



# Duty, Desire, And Detachment: An Analysis Of Niṣkāma Karma In The *Bhagavad-Gītā*

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## Abstract

The concepts of duty, desire, and detachment occupy a highly significant place in the religious philosophies across the continents. Among the great many Indian philosophical texts, it is the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that offers one of the most comprehensive discussions on these concepts through its doctrine of *Niṣkāma Karma*—action performed without attachment to its fruits. This paper examines *Niṣkāma Karma* as articulated in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, situating it within the broader framework of karma theory and its philosophical interpretations. This study also inquires how this Indian philosophical treatise reconciles the apparent contradiction between the inevitability of action and the binding nature of desire-driven deeds.

**Index Terms** - Bhagavad-Gītā , Niṣkāma Karma

## Introduction

Duty, desire and detachment are some of the most significant concepts in religious philosophies across traditions. These concepts have played a vital role in shaping human conduct and spiritual development as they deal with the elemental issues of how man should act in the world and what ways should one adopt in order to achieve moral and spiritual goals. The moral and ethical obligations governing human actions—in simple words, duties—have variously been called as *dharma*, *le*, *ren* etc. in different religious or philosophical traditions. Similarly, desire is the strong feeling of wanting something acutely and it has been termed as *kāma*, *taṇhā*, or appetite etc. The concept of detachment lies somewhere in between the concepts of duty and desire and it prevents one from getting excessively attached to someone or something. This concept of detachment holds a unique place in Hinduism, Buddhism as well as in Christianity.

Among the Indian epics and scriptures, it is the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that occupies the central position. This philosophical text constitutes a part of the great epic poem, the *Mahābhārata* and begins at the war of Kurukhetra between the Kaurabhas and the Pāṇdavas. Although this poem is known for its layers of meaning, its popularity is not certainly limited to scholars only, rather, the ordinary people have also accepted it as an integral part of their lives. Every age has seen the meanings of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* enlarge and expand. However, its central teachings have remained unchanged and constant illuminating the way of life for generation after generation. “Sri Kṛṣṇa’s message is as valid today as it was centuries ago, and it will continue to be so tomorrow, for it describes the eternal truth of life that the fiercest battle we must wage is against all that is selfish, self-willed, and separate in us” (Easwaran 16). The *Bhagavad- Gītā* is arguably the best source for providing the solution to the chief problem that humanity is facing today—the reconciliation of mankind. It attempts to reconcile varied and apparently antithetical forms of human consciousness and stresses the basic conceptions of religion which are neither ancient nor modern but eternal and belong to the very flesh of humanity, past, present and future. (Radhakrishnan 7)

## Niṣkāma Karma

In India, every classical philosophical school believed in the concepts of karma and rebirth with the Cārvāka naturalists as the notable exception. The widespread popularity of the doctrine of karma meant that it had a deep traction on the common people who accepted that the events of life are not only determined by their antecedent causes but also that there is absolute justice in the rewards and punishments that come our way (Hirianna 48). This karma doctrine is firmly based on a moral view of the universe and enjoins people to commit to a principle of an ideal and moral life. It teaches people about the existence of an ideal way of life, the attainment of which should be their principal objective in life. The rewards and retributions of life are the steps of a ladder towards the moral growth of a person and hence, they do not constitute the ends of human life.

One of the best deliberations on karma is to be found in the *Bhagavad- Gītā*. While this great Indian philosophical work is replete with the best of thoughts and ideas, one of these that has caught the attention of the people throughout the ages is that of Niṣkāma Karma. It is the kind of philosophy of life that is advocated by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad- Gītā* and its essence is to be found in the well known sloka:

*karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadā cana |*  
*mā karmaphalahetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi ||2-47||*

[“To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive nor let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.”]

While speaking about Niṣkāma Karma, one feels the need of clarifying the concept of karma before going to the subtler nuances of Niṣkāma Karma. Karma is usually divided into four categories, viz., *Nitya*, *Naimittika*, *Kāmya*, and *Niṣiddha*. While the term Karma ordinarily denotes a desired or intended action, in the *Bhagavad- Gītā* it “covers all kinds of activities whether bodily or mental or even verbal” (Masih 186). In addition to the aforementioned four categories of Karma, it has also been divided into the categories of *Sakāma* and *Niṣkāma*. Here ‘kāma’ stands for hankering for pleasure and attempting the painful. But the feeling of pleasure as well as pain is nothing but the products of the subjective states of an individual. That is why the *Sakāma* Karma is believed to be purely egotistic in nature. On the other hand, *Niṣkāma* Karma is not purely egotistic like the *Sakāma* Karma since the focus of the former lies in the good of the doer as well as of others. Since, in *Niṣkāma* Karma, the good of the doer and of others get identified, it is taken to be objective and non-egotistical. The *Bhagavad- Gītā* goes on to explain that *Niṣkāma* Karma is free from ego as it is attained only when the doer is not the agent of the act, but the *Prakṛti* alone is at work. It can also be attained when the doer is conscious of the fact that he is functioning only as a willing agent or instrument of God with a view to promoting the welfare of the people or for establishing righteousness in the society. As a matter of fact, his work can be compared to that of God where there is no binding necessity or compelling ignorance. Even when he is busy performing a duty, he remains unattached. (Radhakrishnan 134) In *Niṣkāma* Karma there is no hankering after, no desire for the fruits of one’s karma as the fruits of one’s karma is believed to be for God only. As Mahatma Gandhi has remarked, “How can the body be made the temple of God? In other words how can one be free from action, i.e., from the taint of sin? The *Gītā* has answered the question in decisive language: By desireless action; by renouncing fruits of action; by dedicating all activities to God, i.e., surrendering oneself to Him body and soul.” (Gandhi Introduction)

The concept of *Niṣkāma* Karma is closely associated with the concept of self-realization, and as such it constitutes one of the most significant aspects in the discourse of the *Bhagavad- Gītā*. However, the discourses of the *Bhagavad- Gītā* are not limited to espousing the significance of this doctrine only. Rather, the *Bhagavad- Gītā* is an endeavour to illuminate the best way to self-realization. (Gandhi Introduction). While many other Indian scriptures have attempted to drive home the same point, the *Bhagavad- Gītā* has proved to be the most valiant attempt in this direction.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa, in the *Bhagavad- Gītā*, has emphasized that the best way to self-realization lies in the renunciation of the fruits of action. This renunciation is closely linked with other elements such as devotion and knowledge which can exist only in an embodied living being. But in some Indian philosophical schools and scriptures the body has been compared to a prison. Another challenge related with the idea of self-realization is that for every embodied being action constitutes one of the most significant characteristics of its existence. Most of the times, this action takes the form of labour. Thus arises the question if the tainted body as well as the tainted action be transformed into instruments for the self-realization of an individual.

Transforming the body into something beneficial involves the treatment of the body as a temple of God. Since every action is tainted, therefore, to turn the body into a temple of God, one needs to free from action—from the taint of sin. According to the *Bhagavad- Gītā*, all these can be accomplished only by desireless action—the *Niṣkāma Karma*—the renunciation of the fruits of action; by dedicating all activities to God, i.e., surrendering oneself to Him body and soul. (Gandhi-16)

The *Bhagavad- Gītā* not only speaks of *Niṣkāma Karma* from the theoretical point of view, the scripture also guides people regarding the ways to attain it. One is not expected to attain desirelessness or renunciation without effort. Nor can it be equated with any intellectual feat. In fact, right knowledge is a requirement for attaining desirelessness or renunciation. However, the *Bhagavad- Gītā* makes it clear that knowledge alone is not enough unless it is accompanied by devotion: “Have devotion, and knowledge will follow.” While giving primacy to devotion, the *Bhagavad- Gītā* further clarifies that it is neither softhearted effusiveness nor blind faith. A person possessing the proper devotion is one who is not jealous of anyone, who is merciful, who has managed to rid himself of egotism, who is selfless, who is firm in his resolution, who is free from exultation, sorrow and fear, and, above all, one who even though linked to action, manages to remain unaffected by it. Such a devotee obviously can not possess any strong sense of attachment.

Various pronouncements of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad- Gītā* make it clear that the principal objective of a real devotee is to realize oneself. This self-realization is not something different from knowledge and devotion. As a matter of fact, they are themselves the things the devotee tries to attain. Here the means and the end become almost identical. For the devotees the extreme means is salvation which is actually nothing but perfect peace. But the kind of knowledge and devotion necessary for attaining salvation should be able to withstand the fruit of renunciation of action. However, the counter-point is that none may survive without action:

*na hi kaś cit kṣaṇam api jātu tiṣṭhaty akarmakṛt |*  
*kāryate hy avaśaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijair guṇaiḥ ||3-5||*

[For no one can remain even for a moment without doing work; everyone is made to act helplessly by the impulses born of nature.]

Thus, here is a dilemma— on the one hand, it has been proved that all action binds, and, on the other hand it is equally true that all living beings have to do some sort of work—perform some action—for survival. So the question is how to keep oneself free from the bondage of action even while one is submerged in action. The *Bhagavad- Gītā* provides the solution as “Do your allotted work but renounce its fruit. Be detached and work. Have no desire for reward and work.” It is evident here that existence without action is untenable, but existence without the desire of the reward of action is sublimating. Again, this renunciation of the fruit of action is not synonymous to the indifference to the result of the action. Before taking up any activity, one must know the expected result, the means to attain it and the capacity required for it. One who has equipped himself with these ideas and submerges himself completely for the completion of the activity without any desire for the result can be said to have attained *Niṣkāma Karma*. Again, the outcome of *Niṣkāma Karma* is certainly not the absence of any fruit for the renouncer. In fact, the renouncer of the fruit reaps a thousand fold. Moreover, the activities of the renouncer should be such that he should be able to persuade others to follow his lead. Thus Kṛṣṇa explains his position:

*na me pārthāsti kartavyaṁ triṣu lokeṣu kiṁ cana |*  
*nānavāptam avāptavyaṁ varta eva ca karmaṇi ||3-22||*

[There is not for me, O Pārtha, any work in three worlds which has to be done nor anything to be obtained which has not been obtained; yet I am engaged in work.]

Then he goes on to say that if he stops working, he may set a bad example for the mortals and incite them to follow a chaotic life leading to their doom. Emphasizing the need of renunciation coupled with action, here he says:

*saktāḥ karmaṇy avidvāṁso yathā kurvanti bhārata |*  
*kuryād vidvāṁs tathāsaktaś cikīrṣur lokasaṁgraham ||3-25||*

[As the unlearned act from the attachment to their work, so should the learned also act, O Bhārata, but without any attachment, with the desire to maintain the world-order.]

## Conclusion

Thus, in the *Bhagavad- Gītā*, action is not negated; rather, it emphasizes the negation of desires attached to one's duty. As desire is the root behind the bondage of human beings and acts as a stumbling block in the way of renunciation or self-realization, it is imperative, according to the *Bhagavad- Gītā*, that the agent frees himself/herself before he attains renunciation and realizes his own reality. (Pathak 130) The mind and intellect of a person not affected by the outcome of his actions remains steady even in the face of all the hardships and challenges.

The philosophy of the Nishkāma Karma, originating from the Upaniṣadic discourse and philosophical treatises like Sāṃkhya Yoga, has continued to attract attention of scholars from diverse fields even in the twenty first century. Today the value of the philosophy of Nishkāma Karma is accepted in most fields of modern civilization including trade and commerce, business and management etc. The philosophy of Nishkāma Karma imbibes a strong work ethic among people while encouraging them to engage with the world in a meaningful way. It advocates a stress-free work ethic without avoidance of duties and responsibilities. While analyzing the relevance of Nishkāma Karma in the fields of business and management in a study , Natesan, N Chinna, Keeffe, Michael J and John R Darling notes 'Employee stress has become a major stumbling block for European and American organizations. Organizations tried to solve it with vacations and benefits like inhouse massages and food. According to the *Gītā* one has to find peace and happiness through action and not by abstaining from work.' (Natesan, Keeffe and Darling 135)

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