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Research Paper

Karma Yoga as a Pathway to Health and Well-Being

Dr. Dinesh Kumar Gupt[1]*

ABSTRACT

Background: Yoga is one of the oldest forms of exercise and a way to become spiritually enlightened. Karma Yoga is the oldest form of yoga and is talked of in ancient texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. The Geeta formulates three path theories (Bhakti, Gyan, and Karma Yoga) in which Karma Yoga focuses on work with intrinsic value. Psychologists are trying to study the factors and conditions leading to a pleasurable and satisfying life. The present paper tries to understand the path of Karma Yoga and the behavioural practices involved in it that lead an individual towards work and satisfying life. ***Aims:*** The objective of this perspective article is to explore the yogic practices and to highlight their uses in contemporary times. ***Materials and Methods:*** The current article presents a perspective on how the karmayoga approach is useful in dealing with mental disorders and living a healthy life, such as Sthitipragyata. The paper highlights the importance of Karma Yoga on healthy and satisfactory life. ***Conclusions:*** The findings suggest that a non-attached (Anasakt) man is a person who not only enjoys health but enjoys his existence. He lives in a blissful state of intrinsic self-fulfillment.

Keywords: *Karma Yoga, Health, Well-Being*

The Bhagwat Gita is a conversation between Arjuna and Lord Krishna, where Arjuna succumbs to dejection when he realizes he has to fight his kinsmen and Krishna helps him to cope with this dilemma and stress. On one side the eastern and western scholars thought Gita to be among the greatest spiritual book in the world whereas some scholars believe Gita is a manual of behaviour that guides us to achieve good health and well-being and also a remedy for all lifestyle disorders. The dialogue between Arjuna and Lord Krishna is an authoritarian kind of counseling where Krishna offered a great insight into different aspects of human life. Thus, Gita is probably the first recorded evidence of crisis intervention psychotherapy (Ahuja, 2002). It has also been explained in great detail how can one have a healthy body and a cheerful mind. It also describes various forms of yoga relating to spirituality. Spirituality maintains our psychological health, affects substance abuse, interpersonal relationship, parenting, and coping. It has been suggested that spirituality also results in finding purpose and meaning in life (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). The paper tries to explore the karma yoga described in Bhagavad Gita and its relationship with Health and Well-being.

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, D.S. College, Aligarh, U.P., India
*Corresponding Author

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Karma Yoga

According to the Bhagwat Gita, any action is Karma. Chapter III Verse 8, says that without action, one cannot even maintain one's physical body. By action, Krishna does not mean any action. Chapter IV Verse 17, says that one has to understand what is right action, what is the wrong action; and also, what is inaction. The context of healthy living means that one should involve himself in those activities which promote good health and must avoid those which are harmful. It has also been explained in great detail how can one have a healthy body and a cheerful mind.

Life means action as it has been asserted in Bhagwat Gita that to be active in human nature. It is inevitable to act like breathing is also an action. It may be voluntary action or maybe an involuntary action. Man's life is a story of continuous action. Arousal is man's nature where the end of arousal is the end of actions in the world. Nature of action and inaction has been described in Gita. In Chapter IV Verse 16 Krishna expounds to Arjuna the truth about action. One who knows the truth about action alone becomes a liberated soul. Three kinds of truths must be known. The truth about the action must be known. The truth about inaction and prohibited action must be known. Chapter IV, Verse 17 further explains the ways of action are mysterious. The person who knows, these three truths about action performs the right action. Right action is detached action. In fact, for a knower of such truths about action and inaction, the duality of action and inaction ceases to exist.

Karmayogi guided by Samkhyanishtha is a man whose actions are guided by the right knowledge. Knowledge and action become integrated. It was shown that a Sthitipragya is above all polarities. For him, there is no distinction between action and inaction. His actions are devoid of a sense, that I am a doer. Since he has attained a stage of desirelessness or wantlessness, he acts as if he is not acting. Chapter V verse 18, says. "A person who is wise sees inaction in action and action in inaction". One who performs actions with this wisdom is a yogi." Further verse 20 elucidate that "he who is, having given up attachment to action and their fruit, no longer depends on the world and is even satisfied, does nothing at all, though fully engaged in action". This last sentence should not be taken to be a mysterious statement. It is the sign of wisdom that dawns upon one who practices detached action. He knows the true meaning of Moksha or liberation.

Chapters III and IV propound detached action. We shall begin with the famous popular verse (Chapter II-47). "Your right is to perform only, but never to the fruit, therefore. Being noninstrumental in making actions bear fruit and let attachment be inaction". Verse 48 says, "perform your duties established in yoga, renouncing attachment, and even-tempered in success and failure; evenness of temper is called yoga". Delinking duty from its fruits or reward (positive or negative) is a cognitive exercise. The common world view does not accept it. An attributional cognitive analysis is needed to understand this detached action. Normal man's causal attribution scheme is different from that of a Karmayogi or Sthitipragya.

Normal man thinks that he is a performer. He is capable of making choices. Whatever he does, he is responsible for it. He does it for getting certain desired goals or fruits. Instrumentality and feeling of being a doer guide his action for the attainment of worldly gains. These gains are extrinsic to him. They are outside him. It is in the external world that fruits of actions are found. A man normally thinks that this cause-consequence linkage is a necessary one. A person with a detached view is guided by detachment. He considers that the cause of his action should be detached action. A Stithipragya shows such a detached,

cause-consequence relationship. He delinks cause from consequence. The consequences are to be found not in the outside world, the actions are not for pleasure and pain he still acts. He is acting for his self-fulfillment. It can also be called intrinsic self-fulfillment. All the pleasures are coming from self-contentment. He need not seek happiness in the external environment. He is happy by himself. It is said that when yogi attains control over his all-mental conditionings he is "Atmna, Atmaneva tusthah." i.e., he is satisfied by and within himself." The Karmayogi is guided by this view. By delinking detached action and extrinsic consequence we can further, explain that actions take place in an environment. It has been shown that instead of feeling attracted towards fruits of action, the Karmayogi deliberately feels a sense of going away from them and is looking inward for fulfillment.

Positive Psychology and Health & Well-Being

Positive psychology is concerned with the scientific and practical explorations of human strengths. It works to enhance happiness and well-being by studying the role of personal strengths and positive social systems in the promotion of optimal well-being. Against the backdrops of previous pathology models, Positive psychology offers a look at the other sides like happiness, hope, creativity, and wisdom (Carr, 2004). The central objective of positive psychology is understanding and facilitating happiness and subjective well-being (Seligman, 2002). Diener 2000, Diener & Lucas, (1999) reported factors that contribute to happiness are not simple matters. Psychological well-being refers to one's full psychological potential whereas psychological and subjective well-being both increase with age, education, emotional stability, extraversion, and conscientiousness.

In western Psychology, it has been shown that the effect of extrinsic reward or reinforcement on behaviour is very significant. It is a common theme that we find in Thorndike, Watson, Hull, Skinner, and the other behaviourists that pairing a beahviour with a reward increases the probability that the behaviour subsequently be repeated. This law of effect which was later called, the principle of reinforcement, was first articulated by Thorndike. Skinner, as a reinforcement theorist, elaborated upon this theme. Hull also considered reinforcement or reward necessary because it reduces a drive, thus augmenting the habit strength of that response and increasing the likelihood that the response will be emitted when the organism is placed in an appropriate stimulus situation. Similarly, a reward can be construed as increasing the subjective expectancy of goal attainment. The organism will engage in the rewarded behaviour on future occasions. Actions that led to desired goals are to be repeated. Reward-based theories of motivation are primarily based on the pleasure-pain principle, which is related to the postulated consequences of a reinforcement.

The all-powerful reward principle dominated the psychology of motivation till it was questioned by psychologists who advocated intrinsic motivation in place of extrinsic reward. They showed with the help of empirical evidence that in tasks in which the child is deeply interested i.e., has intrinsic motivation loses his interest when an external reward (extrinsic motivation) is promised for performing that task. Weiner has identified this body of knowledge under the heading of "intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation" or the 'undermining effects of extrinsic motivation on intrinsic interest'. There is a significant distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to factors that make certain activities rewarding in themselves, such as hobbies, games puzzles, creative endeavors, etc. (For Gita no such listing of activities as examples of intrinsic self-fulfilling activity can be made because for a Karmoyogi all actions are inner-directed). Extrinsic motivation refers to those rewards given to us for our behaviour by other people.

Karma Yoga and Well-Being

Karma-Yoga is the core of the Hindu work ethic as it is elaborated in the Bhagavad Gita. Gita is considered to be the most representative text on Indian thought and religion (Eder, 1988; Minor, 1980). Karma-Yoga (the yoga of action) is one of three fundamental kinds of yoga, the others being Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of devotion) and Jnana Yoga (the yoga of knowledge). Yoga has been interpreted as a "way of life" (Kauts & Sharma, 2009), discipline (Mof-fitt, 1977), and union (Joshi, 1965) among others. White (1971) suggests Karma-Yoga as a path of action to attain human perfection and happiness. The Bhagavad Gita proposes that Yoga through Karma (or action) can be attained if one strives for skillfulness in actions even if unattached to the outcomes (Upadhyaya, 1969).

Well-being is a complex, multidimensional and multiphasic construct. The construct has been variously defined by different perspectives. A broad array of indicators underscores the multidimensional nature of well-being. Well-being is a cluster of several dimensions like physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social and spiritual well-being". Thus, the current trend to approach health and well-being is holistic. A holistic conception of a healthy personality and functioning is an internal part of personality theories of Adler, Allport, Maslow, and Rogers (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1981), off-late personalities theorists like Paloutzian & Ellison (1982) have laid much emphasis on viewing human beings as "integrated psycho-spiritual entities". In India, spiritual beliefs and convictions govern the life of individuals. The belief about the creation of the universe, the relation of man to the universe, the real goal of human existence, the theory of Karma, etc., provides a very broad subtle perspective is which well-being is understood. The human being is a unified whole and "Self-realization" is the real goal of human life. Psycho-spiritual integration is possible when the total self is involved. Spirituality is considered as a journey towards "inner self".

Functional Role of Karma Yoga on Well-Being

Gita says that by performing one's duty one attains the supreme. Here supreme should not mean any supreme being rather it is a supreme state of self-fulfillment. A state of bliss and ecstasy. In chapter 3, verse 8 Krishna says, perform your allotted duty, for action is superior to inaction. The action free from detachment should be performed by considering it as a sacrifice. In verse 9 it is again said that "Arjuna, do perform your duty efficiently, free from detachment for the sake of sacrifice alone". When there is detachment from extrinsic consequences and one performs with a sense of duty, he feels a sense of self-fulfillment. By delinking the action from consequences or fruits here I mean that external reward can not influence, the detached action. By delinking all the action from extrinsic rewards make external consequences psychologically non existent for the Karma Yogi. A karmayogi opts the path of disinterested action and who knows the intrinsic nature of the experienced reality. Any man can follow the path of karmayoga, like Arjuna did. The message of Gita for the psychological health is physical, psychological and spiritual state of harmony. Samsthiti (Samatvam Yogam Yuchyate) means that one should try to attain a mental state of an observer who is an impartial, detached observer or actor in this world. Health can only be attained by developing a healthy attitude. A set of beliefs, emotions and actions must be integral component of this attitude. For a karmayogi this attitudinal change is must. In chapter II from verse 55 to 72 Krishna explains the attitudinal structure of a Sthitipragya. He explains the structure of an ideal personality consists of many traits like, to whom pain and pleasure are alike, perceives birth and death both as of no consequences, has single mindedness of purpose, he renounces attachment and have self-control an many more. As we know cognition plays an important role in the development of mental process. If the goal

of action is met in a chosen path of action, then there is no problem. If the result of fruit of action re not as desired by the action man feels frustrated. The negative emotion of anger is aroused. This non-attainment makes a man feel greater infatuation produces a state of emotional arousal. It is assumed that in a aroused emotional state there is mental disturbance and memory ans reasoning both are negatively influenced. Consequently, there is a loss of rational decision making. In verse 37 Krishna says "It is desire begotten of the elements of Rajas, which appears as wrath, it is insatiable and grossly wicked, know this to be the enemy in the case. Lastly, Arjuna learns how detached or non-attached action (Anasakt Karma) is to be delinked its wordly external environmental consequences and also, he learns how non attachment can lead to intrinsic self-fulfillment.

Study of Sthitipragya

Pandey and Naidu (1992) studied non-attachment in their first empirical study of Stithipragya, they developed a scale measuring 'Anasakti'. It was based on the characteristic of a man of steady wisdom, Sthithipragya. It was hypothesized that those scoring high on 'anaskti' would experience less distress and exhibit fewer symptoms of strain when faced with life events. As predicted, anasakti subjects were less distressed and exhibit fewer symptoms of strain when faced with stressful life events. Anasakti was also found to be the most significant predictor of strain symptoms. This study is very important for two reasons: (1) It showed that the concept of non-attachment can be empirically measured (2) A Stithipragya is mentally more healthy. Thus, we can say that a complete Anasakta man is a person who not only enjoys health but enjoys his existence. He lives in a blissful state of intrinsic self-fulfillment. The concept of inner happiness is difficult to be defined in words. However, an attempt shall be made to make it comprehensible.

CONCLUSION

This article is an attempt to discuss the role of karma yoga on health and well-being. In order to discuss the role of karma on health, we found that a non-attached (Anasakt) man is a person who not only enjoys health but enjoys his existence. He lives in a blissful state of intrinsic self-fulfillment.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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