

Karma — Action, Karma-Yoga, and Nishkama Karma

Action, Yoga of Action, and Desireless Action

What is Karma? What is Karma-Yoga? What is Nishkama Karma? Who Can Practice It?

What is Karma? — Defining the Term

What is karma? What is Karma-Yoga? What is Nishkama-Karma (desireless action)? Who can practice Nishkama-Karma?

'Kriyate iti karma' — that which is done is karma. The word 'karma' comes from the root 'kri,' meaning 'to do.' Similarly, 'kuru' also means 'to do.' Without the Prana (life-force) within us, can we perform karma? We cannot. It is the Prana that moves and causes karma to happen. Therefore, Prana is both the instrument of karma (the tool that enables action) and, in a sense, karma itself.

Our revered supreme Guru, Sri Sri Swami Shivananda Paramahansa, has declared that the Jiva-Shakti (life-force) that dwells within us — the Prana Vayu — is itself karma. In the triad of Karta (doer), Karma (action-instrument), and Kriya (the activity itself), the grammar of our existence is: 'I' (the Karta, the doer) uses the Jiva-Shakti (Prana Vayu) as the instrument (Karma) to perform various activities (Kriya). Therefore, in the deepest sense, karma is the Prana Vayu. However, in Vedantic terminology, what is being called 'Kriya' is itself referred to as 'karma.'

Diagram 1: The Trinity of Action — Karta, Karma, and Kriya

| THE GRAMMAR OF ALL ACTION — KARTA, KARMA, KRIYA |
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| KARTA (The Doer): 'I' — the individual consciousness, the Jiva |
| The witness-self that initiates action |
| In truth: the Atman / Paramatma, appearing as a limited self |
| KARMA (The Instrument): Prana Vayu — the Life-Force Energy |
| The living power that makes action possible |
| Without Prana, no action can occur — body becomes inert |
| Guru Sri Swami Shivananda: 'Jiva-Shakti, the Prana Vayu, IS Karma' |

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|---|
| KRIYA (The Activity): The actual visible action performed |
| What we ordinarily call 'karma' in daily life |
| In Vedantic usage: KRIYA = KARMA (the two terms are used interchangeably) |
| Yoga Vasishtha: 'Chit-spandam bhavati karma' — The vibration of Mind is Karma |
| Yoga Vasishtha: 'Yat praane pavana spande, chitta spandas sa eva hi' — By Prana's movement, the Mind's vibration arises |

The Yoga Vasishtha states: 'Chit-spandam bhavati karma' — the vibration of the mind itself is karma. And why does the mind vibrate? Because of the movement of Prana Vayu! It is the movement of Prana that creates the three-fold karma — Mano, Vak, and Kaya (mental, verbal, and physical actions). Everything done by mind, speech, or body constitutes karma.

Yat praane pavana spande, chitta spandas sa eva hi

— *Yoga Vasishtha*

Anyone who lives and breathes is inevitably performing one or another of these three types of karma. The Bhagavad Gita confirms:

*Na hi kashchit kshanam api jaatu tishthaty-akarma-krit
Kaaryate hy-avashaha karma, sarva prakritijair gunaih*

— *Bhagavad Gita 3-5*

Not even for a single moment can any being remain without performing karma. All are helplessly driven to act by the three Gunas (Sattva, Rajas, Tamas) arising from Prakriti (Nature). The universe is a field of constant action — no one stands still.

Diagram 2: The Three-Fold Karma — Mano, Vak, Kaya

| THE THREE TYPES OF KARMA — Mental, Verbal, Physical |
|---|
| MANO KARMA (Mental Action): |
| Every thought, intention, imagination, or desire |
| 'Chit-spandam bhavati karma' — Mind-vibration = Karma |
| Most subtle and most powerful — root of all other karma |
| VAK KARMA (Verbal Action): |

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|--|
| Every word spoken — prayer, speech, gossip, teaching, argument |
| Sound is a form of Prana-energy in motion |
| KAYA KARMA (Physical Action): |
| Every bodily deed — walking, building, fighting, serving, farming |
| The most gross and visible level of karma |
| Bhagavad Gita 3-5: 'All beings are helplessly driven to act by the three Gunas' |
| NO ONE CAN STOP KARMA — the only question is: with what quality is it performed? |

Karma Binds — The Crucial Problem

Karmana badhyate jantuh, vidyayaa cha vimuchyate

— *Sanyasopanishad 2-21*

The Jiva (individual soul) is bound through karma, and it is through Jnana (wisdom) that liberation is attained. Since karma is declared to be the cause of bondage, one might conclude from this Upanishadic teaching that all karma should be abandoned. Yet the Bhagavad Gita presents a counterbalance:

*Yajna daana tapah karma na tyajyam kaaryam eva tat
Yajacho daana tapashchaiva, paavanaani manishinaam*

— *Bhagavad Gita 18-5*

The Gita says: yajna (sacrifice), daana (charity), and tapas (austerity) are not to be abandoned — they must be practiced. These purify the wise. This seems to contradict the Upanishad's teaching that karma binds. Let us understand the resolution.

The apparent contradiction dissolves when we understand WHICH karma and HOW it is performed. The Gita does not encourage just any karma — it advocates Yoga-karma: action performed in a specific, liberated way that does not create binding impressions.

The Teaching Through Arjuna's Battle — Not War but Yoga

*Hatva prapyasi svargam, jitvaa vaa bhokshyase maheem
Tasmaad uttishtha kaunteya, yuddhaaya krita nishchayah*

— *Bhagavad Gita 2-37*

'O Arjuna, rise up with firm resolve to fight! If you die in battle, you will attain heaven; if you win, you will enjoy this earth.' Here Sri Krishna, the Paramatma, is encouraging the karma of battle. Does this mean Krishna simply wants Arjuna to fight?

No — Sri Krishna already knows two things about Arjuna: (1) Arjuna's Kshatriya nature compels him to fight — it is his dharmic duty; (2) Arjuna is currently paralyzed by moha (delusion) and refusing to fight. In this context, Krishna speaks to prevent Arjuna from falling into the danger of karma-phala (the consequences of battle) by offering a special method — not mere encouragement to fight, but the Yoga of how to fight. The specific solution Krishna offers is:

*Sukha-duhkhe same kritvaa, laabha-laabhau jayaa-jayau
Tato yuddhaaya yujyasva, naivam paapam avaapsyasi*

— *Bhagavad Gita 2-38*

'Treat pleasure and pain equally; treat gain and loss equally; treat victory and defeat equally — and then fight. In this way, you will not incur sin.' The meaning: karma is naturally self-motivated and bound up with desire for personal benefit. This attachment to karma-phala causes one to take birth again to experience those fruits. The danger of this endless birth-cycle compels Krishna to speak — and his unique solution is:

Diagram 3: Arjuna's Battle — Two Levels of Understanding

| SURFACE READING | DEEPER TEACHING |
|---|---|
| Krishna encourages Arjuna to fight | Krishna teaches Arjuna the YOGA of fighting |
| Battle for heaven or for earth | Equal vision: treat win/loss/pain/pleasure the same |
| Warrior's duty — Kshatriya dharma | Karma performed without ego-attachment |
| Die and get Svarga; win and get the kingdom | No sin incurred when karma is done with Samatvam |
| Action motivated by outcome | Action free from karma-phala binding |

The Bhagavad Gita is not teaching Arjuna to go to war. It is teaching YOGA — the inner quality of equanimity (Samatvam) with which any karma, including battle, can be performed without binding the doer. This is a universal teaching for every human being engaged in any action.

Yoga as Samatvam — The Definition of Yoga Itself

*Yoga-sthas kuru karmaani, sangam tyaktva dhananjaya
Siddhya siddhyoh samo bhuutvaa, samatvam yoga uchyate*

'Perform actions while established in Yoga, O Dhananjaya, abandoning attachment. Be equal in success and failure — this evenness of mind is called Yoga.' When karma is performed with this inner equanimity — Samatvam — the mind is not attached to its outcome. Without attachment, no karma-phala is generated, and no new birth is required to experience it.

The Gita's Acharya is not asking anyone to stop karma. He is asking every person to perform karma the Yoga way — with Samatvam.

Diagram 4: Samatvam — The Quality That Changes Everything

| SAMATVAM — EQUANIMITY AS THE DEFINITION OF YOGA (BG 2-48) |
|--|
| WITHOUT SAMATVAM (ordinary karma): |
| Mind attached to outcome → karma-phala accumulates |
| Success creates elation → craving for more |
| Failure creates depression → resentment, revenge |
| Actions motivated by personal gain (Svalabha-apeksha) |
| Result: More births required to experience accumulated karma-phala |
| |
| WITH SAMATVAM (Yoga-karma): |
| Mind equalized → not attached to outcome |
| Success = Failure = same inner state |
| Gain = Loss = Pleasure = Pain = equal in mind |
| Action flows from Dharma, not from personal desire |
| Result: No karma-phala binding → no future births required |
| |
| SAMATVAM = YOGA — the very definition of Yoga in the Bhagavad Gita |

Yadyadhi kurute karma, tat-tatkamasya cheshitam

— Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

'Every karma is impelled by desire.' This is the natural condition of all karma — every action carries within it a seed of desire or expectation. This is precisely why karma binds:

Karmoda-ye karmaphala-anuraagaas-tadhaa-nuyanti na-taranti mrityum

'Those who begin karma with attachment to its fruits cannot cross over death.' Because karma is naturally coupled with desire for results, performing karma means being bound to experience those results — and to experience them requires being born again. This is the cycle that compels Krishna to offer the solution of Yoga.

Diagram 5: The Karma-Desire-Birth Cycle — Why Karma Binds

| THE BINDING CYCLE — HOW ORDINARY KARMA PERPETUATES BIRTH |
|---|
| STEP 1: Karma begins with DESIRE (Kama) |
| 'Yadyadhi kurute karma, tat-tatkamasya cheshitam' |
| Every action is naturally infused with desire for its outcome |
| |
| STEP 2: Attachment to karma-phala ACCUMULATES |
| The attachment (Anuraga) to results creates Sanchita impressions |
| These impressions demand fulfillment in a future life |
| |
| STEP 3: New BIRTH is required to experience accumulated phala |
| 'Karmoda-ye karmaphala-anuraagaas...' — cannot cross death |
| Birth → New karma → New attachment → New birth → Cycle repeats |
| |
| SOLUTION (BG 2-38): Perform karma with SAMATVAM (equal vision) |
| Treat pleasure/pain, gain/loss, victory/defeat as equal |
| No attachment formed → no phala accumulated → no new birth needed |

Performing karma is the Jiva's very nature. It need not be encouraged externally. What needs to be encouraged is YOGA — the inner approach to karma that prevents it from creating binding impressions. This is what the Bhagavad Gita Acharya promotes — not karma itself, but Yoga-karma.

*Yuktaha karmaphalam tyaktvaa, shaantim-aapnoti naishtikeem
Ayuktaha kaamakarena, phale sakto nibadhyate*

— Bhagavad Gita 5-12

The Yukta (the Yogi) performs karma and releases its fruit — attaining the peace of Naishtiki (permanent liberation). The Ayukta (the non-Yogi) has a mind that is turned outward (Bahirmukha)

— fully absorbed in both the action and its fruits. Being full of desires, this person is bound and caught in the cycle of Samsara. Therefore, the Bhagavad Gita Acharya is encouraging not 'the karma of battle' but 'Yoga-karma' — the inner art of desireless action.

Diagram 6: The Yukta vs. The Ayukta — Two Ways of Doing the Same Action

| AYUKTA — The Non-Yogi | YUKTA — The Yogi |
|--|---|
| Mind turned OUTWARD (Bahirmukha) | Mind turned INWARD (Antarmukha) |
| Fully absorbed in the action itself | Performs action with equanimity |
| Craves the results (Phala-sakta) | Releases the fruits (Phala-tyaga) |
| Bound by desires — Samsara cycle | Attains Naishthiki-Shanti (permanent peace) |
| Even 'good' actions create bondage | Actions leave no binding impressions |
| Karma accumulates → new birth required | Freedom from the birth-death cycle |

What is Karma-Yoga? — The Precise Definition

In everyday usage, we call every action 'Karma-Yoga.' But the scriptures give a precise definition:

Bandhanam manaso nityam, karmayogas sa uchyate

— *Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad* — 18

'That karma which permanently restrains the moving mind — that is called Karma-Yoga.' The mind is moved by the movement of Prana Vayu. Therefore, the Pranayama that controls Prana's movement is itself Karma-Yoga. However, ordinary karma cannot be Karma-Yoga.

Tadha vedanta-shravaNo bodha, karmayogadvina-shyati

— *Shankaracharya*

Shankaracharya states: the Jnana (knowledge) arising through Vedanta-Shravana (hearing the scriptural truth) is destroyed by what he calls 'Karma-Yoga' here — meaning ordinary external karma. He is pointing out that people commonly misuse the term 'Karma-Yoga' to mean ordinary worldly actions, which actually work against Vedantic Jnana rather than supporting it.

Diagram 7: True Karma-Yoga vs. Misused 'Karma-Yoga'

| ORDINARY KARMA (Falsely Called 'Karma-Yoga') | TRUE KARMA-YOGA (Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad) |
|--|--|
| External worldly actions | INNER action — Pranayama practice |
| Office work, farming, charity, rituals | That which permanently restrains the mind |
| Mind remains outward (Bahirmukha) | Prana movement is controlled → Mind is stilled |
| Does not restrain the moving mind | Mind turns inward (Antarmukha) |
| May destroy Vedantic Jnana if done with attachment | Generates Jnana rather than accumulating phala |
| Called 'karma' — NOT 'Karma-Yoga' | This alone is the real Karma-Yoga |

Two Types of Karma — Pravritti and Nivritti

Pravrittim cha nivrittim cha, dwividham karma vaidikam

— *Manu Smriti*

The Manu Smriti declares that the Vedas describe two types of karma: Pravritti and Nivritti. Pravritti means the external worldly actions that perpetuate the cycle of birth and death (Samsara Chakra). Nivritti is the Jnana that enables escape from that Samsara — the inward-turning path of liberation. Nivritti-karma means Yoga-karma — the inner action that generates Jnana.

*Na hi jnaanena sadrisham pavitram iha vidyate
Tat svayam yoga-samsiddha, kaalenaatmani vindati*

— *Bhagavad Gita 4-38*

Yogaat sanjaayate jnaanam

— *Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad — 16*

Nothing in this world is as purifying as Jnana. And that Jnana is found spontaneously within oneself when one is perfected in Yoga — Yoga alone generates Jnana. Therefore, Nivritti-karma = Yoga-karma = Karma-Yoga = Pranayama. This is the one Yoga that alone is called Nivritti.

Diagram 8: Pravritti vs. Nivritti — Two Paths of Karma

| PRAVRITTI vs. NIVRITTI — THE TWO PATHS OF KARMA |
|--|
| PRAVRITTI KARMA (Outward Path): |
| All external worldly actions — business, rituals, social duties, warfare |
| Perpetuates Samsara Chakra (the cycle of birth and death) |

| |
|---|
| Encouraged for those in the active phase of worldly life |
| Result: Continued births in higher, lower, or human realms |
| NIVRITTI KARMA (Inward Path): |
| Yoga-karma — inner action that generates Jnana |
| The specific karma of Pranayama that stills the mind |
| Leads AWAY from the cycle of birth → toward liberation |
| 'Yogaat sanjaayate jnaanam' — From Yoga, Jnana is born |
| THE EQUATION: Nivritti = Karma-Yoga = Yoga-Karma = Pranayama = Jnana-Kara |
| This is the ONE Karma that truly liberates — all else is Pravritti |

What is Karma? What is Akarma? — Even the Wise Are Confused

*Kim karma kim akarme-ti, kavayo-apy-atra mohitaah
Tat te karma pravakshyaami, yaj jnaatvaa mokshyase-ashubhaat*

— *Bhagavad Gita 4-16*

'What is karma and what is akarma (non-karma)? Even the learned are confused about this. I will declare to you that karma by knowing which you will be liberated from this inauspicious Samsara.'

Krishna acknowledges that even Vedantins without direct experience (anubhava) remain full of doubts about karma and akarma. He then teaches the Buddhi-Yoga — the wisdom-united approach to action that liberates from Samsara — as the special karma capable of achieving what no other karma can.

*Esaa te-abhihitaa saankhye, buddhir yoge tv imaam shrinu
Buddhyaa yukto yayaa paartha, karma bandham prahaasyasi*

— *Bhagavad Gita 2-39*

Dureena hy avaram karma, buddhi-yogaad dhananjaya

— *Bhagavad Gita 2-49*

'Karma and Buddhi-Yoga are distant opposites.' Karma here refers to outer/external action; Buddhi-Yoga refers to inner Yoga-karma. The contrast reveals: external karma is 'far inferior' (Dureena avaram) to Buddhi-Yoga. Karma is external; Buddhi-Yoga is internal (Antarkarma). This explains why Sri Krishna assigns supreme importance to Yoga-karma.

Diagram 9: Karma vs. Buddhi-Yoga — External vs. Internal

| KARMA (External Action) | BUDDHI-YOGA (Inner Yoga) |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Outer worldly deeds | Inner Yoga practice — Pranayama |
| Bahya-karma — done with body/speech/mind | Antarkarma — inner action |
| Mind fully engaged in the action | Mind restrained — turned inward |
| Results in karma-phala (good/bad fruits) | No karma-phala generated |
| Creates bondage — Samsara continues | Creates Jnana → liberation |
| 'Dureena avaram' — far inferior | 'Vishishyate' — superior, excellent |

The Bhagavad Gita (2-40) adds the remarkable assurance: Buddhi-Yoga has no loss of commencement (Neh-abhikrama-nashosti) — even if practiced only partially, it protects from great danger. And there is no counter-fault (Pratyavaaya-dosha) — unlike prescribed Vedic rituals that create faults if not performed correctly. Even a little of this Yoga-karma brings tremendous protection.

*Neh-abhikrama-nasho-asti, pratyavaayo na vidyate
Svalpam api asya dharmasya, traayate mahato bhayaat*

— Bhagavad Gita 2-40

What is Nishkama Karma? Who Can Practice It?

Nishkama karma means action performed WITHOUT desires (Nishkama = desireless). Is it possible to perform actions without any desire? The scriptures and realized teachers say YES — but only in a specific way.

The method is demonstrated by Janaka Chakravarti (King Janaka) to Shuka Brahmarshi: place a full vessel of oil on your head and walk throughout the entire city without letting a single drop spill — without using your eyes to look around. Janaka Chakravarti instructed Shuka Brahmarshi to do this. When Shuka returned after walking the entire city, Janaka asked what he had observed in the city. Shuka replied that he had seen nothing.

This is the experience: to walk through the city without spilling oil, Shuka had to keep his mind fully fixed on the vessel on his head. Therefore, although his feet walked and his eyes were physically open, he saw nothing — no visual experience reached his awareness. In the same way, one who places the mind on the Atman and then acts with the senses (Jnanendriyas and Karmendriyas) — such a person does not perform karma in the binding sense. Karma does not attach to that person. That person is the Nishkama Karma Yogi.

Diagram 10: King Janaka's Teaching — The Oil Vessel Analogy

| THE OIL VESSEL TEST — HOW NISHKAMA KARMA IS ACHIEVED |
|--|
| KING JANAKA'S INSTRUCTION TO SHUKA BRAHMARSHI: |
| 'Carry this vessel full of oil on your head through the entire city' |
| 'Do not let a single drop spill' |
| 'Without using your eyes to look around' |
| |
| WHAT HAPPENED: Shuka walked the entire city |
| Feet walked → KAYA KARMA (body karma) occurred |
| Eyes were open → J N A N E N D R I Y A S (sense organs) were active |
| BUT: Mind was entirely fixed on the oil vessel |
| Result: Shuka saw NOTHING of the city despite walking through it |
| |
| THE TEACHING: Mind was NOT with the eyes — so no impression was formed |
| 'I performed no karma' — correct, because the mind was elsewhere |
| |
| THE NISHKAMA APPLICATION: |
| Place the mind on ATMAN instead of the oil vessel |
| Then act with body and senses (Indriyas) in the world |
| The actions happen — but the mind is NOT with them |
| No karma-phala attaches → the Nishkama Karma Yogi is born |

*Chetasaa sarva karmaani, mayi sannyasya mat-parah
Buddhi-yogam upaashritya, mach-chittaha satatam bhava*

— *Bhagavad Gita 18-57*

'Surrender all actions to Me in the heart, take refuge in Buddhi-Yoga, and keep your mind always absorbed in Me.' Here Sri Krishna instructs: practice Yoga-sadhana, and keep the mind always fixed in the Atman. Such a Yogi, even while performing actions with hands and feet, does not accumulate karma. That person is the true Nishkama Karma Yogi.

Yasya naaham-krito bhaavo, buddhir yasya na lipyate

Hatvaa-api sa imaan lokaan, na hanti na nibadh-yate

— *Bhagavad Gita 18-17*

'One who has no sense of Aham-kara ("I am doing this"), whose intellect is not tainted — even if such a person kills all these people, they are not the killer, they are not bound.' The Bhagavad Gita Acharya's statement: this person is not tainted by karma, even when performing the action of killing — because there is no Ahankara (ego-identification with the act), and the Buddhi (intellect) remains untainted.

Therefore: Karma-Yoga is Yoga itself. Nishkama Karma is also Yoga. The Yogi alone is the true Nishkama Karma Yogi.

Chapter Summary — Key Teachings

- Karma means 'that which is done' — from the root 'kri' (to do). At the deepest level, Prana Vayu (life-force energy) is karma itself — the instrument without which no action is possible. In Vedantic usage, Kriya (activity) itself is called karma.
- All action arises from three sources: Mano (mind), Vak (speech), and Kaya (body). Not even for a single moment can any being cease from karma — all are driven by the three Gunas of Prakriti.
- The Upanishad teaches: 'Karma binds; Jnana liberates.' Yet the Bhagavad Gita says yajna, daana, and tapas must not be abandoned. This apparent contradiction resolves when we understand the QUALITY of karma — not whether to act, but HOW to act.
- Krishna's teaching to Arjuna is NOT about encouraging battle — it is about teaching the Yoga of how to perform any karma without creating binding impressions. The key is Samatvam (equal vision): treat pleasure/pain, gain/loss, victory/defeat as equal.
- Ordinary karma is naturally motivated by desire (Kama). This attachment to karma-phala forces rebirth to experience the fruits. The Yogi (Yukta) performs action with Samatvam and releases the fruits — the non-Yogi (Ayukta) is absorbed in fruits and bound.
- The precise definition of Karma-Yoga (from Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad): 'That which permanently restrains the moving mind.' Since mind moves by Prana-movement, Pranayama — which controls Prana — is the true Karma-Yoga. Ordinary external work is NOT Karma-Yoga.
- Manu Smriti identifies two types of Vedic karma: Pravritti (outward worldly actions that sustain the Samsara cycle) and Nivritti (inward-turning karma that generates Jnana and leads to liberation). Nivritti = Karma-Yoga = Pranayama.
- 'Yoga generates Jnana' (Yogaat sanjaayate jnaanam) — nothing is more purifying than Jnana. Karma (external action) and Buddhi-Yoga (inner Yoga) are 'distant opposites.' Buddhi-Yoga is far superior.
- Buddhi-Yoga has two unique assurances: (1) no loss of commencement — even partial practice protects; (2) no counter-fault — unlike prescribed rituals, there is no penalty for imperfect practice.
- Nishkama Karma (desireless action) is demonstrated through the oil-vessel analogy: King Janaka told Shuka to walk the city with oil on his head. Shuka saw nothing — because his mind was on the vessel, not the city. Similarly, the Yogi fixes mind on Atman, acts with senses in the world, and accumulates no karma.
- Bhagavad Gita 18-17: One without Ahankara (the sense 'I am doing') and with an untainted Buddhi — even if such a one kills, they are not the killer, they are not bound. Freedom from karma comes from inner non-identification, not from outer inaction.
- Final synthesis: Karma-Yoga = Nishkama Karma = Yoga. Only the Yogi — one established in Pranayama practice with mind fixed in Atman — is the true Nishkama Karma Yogi. This is the central and secret teaching of the Bhagavad Gita on the subject of karma.

Key Concepts Glossary

| Sanskrit Term | Telugu | Meaning |
|-----------------------|--------------|---|
| Karma | కర్మ | Action; that which is done; at its deepest level, Prana Vayu itself is karma; in Vedantic usage, Kriya (activity) = Karma |
| Karta | కర్త | The doer; the individual 'I' who initiates action; in truth, the Atman appearing as a limited self |
| Kriya | క్రియ | The actual activity; the visible action performed; in Vedantic usage used interchangeably with Karma |
| Prana Vayu | ప్రాణవాయువు | Life-force energy; the subtle vital air that animates all action; Guru Sri Swami Shivananda: 'Prana Vayu is Karma' |
| Mano-Vak-Kaya | మనో-వాక్-కాయ | Three-fold karma: Mental (thought), Verbal (speech), Physical (bodily action); all karma is of one of these three types |
| Karma-Yoga | కర్మయోగం | True definition (Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad): that which permanently restrains the moving mind — i.e., Pranayama; NOT ordinary work |
| Nishkama Karma | నిష్కామ కర్మ | Desireless action; action performed with mind fixed in Atman, so no karma-phala accumulates; demonstrated by the oil-vessel analogy |
| Samatvam | సమత్వం | Equanimity; treating pleasure/pain, gain/loss, victory/defeat equally; the Bhagavad Gita's definition of Yoga itself (BG 2-48) |
| Yukta | యుక్తుడు | The Yogi — the one who performs karma with equanimity and releases the fruit; not bound by actions |
| Ayukta | అయుక్తుడు | The non-Yogi — one whose mind is turned outward, absorbed in action and its fruits; bound by desires and Samsara |
| Buddhi-Yoga | బుద్ధియోగం | Wisdom-united action; inner Yoga (Antarkarma); far superior to external karma; protects even when practiced partially |
| Pravritti | ప్రవృత్తి | Outward karma; actions that perpetuate the Samsara cycle; worldly activities, Vedic rituals for householders |
| Nivritti | నివృత్తి | Inward karma; Yoga-karma that generates Jnana and leads to liberation; = Karma-Yoga = Pranayama |

| | | |
|----------------------------|----------------|---|
| Phala / Karma-Phala | కర్మఫలం | The fruit/result of action; when action is performed with attachment to phala, it binds the doer to future births |
| Phala-Tyaga | ఫలత్యాగం | Renunciation of the fruit of action; the inner act of releasing attachment to results; key practice of the Yogi |
| Bahirmukha | బహిర్ముఖం | Outward-turned mind; the Ayukta's condition — mind fully absorbed in the external world and its fruits |
| Antarmukha | అంతర్ముఖం | Inward-turned mind; the Yogi's condition — mind fixed in Atman regardless of outer activity |
| Ahankara | అహంకారం | Ego; the sense 'I am the doer'; when absent, karma does not bind — BG 18-17 |
| Nishkama | నిష్కామం | Desireless; free of desires; the quality of action performed with mind in Atman |
| Abhikrama-Nasha | అభిక్రమనాశం | Loss of commencement; BG 2-40 assures: Buddhi-Yoga has NO loss — even partial practice yields protection |
| Pratyavaaya-Dosha | ప్రత్యవాయ దోషం | Counter-fault; error arising from incomplete ritual performance; BG 2-40: Buddhi-Yoga has NO such fault |
| Kama | కామం | Desire; the natural driver of all ordinary karma; 'every karma is impelled by desire' (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad) |

Questions & Answers — Reflective Inquiry

Beginner Level

Q1. What is the basic meaning of 'karma' and why can't anyone stop performing it?

A1. Karma comes from the Sanskrit root 'kri' — meaning 'to do.' In its most basic sense, it means any action: mental thought, spoken word, or physical deed. No one can stop karma because all beings are driven by the three Gunas (Sattva, Rajas, Tamas) of Prakriti — the fundamental qualities of nature. The Bhagavad Gita (3-5) states that not even for a single moment can anyone remain without performing action. As long as Prana (life-force) is present in the body, karma is happening. Even sitting still, breathing is karma; even resting, thinking is karma. The question is never whether to do karma — it is always HOW to do it.

Q2. The Upanishad says karma binds, but the Gita says yajna-daana-tapas must not be abandoned. Is this a contradiction?

A2. This is an apparent contradiction that dissolves when understood correctly. The Upanishad's statement 'karma binds' refers to karma performed with desire and ego-attachment — actions where the doer is absorbed in wanting a particular result. Such karma generates impressions (Samskaras) that demand fulfillment in future lives. The Gita's instruction to continue yajna, daana, and tapas refers to these same actions performed WITH Yoga — with equanimity, without attachment to the outcome. The same external action can either bind or liberate depending on the inner quality of the doer. Karma performed with Samatvam (equal vision) does not create the binding impressions that force rebirth.

Q3. What did Krishna actually mean when he told Arjuna to fight?

A3. Krishna did not simply encourage Arjuna to fight. He was addressing a specific situation: Arjuna's Kshatriya (warrior) dharma obligated him to fight — it was his unavoidable karma. Arjuna was paralyzed by moha (delusion), refusing his duty. Krishna's deeper message was: don't perform this karma out of attachment to victory or fear of loss. Instead, develop Samatvam — equal vision toward pleasure and pain, gain and loss, win and loss — and THEN act. In this way, the karma of battle will not generate phala that binds you. Krishna was teaching the YOGA of battle, not the ethics of war.

Q4. What does Samatvam mean, and why does the Gita call it 'Yoga'?

A4. Samatvam literally means 'equanimity' or 'sameness.' It means maintaining the same inner state regardless of whether circumstances produce pleasure or pain, gain or loss, victory or defeat. The Bhagavad Gita (2-48) says: 'Samatvam yoga uchyate' — equanimity is called Yoga. When the mind is equalized — not pulled toward pleasant outcomes or repelled by unpleasant ones — actions are performed without the seeds of desire. Without desire, no karma-phala accumulates. Without karma-phala, no rebirth is required. The inner state of Samatvam is thus the direct mechanism of liberation — which is why it IS the definition of Yoga.

Q5. What is the difference between an ordinary person's approach to karma and a Yogi's approach?

A5. The Bhagavad Gita (5-12) describes this beautifully using the contrast between Yukta (the Yogi) and Ayukta (the non-Yogi). The Ayukta has a mind turned OUTWARD (Bahirmukha) — fully absorbed in both the action and its desired results. This person craves fruits and is bound to experience them, continuing the Samsara cycle. The Yukta (the Yogi) performs the same external actions but with mind turned INWARD (Antarmukha) — not attached to the fruits. The Yogi releases the fruits entirely (Phala-Tyaga) and attains Naishtiki-Shanti — the peace of permanent liberation. The same action, the same outward behavior — but two completely different inner relationships to it.

Deeper Inquiry

Q6. The Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad defines Karma-Yoga as 'that which permanently restrains the moving mind.' How is Pranayama Karma-Yoga?

A6. This requires understanding the chain of causation: Prana Vayu moves → the mind vibrates (Chit-spandam bhavati karma, Yoga Vasishtha) → the mind's vibration creates karma. If the movement of Prana creates mental movement, and mental movement creates karma, then controlling Prana-movement (Pranayama) directly addresses the root. Pranayama is therefore the most fundamental karma — it works at the level of Prana itself, not merely at the level of action or thought. Ordinary activities (office work, charity, rituals) do not restrain the mind; they engage and stimulate it. Only Pranayama — by stilling Prana — actually achieves the permanent restraint of the mind that the Trishikhi Brahmanopanishad declares to be the definition of Karma-Yoga.

Q7. Shankaracharya says 'the Jnana from Vedanta-Shravana is destroyed by Karma-Yoga.' How should we understand this apparently shocking statement?

A7. This statement requires careful reading. Shankaracharya is using 'Karma-Yoga' here in the POPULAR (misused) sense — meaning ordinary external worldly activities that people mistakenly label 'Karma-Yoga.' His point is: if someone gains Vedantic Jnana through scriptural study and then returns to intense worldly activity (calling it 'Karma-Yoga'), the mental outward-turning that worldly activity creates will erode that Jnana. He is NOT saying that Yoga practice destroys Jnana — the Bhagavad Gita says the opposite: Yogaat sanjaayate jnaanam (Yoga generates Jnana). Shankaracharya is warning against the confusion of terms — calling ordinary work 'Karma-Yoga' and using that label to justify remaining absorbed in worldly activity while claiming to be a spiritual practitioner.

Q8. The oil-vessel story with King Janaka and Shuka seems simple on the surface. What is the deep philosophical implication of this teaching?

A8. The story reveals the mechanism of karma-accumulation. Karma does not bind through the mere occurrence of physical or sensory events — it binds through MENTAL ENGAGEMENT. Shuka's feet walked and his eyes were open — physical karma was happening and sensory input was arriving. Yet no impression was formed, because his mind was entirely elsewhere (on the oil vessel). This reveals: karma-phala does not accumulate at the level of body or senses — it accumulates at the level of the MIND. The Nishkama Karma Yogi does the same thing spiritually: places the mind on Atman (instead of the oil vessel) and then acts in the world with body and senses. The world's events reach the senses — but the

mind is in Atman. No mental engagement, no karma-phala, no binding. This is the philosophical underpinning of BG 18-17: no Ahankara, untainted Buddhi = not the doer, not bound.

Q9. BG 18-17 says one without Ahankara who kills is 'not the killer and not bound.' This seems to justify any action. How should we understand this?

A9. This verse must be understood in its complete context and not lifted out of it. Krishna is not providing a license for violence — he is describing the metaphysical reality of the liberated state. For someone to truly have zero Ahankara (no sense of 'I am doing this') and a genuinely untainted Buddhi, they would necessarily be a fully realized Yogi in a state of deep Atman-abidance. Such a person does not act from personal desire, prejudice, or impulse — they act only in accord with Dharma and Paramatma's will. The verse is not an ethics argument ('it's okay to harm others if you feel detached') — it is an ontological statement about how action and identity relate in the state of true liberation. In practice, a genuine Yogi is MORE careful and compassionate in action precisely because ego-impurity is absent.

Q10. How does Karma-Yoga as Pranayama relate to ordinary life? Does one have to give up work and family to practice it?

A10. Absolutely not — this is the beauty of the teaching. Karma-Yoga as Pranayama is an INNER practice — it does not require renouncing external life. The teaching is: perform your duties, engage with family and work (these are your Pravritti karma of this life), BUT add the inner practice of Pranayama (the Nivritti karma). The Pranayama practice stills the mind from within — gradually shifting the mind from Bahirmukha (outward) to Antarmukha (inward). Over time, even while acting in the world, the mind becomes less and less entangled in karma-phala. The oil-vessel practice doesn't require you to leave the city — it requires you to carry the focused mind INTO the city. The Nishkama Karma Yogi lives in the world, serves their dharmic responsibilities, AND maintains inner Atman-abidance through regular Pranayama. This is the complete Karma-Yoga: Pravritti + Nivritti together.

తెలుగు విభాగం — Telugu Section

అధ్యాయ సారాంశం — Chapter Summary (Telugu)

- కర్మ అంటే 'క్రియ' అని అర్థం — 'కృ' ధాతువు నుండి వచ్చింది. ఏ జీవి అయినా ఒక్క క్షణమైనా కర్మ లేకుండా ఉండలేదు; మనస్సు, వాక్కు, శరీరం ద్వారా నిరంతరం కర్మ జరుగుతూనే ఉంటుంది.
- ప్రాణవాయువే కర్మ — గురువు శ్రీ శ్రీ స్వామి శివానంద పరమహంస మాటలు: జీవశక్తి అయిన ప్రాణవాయువే కర్మ. ప్రాణం ఆగిపోతే కర్మ చేయడం అసాధ్యం.
- ఉపనిషత్ 'కర్మ బంధం కలిగిస్తుంది' అంటుంది; గీత 'యజ్ఞ-దాన-తపస్సులు విడవకూడదు' అంటుంది — ఈ వైరుధ్యం, కర్మ చేసే తీరు (సమత్వంతో చేసిన కర్మ) లో పరిష్కారం అవుతుంది.
- అర్జునుడికి శ్రీకృష్ణుడు యుద్ధం చేయమని ప్రోత్సహించడం — కేవలం యుద్ధ ప్రేరణ కాదు; 'సుఖ-దుఃఖ, లాభ-నష్ట, జయ-అపజయ' లలో సమత్వంతో యుద్ధం చేయమని యోగాన్ని బోధించడం.
- సమత్వమే యోగం (భగవద్గీత 2-48): సమత్వబుద్ధితో కర్మ చేస్తే కర్మఫలం అంటదు; ఫలం అంటకపోతే జన్మ అవసరం ఉండదు.
- త్రిశిఖి బ్రాహ్మణోపనిషత్ ప్రకారం కర్మయోగ నిర్వచనం: 'కదిలే మనసును శాశ్వతంగా కట్టిపడేసేది కర్మయోగం.' ప్రాణం కదిలిస్తే మనస్సు కదులుతుంది; కాబట్టి ప్రాణాయామమే నిజమైన కర్మయోగం.
- మనుస్మృతి ప్రకారం వేదంలో రెండు రకాల కర్మలు: ప్రవృత్తి (సంసార చక్రాన్ని నడిపించే బాహ్య కర్మలు) మరియు నివృత్తి (జ్ఞానాన్ని కలిగించి సంసారం నుండి విముక్తి ఇచ్చే యోగకర్మ).
- నిష్కామ కర్మ అంటే కోరిక లేకుండా చేసే కర్మ. జనక చక్రవర్తి శుక బ్రహ్మర్షికి చెప్పిన నూనె కుండ ఉపమానం: మనసు ఆత్మపై ఉంచి ఇంద్రియాలతో పని చేయడం — ఇదే నిష్కామ కర్మ యోగి లక్షణం.
- భగవద్గీత 18-17: అహంకారం లేనివాడు, బుద్ధి అంటుకోనివాడు — అన్ని లోకాలను చంపినా, అతడు చంపేవాడు కాడు, బంధం కలుగదు. కర్మ బంధం అంటా అంటదు.
- నిష్కామ కర్మ = కర్మయోగం = యోగమే. యోగి మాత్రమే నిజమైన నిష్కామ కర్మయోగి. ఇదే గీత యొక్క కర్మ రహస్యం.

ముఖ్య పదాల అర్థాలు — Key Concepts (Telugu)

పదం

తెలుగు అర్థం

| | |
|--------------|--|
| కర్మ | చేష్ట; చేయడం; మనస్సు, వాక్కు, శరీరం ద్వారా జరిగే ప్రతి చర్య |
| కర్త | చేసేవాడు; 'నేను' అనే వ్యక్తి చైతన్యం; నిజంగా ఆత్మ/పరమాత్మ |
| ప్రాణవాయువు | జీవశక్తి; అన్ని కర్మలకు మూల సాధనం; ఆగిపోతే కర్మ జరగదు |
| మనో-వాక్-కాయ | మూడు రకాల కర్మలు: మానసిక (ఆలోచన), వాచిక (మాట), శారీరక (చేష్ట) |
| కర్మయోగం | 'కదిలే మనసును శాశ్వతంగా కట్టిపడేసేది' (త్రిశిఖి బ్రాహ్మణోపనిషత్); అంటే ప్రాణాయామమే నిజమైన కర్మయోగం |
| నిష్కామ కర్మ | కోరిక లేకుండా చేసే కర్మ; మనసు ఆత్మపై ఉంచి ఇంద్రియాలతో పని చేయడం |
| సమత్వం | సుఖ-దుఃఖ, లాభ-నష్ట, జయ-అపజయాలలో సమభావం; ఇదే గీత ప్రకారం యోగ నిర్వచనం |
| యుక్తుడు | యోగి; సమత్వంతో కర్మ చేసి ఫలాన్ని వదిలివేసేవాడు; కర్మకు అంటుకోనివాడు |
| అయుక్తుడు | యోగి కానివాడు; మనస్సు బాహ్యుఖంగా ఉండి, ఫలంపై ఆసక్తి ఉన్నవాడు; సంసారంలో కొట్టుమిట్టాడేవాడు |
| బుద్ధియోగం | జ్ఞానంతో కూడిన అంతర్కర్మ; బాహ్య కర్మకంటే ఉన్నతమైనది; కొంచెమైనా చేస్తే రక్షణ ఇస్తుంది |
| ప్రవృత్తి | సంసార చక్రాన్ని నడిపించే బాహ్య కర్మలు; గృహస్థ జీవన విధులు |
| నివృత్తి | సంసారం నుండి విముక్తి ఇచ్చే అంతర కర్మ; యోగకర్మ = ప్రాణాయామం |
| కర్మఫలం | కర్మకు వచ్చే ఫలితం; ఫలంపై ఆసక్తి ఉంటే జన్మ అవసరమవుతుంది |
| అహంకారం | 'నేను చేస్తున్నాను' అనే భావం; ఇది లేకపోతే కర్మ బంధం కలగదు |
| బాహ్యుఖం | బయటికి తిరిగిన మనస్సు; అయుక్తుని లక్షణం; కర్మ మరియు ఫలంలో నిమగ్నమైన స్థితి |
| అంతర్ముఖం | లోపలికి తిరిగిన మనస్సు; యోగి లక్షణం; ఆత్మపై స్థిరంగా ఉన్న స్థితి |

ప్రశ్నలు మరియు జవాబులు (Telugu Q&A)

ప్ర1. కర్మ అంటే ఏమిటి? ఏ జీవి అయినా కర్మ చేయకుండా ఎందుకు ఉండలేదు?

జ1. కర్మ అంటే 'కృ' ధాతువు నుండి వచ్చిన పదం — చేయడం. మనస్సు, వాక్కు, శరీరం ద్వారా జరిగే ప్రతి చేష్ట కర్మే. ప్రకృతి యొక్క మూడు గుణాలు (సత్య, రజస్, తమస్) ద్వారా అన్ని జీవులు నిరంతరం కర్మ చేయడానికి నిర్బంధింపబడుతున్నారు (భగవద్గీత 3-5). ప్రాణం ఉన్నంత కాలం కర్మ ఆగదు.

ప్ర2. ఉపనిషత్ 'కర్మ బంధం' అంటే, గీత 'యజ్ఞ-దాన-తపస్సులు చేయాలి' అంటుంది — ఇవి విరుద్ధంగా ఉన్నాయా?

జ2. విరుద్ధం కాదు. ఉపనిషత్ 'ఆసక్తితో చేసే కర్మ బంధిస్తుంది' అంటుంది. గీత 'సమత్వంతో చేయమని' చెప్పి అదే కర్మలను అనుమతిస్తుంది. కర్మ ఏదైనా — చేసే తీరు మారినట్టే బంధమా విముక్తి అవుతుంది. అదే సమత్వయోగం.

ప్ర3. శ్రీకృష్ణుడు అర్జునుడికి యుద్ధం చేయమని ప్రేరేపించడం అంటే ఏమిటి?

జ3. శ్రీకృష్ణుడు కేవలం యుద్ధానికి ప్రోత్సహించలేదు. అర్జునుడి క్షత్రియ ధర్మం ప్రకారం యుద్ధం అనివార్యం; అయినా మోహంతో అతడు నిరాకరిస్తున్నాడు. 'సుఖ-దుఃఖ, లాభ-నష్ట, జయ-అపజయ లలో సమత్వంతో యుద్ధం చేయి — పాపం అంటదు' అని యోగాన్ని నేర్పారు. యుద్ధ ప్రేరణ కాదు — యోగ బోధన.

ప్ర4. సమత్వం అంటే ఏమిటి? గీత దీన్ని 'యోగం' అని ఎందుకంటుంది?

జ4. సమత్వం అంటే సుఖ-దుఃఖ, లాభ-నష్ట, జయ-అపజయాలన్నింటిలో సమభావంగా ఉండటం. ఆ స్థితిలో కర్మ చేస్తే ఫలాపేక్ష ఏర్పడదు; ఫలాపేక్ష లేకపోతే కర్మఫలం అంటదు; కర్మఫలం అంటకపోతే జన్మ అక్కర్లేదు. అందుకే 'సమత్వమే యోగం' (భగవద్గీత 2-48).

ప్ర5. నిష్కామ కర్మ ఎలా చేయగలం? జనక-శుక ఉపమానం ఏమి బోధిస్తుంది?

జ5. జనక చక్రవర్తి శుక బ్రహ్మర్షికి తలపై నూనె నిండిన పాత్ర పెట్టి నగరమంతా తిరిగిరమ్మన్నాడు. శుకుడు తిరిగి వచ్చి 'నాకేమీ కనిపించలేదు' అన్నాడు — ఎందుకంటే మనస్సు పాత్రపై ఉంది, కళ్ళపై లేదు. అదేవిధంగా మనస్సు ఆత్మపై ఉంచి ఇంద్రియాలతో పని చేస్తే కర్మఫలం అంటదు — ఇదే నిష్కామ కర్మ.

ప్ర6. 'మనస్సును శాశ్వతంగా కట్టిపడేయడమే కర్మయోగం' అని ఎందుకు చెప్పారు?

జ6. మనస్సు ప్రాణవాయు చలనంతో కదులుతుంది. ప్రాణం కదిలిస్తేనే మనస్సు కదులుతుంది; మనస్సు కదిలిస్తేనే కర్మ జరుగుతుంది. కాబట్టి ప్రాణ చలనాన్ని నియంత్రించే ప్రాణాయామమే నిజమైన 'మనస్సును కట్టిపడేసే' కర్మయోగం. బాహ్య పని మనస్సును కదిలిస్తుంది; ప్రాణాయామం మనస్సును శాంతింపజేస్తుంది.

ప్ర7. ప్రవృత్తి, నివృత్తి కర్మలు అంటే ఏమిటి?

జ7. ప్రవృత్తి కర్మ: సంసార చక్రాన్ని నడిపించే బాహ్య కర్మలు — వ్యాపారం, గృహస్థ ధర్మం, యజ్ఞాలు. ఇవి జన్మ పరంపరలను కొనసాగిస్తాయి. నివృత్తి కర్మ: లోపలికి తిరిగి జ్ఞానాన్ని కలిగించే అంతర కర్మ — యోగకర్మ = ప్రాణాయామం. ఇది సంసారం నుండి విముక్తి ఇస్తుంది. రెండూ కలిసి ఆచరించడమే సమగ్ర కర్మయోగ జీవితం.

ప్ర8. బుద్ధియోగం బాహ్య కర్మ కంటే ఎందుకు ఉన్నతమైనది?

జ8. 'కర్మ బాహ్యం, బుద్ధియోగం అంతరమైనది' (భగవద్గీత 2-49). అంతర కర్మ (ప్రాణాయామం) నేరుగా ప్రాణ మూలంలో పని చేస్తుంది — జ్ఞానాన్ని కలిగిస్తుంది. బాహ్య కర్మ మనసును బయటికి తీసుకుపోతుంది; బుద్ధియోగం మనసును లోపలికి నడిపిస్తుంది. అంతేగాక, బుద్ధియోగంలో 'అభిక్రమ నాశం లేదు' — కొంచెమైనా చేసినా రక్షణ ఉంటుంది.

ప్ర9. 'అహంకారం లేనివాడు చంపినా చంపేవాడు కాదు' (గీత 18-17) అంటే ఏ అర్థంలో అర్థం చేసుకోవాలి?

జ9. ఇది హింసకు అనుమతి కాదు — ఇది విముక్తుని స్వభావ వర్ణన. నిజంగా అహంకారం లేనివాడు, 'నేను చేస్తున్నాను' అనే భావం లేనివాడు — అతడు కేవలం ధర్మానుసారం, పరమాత్మ సంకల్పం ప్రకారం మాత్రమే పని చేస్తాడు. అటువంటి స్థితిలో కర్మ అంటదు. ఇది అనుభవ సత్యం — తత్వ విచారణ, నైతిక అనుమతి కాదు.

ప్ర10. కర్మయోగాన్ని ప్రాణాయామమని చెప్పడం అంటే సాధారణ జీవితం వదిలివేయాలా?

జ10. అవసరం లేదు. ప్రాణాయామం అంతర సాధన — బాహ్య జీవితాన్ని వదలాల్సిన అవసరం లేదు. ప్రవృత్తి కర్మలు (ఇంటి పని, ఉద్యోగం, కుటుంబం) చేస్తూనే, నివృత్తి అయిన ప్రాణాయామాన్ని నిత్యం ఆచరించడం — ఇదే సమగ్ర కర్మయోగం. నూనె పాత్ర ఉపమానం: నగరాన్ని వదలాల్సిన అవసరం లేదు — నగరంలో తిరుగుతూ మనసు ఆత్మపై ఉంచగలగడమే కర్మయోగం.

॥ సమత్వం యోగ ఉచ్యతే ॥

Equanimity is called Yoga. — Bhagavad Gita 2-48