

**BHAGAVAD GITA AND INDIAN ETHICS PREACHING OF  
GREAT PHILOSOPHER ADI SANKARA**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the profound implications of Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, particularly in its interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, for fostering ethical practices within society. Shankara's non-dualistic philosophy, emphasizing the ultimate oneness of the individual soul (Atman) with the Absolute Reality (Brahman), provides a unique metaphysical foundation for universal ethics. By delving into key concepts from the Bhagavad Gita such as Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and the nature of Dharma, as expounded through Shankara's commentary, this article demonstrates how his teachings transcend mere ritualism and offer a robust framework for moral conduct, social harmony, and selfless action. The paper argues that an understanding of Advaita, as elucidated by Shankara through the Gita, cultivates virtues like compassion, detachment, self-control, and a sense of interconnectedness, which are crucial for addressing contemporary ethical challenges and promoting a more just and harmonious society.

**Keywords:** Adi Shankara, Bhagavad Gita, Advaita Vedanta, Ethical Practices, Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Dharma, Society, Morality, Non-duality.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The quest for ethical living and a harmonious society has been a perpetual human endeavor. Across civilizations and epochs, philosophers and spiritual leaders have offered diverse perspectives on the foundations of morality and the principles guiding human conduct. In the rich tapestry of Indian thought, the contributions of Adi Shankara (c. 8th century CE) stand out as particularly transformative. A towering figure in Hindu philosophy, Shankara systematized and revitalized the Advaita Vedanta School, a non-dualistic philosophy that asserts the ultimate oneness of all existence. Central to his philosophical edifice is his profound commentary on the Prasthanas Trayi – the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita. Among these, the Bhagavad Gita, a concise yet comprehensive scripture embedded within the Mahabharata, serves as a crucial practical guide for ethical living, and Shankara's interpretation breathes new life into its teachings.

The Bhagavad Gita, a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, addresses fundamental questions concerning duty (Dharma), action (Karma), knowledge (Jnana), and devotion (Bhakti) in the face of existential crisis. While often perceived as a theological text, its underlying principles offer deep insights into human psychology, social responsibility, and the path to ethical excellence. Shankara's commentary on the Gita, known as the Bhagavad Gita Bhashya, is not merely an exegetical exercise but a profound philosophical elucidation that consistently aligns the Gita's message with the tenets of Advaita. He interprets the seemingly diverse paths of action, knowledge, and devotion as ultimately converging towards the realization of the non-dual Brahman, a realization that he argues is the true basis of ethical conduct.

This article aims to explore the multifaceted implications of Adi Shankara's philosophical framework, as elaborated through his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, for fostering robust ethical practices in society. It will delve into how Advaita Vedanta, with its emphasis on interconnectedness and the transcendence of individual ego, provides a compelling rationale for universal morality, selfless action, and the cultivation of virtues essential for societal well-being. By examining specific aspects of the Gita through Shankara's lens, we will demonstrate how his teachings offer timeless wisdom relevant to navigating the ethical complexities of the modern world.

## **2. THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATION: ADVAITA VEDANTA AND UNIVERSAL ETHICS**

At the heart of Shankara's philosophy is the grand pronouncement of Advaita: "Brahma Satyam Jagat Mithya Jivo Brahmaiva Na Aparah" (Brahman is real, the world is an illusion, the individual soul is non-other than Brahman). This core tenet, while seemingly abstract, lays a powerful metaphysical groundwork for universal ethics.

**Oneness and Interconnectedness:** If Brahman alone is real and everything else is a manifestation or an appearance of Brahman, then all beings are fundamentally interconnected. The distinction between "self" and "other" is ultimately illusory from the highest standpoint. This understanding naturally leads to empathy, compassion, and a recognition of the inherent worth of every individual. Harming another is, in essence, harming oneself, as the same divine essence animates all. This provides a strong ontological basis for the ethical imperative to treat all beings with respect and kindness, transcending narrow parochial interests.

**Transcending Ego and Selfishness:** The concept of Maya (the illusory power that projects the phenomenal world) is central to Advaita. It is Maya that gives rise to the sense of a separate ego, leading to desires, attachments, and actions driven by self-interest. Shankara argues that true ethical action stems not from egoic desires but from a profound understanding of one's true nature as Brahman. When the ego is transcended through knowledge (Jnana), actions are no longer motivated

by personal gain but by a sense of cosmic duty and universal well-being. This detachment from the fruits of action, as emphasized in the Gita, becomes a natural outcome of Advaitic realization.

**The World as Vyavaharika Satyam (Empirical Reality):** While the world is ultimately Mithya (illusory) from the absolute perspective (Paramarthika Satyam), Shankara does not advocate for nihilism or inaction. He recognizes the world as empirically real (Vyavaharika Satyam) for all practical purposes. This means that ethical duties and responsibilities within society are very much real and necessary as long as one perceives the world of distinctions. The Advaitin, even while striving for ultimate liberation, fully engages with the world, but with an enlightened perspective – performing actions without attachment, driven by a sense of duty and universal good. This pragmatic approach allows for both spiritual aspiration and active social engagement.

**Karma and the Law of Cause and Effect:** Advaita fully accepts the law of Karma – that every action has consequences. While the ultimate goal is liberation from the cycle of Karma through Jnana, ethical conduct in the empirical world is crucial for purifying the mind and preparing it for the dawn of knowledge. Unethical actions bind one further, whereas ethical actions, especially those performed selflessly, lead to inner purity and facilitate spiritual progress. Thus, the ethical framework is not merely a social construct but an integral part of the spiritual journey.

### **3. ETHICAL DIMENSIONS IN BHAGAVAD GITA THROUGH SHANKARA'S LENS**

Shankara's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita meticulously weaves the ethical teachings of the Gita into the fabric of Advaita. He consistently interprets the various Yogas (paths) presented in the Gita as conducive to the ultimate realization of Brahman, thereby providing a deep ethical underpinning to each.

#### **3.1. Karma Yoga: Action in Detachment and Selflessness**

The Bhagavad Gita's profound teaching on Karma Yoga, encapsulated in the famous verse "Karman्य-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana" (You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action – BG 2.47), forms the cornerstone of ethical action in society.

**Action for Duty, Not Desire:** Shankara emphasizes that Karma Yoga is about performing one's duties (Dharma) without attachment to the results. He explains that actions performed with a desire for specific outcomes lead to bondage. Ethical action, therefore, is not about what one gains, but about fulfilling one's responsibilities with diligence and integrity. This fosters a sense of commitment and removes the incentive for corrupt or unethical means to achieve desired ends.

**Purification of Mind (Chitta Suddhi):** For Shankara, the primary purpose of Karma Yoga is Chitta Suddhi or purification of the mind. Actions performed selflessly, without egoic attachment, gradually cleanse the mind of impurities like lust, anger, greed, and delusion. A purified mind becomes a suitable receptacle for the dawn of knowledge (Jnana). This links ethical action directly to spiritual progress, making it a prerequisite for higher realization.

**Social Responsibility:** While individual liberation is the ultimate goal, Shankara's interpretation of Karma Yoga implicitly promotes social responsibility. When individuals perform their duties diligently and selflessly, contributing to the collective good without seeking personal aggrandizement, society naturally flourishes. The concept of Loka-samgraha (welfare of the world), as mentioned in the Gita (BG 3.20, 3.25), is often interpreted by commentators, including those in the Advaitic tradition, as the preservation of social order and the promotion of universal well-being through selfless action.

**Detachment from Success and Failure:** A key aspect of Karma Yoga is equanimity in the face of success and failure (Samatvam Yoga Uchyate – Yoga is equanimity – BG 2.48). Shankara highlights that true detachment means performing action with full effort but remaining undisturbed by the outcomes, whether favorable or unfavorable. This mindset prevents frustration, despair, and unethical shortcuts, encouraging perseverance and integrity in all endeavors.



### **3.2. Jnana Yoga: The Path of Knowledge and Ethical Discernment**

Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge, is central to Shankara's Advaita. While it leads to the ultimate realization of Brahman, it also has profound implications for ethical practices.

**Discrimination (Viveka) and Detachment (Vairagya):** The pursuit of Jnana involves developing Viveka, the faculty of discrimination between the real (Brahman) and the unreal (the phenomenal world), and Vairagya, detachment from worldly pleasures and desires. These two qualities are fundamental to ethical conduct. Viveka allows one to discern right from wrong, true from false,

and prioritize long-term ethical well-being over immediate gratification. Vairagya frees one from the pull of unethical temptations rooted in desire and attachment.

**Seeing the Self in All Beings:** As one progresses on the path of Jnana, the understanding that the Atman (Self) is identical with Brahman deepens. This leads to the realization that the same Self resides in all beings. This profound insight naturally gives rise to universal compassion (Karuna) and non-violence (Ahimsa). When one sees the Self in all, harming another becomes inconceivable, as it would be akin to harming oneself. This ethical principle extends beyond human beings to all forms of life.

**Transcendence of Dualities:** Jnana leads to the transcendence of dualities such as pleasure and pain, good and bad, honor and dishonor. While these distinctions are real at the empirical level, the Jnani (one who has realized Brahman) operates from a higher perspective. This transcendence does not imply indifference to suffering or injustice, but rather a freedom from being swayed by external circumstances, allowing for a more stable and profound ethical response rooted in wisdom.

**Ethical Foundation of the Sage:** Shankara describes the characteristics of the Sthitaprajna (one of steady wisdom – BG 2.54-72) as someone whose mind is unperturbed by desires, free from attachment, fear, and anger, and who is compassionate towards all beings. These are not merely intellectual achievements but embody the highest ethical ideals. The Jnani acts as an exemplar of ethical living, guiding society through their conduct rather than through prescriptive rules alone.

### **3.3. Bhakti Yoga: Devotion as a Path to Ethical Purity**

While Shankara is primarily associated with Jnana Yoga, he acknowledges the validity and importance of Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion) as a means to an end. For him, Bhakti is a crucial preparatory stage for Jnana, purifying the mind and making it receptive to higher truth.

**Self-Surrender and Humility:** Devotion involves surrendering one's ego to a higher power (Ishvara). This act of self-surrender fosters humility, reduces arrogance, and opens the individual to divine grace. Ethically, humility is a foundational virtue that prevents hubris and fosters a willingness to learn and adapt.

**Cultivation of Divine Qualities:** The practice of Bhakti often involves contemplating and imbibing the divine qualities of the chosen deity, such as compassion, justice, truthfulness, and love. By focusing on these virtues, the devotee gradually cultivates them within themselves, leading to a more ethical character.

**Motivation for Righteous Action:** For a devotee, performing actions as an offering to God provides a powerful motivation for righteousness. The desire to please the divine encourages adherence to ethical principles and avoidance of unrighteous conduct. Actions are no longer for personal gain but as a form of worship, elevating their ethical quality.

**Universal Love:** True devotion, in the Advaitic framework, ultimately expands beyond a personal deity to a universal love for all creation, recognizing the divine presence in everything. This fosters a sense of interconnectedness and universal brotherhood, promoting ethical interactions based on love and respect.

#### **4. DHARMA AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN SOCIETY**

The concept of Dharma is central to the Bhagavad Gita and is intricately woven into Shankara's ethical vision for society. Dharma encompasses righteousness, duty, moral law, and the underlying order of the cosmos.

**Svadharmā (One's Own Duty):** The Gita places significant emphasis on Svadharmā – performing one's own duty rather than another's. Shankara interprets Svadharmā not rigidly as a caste-based system, but more broadly as one's inherent nature, capabilities, and responsibilities within a societal context. Fulfilling Svadharmā with dedication and integrity is an ethical imperative. This encourages individuals to excel in their chosen fields and contribute effectively to society, avoiding misdirected efforts or the pursuit of roles for which one is ill-suited.

**Ethical Decision-Making in Crisis (Arjuna's Dilemma):** Arjuna's dilemma on the battlefield – whether to fight his own kin – is a classic ethical conundrum. Krishna's teachings, interpreted by Shankara, guide Arjuna towards fulfilling his Kshatriya Dharma (duty as a warrior) but with a detached mind, free from the desire for victory or fear of defeat. This illustrates a crucial ethical principle: sometimes, difficult actions must be performed if they align with Dharma, even if they cause personal discomfort, provided they are undertaken with detachment and without malicious intent. This emphasizes the importance of a clear understanding of duty over emotional entanglement in ethical decision-making.

**The Role of Knowledge in Upholding Dharma:** Shankara consistently links the proper understanding and execution of Dharma to Jnana. Without true knowledge of the Self, actions, even if seemingly ethical, can be tainted by ego and desire. The Jnani, having transcended dualities, is best equipped to uphold Dharma in its purest form, acting spontaneously out of wisdom and compassion rather than adherence to external rules alone.

**Beyond Ritualism to Inner Purity:** Shankara's Advaita often critiqued mere ritualistic adherence to Dharma if it lacked inner understanding and purity. For him, true Dharma involved not just outward actions but an inward transformation, a purification of the mind and a shift in perspective towards non-duality. This ethical emphasis moves beyond superficial adherence to rules to a deeper cultivation of virtuous character.

## **5. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND CHALLENGES**

The implications of Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, as illuminated by the Bhagavad Gita, hold profound relevance for contemporary society grappling with complex ethical dilemmas.

**Addressing Consumerism and Greed:** Modern society is often driven by excessive consumerism and a relentless pursuit of material wealth. Shankara's emphasis on detachment (Vairagya) and the transcendence of desire offers a powerful antidote. By recognizing the transient nature of worldly possessions and the ultimate futility of endless accumulation, individuals can cultivate contentment and reduce the unethical practices driven by greed, such as exploitation, corruption, and environmental degradation.

**Fostering Environmental Ethics:** The Advaitic understanding of interconnectedness provides a robust foundation for environmental ethics. If all existence is a manifestation of Brahman, then nature, animals, and all elements of the ecosystem are part of the divine whole. Harming the environment is, therefore, a violation of this fundamental unity. This perspective encourages ecological responsibility, sustainable living, and a deep reverence for nature, countering the anthropocentric view that often leads to exploitation.

**Promoting Social Harmony and Reducing Conflict:** In an increasingly polarized world, the Advaitic message of universal oneness can bridge divides. By recognizing the same divine Self in all, irrespective of nationality, religion, race, or socio-economic status, barriers of prejudice and discrimination begin to dissolve. This fosters empathy, mutual respect, and a collective endeavor towards social justice and peace. Conflict often arises from the perception of "otherness"; Advaita systematically dismantles this perception.

**Ethical Leadership and Governance:** For leaders, the teachings of Karma Yoga and Svadharma offer guidance on selfless service. A leader guided by Advaitic principles would prioritize the welfare of their constituents (Loka-samgraha) over personal gain, perform their duties with integrity, and remain equanimous in success and failure. This fosters transparent and ethical governance, crucial for public trust and societal progress.

**Navigating Technological Advancements:** The rapid pace of technological advancement presents new ethical challenges, from artificial intelligence to biotechnology. Shankara's emphasis on Viveka (discrimination) and Jnana provides a framework for ethical discernment. It encourages asking fundamental questions about the true purpose of technology, its impact on human dignity, and whether it leads to greater interconnectedness or further fragmentation. The detachment from results (Karma Yoga) can also help prevent the unbridled pursuit of technological prowess without considering its wider ethical implications.

### **5.1 Challenges in Application:**

While profound, the practical application of Advaita Vedanta in society faces challenges. The realization of non-duality is a high spiritual attainment, and expecting universal adherence can be idealistic. The rigorous intellectual and spiritual discipline required for Jnana is not easily accessible to all. Moreover, the interpretation of Mithya (illusory nature of the world) can sometimes be misunderstood as a call for inaction or indifference to worldly suffering, though Shankara himself vigorously refuted this. Therefore, promoting these ethical principles requires careful articulation, emphasizing the Vyavaharika (empirical) reality of ethical duties while pointing towards the ultimate Paramarthika (absolute) truth.

### **6. CONCLUSION**

Adi Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, through his insightful commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, offers a timeless and profound framework for ethical practices in society. His philosophy transcends mere moral injunctions by providing a robust metaphysical foundation for universal ethics. The core Advaitic tenet of the ultimate oneness of Atman and Brahman naturally leads to compassion, empathy, and a sense of interconnectedness among all beings. By meticulously interpreting the Bhagavad Gita's teachings on Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga, Shankara demonstrates how selfless action, the pursuit of knowledge, and sincere devotion are not only paths to spiritual liberation but also powerful catalysts for ethical living. Karma Yoga, with its emphasis on performing duty without attachment to results, fosters integrity and dedication. Jnana Yoga, through the cultivation of discrimination and the realization of the Self in all, instills universal compassion and detaches one from ego-driven unethical impulses. Bhakti Yoga, as a preparatory discipline, purifies the mind and cultivates virtuous qualities.

The concept of Dharma, understood through Shankara's lens, moves beyond rigid ritualism to an inner transformation, where ethical conduct flows naturally from an enlightened perspective. In an age marked by individualism, consumerism, and conflict, the Advaitic vision offers a powerful antidote, advocating for a society built on shared understanding, selfless service, environmental responsibility, and genuine harmony.

While the complete realization of Advaita is a spiritual pinnacle, the ethical implications derived from Shankara's teachings on the Gita provide practical guidance for individuals and collectives alike. Cultivating detachment, embracing duty, fostering a sense of universal kinship, and pursuing knowledge with discernment are virtues that can significantly contribute to a more just, compassionate, and sustainable global society. Adi Shankara's legacy, particularly through his elucidation of the Bhagavad Gita, remains an invaluable resource for navigating the complexities of human existence and fostering a deeply ethical engagement with the world.

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