

## The Age-Old Methods for Self-Regulation: Insights from the Bhagwad Gita

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### ABSTRACT

Self-regulation is a well-known concept in psychology in relation to motivation, learning and achievement. It is one of the important aspects of human life pertaining to a goal driven, meaningful and value-consistent life. Self-regulation encompasses the activities of goal selection, planning, consistent action, self-monitoring, and evaluation. This study aims to find the relation between the self-regulative action and the *Nishkama karma* proposed under *Karma Yoga* in *Bhagwad Gita*. The *Bhagwad Gita* provides a philosophical discourse between Lord Shri Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. A grief-stricken Arjun gets an insight about true nature of living and performing the given duty without being afraid, attached, judgmental or envious. It is a guide to relieve us from the stress and dilemma and to improve upon our unhealthy lifestyle.

**Keywords:** *Self-regulation, Karma Yoga, Nishkama Karma, Self-realization*

The concept of self-regulation has widely been studied to understand the ways in which one can regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behavior. Many researchers have focused on the idea that there is always a purpose, goal or meaning which guides the regulation process. Thus, so far, self-regulation is understood as finding the purpose in life and then searching for suitable ways to reach a state of self-regulated living.

Self-regulation describes the strategies people use to regulate and manage one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In recent times, the therapies provided also follow various techniques and strategies to control, manage and promote self-regulative practices among the individuals. The impact of self-regulation is quite immense in context to one's physical health, social life, cognitive functioning and well-being. Coming across these ancient teaching with their evergreen methods to enlightened learning and living helps to find answers and resolve our miseries, distress, conflicts and dilemmas, and to thrive towards more conscious ways of living.

The main objective of the study is to gain insights from the *Bhagwad Gita's* teachings on regulation of self and its application in the current times. This study is to delve into the

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knowledge base of an ancient teaching and understand its significance with the conceptions of contemporary psychology. It is to explore the intricacies of *nishkama karma*, detachment, karma yoga and self-realization. The current study focuses on listing the major themes in the *Bhagwad Gita* linked with self-regulative practices. The verses of the *Gita* particularly the one which attends to the importance of *Karma* are studied. The textual analysis is carried out in a holistic way and understanding it in terms of seeking relevance with the psychological concepts and its contemporary significance.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the concept of self-regulation, selection of goals is an important precursor in directing one's life in a self-determining and consistent way. Self-regulation is one of the adaptive factors of the human behavior (Vohs & Baumister, 2004). The developmental progress of an individual depends on the opportunities one seeks based on one's selected goals and pursue and modify them according to their abilities, situations and availability of resources. The term self-regulation is often used to refer generally to efforts by humans to modify their thoughts, feelings, desires and actions in the perspective of higher goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998). It is an important aspect of making out valuable goals for oneself which will help increase the likelihood of goal attainment. It is found to play a key role in the development of psychological well-being (Gagnon, Durand-Bush & Young, 2016). It also provides mental resources for perseverance, hope and intrinsic motivation. The matter it depends on is the understanding of the meaning embedded in the identified goal and the significance and strength it provides to determine the perseverance level, chances of success and competence. Successful regulation requires the strategic mobilization of mental resources governing ones thoughts, feelings and actions (Cantor, 1990; Kuhl, 2000). The capacities of self-regulation also include one's ability to resist temptations and delay gratifications which in turn are predictive of academic success and social competence. Thus, self-regulation is used for the purpose of restraining from those selfish motivations in order to serve the goal (Heatherton & Vohs, 1998).

Self-regulation takes one to an adaptive level of understanding of oneself and ability to deal with changing situations. Higher the self-regulatory capacity the more it strengthens the relation between the intention and behavior as it enables an individual to inhibit undesired responses (De Ridder, Lensuelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok & Baumister, 2012). By pursuing personally relevant goals that provides meaning in one's life and is also supported by social value system, it is what leads one towards regulation of self. It is also the ability one has to resist or control impulses dwelling in between one's valued goals. The individuals who follows the principles of regulated living are able to resist their own impulses, adapt their behavior to a range of standards and change their current behaviors in the service of attaining distal goals (Baumister, 1999). Following these regulatory principles, one can achieve health, growth and life satisfaction. Self-regulation ability is positively associated with better health, good adjustment, mental and physical wellbeing (Vohs & Baumister, 2004).

### *Insights from the Bhagwad Gita*

The ancient Indian text of the *Bhagwad Gita* promotes the importance of *Dharma* or Virtuous Living. *Dharma* can mean following a set of value-consistent goals which helps direct our life with the virtues of truthfulness, compassion and integrity. According to the *Bhagwad Gita*, *Dharma* is the guiding principle towards the path of righteousness, moral duty and ethical conduct. The sacred text also describes the importance of *Karma* and its implication on our lives.

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The mechanism of performing an action is an important aspect of learning and mastery. 'The *Bhagwad Gita*' helps us understand the value of work and 'how' to perform our prescribed duties and work efficiently. The '*Karma Yoga*' mentioned in the texts of 'The *Bhagwad Gita*' highlights the importance of work-oriented life without any desire or attachment with the outcomes or results of the work.

The *karma yoga* directs the path of delivering one's prescribed duties without the expectation of anything in return. Not desiring anything from an action/work/duty is one of the sacrificial attitudes which can be developed, monitored and maintained. *Karma Yoga* addresses the quality of work, whatever is being done, must be done with full grace and indulgence, not thinking of sense gratification and any expectation to receive any outcome or reward. Thus, *Karma Yoga* defines clearly that the anticipation of anything like a reward or gratification from an action is not the job of the doer, yet it has to be kept aside while performing an action.

The anticipation of rewards always makes the humans highly motivated to perform an action, but the repercussion of this orientation and attitude of the individual becomes externalized to a limit that one forgets the inner strengths and start living in a reality where motivation lies outside of them.

According to Lord Shri Krishna, the sufferings in life are due to the attachment with sense objects and constant flickering of the mind caused due to our attention focused on those sensory objects. The desires arise due to these sensory objects results in focusing our attention in seeking pleasures. But the teachings of the *Gita* affirms that if for once a sense object is a form of pleasure, then at some point of time it will cause misery too. Thus, it is said that the intelligent and the wise person never takes delight in the sense objects because they know that it is bound with a temporality of beginning and end. So, attaching oneself with temporary pleasures of life will cause suffering and misery too. Detaching oneself from such illusory (*Maya*) objects will govern your life in the right direction and you may be able to self-regulate yourself towards the *nishkama karma* and become a karma yogi. A *karma yogi* is someone who practices karma yoga i.e., a mental discipline that governs and includes working selflessly for the benefits of others.

Anyone can become a *Karma Yogi* by shifting their mental attitude and doing actions with complete effort and without the constant thought of result. The *Bhagwad Gita* teaches that the karma yoga can be attained if one strives for skillfulness in actions and being unattached to the outcomes.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology of comparative analysis is used in the present study to draw similar or contrasting views on self-regulation from the ancient Indian text of the *Bhagwad Gita* and its relevance in today's time. Textual analysis and identification of themes were used from the verses mentioned in the *Bhagwad Gita* to relate it with the concepts of self-regulation. The comparison is drawn between the conceptual construct, understanding and importance of self-regulation. The texts from the *Bhagwad Gita* were handled with reverence and consideration of its cultural significance. The following are the major themes found in context to the regulation of self:

### 1. Self-regulation and Dutifulness

According to the *Bhagwad Gita*, it is emphasized to follow one's *Dharma* or the code of conduct and always be responsible for your prescribed duties. The duties which can be at levels of personal, professional, societal or environmental must be attended to no matter how much difficulty or obstacle you face when delivering your duties. This is one of the important rules in attaining *Karma Yoga*. Yoga is a disciplinary action which is self-controlled and temporally consistent and guides in accomplishing one's tasks and duties in a determined and devoted manner. In the chapter 2 of verses 41, it is explained that if the individual performs one's duties wholeheartedly can only maintain a singular purpose without deviation which will provide meaning and value to his life. But if fails to deliver the duties, will have an irresolute purpose and divided attention. Thus, *Sri Krishna* instructs *Arjun* to fight for the sake of delivering his prescribed duties, following his *Kshtriya* dharma.

### 2. Self-Regulation and Routine Habits

The mention of routine habits, exercise and activities are given importance in regulating one's actions and maintain one's daily living. In the chapter 6 of verses 16, it clarifies that the person who is not regular in the quantity of what one eats and how much one sleeps can never become a yogi. It explains the person who eats too little or too much, also the one who sleeps too little or too much are said to be inconsistent and incapable of regulated living. In continuation with the next verse, it is pointed out that the activity of eating, sleeping, recreation and work in an equilibrated manner where both quantity and quality is met at optimal levels will ensure no material pains or distress and support regulated way of living (Chapter 6 Verses 17).

### 3. Self-regulation and Sensory Control

The *Bhagwad Gita* states the importance of sense control in maintaining one's consistency in the engaged work and attain peace and happiness. In the chapter 2 of verse 67, it is said that the roaming senses from one thing to another have the potential to take away the person's ability to think, decide and act in a consistent manner. Thus, it is important to govern sensory control over these all-time roaming senses. It is elaborated that the strength of these moving senses are so strong and motivating that it happens to disrupt proper thinking and reasoning in a person (Chapter 2 Verses 60). In analogy, a boat being directed or moved by the force of the wind is what happens with the mind and intellect of the person who loses self-control and get involved with those distracting senses that deviates one from its goal. Thus, *Shri Krishna* tells *Arjun* that the one who is in control of oneself and can withdraw those moving senses from the material sources is the one who can achieve a perfect state of consciousness (Chapter 2 Verses 58).

### 4. Self-regulation and Equanimity

According to the *Bhagwad Gita*, the person who never discriminates between happiness and distress, victory or defeat and hot or cold is the one who has overcome the limitations of a wandering mind and now possess full control over its functionalities, attains peace and tranquility (Chapter 6 Verses 7). In the chapter 4 of verses 22, it is advised to become free from the expectation of desired outcomes by practicing satisfaction with what one receives, never discriminate between good, bad, happiness and distress and be content with both success and failure. Thus, it is said that the person achieves a state of perfect knowledge if he remains undeterred by the comparison between good or evil, not praising the good or demeaning the bad (Chapter 2 Verses 57). In other words, one must have an unbiased

attitude towards any polarized or dualistic thoughts in order to achieve equanimity in thinking and action.

### 5. Self-Regulation and Yoga

In the chapter 6 verses 3, there is an exemplification of the steps taken to learn and progress in yoga. The first step is for the beginners who have to start to learn yoga are advised to engage oneself in the work as the stepping stone towards yoga. The second step indicates the ones who have already started to engage in yoga practice are now advised to restrain senses from the material objects and practice detachment. It is said that the person who is a master of yoga have renounced all the sensory attachments with the material possessions. And, this person never acts for the sake of sense gratification (Chapter 6 Verses 4).

According to the *Bhagwad Gita*, a person is said to be a yogi only and only when he is in full knowledge of his true self and is fully satisfied and situated in the higher conscious state. This person is self-controlled and has an equal eye for the pebbles, stones or gold, as all seems the same to him (Chapter 6 Verses 8). Thus, it is mentioned in the text of chapter 6 and verses 32, that a perfect yogi in comparison with oneself sees all beings as equal even if they are in distress or happiness.

## DISCUSSION

The text of the *Bhagwad Gita* encompasses with enriching lessons that guide in directing our lives in the path of morality and ethics. The lessons enlighten on different types of yoga, a yoga which is a form of exercise towards a path of spiritual awakening. It also covers major themes on controlling senses, becoming equanimous, responsibly performing one's duties and working towards self-realization. Thus, the *Bhagwad Gita* provides in-depth insights on self-regulatory mechanisms and thus learning them can help reach higher mental realms of consciousness.

The regulation of self has long been a part of core study in the field of Psychology and understanding different personalities with their regulative and coping mechanism has been extensively studied by many researchers. The major shift in these studies have come when it was understood that merely controlling one's behavior will not result in self-regulation rather the mind encompassing the thoughts and emotions have found to play a role in completing the process of self-regulation. Thus, now the self-regulation process includes reframing, refocusing and regulating all these three together i.e., thoughts, emotions and behavior.

The current study seeks to understand and gain practical insights from the *Bhagwad Gita* and how it can help us understand the better way of living and coping. The importance placed in understanding and learning to manage one's thoughts, emotions and behavior has been the focal point of psychological endeavor i.e., to identify the possible strategies for regulating one's affect, cognition and behavior. A control on one's actions and emotions with the appropriate strategies related to it get abundant attention for its importance and applicability in the current times. Individuals look for different ways and methods for the better management of emotions and actions.

With reference to the *Bhagwad Gita*, it is understood that the sense of self-realization can be achieved through regulated and detached way of living which contributes towards perfect state of consciousness, happiness and peace. Thus, self-regulation can be followed via self-awareness and self-monitoring as a means to attain your goals in life and maintain

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psychological well-being (Carver and Scheier, 1998). As per the Gita, it is said that if only one becomes self-controlled can one attain the truest form of knowledge. Similarly, self being a dynamic and complex system can be maintained by self-regulation which directly impacts self-esteem and self-concept (Baumeister, 1999). Thus, self-control is very essential in goal achievement and maintaining well-being (De Ridder et al, 2012). Controlling the mind and the senses is what is stated as the major steps in controlling one's actions (*Karma*). In the study by Cantor (1999), it is highlighted that the process of self-regulation can be maintained only through cognitive processes as it plays a central role in goal directed behaviours. Later, in the study conducted by Mischel and Ayduk in 2002, they highlighted the importance of both cognitive and affective processes that can influence the course of self-regulation.

In the *Bhagwad Gita*, it is mentioned that every individual is driven by his *prakriti* or nature which is governed by modes of material nature, these are, Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Similarly, according to Kuhl, there is a dynamic interaction between personality systems which influences the effectiveness of self-regulation. Thus, understanding the interaction among personality systems can help build effective self-regulation tools and interventions (Kuhl, 2000). The framework of Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS) explains self-regulation as governed by two processes (Cognitive and Affective) that influence the dynamics of self-regulation. Basically, it proposes that the mechanism of self-regulation is a coordinated cycle of cognitive and affective components (Mischel and Shoda, 1995).

The *Karma Yoga* is a self-disciplined action which is performed in self-controlled and consistent manner; it guides in fulfilling one's duties in a socially appropriate manner. This is in consonance with the idea of self-regulation, describing the most essential feature of self-regulation is self-consistency (Baumeister, 1999). The daily routine habits are the crucial signatures in depicting our overall lifestyle. And these habits direct and control our daily living and govern our whole life. Thus, the quality of one's daily activities determines one's quality of living. Taking control of our daily habits starts with having control over our attentional focus. According to Mischel and Ayduk's, attentional control is crucial in regulating oneself which enables to focus on the goal (Mischel and Ayudik, 2002).

Also, in addition to taking control of our daily habits, controlling ones all time diverting senses from one thing to the other is also considered a significant step in achieving *karma yoga*. Control of one's senses can be complementary to a focused engagement in one's work for a longer duration. Focused engagement maintains consistency in work. This can be supported by the study conducted by Carver and Scheier in 1998 which explains that the awareness and monitoring of self facilitates self-regulation. The delay in sense gratification for long term purpose or goal which is a self-control measure essential for meeting one's goal and enhancing wellbeing and thus is a form of higher self-regulation (Heatheron & Vohs, 1998; De Ridder, Lensuelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stock & Baumeister, 2012). Therefore, higher self-regulation capacity is associated with lower burnout and higher well-being (Gagnon, Durand-Bush and Young, 2018).

Self-regulation fosters one with the required ability to seek for the availability of resources, feasibility of conditions or favorability of time. Thus, the modification in the succession of goal or the task can be done at hand and meeting the goal with presence of mind, determination and hard work. Self-regulated performance accompanies three important processes: cognitive, meta-cognitive and motivational processes (Schunk and Usher, 2013). This can be carried out by following three steps of self-regulation and that is, thinking on

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systematic goal achievement (cognition), performing (motivation) and then reflecting (meta-cognition) on the work performed (Zimmerman, 2000). The dualistic way of thinking always branches our intelligence and attention, which later impacts our attentional control, consistency and engagement in any work.

According to the *Bhagwad Gita*, having a dual-sided thought pattern always focusing on making a distinction of two opposite objects rather appreciating their unique qualities is a form of polarized thinking. This leads to loss of control, attention deficit and multiple conflicting goals. This has been addressed as self-regulation vulnerabilities which further deteriorates mental health condition predicting the risk of psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Morf and Mischel, 2002). Thus, self-regulatory failure contributes to psychological disorders (Carver and Scheier, 1998). Hence, the text in the *Bhagwad Gita* suggest, following equanimity in thinking and action will reflect in one's purposeful living and reaching for the goal of self- realization.

In today's time, the life of all beings have become so fast-paced, where instant gratification is on top of the list where everybody is craving for a quick solution. Thus, the result of which has commonly shared as high level of emotional arousal and paramount of popping thoughts every second have made our generation more confused, agitated and disoriented. The simpler ways of living mentioned in the text of the *Bhagwad Gita* explains that equanimity, detachment, sense-restraint and self-realization are strategies recommended which are in alignment with psychological concepts of Balancing or congruence, self-distancing, delaying gratification and self-actualization respectively. All these are reported in several researches to enhance emotion regulation and improving mental health and well-being. Thus, for improving psychological well-being and functional adaptability, and to deal better with the conflicts and distress, it can be beneficial to understand and practice the timeless wisdom proposed in the *Bhagwad Gita*.

The study has a limitation of not focusing on the entire texts of the *Bhagwad Gita* and limiting to only few chapters. This could have led to missing some more details on the ways of self-regulation. The future prospects of this research could be to use extensive and delve deeper in more elaborative understanding of the ways and methods which can contribute as a change agent in reversing the side effects of maladaptive lifestyle, thoughts and behaviors in current times.

### CONCLUSION

The main purpose of the study was to explore the methods and techniques for understanding the self and directing its existence towards equilibrium. Thus, managing and maintaining the process of self-realization via self-regulation. The study takes into account the verses in the *Bhagwad Gita* and a textual analysis is carried out to identity major themes with reference to regulative practices and its long-term maintenance. The insights from the study can be used to develop intervention programmes and life skills learning courses to further contribute to its implication. The present work put forth the importance of having singular purpose and goal in life devoid of attachment and desires which makes the process more significant in maintenance of strength and regularity of action.

This study concludes on the term that one must engage in the practice of self-regulative activities with the determination to not deviate from the path of self-realization. It is considered important in the *Bhagwad Gita* that one should stay away from material senses and desires which are born from the dwelling senses. A firm focus must be maintained in the

work engagement and controlling the senses which can be useful in directing the functionalities of mind towards the path of enlightened living. As per the *Gita's* teaching it is directed that a yogi is someone who can keep a check on his senses and desires, and with practice and detachment he transcends towards ultimate upliftment.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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