

Brief summary for Tuesday 15th March (4.16 - 4.18 session)

We must thank all our teachers for their contribution to what has been written below. These are things we have learned and heard from other gracious souls whose teachings are expressed in our own words/understanding.

If you missed part 49, [check out the notes here.](#)

You can find [all the previous notes here.](#)

Krishna has been encouraging Arjuna to act in his role as a warrior and wants to make clear that he will not accrue karma by doing so. Arjuna wanted to leave the battlefield and remain inactive, misunderstanding that this is real knowledge (jnana). The next nine verses (16-24) we will see Krishna explain some of the intricacies of karma (action) and how no karma is accrued by one who works in transcendental knowledge.

In 4.16, Krishna points out that even learned people (people of discrimination) are confused in understanding what the nature of action is and what the nature of inaction is. Krishna says if someone actually understands what He is about to teach about action (karma) then one will be freed from misfortune, liberated from the realm of karma. Krishna wants to teach Arjuna so he can act without harm, as the science of karma can challenge even brilliant minds.

We may question what is difficult to understand, either one acts or does not act. But the science of karma is more intricate than that, therefore Krishna will explain it in more detail in these verses (16-24). One thing to take away from what Krishna says here is that Krishna wants Arjuna to not just perform his prescribed duty by imitating the previous spiritual authorities He mentioned in the previous verse, but rather, wants Arjuna to understand the specific nature of action and its varieties.

It can be easy to just act or work by imitating the actions of others without trying to deeply understand the purpose of action. If we imitate a good thing, certainly there may be benefits, but still if our internal motivation isn't right then it will not be as powerful as acting with proper knowledge and refined motivation. So Krishna is pointing out that it is important to know the inner aspect of action as well, especially for an aspirant for liberation and beyond. We will see in the upcoming verses that Krishna will teach action that includes knowledge within itself so Arjuna can be released from the bondage of karma.

In verse 4.17, Krishna explains the intricacies of action prescribed in the sacred literature (Vedas), the action prohibited in the sacred literature, and the renunciation or nonperformance of action. Although He was mainly speaking about karma (action) and akarma (inaction), here Krishna adds vikarma (forbidden action) for a more detailed explanation of action.

Krishna points out that the path of action is mysterious and this is why even those with discrimination and intelligence are bewildered by it. Although action is generally understood to be the activity of the body and senses and inaction the opposite of this, there is more to the understanding of action than this. Although a difficult subject, Krishna says that if one is serious about liberation from material bondage then it is important to understand, and is why He is teaching the special considerations to understand about the true nature of activities.

Srila Prabhupada points out in his purport that **"One has to apply oneself to such an analysis of action, reaction and perverted actions because it is a very difficult subject matter."**

These subjects are important because action itself isn't a bad thing. Work is divine with proper knowledge. There is work or action to be avoided, and work that binds, but Krishna also will show that there is work that frees one too. Although we will look in more detail, simply put, work that binds is work

done with attachment to the results, and work that frees is any work done without attachment to the results.

KARMA

Karma is a universal law of nature. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Both good and karma bind us to this world though. Karma in the way Krishna is speaking about it here is those activities done according to the Vedic scriptures. So for example, Arjuna doing his duty as a warrior. These activities are generally referred to as karma-kanda. The performer acts but with some material desire (e.g. to go to heaven, or wealth in this world, etc) but because they act in accordance with the Vedas, the activities give "good" reactions albeit material ones. To do one's karma is to act according to one's duty for further advancement of material life.

VIKARMA

Vikarma means those activities prohibited in the Vedas. They produce "bad" material reactions and so lead to misery. Eating meat or drinking alcohol is a good example. The principle is that any activity which needlessly harms or exploits another living being or one's own self, should be avoided. The Vedic tradition gives many examples of activity that one should avoid. Interestingly, some commentators (including Srila Prabhupada) class any action that is filled with desire and craving as vikarma because even "good" karma creates bondage for the living entity to material existence. We will discuss this understanding more shortly.

AKARMA

Akarma generally means to not perform one's prescribed action (karma). For example, on the path of Jnana, when one takes sannyasa (renounced life), then they no longer perform their previous prescribed duty. They avoid

activity to cultivate internal meditation and this is meant to be auspicious for them. So akarma or non-action is sometimes equated with knowledge of the self. Selfless action performed without egotism which is really what inaction is about.

In a more broad sense we could say there are three levels of inaction. Those who don't perform the karma prescribed in the Vedas due to laziness or ignorance. We would generally put this kind of inaction in the category of vikarma as it leads to a miserable future.

Those who understand that karma or prescribed duties are perishable, and so even good karmic results lead to misery, renounce karma and only act to attain liberation. For example, the wise sannyasi.

Classically, this is akarma but there is another level of understanding. Those who don't perform their prescribed karma and instead cultivate bhakti also are seen to have inaction after hearing topics of Krishna. It is said in the Srimad Bhagavatam (11.20.9) that one should perform their prescribed duty as long as they have not developed faith in hearing topics about Krishna. So akarma also refers to work performed for Krishna's pleasure and so such work brings no material reaction, whether good or bad. This is the way Srila Prabhupada and other Gaudiya commentators understand akarma.

This is why the varnasrama system exists, for those who haven't developed faith in bhakti. But as has been pointed out, the shastras connected to this ultimately aim at one result: moksha (liberation from material results). Even if one acts according to their prescribed duty, one won't be liberated just by knowing the do's and don'ts of action. Krishna is pointing out that only by correct knowledge of the nature of actions can one be liberated. Ultimately, this means knowledge of Krishna as well (as will be expanded upon in the Gita) because one needs to understand how all actions are ultimately performed in relation to Him. Krishna in the heart of every living entity (Paramatma) is the main ingredient for moksha.

Since all actions have originated from Krishna (everything ultimately emanates from Him, including the energy behind action), it is in our best welfare to understand His position and His connection to action. Therefore, as Krishna is pointing out, the wise perform actions accordingly after reflecting and contemplating on the intricacies of action that Krishna has been explaining.

As aspirants of pure devotion, we also want akarma in the sense that actions of bhakti being nirguna (beyond the modes of nature) are free from reactions because karmic reaction is a result of fruitive consciousness and not activity itself. Srila Prabhupada, along with grouping karma and vikarma, nicely points out the emphasis on Krishna conscious activities:

“To understand Krsna consciousness and action according to its modes, one has to learn one’s relationship with the Supreme; i.e., one who has learned perfectly knows that every living entity is an eternal servitor of the Lord and that consequently one has to act in Krsna consciousness. The entire *Bhagavad-gita* is directed toward this conclusion. Any other conclusions, against this consciousness and its attendant actions, are *vikarmas*, or prohibited actions. To understand all this one has to associate with authorities in Krsna consciousness and learn the secret from them; this is as good as learning from the Lord directly. Otherwise, even the most intelligent persons will be bewildered.”

In verse 4.18, having introduced the term vikarma, Krishna returns to make the main distinction between karma and akarma. This is really Arjuna's dilemma, whether to act or not to act according to his karmic duty as a warrior and so Krishna is explaining these intricacies and subtleties.

Krishna points out that a wise person can actually perceive inaction in action and action in inaction. That is, freedom from reaction can result from proper action, and a bad reaction can result from improper renunciation. A person who can see like this is spiritually situated and can act themselves without being bound by the reactions. Such a person's actions are actually

selfless and so would actually be inaction (akarma). If someone with an impure heart renounces action, this would not lead to a good result and so would actually create karma.

Krishna has mentioned great personalities that He wants Arjuna to follow. Such personalities who have pure hearts and are fixed in knowledge do not renounce activity but actually engage in action, even though they don't become bound by karma as there is a spirit of niskama karma yoga. It is akarma (non-action) because they selflessly offered the fruits of their activity to Bhagavan. Niskama karma yogis are not considered the same as fruitive workers even though they also perform all types of action. Action and inaction are the same for them because they renounce the fruits.

One who can see inaction in actions such as sacrifice to Krishna (yagna), knowing that such non-action leads to knowledge, is not bound to material existence. Inaction means actions that bring no reactions, and so leads to knowledge, purity of mind, and ultimately liberation. Even when the body and senses are active, when one knows the atma (soul) is distinct from the physical body, action is seen as inaction. We saw previously in verse 2.40 how Krishna said that there is no loss or fear of negative results with this type of action:

"In this endeavor there is no loss or diminution, and a little advancement on this path can protect one from the most dangerous type of fear."

The living being accepts karma and reactions to actions when egoism is present. The word Krtsna is used, which means whole, or entire, which suggests there is more to action than what is visible. Though the external action is visible to us, the karma or reactions that come with actions are not visible. Egoless action may look the same on the surface but there is no reaction connected.

This emphasis on egoless action by Krishna is important. As Krishna has pointed out, one should avoid artificial attempts at inaction because one will

be forced to act anyway and will accrue karmic reactions in the process. Inaction, like improper action, carries karmic consequences. If someone artificially renounces their prescribed duties (as Arjuna is suggesting he do), but their heart is not yet cleansed enough to take up Jnana, one may become proud and seek praise for their renunciation for example. Eventually this will lead to poor conduct.

A sannyasi who doesn't have transcendental knowledge may appear not to perform work, but as action is in the very nature of the soul, such a person can't avoid activity and the entangling results. The sannyasi must breathe, must eat, step on living entities while walking, and so on. Due to not having knowledge of Krishna, these activities have no transcendental basis. They may even have intellectual knowledge of the scriptures and be able to speak in a compelling way, but lack realised knowledge. They don't seek higher association and end up suffering in the long term.

Further, as pointed out, artificial attempts at inactivity can lead to more danger because the impure mind will naturally gravitate to meditating on sense enjoyment even while the senses seem not to be engaged. This will inevitably lead to one falling from the spiritual path, even if such a "renunciate" externally appears to be less "in" the world than a devotee.

The Srimad Bhagavatam 11.18.40-41 points out:

One who has not controlled the six forms of illusion [lust, anger, greed, excitement, false pride and intoxication], whose intelligence, the leader of the senses, is extremely attached to material things, who is bereft of knowledge and detachment, who adopts the sannyasa order of life to make a living, who denies the worshipable demigods, his own self and the Supreme Lord within himself, thus ruining all religious principles, and who is still infected by material contamination, is deviated and lost both in this life and the next.

Such a person may avoid actions because they are troublesome and difficult. Krishna pointed out in verse 3.6 that this kind of non-performance of action is hypocritical and is an obstruction to gaining real knowledge:

"One who restrains the senses of action but whose mind dwells on sense objects certainly deludes himself and is called a pretender."

The commentators on the Gita also often use the example of apathy to actions one could perform but doesn't out of difficulty or laziness. The example of Ekadasi-vrata is sometimes used, where one is advised to abstain from grains on the 11th day of the waxing and waning moons (although we find this vow in bhakti as well, it is also there in the paths of karma and jnana). If one has inaction even when they are able to perform such acts then this also binds one because of the inner motivation. Whereas if one plans to observe such a vow and accidentally eats grains because of miscalculating the time of starting or breaking the fast, then there is no reaction because the sankalpa or internal resolve was to perform the vow.

Another way we can look at this action in inaction is the consequences of apathy. If a child wanders into traffic, onlookers who stand idly by and do nothing are implicated in karmic reaction by their failure to come to the child's aid. We could say they did not act, but it is not inaction in the way Krishna speaks about akarma. So we can see there is more in the subtle nuances between what is actually action and what is actually inaction and why it can be confusing even to intelligent people.

Krishna wants to make clear to Arjuna that the selfless action He has been speaking about (niskama-karma yoga) is itself knowledge. No one, even a renunciate, can be free from action for a moment (as Krishna has previously pointed out). Perfectly executed, karma yoga is perfect knowledge.

One can perceive, by constant contemplation on the truth about the self, that the action that is being performed in itself is a form of knowledge.

Krishna points out that a wise person can see actions included in contemplation on the reality of the self. No contradiction between knowledge and action is felt by one who knows the philosophy of the self. Remember Arjuna was confused about this, seeing action and knowledge as distinct at the start of the third chapter and so Krishna is expanding on this to make the point clearer.

Krishna uses the word *yuktah* to show an intelligent person's actions are connected to the pursuit of the communion of the individual conscious entity with the ultimate consciousness. They are truly yogis even though they seem to act like a normal person externally. They can comprehend and apply this esoteric subject matter about action.

This verse 4.18 also verifies what Krishna stated in verse 2.46 about the purpose of all actions:

All purposes served by a small well can at once be served by a great reservoir of water. Similarly, all the purposes of the Vedas can be served to one who knows the purpose behind them.

The verse also emphasizes what Krishna was saying in verse 3.4 about not performing action:

Not by merely abstaining from work can one achieve freedom from reaction, nor by renunciation alone can one attain perfection.

So Krishna is again emphasizing that karma (action) can actually be seen as jnana (or knowledge). Remember this chapter is all about jnana. Akarma (which is real knowledge) refers to actions without reactions, and so these types of actions are on the absolute platform. Krishna wants Arjuna to really see that action itself when performed in this spirit of *niskama karma yoga* is knowledge itself.

This inaction in action is naturally there in bhakti as the activities of bhakti are performed only for Krishna's pleasure. No material reactions come from

such activity because the devotees don't seek reward for their work. One can perform detached actions in Krishna's service by applying transcendental knowledge. We will discuss this more thoroughly later in the Gita when we come to the section on bhakti, but for now we should know that even when we have material duties to do, or need some material function to have a psycho-physically balanced life, if it is ultimately in the pursuit of bhakti, then no karma is involved in our activity. We don't need to renounce activity. Rather, we should learn to integrate even our material lives in pursuit of self-realisation. How to do this will be discussed more in later chapters.

Next time we will study verses 4.19 and 4.20 where Krishna will elaborate on the points He raises in verse 4.18 and describe the life of the true practitioner of karma yoga, as well as the life of one who has attained perfection in this practice.