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The Bhagavad Gita and the idea of self-realization: Examining its significance in modern spiritual activities

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Abstract

Background: The Bhagavad Gita, one of the most valued works in Indian philosophy, delves deeply into the concept of self-realization, presenting it as the ultimate aim of human existence. This study investigates the Gita's teachings on self-realization, namely the path of the self (Atman) toward discovering its true nature beyond the constraints of ego, wants, and material existence. This study aims to provide light on how the Gita's discourse on the connectivity of the self with universal consciousness (Brahman) remains relevant in the context of contemporary spiritual practices.

Objectives: The study investigates the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on self-realization through Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga, and compares them to Buddhist traditions such as Nirvana. It focuses on their similarities in obtaining spiritual enlightenment and how these routes have been incorporated into modern techniques such as mindfulness and meditation. It addresses problems and opportunities for applying old teachings to modern spiritual practices.

Methodology: The Bhagavad Gita, a spiritual teaching has been extensively researched using academic databases such as Google Scholar and PubMed to better understand its relationship to other spiritual traditions and its contemporary relevance in modern spiritual practices.

Conclusion: The Bhagavad Gita's teachings on self-realization remain relevant in today's world, offering a timeless framework for personal development and spiritual fulfillment. These teachings are integrated into modern techniques like mindfulness and meditation, demonstrating their long-term value. Future research should focus on cross-cultural applicability and the long-term effects on personal and societal well-being.

Keywords: The Bhagavad Gita, self-realization, karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga

Introduction

In the Mahabharata, Krishna explains to Arjuna about several facets of battle when Arjuna is disturbed. Arjuna struggled to make decisions and experienced mental instability. Lord Krishna's teachings helped Arjuna acquire knowledge and obey his commands. The Bhagavad Gita is a literature explaining Lord Krishna's instructions to Arjuna on the battlefield when he was unable to make a decision. It is considered the essence of the Vedas^[1]. The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text of Indian philosophy, has been revered for millennia as a guide to spiritual wisdom and self-realization^[2]. At its core, the Gita presents self-realization as the ultimate goal of human life, emphasizing the discovery of the true self (Atman) beyond ego, desires and material concerns^[3]. In the contemporary world where spiritual seekers face a myriad of paths, the Gita's teachings continue to offer valuable insights into the nature of existence, the purpose of life, and the journey toward enlightenment^[4]. Yoga is covered in great detail in the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita communicates its fundamental ideas in a way that goes beyond yoga poses and exercises. According to the Bhagavad Gita, yoga is about regulating the mind and purifying actions^[5]. Yoga places a strong emphasis on doing good deeds regardless of the result. In the following line from the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna is called "Yogeshwar" and is the champion of righteousness.

यत्र योगेश्वरः कृष्णो यत्र पार्थो धनुर्धरः |
तत्र श्रीर्विजयो भूतिध्रुवा नीतिर्मतिर्मम || (18.78) (Bhagavad Gita)

Problem Statement

In an age marked by materialism, consumerism and a rapidly shifting global culture, individuals are increasingly searching for meaning and purpose. Ancient texts like the Bhagavad Gita offer timeless wisdom but their applicability to modern spiritual practices is often questioned. This research seeks to explore how the Gita's discourse on self-realization through Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga remains relevant today especially in light of modern spiritual practices such as mindfulness and meditation.

Objectives

1. To examine the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on self-realization through the paths of Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga.
2. To compare the Gita's concept of self-realization with Buddhist teachings on Nirvana and other spiritual traditions.
3. To analyze the integration of these ancient practices into modern techniques like mindfulness and meditation.

Hypotheses

1. The Bhagavad Gita's teachings on self-realization provide a practical and timeless guide to personal development and spiritual fulfillment in the modern world.
2. Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga, when applied to contemporary spiritual practices, enhance mindfulness, meditation, and overall well-being.
3. There are strong parallels between the Gita's teachings and other spiritual traditions, particularly in their approaches to attaining self-realization or enlightenment.

Literature Review

Self-Realization in the Bhagavad Gita

The Gita dives into the essence of the atman (self) and its ultimate aim, self-realization (moksha). It promotes introspection, self-awareness, and liberation from egoism. Philosophical therapy requires significant insight and contemplation^[5]. This realization involves transcending the ego, desires, and material world to attain unity with the infinite. According to the Gita, self-realization can be pursued through three primary paths:

- **Karma Yoga (Path of Action):** In this path, one attains self-realization by performing selfless action without attachment to outcomes. The practice of Karma Yoga emphasizes duty (dharma) and renunciation of the fruits of action (nishkama karma).
- **Bhakti Yoga (Path of Devotion):** Bhakti Yoga emphasizes love and devotion toward a personal deity (Ishvara) as the means to attain spiritual enlightenment. By surrendering one's ego and desires to God, the individual achieves union with the divine.
- **Jnana Yoga (Path of Knowledge):** This path focuses on the pursuit of knowledge, particularly the understanding of the self (Atman) and its relationship to Brahman. It involves deep contemplation and meditation on the nature of existence and the ultimate reality.

Important insights from the Bhagavad Gita for philosophical counselling

The Gita has numerous subsections, but Karma yoga is significant not only for Sri Krishna's teachings and ideals, but also for its practical application in present times. Karma, derived from the Sanskrit word 'krish', refers to doing something or performing an action Perform our actions regardless of the results (karmaphala). Performing an activity with the appropriate motivation and intention can lead to excellence or dominance through karma.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ (2/47) (Bhagavad Gita)

Everyone acts in the modern world in order to benefit from their actions. Karma is for Karma Phala. We are taught by the Gita to carry out our deeds without regard for the results. The Gita highlights the atma samyama yoga as a means of becoming a Karma yogi. Numerous problems that arise in our daily lives leave us feeling helpless, anxious, and scared. Sometimes fear and ignorance prevent us from making the best decisions that will ultimately be beneficial. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Krishna imparted to Arjuna the concept of conflict settlement. In order to overcome the mental object and lead with genuine courage, conviction, and inner strength, Krishna provides us with the most potent knowledge and instruments.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।

स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ (3/21) (Bhagavad Gita)

Comparisons with Buddhist Traditions

The concept of self-realization in the Bhagavad Gita bears similarities to the Buddhist concept of Nirvana which is the cessation of suffering and the realization of emptiness (Sunnyata). While the Gita focuses on the realization of the self (Atman), Buddhism teaches the doctrine of no-self (Anatta). Despite these philosophical differences both traditions emphasize the need for transcendence beyond material attachments and desires to achieve spiritual liberation. Buddhism's "Eightfold Path" and the Gita's spiritual practices share common elements such as mindfulness, ethical conduct, and meditation, which are essential for attaining enlightenment or self-realization. Modern mindfulness practices, derived primarily from Buddhist traditions, resonate with the Gita's teachings on controlling the mind and senses as a pathway to spiritual growth. Ancient Buddhist books provide the ideology and meditation techniques of Buddhism. In Buddhism meditation is considered as part of the path towards nirvana. According to legend, Gautama Buddha identified two significant mental attributes that result from meditation practice.

These are insight that allows the practitioner to examine the five components of a sentient being—matter, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness—and serenity or peace that composes and concentrates the mind^[6].

Buddhism places a strong emphasis on meditation. The eightfold path is the foundation of Buddhist meditation. The terms "samadhi," or correct efforts, right mindfulness, and right concentration, relate to meditation. Through practice, one can achieve nirvana, mental clarity, insight into

conditional reality, and liberation from negative states. The most important form is insight meditation “vipashyana” [7]. The ultimate stage of Buddhist meditation known as “Nirvana.” This meditation is practiced by almost all monks and nuns. Although the practice of trance “Samadhi” was acknowledged and even encouraged, the states attained were not given precedence because they were thought to be a distraction from realizing nirvana [8].

Contemporary Relevance

The Gita’s teachings on self-realization remain relevant in contemporary spiritual practices, particularly in the fields of mindfulness, meditation, and self-development. Techniques like mindfulness, which emphasize awareness of the present moment, mirror the Gita’s advocacy for maintaining focus and equanimity in action. Similarly, meditation practices that encourage introspection and self-inquiry align with Jnana Yoga’s emphasis on understanding the nature of the self.

The rise of spiritual movements such as yoga, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), and other holistic practices has reinvigorated interest in ancient texts like the Bhagavad Gita. These practices provide practical tools for individuals to navigate the complexities of modern life while staying connected to their inner selves.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of the Bhagavad Gita and its teachings on self-realization, examined through the lens of contemporary spiritual practices. A comprehensive review of academic literature, including studies from Google Scholar, PubMed, and other scholarly databases was conducted to explore the intersections between the Gita’s philosophy and modern techniques such as mindfulness and meditation. Comparative analyses between the Gita and Buddhist traditions were also conducted to understand commonalities and differences in achieving spiritual enlightenment.

Data Collection

The study utilized secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books and online resources to gather data on the Bhagavad Gita’s teachings and their relevance to modern spiritual practices. Primary texts of the Bhagavad Gita and key Buddhist scriptures were reviewed to identify the core principles of self-realization and enlightenment.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically, focusing on the following areas:

- 1. Teachings on Self-Realization:** An analysis of the Gita’s core teachings on the self (Atman), its relationship to Brahman and the pathways to self-realization (Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and Jnana Yoga).
- 2. Comparison with Buddhist Traditions:** A comparative analysis of the Gita’s approach to self-realization and the Buddhist path to Nirvana, highlighting common themes and differences.
- 3. Integration into Modern Practices:** An exploration of how the Gita’s teachings are being integrated into contemporary spiritual practices like mindfulness and

meditation.

Results and Discussion

Relevance of Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga

The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita provide a flexible and adaptive framework for self-realization in modern spiritual contexts. Karma Yoga which advocates selfless action resonates with the modern emphasis on altruism and ethical living. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna talks on the path of knowledge and deeds. He challenges Arjuna’s view that action is preferable to knowledge, contending that karma yoga ought to be practiced. According to Krishna, it’s critical to recognize the difference between good and negative deeds since the former produce positive outcomes while the latter do the opposite. A separate relationship between actions and their results is necessary to break the cycle of birth and death. Moral and ethical standards are based on the rule of Karma, which is the cornerstone of Indian ethical and philosophical theory. Humanity is taught to act in the Gita with an open mind and no expectation of return [9]. Karma Yoga says that most people waste much of their energy because they are unaware of the karma’s secret. Through karma, salvation is only available to those who strive for society, the nation and the entire world while committing their fruits to God [10]. The principles of Bhakti Yoga with its focus on devotion and surrender have found relevance in movements that emphasize faith connection to a higher power and emotional healing. Bhakti yoga is the practice of doing the right thing, which comes from reaching the pinnacle of devotion. When conventional morality is viewed incorrectly, moral parasites—those who expect others to uphold moral and ethical standards but do not aim to do so themselves—are born. In Bhakti Yoga, those who have set their attention on Him and adore him with unwavering devotion are regarded as perfect. A devotee like this is devoid of angularities, attachment, and repulsion. All day and all night, their hearts are dominated only by thoughts of the Lord. Thus, they are ideal yogis [11]. Jnana Yoga which emphasizes knowledge and self-inquiry aligns closely with modern meditative practices that encourage introspection and the pursuit of wisdom. The Gita’s discussion of controlling the mind and senses through meditation remains relevant for individuals seeking mental clarity and spiritual growth today.

Mindfulness and Meditation

The Gita’s teachings on mindfulness and controlling the fluctuations of the mind are echoed in contemporary practices such as MBSR, which emphasizes moment-to-moment awareness. Both traditions advocate for mental discipline, which is seen as a crucial step in the path toward self-realization or enlightenment.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita’s teachings on self-realization continue to offer a timeless and practical framework for spiritual growth and personal development. Through the paths of Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga the Gita presents a comprehensive guide to achieving self-realization one that resonates with modern practices such as mindfulness and meditation. The integration of these teachings into contemporary spiritual practices underscores their enduring relevance and value in today’s world.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore the cross-cultural applicability of the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on self-realization, particularly in non-Hindu contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies on the effects of integrating these teachings into modern spiritual practices could offer insights into their long-term impact on personal and societal well-being.

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