

UNITED WISDOM

Karma-yoga: action and attachment to results

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

“Work through freedom!”

Swami Vivekananda, Karma-Yoga, Chapter III, The Secret of Work: a short exclamation in his own exposition. Original English. This is a call within a religious teaching about liberation, not a promise that external constraints disappear. Primary context.

What this article is about

Irina helps a small library sort donated books. She chooses two free evenings, agrees on the task and keeps some time for other commitments. The work is finished, but nobody mentions her name at the gathering. Irina feels angry: without thanks, it seems that all her participation has lost its meaning. She did not ask for public recognition beforehand, yet now discovers that she expected it to confirm the value of what she did. This fictional scene allows us to distinguish the subject of help, an unspoken expectation and an actual condition of participation.

In Karma-Yoga, Vivekananda considers work in relation to non-attachment and the liberation of the soul. We turn to a particular chapter, preserving its religious framework and demands that are difficult to apply today. The article does not reduce the teaching to forgetting results, working without pay or feeling no disappointment. Our voluntary trial concerns one available action; it is untested as a method and does not establish a spiritual state. Contracts, material conditions and support where there is pressure require their own facts, which this fictional example does not establish.

I. Action is considered within a religious goal

In the selected Chapter III, Vivekananda begins with different forms of help, then turns to impressions left by thoughts and actions, and liberation from bondage. Work is therefore more than a way to produce a practical outcome. It belongs to his account of a person’s relationship with the world and their soul. We can read this account carefully without requiring every reader to accept its metaphysics. The source remains religious and philosophical exposition, rather than research into effective volunteering or a psychological description of Irina.

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The author distinguishes liberation from accumulating even good tendencies. In his image, a golden chain remains a chain, though it differs from an iron one. This concerns the goal of yoga, rather than a modern declaration that every habit is harmful. It does not mean that helping the library is useless or that a responsible agreement obstructs freedom. We retain the historical question of bondage without turning every commitment into a diagnosis. To discuss a particular action, we first need to know what it means to participants, rather than assigning it a spiritual judgement from one outward sign.

Within this framework, non-attachment does not mean inactivity. Vivekananda repeatedly insists on working, while seeking a change in the relationship to work. Irina really did sort books: the subject does not disappear when she examines her expectation. A distinction emerges where completed work must also establish her significance in other people's eyes. This is our editorial question, not a translation of the whole religious goal into the language of a community project. An expectation of thanks can be examined without claiming that two evenings of help already reproduce the path of liberation the author describes.

One scale should not replace another. The source's spiritual goal may be broad and absolute; Irina's present task has a timetable, resources and available conditions. She need not prove universal independence to decide whether she is willing to help again. We can say that the text asks about the character of participation while leaving our own relationship to its ultimate metaphysical goal unresolved. Such reading does not devalue the teaching. It makes visible the transition from a historical explanation to our proposed small reflection, which the source did not test as a separate practice.

II. A practical result and an expected return are different

Irina knows the books have been placed on shelves and can be used. That is a practical result of her action. She also wanted to hear thanks. The second wish may be understandable, but it does not automatically cancel the first fact. Combining them turns the absence of recognition into proof that the work achieved nothing. More accurately, both conditions can be named: the task is finished, and the desired acknowledgement was not received. This avoids devaluing what happened without demanding a happiness that is presently absent. The distinction preserves the experience without requiring a cheerful interpretation.

A result may be an agreed condition. For example, the library promised payment for particular work or a credit in its report. That concerns a known promise, rather than an internal expectation alone. The article determines neither contractual consequences, evidence nor an appropriate way to pursue a claim. But language about non-attachment should not silently turn accepted conditions into insignificant wishes. Irina can notice attachment to recognition while still clarifying what was agreed. These are separate subjects: considering her expectation does

not replace factual examination of another participant’s obligation or declare that obligation already fulfilled.

There may also be a desired result nobody promised. Irina wants the organiser to regard her as indispensable. Even detailed thanks do not guarantee that attitude. Someone can value particular help without accepting a permanent role in the helper’s story. Here we see a boundary between useful action and trying to purchase another person’s feeling through it. Naming this boundary does not mean that wanting recognition is always wrong. We ask whether an unspoken expectation became a hidden condition of help, unknown to the recipient and never answered by them.

One action can have several significant outcomes. The books are available, Irina learned how the library works, part of the evening was difficult, and thanks were insufficient. There is no need to choose one outcome and call the rest false. Such attention also helps with her next decision: what is she willing to repeat, which conditions does she want to name, and what would she prefer to decline? In our limited trial, non-attachment does not mean eliminating every interest in consequences. It means not giving one desired return the power to cancel every other known aspect of participation or determine someone’s worth in advance.

III. A gift should not silently become a debt entry

Vivekananda proposes the position of a giver who does not demand a return. In the selected context, this is connected with religious non-attachment. Our editorial question about the library is narrower: was help actually offered without this condition? Irina may discover that she regarded her participation as freely given while mentally entering future gratitude as a debt. This discovery does not require accusing her of hypocrisy. Intention and an expectation not yet noticed can diverge. What matters is not presenting the hidden entry as a shared agreement another person supposedly violated merely because our hope became strong.

If a condition matters, it can be stated before new participation. Irina is willing to work for agreed payment or wants a clear way of being credited in the report. This clarity does not make her participation inferior on our scale: the article introduces no ranking of the purity of gifts. The recipient can consider the proposed conditions and decline further voluntary help if they are unsuitable. After a clear response, the subject changes. People are discussing a known exchange or a particular promise, rather than a free offer to which demands absent from the original conversation were subsequently added.

A recipient can also use selflessness as a means of pressure. The organiser tells Irina that real goodness cannot be limited to two evenings and that asking about expenses reveals insufficient spirituality. This is an additional demand. A religious text does not become the organiser’s authority to control her resources. We do not establish the organiser’s motives

from the scene, but distinguish an offer from an imposed judgement. Irina can decline more work while preserving the value of earlier help. Neither gratitude nor spiritual praise should disguise the absence of clear agreement to an action only now being proposed.

A gift retains its participant and its limits. Irina can give her time, but not someone else's weekends, family funds or another person's capacity to keep helping. A good intention has no automatic right to promise on behalf of everyone affected by the work. If the library needs more, the actual shortfall can be recognised and another available approach sought. A small offer need not pretend to solve the whole task. Its limits do not make completed help unreal: two agreed evenings were two evenings, rather than a hidden promise to remain available for every future request.

IV. Freedom does not cancel working conditions

The author's contrast between free work and slave-like bondage requires care. It belongs to historical spiritual language in which Vivekananda evaluates a relationship to action. We do not use it to label an actual worker who receives wages, experiences material need or depends on an employer. External coercion cannot be explained by an internal expectation alone. Changing one's attitude may sometimes be possible, but that does not establish freedom in the conditions. Payment, safety, available time and the right to refuse remain separate questions that a spiritual metaphor neither answers nor makes unimportant.

Irina can sincerely want to help while needing travel expenses covered. Words about non-attachment cannot remove that need. If expenses were not discussed, they can be clarified before the next action without pretending that money does not matter. We establish neither an appropriate sum nor the library's obligation. We preserve accuracy in the offer: what resources are available now, and which conditions are missing? Wanting to act freely should not require lying about one's capacity to fit someone else's image of generosity or one's own attractive image of a helper.

Conditions matter for the recipient too. The library may lack money or the means to organise work as requested. Naming that limit honestly is better than promising an unavailable arrangement to secure Irina's immediate agreement. She can then choose according to known circumstances rather than an impossible plan. Refusal does not necessarily prove indifference to books. It may mean that the proposed work is unsuitable under present conditions. The article does not promise agreement in every conflict: sometimes freedom is preserved by recognising that no mutually manageable option exists now, without seeking a compulsory spiritual explanation for that mismatch.

Where there are threats, exploitation or punishment for refusing, we do not suggest testing non-attachment through another shared trial. Suitable safe support and actual conditions

matter more. A historical demand to keep doing good does not replace an assessment of danger. A voluntary trial can be stopped without explaining this as an insufficiently strong soul. Our question about gratitude concerns an ordinary limited situation, rather than a capacity to endure any harm. Existing substantial obligations also require separate consideration; they can neither be cancelled nor assigned from an example about a library or a convenient statement about personal freedom.

V. Caring about an outcome is different from owning it

Irina checks whether she arranged the books properly. This is attention to the quality of an action, rather than necessarily wanting to control every reader. If she discovers an error, she can correct it in an available way. Giving up a hidden reward does not require ceasing to notice the consequences of her work. Otherwise, non-attachment becomes a convenient excuse: since I am not holding on to the result, I do not care whether the help is suitable. Our trial does not imply this. The action retains criteria; wanting recognition and attending to a known mistake have different meanings and require different responses.

The outcome can be left open beforehand. Irina will prepare the selected shelves, but does not promise that the books will be read or that visitors will appreciate her arrangement. Nor should the library confirm success in advance simply because the help was well intended. Afterwards, what happened can be established from facts. The absence of a guarantee does not mean the absence of interest. It marks a limit to the promise: effort and some available conditions are known, while others' further participation remains unknown. Even a good plan has no right to demand that the world confirm the entire story its participant has built around the result.

Sometimes an outcome shows a need to change the action. Visitors find the shelves inconvenient, and the librarian suggests another arrangement. Irina can listen to the specific criticism without concluding that her participation was wholly rejected. She can also ask whether the new request fits the agreed scope. A correction should not quietly add another week of work. Quality, recognition and conditions are once again distinct. Being able to correct what was done preserves responsibility; limiting new participation preserves a free response. Neither subject requires complete knowledge of how sincerely everyone values one another.

Not every unsuccessful attempt needs repeating. If a task has lost its purpose, resources have ended or conditions have changed, participation can be reconsidered. Continuing does not itself prove non-attachment, just as stopping does not itself prove selfishness. Vivekananda describes sustained religious work on bondage; we do not measure success in it by counting library shifts. Present decisions need appropriate clarity about the subject: what needs doing, what is available and who genuinely agrees? This question leaves the result significant without turning it into the sole ruler of future action.

VI. Love is not established by an absence of pain

In the selected chapter, Vivekananda connects true love with freedom and the absence of a painful reaction. This is a strong proposition in his spiritual account. We do not use it as a modern test of feelings. Irina's disappointment does not prove her care was false, and calm does not establish moral purity. The source's ideal can be read without diagnosing every ordinary experience through it. Our distinction concerns an action used to acquire another person's gratitude or compliance. It does not establish the whole nature of their love or require pain to disappear before their next choice.

The author describes a jealous demand to control another person's movements as bondage mistaken for love. In a limited contemporary comparison, the important question concerns that person's response: are we making the recipient live according to the helper's script? Irina can care for the library without owning the decisions of its visitors or organisers. That does not mean every action by an organiser is acceptable. She can refuse pressure and discuss a known violation. Someone else's freedom does not cancel her limits; it simply does not allow a good action to become a right to govern the whole lives of its recipients.

Gratitude also remains free insofar as nobody can promise it as an internal state. Someone can say polite words, but Irina cannot know their entire appreciation from them. Demanding that they convince her completely may turn recognition into an endless examination. She can accept the known message, notice her dissatisfaction and decide how to participate further. There is no need to call all thanks insincere merely because they did not remove her expectation. Nor must she force herself to regard them as sufficient for every future task. One response has its own limited size.

In our scene, Irina can feel disappointed without presenting a hidden debt. This already distinguishes action from experience; it does not promise a changed feeling. She can tell an appropriate listener about a difficult evening without requiring the recipient of help to remove her pain as the final payment. Support is not guaranteed either and has the other person's conditions. A small change consists in the feeling not becoming an order to the organiser. It remains Irina's real experience, which can inform a new free decision without becoming proof of everyone's complete moral wrongdoing.

VII. Self-sacrifice has historical and practical limits

The chapter ends with a story about a family who gave a guest all their food during a famine and died. Vivekananda uses it for a radical ideal of self-giving. We do not conceal this part to make the source sound like a convenient guide to balance. At the same time, we do not propose repeating it as a practice. A literary and religious image does not establish a duty to endanger oneself or dependants. It cannot be used to demand that readers prove selflessness by giving up necessary resources, treatment, protection or their own agreement to a particular new action.

Vivekananda also sharply contrasts ideas of help in different societies and ranks physical help below spiritual help. These judgements belong to his argument. The article does not adopt them as a measured hierarchy of human worth or contemporary cultures. Food and material support address real necessary needs; a spiritual explanation does not make them trivial. Our reading is limited to the return a helper demands for their action. Asking about it does not require claiming that changing character will remove all need or that one tradition possesses the only authentic way to help.

Irina can consider the cost of two evenings and keep time for her other responsibilities. This does not fully reproduce the chapter's radical self-giving. We explicitly retain the difference instead of calling any manageable choice the original teaching without qualification. The editorial trial borrows a question rather than the whole ideal. Readers can decline the trial or turn to the source for its own religious foundations. Naming the limit accurately helps both author and reader: a contemporary proposal is not presented as a tested outcome of all yoga, and difficult parts of the primary text are not hidden.

Responsibility for others makes the boundary especially clear. Irina cannot present the absence of personal gain as permission to use family resources without agreement. Selflessness about recognition does not mean freedom from consequences for someone else's life. If help requires shared resources, participants need their own response to its conditions. The article does not establish a complete procedure for family decisions. It does not allow one spiritual word to make others silent participants in a sacrificial action we chose, which they may not know about and did not choose for themselves.

VIII. The resemblance to a Stoic distinction remains limited

In § 1 of The Enchiridion, translated by Elizabeth Carter, Epictetus distinguishes our actions from what does not belong to them. This provides a different philosophical entry into expecting recognition. Irina can carry out an agreed step but does not govern someone else's opinion of it. The resemblance is real and limited by its subject. A Stoic distinction does not become proof of every proposition Vivekananda makes about the soul, impressions and liberation. Two historical lines help pose neighbouring questions without becoming one universal teaching under different names.

The selected Stoic context also contains strong promises of immunity from harm and instructions to regard externals differently. We do not transfer them as a claim that someone consented to harm done to them. External conditions matter, protection may be necessary, and a free response is not always equally available. The limited comparison concerns the impossibility of guaranteeing gratitude through one's action. It neither declares material circumstances empty nor makes a suffering person guilty of judging incorrectly. Our scene supplies neither facts nor grounds for such a conclusion.

Differences between the sources help avoid uniting them too quickly. Vivekananda discusses work in relation to freeing the soul from bondage; Epictetus's selected opening introduces the domain of one's action and what is external. A reader can explore each framework separately. Our question about the library need not finally decide which is correct. It is enough to see where the comparison comes from and what it does not establish. It does not test the exercise's benefit, cancel agreed payment or promise that ceasing to demand thanks will necessarily feel pleasant or improve relationships with organisers.

Someone may even find that the comparison is presently unhelpful. Irina is too tired for philosophical reflection and simply wants to clarify future conditions. That is an available choice. Traditions should not become another obligation added to work someone already did. Careful reading matters for our attribution, but readers need not master both teachings before making a manageable decision. Broad foundations can remain open while one subject is named: what am I offering, what response do I need, and what do I merely hope to receive without a known promise?

IX. Non-attachment should not become a new measure of superiority

Irina decides to stop expecting thanks, then becomes irritated because she still expects them. A new demand has joined the earlier one: to be someone who needs no recognition at all. If every reaction is judged as a spiritual failure, the original action disappears from view again. Our trial does not require an impeccable state. An expectation can be noticed without giving it authority over the recipient. This is a limited choice that does not measure a person's entire maturity. Observation itself does not establish liberation, and continuing resentment does not cancel the capacity to accept a small clear boundary.

Nor should another person be labelled attached because they ask for payment, thank someone differently or do not want to help. We do not know the whole subject and its conditions. A spiritual word can easily become a convenient judgement on someone else's life. Irina can discuss her own offer without presenting unknown facts about the librarian as established bondage. She can decline the task without such a verdict. It is not needed to explain missing resources or mismatched conditions. A free response is more accurate when it concerns a present action rather than requiring one participant to be declared purer so the other can be allowed to stop.

If an internal expectation changes, this need not become a public report. Irina can notice that she values the books' availability more and thinks less about being mentioned. She need not tell the organiser about a new level of selflessness and expect recognition for that instead. Such a report can sometimes return to the same subject in another form. But we do not establish the motive of every personal account. Someone can share a meaningful experience if they want, preserving a limit: the listener need not confirm the final correctness of our interpretation or establish an internal state we have achieved.

The small trial may remain unfinished. Irina notices an expectation but does not yet know whether she is willing to help again. This is an honest result if it reflects the circumstances. Philosophical reading need not become an obligation to produce an attractive answer immediately. She can take time, clarify conditions or decline further participation. The article sets no single pace and does not promise that understanding instantly changes experience. Asking about attachment is useful for its precision: it shows where hope became a demand, rather than requiring proof that someone has stopped hoping forever.

X. What was done retains its size

A possible outcome is modest: Irina recognises that the books were arranged, that she missed receiving thanks and that she is not promising future work yet. Another outcome is possible too: conditions become clearer and participation continues. Neither proves the approach effective. It matters more not to replace the known with the desired. Work was an action, the expectation was hers, and another person’s attitude remained partly unknown. Between these subjects, room for a decision can be preserved without requiring one to settle every other or make the story pleasant for everyone involved.

Reading Karma-Yoga does not establish a universal demand to work without a result. In the selected chapter, results are considered within a spiritual framework of bondage and liberation; our question concerns trying to own a return for help. This is not a complete translation of the teaching into everyday language. The source can be respected while the difference remains. Attention to consequences, correcting mistakes, agreed conditions and the right to stop voluntary participation do not disappear. A limited response concerning one subject should not pretend to be freedom from every external circumstance or turn gratitude into a measure of someone’s moral worth.

Freedom in action is visible here in offering what one is actually willing to do and honestly naming important conditions. It is also preserved by not making the recipient a debtor on a hidden account. Both limits matter. Without the first, selflessness can disguise pressure on a helper; without the second, help becomes an attempt to govern another person. Our scene does not settle the whole ethics of work and giving. It leaves one manageable question to consider without promising oneself endless resources or promising the world an impeccable inner state.

What this means in practice

For calm individual reflection, choose one ordinary voluntary action. What was offered and done in fact? Which conditions were actually agreed? What return did you hope for without anyone promising it? There is no need to assess your whole personality. A record can be mental, short or unnecessary; it need not be shown to the recipient of help. This is an editorial trial rather than a spiritual examination or a tested method.

Separate the action’s quality from desired recognition. Is there a specific mistake you can correct? Is there a known unfinished subject needing factual clarification? Do not declare these questions gone through the language of non-attachment. At the same time, do not turn missing thanks into proof that the action produced no result. Both conditions can be acknowledged: something useful happened, and a pleasant response was insufficient.

Before new participation, name your resources and important conditions. Do not promise for others, add hidden demands after helping or accept a spiritual judgement as a duty to agree to any amount of work. Where there are threats or coercion, an ordinary shared trial is not proposed: suitable safe support under actual conditions matters more. Significant obligations are clarified separately; this article does not establish them.

You can skip, change or leave the trial. Afterwards, note only what is known: what was done, which expectation was noticed, what needs clarifying and what remains unknown. One calm reaction cannot establish liberation, and disappointment cannot disprove the value of all care. A precise limit to a new promise or acknowledged uncertainty may be enough. Gratitude, continued help and a pleasant feeling are not guaranteed.

Key quotation

> *“Attachment comes only where we expect a return.”*

Swami Vivekananda, Karma-Yoga, Chapter III: a separate sentence in his own exposition after considering the giver’s position. Original English. This religious proposition does not cancel known contracts, working conditions or material needs. Source.

Connections between traditions

Line of thought	Shared question and limit of the comparison
Vivekananda ↔ voluntary help	An expected return can bind action. Our limited question does not reproduce the entire religious goal of liberation.
Epictetus ↔ recognition of a result	Our action does not guarantee someone else's opinion. The Stoic distinction does not prove the metaphysics of Karma-Yoga or cancel external harm.
A gift ↔ an agreed exchange	It matters which conditions were actually accepted. Non-attachment does not turn promised payment into an insignificant hope.
Care ↔ correction	One can avoid buying gratitude while attending to consequences. Declining ownership of an outcome does not mean declining to check one's work.
Radical self-giving ↔ a manageable trial	The historical ideal is retained in the reading. Dangerous depletion and control of others' resources are not proposed as contemporary practice.

Primary sources

1. Swami Vivekananda. Karma-Yoga, Chapter III: The Secret of Work. The historical work was first published in 1896; the selected transcription belongs to Complete Works, Volume 1. Chapter III was read completely, including its hierarchy of help, impressions, liberation, relationships and concluding story of extreme self-sacrifice. Two short fragments of Vivekananda's own exposition are quoted, rather than embedded words from the Gita or Sankhya. Complete reading of the collection is not claimed; international permission for every operation has not been established.

2. Epictetus. The Enchiridion, § 1, translation by Elizabeth Carter. Attribution and the complete selected § 1 were read, including its strong historical promises and instructions. The page's exact printed basis has not been established; complete reading of the treatise is not claimed. A limited philosophical comparison without direct quotation, rather than an empirical guarantee of immunity from harm or freedom from needs.

Tags

karma-yoga, Vivekananda, work, action, non-attachment, result, liberation, religious framework, help, gift, return, expectation, gratitude, recognition, conditions, payment, resources, agreement, refusal, promise, quality, consequences, correction, care, love, self-sacrifice, historical limits, Epictetus, Stoicism, voluntary practice, safety, United Wisdom

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