

KARMA YOGA AND KARMA SANYĀSA

(The Bhagavat Gita Perspective)

Ankita Podder¹

¹Independent Research Scholar, Master's degree in Philosophy from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

Received: 20 Jan 2026, Accepted: 25 Jan 2026, Published with Peer Reviewed on line: 31 Jan 2026

Abstract

Our practical life is a life of action. Actions are performed in accordance with contextual reality. The context is the real situation we ever confront with while doing any action. One act must. But how to act is a question of skill or art of performing our assigned action. This is called in the *Bhagavat Gitā* as “*Yoga Karmesu Kousalam*”. The skill of performing an action is *Karma yoga*. The skill is doing an action in the sense of duty and without the sense of agency, doing an action with a sense of surrender before the divinity and without the sense of ego. Attachment to *karma* leads to bondage. Attachment to the results of karma leads to greater bondage. Hence one should be free from both the attachment of karma and the consequences thereof. This is known as “Renunciation in action.”

Keywords - Renunciation of action, Renunciation in action, Karma yoga, Bhagavat Gitā, Karma Sanyāsa.

Introduction

The *Bhagavad Gitā*, one of the most profound philosophical texts of Indian thought, presents a comprehensive vision of life that harmonizes action, knowledge, and devotion. Among its central teachings, **Karma Yoga** (the path of selfless action) and **Karma Sanyāsa** (renunciation of the fruits of action) occupy a pivotal place. Rather than viewing these paths as mutually exclusive, the *Gitā* offers a nuanced synthesis that redefines renunciation not as withdrawal from action, but as inner detachment while remaining actively engaged in the world.

In the socio-moral crisis depicted on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, Arjuna's dilemma symbolizes the universal human conflict between duty and detachment, action and renunciation. Lord Krishna's discourse resolves this tension by emphasizing that **true renunciation lies in abandoning ego, attachment, and desire**, not in the abandonment of action itself. Karma Yoga thus becomes a disciplined mode of living where actions are performed in accordance with *dharma* without selfish motivation, while Karma Sanyāsa represents the inner renunciation that purifies action and leads to spiritual liberation.

The *Bhagavad Gitā* challenges the conventional ascetic notion that liberation can be attained only through physical renunciation. Instead, it asserts the superiority of **renunciation in action (Karma Yoga)** over **renunciation of action**, especially for individuals embedded in social and ethical responsibilities. By integrating Karma Yoga with the spirit of Karma Sanyāsa, the *Gitā* establishes a dynamic spiritual ideal—one that affirms worldly engagement while fostering inner freedom.

Thus, the *Gitā*'s perspective on Karma Yoga and Karma Sanyāsa offers a timeless ethical and spiritual framework, relevant not only for spiritual aspirants but also for individuals navigating the complexities of modern life. It presents a path where action becomes a means of self-realization and renunciation evolves into a state of inner awareness, balance, and liberation (*mokṣa*).

In our practical life this spiritual *sādhanā* should be practised by all humans for attaining *Karma yoga*. Here in this paper one thing we shall discuss whether “renunciation in action” is better or the “renunciation of action” is better. In common parlance it is discussed that renunciation in action is better than renunciation of action. But in the *Bhagavat Gitā*, it is declared that ‘**renunciation of action**’ is better than ‘**renunciation in**

action'. The understanding of the concept "renunciation of action" has double meaning leading to two diverse paths. One meaning of this concept is very familiar that one should avoid doing any action and this attitude is condemned in the *Bhagavat Gitā*. One should not refrain from the actions meant for the individual and society at large. To live is to act. Without action one cannot live. So "renunciation of action" in this sense is unethical and can never be accepted in our practical life. Another meaning of this concept of "renunciation of action" is that one should renounce certain actions which are not conducive for spiritual transformation. This is called *Karma Sanyasa* in the *Bhagavat Gitā*. In this sense renunciation of action or *karma sanyāsa* is better than renunciation in action or *karma yoga*. Both *karma yoga* and *karma sanyāsa* are significant in our practical life.

Impact of Bhagavat Gitā in our practical life - The *Bhagavat Gitā* teaches us to perform all bounden duty (*Niyatam Karma*) to include all obligatory actions of an individual. Thus, not to perform diligently all our duties would be inaction. Here the word 'inaction' is interpreted as 'not doing our duties'. In this sense action is better than inaction. *Karma Yoga* prescribes to perform action in the sense of *yajna* or the sake of sacrifice. The understanding that every action leads to bondage is a misunderstanding in the perspective of the *Bhagavat Gitā*. It is only unintelligent activities that create a wall between the egocentre and the unlimited Divine spark in us. Such actions create *vāsanā*-bondages. Such actions cannot be self-liberating. Therefore the intelligent action is *yajna* activity which is undertaken in a spirit of self-dedication and for the welfare of all. The wise act in the sense of duty without attachment and by performing action in this way, he attains freedom from karmic bondage. For such a person there is here no interest whatever in what is done or what is not done. This is a state of inaction in the higher sense. This is a state of wisdom. The twenty seventh verse of the third chapter of the *Bhagavat Gitā* says, "All actions are performed, in all cases, merely by the qualities in Nature (*Gunas*). He whose mind is deluded by egoism, thinks 'I am the doer'." And in the twenty ninth verse declares that "Those declared by the qualities of nature, (*Gunas*), are attached to the functions of the qualities. The man of perfect knowledge should not unsettle the foolish, who are of imperfect knowledge." *Karma Yoga* teaches the skill of doing an action without the sense of agency and expectation of the consequences. Here the doer thinks himself as a mere instrument and acts according to the will of the divine. *Karma Yoga* prescribes both the skill of action and the tranquil of intention. "***Yoga Karmesu kousalam***" and "***Samatyam Yoga Uchyate***" are two basic disciplines of *Karma Yoga*. Thus *Karma Yoga* means the act of connecting the lower with the higher through a technique consisting of one's own self-evolution.

Karma Sanyasa teaches the higher order of inaction. Inaction or *Akarma* has been interpreted in two different senses. Some commentators interpret inaction as the state of actionlessness or the Self-hood. *Akarma* or inaction can also be interpreted to mean 'unactivity' or the state of *sattvik* peace and joy. The agent can undergo two distinct experiences while doing an action. He may stop acting physically but he is fully engaged in *karma-vāsanā* in his mental and intellectual activity. On the other hand, he may be acting physically with full alertness but mentally and intellectually may be unattached and be a simple observer. This is the state of unactivity or the *sattvik* state of peace and joy. Right action, done with right intention for selfless welfare of the society or community, creates a sense of complete detachment and makes the agent a disinterested observer of all that is happening within and without him. When an individual detaches himself and observes his own activities his actions get converted to the state of meditation. We cannot say that one is inactive as merely because he is keeping quiet. On the other hand, we cannot say that one is active when one is really involved in performing his duties. Such an individual who can thus stand constantly apart from himself and observe the activity in inactivity and complete inactivity even in the highest activity is called *Ātma Yukta*. The capacity to observe oneself as an actor immediately redeems us from our selfish preoccupations with life's ever changing incidents and accidents.

Conclusion- Action is equivalent to inaction when it is done devoid of all desires and attachments. The twentieth verse of fourth chapter of the *Bhagavat Gitā* says, “having abandoned attachment to the fruits of action, ever content, depending on nothing, he does not do anything, though engaged in actions”. Renunciation of fruits of action does really mean to renounce our mental slavery and intellectual clinging to the expected fruits. Our body, mind and the intellect act in the world of diversity, but not the Self. So one, who is established in the Self (*Ātma nista*), though he is engaged in action, cannot not be said to do any action. Action is posited by the awareness of the ego as the agent. Action is negated by the realisation of the Self. A Self-realized Saint’s activities do not touch him at all since he is not the actor; the actins only flow through him. *Karma Sanyāsa* is possible by the annihilation of ego and egocentric activities. The state of egolessness leads to the state of actionlessness. This is a psychic transformation of mind centred in knowledge. Dexterity in action is *Karma yoga* but complete renunciation of the *Karma-vāsanā* is *Karma sanyāsa*. In *Karma sanyāsa*, our senses are offered into the fire of self-control, so that the senses get burnt up, contributing a greater freedom and joy in our inner life. Then we become capable of controlling our mind and enjoy the state of peace and joy though we are fully engaged in activities.

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