

Karma & Dharma: THE TIES THAT BIND

“ONE’S DHARMA IS TO PERFORM RESPONSIBILITIES IN A MANNER THAT BRINGS ONE CLOSER TO GOD OR CAUSES ONE TO PURIFY THE MIND AND IMPROVE ONE’S LIFE.” - SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

SIMILAR TO THE WAY THAT MEDITATION IS USED TO UNITE THE LOWER SELF TO THE HIGHER SELF VIA A CONCENTRATED MIND, KARMA YOGA, OR THE YOGA OF “ACTION,” BRINGS US INTO A HIGHER STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS AT WORK. In Western terms, this approach might also be seen as stress management. The typical view of stress is that we are managing a bad thing, like a disease, yet yoga approaches stress through the purification of the mind’s perceptions of a situation. Selfless service utilizes a positive philosophy that alters our perception of reality. Reality itself is neutral, and in this view, only an individual’s reaction to life’s situations can be improved. For example, instead of reacting to anger with anger, we seek to understand a situation more fully. With a clear mind and open heart, even potentially devastating situations can yield positive results.

Often, work is viewed as a burden, or a “have to” duty. However, those who have found their calling in life and dedicate their work efforts in the service of a God/higher reality experience see their work as part of their spiritual practice. Like the mind-body split, there is a work-spirit split. Work becomes more difficult when a person is not focused on personal or spiritual growth. With the right attitude, even a mundane job can be a path of lasting happiness.

Karma Yoga’s philosophy begins with acceptance of a situation and the recognition that it is our desires, expectations and egos that color reality. Acceptance does not mean that we resign ourselves to inaction. Instead, it looks at how any given task fits into the larger reality. This recognition allows for the individual to place their full concentration to the completion of the task. The same concentration that is used in meditation is applied to work. Concentration conserves energy and makes the worker more efficient and less stressed. The overall result is excellence in both job performance and state of mind while working. Non-attachment to the results of work reminds the worker to enjoy the job for its own sake and not for the end result. It also reminds us that many things are beyond our control. This enlarged frame of reference offers a way for us to approach work-related difficulties as opportunities for personal growth. As we begin to grasp selflessness, we can perceive reality as independent of ourselves. Thus, no human being has the pressure of saving the planet, nor the right to own the planet. In fact, the world goes on whether we are big or small, alive or dead, happy or sad. As we make strides in non-attachment, suffering decreases and quality of life improves.

In today’s individualistic and “free” society, the sheer multitude of career options is confusing. How do we find our calling? The average person has a variety of careers throughout different phases of life. In the midst of all this flux, society’s needs are changing and companies are restructuring. The good news is that our *Dharma* can be practiced now, wherever we are. Knowledge of a life purpose begins from an inner conviction of virtue. It starts with recognizing that being a virtuous person (loving, compassionate, accepting, for-

giving etc.) is at the core of our dharma. From this core understanding we can attempt to harness our talents and behaviors and increase our expressions of virtue. We can start with the simple things and then gradually grow into our life’s purpose. In some ways, it is a great relief to know that our dharma can be revealed in the midst of ordinary tasks.

There is a great story about three workers in an ancient kingdom that exemplifies the power of attitude. With the land in the throes of a severe drought, the King declared that all unemployed farmers must work on a temple building project. Out under the hot sun the farmers became quarrymen, swinging heavy mallets and crushing stone to build the foundation of the temple. To document the events, the King sent his historian to the fields to observe and interview the men. The historian asked the first farmer he came across what he was doing and the farmer said, “Can’t you see? I am stuck in this hot sun because of this damn drought. I am forced like a slave to crack stone, cursed kingdom.”

When asked the same question, a second farmer replied, “I am earning my food ration by working eight-hours a day cutting stone. I can support my family this way. Do I receive a bonus for sharing my views with you?”

The third man that the historian interviewed said “Can’t you see, friend? I am building a temple that will be house of holy service and worship.”

Though each farmer was outwardly performing the action of cracking stone, the inner states of each of their minds varied greatly. In this example, the third man was the only individual who was performing his duty or his dharma.

This story provides us with a powerful example of how to examine and approach our own daily tasks. A contemplative exercise to get started might look like:

How can I adopt an attitude of appreciation for work?

Where do I already see a divine process in at work in my life and how can I expand this awareness?

Reviewing the Karma Yoga philosophy, choose one area to enhance. Develop a plan to support yourself in practicing a Karma Yoga attitude. In your calendar, consider making a date in one month to revise your Karma Yoga theme. Choose one time during the day/work time where you can affirm your highest aspiration for your work, i.e. non-attachment, selflessness, kindness, compassion, acceptance. Keep a journal about your experiences and see how the changes affect your overall well-being. ▲

RECOMMENDED READING:

Building Your Field of Dreams, Mary Manin Morrissey
Karma Yoga, Swami Vivekananda
The Bhagavad Gita, Eknath Easwaran