

Śloka 17

कर्मणो ह्यपि बोद्धव्यं बोद्धव्यं च विकर्मणः ।  
अकर्मणश्च बोद्धव्यं गहना कर्मणो गतिः ॥ १७ ॥

*karmaṇo hyapi boddhavyaṁ boddhavyaṁ ca vikarmaṇaḥ  
akarmaṇaśca boddhavyaṁ gahanā karmaṇo gatiḥ*

कर्मणः	<i>karmaṇaḥ</i>	of right action
हि	<i>hi</i>	for
अपि	<i>api</i>	also
बोधव्यम्	<i>boddhavyam</i>	should be known
च	<i>ca</i>	and
विकर्मणः	<i>vikarmaṇaḥ</i>	of the forbidden action
अकर्मणः	<i>akarmaṇaḥ</i>	of inaction
च	<i>ca</i>	and
बोधव्यम्	<i>boddhavyam</i>	should be known
गहना	<i>gahanā</i>	deep
कर्मणः	<i>karmaṇaḥ</i>	of action
गतिः	<i>gatiḥ</i>	the path

**The true nature of action should be known and the truth about prohibited action should be known. Similarly, the truth about inaction should be known. The nature of action is hard to understand.**

**The true nature of action should be known and the truth about prohibited action should be known.** - Life itself is action; life and action cannot be separated. Activity only ceases when one dies. In this verse action is explained in its triple form as right action, forbidden action, and inaction.

What is right action? Action motivated by certain constructive desires or intentions that bring a positive result is right action. Right action is performed in three ways:

1) Daily duties (*nitya karma*) - These are actions performed for one's physical and mental health; such as taking care of the household, prayers, and meditation as recommended by the scriptures.

2) Actions performed for a special occasion (*naimittik karma*) - These are actions such as ceremonies, worship, giving alms on certain days, and pilgrimage at certain times.

3) Actions performed to attain certain desirable results (*kamya karma*) - These are actions like performing certain rituals; for example, in order to have a child; or to perform fire sacrifice to achieve success in worldly life.

What is prohibited action (*vikarma*)? Prohibited action is any action in which the motive is destructive, harmful to others, against the rules of society, or forbidden by the scriptures.

Lord Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna that right actions are conducive to one's self-development and should be pursued. Forbidden actions (*vikarma*) should be shunned because they block one's self-development and also harm the society.

**the truth about inaction should be known** - Inaction (*akarma*) is generally understood to mean the suspension of the activities of the mind, speech, or body. Such inactivity is rejected in the teachings of the **Bhagavad Gītā** because it blocks a person's self-development. The truth of inaction, which needs to be known, is subtle. As with action, the characteristics of inaction can be determined by the motive behind the inaction. Inaction can be action if there is a motive to attain a desirable result. It can even be forbidden action if the motive behind the inaction is destructive. In reality, true inaction means action without the desire to act, or action with no self-interest.

*Karma* (action), in its triple aspect, can be very hard to understand because its real nature is subtle.

## Śloka 18

कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्मणि च कर्म यः ।  
 स बुद्धिमान्मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत् ॥ १८ ॥

*karmaṇyakarma yaḥ paśyedakarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ  
 sa buddhimānmanuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt*

कर्मणि	<i>karmaṇi</i>	in action
अकर्म	<i>akarma</i>	inaction
यः	<i>yaḥ</i>	who
पश्येत्	<i>paśyet</i>	would see
अकर्मणि	<i>akarmaṇi</i>	in inaction
च	<i>ca</i>	and
कर्म	<i>karma</i>	action
यः	<i>yaḥ</i>	who
सः	<i>saḥ</i>	he
बुद्धिमान्	<i>buddhimān</i>	wise
मनुष्येषु	<i>manuṣyeṣu</i>	in men, in people
सः	<i>saḥ</i>	he
युक्तः	<i>yuktaḥ</i>	yogi
कृत्स्नकर्मकृत्	<i>kṛtsnakarmakṛt</i>	performer of all actions

## VERSE 18

*The Truth About Action Is Expounded*

18

**He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is wise among men. He is a yogi and a true performer of all actions.**

The expression of any known or hidden desire in the mind is an action. In performing action, the mind, intellect, senses, and body are involved. The previous verse explained the nature of action (*karma*) as 1) right action, 2) wrong action (*vikarma*), and 3) inaction (*akarma*), saying that true inaction means action performed without the desire to act, or action with no self-interest. Prohibited action binds the soul in the cycle of birth and death by creating ignorance and as this verse is teaching how to get liberated from this cycle, prohibited action (*vikarma*) is not mentioned. The verse expounds the truth of right action and inaction (*akarma*).

**He who sees inaction in action** - This means to remain unattached in the performance of action or in the planning of action. Actions undertaken with no self-interest and with a sense of devotion create detachment. In deep thinking and planning, which is also action, one should remain unattached.

When there is no attachment to action, whether the action is performed outwardly or not, the performer of the action becomes an observer of his or her own activities. In the action there will be no self-interest and no ego of being a doer. The action then becomes true inaction and the doer becomes a non-doer.

When one understands and performs action without expecting the fruit of the action, action stops creating new desires. Also, when actions are performed as a service to others with no selfish motive, existing desires in the mind subside. In this way one becomes desireless. The state of desirelessness reinforces the state of actionlessness and this leads to a state of complete detachment.

Performing action with no selfish motive, performing action without attachment to the action and its fruit, and performing action only for the good of others, are examples of seeing "inaction in action." In these cases the body, mind, and senses act within the field of desireless inaction.

**action in inaction** - In reality there can be no inaction as long as one is alive because the three *gunas* are continuously acting in the mind, intellect, senses, and body. Only the Self, which is the life force behind the function of the mind, body, intellect, and senses, is beyond action and inaction. One who understands

this sees “action in inaction.”

One who renounces all worldly activities and lives in seclusion, and yet desires worldly activities and possessions, and identifies oneself as the doer as in “I have renounced the world,” that one is performing “action in inaction.” The mind is always thinking about the world and its pleasurable objects, which create binding.

Aspirants who develop the capacity to examine their own thoughts can easily discover their own self interest in action. They can choose to renounce attachment to action and its fruit and thus perform perfect action. Such a person who recognizes “inaction in action” and “action in inaction” without any attachment or ego of being a doer, and who stands as an observer, is the wise one among humans. That one is a yogi and knower of the Self, and a true performer of all actions.

This verse can also have the following interpretation: *Karma* is action performed in the present. *Vikarma* denotes the diversified latencies of past actions that are stored in the mind. *Akarma* is that portion of *vikarma* that are ripe and ready to give their fruit, and is called destiny or fate. One who sees inaction (*akarma*) in action (*karma*) means one who sees the possibilities of all present actions as being destined and so does not identify oneself as the doer, does not get attached, and does not develop self interest. Seeing action (*karma*) in inaction (*akarma*) means seeing the latencies of past actions bearing fruit in the present as the result of past actions. One accepts the resulting pleasure and pain as caused by past action and does not develop the ego of being the doer. Hence, one is saved from the sins of all action.

## Śloka 19

यस्य सर्वे समारम्भाः कामसंकल्पवर्जिताः ।  
ज्ञानाग्निदग्धकर्माणं तमाहुः पण्डितं बुधाः ॥ १९ ॥

*yasya sarve samārambhāḥ kāmasaṅkalpavarjitāḥ  
jñānāgnidagdhakarmāṇaṁ tamāhuḥ paṇḍitaṁ budhāḥ*

यस्य	yasya	whose
सर्वे	sarve	all
समारम्भाः	samārambhāḥ	undertakings
काम	kāma	desire
सङ्कल्प	saṅkalpa	purpose
वर्जिताः	varjitāḥ	devoid of
ज्ञानाग्नि	jñānāgni	fire of knowledge
दग्ध	dagdha	burnt
कर्माणम्	karmāṇam	actions
तम्	tam	him
आहुः	āhuḥ	call
पण्डितम्	paṇḍitam	a sage
बुधाः	budhāḥ	the wise

## VERSES 19-22

*Non-attachment of the Performer of Action Who Sees  
"Inaction in Action and Action in Inaction"*

19

**Even the wise call him a sage whose undertakings are free from desires and purpose, and whose actions are burned up by the fire of wisdom.**

The memory of any physical object creates desire and purpose. The desire is caused by the purposefulness of the object. Desire and purpose create thinking and planning. Activity takes place based on thoughts and plans. In any undertaking this process of desire, purpose, thoughts, plans, and action takes place. In this process the mind remains attached to the action and expects a favorable result. This planned pattern of action with attachment forces a person to work hard and fight against the odds to achieve the goal. Because the mind is intensely attached to such undertakings, the person becomes trapped by desires, and dwells in a state of discontent. Such a person's mind remains clouded by ego, attachments, and desires.

In contrast, a yogi's undertakings are without desire or attachment to action and its result. The actions performed by the yogi with that spirit become inaction. This does not mean that the undertakings of a yogi are performed without any thoughts, plans, or purpose. It only means that, unlike a common person, a yogi never gets attached to any undertakings, nor does the yogi expect any selfish gain. Instead, the yogi performs action to keep the world order without having a sense of doership. At the same time the yogi works with intelligence, full zeal, and enthusiasm.

Desire, attachment, and the ego of doership are caused by ignorance. When ignorance is removed by the knowledge of truth, all desires and purposes automatically cease. A perfect yogi, or sage, who works in the world, works only due to the will of the divine and not due to desire to achieve something in the world. All of the actions of such yogis, who have realized the truth, are burned up by the fire of wisdom; they are called sages by the wise.

## Śloka 20

त्यक्त्वा कर्मफलासङ्गं नित्यतृप्तो निराश्रयः ।  
कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित्करोति सः ॥ २० ॥

*tyaktvā karmaphalāsaṅgam̐ nityatr̥pto nirāśrayaḥ*  
*karmaṇyabhipravṛtto'pi naiva kiñcitkaroti saḥ*

त्यक्त्वा	<i>tyaktvā</i>	having abandoned
कर्मफल	<i>karma phala</i>	fruit of action
सङ्गम्	<i>saṅgam̐</i>	attachment
नित्यतृप्तः	<i>nityatr̥ptaḥ</i>	ever content
निराश्रयः	<i>nirāśrayaḥ</i>	depending on nothing
कर्मणि	<i>karmaṇi</i>	in action
अभिप्रवृत्तः	<i>abhipravṛttaḥ</i>	engaged
अपि	<i>api</i>	even
न	<i>na</i>	not
एव	<i>eva</i>	verily
किञ्चित्	<i>kiñcit</i>	anything
करोति	<i>karoti</i>	does
सः	<i>saḥ</i>	he

**Having given up attachment to the fruits of action, ever content, depending on nothing; he does not do anything, though engaged in action.**

A yogi who sees “inaction in action” and “action in inaction” possesses these qualities: 1) non-attachment to the fruit of action, 2) contentment, and 3) dependence on nothing.

When a person of action thinks, “I am the doer,” “the mind, body, and senses, which are the instruments of action, are mine,” “the action belongs to me,” or “the fruit of action is for me,” that person becomes the cause of actions and does not possess the three qualities of the yogi stated above. In contrast, the yogi who has attained perfection by the practice of **Karma Yoga** acknowledges the separation between the Self and worldly objects.

The Self is actionless, but the three *gunas* are always acting. When the yogi identifies with the Self as “I am,” rather than identifying with the mind-body complex constituted by the three *gunas*, then the yogi automatically becomes actionless. However, the mind-body complex, which is an evolute of *prakṛti*, is always active. A yogi who realizes this does not become the cause of any action.

One who relates to the mind, body, and senses as “I am,” desires worldly objects for the happiness of the mind and comfort of the body. That desire creates attachment to objects and gives rise to discontent because achievement of worldly objects gives short-lived satisfaction rather than everlasting content. As a result the mind has a continual hankering for worldly desires. A yogi who identifies with the Self does not crave for any worldly objects. In that yogi all egocentric desires end, and the yogi remains ever satisfied in the intimate experience of the Self. Having nothing else to achieve, that yogi acts in the world with no self-interest and only for the welfare of the society.

As long as people depend on actions and their fruit for happiness and sustenance in life, there will be a dependence on others such as family, friends, work associates, or society. In the case of a yogi who identifies with the Self, that yogi is freed from all desires and needs, and does not depend on any worldly objects, friends, family, or society.

A yogi who is established in the Self, functions in the world through the mind, body, and senses, but without desire and attachment. Consequently, the yogi does not perform any action because the Self, which pervades the mind, body, and senses, is actionless. However, without the energy of the Self, the mind-body complex cannot function. Therefore, the yogi who is seen to be performing action in the world is not really doing anything; that yogi is a true performer of action.