

## Karma Yoga of Gita and its application in modern life

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*While Karma Yoga of Gita remains the basis of my discussions, this paper tries to understand answers to the questions: How do we convert our modern works and actions (Karma) into Gita works and actions? Can all the works and actions of the world be commutated with Gita works and actions for bringing about a better life? If yes, how, and what are the philosophical and practical differences between a Gita-worker/actor and a General one?*

*Modernity, in its ordinary meaning, reinterprets the human condition – an external drive to progress – generally negating an essential inner life. We disagree in modern life that lives are interdependent, and our life is a projection of our inner realities: fears, anxieties, insecurities are projected into the real world. Our hopes, visions and dreams also get projected.*

*Therefore, modern life is far more complicated than life in the past, which took care of the inner nature and process of Work. Such complication is fundamentally a function of perplexed or baffled mental states in a created world of conflicts and competition. For a "Sattvic" person, these disharmonies do not exist, and they are Maya (Radhakrishnan, 1993). One has to soar above this Maya and take the battle for a life Arjun had to fight in the long run. He won and showed the highway to the Truth. The Lord changed Arjun's inner life through the advice in Gita. A modern person has not to transform the world but to transform his or her inner life by gradually abandoning Rajasic and Tamasic egos as advised by Lord Krishna. Karma then transcends from ordinary Work into Yajna. When karma is elevated at this alter of Yajna, a worker is transformed into a Yogi, owning the transcendental knowledge.*

*This paper tries to analyse the rays of hope traced in the recent modernity trend towards enhancing ethical, philosophical, and psychological domains of human resources far beyond the mundane capital, plant, and equipment; technology and know-how; materials and energy; product design; and people. This optimism is vital to our existence; otherwise, the application of Gita-Karma would remain far from reality!*

### Keywords

Karma Yoga  
Bhagavad Gita  
Modern life  
Rajasic  
Tamasic  
Sattvic  
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### Modern World Defined

Modern world ordinarily means a contemporary world that provides opinion or ways of behaviour which most people in Society have not yet accepted. It is a dynamic situation where any old and outdated ways of life continue to change, yielding the new. It is essentially external, bypassing the inner nature or practices. According to Lessing (2003), it is the "prison we choose to live inside". We generally disagree that lives are interdependent in modern life, and our life is a projection of our inner realities. When these internal human factors are ignored, and modernism's external vocabularies surpass those internal factors, sustained peace, and happiness withers. Doris' prison is framed with unending material desires and

objects of self-aggrandisement. But it is a myopic observation, as we will realise from later discussions. The modern world has its broader definition too.

Modernism is a necessary scenario in this dynamic world. Human society is never satisfied with existing practices and values, and it requires changes which the modern world introduces for practice. It does not necessarily eliminate inner instincts, attributes, and values; instead, it may influence such traditional inner qualities to accommodate changes brought about by external developments. So modern world is not to be considered as only mechanical and inimical to the conventional world. It has its moral and instinctive values, too, with all kinds of flexibilities for communities to adopt (Krshnan, 2015)

### **The Process of Work in Modern World**

Life in the modern world is usually seen as swayed by external changes that one cannot even perceive or understand clearly before one adopts. So, virtually, we have to hang on to opinions that are not yet verified by long-term real-world principles that suit one or one's self-encounters. It is like seeing one's image in an externally articulated mirror able to re-shape one's appearance in the way the modern world wants to see. One may, by chance, find oneself best suited to match the image. But that is not seeing the self. Dominant social, ethical, political, and economic narratives drift away from oneself to a distance (from the accurate self-image), causing crazy and psychopathic reactions fed by unstable mental and emotional states. It is as if *we are amusing ourselves to death* (Postman, 1985). This is the philosophical side of the coin.

The other functional side of the coin, the process of modern Work, essentially provides a pre-assessed array of works (inputs) meant to lead to some pre-defined results (outcomes). Risks or uncertainties are treated in the process to ensure the outcomes. The variables are primarily objective, and parameters to gauge the achievements are either known from experience somewhere or scientifically proved correct before a modern work is initiated. This process does not carry endorsement from inner values, urges and instincts of individuals and runs into traumatic results out in the Society.

### **A Critical Review of the Work in Modern Life**

The complete picture of the coin, therefore, is challenging to see: philosophically undefined but functionally defined. We know we are changing, but we don't know where we ultimately go, with how much material achievement, let alone inner life achievements. A changing society cannot have a deterministic character, particularly when the changes are mainly external or material. A psychological trauma persists all along because the fabrics of social changes mostly bring about changes in the material world or vice versa where Work or actions of mankind cannot follow some ground rules which are as truthful as the rules of the services of fundamental natural bounties of soil, water, air, energy, and space.

The reason why such uncertainties remain is not difficult to follow: trust, intuitions, instructions from the higher minds and Shastras etc., which help meet the day-to-day crises or opportunities are getting lost to the elegant but fragile pots and pans of material products and services of modernity, stated above. The science and art of proper knowledge, good works, correct living (nitya karma) regulated by the essential nature of one's "Swabhava" are ignored, let alone those held by the Will of the Supreme within and above us. We have almost forgotten the Truth that life lies beyond reason (intellect) into the sacred entity whose presence is not sometimes endorsed in modern life. In the language of Gita, these are Rajasic and Tamasic Gunas that uphold the preponderance of individual 'self'.

One may argue, ancient Shastras or religious instructions do not meet the changing needs of modern life. The question is: How do we define the needs of contemporary life as such? Simply these are changing material needs bringing about the satisfaction of necessity, comforts, and luxuries of life. Gita says, material demands of life are infinitely elastic, resulting in eternal greed, maze, idleness, envy, which are enemies of human beings. These rob away the invaluable wealth of humankind: PEACE. One loses one's "self" to these and gets obsessed by a lower mind's wishes to get satisfied with low hanging fruits only.

But once the person knows the "Self" he or she immediately perceives that material needs are only secondary. The primary requirement is peace within. Once peace is established, all such conditions appear to be superfluous.

Following the discussions above, the Work or Karma, according to Gita (chapter-4, Sloka-16), may be divided into three types which are not mutually exclusive:

- Work with a desire that follows Sashttras (disciplines set by Rishis) as a sacred duty - Karma.
- Work with a desire that does not follow Sashttras - Bikarma.
- Work without desire for results/fruits that may follow Sashttras or not - Akarma.

However, Work in modern life is identical with the Two Gita terms: Karma and Bikarma as explained above. But Akarma is not endorsed by the Modern Life reality because a fruitless work (meaning no returns from the involvement of valuable time, money, and energy) will ruin the Society and make it unsustainable.

The factors needed for modern Work (except for natural or habitual Work like eating, breathing, walking, talking etc.) are typically the following: a worker or a person, his/her energy and skill, material factors, a feasible work plan, financial support, technology, insurance against risks etc. These factors are designed to be engaged for a defined work to produce some defined outputs. So, the modern Work presumes a person to be a factor of production and consumer of products. Developing mind, body, and intellect towards a higher goal than material gains are lost. Moral values and inner human urges are secondary, which can be generated through training and motivation. Many modes of training for increasing moral heights in business and commerce are being innovated nowadays in advanced societies. This again is mainly for successful marketing and higher profits from production in critically competitive regimes.

One may argue the modern Society is not devoid of higher values and more outstanding moral achievements. These are only seen as rules of business and codes of conduct in contemporary life. Production, consumption, distribution, and exchange have occupied the front seats, but these leave space for the inner life-process too to develop.

The answer is simple. When mind, heart and intellect have mostly been overhauled in one's daily life to cope with the front seaters, the narrow space left remains only for possibly the few rebels who can come out of the current orbit of material life and join Brahma Karma.

The fate of the rebels is not far to seek. Underdeveloped and developing nations of the world are distant examples of insurgents. These have failed to hold higher values and heights of Brahma-Karma due to demonstration effects from modern and developed nations who prefer to call the others outdated, unsmart and conservative. The price for enjoying the captivating consumption goods and opportunities for immoral self-aggrandisement has eaten away the bulk of their original moral and spiritual values and made them dependent on the modern world for supplies of hybrid values as better substitutes of traditional ones. In most cases, those everyday goods, services, and even new values do not match the developing nations, nor they are needed or even suitable for the low-developed nations. The highest price of falling prey to such neo-exploitation has been the loss of higher human values and transparent mental and intellectual faculties required for performing Brahma Karma.

### **Factors Constructing Karma**

Gita defines Five factors (Gita, Chapter-4) one needs to accomplish Work or Karma: (i) the frame of body, life, and mind (standing ground of the soul in nature); (ii) the doer; (iii) various instrumentation of Nature (Karana); (iv) the many kinds of efforts which make up the force of action and (v) fate or the influence of the Power other than human factor. Gita terminology describes these respectively as

Adhistan, Karta, Karana, Cesta and Daiva. These five factors make up the efficient causes that determine the shape and outcome of the work/action.

The modern world recognises all the first four factors except fate or Daiva. All current actions aim to achieve some defined results for which the first four factors are designed adequately. An external factor has the chance to enter as Daiva (transcendental according to Gita), but the modern world terms it as Risks only in the negative sense, in place of Daiva. Daiva is a factor (unknown to the doer of the action) that can influence the actor positively or negatively, according to Gita. Still, modernity does not recognise it as an unknown factor. Modern management fortifies the four elements adequately so that such unknown risks (in the negative sense only) can be covered or averted.

There are aspects, therefore, how the modern world diverges from Gita factors of Work:

Table-1: Divergences of Factors of Work Between Gita and Modern World

Perception of Factors for Work as per Gita	Perception of Factors for Work as per Modern World
Adhithana is nature's phenomenon	Adhithana is biological and mundane
Karta is the Brahman	Karta is the person who works
Karan is the design of nature	It is the acquired capital, plant, and equipment; technology and know-how; materials and energy; product design, people, market, and the like.
Cesta emanates from the Power of Brahman	Cesta is the Power of human efforts, experience, and training etc.
Daiva is Natural	No Daiva, but Risks (potential negative influences) which risk-aversion strategies can cover

Source: Gita: Chapter-18, Sloka-14 developed by the author

The modern world says karma emanates from human needs and, therefore, it should be triggered towards meeting those needs efficiently. Development of inner spirits and higher values is the concern for those few who prefer knowledge and wisdom about Brahman to those about the material world.

Gita says karma emanates from Brahman (Gita, Chapter-3, Sloka-15). Every karma, external and internal, mundane, or eternal, has to be dedicated to Brahman's cause of satisfaction. Here, Work must not be induced directly or indirectly by any egoistic instinct or expectation. It should be exclusively devoid of material attachment or returns that satisfy one's personal needs in this mundane world. Gita-Karma results in the knowledge or wisdom about Brahman, the supreme Power and refuge of the universe. Once the Power (Brahman) is known, worldly works, including modern works, turn out stainless and straightforward. Karma paves the way to this greater wisdom through experience, causing the world to get rid of conflicts, perplexity, dualities, disappointment, distress, and destruction.

The iconic point here is the attitude towards life; it is not to distinguish between modern and Gita life as if in a competition as to which one is better. Life is an opportunity for everybody with five factors of Work to achieve targets both for this worldly welfare and for inner peace and happiness. Work is open for both targets. One's attitude towards Work may vary according to one's instincts which Gita explains to be influenced by one's Gunas (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas), and its consequences are briefly illustrated in Chapter-13.

### Difference between Karma and Karma yoga

Karma Yoga is defined in Gita as a part of Brahmavidya (Gita, Chapter-4, Sloka-1). It is the desireless action/work which has its foundation on knowledge about the action. This karma paves the way to emancipation from this transitory and mundane pain and pleasure on earth in the long run. Gita is Brahmavidya, the knowledge that leads a Karma yogi to the Brahman. So, Gita wishes that every person should lead a life that ultimately meets the Godhead. Gita first provides the road map for the journey from

mundane Work to Sattvic Work. Once a person agrees and follows the Sattvic path with "Sradhha" (unconditional respect to God), he or she can have an ascent out of the vicious circle of the three Gunas (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas). So, acquiring Sattwa guna is a precondition for taking off along the runway of emancipation. The propelling forces then transcend from the Godhead who guides the journey to the destination at His Will. The mental and self-centred views of the person disappear, attachment to material gains or losses gets lost. Still, the Will to work in nature even at this immune state of mind is generated from transcendental or integrated Knowledge (Chapter-4 of Gita), a gift from the Brahman.

In its ordinary meaning, karma is actions for the life and livelihoods of humankind in this world. It has three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Cognitive is the knowledge part of Work, affective is the love or devotion part, and psychomotor is the instrumental part like the 4 factors described above. These are all external, objective and material. According to the accepted standards of the Society, this Work or Karma may be good, bad, or mixed, which is ego-bound. It is indifferent to whether karma emerges from a divinely enlightened mind or humans' inner being. This karma's success or failure is seen from prison of seer's separative ego through the barred windows of the finite mind. Even the highest intellectual karmas of this type amount to perennial labour of Sisyphus (9/12), an Asuric nature when it is altogether devoid of self-awareness and transcendental Knowledge of Work.

When karma is looked upon as Yoga in Gita, desirous Karmas are dubbed as the manacle or chain binding human beings in profitless circling: reappearing in the cycle of birth and death with false knowledge every time. To attain the stage of karma yoga (Datta,2019) from simple karma is a complete "U" turn from Asuric or Rakshashic Nature into the divine nature. Rajas and tamas actions have to be shunned, and the divine light has to be brought in. Then it is realised that man's proper Work is to help the growth of God inside (Aurobindo, 1949)

### The Graduation Process (from Ordinary Karmi to Karma yogi)

Graduation from ordinary Karmi to Karma yogi is a process of abandoning three Gunas of Nature:



Figure-1: Graduation Process from Ordinary Karmi to Karma Yogi according to Gita Chapter-14 and 18  
(Developed by author)

Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic. Sattvic guna emanates from Nirmalattayat (transparency), Sukhasangena (pure happiness), Ynanasanghena (transcendental knowledge) (14/6). In contrast, Rajasic guna from Ragatmakam (attachments), Trishnasangam (desires) (14/7), (It grows from Kama and Anger) (3/37) and Tamasic from Agyanajam (ignorance), Mohanam (loss of judging Power), Promad (conflicting mind), Alashya (idleness), Nidra (sleep) (14/8) (Ghose, 1996). So, we see that these three Gunas's abandonment opens up the closed corridors of Divine Knowledge gradually to the seekers. It must be a cherished GOAL

of human life which is difficult but not impossible. To offer a handful of sand to a thirsty man in the desert is easy, but it will not quench his thirst while to provide a glass of fresh water is difficult, but it will serve the purpose. For bringing about a Divine life, ease of attainment is not to be expected.

If we want the graduation of our ordinary karma towards karma yoga, we have to abandon the three Gunas gradually, as said above. To make it an objective of our life, we have to analyse graduation stages one by one. A mundane Karmi meets daily and worldly desires by using labour, material and financial resources, skill, intellect, memories, technology, etc. It is actually a crisis-coping stage where one wish met begets another to be completed. Abandonment of such desires is a requirement to do away with such ever-grooming wants of material needs. It is the first stage where one realises the Truth through the experience of Work that this desire is an enemy killing the energy which, when used on the contrary in desireless Work, can bring peace of mind. The reason behind this is the freedom from the expectation of results of the Work. One karma full of desires is a seed of innumerable further Karmas which invite excellent or dire consequences for which one has to enjoy or suffer. Both these results have negative impacts in the long run because bad results make the person suffering and good results last for a short time, leaving the person again in another wok. This is an unending process of coping with crises. So, Gita advises to forget the results but to continue good Work without desires. This gives double benefits: long-lasting benefit to the doer and lasting use to the doer as no results bind the person for worldly consequences.

The Figure above shows how a mundane, ordinary karmi abandons Rajas and Tamas works (works with desires of different categories). Continuously abandoned, such Karmas lead a person to the stage of Best Karmi. But it is not enough, and the Best karmi has to purify the factors constructing Karmas of the person. Here the person is a liberated Karmi. Now a transcendental knowledge flashes onto that transparent body of the liberated karmi and illumines the intellect. The person at this stage finds the presence of super consciousness, a light that brings about an equilibrium of all conflicts and disharmonies. Gunas disappear, karma continues spontaneously, guided by the dictates from above. Results whatever deemed superfluous and ignored. At this stage, a person is called Karma Yogi, who performs all karmas with transcendental Knowledge (Muktashya Karma) or the Work of a spiritually liberated person.

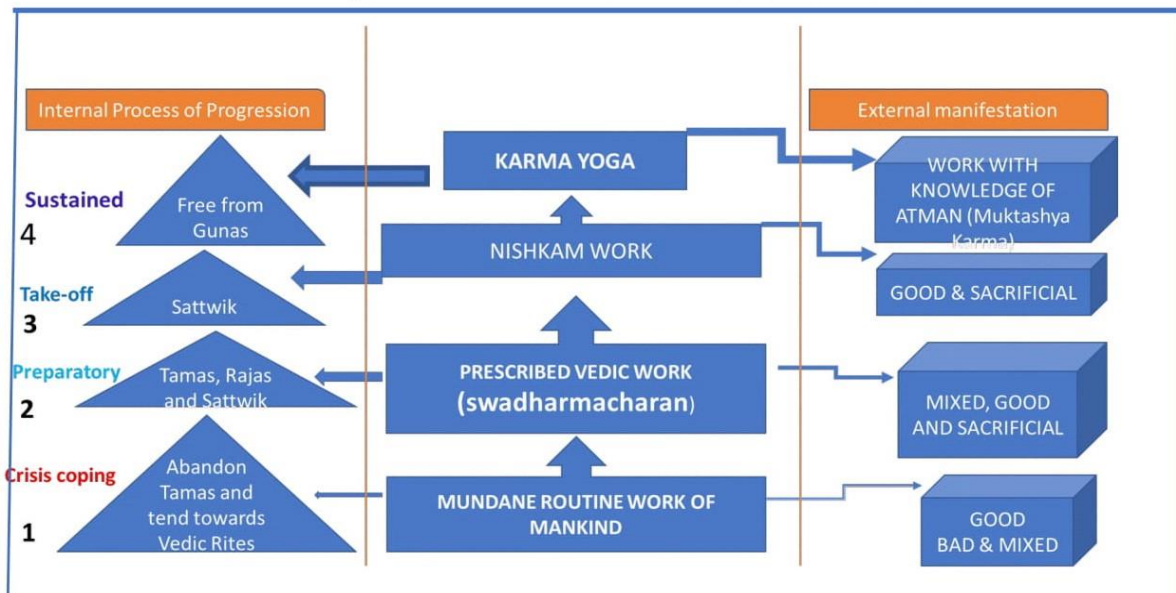
### **The Flow of Internal Progress and Corresponding External Manifestation of Work**

The graduation process from ordinary to Yogic Karma, as stated above, is not a straightforward ascent. This uphill journey implies many sacrifices and firm convictions ever made or held by only a few in the world. The ladder is shown in the following Figure with four steps of complex accomplishments. It is dubbed as a flow because once the person vows to ascend from crisis to the preparatory step, the Yogi gets internally ready to abandon Tamas works (works of ignorance and lower nature). At the same time, momentum develops inside, which is formed into a flow to Godhead. Here the person's *Swabhava* (Brahmachari, Gita Dhyana, 2001) and *Swadharma* (Ibid, P-69) play an essential role to convert the mere intention into a force of action. He or she realises that it turns the lower Asuric and Rakshashic into the divine nature, which is the carefully hidden meaning of human life. The eye opens to the Godhead in the universe, sees inwardly, and the external world is seen full of infinite spirit. From this step onward, all the inner self's prolonged stress to break outward becomes a new spiritual endeavour and aspirations. All life becomes a regular Yoga. Prescribed Vedic works appear to be his or her duty, though with desires for the time being. The way of results turns into the adoration and devotion of self-giving. It rises to an entire sacrifice of all wills and activities to the Godhead. The outward Vedic rites performed, though purposefully heavenward, the real sacrifice is the person's inner oblation in which the Divine All becomes himself the ritual action (Aurovindo, 1949) (Gita, Chapter-4, Sloka-24). This is named Yajna in Gita, which burns out the Rajas and Tamas Gunas in the person. The preparatory step is over. What he or she performs

now is Sattvic, with desire, though. So, this is a take-off step while Sattvic works continue for some time to reach a fully Nishkam step upward (not even desiring the enjoyment of heavens). At some point in the Sattvic stage, the Divine thinker becomes him or herself. The Divine enlightens the Sacred Mantra – both world and self, nature, and the soul. Here happens a synthesis of mind, heart, and will power in the Oneself. Here is the synthesis of knowledge (about Godhead), Love (for Godhead) and Work (for Godhead) in this integral union, the embracing God-realisation (Ibid). The Yogi meets the stage of Karma Yoga. Gita asks this Yogi not to stop working but continue sacrificial Work for such Work results would eventually cause real and sustainable happiness of humankind in this material world even.

The discussion above gives an idea of the systematic sequence of progression in internal and external states of a person (a combination of five factors constituting Work), as Gita endorsed. This internal process of Yogic progression and its resulting outward manifestation is shown in the following Figure for a consistent understanding:

Figure-2: FLOW CHART - KARMA TO KARMAYOGA



Source: Gita: Chapters-3, 14, 16, 18 (author's own experience and ideas integrated into the Gita verses to sequence the steps for ease of understanding)

## Conclusions

### Attaining Karma Yoga in modern days is difficult.

Given the process as above, it looks challenging to attain Karma yoga in modern days. The reasons may be, among others, the following:

- Modernity reinterprets the human condition – an external drive to progress – apparently negating an essential inner life.
- The science and art of proper knowledge, right works, right living (nitya karma) regulated by the essential nature of one's "Swabhaba" or "Swadharma" are ignored.
- These are taken to be regulated by Dynamic Human Resources Development Principles & Practices.
- Knowing the "Self" is not essential; the use of Power of judgement and intellect is expected.

- Desireless Work is impossible, and every Work is output-oriented and must be technically, socially, financially, and economically viable.
- Out of 5 Factors for Gita Work (see above), 4 Factors are common in broad terms, but 1 (Daiva) is not recognised in Modern Work.
- Macro-environment for a Worker is inimical to become a Desireless Worker.
- Lack of proper values and culture, mounting avenues for harnessing low hanging fruits. of the world.
- Modern welfare functions of Governments and Charitable persons are mainly politically motivated, not enhancing human domains of philosophical perspectives.
- Micro or Personal level practices of de-escalation of desires and lust to reach the perfection of Yoga are very limited.
- Demonstration effect of increasing wasteful behaviour in the material world.

### **But Human Beings are not Passive.**

In spite of all the above characters of modern Society, efforts are not lacking to cross the barriers towards achieving inner peace and happiness. Because God is in them. Today, the world is tired of conflicts and confrontations on many fronts: personal, communal, social, national, and international. People, therefore, try to escape the boundaries of personal desires and enjoyments to get an air of universality and inclusive development. The examples are many at the personal, social, and national level:

#### *Personal Level*

- With globalised culture, syncretism has been the growing choice among the young generation. enhancing personal choice of religious values according to individual Swabhava and Swadharna.
- Increasing rate of Yoga practices among young generation all over
- Peace has been the most wanted wealth of life, bringing in calm and serene life and livelihoods.
- Environmental imperatives are orienting the world to prefer the love of nature, silence, creativity, freedom from opulence; and
- A blissful abode during a lifetime

#### *Society Level*

- Social NGOs' Initiatives against Injustice and Deprivations
- Rise of social awareness around the urgency of peaceful living through better and proper education with higher consciousness
- Rise of the intensity of skill and acumen among the people due to competition and economic pressure
- Luxury is increasingly sacrificed to Comforts due to many negative externalities.
- Understanding the benefits of moral actions increasing among larger populations
- Modern Society, in particular, can best apply karma Yoga as they are eager to be engaged in Work without laziness.

#### *National Level*

- Rise of Ethical Consumerism, raising moral and ethical standards of employees.
- Extension of Social Welfare programs in Many societies, aiming at Gender Equality.
- Lowering of Absolute and Relative Poverty Levels
- Tendency to make Legislature, Executive and Judiciary functions more and more focused towards Humanity and Moral standards
- The trend to develop Global Family.



**Suggested Basic Requirements for Applying Karma yoga in Modern Life.**

The efforts cited above are positive but not sufficient from Gita point of view. Gita wants humankind to soar above ignorance about the Nature of Work and acquire transcendental knowledge, illuminating the mind, body, heart, and intellect. It is a total Yoga (Purna Yoga), not a partial one. So, what are the critical requirements besides what the modern world is now fighting for?

- Knowing the Nature of Karma perfectly, as its nature is impenetrable (4/17), "Gahana Karmano Gatih" (Karma, Akarma, Bikarma)
- Renouncing the returns from any work in life (3/9): "Muktasanga Samacharah."
- A persevering and adhering (Abhyasa) character (6/35, 12/9) progressively renouncing personal, corporate, and ultimately all desires (8/8, 12/9, Abhyasayogayuktena)
- Transparency and skill in Work and in all transactions in life through pursuing Swadharma and Swabhava (3/35)
- Tapasya: Mind, Body and Speech (17/14, 15, 16)

**Suggested TIPS for a Modern Worker to Convert Ordinary Karma into Karma Yajna**

*Not Overnight: Have Patience, Be Peaceful*

- Start with control of the mind (3/6)
- Regulate sense and work organs by the controlled mind (3/7)
- Transform Work into Yajna by amelioration and perseverance (3/9)
- Detach desire and continue karma (3/19)
- Be the best worker for others to follow (3/21)
- Gradually grow to be Sattvic worker by shunning doership of Work persistently
- Work with transcendental Knowledge and be Karmayogi.

**Caution**

1. Nature engages one to do Work; never feel yourself the doer.
2. Rajas (Ego) and Tamas (Ignorance) are the Gunas of Nature, these are the enemies.
3. They shade wisdom by force if the will force is weaker.

**Note:** Numbers in the parentheses in the article represent Chapter and Verse (Stoka) of Gita, e.g., Chapter-3 and Verse-21 is presented as 3/21.

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