

Niṣkāma Karma and Bodhicitta A Comparative Study of the Bhagavadgītā and Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra

Dr. Devendra Singh

*Head, Department of Sanskrit Language and Literature Sanchi University of Buddhist-Indic
Studies, Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India*

Abstract—This paper examines two of the most influential ethical ideals of classical Indian thought: niṣkāma karma (desireless action) as articulated in the Bhagavadgītā, and bodhicitta (the awakening mind) as systematised in Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra. Although the two texts emerge from distinct metaphysical traditions (theistic Vedānta on the one hand, Madhyamaka Mahāyāna Buddhism on the other), both propose a radical reorientation of human motivation in which action is purified of self-interest and directed toward a good that transcends the individual agent. The paper argues that the two ideals converge remarkably at the level of moral psychology (the critique of egoistic craving, the cultivation of equanimity, the primacy of intention over outcome), while diverging sharply at the level of metaphysics (the status of the self, the role of God, the destination of the path). By reading the texts against each other, the paper suggests that niṣkāma karma and bodhicitta are best understood not as rival doctrines but as two solutions to a shared problem: how one may act fully in the world without being bound by the world.

Index Terms—Bhagavadgītā, Bodhicaryāvatāra, bodhicitta, comparative philosophy, niṣkāma karma

I. INTRODUCTION

Classical Indian philosophy rarely separates ethics from soteriology. The question “how should I act?” is almost always inseparable from the question “how may I be free?” Two texts illustrate this fusion with unusual clarity. The Bhagavadgītā (hereafter BhG; c. 2nd century BCE – 2nd century CE), embedded in the Mahābhārata, responds to Arjuna's paralysis on the battlefield by teaching a discipline of action performed without attachment to its fruits. The Bodhicaryāvatāra (hereafter BCA; c. 8th century CE), composed by the Nālandā monk Śāntideva, offers a step-by-step guide to generating and sustaining bodhicitta, the resolve to attain full awakening for the sake of all sentient beings.

This paper attempts such an engagement. Its central thesis is twofold. First, at the level of moral psychology, that is, the analysis of desire, attachment, intention, and equanimity, *niṣkāma karma* and *bodhicitta* display a striking structural convergence. Second, at the level of metaphysics and teleology, namely the nature of the agent, the presence or absence of a personal deity, and the ultimate aim of practice, the two ideals diverge in ways that are not merely superficial but constitutive of their respective visions.

II. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Both texts have been enormously influential within their own traditions. The *Gītā* became the central scripture of Hindu ethical reflection, commented upon by Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Jñāneśvara, Tilak, Gandhi, and Aurobindo. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* became the primary handbook of Mahāyāna ethical training in Tibet, where it is memorised, recited, and taught to this day. Yet despite their comparable stature, sustained comparative treatment of the two remains limited. Scholars have compared the *Gītā* with Kant, with Aristotle, and with Buddhist ethics in general, but specific engagement with Śāntideva's text is rare.

The comparison proceeds textually and thematically rather than historically. No direct historical influence is claimed in either direction, although both texts belong to a shared Sanskrit intellectual culture and respond to overlapping concerns (the problem of karma, the value of renunciation, the relation between wisdom and action). Where the *Gītā* is cited, chapter and verse numbers follow the standard 700-verse recension [1], [2]. Where the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is cited, chapter and verse numbers follow the ten-chapter canonical text edited by Vaidya [3] and translated by Crosby and Skilton [4]. Sanskrit terms are given in IAST transliteration.

The method is one of reciprocal illumination: each text is used to sharpen questions that the other leaves implicit. The aim is neither to reduce one tradition to the other nor to construct a perennialist synthesis, but to clarify what each is actually claiming.

The position taken in this essay is that *niṣkāma karma* means not the renunciation of desire but the renunciation of ownership over desire (cf. [5]). Just as, for Śāntideva, suffering is to be removed even though it has no owner (BCA 8.101–103; cf. [6]), so too, for the *Gītā*, action is to be performed even though its fruit has no owner. Desire remains; only the “mine” is removed.

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Niṣkāma Karma in the Bhagavadgītā

The problem of action

The *Gītā* opens with a crisis of agency. Arjuna, seeing his teachers and kinsmen arrayed against him, refuses to fight. His refusal is not cowardice but a moral argument: victory would bring guilt, and no kingdom is worth such a price (BhG 1.31–46). Kṛṣṇa's response over the following seventeen chapters can be read as an extended answer to a single question: how may one act rightly when every action seems to entangle the agent in consequences?

Kṛṣṇa first denies that inaction is possible. Every embodied being is compelled to act by the guṇas of prakṛti (BhG 3.5). The renunciate who ceases outward action while the mind continues to crave is a hypocrite (BhG 3.6). The solution therefore cannot lie in withdrawal from action but in a transformed relationship to it.

The core formulation

The doctrine receives its classic statement in BhG 2.47:

karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana /mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi //

The verse makes four distinct claims: (i) one's entitlement (adhikāra) extends only to action itself; (ii) never to its fruits (phala); (iii) one should not make the fruit the motive (hetu) of action; and (iv) one should not become attached to inaction. The last clause is crucial and often overlooked. Niṣkāma karma is not passivity; it is the most vigorous engagement, freed of the anxiety that ordinarily accompanies engagement.

The subsequent verse names the resulting disposition samatva, "evenness," and identifies it with yoga itself (BhG 2.48). Success and failure become equal not because the agent is indifferent to outcomes in the world, but because the agent's inner stability no longer depends on them.

The psychology of desire

Chapter 2 supplies a genealogy of bondage that functions as the psychological foundation of the whole doctrine (BhG 2.62–63). From contemplation of sense-objects arises attachment (saṅga); from attachment, desire (kāma); from desire, anger (krodha); from anger, delusion; from delusion, loss of memory and discrimination; and finally destruction. The chain is important because it locates the root of suffering not in action but in kāma, the craving that fastens the self to particular outcomes. Niṣkāma karma is precisely action from which this fastening has been removed.

Chapter 3 extends this analysis by identifying kāma as the "eternal enemy" of the wise, veiling knowledge as smoke veils fire (BhG 3.37–39). The practitioner is instructed to conquer it by establishing the self in the self (BhG 3.43).

Three modalities of desireless action

The Gītā offers at least three complementary framings of how action becomes desireless.

(a) Sacrifice (yajña). Action performed as an offering, rather than for personal gain, does not bind (BhG 3.9). The Vedic ritual model is here universalised: all action, not merely ritual, can be sacrificial when its fruit is surrendered.

(b) Knowledge of the non-agent self. The one who knows that "the guṇas act upon the guṇas" understands that the true self (ātman) is not the doer (BhG 3.27–28; 5.8–9). Attachment to fruits presupposes an ego that claims authorship; when that claim dissolves, so does the attachment.

(c) Devotion (bhakti). From chapter 9 onward, the surrender of fruits acquires a personal object. Whatever one does, whether eating, offering, giving, or practising austerity, is to be done as an

offering to Kṛṣṇa (BhG 9.27). The concluding instruction of the text is to abandon all dharmas and take refuge in the Lord alone (BhG 18.66). Desirelessness thus culminates not in a void but in love.

Lokasaṅgraha: The welfare of the world

Niṣkāma karma is not merely a technique for the agent's liberation. Kṛṣṇa states that he himself, though having nothing to gain, continues to act, since if he ceased the worlds would fall into ruin (BhG 3.22–24). The wise should act “for the holding-together of the world” (lokasaṅgraham evāpi sampaśyan kartum arhasi, BhG 3.20). The Gītā thus contains an outward-facing, altruistic dimension that is frequently underplayed in readings that emphasise personal detachment alone. Later, the text describes the liberated person as sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ, “devoted to the welfare of all beings” (BhG 5.25, 12.4), and as one who sees the same self in all (BhG 6.29, 6.32).

Bodhicitta in the Bodhicaryāvatāra

The awakening mind

Bodhicitta is the defining category of Mahāyāna ethics. It designates the mind (citta) oriented toward awakening (bodhi), specifically the aspiration to attain Buddhahood in order to liberate all beings from suffering. Śāntideva's text is structured as a manual for generating (chs. 1–3), protecting (chs. 4–6), strengthening (chs. 7–8), and finally grounding in wisdom (ch. 9) this single resolve, concluding with a dedication of merit (ch. 10).

Chapter 1 praises bodhicitta in extravagant terms: it is the elixir that transmutes the impure body into a Buddha's form, the fire that consumes evil, the one refuge for beings adrift in saṃsāra. Śāntideva distinguishes two phases (BCA 1.15–16): praṇidhi-bodhicitta, the aspiration to awaken for others' sake, and prasthāna-bodhicitta, the actual engagement in the bodhisattva's practices. The distinction is that between resolving to travel and setting out on the road.

The genesis of altruistic intention

How does such an intention arise? Śāntideva's answer, developed most fully in chapter 8, is analytic rather than merely exhortative. He begins from the observation that all beings equally wish to be happy and to avoid suffering (BCA 8.94–96). The privileging of one's own happiness over others' therefore has no rational basis: when happiness is equally dear to oneself and to others, there is nothing special about oneself that would justify striving for one's own happiness alone. The argument is one of parity: there is no morally relevant feature that distinguishes my suffering from anyone else's.

Śāntideva then proceeds to the meditation on exchanging self and other (parātmaparivartana, BCA 8.120–173), in which the practitioner deliberately reverses the ordinary self-preference, learning to regard others' welfare as one's own and one's own as secondary. This is among the most demanding contemplative exercises in Buddhist literature.

Bodhicitta and the critique of self

The crucial metaphysical support for this ethic appears in chapter 9, the wisdom chapter. Śāntideva argues, in accordance with Madhyamaka philosophy, that there is no enduring, independent self

(ātman). The “I” is a conceptual imputation upon a stream of momentary physical and mental events. From this follows a famous argument (BCA 8.101–103), extensively discussed by Williams [6]: if there is no owner of suffering, suffering should be eliminated simply because it is suffering, without asking whose it is. The abolition of the self does not undermine ethics; it universalises it. Compassion becomes ownerless.

Dedication and non-grasping

Chapter 10 dedicates all merit accumulated through the composition and practice of the text to the welfare of beings. This is not a rhetorical flourish. Within Mahāyāna soteriology, the dedication (pariṇāmanā) of merit is what prevents good action from becoming a subtle form of self-aggrandisement. The bodhisattva does not hoard virtue; virtue is given away. Śāntideva’s final aspirations, to be medicine for the sick, a bridge for those crossing, a lamp for those in darkness (BCA 3.6–21), express a mode of action in which the agent has become instrumental to the good of others.

Points of convergence

Intention over outcome

Both texts locate moral worth in the quality of intention rather than in the success of results. The Gītā’s mā phaleṣu kadācana has a close analogue in Śāntideva’s insistence that the bodhisattva’s merit derives from the aspiration to benefit beings, even when nothing has yet been achieved (BCA 1.21–23). In both, this shifts the criterion of right action from what is accomplished in the world to what is enacted in the heart.

The enemy within: Kāma and kleśa

Both texts identify inner affliction, not external circumstance, as the source of bondage. The Gītā’s kāma and the Bodhicaryāvatāra’s kleśa (especially anger, treated in chapter 6, and self-cherishing, treated in chapter 8) function analogously. Śāntideva’s image of the afflictions as enemies who must be fought without retreat (BCA 4.28–48) parallels the Gītā’s martial framing of the struggle against desire (BhG 3.43). In both, the true battlefield is internal.

Equanimity as the condition of right action

The Gītā’s samatva and Śāntideva’s kṣānti (patience, BCA ch. 6) share a common function: they stabilise the agent so that action is not distorted by reactive emotion. The Gītā’s steady-minded person (sthitaprajña, BhG 2.54–72) who is untroubled by sorrow and undesirous of pleasure finds a counterpart in Śāntideva’s practitioner who welcomes suffering as an opportunity for growth and remains unshaken by praise or blame (BCA 6.10–21; 8.16–22).

Action without ego

Both texts dissolve the ordinary agent. The Gītā says the wise man knows “I do nothing at all” (BhG 5.8). Śāntideva’s Madhyamaka analysis concludes that neither agent nor action nor object exists as an intrinsic entity (BCA 9.2ff). Though the underlying ontologies differ (see the discussion of ātman

and anātman below), the practical upshot is similar: action becomes possible without the burden of self-reference.

Orientation to the welfare of all beings

Finally, and importantly, both ideals are ultimately other-directed. Niṣkāma karma finds its purpose in lokasaṅgraha and in devotion to sarvabhūtahita; bodhicitta is by definition parārtha, “for the sake of others.” Readings of the Gītā that stress only detachment, and readings of Śāntideva that stress only compassion, miss this shared structure in which detachment from self and engagement with others are two aspects of a single transformation.

Points of divergence

Ātman and anātman

The most fundamental difference concerns the self. For the Gītā, detachment is possible because the true self is eternal, unborn, and untouched by action (BhG 2.20–25). One can let go of fruits because one’s real identity was never at stake in them. For Śāntideva, detachment is possible because there is no self to be at stake at all. The Gītā’s non-agency rests on a metaphysics of the transcendent witness; Śāntideva’s rests on a metaphysics of emptiness (śūnyatā).

This produces different phenomenologies of selfless action. The Gītā’s practitioner discovers a deeper self behind the empirical ego; Śāntideva’s practitioner discovers the absence of any self, and thereby the arbitrariness of the self/other boundary. It is arguably this second move that gives bodhicitta its distinctive radicalism: the exchange of self and other has no exact parallel in the Gītā, where the liberated person sees the same ātman in all but does not thereby become the other.

The presence or absence of God

The Gītā’s desirelessness is finally theistic. The renunciation of fruits is a renunciation to someone: Kṛṣṇa, who receives the offering, guarantees the outcome, and promises liberation (BhG 9.34, 18.66). This gives niṣkāma karma an affective warmth and a secure foundation: the practitioner acts without anxiety because a benevolent Lord holds the world.

Śāntideva’s universe contains no such Lord. There are Buddhas and bodhisattvas who may be invoked, and to whom offerings and confessions are addressed (BCA chs. 2–3), but they are exemplars and witnesses, not creators or controllers of karma. The bodhisattva’s confidence rests not on divine providence but on the intrinsic power of the awakening mind and on the emptiness of the obstacles that seem to oppose it. Where the Gītā asks the practitioner to surrender, Śāntideva asks the practitioner to undertake, to make the vow oneself, with full awareness that no one else will fulfil it.

Svadharmā and universal ethics

The Gītā frames action within svadharmā, one’s own duty as determined by birth, station, and nature (BhG 3.35, 18.41–48). Arjuna is to fight because he is a kṣatriya. Niṣkāma karma is therefore the manner in which a given social role is to be performed, not a principle for determining what the

role should be. The text is famously ambivalent about whether svadharma can be criticised from a higher standpoint.

Śāntideva's ethic is, by contrast, radically universal. The bodhisattva vow makes no reference to caste, lineage, or social station. Its scope is "all beings without exception" (BCA 3.10), and its content is derived from the single principle of the parity of suffering. Bodhicitta thus contains an internal critique of hierarchy that niṣkāma karma, as presented in the Gītā, does not.

The telos of practice

The Gītā's goal is mokṣa, understood variously as union with Brahman (BhG 5.24), attainment of Kṛṣṇa's abode (BhG 8.21), or eternal loving service (BhG 18.65). The liberated person continues to act for lokasaṅgraha, but liberation itself is the fulfilment of the individual's relation to the divine. Śāntideva's goal is Buddhahood, but Buddhahood explicitly for others. The bodhisattva may postpone personal liberation across incalculable aeons; indeed, the text frames one's own awakening as valuable primarily as the most effective means of helping beings. In the Gītā, altruism is an expression of liberation; in the Bodhicaryāvatāra, liberation is an instrument of altruism. The direction of subordination is reversed.

Renunciation of fruit versus dedication of merit

A subtle but revealing contrast lies in how each text handles the results of good action. The Gītā counsels tyāga, giving up attachment to fruit (BhG 18.2, 18.9–11). Śāntideva counsels pariṇāmanā, actively redirecting merit toward others' awakening. The first is a negative discipline (not grasping); the second is a positive one (giving away). One might say that the Gītā empties the hand, while Śāntideva opens it toward another. Both prevent the self from possessing the results of its virtue, but they do so with different gestures.

Synthesis: Two answers to one question

If the foregoing analysis is correct, niṣkāma karma and bodhicitta may be understood as structurally parallel responses to a problem both traditions inherit from the wider Indian discussion of karma: that action binds, yet action is unavoidable. The shared answer is that what binds is not action but self-referential craving, and that action purified of such craving is not only permissible but liberating.

The traditions differ on what remains once craving is removed. For the Gītā, what remains is the ātman in devoted relation to the Lord, performing its allotted duty for the world's welfare. For Śāntideva, what remains is the flow of compassionate activity, ownerless, directed by the resolve to end all suffering.

It is worth resisting two tempting oversimplifications. The first is to read the Gītā as merely a doctrine of detachment and Śāntideva as merely a doctrine of compassion; the texts show that each contains both. The second is to treat the metaphysical differences as negligible "cultural packaging" around a common core. The presence or absence of a self, and of a God, genuinely changes what desireless action is: what it feels like, what it aims at, and what sustains it when outcomes fail.

Nevertheless, a practitioner of either tradition reading the other text would recognise a companion. Both texts train the mind to act fully, care intensely, and yet remain free. In an age that tends to oppose engagement and serenity, altruism and self-care, this shared achievement retains considerable relevance.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the Bhagavadgītā's niṣkāma karma and Śāntideva's bodhicitta converge at the level of moral psychology, in the critique of craving, the priority of intention, the cultivation of equanimity, the dissolution of egoistic agency, and the orientation toward universal welfare, while diverging at the level of metaphysics and teleology, in their accounts of the self, the divine, the scope of duty, and the ultimate purpose of practice. Neither text is reducible to the other. Read together, however, they clarify one another: the Gītā's lokasaṅgraha is thrown into sharper relief by Śāntideva's radical altruism, and the Bodhicaryāvatāra's emphasis on non-grasping is illuminated by the Gītā's precise anatomy of desire. Future comparative work might extend this analysis to the commentarial traditions, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on the Gītā and Prajñākaramati on Śāntideva, where the tensions identified here are debated with great subtlety.

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