verse 25) as an example to others.

**As the unenlightened act from attachment to action, O Bharata, so should the enlightened act without attachment, desirous of the guidance of the multitude.**

Krishna imparts the esoteric knowledge that in the highest sense, there is "no doer", that all actions are truly performed by the Universal Force Itself and not by individual egos. In Verse 27 he says

**The Gunas of Prakriti perform all Karma. With the understanding clouded by egoism, man thinks, "I am the doer."**

Krishna advocates the Fifth Niyama (Iswara Pranidhana) as the means of freeing oneself of the Karmic effect of actions - surrender of all deeds to the Divine (In Verse 30)

**Surrendering all actions to Me, with your thoughts resting on Self, freed from hope and selfishness and cured of mental fever, engage in battle.**

When in doubt as to the course of action, Krishna advises that one must do one's own Dharma.

**One's own dharma, though imperfect, is better than the dharma of another well discharged. Better death in one's own dharma; the dharma of another is full of fear.**

Eventually one must overcome desire, which is the cause of all distress.

Krishna reveals the Nature of Karma to be a paradox. In Verse 18 of Chapter 4 he says

**He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, he is wise among men, he is a Yogi and accomplisher of everything.**

This esoteric concept Krishna explains is totally dependent upon Vairagya, detachment.

**Having abandoned attachment to the fruits of action, ever content, depending on nothing, though engaged in Karma, verily he does not do anything.**

Krishna describes such a perfected being in Verse 22 in Chapter 4

**Content with what he obtains without effort, free from the pairs of opposites, without envy, balanced in success and failure, though acting he is not bound.**

The key to transcendence of the Karmic chain of cause - effect lies in transcendence of the Ahamkara. The sense of self, the sense of doing, the sense of possession. Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna in Verse 11, Chapter 5

**The sage centered in the Self should think, "I do nothing at all" - though seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, sleeping, breathing, speaking, emptying, holding, opening and closing the eyes - firm in the thought that the senses move among sense-objects.**

The proper attitude towards work, towards action, Lord Krishna says in Verse 11, chapter 5

**The Yogi, abandoning attachment, performs work with the body, the mind, the intellect and the senses only for self-purification.**

Learning to live within the Karmic Law involves transcending the sense of differences. Everything is seen with equal mindedness. In Chapter 5, Verse 18

**Men of Self-knowledge are same-sighted on a Brahmana imbued with learning and humility, a cow, an elephant, a dog and an outcaste.**

One neither is attached to the pleasant, nor repulsed by the unpleasant. In Chapter 5, Verse 20, Krishna says

**Established in Brahman, with firm understanding and with no delusion, the knower of Brahman rejoices not getting what is pleasant and grieves not, getting what is unpleasant.**

In other words, Lord Krishna's teaching in regard to the Law of Karma is to act with detachment, and without any desire for the fruits or rewards of that action. In simple words, **"Do your best and leave the rest"** is the Yogic attitude which allows one to rise above the cause - effect bondage of action - reaction.

When one studies the eighteen chapters of the **Bhagavad Gita**, one realises that it is a textbook which cultivates the proper attitude of mind towards all life circumstances. Thus, freedom from bondage of Karmic Law lies in adapting the proper, positive attitude towards everything which happens to one in one's life. Freedom thus rises from constructing the correct attitude and control of body, emotions and mind.