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Indian Journal of Psychiatry
Official Publication of the Indian Psychiatric Society
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Indian J Psychiatry. 2013 Jan; 55(Suppl 2): S150–S152.
doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.105511
PMCID: PMC3705674
PMID: 23858246

Karma yoga: A path towards work in positive psychology

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Abstract

Karma yoga is the path that leads to salvation through action. Salvation is the ultimate state of consciousness. Work is the central and defining characteristic of life. It may have intrinsic value, instrumental value, or both. Instrumental value includes incentive, dignity and power, etc., which is the result expected from the work. The Gita teaches us to do work without thinking of result (work with intrinsic value). Attachment with the result leads to stress, competition and aggression. Stress further gives rise to heart ailments, depression and suicide. Positive psychology studies the factors and conditions leading to pleasantful and satisfying life. Understanding Karma yoga and its practice has a similar role that lead an individual towards work and leading to a satisfied life. This may play a unique role towards practical aspects of positive psychology to improve one's lifestyle and aid in the treatment of stress disorders.

Keywords: Karma, positive psychology, salvation

INTRODUCTION

Bhagavad Gita is probably the first recorded evidence of crisis intervention psychotherapy.[1] It describes the various forms of yoga relating to spirituality. Spirituality is associated with mental health, managing substance abuse, marital counseling, parenting, and coping. It has been suggested that spirituality also leads to finding purpose and meaning in life.[2] This article focuses on the karma yoga described in Bhagavad Gita and its meaning in relation with positive psychology.

BHAGVAD GITA

The Gita teaches the doctrine of uttermost detachment.[3] It is a Sanskrit text written in Bhisma Parva of Mahabharata epic, comprising 745 verses.[4] Philosophical concepts of Gita's are Ishvara (The Supreme Controller), Jiva (Living beings/the soul), Prakrti (Matter), Karma (Action) and Kala (Time).[5] Bhagavad Gita proposed that true enlightenment comes from growing beyond identification with the temporal ego and self. According to Krishna, the root of all suffering and discord is the agitation of the mind caused by a selfish desire. The only way to douse the flame of desire is by simultaneously stilling the mind through self-discipline and engaging oneself in a higher form of activity.

The Gita formulate theories of the three paths (Bhakti, Gyan and Karma Yoga) without creating any conflict. In the current article, we are more focused on Karma Yoga or Yoga of action.

KARMA YOGA

The following lines are taken from the book "Karma Yoga," written by Vivekananda.[6] The word Karma is derived from the Sanskrit word "Kri" meaning to do; all actions are Karma. This word also means the effects of actions. The cause of all the miseries we have in the world is that men foolishly think pleasure to be the ideal to strive for . Our Karma determines what we deserve and what we can assimilate. With regard to Karma-Yoga, the Gita says that it is doing work with cleverness and as a exercise; by knowing how to work, one can obtain the greatest results. Man works with various motives. Some people want to get fame, and they work for fame, money, power, etc. We read in the Bhagavad Gita again and again that we must all work incessantly. All work is by nature composed of good and evil. The Gita teaches us about detachment from the result of work. If working like slaves results in selfishness and attachment, working as master of our own mind gives rise to the bliss of non-attachment.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND WELLBEING

Positive psychology is concerned with the enhancement of happiness and well-being, involving the scientific study of the role of personal strengths and positive social systems in the promotion of optimal well-being. The central themes of positive psychology include happiness, hope, creativity and wisdom.[7] Understanding and facilitating happiness and subjective well-being is the central objective of positive psychology.[8] Identifying factors that contribute to happiness is not a simple matter. [9,10] Psychological well-being refers to the achievement of one's full psychological potential. Both psychological and subjective well-being increase with age, education, emotional stability, extraversion and conscientiousness.

A distinction may be made between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. With extrinsic motivation, we do things because the outcomes of these activities will bring about situations that we like or which allow us to avoid unpleasant emotions. With intrinsic motivation, we do things because we like the activities themselves. We develop intrinsic motivation to do activities that are:[1] Moderately challenging;[2] that we feel we can do well; and,[3] that give us satisfaction.[11]

Flow experiences occur when we become engaged in controllable but challenging tasks or activities that require considerable skill and which are intrinsically motivating.[12–14] To experience a flow, a deep level of concentration on the task is essential. This results in a loss of awareness of the self.

KARMA YOGA TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

"Don't hanker after the fruit", says the Gita. However, it also insists that you should act with full energy and skill. The action of the person who acts without desire should be much better than that of the person who acts with desire. The latter is attracted to the fruit, and a part, much or little, of his time and attention will, of course, be spent on thought and dreams of the fruit.

Vinova Bhave,[15] Krishna said that only work come in your jurisdiction and not the result (Karmanyevadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana).[16] At the same time, it is evident that no work remains fruitless. It will give either positive result or negative. It is the positive psychology by which we learn to be happy. By focusing on only work we can give 100% of our concentration. It is the desire of a result that comes in the way causing anxiety. Whenever emotions are intense, it causes distraction and work is hampered. Krishna also emphasizes to focus on the present not on past or tomorrow.[16] It is the similar to give up the desire and result. Expectation of a result is future of the work done in the present. We should not forget to plan for future because planning is present. Work is worship-the statement is perfect in its meaning when we do not think that which work is great and which is not. Flow of work as explained in positive psychology can be only understood by understanding karma yoga when we become indulged in the given work. It is intrinsic motivation secondary to the pleasure we gain by just doing work, which is higher state of concentration. Attainment of yoga leads to salvation. Although, meaning of salvation does not matter, but it matters if we get a taste of flow in work.

STRESS MANAGEMENT AND KARMA YOGA

Stress is defined as a condition in which there is a marked discrepancy between the demands made on an organism and the organism's capability to respond.[17] It is found to be one of the important factors in causation of various psychiatric disorders like acute stress disorder, affective disorder, and various psychosomatic disorders like irritable bowel syndrome.[18–21] Work stress, in particular, is found to be associated with depressive episode and one of the most common diseases causing mortality and morbidity in the community-cardiovascular disease.[22,23] Recent review focused on mind body medicine, which included the role of meditation as a management practice of the illnesses having the biopsychosocial model.[24]

Management of stress may be a possible alternative to improve one's lifestyle and reducing mortality and morbidity in community. Recent trend is changing to the improvement of normal life to make it more fulfilling. This was the basis of origin of positive psychology, which is a branch of psychology that "studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive".[25]

Stress, the major factor predisposing depression and cardiovascular diseases can be reduced just by overcoming anxiety related to our daily hazels. Cutting down the worry (past) and result expectation (future) may be one of the positive factors to reduce anxiety. At the same time, good future planning (living in present) boosts up our spirits to perform good work up to the mark. Proposed statements are the prophylactic measures.

Karma yoga may be a therapeutic method to reduce anxiety and apprehension to reduce morbidity associated with psychiatric and medical illnesses relating to it. It means "leave the past and future and live in present" teaching of Gita.

SUMMARY

The essence of the paper is to focus on Karma Yoga to improve ourselves as well as our work in daily activities to reach highest level. By taking this path, we may be able free from stress as well as be able to help others to come out of their sufferings in life.

Footnotes

Source of Support: Nil

Conflict of Interest: None declared

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