



# **The Essence of Karma Yoga**

**based on**

**Lectures of Swami  
Vivekananda**

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# Invocation

Let us invite the presence of Swami ji among us to guide us through this session of reflecting on his teachings of Karma Yoga

ॐ नमः श्री यति राजाय विवेकानन्द सूरये  
सत्त्वित् - सुख स्वरूपाय स्वामिने तापहारिने

*Om Namah Sri yathiraajaaya Vivekananda Suraye  
Satchit sukha swarupaaya swamine taapahaariney*

**Meaning:** Salutations to the king of ascetics, the hero Vivekananda, who is of the nature of existence-knowledge-bliss, who is established in the self and who is the remover of sorrows.



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# Goal of our Life

*“Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.*

*Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy — by one, or more, or all of these — and be free.*

*This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.”*

*~ Swami Vivekananda*

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# Summary of the Four Yogas

Path of	Yoga	What is the Problem	Solution
Work	Karma Yoga	Selfishness. Recognizing with body/mind, leads to selfishness	Practice Unselfishness, Kindness. Leads to Purification
Devotion	Bhakti Yoga	Desire of Sense Objects. Senses flow outwards	Focus your desires towards God
Meditation	Raj Yoga	Thoughts are scattered, and so spiritual truth is not revealed	Focus the thoughts on one point, or be thoughtless and truth will be revealed
Knowledge	Jnana Yoga	Ignorance. We dont know who we are	Knowledge of Self will reveal our true nature.
		<b><i>Summary of 4 Yogas</i></b>	

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# What is Karma?

Living Being

Agency

Suffering/Pleasure

Moral Dimension (+ Choice)

Cosmic Dimension ( across birth')

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## Talks by Swami ji on Karma Yoga

1. Karma in its Effect on Character *[Dec 1895, Vedanta Society]*
  2. Each is great in his own place *[Dec 1895, Vedanta Society]*
  3. The Secret of Work *[Dec 1895, Vedanta Society]*
  4. What is Duty? *[Dec 1895, Vedanta Society]*
  5. We help ourselves, not the world *[Jan 1896, Vedanta society]*
  6. Non-attachment is complete self-abnegation *[Jan 1896, Vedanta society]*
  7. Freedom *[Jan 1896, Vedanta society]*
  8. The Ideal of Karma-Yoga *[Jan 1896, Vedanta society]*
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# 1. Karma and its Effect on Character

**The goal of mankind is knowledge.** That is the one ideal placed before us by Eastern philosophy. Pleasure is not the goal of man, but knowledge. [*Through knowledge one attains freedom*]

## **True character of man**

After a time man finds that it is not happiness, but knowledge, towards which he is going, and that both pleasure and pain are great teachers, and that he learns as much from evil as from good. As pleasure and pain pass before his soul they have upon it different pictures, and the result of these combined impressions is what is called man's "character".

Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he be.

Good and bad, misery and happiness, all are running towards Man and clinging round him; and out of them he fashions the mighty stream of tendency called character and throws it outwards. As he has the power of drawing in anything, so has he the power of throwing it out.

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# 1. Karma and its Effect on Character

## **Where does this knowledge come from?**

No knowledge comes from outside; it is all inside.

We say Newton discovered gravitation. Was it sitting anywhere in a corner waiting for him? It was in his own mind; the time came and he found it out. All knowledge that the world has ever received comes from the mind; the infinite library of the universe is in your own mind.

All knowledge, therefore, secular or spiritual, is in the human mind. In many cases it is not discovered, but remains covered, and when the covering is being slowly taken off, we say, "We are learning," and the advance of knowledge is made by the advance of this process of uncovering.

Like fire in a piece of flint, knowledge exists in the mind; suggestion is the friction which brings it out. So with all our feelings and action — our tears and our smiles, our joys and our griefs, our weeping and our laughter, our curses and our blessings, our praises and our blames — every one of these we may find, if we calmly study our own selves, to have been brought out from within ourselves by so many blows.

All these blows taken together are called Karma — work, action. Every mental and physical blow that is given to the soul, by which, as it were, fire is struck from it, and by which its own power and knowledge are discovered, is Karma, this word being used in its widest sense. Thus we are all doing Karma all the time. I am talking to you: that is Karma. You are listening: that is Karma. We breathe: that is Karma. We walk: Karma. Everything we do, physical or mental, is Karma, and it leaves its marks on us.

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# Karma and its Effect on Character

## **How do we build our future?**

We are responsible for what we are; and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act.

**Why do we work?** All work is simply to bring out the power of the mind which is already there, to wake up the soul. The power is inside every man, so is knowing; the different works are like blows to bring them out, to cause these giants to wake up.

**How should we work?** Man works with various motives. There cannot be work without motive. Some people want to get fame, and they work for fame. Others want money, and they work for money. Others want to have power, and they work for power. Others want to get to heaven, and they work for the same. Others want to leave a name when they die.

**Work for work's sake.** There are some who are really the salt of the earth in every country and who work for work's sake, who do not care for name, or fame, or even to go to heaven. They work just because good will come of it.

If a man works without any selfish motive in view, does he not gain anything? Yes, he gains the highest. **Unselfishness** is more paying, only people have not the patience to practice it.

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## Karma and its Effect on Character

Love, truth, and unselfishness are not merely moral figures of speech, but they form our highest ideal, because in them lies such a manifestation of power.

**It is more paying from the point of view of health also.** [ *Kindness habit, Oxytocin* ]

Even the lowest forms of work are not to be despised. Let the man, who knows no better, work for selfish ends, for name and fame; but everyone should always try to get towards higher and higher motives and to understand them.

"To work we have the right, but not to the fruits thereof:" Leave the fruits alone. Why care for results?

If you wish to help a man, never think what that man's attitude should be towards you. If you want to do a great or a good work, do not trouble to think what the result will be.

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# Karma and its Effect on Character

## Ideal of Karma Yoga

There arises a difficult question in this ideal of work - Intense activity is necessary; we must always work. We cannot live a minute without work. What then becomes of rest?

1. *Here is one side of the life-struggle — work, in which we are whirled rapidly round.*
2. *And here is the other — that of calm, retiring renunciation: everything is peaceful around, there is very little of noise and show, only nature with her animals and flowers and mountains.*

Neither of them is a perfect picture. A man used to solitude, if brought in contact with the surging whirlpool of the world, will be crushed by it; just as the fish that lives in the deep sea water, as soon as it is brought to the surface, breaks into pieces, deprived of the weight of water on it that had kept it together.

Can a man who has been used to the turmoil and the rush of life live at ease if he comes to a quiet place? He suffers and perchance may lose his mind.

**The ideal man is he who, in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert. [BG 4.18]**

He has learnt the secret of restraint, he has controlled himself. He goes through the streets of a big city with all its traffic, and his mind is as calm as if he were in a cave, where not a sound could reach him; and he is intensely working all the time. That is the ideal of Karma-Yoga, and if you have attained to that you have really learnt the secret of work.

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# Karma and its Effect on Character

## How do we start our journey?

But we have to begin from the beginning, to take up the work as they come to us and slowly make ourselves more unselfish every day.

We may all hope that some day or other, as we struggle through the paths of life, there will come a time when we shall become perfectly unselfish; and the moment we attain that, all our powers will be concentrated, and the knowledge which is ours will be manifest.

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Reflection – Start with ethical living. Practice giving back & kindness, and make it a habit. Slowly unselfishness will become our second nature.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place

Nature has 3 forces - Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas.

- Tamas is darkness or inactivity;
- Rajas is activity, expressed as attraction or repulsion; &
- Sattva is the equilibrium of the two.

These three forces are there in every man. However, one of them is generally predominant in different men.

*Our journey is to move from Tamas to Rajas to Sattva. However you can jump stages.*

Karma-Yoga has specially to deal with these three factors.

**Duty & Morality** - important thing is to know that there are gradations of duty and of morality — that the duty of one state of life, in one set of circumstances, will not and cannot be that of another.

*The way of the ignorant, who think that there is only one way to truth and that all the rest are wrong, and the way of the wise, who admit that, according to our mental constitution or the different planes of existence in which we are, duty and morality may vary.*

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place

The idea of **duty** varies much among different nations. In one country, if a man does not do certain things, people will say he has acted wrongly; while if he does those very things in another country, people will say that he did not act rightly .

We have the way of the ignorant, who think that there is only one way to truth and that all the rest are wrong, and the way of the wise, who admit that, according to our mental constitution or the different planes of existence in which we are, duty and morality may vary.

Our first duty is not to hate ourselves, because to advance we must have faith in ourselves first and then in God. He who has no faith in himself can never have faith in God.

Many felt astonished at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter (BG), wherein Shri Krishna calls Arjuna a hypocrite and a coward because of his refusal to fight, or offer resistance, on account of his adversaries being his friends and relatives, making the plea that non-resistance was the highest ideal of love.

This is a great lesson for us all to learn, in all matters the two extremes are alike. The extreme positive and the extreme negative are always similar.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place

Buddha gave up his throne and renounced his position, that was true renunciation; but there cannot be any question of renunciation in the case of a beggar who has nothing to renounce. So we must always be careful about what we really mean.

Inactivity should be avoided by all means.

If you desire wealth, and know at the same time that the whole world regards him who aims at wealth as a very wicked man, you, perhaps, will not dare to plunge into the struggle for wealth, yet your mind will be running day and night after money. This is hypocrisy and will serve no purpose. Plunge into the world, and then, after a time, when you have suffered and enjoyed all that is in it, will renunciation come; then will calmness come.

Every man should take up his own ideal and endeavour to accomplish it. That is a surer way of progress than taking up other men's ideals, which he can never hope to accomplish.

Unity in variety is the plan of creation. Our duty is to encourage every one in his struggle to live up to his own highest ideal, and strive at the same time to make the ideal as near as possible to the truth.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place

The householder should be devoted to God; the knowledge of God should be his goal of life. Yet he must work constantly, perform all his duties; he must give up the fruits of his actions to God.

It is the most difficult thing in this world to work and not care for the result, to help a man and never think that he ought to be grateful, to do some good work and at the same time never look to see whether it brings you name or fame, or nothing at all.

The householder is the basis, the prop, of the whole society. He is the principal earner. The poor, the weak, the children and the women who do not work — all live upon the householder; so there must be certain duties that he has to perform, and these duties must make him feel strong to perform them, and not make him think that he is doing things beneath his ideal.

The householder is the centre of life and society. It is a worship for him to acquire and spend wealth nobly, for the householder who struggles to become rich by good means and for good purposes is doing practically the same thing for the attainment of salvation as the anchorite does in his cell when he is praying; for in them we see only the different aspects of the same virtue of self-surrender and self-sacrifice prompted by the feeling of devotion to God and to all that is His.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place - A Story shared by Swami ji

A certain king used to inquire of all the Sannyasins that came to his country, "Which is the greater man — he who gives up the world and becomes a Sannyasin, or he who lives in the world and performs his duties as a house holder?"

Many wise men sought to solve the problem. Some asserted that the Sannyasin was the greater, upon which the king demanded that they should prove their assertion. When they could not, he ordered them to marry and become householders.

Then others came and said, "The householder who performs his duties is the greater man." Of them, too, the king demanded proofs. When they could not give them, he made them also settle down as householders.

At last there came a young Sannyasin, and the king similarly inquired of him also. He answered, "Each, O king, is equally great in his place." "Prove this to me," asked the king. "I will prove it to you," said the Sannyasin, "but you must first come and live as I do for a few days, that I may be able to prove to you what I say."

The king consented and followed the Sannyasin out of his own territory and passed through many other countries until they came to a great kingdom. In the capital of that kingdom a great ceremony was going on. The king and the Sannyasin heard the noise of drums and music, and heard also the criers; the people were assembled in the streets in gala dress, and a great proclamation was being made. The king and the Sannyasin stood there to see what was going on. The crier was proclaiming loudly that the princess, daughter of the king of that country, was about to choose a husband from among those assembled before her.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place - A Story

It was an old custom in India for princesses to choose husbands in this way. Each princess had certain ideas of the sort of man she wanted for a husband. Some would have the handsomest man, others would have only the most learned, others again the richest, and so on. All the princes of the neighbourhood put on their bravest attire and presented themselves before her.

The princess was taken round on a throne, in the most splendid array, and looked at and heard about them. If she was not pleased with what she saw and heard, she said to her bearers, "Move on," and no more notice was taken of the rejected suitors. If, however, the princess was pleased with any one of them, she threw a garland of flowers over him and he became her husband.

She was the most beautiful princess in the world, and the husband of the princess would be ruler of the kingdom after her father's death. The idea of this princess was to marry the handsomest man, but she could not find the right one to please her. Several times these meetings had taken place, but the princess could not select a husband. This meeting was the most splendid of all; more people than ever had come to it.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place - A Story

The princess came in on a throne, and the bearers carried her from place to place. She did not seem to care for any one, and every one became disappointed that this meeting also was going to be a failure.

Just then came a young man, a Sannyasin (another one), handsome as if the sun had come down to the earth, and stood in one corner of the assembly, watching what was going on. The throne with the princess came near him, and as soon as she saw the beautiful Sannyasin, she stopped and threw the garland over him. The young Sannyasin seized the garland and threw it off, exclaiming, "What nonsense is this? I am a Sannyasin. What is marriage to me?" The king of that country thought that perhaps this man was poor and so dared not marry the princess, and said to him, "With my daughter goes half my kingdom now, and the whole kingdom after my death!" and put the garland again on the Sannyasin. The young man threw it off once more, saying, "Nonsense! I do not want to marry," and walked quickly away from the assembly.

Now the princess had fallen so much in love with this young man that she said, "I must marry this man or I shall die"; and she went after him to bring him back.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place - A Story

Then our other Sannyasin, who had brought the king there, said to him, "King, let us follow this pair"; so they walked after them, but at a good distance behind. The young Sannyasin who had refused to marry the princess walked out into the country for several miles. When he came to a forest and entered into it, the princess followed him, and the other two followed them.

Now this young Sannyasin was well acquainted with that forest and knew all the intricate paths in it. He suddenly passed into one of these and disappeared, and the princess could not discover him. After trying for a long time to find him she sat down under a tree and began to weep, for she did not know the way out. Then our king and the other Sannyasin came up to her and said, "Do not weep; we will show you the way out of this forest, but it is too dark for us to find it now. Here is a big tree; let us rest under it, and in the morning we will go early and show you the road."

A little bird and his wife and their three little ones lived on that tree, in a nest. This little bird looked down and saw the three people under the tree and said to his wife, "My dear, what shall we do? Here are some guests in the house, and it is winter, and we have no fire." So he flew away and got a bit of burning firewood in his beak and dropped it before the guests, to which they added fuel and made a blazing fire.

But the little bird was not satisfied. He said again to his wife, "My dear, what shall we do? There is nothing to give these people to eat, and they are hungry. We are householders; it is our duty to feed any one who comes to the house. I must do what I can, I will give them my body." So he plunged into the midst of the fire and perished. The guests saw him falling and tried to save him, but he was too quick for them.

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## 2. Each is Great in His Own Place - A Story

The little bird's wife saw what her husband did, and she said, "Here are three persons and only one little bird for them to eat. It is not enough; it is my duty as a wife not to let my husband's effort go in vain; let them have my body also." Then she fell into the fire and was burned to death. Then the three baby-birds, when they saw what was done and that there was still not enough food for the three guests, said, "Our parents have done what they could and still it is not enough. It is our duty to carry on the work of our parents; let our bodies go too." And they all dashed down into the fire also.

Amazed at what they saw, the three people could not of course eat these birds. They passed the night without food, and in the morning the King and the Sannyasin showed the princess the way, and she went back to her father.

Then the Sannyasin said to the king, "King, you have seen that each is great in his own place.

**If you want to live in the world, live like those birds, ready at any moment to sacrifice yourself for others.  
If you want to renounce the world, be like that young man to whom the most beautiful woman and a kingdom were as nothing.**

*If you want to be a householder, hold your life a sacrifice for the welfare of others; & if you choose the life of renunciation, do not even look at beauty and money and power.*

Each is great in his own place, but the duty of the one is not the duty of the other.

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## 3. The Secret of Work

Helping man spiritually is the highest help that can be given to him. Spiritual knowledge is the only thing that can destroy our miseries for ever; any other knowledge satisfies wants only for a time.

He who gives man spiritual knowledge is the greatest benefactor of mankind.

Next to spiritual comes intellectual help. The gift of knowledge is a far higher gift than that of food and clothes; it is even higher than giving life to a man, because the real life of man consists of knowledge.

Ignorance is death, knowledge is life.

**The miseries of the world cannot be cured by physical help. Until man's nature changes, these physical needs will always arise, and miseries will always be felt, and no amount of physical help will cure them completely.** The only solution of this problem is to make mankind pure. [*Example – Lottery winner*]

Let men have light, let them be pure and spiritually strong and educated, then alone will misery cease in the world, not before. We may convert every house in the country into a charity asylum, we may fill the land with hospitals, but the misery of man will still continue to exist until man's character changes.

Every work is necessarily a mixture of good and evil. We cannot do work that is only good or only bad. Good and evil will both have their results, will produce their Karma.

Gita shares on this bondage-producing nature of work that, if we do not attach ourselves to the work we do, it will not have any binding effect on our soul.

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## 3. The Secret of Work

### What is non-attachment to work?

Samskâra can be translated very nearly by “inherent tendency” (or conditioning).

Every ripple, every wave that rises in the mind, when it subsides, does not die out entirely, but leaves a mark and a future possibility of that wave coming out again. This mark, with the possibility of the wave reappearing, is called Samskâra.

Every work that we do, every movement of the body, every thought that we think, leaves such an impression on the mind-stuff, and even when such impressions are not obvious on the surface, they are sufficiently strong to work beneath the surface, subconsciously.

What we are every moment is determined by the sum total of these impressions on the mind. This is what is meant by character; each man’s character is determined by the sum total of these impressions.

If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad.

If a man continuously hears bad words, thinks bad thoughts, does bad actions, his mind will be full of bad impressions; and they will influence his thought and work without his being conscious of the fact.

When a man has done so much good work and thought so many good thoughts that there is an irresistible tendency in him to do good in spite of himself and even if he wishes to do evil, his mind, as the sum total of his tendencies, will not allow him to do so. When such is the case, a man’s good character is said to be established.

There is a higher state than having this good tendency, and that is the desire for liberation.

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## 3. The Secret of Work

Remember, that **freedom** of the soul is the goal of all Yogas, and each one equally leads to the same result. By work alone men may get to where Buddha got largely by meditation or Christ by prayer.

Liberation means entire freedom — freedom from the bondage of good, as well as from the bondage of evil. A golden chain is as much a chain as an iron one.

Thus bad tendencies are to be counteracted by the good ones, and the bad impressions on the mind should be removed by the fresh waves of good ones, until all that is evil almost disappears, or is subdued and held in control in a corner of the mind; but after that, the good tendencies have also to be conquered.

Work, but let not the action or the thought produce a deep impression on the mind. How can this be done? We see that the impression of any action, to which we attach ourselves, remains.

I may meet hundreds of persons during the day, and among them meet also whom I love; and when I retire at night, I may try to think of all the faces I saw, but only that face comes before the mind — the face which I met perhaps only for one minute, but which I loved; all the others have vanished. My attachment to this particular person caused a deeper impression on my mind than all the other faces.

Therefore, be “unattached”. Work as if you were a stranger in this land, a sojourner; work incessantly, but do not bind yourselves.

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# Secret of Work - work through Love, and Freedom

Remember the great saying of the Sâmkhya, “The whole of nature is for the soul, not the soul for nature.” The very reason of nature’s existence is for the education of the soul; it has no other meaning; it is there because the soul must have knowledge, and through knowledge free itself.

If we remember this always, we shall never be attached to nature; we shall know that nature is a book in which we are to read, and that when we have gained the required knowledge, the book is of no more value to us.

You should work like a master and not as a slave; work incessantly, but do not do slave’s work.

We are continually making this mistake; we are regarding nature as ourselves and are becoming attached to it; which binds us down and makes us work not from freedom but like slaves. Ninety-nine per cent of mankind work like slaves, and the result is misery; it is all selfish work.

So when we ourselves work for the things of the world as slaves, there can be no love in us, and our work is not true work. Selfish work is slave’s work;

Work through freedom! Work through love! The word “love” is very difficult to understand; love never comes until there is freedom.

Every act of love brings happiness; there is no act of love which does not bring peace and blessedness as its reaction. Real existence, real knowledge, and real love are eternally connected with one another, the three in one: where one of them is, the others also must be; they are the three aspects of the One without a second — the Existence – Knowledge – Bliss.

True love can never react so as to cause pain either to the lover or to the beloved. True love is unattached and selfless.

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# Work through Love, and Freedom - Secret of Work

Krishna Says “I am the one Lord, but why do I work? Because I love the world.” God is unattached because He loves; that real love makes us unattached. Wherever there is attachment, the clinging to the things of the world, you must know that it is all physical attraction between sets of particles of matter

To attain this un-attachment is almost a life-work, but as soon as we have reached this point, we have attained the goal of love and become free; the bondage of nature falls from us.

Do you ask anything from your children in return for what you have given them? It is your duty to work for them. In whatever you do for a particular person, a city, or a state, assume the same attitude — expect nothing in return.

If you can invariably take the position of a giver, in which everything given by you is a free offering to the world, without any thought of return, then will your work bring you no attachment. Attachment comes only where we expect a return.

There is another way in which can be put into practice; that is, by looking upon work as “worship” in case we believe in a Personal God. Here we give up all the fruits of our work unto the Lord, and worshipping Him thus, we have no right to expect anything from mankind for the work we do.

The selfless and unattached man may live in the very heart of a crowded and sinful city; he will not be touched by sin.

Karma-Yoga means; even at the point of death to help any one, without asking questions. Never vaunt of your gifts to the poor or expect their gratitude, but rather be grateful to them for giving you the occasion of practicing charity to them.

Thus, to be an ideal householder is a much more difficult task than to be an ideal Sannyasin; the true life of work is indeed as hard as, if not harder than, the equally true life of renunciation.

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## Summary

**"They along live, who live  
for others. the rest are more  
dead than alive"**

**~Swami Vivekananda**





**Questions Please  
& Thank You!**

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# The Song of Sannyasin

- *“Who sows must reap,” they say, “and cause must bring  
The sure effect ; good, good ; bad, bad ; and none  
Escape the law. But whoso wears a form  
Must wear the chain.” Too true ; but far beyond  
Both name and form is Âtman, ever free.  
Know thou art That, Sannyâsin bold! Say—  
“Om Tat Sat, Om!”*
  - *Thus, day by day, till Karma’s powers spent  
Release the soul for ever. No more is birth,  
Nor I, nor thou, nor God, nor man. The “I”  
Has All become, the All is “I” and Bliss.  
Know thou art That, Sannyâsin bold! Say —  
“Om Tat Sat, Om!”*
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