

# Lessons on Self Realization from the Bhagavad Gita

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**Abstract:** Self-realization and self-actualization have been a part of human mankind's evolution. It pervades philosophy and different religions through history. Self-realization as a concept was used by neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein to describe a biological tendency of organisms. Realization of the innate drive is termed as self-actualization. Self-actualization according to the western psychologists and theorists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers is the ultimate psychological need that arises after the physical and the psychological needs are met, and self-esteem is achieved. Eastern spiritualities refer to self-realization differently in different religions. Taoism and Buddhism consider a drive towards a higher state of being- 'Oneness' or 'Enlightenment' similar to self-actualization. Confucianism focusses on social code for individuals with emphasis on the relationship between the sage and the society around them. Christianity views self-actualization as a person attaining full potential as a human being by being good, loyal with positive characteristics. The Islamic perspective on self-realization rests on worship- 'Ibadah' as a medium with exceptional features. Bhagavad Gita's teachings give different paths of self-realization which lead to the spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. Bhagavad Gita is a comprehensive philosophical thought for all humankind.

*Keywords* — *Lessons from the Bhagavad Gita, Philosophy, Religion, Self-Actualization, Self-realization, Self-reflection.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Self-realization and self-actualization have been a part of human mankind's evolution. It pervades philosophy and different religions through history. Self-actualization is fulfillment of a person's personal potential in life. Self-realization is synonymous with self-actualization, self-reflection, and self-exploration. The term self-realization was first used by neuropsychiatrist Kurt Goldstein to describe a biological tendency that is representative of all organisms. Goldstein has given three aspects of self-actualization, namely-individuation-the process of becoming a self, holism-dealing with the organism and environment relationship and as a motivating drive.[5] Realization of the innate drive is termed as self-actualization. The concept of self-actualization was popularized by humanistic existential psychologists and therapists in 1960s. Self-actualization according to the western psychologists and theorists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers is the ultimate psychological need that arises after the physical and the psychological needs are met, and self-esteem is achieved. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a five-layered pyramid focused on human needs. The first layer is focused on the physiological needs at the base of the pyramid, followed by personal safety needs, love and social needs, self-esteem needs and finally self-actualization, the process of fulfilling personal potential in life. Some of the people studied for the research findings had spiritual or personal peak experiences which were more than the ordinary consciousness. Carl

Roger's believed that people have the self-actualizing tendencies and the environment of genuineness, acceptance, and empathy nurtured growth.

The idea of self-concept being central to a person's personality was emphasized by Carl Rogers. [1]According to Carl Rogers self-concept has three components of self-concept-self-image, self-esteem, and ideal self. Self-actualization is a continuous process over the entire lifetime of a person whereby the self-concept is reshaped with new experiences and development. However, self-actualization according to Carl Rogers is a possibility only when the ideal self-who an individual wants to be and self-image-the actual behaviour is overlapping. [19]Today, self-actualization has shaped the development of humanistic and positive psychology and is used in counselling, education, and therapy.

Eastern spiritualities refer to self-realization differently in different religions. According to Hinduism, self-realization is knowledge of true self, beyond delusion and material life. Buddhism considers self-realization as an awakening of true reality; Sikhism believes in separating the self from one's false ego and Jainism defines self-realization as removal of artificial layers of personality and an understanding of one's true self. [2]

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research paper on 'Lessons on Self-realization from the Bhagavad Gita' is aimed at addressing the following:

1. To understand the concept of self-realization.
2. To analyze and present the different paths of self-realization given in the Bhagavad Gita to achieve liberation of the soul.
3. To study, analyze and compare self-actualization and self-realization from psychological, scientific, and philosophical perspective.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle believed that self-realization is fulfillment of one's potentialities and is the goal of ethical life. Plato's concept of true self is the rational soul not the body. However, Aristotle diverged from Plato's view and believed that the true self to be a rational animal who can think and the soul as the principle of life. Aristotle classified the souls at three levels-vegetative in plants, sensitive in animals who respond to sensation and rational in humans capable of thinking. Aristotle's concept of self is hylomorphic, with both body and soul forming the self of a human person. [3]

Goldstein considers three aspects of self-actualization. Individualization is a process of becoming, that remains despite changes in environment, behavior, and organism proper. The individual maintains a relative constancy. Hoffmeyer, has discussed the self as an emergent property that has some degree of authority and autonomy. [20] For biosemiotics, 'self' or 'soul' is a way of naming the innermost agency that springs from life history of an organism, human or non-human. The organism-environment relationship is an important aspect of self-actualization. The individual cannot be viewed independently from its environment, as the organism is dependent on the environment for all its supplies. The third aspect, is self-actualization is the motivating drive, compelling the organism to move. Self-actualization is the drive even when an organism is pre-occupied with pre-potent single drive of physical needs, safety needs and self-esteem need.[4]

Maslow conceived the concept of a hierarchy of needs-physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. The first four were classified as deficiency or lower needs and the top level as growth or being needs. Maslow gave a positive account of human behavior focused on what goes right. He focused on the human potential and how to fulfil that potential. The growth of self-actualization is the need for personal growth, which subsequently led to positive outcomes for the society.[6] Maslow believed that self-actualization brings peace, harmony, care, advancement in the world. [7] Maslow's hierarchy of needs is influenced by the Blackfoot Native Americans after his visit to Canada

in 1938. The Blackfoot perspective has self-actualization at the base of the pyramid and a foundation of community development. Community actualization eventually leads to development of knowledge and wisdom of the community called cultural perpetuity or the Gitksan breathe of life belief which ensures that even though a person has limited life even then people's teaching live on.

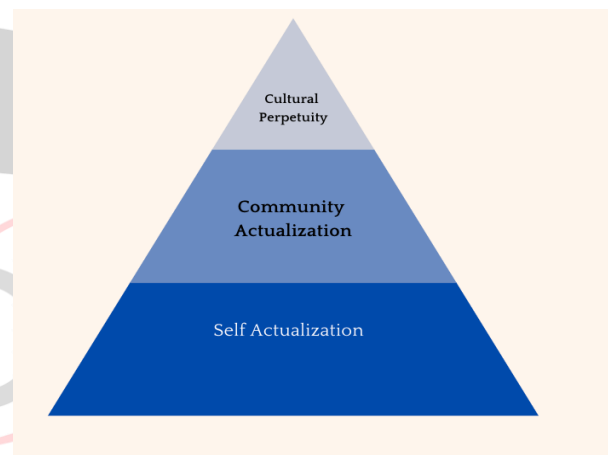
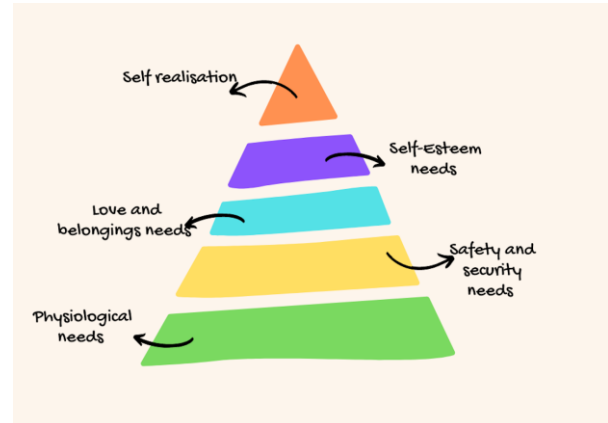


Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Blackfoot Native American's Gitksan Breathe of Life Theory

However, self-actualization is considered a western concept developed by studying characteristics of peers and historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and Albert Einstein. Other cultures have similar but different ways to attain the higher state of being. Taoism and Buddhism consider a drive towards a higher state of being- 'Oneness' or 'Enlightenment' similar to self-actualization. Confucianism focusses on social code for individuals with emphasis on the relationship between the sage and the society around them. A self-actualized individual may or may not care for the people around them. [11] However, Buddhism focusses on selfless reference whereas self-actualization gives priority to self-identification and positive self-esteem. According to the Buddha, the only way to eradicate human suffering is to remove attachment- 'upadana' or craving- 'trsna' of the mind towards things we are attached to and become aware of 'non-self'. Mindfulness meditation, a fundamental path to become aware of the causes and sources of suffering, are elements of Buddha's "noble eightfold path" to end

suffering, full freedom of mind and obtain wisdom and complete enlightenment.[10]

Biblical perspective on self-realization focusses on living humbly before God and seeing Him accomplish his work through our lives.[14] Christianity views self-actualization as a person attaining full potential as a human being by being good, loyal with positive characteristics.

The Islamic perspective on self-realization rests on worship-*'Ibadah'* as a medium with exceptional features. Ibadah is classified as *'Ilmiyah'*-enlightening by procuring knowledge and *'Amaliyah'*-fulfilling religious and social obligations in a righteous way. Both focus on self-discipline and total commitment. Worship which involves practices like fasting, charity, prayers improve a person's intuition, self-esteem, inner strength, personality.[15]

Paramhansa Yogananda, a yoga master of India launched a spiritual revolution in the west in early twentieth century with his writings and spiritual campaigns and message of universal spiritual path of self-realization. According to Yogananda, "*Self-realization is the knowing in all parts of body, mind, and soul that you are now in possession of the kingdom of God; that you do not have to pray that it come to you; that God's omnipresence is your omnipresence; and that all you need to do is improve your knowing.*" [8]According to Yogananda, self-realization unites all religions.

Bhagavad Gita's teachings give different paths of self-realization which lead to the spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. Bhagavad Gita is a comprehensive philosophical thought for all humankind. It provides two types of knowledge-physical, which includes arts, science, management and the other spiritual-of mind, body and soul which plays an important part in building the character of an individual and community. [9]

#### IV. RESEARCH METHOD

The constructivist paradigm of research has been adopted for this study as there is no single truth or reality that needs to be interpreted, but qualitative research to discover multiple interpretations of the events in the scripture. The epistemology of the study is subjectivism as knowledge comes from individual believer. The theoretical perspective is hermeneutical interpretation of historical scripture which has an impact on the culture, history, experiences, and feelings of the people of India and followers in many countries. The research methodology is a qualitative heuristic study with greater importance given to human experiences with slokas in the scripture analysed in social context. The slokas from the Bhagavad Gita have been interpreted and perceived based on the experience and understanding of the researcher to analyse Bhagavad Gita's lessons on different paths of self-realization which lead to the spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. The research methodology of heuristic inquiry adopted for the research

undertaken is based on the implicit knowledge from the slokas of the Bhagavad Gita, the sixth book of Mahabharata, a Sanskrit epic poem of ancient India. The philosophy of self-realization in different religions through history and the western philosophy have been analysed.

#### V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Bhagavad Gita is a true classic which highlights the virtues of self-discipline and knowledge. Bhagavad Gita literally means 'Song of the Lord', is the sixth book in the epic Mahabharata, narrated just before the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas at Kurukshetra. It is a conversation between Krishna, the charioteer for Arjuna and Arjuna himself. Arjuna is overcome with despondency and refuses to fight. The challenging situation forces Arjun to question moral laws, principles of '*dharma*'-moral righteousness. Krishna introduces Arjuna to philosophical perspective of life, education and ways of salvation to guide him to fulfil his duty as a warrior, a prince, a righteous man, reminding him of his duty as a '*Kshatriya*'-warrior to stand against evil and restore peace through selfless action.[12]

The Bhagavad Gita is divided into three parts comprising eighteen chapters with seven hundred verses. The first six chapters has two hundred and seventy-nine verses which deal with '*Karma-yoga*', the path of action. The seventh to the twelfth chapter has two hundred and nine verses which explain '*Bhakti-yoga*', the path of devotion and the last thirteen to eighteenth chapters include two hundred and twelve verses explaining '*Jnāna-yoga*', the path of transcendental knowledge of the Supreme. [13]

During the conversations between Lord Krishna and Arjuna at the time of the battle, Lord Krishna reveals the science of the universe and the knowledge of self. Krishna helps Arjuna understand his true form and sets him on the path of self-realization. Krishna gave four different paths of self-realization but all lead to spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. Krishna describes yogic philosophies namely, knowledge based '*samkhya or jnāna*' (BG 6.30), devotion based '*bhakti*' (BG 12.9), action based '*karma*'. (BG 2.39) and path of self-control and wisdom '*raja*' (BG 9.1-34).

*'Jnāna-yoga'*- the path of true knowledge, wisdom, and introspection, when a person learns to differentiate between the real and the unreal. Knowledge based philosophy explains the self and its existence in the universe. Selfhood is an illusion. We are all manifestations of one Supreme Lord. '*Bhakti yoga*'- the path of love, compassion and unconditional devotion, Devotion based philosophy holds that all actions should be devoted to the Supreme Lord by surrendering to him. '*Karma yoga*'-the path of selflessness and service without expectation of reward. To perform action without any attachment to the outcome of that action. It promotes adopting the right course of action and duty without selfish motive. This will free the doer from karmic consequences of their action. Practice of karma yoga leads to

liberation from the bondage of work. 'Raja yoga'-the path of self-control and meditation. The Bhagavad Gita treats renunciation as a state of mind which can be reached by self-control, detachment from worldly attachments, material objects, devotion without expectations, Karma without attachments to the results and renouncing the desires for sensory pleasures to attain freedom from the cycle of birth and death. The core lessons of the Bhagavad Gita include action, renunciation, love, worship, wisdom, and knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita focusses on the inner world of self. [21]

Chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita reflects on the Sankhya Yoga or the Path of Knowledge and enlightens Arjuna on sole purpose of the Soul-*jiva*, Dharma, Karma and the Senses. Shri Krishna reminds Arjuna of his immortal nature, the eternal soul or atman that never dies for it is never born. This chapter introduces the concept of self and the idea of rebirth-*samsara*. The soul travels from one life to the other. Death is certain for the living just like rebirth is certain for the dead. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal and ageless. It can neither be destroyed when the body ceases to exist.

*na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin  
nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ  
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yam purāṇo  
na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre (2.20)*

The Bhagavad Gita's teachings and spiritual wisdom focus on developing detachment from pleasure and pain and identifying with the Atman, the immortal self. The answers to Arjuna's questions to Shri Krishna in Chapter 2 contain the essence of the Bhagavad Gita. Mahatma Gandhi considered the verses from the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 2, Verses 55-72 as the essence of the scripture. [17]

In Chapter 2 verse 56, Lord Krishna describes the qualities of a sage of steady wisdom who is free from craving of pleasure, fear and anger and his mind is on the transcendental, spiritual level.

*duḥkheṣhv-anudvigna-manāḥ sukheṣhu vigata-sprīhaḥ  
vīta-rāga-bhaya-krodhaḥ sthita-dhīr munir uchyate (2.56)*

In Chapter 2.48 Shri Krishna asks Arjuna to act in yoga with equanimity, doing his duty without expectation of reward. Thus, accepting success or failure, pleasure or pain, fame or disgrace equally without attachment to results. Surrendering the fruits of our actions to God is true Yoga.[13]

*yoga-sthah kuru karmani sangam tyaktva dhananjaya  
siddhy-asiddhyoh samo bhutva samatvam yoga uchyate  
(2.48)*

Shri Krishna asks Arjuna in Chapter 2 verse 64 to give up attachment to sensual pleasures and to seek happiness with the aim of attaining spiritual attachment of the mind to God. Attachment and aversion to material objects are two sides of the same coin. When the mind is free from such thoughts positive or negative, and resonates with devotion for God, the mind is free and attains divine bliss. [13]

*rāga-dveṣha-viyuktas tu viṣhayān indriyaiḥ charan  
ātma-vaśhyair-vidheyātmā prasādam adhigachchhati (2.64)*

God realisation is a state when the soul is *jivan mukt*, liberated even while in the body. God gives divine energies-knowledge, love, and bliss, to the soul and liberates the soul from *sanchit* karmas which get destroyed. The state of eternal liberation is called nirvana, moksha. Buddhist philosophy considers the stage of ending materialistic life as emptiness. The Bhagavad Gita believes that the actual life begins after the stage of ending materialistic life, called *brahma-nirvana*. *Brāhmī sthitiḥ* is liberation from material bondage.

*eṣhā brāhmī sthitiḥ pārtha nainām prāpya vimuhyati  
sthitvāsyām anta-kāle 'pi brahma-nirvāṇam ṛichchhati  
(2.72)*

Similar to the hierarchy of needs given by Maslow, the Bhagavad Gita in Chapter 3 verse 42 explains the sequence of superiority of the body, senses, mind, intellect and the soul.

*indriyāṇi parāṇyāhur indriyebhyaḥ param manaḥ  
manasas tu parā buddhir yo buddheḥ paratas tu saḥ (3.42)*

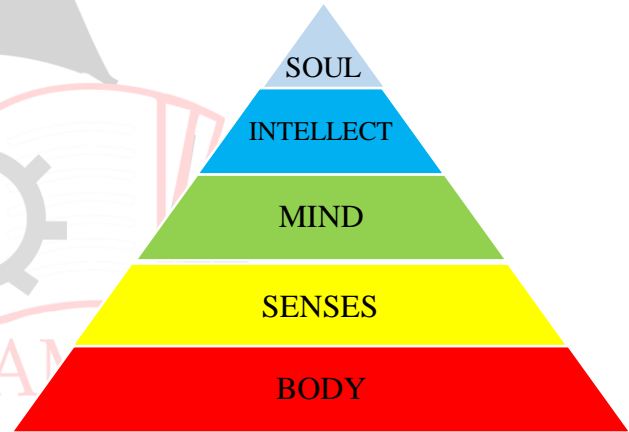


Figure 3: Gradation Of Instruments Provided By God Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 3.42

Control over the mind, which is a potential source of negative thoughts, anxiety, stress, and depression can turn the purified mind to be as source of positive thoughts. A disciplined mind of a yogi does not flicker and remains steady in meditation and devotion in union with God, the supreme.

*bandhur ātmātmanas tasya yenātmaivātmanā jitaḥ  
anātmanas tu śhatrutve vartetātmaiva śhatru-vat (6.6)*

*yathā dīpo nivāta-stho neṅgate sopamā smṛitā  
yogino yata-chittasya yuñjato yogam ātmanaḥ (6.19)*

In Chapter 9 of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna shares the secret of how to attain wisdom and overcome suffering. Those people who do not believe in the existence of God and lack faith are unable to tread the path of God-realization. These people cannot be freed from the cycle of birth and death and repeatedly come back to this world.

*aśhraddadhānāḥ puruṣhā dharmasyāsyā parantapa  
aprāpya mām nivartante mṛityu-samsāra-vartmani (9.3)*

The body, the soul-both knower and doer, senses, efforts, divine providence are the five factors responsible for action. God bestows different abilities to different people depending upon their past karmas to perform actions. The ultimate goal being to attain liberation of the soul.

*adhiṣṭhānam tathā kartā karaṇam cha pṛithag-vidham  
vividhāśh cha pṛithak cheṣṭā daivam chaivātra  
pañchamam*

*śharīra-vān-manobhir yat karma prārabhate naraḥ  
nyāyām vā viparītām vā pañchaite tasya hetavaḥ  
tatraivam sati kartāram ātmānam kevalam tu yaḥ  
paśhyaty akṛita-buddhitvān na sa paśhyati durmatih  
(18.14-16)*

God is the *advaya jñāna tattva*, who exists in all creation and the entire creation is bound with one energy which pervades all.

*sarva-bhūteṣhu yenaikam bhāvam avyayam īkṣhate  
avibhaktaṁ vibhakteṣhu taj jñānam viddhi sātvikam  
(18.20)*

## VI. FINDINGS

This paper has delved into the philosophy of self-realization in different religions through history and Bhagavad Gita's teachings giving different paths of self-realization which lead to the spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. Bhagavad Gita is a comprehensive philosophical thought for all humankind.

Bhagavad Gita is a universal scripture with its lessons for humanity. It introduces you to virtuous knowledge, development of inner personality for attaining the ultimate destination, resolution of conflict within an individual to attain the path of self-realization, develop conscience by purification of heart and become a beacon of knowledge, develop logical abilities and intellect to take decisions, to build character, overcome ignorance, develop divine attributes, and experience your true self. The ultimate goal of liberation is freedom from the cycle of birth and death, old age, sorrow and attains immortality, which can be achieved through self-realization.

Krishna helps Arjuna understand his true form and sets him on the path of self-realization. Krishna gave four different paths of self-realization but all lead to spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. Krishna describes yogic philosophies namely, knowledge based '*samkhya or jnāna*' (BG 6.30), devotion based '*bhakti*' (BG 12.9), action based '*karma*'. (BG 2.39) and path of self-control and wisdom '*raja*' (BG 9.1-34). The Bhagavad Gita's teachings and spiritual wisdom focus on developing detachment from pleasure and pain and identifying with the Atman, the immortal self. The core lessons of the Bhagavad Gita include action,

renunciation, love, worship, wisdom, and knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita focusses on the inner world of self.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The concept of self-realization and self-actualization pervades philosophy and different religions through history. The Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Plato delved on the concept of self-realization as fulfillment of one's potential and goal of ethical life. The term of self-realization was coined by German psychiatrist, Kurt Goldstein in 1943 to describe a biological tendency, a relationship with the environment and as an innate drive.

The Western psychologists and theorists consider self-actualization as a need for personal growth. Maslow's hierarchy of needs was influenced by Blackfoot Native American perspective, whereby self-actualization led to community development which ultimately led to growth of knowledge and wisdom which would live on in time. The Eastern spiritualities consider self-realization differently in different religions. Taoism and Buddhism consider self-realization as a higher state of being whereas Confucianism places emphasis on social code for individuals. Christianity views self-actualization as attainment of full potential by a human being by being good, loyal with positive traits. Islamic perspective on self-realization rests on worship to achieve enlightenment and to fulfill religious and social obligations in a righteous way with focus on self-discipline and total commitment. The Bhagavad Gita has given four different paths of self-realization but all lead to spiritual goal of liberation of the soul.

Thus, the western philosophy or the eastern spiritualities and the Bhagavad Gita all consider different paths of self-realization which eventually lead to spiritual goal of liberation of the soul. Self-realization unites all religions in terms of the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation of the soul.

This paper has analysed self-realization and self-actualization from different points of view-psychological, scientific and philosophical and the results show that the different streams converge on their interpretations of self-realization.

## VIII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study adopts a constructivist paradigm of research to discover interpretations of the events in the scripture as there is no single truth that can be interpreted. The hermeneutics interpretations given to the verses depends on the understanding of an individual. The present study is limited to the researcher's limited understanding of the Bhagavad Gita and may be subject to discussion.

The study is limited to only one aspect of critical analysis of Bhagavad Gita's lessons on self-realization due to limitation of time and resources. The study is self-funded research undertaken by the author. The study is based on secondary

data, journals, periodicals, and literature on the Bhagavad Gita.

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