

# SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VIEW ON KARMA AND MOKSA: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

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## **Abstract**

*The concept of karma is a doctrine considered to be the foundation stone of entire Indian philosophical thought. The word 'karma' is derived from 'kri' dhatu of Sanskrit. Literally it means to do something. Metaphysically, it means which of our past actions were causes of our present state of affairs. The Indian solution of the great riddle of the origin of suffering and the diversity of human conditions is to be found in the word karma. The doctrine of karma and their retribution is of great antiquity in India. It gradually broke away from Vedic naturalism, mysticism and piety. As a man himself sows, so he himself reaps, no man inherits the good or evil act of another man. The fruit is of the same quality with the action good or bad, there is no destruction of the action. In Indian philosophy there are four Purusarthas. Among them, Moksa is considered as the highest end of life. It is used for various terms like- emancipation, enlightenment, liberation and release in different schools of Indian philosophy. It refers to freedom from samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth. According to the epistemological and psychological standpoint, moksa means freedom from ignorance, self-realisation, self-actualisation and self-knowledge. An attempt is made here to discuss how Vivekananda considers the notion of KARMA and MOKSA.*

**Keywords:** karma, moksa, realization, mukti, reward, punishment, yoga.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Indian philosophy believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives that is samsara and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived they are karmas. In a lifetime, people build up both good and bad karmas. They are based on their actions within that lifetime. This karma affects their future lives and existence. Therefore, people must take the responsibility for their actions either within this lifetime or the next. And death is a key part of this cycle and is treated with specific importance. On the other hand, moksa is the end of the cycle of death and rebirth which is classed as the supreme goal.

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The concept of moksa is considered as the highest purusartha in the Indian philosophical thought. It is a state of existence in which man attains liberation and absolute freedom. This freedom is not to be considered in terms of narrow individualism, but of the realization of infinity. It is the divinization of man that takes place in the state of moksa. The Rig Veda presented life after death as a life spent with the gods in heaven. The Brahmanas advocated the performance of sacrifices that the fellowship with the gods in svarga or paradise would be assured. But the Upanisads showed how life in heaven was only a prolongation of life on earth because man was again born into this world. The Upanisads also brought into the fore identity between Brahman and Atman. It is this identity that man himself seeks to achieve through intuitive apprehension. It gives him the real knowledge which in turn has the power to transform him fully. The attainment of this state of existence is moksa according to the Upanisads.

Radhakrishnan maintains, "If the human mind always strives to reflect the Mind, Divine and if human action partakes of the creativity of the Divine life.....the long labour of the cosmic process will receive its crowing justification...." (An Idealist View of Life, p-123) The Buddhists call this state nirvana, the Christians call it the Kingdom of Heaven and for Plato is the delight of perception of the primordial and pure idea. In moksa, man comes face to face with his true origin and merges with the absolute and eternal Brahman. In theistic systems, moksa is considered in terms of personal liberation and of personal encounter with the possession of the Supreme Being specifically as the other. On the other hand, non-dualistic systems conceive moksa as a disintegration of individuality, a giving up of selfish isolation, but it is not mere nothing or death.

The concept of moksa has two aspects- positive and negative. Negatively, moksa is necessitated by the fact that both Brahman and moksa which is the state of absorption is Brahman are basically beyond the categories of our thought and expression. And positively moksa can be said to be a state of eternal bliss and ecstasy. The notion of karma and moksa are related to each other. In this world, every human being has a desire to attain this ultimate goal i.e. moksa. And by their own karmas it is possible for them to reach this goal or the ultimate end. Therefore we can say that karma is closely connected with moksa. The karmas whether they are good or bad determines the path of moksa. Moksa is the release from bondage and ignorance is the cause of bondage. If we overcome this bondage and get knowledge about the reality or truth we can able to release from this state. Through good deeds it is possible for us to overcome this state of bondage. Hence in order to attain moksa or supreme goal karma helps us. Thus karma and moksa have a close connection to each other.

Therefore, moksa is unity with the supreme self. It is called by different names like, mukti or release, brahmisthiti in Brahman, naiskarmya or non-action, kaivalya or solitary salvation, brahmabhava or being of Brahman. In the absolute experience there is a feeling of the oneness of all. This state of liberation has various types. They are karma-mukti, videha-mukti, jivan-mukti and sarva-mukti. Karma-mukti is a state in which the self has not reached complete and definite liberation though the self has the consciousness of its true identity. As the self has not become fully free, it tends to affirm its separate empiric existence. So far as it has had the higher consciousness, it moves positively towards the true self.

Videha-mukti refers to deliverance after a man's physical death and jivan-mukti refers to the state in which a man is liberated already during his life on earth. Jivan-mukti takes place once and for all. It is a definitive liberation unlike the state of karma-mukti and the possession of a body by itself does not denote any

imperfection. The jivan-mukta is a true siddha and not asadhaka because he does not identify himself with his body and because he has broken the bonds while in the body. The exalted state of jivan-mukti brings with it the capacity to assume different human forms without being conditioned by them. Sarva-mukti means the liberation of all human beings. Brahmaloaka or the Kingdom of God, implies corporate salvation. Therefore, the liberated soul cannot remain isolated from the world and indifference to the spiritual plight of the unredeemed souls.

Impelled by the motive of ushering in the kingdom of God, the jivan-muktas act, but their actions are marked by detachment and freedom from desire. They are detached “at heart but outwardly acting as if with attachment, inwardly cool but outwardly fervent.”(The Brahmasutra, p-217) Their action does not exhibit any uniformity because it is conditioned by the innate nature they possess. Some fulfill the functions of a king -like Janaka and Rama, some take up the task of a householder and others-like Suk, exalt in renunciation. But whatever they do, they are detached and their mind delights only in the Supreme. Since, their action is not motivated by selfish personal gain; it does not increase or decrease the value of their realization. The liberated souls spontaneously work to accomplish sarva-mukti or the world-redemption. Only when all men through the saving intuition of their true identity attain complete and full liberation, the final, irrevocable redemption takes place. As long as there are souls on the way to mukti, the liberated souls engage in action that brings the day of final redemption closer to mankind.

Regarding the state of ultimate end, the Gita offers two views. One that makes the freed soul loses itself in the impersonality of Brahman and attains a peace beyond the strife of the world. And the other where we possess and enjoy God, being lifted above all suffering and pain and eagerness of petty desires which are the badges of subjection. Thus the Gita views of the ultimate state of freedom are the intuitional and the intellectual ways of representing the one condition. From our human standpoint the absolute seems to be a passive, relation less identify, making all action impossible while it is not really so. The Gita says that in the highest reality impersonality and personality are combined in a manner that is incomprehensible to us. According to the Gita, the freed soul is beyond all good and evil. Virtue is transcended in perfection. He is free from ordinary rules and regulations. The Gita says, “The liberated do not suffer any vexation in them or cause vexation to others.”(XII, 15) It is their second nature to work for the welfare of the world. These noble souls regard with equal mind all things of the earth. They stand for a dynamic creative spiritual life, and see to it that the social regulations tend to the fuller spiritual unfolding or expressions of human life. They do their appointed work, niyatam karma, ordained by the divine will which works in them.

The most prevalent view in Indian thinking is that moksa may be achieved while living. But the Nyaya-Vaisesika and Samkhya philosophers considers moksa as possible only after death. Besides the distinction between liberation while living and liberation after death, there has been a distinction between individual and collective liberation. While the traditional philosophy believes in individual liberation, the neo-Vedanta philosophers like – Vivekananda, Gandhi, Tagore, Tilak etc. insist upon the necessity and possibility of collective liberation.

## **II. VIVEKANANDA’S VIEW:**

According to Vivekananda, the ultimate destiny of an individual is the liberation, i.e. the realization of the soul. It is only when man is able to pass beyond the cycle of births and rebirth, that he is able to attain this

state. Births and deaths are guided by the Karmas performed by the self, and again by actions, the activity of body producing karma can be stopped. This state would be a state in which suffering and the chain of death and rebirth come to an end. It is the state of identity with God, the infinite. Vivekananda used the term liberation instead of moksa. He defines liberation into two kinds, Jivan-mukti and Videha-mukti. Jivan-mukti is a state of freedom realized in one's own lifetime, he realizes union with the Brahman but he yet remains tied with the body. For Vivekananda, this is due to the binding effect of the acquired karmas. But when the potencies of acquired karmas are spent up, the body ceases to function. Then the jivan-mukta realizes permanent and eternal repose in the Brahman.

The jivan-mukti precedes the final liberation. Though the ego and ignorance disappear from the jivanmukta, he has links with the past karmas that keep him detained in the world. But soon after when the energy of the past karmas get spent up, the soul realizes eternal freedom from body, life and mind. The final liberation Videha mukti is attained when the self reposes in eternal identity with the Brahman. It becomes one with the Absolute, which are truth, existence, consciousness and bliss. The liberated soul becomes united with the Absolute forever. There remains for him no ignorance, no suffering, no ego, no world, no life and no rebirth.

According to Vivekananda, the realization of ultimate reality can be achieved by Karma, Jnana, Bhakti and also through psychic control. They are not inconsistent with each other, but they are complementary to each other. He is of the opinion that the idea of perfect man and the ideal of religion are to become harmoniously balanced in the four elements that could be attained by Yoga or union. In his words, "To the worker, it is union between man and the whole humanity, to the mystic, between his lower and higher self, to the lover, union between himself and the God of love and to the philosopher, it is the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga." (Jnana Yoga, p-386) For Vivekananda, the man who seeks after this union is a Yogi. Some people try to lift veil of ignorance through Jnana, they are the followers of Jnana Yoga. Some try to attain their goal by doing work selflessly, are following Karma –yoga. Again some people try to establish communion with God through love is the followers of Bhakti-yoga and lastly, there are men who try to realize God by their concentration is the method of Raja-yoga.

Jnana –Yoga: Jnana yoga is the way for the realization of the highest reality through knowledge i.e. Brahman. It is based on the realization that bondage is due to ignorance and hence there is no liberation without knowledge of the ultimate reality. Mere knowledge about the reality is not enough for the realization of Brahman. Jnana yoga helps us to know that our real nature is nothing but the Infinite Reality or Brahman. The truth about the reality is first to be heard, then thought about and then meditated upon it. These three steps are called Sravana, Manana and Nididhyasana. Only after continuous meditation, one is able to realize that Brahman in his own life. A Jnana- yogi should firstly try to control his senses and body and should also try to get rid of all kinds of selfishness through controlling the body, the senses and even the mind. By controlling the body, the senses and the mind one can concentrate on the Highest Reality and through this concentration he can attain perfect peace. Vivekananda states that man must first try to bring the mind under control, no matter what the process is. Everything else follows as a matter of course. And knowledge – the non-dualistic realization is very to attain. Know that to be the highest human goal. But before one reaches there one has to make a long preparation and prolonged effort. The company of holy men and dispassion are the means to it. There is no other way.

According to Vivekananda, this yoga can be practiced only by some persons who are mentally and intellectually more strong. A Jnana yogi wants to see reality as it is, to realize it and to become one with it. A complete identity between Atman and Brahman is established by him in this way. Thus jnana yoga tells man that he is essentially divine. It shows to mankind the real unity of being and that each one of us is the God himself, manifested on earth. All of us, from the lowest worm that crawls under our feet to the highest beings to whom we took up wonder and owe- all are manifestation of the same Lord.

**Bhakti- Yoga:** The path of devotion to God for salvation or moksa is called Bhakti yoga. This yoga requires real, ceaseless, unlimited love of God to achieve this supreme identity. In devotion certain disciplines should be observed by the devotee. They are –

- (a) Purity in food
- (b) Freedom from desire
- (c) Performance of religious practices
- (d) Doing good to others
- (e) Truthfulness in thought, speech and behavior
- (f) Cheerfulness.

Bhakti yoga is a genuine search after the God, a search beginning, continuing and ending in love. The central secret of bhakti yoga is to control feelings and emotions and to give the soul higher and higher directions towards God. The union with God through intense love is the easiest of all the other ways leading to spiritual goal. Vivekananda defines it as a method of “the realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God.” (Complete Works, vol-5 p-292) Bhakti yoga accepts the Personal God as its main postulate, because personal God fits into the very mental structure to the Bhakta. And this path is a path of love, but this love cannot be reduced to any earthly benefit, because so long as worldly desires last that kind of love does not come. He believes that strong emotions have the capacity to awaken and active the potential powers of man. Ordinary emotions can be transformed into powerful feelings. Ordinary love can be converted into Divine love or supreme devotion that is Bhakti marga.

Vivekananda classified various steps through which the bhakti yoga progresses towards the realization of the supreme goal. The first step is the external worship. It is prescribed for the ordinary man because he cannot concentrate on the subtle expression of God. He begins his worship in a gross manner, the representation of God’s like idols and images are all objects of external worship. In the next step, prayer and repetition of God’s name, chanting of religious hymns and singing songs of God’s glory, would become prominent. In the next stage, this kind of prayer is transcended, and in its place, a sort of a silent meditation starts. In this stage, there exists for the devotee nothing but God. In the final stage, this distinction vanishes and the devotee becomes one with the supreme. It is a kind of inner realization, and a feeling of oneness of everything. In Bhakti yoga, we start as a dualist. God seems to be a supreme being. Man begins to approach God through love and comes nearer and nearer to God, until the two becomes one.

**Karma-Yoga:** Vivekananda has given much stress on KARMA and attainment of liberation through it. He was himself a karma yogi and he denounced inactivity, idleness and advised to work and work. For him, the work itself is worship. Karma yoga is the attachment of God through work, it is a system of ethics and religion

intended to attain moksha through unselfishness and by good works. It emphasizes the nature of action and selflessness. A karma yogi is one who gives up his whole body, mind and everything as an eternal sacrifice to Lord and attain perfect peace. Therefore, according to Vivekananda, karma yoga is a system of religion and ethics. He said that karma yogi need not believe in any doctrine whatever. He may not believe in God, may not ask what his soul is, nor think of any metaphysical speculation. But he has got his own special aim of realizing selfishness and he has to work it out himself.

According to Vivekananda, karma yoga is a manner and in that manner a man can realize his own divinity through works and duty. It also teaches us how to work for work's sake, unattached without caring who is helped and what for. He says, "Our duty to others means helping others, doing well to the world. Why should we do to the world? Apparently to help the world, but really to help ourselves, we should always try to help the world that should be the highest motive in us" (Complete Works, vol-1, p- 75) Thus, for Vivekananda, karma yogi works because it is his nature and he feels that it is good for human to do so and he has no object beyond that.

Thus karma yoga teaches us that man can attain realization by doing selfless activity in this world. A continuous doing of selfless work or constant practice of not attachment in all action of life enables man to rise above his self and to have a feeling of oneness with everything. Unattached action is evidently transcendence of the bondage of the self. In that homogeneity, we can attain the absolute bliss in this world. Vivekananda said that the karma yogi should like a lotus flower which is under hip of water but detached.

Raja Yoga: Raja yoga is a method for the realization of salvation by controlling the mind and body, by subjecting them to certain physical and mental disciplines. This yoga is called Raja yoga because it is believed that it is the king of all yogas, i.e. something like the master yoga. As a science, Raja yoga teaches us that of controlling one's inner nature, one can control the whole course of nature- the external and internal by controlling his mind. Therefore, Vivekananda remarks Raja yoga as 'the realization of the divinity through the control of mind.'

Raja yoga is based on the pre-supposition that bondage is due to the distracting activities of body and mind with the control and analysis of mind, man comes face to face with the perfect power lying hidden in him and finds his miseries, vanishing. When he finds that he is immortal and eternal, he goes beyond all wants and miseries. For attaining such knowledge, raja yoga prescribes the discipline of concentration. Vivekananda writes, "This, the power of concentration, is the only key to the treasure house of knowledge. The system of Raja yoga deals almost exclusively with this. In the present state of our body we are so much distracted, and the mind is fritters away its energies upon a hundred sorts of things. As soon as I try to calm my thoughts and concentrate my mind upon any object of knowledge, thousands of undesired impulses rush into the brain; thousand of thoughts rush into the mind and disturb it. How to check it and bring the mind under control is the whole subject of study in Raja yoga." (Complete Works, vol-5 p-292) Thus, by right concentration the mind can know its own nature and operation.

Raja yoga is divided into eight steps. The first step is Yama – non killing, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence and non- receiving of any gifts. Second is Niyama – cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study and surrender to God. Next is Asana or posture is a series of physical and mental exercise. Pranayama or controlling

the breathing is the fourth step, regulating the motive power of everything in the body. Pratyahara, the next step is the controlling of mind and not allowing to join itself to the physical centers. Then Dharma, the citta or mind stuff is confined and limited to a certain place. Dhyana or meditation is the highest stage which the mind can reach. It can go beyond the consciousness. When it goes beyond the consciousness and when it goes beyond the line of self-consciousness it is called Samadhi or super consciousness, where the barrier between jiva and Brahman is removed. As he maintains that the science of Raja yoga proposes to put before humanity a practical and scientifically worked out method of reaching this truth.

### III. CONCLUSION

Although Vivekananda talks of these different paths for the attainment of moksa, he conceived that all of them are leading to the same goal. These different paths are recommended keeping in view the fact that men differ with regard to their dispositions, capacities, tendencies and capabilities. It is quite possible that for a particular man the way of Devotion is most convenient and not the way of Knowledge. It is difficult for most people to practice Raja yoga, but there are some who effortlessly take to them. Therefore what path one chooses is not important. He may choose any according to his likes. But the important point is that he should take to it with all sincerity and purity. Because, purification of mind from all forms of desire is the essential condition of this realization. This may be done through philosophy of psychic control, worship or selfless work. It does not matter much whether we become harmoniously balanced in all these paths or follow only one of them. The most important thing is to rid the mind of all its dross.

Vivekananda says that these paths are not divided into water-tight compartments. In fact they overlap. The man of devotion performs certain selfless karmas too. The karma-yogi knows also. In this way Vivekananda has reconstruct the Vedanta concept of moksa. He expressed the norms of social morality in a new way and believed in collective liberation. Thus Vivekananda believes in collective liberation. Though he believes in personal liberation also, but he gave more importance on its collective aspect. For him 'service to man is service to God'. So he said about collective liberation in terms of personal liberation.

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