

# Outside the Tick-Tock: Do We Practice Karma Yoga in the Eternal Present?

By Keith R Parker

## **The short answer:**

Yes.

Whenever we serve the desires of others, we practice Karma Yoga, and step outside the passage of time and into the present. Acting to fulfill other's desires, we innocently renounce our own. We let go. No desires, no attachments, content with the present, we live in the present. Living without expectations we remain peaceful, calm and content deep within while on the surface level of the mind we freely think and act effectively. Practice makes perfect. Through repeated acts of selfless service, contentment becomes established. We live in the present at all times. All this from repeating simple acts of serving other's desires, that is, from practicing Karma Yoga.

## **The long answer:**

Yes and the *Bhagavad Gita* verifies it.<sup>1</sup>

The *Bhagavad Gita* tells the story of discord between ephemeral, bounded lower self and eternal, unbounded higher Self — and their ultimate union. In disunion, lower self and higher Self work without mutually benefiting each other, conflicts arise and life is limited. The practice of Karma Yoga strengthens the mind and unites self within Self. Discord evaporates. Eternal contentment of Self shines through self, life is lived in harmony, and the highest levels of spiritual and material wellbeing are reached.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has a heart. It takes 700 verses, a cast of characters, with leading roles of Lord Krishna and Arjuna (Self and self, respectively) to tell the *Gita's* story. Fortunately for us, deep within the second chapter we find the kernel of Krishna's teachings. These seminal verses are the nitty-gritty of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the core of Krishna's teachings and the essence of Karma Yoga. The easy, logical flow of Krishna's discourse in these verses is similar to receiving basic instructions on building a house and ultimately, living in a home of your own making.

- 2.39 - 2.44: Lay a solid foundation by understanding the goal of Karma Yoga, the ease in practicing it and the need to improve upon rewards of selfish action and past practices.
- 2.45 - 2.48: Build the house. Learn the fundamentals of practicing Karma Yoga, what to expect as a result of living in the present and how through repeated practice, balance of mind becomes established in activity.
- 2.49-2.52: Enjoy your imperishable home. Freed from the bondage of action (the bondage of Karma) enjoy inner peace, uninvolved with activity, balanced in success and failure and unmindful of the consequence of our actions. Act with wisdom.

We begin where Krishna transitions from philosophical to practical, from intellectual understanding to direct experience.

2.39 *That which has been set before you is understanding in terms of Samkhya; hear it now in terms of [the practice of] Yoga. Your intellect established through it, you will cast away the binding influence of action [cast away the bondage of karma].*

This verse is pivotal and critical to gaining understanding and experience of Karma Yoga advanced in the remainder of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Here, Krishna shifts gears from theoretical to practical, from understanding to experience, from the philosophy of Samkhya to the practice of Karma Yoga. Understanding opens doors; experience walks us through. Brought together in this verse, the remainder of the *Gita* wends like a river through the varied landscape of life and conflict to the sea of eternal knowledge where understanding and experience merge into one.

**The happy marriage of understanding and experience:** To move us forward along our path of evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing requires both understanding and experience. They support and enliven each other.

Understanding opens the door and shines forward the light of possibilities. But understanding by itself is insufficient to move forward. Experience moves us forward. But without understanding gained along the way, experience feels isolated and directionless; *sans* understanding, we stumble along, at best. Understanding pulls experience out of isolation, gives it direction and makes it real. In turn, experience verifies understanding and deepens it. Deeper understanding infuses forward momentum into experience. Taken together, understanding and experience align themselves and move us along our path of evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing.

*‘That which has been set before you is understanding in terms of Samkhya.’* According to the philosophy of Samkhya, we are eternal (2.12 - 2.15). We neither begin nor end. We just are, conscious beings existing outside time in the eternal present, with neither beginning nor ending. We can’t be snuffed out. The take-home: Do not fear death; your life is more than you know it to be. While comforting for Arjuna to hear, this is just unrealized philosophical understanding. Not one to dawdle and leave Arjuna hanging, Krishna immediately backs up understanding of eternity with experience of it.

*‘Hear it now in terms of Yoga.’* The practice of Karma Yoga brings to fruition the philosophy of Samkhya. Having extolled the virtues of eternal life, Krishna turns to the practice of it. In the practice of Karma Yoga — serving the desires of others — we naturally renounce our own desires, free ourselves from attachments and experience the eternal present. Living only in the present we gain equanimity of intellect, experience balance of mind and live 200% of life, 100% lower, outer self and 100% higher, inner Self.

**What does ‘Yoga’ mean?** Yoga is as union of lower self with higher Self. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna delineates self from Self. The lower self is ever-changing, perishable; the higher self is never-changing, imperishable, eternal. The lower self is bounded individuality; the higher Self is unbounded universality. The lower self lives in time (or perhaps creates time as system to organize our nows) and gets things done; the higher Self lives outside the passage of time and just is, eternally content in its unbounded contentment.

Not having yet realized nature of the Self, self and Self play tug of war with our attention, with inner and outer mind. We feel imbalanced. Though we instinctively know there is something more harmonious to life, we just can't reach it. Conflicts and frustrations arise between knowing there's something more and not living it. Infrequently, life is smooth and rewarding. We more often scratch across the grooves than find ourselves merrily tapping our foot in one. We seldomly experience the lower self in harmony with higher Self. And here's the rub: we all know contentment lies within but we just can't reach it of our own accord.

In answer to questions about conflicts and frustrations, Yoga raises its hand. Having philosophically established inner and outer aspects of life, Krishna turns to hands-on and addresses the practice of Karma Yoga. In its practice we achieve union through action, hence Karma (action) Yoga (union). We gain unbounded freedom on the level of individuality. Deep within we live in peace and contentment (Self) while simultaneously on the surface level we engage in all life's activities (self). In union we live freed from conflict, frustration and suffering, our intellect established in Yoga, established in union.

**Established intellect:** *'Your intellect established through it.'* Intellect rules the roost. Intellect discerns what is real and true. Without *'established intellect'* we're lost and directionless. Through the practice of Karma Yoga, we purify and strengthen intellect, and realize the ultimate reality and truth: in my very nature I am unbounded contentment of Self. By definition, unbounded includes all that is bound. Having experienced the unbounded nature of Self, the bounded lower self naturally unites with it. United, conflicts and frustrations of inner and outer fall away. We no longer rely on actions to attain happiness and contentment through material possessions. We don't have to. Content deep within we remain at peace and on that level, do not act at all. No action, no binding influence of it. We *'cast away the binding influence of action.'* We achieve balance of inner and outer, balance of mind. Verses 2.45 and 2.47 detail the mechanics of realizing the higher Self, achieving union of lower self with it and establishing intellect.

**Binding influence of action:** We become bound (attached) to our actions when desire contacts the senses with attractive qualities found in objects of sensory experience. The sight of a spiffy new Porsche, touch of silk, enchanting music, alluring scent of perfume, the feel of new running shoes ... capture our attention and pull the inner mind out into the ever-changing, relative field of life. In a sense, desire suckers the weak mind into thinking we've arrived — that the happiness we seek in some sensory experience is the real deal. We're there. *'I've found the happiness and contentment I've always sought.'* Or so we think. Or more so, so we imagine.

Through the offices of desire, our imagination takes over. Upon seeing an ad for vacationing in Bora Bora, we imagine running through the surf, cool water splashing our sun-warmed skin, the scent of hibiscus, the taste of a Bahama Mama sucked through a long straw poked into a coconut ... fulfilling, primitive sex on the beach. The mind's imagined sensory experiences and a busy feeling of progress gained through strategizing how to attain them, overshadow our ability to correctly discern what is real and true (that is, overshadow the intellect) and the experiences we identify with (ego, the finest quality of intellect). Such is the nature of a weak mind. The intellect flits about on

imagined sensory experiences thinking therein lies lasting happiness and contentment. The ego loses familiarity with who we really are, unbounded inner contentment.

For the weak mind, all powerful desire hijacks refined qualities of intellect and ego, and drags them "out there" to where we think we'll find happiness and contentment in the transient/ever-changing relative field of life. This, despite the fact that we all know full well that true happiness and lasting contentment lie within. Regardless, we get all involved (senses, mind, intellect, ego) in desires, thoughts, strategies and actions to attain the object of our desire, believing it will lead to happiness and lasting contentment. The deep-rooted and steady natures of intellect and ego get caught-up in the ever-changing. All seems right with the world.

However, happiness in the ephemeral world of ever-change doesn't last. In time the acquired object loses its allure. Intellect and ego waver. Failure to find lasting contentment —say, in Bora Bora — registers an *impression* of dissatisfaction deep within the mind which rises as a *desire* to once again find happiness and contentment in some new and different object of the senses, say, a new pair of running shoes. Desire seeds *action* anew (we buy the running shoes and go for a run) and again in time, dissatisfaction. On it goes, one action after another to achieve the object of our desire, lasting inner contentment never achieved.

This binding influence of action fixes us to a cycle of

*impression-desire-action.*

Bound to our actions, our attention flows ever outward away from inner contentment, the very goal sought.

Yet, when we selflessly serve other's desires, we break the cycle of *impression-desire-action* on the level of our desire to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses. Serving other's desire we innocently renounce our own. No *desire* to seek happiness and contentment in material things, no selfish *action* to attain it, no *impression* of dissatisfaction. WhamO: the binding influence of action broken. No desire, no attachment to objects of desire. Content in the present, we live in the present. Serving other's desires is key to practicing Karma Yoga (2.45).

In the following verses Krishna addresses the effortless nature of the practice and contrasts it with counterproductive selfish actions which foster bondage to action.

*2.40 In this practice of Yoga no effort is lost and no obstacle exists. Even little of this Dharma [even a little of this practice of Karma Yoga] delivers from great fear.*

Multitasking is a myth: we can't perform two actions at once. Consequently, as soon as we act to serve the desires of others, we innocently renounce our own desires and actions to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses, that is, we renounce attachments. Liberated from attachments, we're freed from the '*binding influence of action*' to acquire them. '*No effort is lost*' because '*in this practice of Yoga*' we experience liberation the instant we act to serve other's desires. '*No obstacle exists*' because we've already broken the binding influence of action. How can an obstacle obstruct our path when we've already reached our destination?

As used here ‘*Dharma*’ means moving forward along the path of evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing. By practicing Karma Yoga — taking action to serve other’s desires — our dharmic path to wellbeing manifests into the present. ‘*Dharma*’ is the feeling of evolution actually experienced during the practice, not some definition on the printed page, not some topic of idle conversation, not wistful thinking. Karma Yoga, the path of action to spiritual and material wellbeing, is our dharma to take. Dharma is the practice of Karma Yoga.

Fear arises from dualities of success and failure. Attached to attractive qualities found in objects of the senses, imagined experiences of success and failure auger into expectations. Fear raises its ugly head out of uncertainty and the potential for despair. However, living in the present and content in all our actions and outcomes, we transcend ephemeral feelings of loss. ‘*Even a little of this Dharma* [even a little of this practice of Karma Yoga] *delivers from great fear.*’

The selfsame destinies of dharma and karma continue in the next verse.

2.41 *In this* [practice and state of] *Yoga the resolute intellect is one-pointed, but many-branched and endlessly diverse are the intellects of the irresolute.*

Charm paves dharma’s path. ‘*In this* [practice of] *Yoga the resolute intellect is one-pointed*’ to establish union of self within eternal and unbounded Self. The practitioner of Karma Yoga experiences the charming feeling of growth towards increased happiness and contentment borne from selflessly serving the desires of others. Unfamiliar with the experience of established union, charm ensures progress by gently resolving intellect and pointing it in the direction of evolution along dharma’s path.

‘*In this* [state of] *Yoga*’ (established union) the goal has been reached. Content within, intellect steadies. Indifferent to the dualities of life on the one hand, and fully resolved and one-pointed by the sweet wholeness of union of self within eternal Self on the other, outer and inner live in the present. One’s feelings, thoughts and actions naturally support the highest levels of spiritual and material wellbeing for all.

Non-practitioners of Karma Yoga operate without the benefit of having charm point the way and encourage action to serve other’s desires. Their minds slip into past and future and get stuck in fantasylands of illusion (*Maya*). Imagination, attractions, aversions, and attachments drag subtle qualities of intellect and ego out onto the anvil of ever-changing reality where they get a sound hammering. Bound to their actions to find happiness and contentment in attachments, non-practitioners ride the turbulence of dualities and emotions. They lose sight of spiritual goals sought. Unresolved in intellect, doubtful and infirm of purpose they hop from one unfulfilling desire and action to the next. ‘*Many-branched and endlessly diverse are the intellects of the irresolute.*’

Without progress towards spiritual goals, non-practitioners lean on selfish actions to achieve material ones, hoping to achieve eternal contentment through satisfaction gained by material wellbeing alone.

2.42 *The undiscerning, engrossed in the letter of the Veda, declare there is nothing else, and speak flowery words.*

“The Vedas are authentic expositions of the path of evolution. They elucidate, step by step, the gradual process of the integration of life and teach the knowledge by which a man may quickly rise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation.”

— *Maharishi Mahesh Yogi* (commenting on 2.42).

“*The undiscerning*” practice poor judgement. ‘*Engrossed in the letter of the Veda*’ they see only its literal language but not its spirit. Through Vedic rites and rituals they seek greater material wellbeing as an end to bondage. *Sans* spirit, their quest for more narrows vision. Believing that enduring happiness and contentment lie within attractive qualities found in objects of the senses ‘*they declare there is nothing else.*’

Problem is, without complementary growth in spiritual wellbeing, material wealth fails to satisfy in the long run. Irresolute and confused about the purpose of the Vedas and how they operate to uplift spiritual wellbeing as well, they seek ever greater material wealth. Never satisfied, they fix themselves to the cycle of impression-desire-action, the binding influence of action.

Ignorance is bliss. Bondage is its own safe space. Attractive qualities found in objects of the senses offer degrees of happiness and satisfaction. Seeing the Vedas as only a means to liberation through attainment of material wealth and power they demonstrate the shallow and meaningless capacity of their understanding by speaking ‘*flowery words*’ to reassure themselves and convince others to join them in folly. Misery loves company.

2.43 *Filled with desires, with heaven as their goal, they proclaim rebirth as the reward for action, and prescribe special Vedic rites for the attainment of enjoyment and power.*

The bliss of ignorance keeps the hamster-wheel spinning. ‘*Engrossed in the letter of the Veda*’ (previous verse) leaves one ‘*filled with desires*’ that are ever-refueled by the impression of dissatisfaction borne of action (in the cycle of impression-desire-action, 2.39).

Fixed on the horizontal plane ‘*the undiscerning*’ (previous verse) see the entire purpose of the Vedas in terms comforts, passions and material wellbeing. To them, heavenly planes are as material as the Earthly one and offer only enhanced luxury and sensual pleasure. Rebirth offers ‘*enjoyment and power*’ at high social positions. *Engrossed in the letter of the Veda*’ (previous verse), the undiscerning see only the cycle of life-and-death, and remain oblivious to the spirit of the Vedas and its promise of spiritual evolution and final attainment of liberation.

Such are the powers of attractive qualities found in objects of the senses to overshadow the weak mind. So focused on ‘*the letter of the Veda*’ and seduced by their own ‘*flowery words,*’ they favor selfish actions. They lose sight of the vertical plane and achieving liberation from bondage through selfless actions, the very opposite of their narcissistic quest for gain along the horizontal plane.

2.44 *The resolute state of intellect does not arise (on the vertical plane) in the mind of those deeply attached to enjoyment and power, and whose thoughts are captivated by their own flowery words.*

This verse sums up the previous three. *‘The resolute state of intellect does not arise’* in the weak mind focused on material wellbeing. Attention held by the attractive qualities found in fruits of action, one lives on the horizontal plane, in an unresolved and *‘many-branched’* state of intellect, skipping from one fruit to the next, failing to find lasting contentment in each. Taking temporary pleasure in nothing higher than the material fruit borne of Vedic action, one loses sight of the ultimate goal to achieve steady and resolved intellect, to *‘cast away the binding influence of action’* (2.39), to “quickly rise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation,” (MMY on the Vedas, 2.42), to live outside rebirth in the eternal nature of the Self.

Attachment engenders attachment. *‘Deeply attached to enjoyment and power’* keeps one bound to the cycle of impression-desire-action, always seeking some greater level of material wellbeing and enjoyment of power over others. If attachment to relative levels of material wellbeing and power is your reality and aspiration —and yet unfulfilling — you’re bound to continually seek attachments of even greater *‘enjoyment and power.’*

Captivated by one’s own *‘flowery words’* speaks to the delusional fallacy of seeking lasting contentment outside one’s Self. Further, seeking liberation on our own level of intellectual understanding we achieve little if any progress along our evolutionary path. Deep down in our heart of hearts we know lasting contentment lies within, that the path we seek has nothing to do with enjoyment and power experienced “out there” and yet, having at most limited experience of liberation and at best fuzzy understanding of how to engender it, we’re lost at sea.

What’s needed is a clear experience of liberation.

*2.45 The Veda’s concern is with the three Gunas. Be without the three Gunas, freed from duality, ever firm in purity, independent of possessions, possessed of the Self.*

There’s a new kid on the block. Yoga supersedes the Vedas. Understanding and experience supersedes the experience of action alone.

The three Gunas are the primal forces of creation — (1) spur to action, (2) development and (3) dissolution — which uphold all activity, everywhere and at all times. All three Gunas are necessary for creation to stay its course of evolution. No one Guna exists without the other two, each operating to relative degrees in the phenomenal world of change: creating, developing and dissolving one stage flowing into the next.

**Be without the three Gunas:** *‘The Veda’s concern is with the three Gunas.’* That is, the Veda’s concern to “arise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation” (MMY on the Vedas, 2.42) is based on action. To shift Arjuna’s attention from the horizontal plane to the vertical and snap him out of his obsession with right and wrong action, Krishna instructs him to be without action. *‘Be without the three gunas.’*

Krishna’s teaching is a master stroke of simplicity and effectiveness: to resolve the course of action, *‘Be without the three Gunas,’* be without action. Don’t look for a solution to issues of right and wrong action on the level of action — *Unfathomable is the course of action’* (4.16) — else you’ll dissolve into a puddle of irresolution, weakness and inaction, which at this point in the *Gita*, Arjuna personifies.

Though it sounds incongruous — resolving the nature of action and its consequences by nonaction — Krishna’s logic fulfills the practice of Karma Yoga he sets out in 2.39: no three Gunas, no action, no *‘binding influence of action.’* On the level of the Self, nonactive deep within and separated from action on the surface level of the mind (self), the practitioner achieves liberation from action, experiences the eternal and unbounded nature of contentment (Self) in all action, while at the same time distancing from the consequences of action.

**Practice Karma Yoga — be without action:** Whenever we selflessly serve the desires of others we break *‘the binding influence of action.’* In serving others, their desire sparks our action to achieve their outcome. We operate on their desire and expectation, not ours. In the moment we act to fulfill the other’s desires, we break the cycle of impression-desire-action at the level of our desire to find lasting contentment in the material world. No desire, no action (no three Gunas), no binding influence of action.

This is the practice of Karma Yoga: serve the desires of others and automatically renounce your own. In selflessly serving others, we innocently renounce our own selfish desires to find happiness and contentment in objects of the senses. No selfish desire to achieve lasting contentment in the material and everchanging world of the three Gunas, no action to attain it (*‘Be without the three Gunas’*), no impression of dissatisfaction to spur desire and action anew. Poof! In putting other’s desires first, we naturally renounce our own and break the cycle of impression-desire-action (2.39).

*‘No effort is lost.’* In the instant as we act to serve other’s desires, our outward flow of attention to seek happiness and contentment in objects of the senses stops dead in its tracks. Liberated from hijacking desire and the self-perpetuating cycle of impression-desire-action, the ever-present and charming field of dharma (2.40) turns attention inward onto the happiness and contentment we seek. Such is the happy and content nature of charm. The path and the goal are one and the same. Liberation is instant.

*‘No obstacle exists.’* Having innocently and completely renounced desire, we need nothing. We’re content. There is nothing to obstruct. We’re there. We’re content within unbounded contentment itself. We live in the eternal present outside time.

**Motive and the mechanics of liberation:** Dharma is motive, an ever-present field drawing us forward along the path of evolution. We seek happiness and contentment in everything we do. Every action. No exceptions. Everyone — Stalin, Gandhi, your mom, the prison-sentence lifer, you — seeks happiness and contentment in all actions taken. (This may be true for coyotes, turtles and amebae as well. *Quien sabe?*) It is the goal of all action to realize “final liberation” by taking the direction of happiness and contentment, the direction of dharma’s flow.

Motive for more happiness and contentment is universally constant, underlies the nature of three Gunas, gives them direction and hence, gives direction to all our feelings, thoughts, and actions. This is dharma: life’s ever-present compass heading towards happiness and contentment along the path to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing, and final liberation from the bondage of karma.

Dharma is the path to liberation. Have faith in your dharma. *‘Be without the three Gunas.’* Throw in the towel. Resistance — that is, selfishness — is futile. Serve other’s



desires. Innocently renounce your own. Hand your awareness over to dharma. Dharma naturally turns attention inward towards unrealized happiness and contentment; acting in accord with dharma to serve other's happiness and contentment manifest — because dharma is the charm of happiness and contentment we seek.

*'The resolute intellect is one-pointed'* (2.41). Having innocently renounced desire and halted the flow of attention out into the disruptive phenomenal world, intellect steadies. Distractions fall away. Singular-motive dharma aims intellect towards liberation. Through intellect's subtlest quality, the ego, we see our ultimate Reality and Truth. Steady, resolute and one-pointed we realize who we really are deep within our mind, outside change, outside time, constant: unbounded and eternal inner contentment, the Self. In realizing our Self in its fulfilling nature of contentment, we feel familiar with all possibilities (Being).

Realization of Self occurs in the same breath we renounce desire. Realization takes no time. As soon as we renounce desire dharma takes over — and the charm of dharma is that happiness and contentment we seek. We live outside the need for change. Content in the present, we live in the present.

**Union:** Having realized Self, we achieve union of finite outer activity (lower self) within the infinite nature of unbounded inner contentment (higher Self). Contentment just is, non-dimensional, constant, unchanging. Contentment is the End in itself, the goal of all action. By definition, the infinite includes all finite and bound. The finite self unites with the infinite Self as soon as we realize our true nature, inner contentment. In union, individual feeling, thinking and acting (self) coexists in simultaneous union with unbounded contentment (Self).

Desires still engage the mind in actions but fail to drag refined qualities of intellect and ego out into the ever-changing phenomenal world. We still desire on the surface level of the mind; deep within desires no longer occur. This is the experience of union (or Yoga): simultaneously maintaining never-changing inner contentment (Self) while engaged in individual outer activity (self). The assuring, comforting and accepting unbound nature of contentment pervades all actions.

**Mother is at home:** In union we feel secure from within. The bright light of contentment shines through everything. Petty individuality drops away. We become cosmic in nature. We really do experience the “good day” everyone tells us to have.

- We're '*freed from duality*' of disunion between lower self and higher Self functioning at relative and absolute levels of life. In union, outer and inner live in harmonious union of inner contentment. Tugs of heart and mind cease to whipsaw us into conflicting feelings and actions which wear us down. In the evenness of inner contentment we achieve balance of mind. Success and failure, progress and reversal, ups and downs, hot and cold, easy and hard, forward and backward ... all the dualities of life release their grip. Liberated from fear engendered by loss and gain (2.40), we act in balanced, skillful and easy ways. Freed to act spontaneously, we readily achieve outcomes. We're in the groove.
- Freed from fear of loss we operate from refined levels of inner awareness '*ever firm in purity*' of our selfless intention to serve others, engendering growth in spiritual and

material wellbeing. Negativity and wrong actions fall away. In contented sense of Self, right action and positive attitude dominate (2.47).

- Unbounded in contentment, we feel fulfilled. In need of nothing, self-worth exists ‘*independent of possessions.*’ Attachments begone. We cast away the burden of tightly holding onto what we have and the need to possess what we don’t. We break free from emotional attachments to outcomes, exercise positive aspects of our personality and enjoy life through actions we take.
- Self dominates. ‘*Possessed of the Self*’ inner contentment pervades all feeling, thinking and action. The bright light of sunshine illuminates all. Our unbounded and fearless inner nature governs. We experience steady intellect and balance of mind (2.48). In the nature of the Self’s unshakable contentment, we feel fulfilled (following verse).

It’s not called a “practice” for nothing. We experience union each time we serve the desires of others. Depth and duration of experience depend on strength of mind. Continued practice of Karma Yoga — serving other’s desires — strengthens the mind, and enlivens experiences of the higher Self and the harmonious union of lower self with it. In time we become established in union, established in Yoga (2.47, 2.48).

**Proof:** Hold the door open for someone.

2.46 *To the enlightened Brahman all the Vedas are of no more use than is a small well in a place flooded with water on all sides.*

“My cup runneth over” (23rd Psalm).

This verse carries the previous verse to its conclusion. ‘*Possessed of the Self*’ the ‘*enlightened Brahman*’ feels fulfilled. The experience of quiet inner contentment and feeling of completeness hold sway. The enlightened Brahman feels at home with the world, attuned to the universe and in the groove. The enlightened Brahman witnesses actions flowing smoothly, one into another. In this state of fulfillment, the enlightened Brahman has reached the goal of all action: complete liberation ‘*from the binding influence of action*’ (2.39).

‘*The Veda’s concern is with the three Gunas*’ (2.45). The Veda’s concern is with action to “rise through all levels of evolution and attain final liberation” (MMY on the Vedas, 2.42). Having achieved the goal of all action there’s no need for action the Vedas prescribe. ‘*All the Vedas are of no more use than is a small well in a place flooded with water on all sides.*’

But to achieve the goal of all action (nonaction) we have to act.

2.47 *You have control over action alone, never over its fruits. Live not for the fruits of action nor attach yourself to inaction.*

‘*You have control over action alone.*’ Choose right action and gain ‘*control over*’ efforts to achieve outcomes. Choose wrong action, choose adversity, mire and muddle, and leave outcomes to other fates.

**Right and wrong actions:** Selfless right actions support growth in spiritual and material wellbeing. Practicing Karma Yoga is right action. When we serve other's desires we feel bigger, more capable and confident. Attention steadies. Operating in the present we feel guided and in tune with the flow, simultaneously purposeful and yet, indifferent to outcomes. Resolute and motivated. At ease. Positive. We find our place in the world, and feel whole and happy. Uplifted from within.

The uplifting feeling of liberation experienced while selflessly acting to fulfill the desires of others spurs us to action and fuels us forward through thick and thin. Unmindful of outcomes deep within while simultaneously motivated to achieve them, we pour single-minded attention into fulfilling tasks that need doing. Distractions lose sway.

Instinctively aware of what's important; unmindful of what's not. Decisive. Each action is in the moment and builds on the foundation set by the previous. We feel harmony between quiet inner awareness and outer activity. Our path of action to higher levels of wellbeing unfolds in front of us.

On the other hand, selfish wrong actions hamper growth in spiritual and material wellbeing. Hence, wrong actions are sins. By engaging in them, we become a negative force. Wrong actions cause harm to others and ourselves; hinder achieving outcomes; produce stress, strain and damaging influences on others and the environment; diminishes what has been created for the greater good. Wrong actions result from selfish attitudes of avarice, anger, fear, revenge ... and the ever-seductive sin, elitism. All these sins hamper evolution: selfish attitudes point our attention outwards in the direction of sensory experiences and attachments. Consequently, they reinforce bondage to action and distance us from life-supporting right actions, evolution, inner contentment, and union.

The good news is that selfless right actions obviate selfish wrong actions. Mutually exclusive right and wrong actions cannot co-occur. Selfless actions in service to others leave no room for negative emotions, selfish attitudes and the harmful wrong actions they engender. *'You have control over action alone.'* Gain *'control'* over action, evolution and outcomes. Choose right over wrong actions. Serve the desires of others. Therein lies the smooth path forward to spiritual and material wellbeing, the ultimate fruit of action.

**Fruits of action:** The fruits of our actions (outcomes) exist in the phenomenal world, beyond ego, intellect, mind, and senses. As a consequence, we have no direct control over them, *'never over its fruits.'* In putting attention on fruits we siphon energy away from actions required to achieve them. We fix our attention on the horizontal plane and lose sight of the vertical and the purpose of action: liberation from bondage. *'Live not for the fruits of action.'*

*'Nor attach yourself to inaction'* because liberation from bondage requires action. No action to break its binding influence, no evolution, no liberation.

**It's a practice:** Through selfless action to serve the desires of others we *'break'* bondage to action. Through repeated service we *'cast'* it away.

Serving the desires of others, we break *'the binding influence of action'* and transcend personal limitations. We feel confident and capable. Dualities, and the anticipation of loss and gain lose their grip. Actions feel natural, purposeful and right. We enjoy

performing them. The harmony between outer actions and nonactive inner contentment strengthens union between the two.

Through repeated acts of selflessly serving others, union strengthens. Optimism rules. Possibilities pop out of the woodwork. Actions feel spot on. Outcomes become more easily and effortlessly achieved. Harmony between inner contentment and outer activity deepens union between the two. In the groove, we increasingly identify with inner contentment. In time, union stabilizes. We *'cast away the binding influence of action'* and become established in union, that is, established in Yoga. How long will it take? Only long enough to understand this chapter.

*2.48 Established in Yoga, perform actions having abandoned attachments and having become balanced in success and failure, for balance of mind is called Yoga.*

This verse brings the previous three to fruition in the practicalities of daily life.

*'Established in Yoga'* we've achieved the goal of all actions and have nothing to gain or lose in performing them. Having *'cast away the binding influence of action'* we're content within. Consequently, we've *'abandoned attachments'* to the fruits of outer activity. Equanimity and balance are two sides of the same coin. Out of this equanimity of inner contentment we experience *'a mind balanced in success and failure'* in outer activities.

Freed from overshadowing *'success and failure'* — and the potential for despair — we're free and open to the flow of life. Surprises hold little influence on our forward movement to get things done. Frictions, delays, difficult personalities ... all the obstructions we encounter in moving the ball downfield fail to knock us off balance. Having cast off the emotional attachments associated with imbalance in loss and gain, we're steady, alert, flexible, and resourceful. We spontaneously respond to situations as they arise. We play heads-up ball and naturally throw ourselves into action.

Balance of mind is manifest union of self within Self. That union is called Yoga. *'For balance of mind is called Yoga.'*

*2.49 Far away from the balanced intellect is action devoid of greatness. Take refuge in the intellect. Pitiful are those who live for the fruits of action.*

Through the faculty of intellect we make thousands of decisions daily. A balanced intellect identifies with unbounded inner contentment of the Self. Based in the Self, all decisions are selfless (by definition) and so, intellect inherently discerns selfless right action from selfish wrong action. (2.47) Call *'balanced intellect'* wisdom (later, 2.51). [By-the-by, balanced intellect and its ability to make wise decisions which support all is the long sought-after goal of a liberal arts education.]

*'Far away from the balanced intellect'* is selfish intellect attached to the ever-changing phenomenal field of existence, riding the rollercoaster of life's dualities. In selfish search for happiness and contentment in objects of the senses, attractions (and aversions) found in those objects overshadow the steady nature of intellect and jerk it around from one promising (or calamitous) outcome to next. Stuck in emotional thinking, we falter.

By taking refuge in wavering intellect, the selfish character of our decisions holds favor. Discernment and making correct decisions which benefit all flies out the window. In the willy-nilly world of wavering intellect, we lose foresight and direction. We stumble along at best.

Under the sway of wavering intellect, we perform feeble and ineffective actions '*devoid of [the] greatness*' required to further evolution in spiritual and material wellbeing. We fritter away life, far less effective than we otherwise might be. '*Pitiful are those who live for the fruits of action,*' selfish, bound to the ever-changing, out of step with the pull of dharma, pathetic and dismissed, willfully trapped on the rollercoaster of dualities, dizzy with the inevitable ups and downs and twisting turns of fate.

'*Take refuge in the intellect.*' Practice Karma Yoga. Serve the desires of others. Be without the three Gunas. Steady the intellect and identify with nonactive Self, contentment, and the source of life and all its potential (Being) (2.45). Naturally perform actions based on a '*balanced intellect*' which identifies with the unbounded nature of Self. Enjoy your inner unbounded strengths. Bring them to fore in outer activity. '*Take refuge in the intellect.*' Go with the flow of dharma. Serve the desires of others. Cast away the consequences of karma (next verse).

2.50 *He whose intellect unites with the Self casts off good and evil [actions/karma] even here. Therefore, devote yourself to Yoga. [The practice of Karma] Yoga is skill in action.*

Be without the three Gunas, be without action, be without karma, Be.

To help illustrate the difference between action and nonaction, Krishna describes the full range of action from good to evil. Good or right actions in accord with dharma support evolution; evil or wrong actions in discord with dharma retard evolution. Through '*good*' actions we prosper. Through '*evil*' actions we suffer. All actions lie between extremes of good and evil, between consequences of prosperity and suffering. Nonactions — actions beyond the consequences of karma — lie outside '*good and evil*' in the field of all possibilities.

'*He whose intellect unites with the Self.*' Through the ego, the subtlest quality of intellect, we realize the ultimate Reality and Truth: we are unbounded and nonactive inner contentment. We are Self, outside action, outside time, outside cause and effect. Being in Self, we unite with it, obviously, and the intellect takes on the nonactive nature of Self: eternally quiet, steady, unbounded, nonactive, untouchable. In nonaction we live beyond time and the whole range of action ruled by the three Gunas. More importantly, in nonaction we live beyond the consequences of our actions, beyond karma and completely '*cast off good and evil even here.*' We fully achieve the promise set forth in 2.39: '*Cast away the binding influence of karma.*'

'*Devote yourself to Yoga.*' Devote yourself to the practice of achieving steady and balanced intellect through the practice of Yoga. Devote yourself to uniting intellect with the Self. That's the name of the game: Yoga. Through the intellect realize the Self. Unite with it. Achieve the state of nonaction deep within you. Let nonaction and all the possibilities of it (Being) flourish in your feelings, thoughts and actions. By serving the desires of others spontaneously renounce your own desires and actions — and the entire

range of good and evil actions they foster. Cast away the bondage of karma. '*Devote yourself to Yoga*' and live beyond the effects of your actions, live beyond karma.

'*Yoga is skill in action.*' In union, lower self unites with higher Self. United with it, active lower self bases itself in non-active higher Self. Beyond dualities and the fear they engender, beyond the consequence of your actions, perform spontaneous, smooth and effective actions, actions that achieve desired outcomes. This is '*skill in action*': lower self based in higher Self, action based in nonaction, action freed from fear, action liberated from the bondage of karma, actions based in all possibilities. The practice of Karma Yoga itself is skill in action, the ultimate in manifest wisdom.

2.51 *The wise, their intellect truly united with the Self, having renounced fruits born of action, liberated from the bonds of birth, live eternally in a place void of suffering.*

'*The wise*' operate from the level of the Self, unattached to the phenomenal world and its sphere of influence and change. '*Their intellect truly united with the Self*' they live beyond the consequences of their actions and naturally make good decisions unencumbered with selfish desire. Desireless actions uphold evolution to higher levels of spiritual and material wellbeing for all (previous two verses).

'*Having renounced the fruits born of action....*' The word "renounced" is past tense. Renunciation is necessary for '*their intellect [to be] truly united with the Self.*' The canonical view is that renunciation is an overt "practice" of indifference to fruits (or outcomes). By practicing indifference to fruits we renounce desire for them. Seems logical enough. The practice of Karma Yoga is then the practice of indifference to objects of desire. True enough but not through overt renunciation.

On the other hand.... In my commentary I use renunciation as an "event." The practice of Karma Yoga is serving other's desires, an event that innocently renounces one's own desires.

Before commenting further we need to resolve which type of renunciation Lord Krishna refers to when he says, '*Having renounced fruits born of action.*' Practice of event? It's a big deal.

Renunciation as a practice:

A universal belief holds that renunciation is the practice of maintaining an attitude of indifference to outcomes (likewise *dispassion*, *disinterest* and *neutral*). By downplaying one's interest in outcomes, one renounces desire for them and achieves a desireless state of mind — or so goes the notion of the canonical practice of Karma Yoga.

Truth be told, there is no such thing as a desireless state of mind, unless of course, you're dead. Desire for more is ever present — at least on the surface level of the mind (self). Desire for more is a good thing; desiring more happiness and contentment points us along our path of dharma to higher levels of wellbeing. Desire for more is true North. So, right out of the starting blocks renunciation as a practice runs into a philosophical problem. It runs into practical problems as well.

Practitioners of indifference achieve the opposite of their intended effect. Rather than liberate themselves from the binding influence of action, renunciation as a practice

reinforces it. Indifference itself becomes the desired outcome. Indeed, to the serious practitioner, indifference becomes their *raison d'être*. But, one can't desire indifference and simultaneously remain desireless. In fact, the more desirous and determined to achieve indifference, the stronger one epoxies desire into the cycle of impression-desire-action, and reinforces bondage — and ignorance.

It gets worse. In practicing indifference one takes their eye off the ball. Concentrating on indifference to outcomes, rather than on actions to achieve them, one becomes unfocused and inattentive. Drawing on a finite store of mental energy to remain indifferent and constantly struggling to overcome the natural desire for happiness and contentment (that is, pull of dharma) wears us down and dulls the mind. Practitioners of indifference become indolent, easily distracted and unproductive — unfortunately, all signs taken as demonstrating the effectiveness of practicing indifference. That is, if you're "spaced out" and detached from reality you've achieved the goal of indifference, or at least you're well on your way.

In focusing on indifference to outcomes, practitioners hit rock bottom. Indifferent actions are selfish actions and lie close to the evil end on the metric of '*good and evil actions*.' Selfish thinking — 'Me. Me. Me. It's all about me conjuring a mood of indifference' — fosters actions which give rise to anger, fear, jealousy, prejudice, and other negative emotions. Negative emotions retard flexibility and hamper evolution. Typically practitioners of indifference — ineffective in worldly life of responsibilities, strained by holding the natural desire for happiness at bay and absorbed in their self — are ticking time-bombs. Such is the nature of being stoned on ignorance. Moods of indifference are not Self-sustaining. Worse, practicing indifference to outcomes is a negative force in the world.

Renunciation as an event:

Whenever we serve the desire of others (the event), we naturally break the cycle of impression-desire-action at the level of our desire to find happiness and contentment in material things. In a snap of the fingers we innocently renounce our own desire to find contentment in '*fruits born of action*.' Having renounced all desire, the intellect unites with the self (2.50). We experience desires on the surface level of the mind. Deep within on the level of contented and unbounded Self, desires no longer occur.

Fish or cut bait?

Krishna establishes criteria for evaluating renunciation in 2.39 and 2.40. He couldn't be clearer: renunciation must '*cast away the binding influence of action*' while '*no effort is lost and no obstacle exists*.' Renunciation as a practice reinforces the binding influence of action and in addition, requires great effort to overcome the mind's natural tendency to follow dharma — a huge obstacle.

Yet.... We don't need to practice indifference. Every time we serve other's desires (the event) we renounce our own. What could be more readily experienced and logical! The mind naturally goes with the flow of dharma towards inner contentment, union and wisdom. '*No effort is lost and no obstacle exists*' when we serve the desires of others.

I'm placing my bet on renunciation as an event. Onward....

*‘Liberated from the bonds of birth....’* Birth continues until the goal of liberation from karma has been achieved. This is the purpose of life and action. Once the goal of all actions and life has been achieved, we are liberated from the bonds of karma. There is no need to be reborn and live another life. We live in a place beyond selfish attachments and the evil actions selfishness fosters, *‘liberated from the bonds of birth, live eternally in a place void of suffering.’* That is, live void of the evil feelings, thoughts and actions, and the negativity and suffering they spawn. Such are the rewards of being wise.

2.52 *When your intellect has crossed the mire of delusion, then you will gain indifference to what has been heard and what is to be heard.*

There is no time like the present.

By renouncing desire (previous verse) we cast away past and future, and surrender to the present. When the intellect steadies through acts of selflessly serving the desires of others, realizes the unbounded nature of the Self and unites with it, the *‘intellect has crossed the mire of delusion’* with the attractive qualities found in objects of the senses that keep us bound to the ever-changing phenomenal world. Stuck in the past. Stuck in the future. This is the ultimate self-delusion: we all know that what we seek lies within, yet we constantly look for it “out there” in some future (or past) imagined event. *Maya* is in our neuron-firing heads.

Having *‘cast away the binding influence of action,’* (2.39) the timeless light of Self illuminates all. The slogfest is over. Understanding and experience become one. The babble stops. The *‘intellect truly united with the Self’* (previous verse), we live in the present, content within, indifferent to the past and future, totally indifferent *‘to what has been heard and what is to be heard’* on gaining liberation from the binding influence of action (see also 2.46).

Be here now. (Sorry. I couldn’t resist.) Live in the eternal present, outside the tick-tock of time. Hold the door open for someone, help your mom with the dishes, pitch in with your spouse ... or perform some other simple act of selfless service. Step into the present and onto the path. *‘No effort is lost and no obstacle exists.’*

Summary:

All feelings, thoughts and actions lead to the Self. There is no escape. It is our dharma to unite lower self with higher Self. The allure of fulfillment draws us like a magnet. When we serve someone else’s desire it is that charming tug towards fulfillment that spurs us to action and overshadows our own desire to find happiness and contentment in attractive qualities found in objects of the senses. We experience union and want more of it.

In the beginning the feeling of union is not enough to sustain itself. The mind is too weak to resist furthering contentment in the material world and we lose the feeling. Repeated experience of union through the practice of Karma Yoga reinforces the feeling of it. In time we come to identify with it and the value of contentment begins to be felt in all we do. Infused with contentment life flows along. The ups and downs are less



consequential. Our actions feel harmonious. We're in the groove. Lower self lives in higher Self and we feel complete. So far, so good.

<sup>1</sup> I stand on the shoulders of a giant. I use *Maharishi Mahesh Yogi on the Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation and Commentary* as my primary reference. Maharishi's emphasis on turning the mind within to the field of least activity through the practice of Transcendental Meditation and my emphasis on the Yoga of action — the practice of Karma Yoga — lead me to slightly alter his translation and differ substantially in commentary. TM prepares the mind for action to achieve the highest levels of spiritual and material wellbeing (pulling the arrow back on the bowstring). This practice of Karma Yoga is that action (the arrow flying forward). The practice of Karma Yoga brings to fruition any practice which quiets the mind and prepares the practitioner for action.