

The concept of duty and Swami Vivekananda: A critical study

Dr. Bapi Mondal

*Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Mahatma Gandhi College, Lalpur, Purulia,
West Bengal, India*

Abstract

This section critically explores Swami Vivekananda's philosophical interpretation of *karma* as *duty*, particularly within the framework of *Karma Yoga*. For Vivekananda, the essence of human life lies not in the pursuit of pleasure but in the attainment of knowledge through selfless action. He emphasizes that every action must be performed as a duty, with devotion, detachment, and a spirit of service. Duty is not limited to a specific class or stage of life but is universal and determined by one's disposition (*guna*) and role (*svadharma*), not by birth. Through various examples—including the housewife and the butcher who surpassed a monk in spiritual insight—Vivekananda underscores the idea that spiritual realization is accessible to all who perform their duties sincerely and selflessly.

Vivekananda rejects hereditary casteism, advocating for a dynamic view of social roles based on action and character. He reinterprets *varna* in terms of personal qualities and societal contribution, stressing the equality and dignity of all sincere labor. Karma Yoga, for him, is the path of action guided by equanimity of mind, where the practitioner remains unaffected by success or failure. The householder, who fulfills responsibilities with a detached spirit and moral clarity, is praised as the true Karma Yogi. This exposition offers a practical and inclusive vision of duty, combining spiritual growth with social service, and affirms that selfless action rooted in love and responsibility leads one toward the Divine.

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda, one of modern India's most influential spiritual and philosophical thinkers, reinterpreted the ancient Indian concept of *karma* as a dynamic and morally grounded path of duty. Rooted in the Bhagavad Gita and the Sankhya philosophy,

Vivekananda's doctrine of *Karma Yoga* elevates action to a spiritual practice, asserting that selfless work is the means to attain ultimate knowledge and liberation. In contrast to the conventional pursuit of pleasure or ascetic withdrawal, Vivekananda emphasizes that human beings should engage actively in the world through their respective duties (*svadharma*) with sincerity, detachment, and compassion.

For Vivekananda, the true meaning of duty lies in its ability to uplift the individual and contribute to the welfare of others. Actions performed with selfish motives are seen as spiritually regressive, while those carried out with a spirit of service and without expectation of reward are transformative and purifying. He challenges the rigid and hereditary caste system, asserting that one's role in society should be determined not by birth but by qualities (*gunas*) and actions (*karma*). Through striking narratives—such as those of the devoted housewife and the humble butcher—he shows that spiritual realization is possible for anyone who performs their duties with dedication and moral integrity.

Furthermore, Vivekananda upholds the role of the householder as central to the stability and moral fabric of society, recognizing everyday life and responsibility as valid and powerful avenues to spiritual growth. In his vision, *Karma Yoga* is not mere physical labor, but a conscious and disciplined path to self-realization, where the highest ideal is the complete surrender of the ego for the good of all. This introduction lays the foundation for a deeper examination of Vivekananda's concept of duty as an ethical and spiritual imperative in modern life.

The concept of duty according to Swami Vivekananda

The Indian contemporary thinker Swami Vivekananda concentrated on karma in the sense of duty. *“But in Karma-Yoga, we have simply to do with the word Karma as meaning work. The goal of mankind is knowledge. That is the one ideal placed before us by the Eastern philosophy. Pleasure is not the goal of man, but knowledge.”*ⁱⁱⁱ He says that the primary goal of karma yoga is to gain knowledge; pleasure and happiness should not be our primary targets. Happiness and pleasure are our means, but knowledge is the end.

Our actions should bring us near God. Our actions are meaningful when done sincerely, honestly, devotionally, and patiently. As he says, *“Any action that makes us go God ward is a good action, and is our duty; any action that makes us go downward is evil and is not our*

duty.”ⁱⁱⁱ A monk or a karma yogi is entirely devoted to God. As Swami Vivekananda says – ‘*Jivaseva is Shiva seva*’ (service to man is service to the God.)

Therefore, work is considered a duty only when it is meant for public welfare. Works done with social responsibility are considered selfless actions. In the words of Vivekananda, it’s being compassionate while being content, with the desire to work intelligently, ambitiously, and keenly not for personal gain but the welfare of others. Further, he says, “...*Now you see what Karma-Yoga means; even at the point of death, helping anyone, without asking questions. Be cheated millions of times and never ask a question and never think of what you are doing. Never vaunt of gifts to the poor or expect their gratitude but rather be grateful to them for giving you occasion of practicing charity to them...*”^{iv} So, “*The highest ideal is eternal, and entire self-abnegation, where there is no “I” but all is “Thou,” and whether he is conscious or unconscious of it, Karma-Yoga leads a man to that end.*”^v On the other hand, evil is the opposite.

But, “*We cannot do any work which will not do some good somewhere; there cannot be any work which will not cause some harm somewhere. Every work must necessarily be a mixture of good and evil....*”^{vi} That is why “*he who sees the supreme Lord dwelling alike in all beings, the imperishable in things that perish, he sees indeed. For seeing everywhere present, he does not destroy the self by the self, and thus he goes to the highest goal.*”^{vii}

Swami Vivekananda says, “*According to karma yoga, the action one has done be destroyed until it has borne its fruit; no power in nature can stop it from yielding its result. If I do an evil action, I must suffer for it; there is no power in this universe to stop or stay it.*”^{viii} From the above, it implies that Swamiji recognizes rebirth and that whatever actions we perform must bear fruits. Whatever the results are accrued to us in the present are nothing but the consequences of our past actions. Therefore, Karma yoga is self-sacrifice; whether you will be cheated by anyone or lose anything in your life does not matter. Because karma yogi never feels bothered, he knows it is his duty.

We find the similarity between karma yoga and the notion of duty. According to Vivekananda, being a karma yogi, one should have qualities such as self-sacrifice, self-abandonment, etc. Therefore, the differences between the concept of duty and selfless actions are not very broadly asserted, but there are slight differences between their senses. According to Vivekananda, “*our tears and our smiles, our joys and our grief, 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. The result is what we are. All these blows taken together are called Karma--work, action.”^{ix} “With regard to Karma-Yoga, the Gita says that it is doing work with cleverness and as a science; by knowing how to work, one can obtain the greatest results.”^x Thus Karma Yoga is an energetic involvement by individuals where laziness is denied, and energy is channeled discretionally in selfless actions. But action is to be considered a duty when it is obligated, which must be performed sincerely and must have a responsibility to act carefully, as we have mentioned earlier. The ordinary idea of duty everywhere is that every good man follows the dictates of his conscience.”^{xi} (Please see the beginning of the quotation). And thus the, “Duty is seldom sweet. It is only when love greases its wheels that it runs smoothly; it is a continuous friction otherwise.”^{xii}

But the question is, can such a model be acceptable universally? Human beings tend to work for themselves. Only through cultivating virtues or noble quality does one elevates him-self from wild to civilized and irrational to rational. Selfish action turns out to be a selfless one. Our social station is so structured, and the members of the society are so concerned about their wealth, privacy, and leisure that nobody is prepared to sacrifice himself for the benefit of the whole. If this is the case, how will the dream of Swamiji be realized?

In response to the question, Swamiji’s opinion is “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 comes of it. There are others who do good to the poor and help mankind from still higher motives, because they believe in doing good and love good.”^{xiii} “...we shall find that helping others is only helping ourselves. As a boy I had some white mice. They were kept in a little box in which there were little wheels, and when the mice tried to cross the wheels, the wheels turned and turned, and the mice never got anywhere. So, it is with the world and our helping it. The only help is that we get moral exercise”.^{xiv} “Our duty to others means helping others; doing good to the world. Why should we do good to the world? To help the world, but really to help ourselves. We should always try to help the world, that should be the highest motive in us; but if we consider well, we find that the world does not require our help at all. This world was not made that you or I should come and help it.”^{xv} So any action or work performed for work’s sake is a preparation for one towards God.

Here it is necessary to clarify that performing a duty or going through karma yoga is a little bit difficult, but when performed with the equanimity of mind, it stems from our conscience. More simply, equanimity of our mind is a state in which there is no force of the emotional effects arising from the success or failure of one's undertakings. A person of equanimity is disinterested in happiness and undisturbed by sadness. Such a person is in a continuous fight to remain mentally balanced, where they bear the sensory distractions and consciously refuse to be led by them, for they feel that indiscriminating exchange shall lead to loss of psychological equality, thereby resulting in an unfocused and movable mind with reduced intellect and that in turn lowers the probability on the part of the individual to experience peace.

So, a person performing his duty or doing karma yoga; always *“he should have a cool and balanced mind. He should have the presence of mind also. He should have equal vision. He should rejoice in the welfare of others. A man who is easily irritated and who can be easily offended over trifling things is absolutely unfit for the path of Karma Yoga.”*^{xvi}

It is also stated, *“How can a man of luxury, with his Indriyas revolting, serve others? He wants everything for himself, and wants to exploit and domineer over others. Another qualification is that he must have a balanced mind. He must be free from Raga-Dvesha (likes and dislikes) also.”*^{xvii}

The concept of universal religion placed him as the champion of the Hindu religion. True religion is the realization of oneness amidst diversity. It is the realization of the Ultimate Unity of the universe (God). The completion is not a matter of theory or a talk. It is a harmonious balance of reason, emotion, action and will. A great man is he who thinks and acts for the poor. A mere intellectually vibrant person is not helpful for the country. The country needs a well-balanced person whose heart bleeds for the poor. Any person of any sect of religion is great if he realizes the core truth. As he says, *“I do not care whether they are Hindus, or Mohamadans or Christians, but those that love the lord will always command my service. Plunge in to the fire, my children ... Everything will come to you, if you only have faith.... Let each one of us pray day and night for them... I am no metaphysician, no philosopher, nay, no saint. Who fees in India we are held for the two hundred million of men and women sunken forever in poverty and ignorance? Where is the way out? Who will bring the light to them? let these people be your God.... Him I call a Mahatma whose heart bleeds*

for the poor.... So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor, who having been educated at their expense, pays not the least not the least heed to them. ^{»xviii}

Each one is endowed with specific qualities and skills. That can be put into the jargon of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. One who meditates on the unity of all and disseminates it to others is a *Brahman*; one who fights for the noble cause is *Kshatriya*; one whose intention in the engagement of work is to earn a profit is a *Vaishya*, and one who serves the other on payment is a *Shudra*. That means these categorizations are not to be interpreted genetically or by birth. Such concepts are practically relevant. Even the same practice is found in society everywhere. Our engagement in different sorts of activities makes us so. A *Shudra* is identified as a *Brahmin* when he plunges himself into the search for the truth, and a *Brahmin* is recognized as a *Shudra* if he serves others at the cost of payment. One is potentially a *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, or a *Shudra* at one time and a place. That means one can do all the functions if the situation demands. What matter is not the birth but action and quality (*Karma* and *Guna*). Therefore, a person of any so-called religion can be great (*mahatma*) in the true sense of the term.

Swami Vivekananda, following the philosophy of *Sankhya* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, says that each comprises three *Gunas*-- *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. One is identified as a *Brahman* when *Sattva* predominates; predominance of the *Rajas* determines one as a *Kshatriya*; predominance of the *Rajas* and *Tamas* identifies one as a *Vaishya*, and predominance of *Tamas* introduces one as a *Shudra*. There is no stringency in this categorization. All these are functional, not constitutional. It is to identify what is one's choice of action. It is not confined to a specific station of life of a particular set of people. Instead, it has a universalistic approach. What is intended to say is that differences must be there either within or outside the individual so far as human beings are concerned. Unity amidst diversity is the essence of creation. Here we can remind of the tripartite aspect of the soul of Plato in Greek philosophy, which reveals that man is by nature constituted of a rational, courageous and appetitive soul. The sensible part or Reason apprehends ideas; the courageous one shows valour, boldness and resolution; and the appetitive one is confined to sensuous fulfillment only. Therefore, this segmentation in man is inherent. One may ask, if it is ingrained, where is the place of human freedom? Freedom to cultivate any of these aspects does not qualify one as a man.

Cultivation of reason is the man. But this is possible not at the cost of other elements. These

are interdependent for a balanced life. So is the case of a balanced society. Vivekananda says, “As there are *sattva, rajas and tamas* - one or other of these *Gunas* – more or less in every man, so the qualities which make a Brahmin, a Kshatriya, a Vaishya, or a Shudra are inherent in every man, more or less. But at times one other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees and is manifested accordingly. Take a man in his different pursuits, for example: when he is engaged in serving another for pay, he is shudrahood; when he is busy transacting some piece of business for profit on his account, he is Vaishya; when fights to right a wrong then the qualities of a Kshatriya come out in him; and when he meditates on God, or passes his conversation about Him, then he is Brahman. Naturally, it is quite possible for one to be changed from caste into another. Otherwise, how did Viswamitra become a Brahman and parashurama a Kshatriya? Caste should not go; but should only be readjusted occasionally. Within the old structure is to be found life enough for the building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste... caste is good. That is the only groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go there will be caste.”

A caste, therefore, is nothing but a social classification of services based on one's choices. Anybody willing to change his choice is required to undergo certain ethical practices. Selection of practices that we call Brahmin can be converted into the choice of rules that we identify as Shudra and vice-versa. Similarly, the options of Kshatriya can be converted into any choices and vice-versa. Nobody adopting any selection of practices should be looked down on in society. By dint of one's will to adopt some rules, one can identify themselves. Adopting any set of practices is not a matter of predetermination but rather self-determination. Our scriptures are the evidence of such examples.

But now the scenario is changed. It is regarded as birth binding. Accordingly, things are going on in society. A set of practices adopted by one is called Shudra is not allowed to worship deities in the temple. A group of practices adopted by one called Brahman is not ready to touch those whom we call Shudra. No set of practices is higher or lower. Adherence to practice must be discharged sincerely, honestly, and truthfully. That means every action must be done with the serenity of mind and for its own sake. Action should not be formal or casual. It should be for the betterment of the whole in and through one's choice of action (*svadharma*). Swami Vivekananda emphasizes the concept of duty. He always wants all individual beings and groups to be loyal to discharge their obligation. Despite being a monk,

a sanyasi, Swamiji always gives the highest place to the householder who performs his duties in a selfless spirit of detachment. He has mentioned the duties of householders, such as, "Excessive attachment to food, clothes, and the tending of the body, and dressing of the hair should be avoided. The householder must be pure in heart and clean in body, always active and always ready for work. To his enemies the householder must be a hero. Then he must resist. That is the duty of the householder. He must not sit down in a corner, weep, and talk nonsense about non-resistance. If he does not show himself a hero to his enemies, he has not done his duty. And to his friends and relatives he must be as gentle as a lamb. It is the duty of the householder...."^{xix} And also he added, "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"^{xx}

To be a householder, everyone has their position and duty. Mother is an essential part of the house whose duty is always to care for her whole family. But, a mother is also a wife or a daughter of someone—accordingly, the role of a father. So, everyone in society is obligated to discharge his duties as per their role. Discharge of duties with a holistic vision is the true mission of man. Such action unites one with the whole and becomes a creative one without infringement on the rights of others.

But the question is, why does *Vivekananda* give importance to the position of the householder? In what sense a householder is a karma yogi? He provides an example: a monk *Kausika*, the young Brahmin who led an ascetic life. After some years of yoga practice, one day, he was sitting under a tree, and dry leaves fell on his head because of a fight between a female crane and a crow. The angry monk had developed the power of a yogi and burnt the birds with his burning eyes. The next minute the poor creature lay charred on the ground. The monk felt arrogance very much by this work.

And after that incident, he went to a house to beg for his daily food. There a housewife who was nursing her sick husband requested the monk to wait for the monk. When the lady ultimately appeared, *Kausika* was agitated and gave her a burning glance. He asked the lady why she did not cater to a Brahmin on priority. In answer, the housewife said she was tending to her husband, which was her most important duty. She also said that neither

she was a crow nor a crane to be burned. The young sannyasi was astonished how he came to know about an event which happened far away in the forest. The housewife replied that she did not practice any yoga or any austerity. Only by doing her daily activities with cheerfulness and wholeheartedness did she become illuminated and thus could scan his thought.

The lady said that she had done all her work very carefully from the time of her spinster. Because I know it was my duty, I am also performing my all duties very sincerely to cure my husband. By performing duties that she is illuminated, thus she could read your thoughts and know what you had done in the forest. She also said, if you have to know something higher than this, go to the market of such and such a town where you will be able to find a Vyadha (butcher) who will tell you something then you may become satisfied.

The monk reached this shop and found that a fat butcher was cutting meat with a big knife, talking and bargaining with different customer types. After looking at the shopkeeper, he thought and asked himself- is this a man or an incarnation of a demon? But in the meantime, the butcher said to the monk that his housewife had sent him. After finishing all his work in the house, the butcher went home with the monk.

After reaching home, the butcher gave him a seat and proceeded to wash his old, sick parents. When the work is finished, the monk asks, "Why do you perform this ugly job and not any other? In reply, butcher says that -it is my duty which was done by my grandfather, by my father, and now I am doing the same work. Maybe I am a butcher, but I am not doing any offence, only I am performing my duty.

In this story, we can see that the butcher is a lower caste, and the housewife is a less spiritual and influential woman than the sannyasi. And it should be said that except Kausika, everyone in this story is a householder. But despite being a lower caste, they have higher knowledge than the sannyasi, because the lady and the butcher perform their work truthfully, with complete dedication, and honestly. And because of that, they have known through that occupation and practising their job properly. Due to that knowledge, they were active and sincere.

Anybody who performs all his works very sincerely achieves his goal very quickly. This is the notion of *svadharma* of the Bhagavad Gita accepted by Swamiji. Here it is seen that

Kausika, though an expert in the practice of powerful yoga, was not spiritually greater than those other two characters. Because the way one performs action matters (*Yogah KarmashuKaushalam*), as is found in the case of the lady and the butcher. That is why we may say that by performing duty sincerely, one can excel. Excellence in one's action identifies the dignity of the agent. In this sense, "karma" and "karma yoga" differ.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's concept of *karma* as duty offers a profound spiritual and ethical framework rooted in selfless action, sincerity, and moral responsibility. He redefines *Karma Yoga* not merely as physical labour but as a disciplined and conscious path toward self-realization and unity with the Divine. Through practical examples, such as the housewife and the butcher, Vivekananda demonstrates that true spiritual growth is not limited to ascetics or scholars but is accessible to anyone who performs their duties with devotion, honesty, and a balanced mind.

He challenges rigid caste distinctions, emphasizing that social roles must be based on one's qualities and actions rather than birth. Every individual, regardless of status, has a unique duty (*svadharma*) to fulfill, and doing so with detachment and compassion is the highest form of spiritual practice. The householder, who upholds social and familial responsibilities with a spirit of service, is held in the highest regard.

Ultimately, Vivekananda's philosophy of duty unites the spiritual with the social, encouraging active engagement in the world while striving for inner purity and universal welfare. It presents a timeless message: that through sincere, selfless work, one not only transforms oneself but also contributes meaningfully to the upliftment of humanity.

References

-
1. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2013. P. 3.
 2. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2013. P.53.
 3. Correspondence: Rastogi Ashish, *Towards a conceptualization of karma yoga*, Kerala, 2014, p.11. Vivekananda, Swami, 1896, *Vedanta Philosophy: Eight Lectures on Karma Yoga (The Secret of Work)*, Hollister, MO: Yogebooks.
 4. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 2013. P. 11.
 5. Vivekananda, Swami. *complete Works*. vol 3, Kolkata: Advaita ashrama, pp. 193-194.

6. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: AdvaitaAshram, 2013. P. 80.
7. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: AdvaitaAshram, 2013. P. 4.
8. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, p. 8.
9. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, p. 48.
10. Correspondence: RastogiAshish, Towards a conceptualization of karma yoga, kerala, 2014, p. 12.
11. Sivananda, Swami (1995). *Practice of Karma Yoga* (6th Ed.), Tehri Garhwal, Uttaranchal: The Divine Life Society.
12. Correspondence: kumar N.K, The Swami and the Mahatma: The socio – political relevance, The Indian journal of political science association, Vol. 53, no 3, p. 300,
13. The life of Swami Vivekananda, chapter LXXXIII, P. 221.
14. Vivekananda, Swami. *Karma yoga*. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, p. 19.