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Title

113. Karma yoga and awakening service: Modern approaches to an ancient practice.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2ht7d3xs>

Journal

Journal of Transpersonal Research, 5(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2013-11-01

Peer reviewed

Karma Yoga and Awakening Service: Modern Approaches to an Ancient Practice

Karma Yoga y el Despertar del Servicio: Modernas Aplicaciones de Antiguas Prácticas

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Abstract

Continuous unbroken practice is widely regarded across the world's contemplative traditions as essential for rapid progress and advanced development. The challenge is therefore how to use daily activities as part of one's practice. The answer is given systematically in Hinduism's discipline of *karma yoga*: the yoga of work and action in the world. However, traditional instructions are somewhat vague and are not specifically oriented towards service. This article therefore offers a more detailed and precise ten step program by which all activities can be used for both contemplative practice and service, and thereby become a practice that can be called "awakening service". Our contemporary global crises are then examined and recognized as global symptoms: symptoms of, in part, our individual and collective psychological immaturities and pathologies. Addressing these crises effectively will therefore require addressing both the external problems—such as nuclear weapons and ecological destruction—as well as their psychological and cultural roots. Karma yoga and awakening service may therefore be valuable practices for working with social and global issues.

Keywords: hinduism, global crises, karma yoga, service, spirituality

Resumen

Una práctica constante es ampliamente valorada en todas las tradiciones contemplativas del mundo como algo imprescindible para el progreso y desarrollo avanzado. El reto es por lo tanto saber cómo manejar las actividades diarias como parte de la práctica personal. La respuesta es dada sistemáticamente en la disciplina del Hinduismo conocida como *karma yoga*: el yoga del trabajo y la acción en el mundo. Sin embargo, las instrucciones tradicionales son de alguna forma vagas y no específicamente orientadas hacia el servicio. Este artículo ofrece un programa más detallado y preciso basado en diez pasos, por el que todas las actividades pueden ser utilizadas tanto para la práctica contemplativa como para la práctica de servicio, convirtiéndose de esta forma en una práctica que puede llamarse "el despertar del servicio". Nuestras actuales crisis mundiales son de este modo examinadas y reconocidas en parte como síntomas globales de nuestras inmadureces psicológicas y patologías individuales y colectivas. Dirigiendo estas crisis eficazmente requerirá manejar tanto los problemas externos –como por ejemplo las armas nucleares y la destrucción ecológica– como sus raíces psicológicas y culturales. El karma yoga y el despertar del servicio pueden ser por tanto unas valiosas prácticas para trabajar las cuestiones sociales y mundiales.

Palabras clave: hinduismo, crisis mundiales, karma yoga, servicio, espiritualidad

Received: July 11, 2013

Accepted: July 31, 2013

Introduction

Anyone who is deeply committed to contemplative practice and to cultivating the qualities it enhances—such as empathy, compassion, clarity and insight, to name only a few—will want to practice as continuously as possible. This means finding a way to use our daily activities and work as part of our practice. Fortunately, such a way is part of the world’s major religious-spiritual traditions, and it is formulated most explicitly in Hinduism as karma yoga.

Hinduism recognizes several distinct kinds of spiritual practice or yoga. Each has its own specific focus, and each is appropriate for a particular kind of person and stage of spiritual life. For example, *bhakti yoga* focuses on love and devotion, *raja yoga* on mind training, and *jnana yoga* on discernment and wisdom Feuerstein (1996).

However, *karma yoga* focuses on the activities and duties of daily life and uses them as the elements of one’s spiritual practice. Its goal is to transform all life into practice, or as the Indian philosopher-sage Aurobindo (1922) put it, “turning of this whole act of living into an uninterrupted yoga” (p. 238).

Karma yoga therefore allows an unbroken continuity of practice, and continuity is widely esteemed as one of the great goals and virtues of spiritual life. For example, the Koran (Koran 2:83) urges “Be constant in prayer” (Cleary, 1993, p. 9) while Ramakrishna claimed that “what is necessary is to pray without ceasing” (Hixon, 1992, p. 116). Likewise the Christian St. Isaac, the Syrian, regarded constant prayer as “the summit of all virtues” (Harvey, 1998, p. 63), and the great Confucian sage Mencius urged “always work at self-cultivation” (Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 65). Karma yoga provides a way to “always work at self-cultivation” by using daily activities as our contemplative practice.

The Three Classic Components of Karma Yoga

Classic texts on karma yoga such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, which was probably composed around 200 BCE, emphasize three main components:

- At the beginning of any activity offer or dedicate the activity to Brahman (God).
- Do your *dharma* (work) as impeccably as possible.
- Simultaneously release attachment to the outcome. As the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1972, p. 45):

Perform every action sacramentally,
And be free from all attachment to results.

This three-fold practice is profound. It combines a transpersonal motive which undercuts egocentric motives, a commitment to impeccability which requires cutting through personal blocks and barriers, and a relinquishment of egocentric attachment to having things turn out as we want them to rather than the way they actually do.

This last step of relinquishing attachment to outcome can also be seen as the practice of acceptance which is a powerful practice in its own right. For example, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who lived from around c.55-135 C.E., urged “Accept things as they are. That way peace is possible” (Epictetus, 1995, p. 15).

Usually, when we work impeccably for a goal we become attached to the outcome. However, combining impeccability and nonattachment makes karma yoga a knife edge practice which cuts away egocentric motives.

Classic texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* are profound and inspiring. However, they are also somewhat vague regarding the specifics of karma yoga, and how exactly one approaches daily life so as to most effectively use all activities as elements of one's contemplative practice.

After years of exploration and experimentation, I have found it helpful to use the following ten steps.

Ten Steps of Karma Yoga

1. *Stop* before beginning any major activity.

Take a moment to stop and breathe. This allows you to become present and to recall your purpose.

2. *Offer* the activity to God or to a Higher Power or Source as you understand this.

3. *Choose an intention*

The intention we choose for an action determines the meaning it has for us and the results it gives us. We can do the same activity, such as our job, primarily for our own benefit, or for the welfare and awakening of all those with whom we interact. While the activity may be the same, the psychological and spiritual impact on us—and probably those around us—will be very different.

One can make sense of this in terms of Maslow's (1971) hierarchy of needs. As a general principle, a higher order motive – such as self-actualization, self-transcendence, or selfless service – brings its specific benefits plus the benefits of lower order goals as well. For example, if you only aim for lower order motives such as survival and physical comfort, that's probably all you will get. However, if you also aim for self-actualization, then you will need to include the appropriate satisfaction of lower order needs as well.

This is not only good psychology but also good theology. As Jesus said, “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added onto you” (Mathew 6:33).

I find it helpful to inquire at the beginning of major activities, “What is this for?” Or “why am I doing this?” One of the most profound and encompassing answers is the Buddhist Bodhisattva aspiration which seeks to use all activities for the welfare and awakening of all beings, including oneself.

4. *Do the activity as impeccably as you can.*

Here the goal is to hold to your intention and to express it as impeccably as you can.

5. *Be mindful.*

Bring as much awareness to the activity as you can, observing, for example, your actions, the environment, your motivation and mental state.

6. *Explore and work with any reactions that arise.*

These might range from blocks and resistance to pride and joy. It's especially helpful to be aware of any reactivity to how your activity is turning out, so pay particular attention to emotions which indicate attachment to a specific outcome. These emotions can span a spectrum from delight and pride if things are proceeding as you hoped, to anxiety, anger, disappointment, and hopelessness if they aren't. All these emotions can be welcomed as feedback signals pointing to an attachment that would be better released (Walsh, 1999; Walsh and Vaughan, 1993).

7. *Release attachment to the outcome.*

Whenever you notice emotional reactivity indicating an attachment, that's a feedback signal to attempt to let it go.

8. *Stop again* at the end of the activity.

9. *Reflect and learn*

Take time to reflect on the activity and your experience and see what you can learn. For example, what can you learn about doing this activity effectively, about yourself, your mind, and your attachments?

10. *Offer the benefits*

Complete the activity by offering its benefit to all others for their welfare and awakening.

It seems paradoxical to try to work impeccably and accrue spiritual benefits, and then attempt to give them away. But this final phase of the practice is based on an understanding of the way the mind works and it is crucial to recognize that what we intend for others, we tend to experience ourselves. For example, if we receive benefits such as a sense of satisfaction and wellbeing from karma yoga and intend to offer those benefits to others, these same qualities are then strengthened in our own minds. This is a beautiful example of the principle that within the mind, to give is to receive.

Awakening Service

A [person] who finds benevolence attractive cannot be surpassed
Confucius (Lau, 1979, p. 73)

Classic karma yoga does not explicitly aim at the service of others. However, it can easily be transformed into a practice of awakening service or spiritual service by two simple steps (Three and Ten) in the above list.

- Step 3: Choose as your intention to use your activities, not only for your own actualization and awakening, but also as a way to serve and awaken others. This service can take many forms, especially to help, heal, teach, and awaken.
- Step 10: At the completion of any activity offer the benefits for the welfare and awakening of all.

When an action is done as both karma yoga and as service it becomes what I call *awakening service* or *spiritual service* because it combines spiritual practice and service while aiming at awakening and actualizing both oneself and others (Walsh, 1999).

The Context and Crises of Our Times

We live and work and serve in a unique time: a time of global crisis that is unprecedented in scope and complexity and that threatens both our planet and our species.

We are all aware of the major elements of this crisis: elements such as population explosion, ecological degradation, species extinction, and weapons of mass destruction. What is crucial to recognize about these challenges is that for the first time in history, the major threats to human survival and wellbeing are all human caused. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, humankind now possess enormous power but little wisdom, and it is no exaggeration to say that humankind is now in a race between consciousness and catastrophe (Elgin, 2013).

So great is our power that the state of the world now reflects the state of our minds and the problems around us now reflect the problems within us and between us. What we call our global problems are actually global symptoms.

Therefore, if we are going to preserve our planet and our species we certainly need to feed the hungry, stop pollution, and reduce weapons of war. But if we only do this, we are only treating symptoms. We also need to address their underlying developmental, psychological, spiritual, social and cultural causes. In short, we need an integral approach (Wilber, 2000).

For this we need to do both inner and outer work. We need periods when we withdraw within ourselves to do inner work and to tap the wellsprings of insight and creativity that lie within us. Then we need periods of going out into the world to act in service. This is what Arnold Toynbee called “the cycle of withdrawal and return” and for this there are many metaphors.

In the West, the classic metaphor is Plato’s cave. Here the person escapes from the cave into the light and sees the Good, but then feels impelled to return to the collective darkness of the cave in order to help, heal, and teach others. In Christianity, this final stage is called “fruitfulness of the soul.” The soul that experiences the divine marriage then separates once again in order to help those who have not yet tasted this marriage. Zen portrays this sequence graphically and beautifully in the Ten Ox Herding Pictures, while Joseph Campbell described this process as the hero’s return.

In summary, we go into ourselves to go more effectively out into the world, and we go out into the world in order to go deeper into ourselves through the practice of karma yoga and awakening service. And we keep repeating this cycle until we realize that we and the world are one.

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