

Lifespan Yoga®: What is Karma Yoga?



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Karma Yoga

Karma means action. Yoga means union of things which have never been separated in the first place, such as the body, mind and spirit. Karma Yoga is a path of yoga where these concepts of action and union are combined in a unique way. This yoga path has nothing to do with fitness, but for those who practice karma yoga, it is a form of meditation.

Where did it come from?



The Bhagavad Gita proposes a three prong approach to liberation. These three paths can be very meditative for some people:

1. Karma Yoga is the path of service. In the beginning, your personality traits may play into which path you are drawn to. People who love action, to work, volunteer and manage a million projects tend to try Karma Yoga.
2. Jnana Yoga is the path of wisdom or knowledge. Brilliant book lovers, introverts, writers, or philosophers may be drawn to Jnana Yoga.
3. Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion. Artists, singers, musicians, chanters and actors may prefer the beauty and soul of Bhakti Yoga.

Just like we often gravitate to a particular asana style that is best for our physical body, we often gravitate to a Kriya Yoga (Jhana, Bhakti or Karma) best for us. Karma Yoga can be a very difficult practice so it is important to know the bumps in the road are completely normal and they are all instructive.

Is it like practicing asana (postures)?



In asana practice we hit an edge. Karma Yoga practice is similar, we will hit an edge. When you hit your edge in asana practice you do not give up asana all together and run screaming from the mat. Imagine you are in Triangle and you find your edge, you stop and you realize your hand is a foot from the ground. This is not where you wanted your hand to be, you want your hand smack down on the floor. You may think everyone else looks better in Triangle. You think why me, this is embarrassing. But you probably do not run out of the yoga studio; tell the teacher you are never coming back and decide yoga is not for you. In fact, sometimes you love the edge. It shows you where your work is. As hard as it may be, you accept “my hand is a foot from the floor.” It is exactly the same practicing Karma Yoga. Let me explain.

How does Karma Yoga begin?

A task is selected or assigned. This may be something you volunteer for or something your teacher or director asks you to do. It may be a wrong you want to right, like building houses for homeless people. This is probably something you are not being paid for and something that will take your time. So the first mental obstacle people encounter, if the job does not meet their expectation, is, “I am better than this. I am not going to do this. My time is much more valuable. Maybe they should ask someone else.”

A volunteer job is a great place to begin because these thoughts come up quite naturally right away and it gives you something to work with. All your excuses are front and center so you can begin practicing yoga. Imagine you volunteer to teach a yoga class at the shelter. No one arrives for your karma yoga class after you gave up your time, gas money and paid the babysitter? You are mad. You do not want to do this “volunteer work” any more. You doubt your ability to do this work. Now you have found your edge. Just like in asana practice, take a breath and know this is where your work is. There is no sense comparing your self to someone else who has a full class. This situation is completely yours and your practice is dealing with what is.

Accept the Task



One thing that happens when there are a few different tasks is once you are assigned a task you think, “I do not want that task. Can you give me something else? Could you relocate me to another area? I do not like doing that sort of thing. That is not what I really signed up for. I want something more perfect for me.” It is another wonderful set of thoughts to work with. It is a way of your mind trying to get out of actually taking the action you originally agreed to or signed up for. The ego is front and center if you can breathe for a minute and notice.

I was in a Karma Yoga Program once and we were divided into two groups – half were asked to clean and the others were asked to cook. Immediately people in the cleaning group began to try and get switched to the cooking group because it was perceived that cooking was a better assignment. They came up with every reason in the book why they should be in the cooking group; they were experienced, they needed to learn cooking skills, they had allergies to cleaning agents. The exact same thing happened in the cooking group. People started whining, I don’t know how to cook, I hate the smell in the kitchen, or I have food issues. The cooks wanted to clean. These people got a wonderful introduction to Karma Yoga- accept the role. Some people quit the karma yoga program and paid for their airline ticket home because they did not want to be in the group they were assigned, they thought they deserved more, different, better. They gave up the opportunity.

What happens when I accept my assignment?



After a task is accepted, time is committed and you realize this is actually going to be sacrifice. But you go to work anyway. You may be cleaning toilets, doing manual labor, using your skills, or being the boss; any number of tasks can begin the Karma Yoga practice. The task really does not matter that much because what you need to practice will come up soon enough. Immediately, a new stream of monkey mind chatter begins.

Monkey Mind #1



A very common thought that buzzes around your mind is, “Who cares what the quality of my work is, they are lucky to have me so I’ll just show up and enjoy myself and if my work is sloppy, it does not really matter.” Notice the ego here. You are thinking quality does not matter. You already have made a decision to not do good work, to not do your best and to rationalize poor quality work away. Why?

You continue to think, “Oh, who cares, no one knows I am the one doing this. I will cut corners. I will do sloppy work and everyone should just shut up and be happy I did the darn thing. No one else is here wasting their time, so at least it is done.” Notice the ego wants recognition. The ego thinks it is important to be recognized. Why is this? For some people it is difficult to perform at a high level and do your best when you are not being paid or recognized for your work. Changing this mindset is hard.

Karma Yoga practice does not allow for this mindset. The idea is to stay in the moment with the task at hand and do your best because this trains the ego. Letting go of the need recognition for a job well done is also part of the process. Being recognized may or may not happen in the future. The craving for money and recognition are the monkey mind. The trick is to notice the craving and get back to the moment.

Monkey Mind #2



Another common mind chatter, “It doesn’t matter if I am late for this little job or skip it once in a while.” Thoughts like this arise after you are acquainted with the task, accepted it, maybe you even enjoyed it for a few hours or a few days. You got a bit comfortable, moved a little bit more into it and bang. It hurt too much to make the sacrifice and burn through it.

Monkey mind tries to make it easier by skipping town.

Getting to this point is actually success, because most people can not even get to this point. This is how we know we are trying. If you begin to show up late, pretend you are sick, call in and lie, skip the work and don’t even call...all of these things are a flashing red light that you have hit your edge. You want out, you want a break, you are completely at your edge and now you may realize this is a hard practice. The easy thing is to show up late or skip a day and disappoint all the people who rely on you.

In Karma Yoga practice, we name it for what it is, monkey mind chatter, and get back to work. Or is it selfishness? If so, name it and get back to work. Exactly like in sitting meditation when your mind zips off into crazy land. In Karma Yoga it is the same, call it what it is and get back to the moment.

Why is it so hard?



Why do I fail at karma yoga when I am so great at asana practice? There is no success or failure. It is a practice. When you are practicing your guitar you are just practicing, not judging. My experience is a large percentage of people who try karma yoga feel like they fail many times. So they quit, say this is not for me, and I am not giving my time away for no recognition any more.

Karma Yoga is a practice. If you find you are always thinking about yourself and your needs, you are aware of the monkey mind. The future results are still unknown, so you can not say this failure. You notice the chatter and get back to work. If you recognize that you are always totally focused on yourself, then it is actually positive growth.

How do I stop thinking about getting something for myself?



Most people once in a while forget about their karma yoga task and begin to think about how this volunteer work will look great on their resume, how they can make a bunch of money, or even how they can knock someone out of the way so they will look better. The trick is to notice this normal mental chatter and let it go. All these thoughts are part of the practice for some people. Getting back to the actual service you were asked to perform, and doing your best, staying in the moment, that is the yoga.

What is the difference between karma yoga and volunteer work?



Karma yoga is a path of service, so it is understandable people confuse it with volunteer work. They both share the fact that you are not forced or compelled to do the work. It is voluntary; you can turn around and go home at any time. The main difference is volunteer work is often done for the ego. University research has found people do volunteer work sometimes for very selfish reasons: they want to put it on their resume, want to ease their guilt, serve an organization they are connected to, or to market their own organization. This is the norm. But over 30 years of research on altruism in humans and animals reveals an innate ability to act with no thought of self that is present in many species and debated fiercely. Therefore, altruism is more closely linked to Karma Yoga.

Karma Yoga in some ways is the opposite volunteerism, in that you work to let go of all those needs of the ego, work to be in the moment and let go of any result. If your service looks good on your resume and brings you fame and fortune the karma yoga practice is to not be attached to those results. If your service drives you crazy, brings you into community with crazy people and takes up all your time, you let go of that result too. You are just practicing. There is no success or failure.

Can I multitask?



Karma Yogis would discourage the idea that you could serve others at the same time you are meeting your own needs. Yoga teachers go through this all the time. They come into their asana teaching role thinking they will get a good workout and teach all their students at the same time. It does not work very well because everyone knows when you do not pay attention to them, and are only focused on yourself. Everyone knows you are thinking about getting your own heels down in down dog pose and you really do not see them. Multi-tasking is just a way to ignore one task in favor of another and possibly do it poorly. The saddest example is when you see a parent out with a child to do something fun together and the parent spends the whole time on the cell phone ignoring the child.

Another common problem is you take the Karma Yoga assignment to promote your own business and what happens is when you are trying to sell your services you may completely miss the individual's real needs. To really practice karma yoga you will need to let go of your needs, no matter how important, for that time. In karma yoga you accept you are a serving the needs of others, not your own.

What if people give me tips and other forms of payment?



There are great people who will immediately want to recognize you with payment of some sort, but simply for the Karma Yoga practice don't accept pay. This way you can focus on the practice and not the money. You can set this time apart from normal daily living and working where we all need to be paid (or we will not be able to pay our bills). When the time of karma yoga is over, by all means earn a living.

What if I really do think I did a good job?



Let it go. You may have done a great job or you may have been pretty average but the practice is to accept no satisfaction in Karma Yoga. In our life we may always be looking for recognition and to feel great about ourselves for one reason or another, but the practice is just to stay with the work and let go of this.

What if I am super popular?



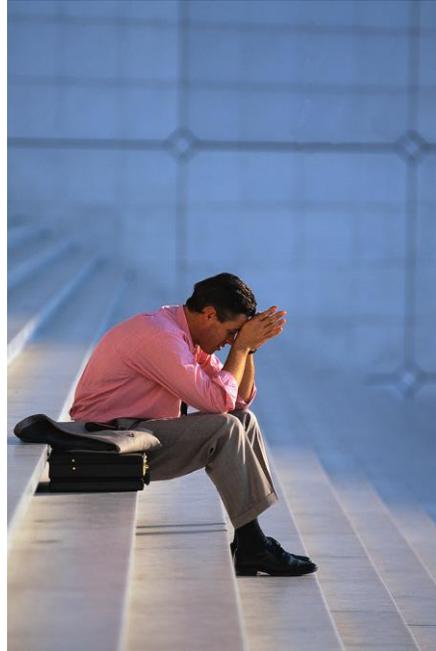
The ego loves to be super popular, well loved and recognized. As hard as it is the practice is, you do not want to accept fame in karma yoga. Accept nothing for the self, including fame.

What if everyone else seems to be better than me?



Follow the path meant for you and only you. We really do not know about another individual's path. Do not compare yourself to others. That is time better spent staying on your path.

What if I am not making any difference at all?



Maybe you are not supposed to. The practice is to accept what comes, even what you do not want to accept these particular results. You may be making a huge difference and you just do not realize it yet. Maybe the difference you make is to a baby that you will never know. Sometimes we are not exactly sure what “making a difference” really is.

What if I feel like I am not very good?



This is a pretty normal thing to think, especially if you are a beginner. The awareness is great, and you may truly stink, but the practice is to accept yourself. Once you do that, you may want to ask around and make sure you are not a danger to anyone but chances are you are just fine and it is the monkey mind playing tricks.

What do I do when I feel pride and self-satisfaction?



Welcome to the club. Celebrate that you were actually aware of it. Then you can move into acceptance of yourself and if your pride was overblown, then accept your weakness. You are human and therefore imperfect. Make the work an offering to the universe. Try to get out of your ego and hand over your work to someone else or to God.

What if I really want people to do it my way?



Let it go. When you want everyone to do it your way, you are saying my way is better than your way; I am better, smarter, and way more awesome than you. In fact, you are saying you know everything. Just for practice, let that idea go. This may feel like you are letting everything “fall apart”. Do not get attached to the result, maybe everything was suppose to fall apart. It is practicing compassion for yourself and others. Karma yoga is an expression of love.

Can Karma Yoga root out selfishness?



That is the point. Karma Yoga is a yoga practice of “selfless service” that helps you to be more aware of what flips your switches. It can heal you and maybe even help or heal other people. A person on this path follows their personal purpose and accepts what comes, in this way they can learn. It is beautiful practice with many edges and cliffs. It is a path that yogis follow to root out a huge ego and selfishness.