

KARMA YOGA BY SRI SWAMI SATCHIDĀNANDA

Karma

The Sanskrit term Karma can mean two things: action and/or the result of action. When you do Karma, you reap Karma. But generally when we say Karma we are referring to the reactions to past actions. Every action will leave its result; every cause will bear its effect. So no action goes without its reaction, and these don't go away but are stored. The Karmas wait for an opportunity to come to the surface and bring their reactions. You don't always get a reaction in the same order that you perform the actions; it depends on the intensity with which the action is performed and what kind of Karma it is. If you eat some undesirable food and soon thereafter put your finger into a candle flame, your first Karma is eating the food and your second is putting your finger into the flame. But the second Karma brings a result immediately. The first Karma may not germinate for two or three days; then you'll get a stomachache. But whatever you have done, you will surely have to accept the reaction.

Knowing about Karma can be helpful. If by chance you are insulted or struck by someone for what seems to be no apparent reason, you can think, "Probably, it's my Karma. I must have hurt somebody earlier and escaped from being hurt in return. Now it comes back to me and I accept it." There is no effect without a cause—no one will hurt you if you are really innocent. You may be innocent today, but days before, years before, even the life before, you probably weren't innocent. So you can say to your oppressor, "Okay, you helped me purge my Karma. Thank you so much." You sow better Karma when you don't return hatred with hatred. Pouring love on hate is like pouring water on fire. It takes strength to do that. Accepting injury without returning it is the highest spiritual practice.

The only way to purge your Karma is by sowing seeds of selfless actions. No teacher, no guru, no scripture, no temple, no church can purge you of your Karma. Even God will not take away your Karma. It is only when you discover how to perform perfect actions that you transform Karma into Karma Yoga, and through Karma Yoga, your heart, mind, and body are soon cleaned.

Perfect Actions

An act becomes perfect when you do it with all joy, without expecting anything in return. All other acts, however wonderful they may look, are still imperfect, because they will affect your mind. If you have a personal motive or if you expect a reward, you build up a tension even before you start. There is expectation and anxiety. There is fear of losing something. Instead, if the mind is kept free from any expectation whatsoever, and your action is done just for the sake of action, for the sake of others, then that action is a perfect one.

If the results of an action bring benefit to all people concerned, without bringing harm to anybody, then it is a perfect action. But if it brings harm even to one individual, or if it builds up a tension in your own mind, it's not a perfect action.

Sometimes even giving can cause harm to someone. If you give ten dollars to somebody who is standing near a bar, you can't call it help. If a mother feeds her child all the candy it wants to eat, she's not helping the child. So an act is judged by both the motive and the effect.

Suppose you walk into a room and see someone cutting another person's arm with a sharp knife. It might look like a terrible act. But if you find out that it's a doctor lancing an abscess