

ETHICS AND *NIṢKĀMA KARMA* IN BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

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Abstract

The doctrine of *Niṣkāma Karma* occupies a central place in the ethical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It presents a distinctive moral vision in which action is affirmed as unavoidable and necessary, while attachment to the fruits of action is decisively rejected. This paper critically examines the ethical meaning of *Niṣkāma Karma* and its relevance to human conduct, particularly in the context of duty (*dharma*), moral responsibility, and liberation. Through an analysis of key verses of the *Gītā*, the study explores Krishna's response to Arjuna's moral dilemma on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, where action appears inseparable from violence, desire, and consequence. The paper further addresses the psychological challenge posed by the idea of desireless action, especially in contrast with modern motivational theories that regard desire as the basis of all activity. It argues that the *Gītā* does not deny motivation altogether but seeks to transform it by replacing egoistic desire with a sense of duty, self-discipline, and detachment. Ethical action, according to *Niṣkāma Karma*, is not action without purpose but action free from selfish attachment. The study concludes that *Niṣkāma Karma* offers a profound ethical framework that reconciles action with inner freedom and moral integrity.

Keywords – Ethics, Dharma, *Bhagavad Gītā*, Nishkama Karma, Duty

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Introduction

Ethics in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is inseparably connected with the problem of action (*karma*) and human responsibility. Situated on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, the *Gītā* presents a profound moral dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, who stands overwhelmed by doubt, fear, and ethical confusion. Arjuna's dilemma is not merely personal but universal: whether one should act when action appears to lead to suffering, violence, and moral guilt. In response, Krishna expounds the doctrine of *Niṣkāma Karma*, or desireless action, which becomes the foundation of *Karma Yoga*.

The *Gītā* rejects both escapism through renunciation of action and blind attachment to results. Instead, it upholds the performance of one's prescribed duty (*svadharma*) without selfish desire for its fruits. These ethical ideal challenges ordinary moral thinking, which commonly associates action with personal gain and motivation. The notion of acting without attachment to results raises important philosophical questions regarding intention, desire, and moral agency.

This paper seeks to examine the ethical significance of *Niṣkāma Karma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, critically analyzing its psychological and moral implications. It aims to show that desireless action represents a transformative ethical principle rather than an impractical moral ideal.

Ethics and Nishkama Karma in Bhagavad Gita

Karma may appear to be small, but its meaning is profound. It may not be possible to define karma. Because it has neither beginning nor end, it is endless and beginning less. Just as life is beginning less, karma, too, is without beginning. Thus, karma's nature is a mystery, and one must

be earnest and steadfast in trying to include its importance. Generally, it is natural to regard the performance of action as karma. For example, to the question as to what someone is doing, we get the answer that he is writing. Here writing is considered karma. Krishna says, "The supreme imperishable is Brahmana; one's self is called *adhyatma*, the activity of me which brings about the creation, is called karma." (B.G 8.3) And it has been advised by our ancient scriptures and teachers that "The action (karma) is the cause of suffering, the action is the cause of bondage until it not will be an action of yajna." (B.G -3.9) Thus, if action is the cause of bondage and the cause of suffering, why should we accomplish our action? As Arjuna says to Krishna in another way, "If the knowledge is superior to action, then why you are engaging me to do the action." (B.G- 3.1)

Krishna wanted to impress Arjuna by saying, "No one under any circumstances can remain even for a moment without undertaking action; everyone is compelled to act by the modes born of nature." (B.G -3.5) Always beings are involve in action, "They are involve in seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, moving, sleeping, breathing, speaking, releasing, holding, opening and closing the eyes." (B.G – 5.8) Means every movement is full of action. And, "One who, in this world, follows not the wheel thus set revolving, living a life of sin and being delighted in the senses, o son of Partha – he or she lives in vain." (B.G–3.16) So "Do perform your prescribed duty, for action is superior to inaction. Besides, even the maintenance of the body would not be possible for you, by inaction." (B.G – 3.8)

Here the word 'prescribed duty' is very significant to discuss. Arjuna was very well known that, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, every fighter must do their duty as a warrior, and everyone must keep in mind to defeat their

enemy. It is their duty; rather it can be better to say it is their prescribed duty on the battlefield.

But for Arjuna to perform the duty was too dilemmatic and challenging. It was too difficult for Arjuna to conclude that he should go through the fight or return home. The dilemma occurred because of right and conflict. Request for the land of Kurukshetra and battle created the spot because of sympathy towards his relatives. Both of these two senses denote a notion of 'Duty'. His duty to his brothers, his cousins, and grandfather, etc., "But the person who is delighted in the atman, satisfied in the atman, and finds joy in the atman alone, he has no obligatory duty to perform." (B.G-3.17) "He or she has object in this world by doing (an action), nor by the non-performance of action nor has he or she any need of depending on anyone for any desirable object." (B.G-3.18) "Therefore, do your obligatory actions, without attachment; by performing action without attachment, the human being attains to the supreme", (B.G-3.19) Krishna says. And "It was by action alone, that Janaka and others attained perfection. You should perform passionless action, also for the good of the world." (B.G-3.20)

We know everyone in this world should perform their prescribed duties. If a person does not perform his duties, he brings sin upon himself. Prescribed duties are performed to renounce affinity for actions. Such a striver performs actions for the welfare of others by renouncing selfish desire for fruit, while a commoner performs activities for himself with the desire for fruit. In the latter case, the action is turned into fruit, so the fruit has its affinity for the action, while the aim has no relationship to action.

Action is the law of our life, and without action, living is impossible. Karma is our Dharma. The Bhagavad Gita teaches people a higher value

when it teaches that not only duties are to be performed but also these are to be performed without any selfishness, desire or anxiety for the results of their actions. It means that result of action should not disturb their minds. The doer who acts should also not demand the result. When the action is accomplished without selfishness, it becomes a sacrifice, a form of worship. Passionless spirit in action denotes a work should be done in high spirits without any personal interest.

As Krishna says, "your duty is to work only; but never to the fruits thereof. May you not be motivated by the fruits of actions, nor let your attachment be towards inaction." (B.G-2.47) From this verse it is being stated that we must perform our action without the desire for results and neither we can leave the action nor we would be able to become a cause of the result as well. One point to be noted is that 'action' should be performed without passion and an interest of fruit. It seems absurd to hear how any action can be accomplished with the result?

We do our actions to achieve our goal or a particular result. We take a breath for a specific reason. We do our work for particular motivation. Generally, we are habituated to doing work with our salary or remuneration. We can't think of action without consequences in our present society. But this thought was presented before Arjuna while he was disinterested in fighting. He was told that he could not fight because of the consequences of war. Before the war, he was thinking about the result repeatedly. This is what Krishna says to Arjuna about Karma yoga. Karma yoga is the fruit of desire less action, which is very difficult to understand because usually, one would think, 'how can there be an action not motivated by desire?'

And this thought of action is called *Niṣkāma karma*. The literal meaning of *Niṣkāma karma* in English is passionless action or desire less action. The term '*karmāni*' in verse 2.47 is a singular proposition which defends only one action. And the other '*phalesu*' is plural. It is significant because if we perform one work, its consequences may be more than one. The consequences of it, may be either good or bad. If we accomplish one action, the result of it must be produced. Sometimes it will be good, which makes us very happy, and occasionally wrong, which makes our life difficult. But it is very sure that, if we accomplish an action, we must be ready to accept the result; it may be good or bad. But Krishna says that the act in and the consequence are different from each other. As we can say, action is used as a verb, but on the other hand, the result is a noun. Action is different from the result because, while we act, we can't say what effect will be produced. Indeed, we wouldn't know whether the result will be good or bad in this verse says Arjuna has the right only to the action but not to the consequences. Thus, it can be said that on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna only had the will to fight but did not realize how much loss would be happening in the future. Arjuna had the right only to the present but not to the future. Arjuna had his right only on the cause but not the effect.

But the problem will occur when someone is forced to do an action without motivation. Always we give an exam to accomplish one purpose; we do an action to fulfil such desire. The purpose may be for us, or it may be for others. Motiveless act neither directs us toward the goal; nor helps to reach the high ambition. In general, we are not used to hearing about a man who has no motive; nor any desire for the result of an action. Without motivation or disinterestedness, the results of an action are not acceptable to us.

Detachment from the result of an action is not satisfactory to us. Instead, attachment to the fruits of action we have accomplished by ourselves makes us happy or unhappy. But then also, we want to be attached to the consequences.

Arjuna, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, did not agree to accept any consequence of war. Instead, he was embraced to do his duty as a warrior. Because he was tense about both the consequences of his action, success and failure in the war, he was very much passionate about the results. The desire for fruits makes a man an agent for action. Desire causes a feeling of lacking something. And its fulfilment makes one labour. Its incompleteness or non-fulfilment causes suffering. Pleasure is derived from the completion of desire. And the fun creates a new desire, so the man gets interested in performing further actions to reap their fruit.

The Bhagavad Gita has announced the path of *Niṣkāma karma* is the kingly road to perfection. It encourages man not to pray for the fruits of action and merely perform one's duties in a detached manner, leaving the results thereof to the Lord. Krishna says he does not forbid a man to do any work in particular. Instead, He is only the dispenser of the results of the works done by humans. As He says, human gets the fruits of actions according to work performed.

Thus according to Bhagavad Gita, we should do *Niṣkāma karma* because, "The karma yogi attains everlasting peace, by abandoning attachment to the fruit of action; whereas he who acts with a selfish motive, being attached to the fruit of actions through desire acquires bondage."(B.G-5.12) "Those karma yogi, whose mind is pure has controlled his body and has subdued his senses and whose self is one with the self of all beings, is not tainted by action even though he acts."(B.G-5.7) And "He who performs actions,

dedicated to the God and abandoning all attachment, is not tainted by sin, just as a lotus – leaf is not moistened by water.”(B.G-5.10) It is very much needed to perform because, Krishna says - He who has renounced all actions by yoga, whose doubts have been destroyed by knowledge and who takes shelter in ‘yoga’ him, actions do not bind.

It seems doubtful of all these messages about *Niṣkāma karma* which Krishna delivered. Because it has a psychological question on desire less action, a question can be asked, how can there be any action if we renounce all our desire? If we ask Western psychology, they answer, - there cannot be activated without desire. Krishna’s psychology is completely opposed to modern psychology. Thus, according to modern psychology, every action is motivational, every work is desirous, and all activities are correlated to the results. Without desire, we do not perform any action in our day-to-day life. Passionlessly we do not accomplish any work. If we do that, our aim or the goal of us never can be achieved.

But on the contrary, another question must be raised: if we always think about the result before an action, would we not become selfish? If every action is desirable and full of desire, then all of us in society will not be unethical? Apart from that, it can be said there will not be any sign of morality in our community. If we always think about ourselves, our wealth or property and never perform our duty, our life will be meaningless. As Krishna says - O Partha, he who does not, in this world, follow the cycle thus set in motion, is sinful, and sensual desires, and lives in vain.

But again, on the contrary, He says, “When a man discards all his desires visiting the mind, and is self-satisfied in own-self, he is to be stable, in wisdom.”(b.g-2.55) “He whose mind remains unperturbed in sorrow, who does not crave for

pleasure, and who is free from passion and anger is called a sage with stable wisdom.”(b.g-2.56) And “He who remains unattached under all conditions, he who is neither delighted at good, nor dejected with evil, is stable wisdom.” Or, “He who gives up all desires, and moves about without the senses of mine and egoism and shuns the thirst for necessities of life, attains peace.”(b.g-2.71) Just as “Waters of different rivers enter the ocean, which though full, remains undisturbed; likewise the man in whom all enjoyments are merged and attain peace, but not he, who hankers after such enjoyments.”

So, being a *Sthitaprajña*, one must discard all desires, remain calm in sorrow, and be unattached to the passions. But again, the question of desire and passion arises. Because how can work will be accomplished without any desires? How will action be performed without any motive and passion?

Accomplishing an action without any desire is the essence of Nishkama Karma, or can be said as an action minus desire. As Krishna says, action minus desire is *Niṣkāma karma* yoga which is no ordinary action, which has neither any bondage nor any sin. A desire less action brings about liberation and freedom. And *Niṣkāma karma* is itself freedom. Freedom does not come as a result or consequence; desire less action is freedom. An unmotivated act is the foundation of *Niṣkāma karma*. Our life never should be revolved around the future and nor revolve around any expectation. If we want to fulfil our expectations, our desires dominate our life. And an action motivated by desire will not be considered *Niṣkāma karma*. Because desire less action is *Niṣkāma karma*, and it is *karma yoga*.

Every desire is a projection into the future, a desire for heaven, the divine, the desire to get liberation, and the desire for the sake of social

welfare. When I am acting for myself is the desired action. But whether it is desire less action when I work for social welfare? As we can argue, when I sing a song to earn money, it is the action performed only for my family or me. It is not a passionless action at all. Instead, I am involved with the desire for wealth. But when I sing for the sake of social welfare, to help the poor, is it desire less action ever? No, not at all; it is a desire less action because there is an intention to do better for my family and society. Also, I have a choice to do better. As I desire a happy family, I have another desire to make a good society. In another way, it can be argued that a monk can beg for himself, for his pet; it would be passionate because it is motivated by a desire. It would be regarded as *sakāma karma*. But, when he begs door to door to build a temple where everyone can go and get peace in their life, this same monk also desires. Like that, to do the welfare of society is also a desire. Thus, there is a desire, a passion, and a motivation behind every action. No action can be performed without motivation, passion, or want.

Conclusion

The ethical doctrine of *Niṣkāma Karma* as presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā* offers a profound reorientation of moral life by redefining the relationship between action, desire, and responsibility. Rather than rejecting action as a source of bondage, the *Gītā* affirms karma as inevitable and essential to human existence, while locating the cause of bondage in attachment to the fruits of action. Through Krishna's teaching to Arjuna, the text resolves the apparent conflict between action and renunciation by advocating the performance of duty (*svadharma*) with detachment and inner discipline.

The critical difficulty of *Niṣkāma Karma* lies in the question of psychological possibility: how can

action be performed without desire or motivation? A careful analysis shows that the *Gītā* does not demand the complete negation of intention or purpose, but the renunciation of egoistic craving and possessiveness. Desireless action, therefore, should be understood not as motiveless action, but as action freed from selfish expectation and anxiety about results. Such action becomes ethically elevating rather than binding.

From an ethical perspective, *Niṣkāma Karma* serves as a corrective to moral egoism and result-oriented conduct. It emphasizes responsibility, self-control, and universal welfare over personal gain. By transforming the inner attitude of the agent, the doctrine enables moral action without fear of failure or obsession with success. In this sense, *Niṣkāma Karma* is not merely a metaphysical path to liberation but a practical ethical ideal with enduring relevance. It provides a balanced moral framework in which action, freedom, and ethical integrity are harmoniously integrated.

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