

## Ideals of Karma in the Bhagavad Gītā: A Philosophical Exploration

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**Abstract:** This paper provides an in-depth examination of the concept of karma in the Bhagavad Gītā, one of the most revered texts in Hindu philosophy. Through a close reading of the Gītā's teachings on karma, this discussion reveals the nuances and complexities its philosophical underpinnings and spiritual implications. The ideal of karma in the Gītā is shown to be a rich and multifaceted framework for understanding the nature of action, the self, and the ultimate reality. This paper analyzes the Gītā's teachings on karma in relation to key concepts such as dharma, bhakti, and moksa, highlighting the ways in which the text offers a unique and profound perspective on the human condition. This discussion also explores the relevance of the Gītā's teachings on karma to contemporary debates in ethics, philosophy and spirituality. By examining the ways in which the concept of karma has been interpreted and applied in various contexts, this paper sheds light on the enduring significance of the Gītā's teachings on karma for modern audiences. Ultimately, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive and philosophical analysis of the Gītā's teachings on karma, highlighting their relevance and significance for contemporary philosophical and spiritual inquiry.

**Keywords:** Bhagavad Gītā, karma, Hindu philosophy, ethics, spirituality, dharma, bhakti, jñāna, moksa.

The Bhagavad-Gītā is the Smrtiprasthāna of Advaita Vedānta. The full title of the book is 'Srimadbhagavad Gītā Upaniṣad'. In short, it is called the Bhagavad-Gītā and also in short, it is called the Gītā. Although it is an in the Upaniṣad, it is not said to belong to the 'Srutiprasthāna' of Vedānta. As Lord Krishna has advised Arjuna on the battlefield is to remember the Gītāttva itself that is why it is called 'Smrtiprasthāna of Vedānta'.

The Bhagavad Gītā is divided into eighteen chapters. These chapters are divided into three sections. Each section consists of six chapters. From the first chapter to the six chapters is the first section, from the seventh chapter to the twelfth chapter is the second section and from the thirteen chapters to the eighteen chapters is the third section. The principle formulated in the eighteenth chapter of the Gītā is the combination of Jñāna or Knowledge, karma or action and Bhakti and yoga or devotion. Advaitavādi however, holds that the Gītā shows the path of transition through the action to devotion and through the devotion to knowledge. So, the Gītā, Karma-yoga is discussed in the first section, and Bhakti-yoga is discussed in the third section. Madhusudan Saraswati's commentary on the Gītā is called 'Guruvṛttidīpikā' and describes Niskāma karma as the essence of the Gītā. According to this view, Niskāma karma is the best path to Liberation. An attempt to Niskāma karma properly resolves the prevailing conflict between individual and social ethics is observed in the Gītā.

The word 'Yoga' is derived from the root 'yuj', which means 'to join'. Its main meaning is 'combination', 'the state of union' etc. Patanjali 'Yoga Philosophy' says that the word 'Yoga' does not mention, in the sense of the union of the individual soul and God. This is the means of "cittavṛttinirodhah". But in the Gītā, the word 'Yoga' is not used in this narrow sense. Here, it is in the sense of 'Karma'. This means it is necessary to acquire the state of combination, union, etc. In this context, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna –

*“Yogaśthah kuru karmāni sangam tyaktvā dhananjaya.  
Siddhyasiddhyoh samo bhutvā yoga ucyate”.* (The Gita-2/48)

That is, consequently, one should be doing the action by abandoning attachment, recognizing siddhi and non-siddhi both are equal (being free from *harsha- Visāda*) or doing yoga (action). So, yoga is the name of equal knowledge of siddhi and non-siddhi.

The word 'Karma-yoga' is the essence of the Gītā. Although the third chapter of the Gītā is known as karma-yoga, the discussion of karma-yoga is not confined to any particular chapter. In the Gītā, the sense of 'karma-yoga' means *Niskāma karma* or the performance of action without the hope of results. In this context, Lord Krishna says-

*“Karmanyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phalesu kadācana.  
Mā karmaphalahetur bhūrmā te sangohastvakarmani”* (The Gita-2/47)

That is, "your right is in the action, not the result. Therefore, do the action. But do not let the desire for the result be the reason for your action. Also, do not let the desire to abandon the action be your instinct." This concept of karma is known as *Niskāma karma*. In this concept, we get four principles-

1. You are responsible for your actions.
2. Let not any desire to be the motive of your action.
3. Let not any desire to be the motive of your action.
4. Do not let the desire for results be the deterrent of your actions.

In the Gītā, the essence of *Niskāma karma-yoga* is- '*Yogaśthah kuru karmani*'. All work has a motive and men perform acts being motivated by the motive. This motive may be two types – fulfillment of own desire and fulfillment of the command of God avoiding own desire. One should work for the welfare of God in association with God *Niskāma karmi*. This is called *Buddhi-yoga*. In the absence of this yoga, it is impossible to perform by *Niskāma karma*. So, in the Gītā, it is said that to be *Yogaśtha*, I to join with God, to fix the *Buddhi* on God to do karma. If all actions are performed in the way, the hope of the result of karma will be automatically abandoned and equanimity will increase. This process of performing actions is called karma-yoga. In the explanation of karma-yoga, Lord Krishna says that karma must be done, because one cannot live even for a moment without doing karma – "*Na hi kaścitsanamapi jātu tisthatyakarmakṛt*"(The Gita-3/5). Libation is the means of taking action by karma yoga; on the other hand, libation is an obstacle to taking action by *jñāna mārga*. But libation cannot be attained by only karma says in the Gītā.

According to the Gītā, there is no need for renunciation of action, for the attainment of knowledge. It means equality and non-attachment to objects of desire and sense. *Buddhi yoga* is fulfilled by karma yoga. And the desire less actions of yoga with its full meaning will get the self-liberating *Buddhi yoga*. Liberation is not only necessary for the performance of karma but also for saving of body. In this context, everyone should perform action keeping an eye on universal welfare- "*lokasaṅgrahamevāpi sampaśyam karturmarhasi*"(The Gita-3/24) . Everyone should try to inspire others to follow the path of action by having their own action. So, if a man

encourages others to follow their own action, it will be beneficial to the world. The word '*Lokasamgraha*' means to Tilak in his book "*Gītā Rahasya*" says, "Binding men together and protecting, maintaining and regulating them in such a way that they might acquire that strength which results from mutual co-operation, thereby putting them on the path of acquiring merit while maintaining their good condition". So, the word '*lokasamgraha*' ordinarily means 'the welfare of human beings' as a man is superior to the other created beings in the world.

In this context, according to the *Gītā*, a liberated man does not desist from action even in the state of liberation, although he does not perform *Sakāma* karma which is inconsistent with his inner peace. Then he becomes unattached and works for *lokasamgraha*, i.e. to deter people from the wrong path and lead them to the right path. So, *lokasamgraha* only can perform prudent person through his own actions. From the standpoint of *yajñā* whatever is known as karma. It is the point of knowledge from *lokasamgraha*. Lord Krishna says to Arjuna – "*lokasamgrahamevāpi sampasyan kartumarhasi.*" i. e. in the same way, for the sake of *lokasamgraha* and you should perform your work. Thus "he who performs his duty without expecting the fruits of actions is a *Sannyāsi* and a karma yogi."

In the *Gītā*, Lord Krishna says that when someone is satisfied within himself by discarding all mental desires, he is called *Sthitaprajñā*. One who is untroubled by sorrow, dispassionate by happiness, whose passion, fear and anger are restrained, is called the *Sthitaprajñā* person. He has merciless in all matters he does not show satisfaction at good things or displeasure at bad things is called *Sthitaprajñā*. And he restrains all the senses like the contradiction of the limbs of a tortoise is called *Sthitaprajñā*. Such a person is self-absorbed, fruitless, dispassionate, virtuous and free from attachment. Acharjya Sankara in his '*Gītā Bhāṣya*' persons depending on the situation there are two types of *Sthitaprajñā*- *Samādhista Sthitaprajñā* and *Byuthita Sthitaprajñā*. The *Niskāma-yogi* has established himself in the land of intellect and is content within him-self having renounced all kinds of desires, than he is called *Samādhista Sthitaprajñā*. On the other hand, when a *Niskāma-yogi* has equal knowledge of all contradictions, i. e. he has the same feelings of happiness and sorrow, winter and summer etc., than he is called *ByuthhitaSthitaprajñā*. In this context, Lord Krishna says:

*"Prajahāti yadā kāmāna sarbāna paārtha manogatāna.*

*Ātmani eba ātmanā tusta sthitaprajñā tadā ucyate."* (*The Gita-2/55*)

“*Dhukhesvanudvigamanāh sukheshu bigataspr̥h.*

*bītarāgavayacrodhah sthitadhīmurnirucyate.*” (The Gita-2/56)

The first of the above two verses of the Gītā seems to describe the *Samādhista Sthitaprajñā* and the second of the *Byuthhita Sthitaprajñā*. In both, they always reside in *Cittabhūmi*. Happiness and sorrow are both *tamas Vṛtti*. Therefore, has no desire for happiness and sorrow with the *sāttvika Vṛtti* of the *Sthitaprajñā*. A *Sthitaprajñā* person is free from passion, fear and anger. Anger is the faculty of the mind. As they are illusions, they cannot touch the theoretical positivity. Restraint of the senses is the sin of *Sthitaprajñā*. So, the *Niskāma yogi* has to completely restrain all the senses. This resulted in the establishment of *Prajñā*.

In the fourth chapter of the Gītā, Lord Krishna describes the concepts of Karma, Akarma and Vikarma. The body and the sense organs performed by ordinary people think that the actions are called karma. And the physical and organic actions are called Akarma. But Lord Krishna says, "Whatever is performed by the body, mind and speech are called karma" .

Akarma means the absence of karma or *karmasunyatā*. *Sannyāsavādins* say that 'Akarma' means renunciation of actions it is the cause of bondage. According to them, knowledge can be attained only by liberation, not by action. But by the *Sannyāsavādins* as prescribed for the attainment of liberation is not necessary to totally abandon action in the Gītā. Generally, we believe that karma binds the doer. So, Akarma means liberation, it is a wrong idea, because every action does not bind the doer. Hence, desire and egoism both are related to the action. Its binds are the doer in bondage. So, this liberation of action is equivalent to karma. The Gītā says *karmasunyatā* of action is not the path of liberation obtaining from the *karmabondh*. So, the means of liberation is the *karmasunyatā* of egoism and desire. *Jñānin* does not abandon action. Because he knows that, it is impossible to totally abandon actions. In this context, Lord Krishna says- "no man can remain even for a single moment without performing action". Because nobody can escape from sleeping, eating, sitting, etc. And if it is totally impossible to be inactive action, then Akarma means that it is not surely the abandonment of action. Then, now the question of what is meant by Akarma? In the Gītā reply says, do not look the karma as your mere performance of action. But decide your karma or Akarma considering the good and bad results.

*Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are two realities in the Sāṅkhya philosophy. All actions come from *Prakṛti* and it is unconscious and active. On the other hand, *Puruṣa* is conscious and inactive. The activities of *Prakṛti* are his own-self thinks due to the *Puruṣa* ignorance. So, due to ignorance, the *Jīva* thinks that 'I am working, I am the doer and I shall reap the results of my action.' This is called bondage. In the net of karma *Prakṛti* is the path of *Jīva* that binds him-self. This is called bondage. *Karmasannyatā* is the means of liberation from this bondage of action. In this context, the Gītā says- "All actions are being performed by the constituents of *Prakṛti*" Also, in this context, Tilak says - "If one sits quietly when someone is hammering one's parents and does not do anything to protect them, that is Akarma, that is *Karmasannyata*, according to the ordinary meaning of the word. It is nevertheless an action, nay, even a Vikarma and according to the doctrine of causality, one cannot escape the evil results of this kind of action."

Vikarma is the means of impure action. But Akarma is the means of all pure actions. It is performed by *Jñānin*. Because knows that his all actions are Akarma in nature. He becomes free from the bondage of action. So, he is a real yogi. In the Gītā Lord Krishna says-"One, who sees inaction in action and action in inaction, is wise among men and he is a yogi, who has performed all actions." Also, the action which is performed by this yogi is called Vikarma. Because he has no egoism, no desire, he does not reap its result even performing Vikarma.

According to Gītā action is of three types in accordance with the predominance of the three qualities or *gunas*- *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tāmas*, these are *sāttvika* karma, *rajas* karma, and *tāmas* karma. In the Gītā, *sāttvika* means "That action which is performed by a man without attachment, without love or hate and without desire for fruitive results as being 'niyata' for him, is called *sāttvika* karma." But in *rājas* karma says "That action which is performed for the satisfaction of desire or with a sense and with an excessive effort is called *rājas* karma" . Another, *tāmas* karma says "That action which is performed without considering what its result will be or what one's strength is and whether it will or will not result in destruction or *himsā* is called *tāmas* karma." In this karma attachment, the desire for results remains absent. The doer performs his duty in the sense of duty.

The Gītā points out that as long as a man remains on the earth he is bound to work for the purpose of maintaining the order of existence. His future depends on his present actions, even though they are determined by his own nature. Human bonds are of three *guns*, which are due to

guṇa, which is the material from which his finite personality is performed. Guṇas are the condition that imposes limitations on the soul. In this state the soul takes a distorted view of things, it can perceive only the multiplicity and separation of things, rather than their essential unity in God. As Lord Krishna says- "The pure clear (Sattva) the affective-active (Rajas), and the inter-dark (Tamas), these nature- necessity-born modalities (guṇas) bind, o, mighty-armed (Arjuna) the imperishable embodied one." The principle of intelligence and light is called sattva guṇa, the principle of activity is called raja-guṇa and the principle of dullness and darkness is called tama guṇa.

In the Gītā, Lord Krishna classifies human actions based on the four social classes (Varṇa) and the four stages of life (Āśrama). Lord Krishna said, "The four varṇas or social classes, created based on guṇa (qualities) and karma (actions), are Brāhmins, Kṣātriyas, Vaiśyas, and Sūdras." These four Varṇas are called Caturvarṇa. Also, they are not caste, they are called Varṇa. In ancient India there was no caste system, there was Varṇa-veda. Brāhman, Kṣātriya, Vaiśya, etc. are not divided into Janma-gata, they are divided into Karma-gata. In the era of Veda, Upaniṣads there was no concept of caste. So, the concept of caste is a foreign concept. Later in society, people are using caste as Varṇa. It is to be noted that through caste like Brāhminism is said to be born Varṇa like Brāhminism is due to guṇa and karma. The word 'guṇa' means sattva, raja, and tama. In the Sāṃkhya philosophy, the three-fold Prakṛti is said to be the fundamental element of the universe. As the original Prakṛti is three-fold, all distortions are three-fold. However, in any action sattva is the main one and raja, and tama guṇa are minor. In any action, raja-guṇa is predominant and sattva, and tama guṇa are minor. Again, in some actions, tama-guṇa is the main entity and sattva, and raja guṇa are minor. According to the variation in the qualities of the four castes – Brāhmin, Kṣātriya, Vaiśya, and Sūdra, these categories of action are shown. This is called Vraṇadharmā. Svadharmā refers to the specific actions of each Varṇa. The Svadharmā of a Brāhmin is study, teaching, yajñā, dhāna and pratigra. The Svadharmā of a Kṣātriya is study, sacrifice, charity and defence. The Svadharmā of a Vaiśya is agriculture, animal husbandry and trade. The Svadharmā of a Sūdra is a service to the society. This Svadharmā distinction of caste like Brahmin is prescribed according to their inherent qualities. Sama, dama, tapasyā, shucitā, kshamā, saralatā, jñāna, vijñāna and āstikya are the nine inherent qualities of Brāhman. Prowess, brilliance, skill, flight in war, charity and the power to lord it over all are the inherent qualities of

a Kṣatriya . Farming, animal husbandry, buying and selling are the inherent qualities of Vaiśya. And the inherent quality of Sūdra is to serve .

Lord Krishna statement to Arjuna in the Gītā is that every human being is sattva, raja, and tama consisting of these three guṇas. The dharma of sattva-guṇa is lightness and manifestation. The dharma of raja-guṇa is efficacy and instinct. And the dharma of tama-guṇa is gravity and cover. Although all these three qualities are present in some people, sattva-guṇa is more in some, raja-guṇa is predominant in some and tama-guṇa is predominant in some. Brāhminism etc. sattva,raja, and tama are this quality arises from the saṁskāra of all births. Because of Sattva-guṇa is due to the svabhava of Brāhmin. Since sattva-guṇa is the svabhava of peace. Raja and tama guṇa both are non-predominant things to Brāhmanism. In Kṣatriyas is thought to be the predominant raja-guṇa, since, sattva and tama guṇa both are thought to be non-predominant. So, Kṣatriyas are tama-guṇa is the ordinary cause of action. Among the Vaiśya, tama-guṇa is way to non- predominant and raja-guṇa is that major. That is why the effort of action is the svabhava of Vaiśyas. And the svabhava of the Sūdra is due to the tama-guṇa with the raja-guṇa. And the svabhava of the Sūdras are the cause of tama-guṇa with the attached of raja-guṇa .

In the above discussion, we get that those svadharmas of four varṇas have been in the Gītā. The qualities found in the Brāhmins are study, teaching, etc. but not found in the Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Sūdras. The qualities found in Kṣatriyas are donation, teaching, charity, defense, etc. but not found in the other three Varṇas. As much the qualities found in Vaiśyas are cultivating, business, etc. but not found in the other three Varṇas. Similarly, as much the qualities found in Sūdras are service to all other castes, but not found in the other three Varṇas, because these are their Svadharma. But in the Gītā, Lord Krishna says that not only by karma, "man attains the highest perfection worshipping in Him (God) by his own natural duties."

In the Gītā, the fourth chapter deals with Jñāna-Yoga, also known as Jñāna-mārga. Liberation can be obtained which is a great mārga. In Hinduism, it is one of the spiritual paths. The Sanskrit word 'jñāna' means knowledge. In the Gītā, 'knowledge' refers to spiritual knowledge, which it means the knowledge of the self. Self-knowledge is not separable from the divine. So, jñāna-yoga places emphasis on self-realization. Jñāna-mārga is the realization of the true knowledge of reality prescribed by the supreme good by man in the Gītā. In the Gītā, recognizes are two kinds of knowledge- one which seeks to understand the phenomena of existence extremely through



intellect and the other attainable only by intuition. On the other hand, knowledge of which is the ultimate reality of the all-changing and passing phenomena. So, these types of knowledge are only different sides of one pursuit. And for all knowledge is the knowledge of God. For this Gītā believes that for attaining the spiritual vision. The yoga system is accepted by the Gītā as a means of mental training to the knowledge of the absolute reality.

Bhakti-yoga is discussed in the twelfth chapter of the Gītā. The word 'Bhakti' was derived from the Sanskrit root 'bhaj' dhatu which means 'to divide', it also means devotion. The Bhakti-yoga is open to all of these the strong and weak follow this path. The method of liberation or mokṣa is clearly evident of the great significance position in the Gītā. Lord Krishna says-"Those who cast off all their works on Me, solely intent on Me, and meditate on Me in spiritual exercise, leaving no room for others do Me honor, these will I lift up a high out of the ocean of recurring death, and that right so on, for their thoughts are fixed on Me. On Me alone let your mind dwell, stir up your soul to enter me henceforth in very truth in me, you will find your home." If a man dedicates his all to God, he is his all to be forced out of bondage. God gives spiritual freedom to His devotees so that they can come to Him and abide in them. It is clear that those who depend entirely on a devotee as the ultimate nature of spiritual life cannot realize their ultimate goodness. Immersion in the eternal impersonal, but as a union with the Supreme Being, the Gītā recognizes absolute surrender and attains bhakti as the best attitude towards God when bhakti is perfected. The devotee is led by God to the ultimate realization that he is one with God himself.

According to the Gītā, it is important to remember that, there is no contradiction among Jñāna, Karma, and Bhakti-yoga. In the Gītā, Lord Krishna said to Arjuna- that a wise person by his knowledge, a karma-yogi by his action and a bhakti by his devotion can attain liberation. They are complementary to each other.

Here's a potential conclusion for a philosophical exploration of the ideal of karma in the Bhagavad Gītā. This philosophical exploration of the ideal of karma in the Gītā has revealed text's unique and profound perspective on the nature of action and its consequences. By examining the Gītā's teachings on karma in relation to key concepts such a dharma, bhakti, and mokṣa, we have gained a deeper understanding of the text's philosophical and spiritual significance. One of the primary insights to emerge from this exploration is the importance of selfless action (niskama karma) in achieving spiritual growth and self-realization. The Gītā's

teachings on karma emphasize the need to perform actions without attachment to their fruits, cultivating a sense of detachment and equanimity in the face of success or failure. Another key insight is the Gītā's understanding of the relationship between individual action and the larger cosmic order. The text's teachings on karma highlight the ways in which individual actions contribute to the maintenance of the social and cosmic order, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities. The Gītā's teachings on karma also offer a profound perspective on the nature of the self and its relationship to the ultimate reality. By emphasizing the importance of self-realization and spiritual growth, the Gītā provides a powerful framework for understanding the human condition and our place within the large universe. Ultimately, this philosophical exploration of the ideal of karma in the Bhagavad Gītā has revealed the text's enduring significance and relevance for contemporary philosophical and spiritual inquiry. As we continue to grapple with the complexities and challenges of human existence, the Gītā's teachings on karma offer a profound and timeless wisdom that can guide us on our journey towards self-realization and spiritual growth.

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