

CHAPTER V
Karma Saṁnyāsa Yoga
The Yoga of Renunciation of Action

Introduction

Renunciation of action leads to Self-knowledge. It is also called **Jñāna Yoga** or Yoga of Knowledge. In III: 1 Arjuna expressed his doubt by saying, “Kṛṣṇa, if you consider knowledge as superior to action, why then do You urge me to this dreadful action, Keśava?” In Chapters III and IV the Lord explained three forms of **Karma Yoga** that are practiced for a person’s spiritual development: 1) *Sakāṁ Yajña* (sacrifice motivated by desire), 2) *Niškāṁ Yajña* (sacrifice with no self-interest), and 3) *Jñāna Yajña* (sacrifice of knowledge). The Lord praised both **Karma Yoga** and **Jñāna Yoga**. However, Arjuna could not clearly understand which of these paths was superior and which was right for him to practice. This shows that his confusion was not removed completely. Therefore Chapter V opens with a similar doubt of Arjuna.

Śloka 1

अर्जुन घ्वाचः

संन्यासं कर्मणां कृष्ण पुनर्योगं च शंससि ।
यच्छ्रेय एतयोरेकं तन्मे ब्रूहि सुनिश्चितम् ॥ १ ॥

arjuna uvācaḥ

*saṁnyāsam karmāṇāṁ kṛṣṇa punaryogaṁ ca śaṁsasi
yacchreya etayorekaṁ tanme brūhi suniścitam*

संन्यासम्	<i>saṁnyāsam</i>	renunciation
कर्मणाम्	<i>karmāṇām</i>	of actions
कृष्ण	<i>kṛṣṇa</i>	O Kṛṣṇa
पुनः	<i>punaḥ</i>	again
योगम्	<i>yogaṁ</i>	yoga
च	<i>ca</i>	and
शंससि	<i>śaṁsasi</i>	(you) praise
यत्	<i>yat</i>	which
श्रेयः	<i>śreyaḥ</i>	better
एतयोः	<i>etayoḥ</i>	of these two
एकम्	<i>ekam</i>	one
तत्	<i>tat</i>	that
मे	<i>me</i>	to me
ब्रूहि	<i>brūhi</i>	tell
सुनिश्चितम्	<i>sunīścitam</i>	conclusively

VERSE 1

Yoga of Renunciation or Yoga of Action

1

Arjuna said,**O Kṛṣṇa, you praise renunciation of action and also yoga of action. Tell me for certain of the two, which is better?**

In several places in Chapter IV the Lord said that renunciation of action brings knowledge of the Self. However, in verse 42 of the same chapter, the Lord urged Arjuna to engage in the yoga of “performance of action.” In addition, in verse 38 the Lord clearly stated that by perfection of selfless service, **Karma Yoga**, the knowledge of the Self dawns by itself. Both paths are recommended, but in fact these two paths, performance of action and renunciation of action, are opposite to each other and no one can accomplish both paths simultaneously. To further this seeming contradiction, in Chapter III and Chapter IV the Lord praised the yoga of action, while at the same time Arjuna heard a very subtle teaching that renunciation of action is more divine.

As a result of hearing Śrī Kṛṣṇa praise both paths, Arjuna feels that the Lord is allowing him to choose whichever path best suits his nature. However, Arjuna is unable to choose a path by himself, and consequently in this verse requests Śrī Kṛṣṇa to point out the one definite path by which Arjuna can attain the highest knowledge.

Śloka 2

श्री भगवानुवाच

संन्यासः कर्मयोगश्च निःश्रेयसकरावुभौ ।

तयोस्तु कर्मसंन्यासात्कर्मयोगो विशिष्यते ॥ २ ॥

*śrī bhagavān uvāca**saṁnyāsaḥ karmayogaśca niḥśreyasakarāvubhau
tayostu karmasanyāsāt----karmayogo viśiṣyate*

श्री भगवान् उवाच	<i>śrī bhagavān uvāca</i>	the Lord said
संन्यासः	<i>saṁnyāsaḥ</i>	renunciation
कर्मयोगः	<i>karmayogaḥ</i>	yoga of action
च	<i>ca</i>	and
निः श्रेयसकरौ	<i>niḥ śreyasakarau</i>	leading to the highest bliss
उभौ	<i>ubhau</i>	both
तयोः	<i>tayoḥ</i>	of these two
तु	<i>tu</i>	but
कर्मसंन्यासात्	<i>karmasanyāsāt</i>	than renunciation of action
कर्मयोगः	<i>karmayogaḥ</i>	yoga of action
विशिष्यते	<i>viśiṣyate</i>	in superior

VERSES 2-3

Superiority of Karma Yoga (Yoga of Action)

2

**The Lord said,
Renunciation of action and yoga of action both lead to the highest bliss; but of the two, yoga of action is superior to the renunciation of action.**

In Arjuna's mind there was some confusion concerning **Karma Yoga**, the yoga of action, and *Karma Samnyāsa Yoga*, the yoga of knowledge in which there is renunciation of action. Arjuna saw them as two separate paths that would lead aspirants to achieve different goals in life. In this verse the Lord assures Arjuna that both paths lead to the same goal, even though there are dissimilarities in the paths.

A karma yogi retains the ego of being a performer of action, but performs action without attachment and without expectation of the fruit of action. In contrast, those who practice Sāṁkhya Yoga do not think of themselves as performers of action. The Sāṁkhya yogi feels that action is caused by the *guṇas* in the form of the mind, body and senses, moving among the *guṇas* in the form of the objects of perception.

A karma yogi separates from God and dedicates all actions to God. Consequently, there is a sense of duality in the karma yogi. For this reason **Bhakti Yoga** comes under **Karma Yoga**. A Sāṁkhya yogi feels that everything is taking place in Brahma (the absolute God). Therefore, there is a sense of non-duality for the Sāṁkhya yogi.

A karma yogi accepts *prakṛti* (nature) and its evolutes (*guṇas*, mind, senses, and elements) as real, whereas a Sāṁkhya yogi recognizes only the absolute God in everything.

For the reasons stated above, the karma yogi is a performer of action while the Sāṁkhya yogi is a renouncer of all actions. The two paths are different and cannot be practiced simultaneously. However, both paths remove attachment and desire for the world. Therefore both paths lead to the same goal of Self-realization or attainment of supreme peace.

Desire and attachment are natural qualities in human beings. Where there is desire and attachment there will be activity to fulfill that desire. However, desire and attachment are the causes of pain and bondage. The path of **Karma Yoga** is easier because the aspirant does not renounce the natural process of action. Instead the aspirant only renounces desire and the expectation of the fruit of action. In contrast, the Sāṁkhya yogi

renounces the world with all its activities.

A karma yogi, by developing non-attachment to action and the fruit of action, automatically becomes the renouncer of action, even while performing action. For that reason the Lord says the path of **Karma Yoga** is superior.

Although both paths lead to the same goal, neither one by itself can suit everyone. *Karma Samnyāsa Yoga* (Sāṅkhya Yoga) is for those who are intellectually advanced in spiritual awareness, who realize the unreality of the world and who have dispassion for the world. However, such people are rare. Most people are full of desires and lead an active life in the world, but like Arjuna, want to attain Self-knowledge. **Karma Yoga** is the path best suited to such people.

Śloka 3

ज्ञेयः स नित्यसंन्यासी यो न द्वेष्टि न काङ्क्षति ।
निर्द्वन्द्वो हि महाबाहो सुखं बन्धात्प्रमुच्यते ॥ ३ ॥

jñeyaḥ sa nityasaṁnyāsī yo na dveṣṭhi na kāṅkṣati
nirdvandvo hi mahābāho sukhaṁ bandhātpramucyate

ज्ञेयः	<i>jñeyaḥ</i>	should be known
सः	<i>saḥ</i>	he
नित्यसंन्यासी	<i>nityasaṁnyāsī</i>	permanent ascetic
यः	<i>yaḥ</i>	who
न	<i>na</i>	not
द्वेष्टि	<i>dveṣṭhi</i>	hates
न	<i>na</i>	not
काङ्क्षति	<i>kāṅkṣati</i>	desires
निर्द्वन्द्वः	<i>nirdvandvaḥ</i>	one free from the pairs of opposites
हि	<i>hi</i>	verily
महाबाहो	<i>mahābāho</i>	O Mighty-armed (Arjuna)
सुखम्	<i>sukham</i>	easily
बन्धात्	<i>bandhāt</i>	from bondage
प्रमुच्यते	<i>pramucyate</i>	is set free

3

He (karma yogi) should be known as a continual renunciate who neither hates nor desires; for, O Mighty-armed (Arjuna), he who is free from the pairs of opposites is easily freed from bondage.

In the previous verse the superiority of **Karma Yoga** (Yoga of Action) over *Karma Samnyāsa Yoga* (Yoga of Renunciation of Action) was explained. In this verse the Lord defines a true renunciate.

who neither hates nor desires . . . who is free from pairs of opposites - This is Lord Kṛṣṇa's definition of a *samnyāsi* or renunciate. The Lord does not say that one who simply renounces action is a *samnyāsi*. This means that true renunciation is defined more by mental attitude than by mere renunciation of physical activities.

A karma yogi who has no self-interest does not get attached to action or the fruit of action, and dedicates all action to God. As a result, that karma yogi has no reason to hate or desire anything. The karma yogi subdues the impulses of attraction and aversion and acts only for the sake of God. Such a yogi automatically rises above the pairs of opposites. Lord Kṛṣṇa declares that such a karma yogi is considered to be a *samnyāsi* (renunciate).

free from pairs of opposites - This means one who has transcended the limits of mind and intellect. As long as the mind dwells in "likes" and "dislikes" a person is locked within the mind and intellect. Such a person cannot be a true *samnyāsi*. **Karma Yoga** is the path by which a practitioner goes beyond the mental perception of comparison and is freed from the limitations of the mind and intellect. The mind and intellect are the instruments of action in the world and consequently the cause of the bondage created by action.

Śloka 4

सांख्ययोगौ पृथग्बालाः प्रवदन्ति न पण्डिताः ।
 एकमप्यास्थितः सम्यग्भयोर्विन्दतेफलम् ॥ ४ ॥

*sāṅkhyayogau pṛthagbālāḥ pravadanti na paṇḍitāḥ
 ekamapyāsthitaḥ samyag---ubhayorvindatephalam*

सांख्ययोगौ	<i>sāṅkhyayogau</i>	knowledge and performance of action
पृथग्	<i>pṛthag</i>	distinct
बालाः	<i>bālāḥ</i>	children
प्रवदन्ति	<i>pravadanti</i>	speak
न	<i>na</i>	not
पण्डिताः	<i>paṇḍitāḥ</i>	the wise
एकम्	<i>ekam</i>	one
अपि	<i>api</i>	even
स्थितः	<i>sthitaḥ</i>	established in
सम्यक्	<i>samyak</i>	truly
उभयोः	<i>ubhayoḥ</i>	of both
विन्दते	<i>vindate</i>	obtains
फलम्	<i>phalam</i>	fruit

VERSES 4-5

Result of Karma and Saṁnyāsa Yoga

4

The ignorant, not the wise, speak of Sāṁkhya (knowledge) and Yoga (yoga of action) as separate; one who is firmly established in one obtains the fruit of both.

The previous verse said that one who has gone beyond the pairs of opposites in performing action is a true renunciate (*saṁnyāsi*). In this verse, the Lord gives Arjuna further encouragement by saying that there is no contradiction between the paths of Sāṁkhya (knowledge) and Yoga (path of action).

In both the path of Sāṁkhya and the path of Yoga, action is performed. In the Sāṁkhya path all actions are performed with renunciation of the idea of doership. A Sāṁkhya yogi goes beyond the pairs of opposites by transcending the mind and intellect. The ego of being a performer of action automatically falls away. In the **Karma Yoga** path, actions are performed without attachment or expectation for the fruit of action. This results in the loss of the ego of being a performer.

Although the two paths have been spoken of as separate ways of approaching Self-realization, a yogi can attain the highest truth either by Sāṁkhya Yoga or by **Karma Yoga**. Those who see the two approaches as different think the results of the two must also be different. In fact, a yogi **who is firmly established** in either path will attain the result of both, which is the realization of the Self through attainment of true knowledge.