

# **LORD KRISHNA'S WISDOM: A BLUEPRINT FOR EXISTENTIAL THERAPY**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to explore how the teachings of Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita align with Existential philosophy. The so-called "Four Givens" of existentialism: Freedom (or responsibility), Meaningless (or absurdity), Isolation, and Death are closely related to the teachings of Lord Krishna as applied in his discourse with Arjuna. The paper study explores how the assistance given to Arjuna fits into the concept of Existential Therapy and how the understanding and implementation of principles like self-realisation, duty (dharma) and the understanding of sufferings in the light of Bhagavad Gita, can help overcome one's existential crisis. By highlighting the concepts of Indian Culture in the context of Existential Therapy, we can create a pattern of therapy that is more culturally sensitive and accessible to a wider range of Indian clients. The Bhagavad Gita provides a profound existential framework with its emphasis on self-awareness, duty, and inner peace, with Lord Krishna acting as the first counselor, guiding Arjuna through life's core challenges. By addressing themes of meaning, choice, and mortality, Krishna's wisdom offers insights that align with modern existential therapy that can be integrated into contemporary therapy for helping individuals find purpose and resilience in their lives.*

**Keywords:** Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna, Wisdom, Existentialism, Existential Therapy, Indian culture

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Bhagavad Gita- an ancient Hindu scripture, highlights the nature of existence, duty, and self-realization, that profoundly aligns with many themes in Existential Philosophy. Though it predates Existential philosophy by millennia, the Bhagavad Gita's exploration of the human concerns resonates deeply with the concern and question put forth by Existential thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger. The Bhagavad Gita's ethical and metaphysical frameworks can be used to address the existential quest for meaning, struggling with freedom , confrontation with suffering, and the role of choosing one's own path and responsibility in shaping one's life.

The Bhagavad Gita begins with Arjuna, a warrior prince, experiencing a profound existential crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Facing the moral and emotional turmoil of participating in a war against his own kin and teachers, Arjuna questions the purpose of life, the nature of duty (Dharma), and the morality of violence. In this moment of crisis, Krishna, his divine Charioteer, engages him in a philosophical discourse, discourse that addresses the very core of human existence.

The 1950s witnessed the rise of Existential Therapy. Rollo May believed that human beings naturally tend to seek meaning and purpose in their lives, but many of us struggle to find meaning in a world that can seem chaotic and uncertain (Vieth, 2013). Existential Therapy aims to help individuals explore their unique experiences of existence and find meaning in their lives. During this period, we also find the emergence of Humanistic therapies which emphasizes the

importance of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and the inherent goodness of human beings (Bryant & Luft, 2023).

The Bhagavad Gita dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The Bhagavad Gita is widely regarded by many knowledgeable scholars, regardless of their religious affiliation, as a valuable resource for gaining profound insights into the self. The Bhagavad Gita can serve as a valuable window for psychotherapists seeking insights into a wide range of Western therapeutic approaches that have emerged throughout history (Thakur et al., 2021).

A very common challenge faced by modern-day psychotherapists in India is difficulty in establishing therapeutic adherence and frequent dropouts (Kashish Behl & Mahalakshmi Rajagopal, 2018; Kullgard et al., 2022). It is worth considering whether Sri Krishna would have been able to effectively counsel Arjuna if Arjuna had not had complete faith in him. Throughout the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna consistently demonstrates an unwavering and profound faith in Sri Krishna.

kārpaṇya-doṣhopahata-svabhāvaḥ  
prīchchhāmi tvāṁ dharma-sammūḍha-chetāḥ  
yach-chhreyāḥ syānniṣhchitaṁ brūhi tanme  
śhiṣhyaste 'haṁ śhādhi māṁ tvāṁ prapannam (Chapter 2, verse 7)

Here, Arjuna, who is both a friend and cousin of Sri Krishna, humbly requests Krishna to become his guru. Arjuna acknowledges that he has been overcome by the flaw of cowardice and pleads with Krishna to guide him on the path of auspiciousness.

By the end of this discourse, Arjuna quotes the following:-

arjuna uvācha  
naṣṭo mohāḥ smṛitir labdhā tvat-prasādan mayāchyuta  
sthito'smi gata-sandehāḥ kariṣhye vachanaṁ tava (Chapter 18, verse 73)

Arjuna declares that he has undergone a profound transformation and is now situated in knowledge, free from confusion. He surrenders himself to the will of God and commits to following Sri Krishna's instructions.

This suggests that the establishment of a strong therapeutic alliance or relationship may be influenced by the level of trust and preconceived notions an individual holds regarding their therapist or guru. All Vedic scriptures uniformly affirm that divine knowledge for our eternal welfare is imparted through the medium of a spiritual master. Thus, it may be stated that it is important for one to have a guide irrespective of their psychotherapeutic or spiritual discourse.

A few similarities between Existentialism and the Bhagavad Gita may be listed as follows:-

Existentialism is a broad philosophical movement that emphasized individual freedom, choice, and responsibility. Existentialists assert that human beings are condemned to be free. In his book, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943) argues that there is no predetermined essence or purpose of humanity, and it is up to each individual to create meaning through their actions. This freedom comes with the burden of responsibility, as each person must confront the reality of their existence, without recourse to external explanations or divine meaning (Sartre, 1943). The responsibility of choosing one's path is central to existential philosophy.

Albert Camus, in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), explores the absurdity of life, the disjunction between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's indifference to human existence. According to Camus, the recognition of this absurdity is liberating, as it allows individuals to live authentically without resorting to false hopes or illusions (Camus, A., 1942). The existential challenge is to embrace the absurd without surrendering to despair.

The existentialist emphasis on authenticity involves confronting one's own being and overcoming societal pressures. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre emphasizes that the authentic individual must live true to their own subjective experience, free from social constructs (Sartre, J. P., 1943). Which requires a radical acceptance of one's freedom and the existential consequences that come with it.

Central to Gita is the concept of dharma, often translated as duty, righteousness, or the moral law. Arjuna was initially hesitant to fight in the battle, torn between his duty as a warrior and his compassion for his family members. Krishna urges him to fulfill his dharma and engage in the battle, emphasizing that one must perform their role in the world without attachments to outcomes (Bhagavad Gita, 2.47). This idea is expressed in the Karma Yoga chapter, where Krishna advises action without attachment to success or failure, a concept that aligns with existentialist notion of personal responsibility.

In Bhagavad Gita, the self is viewed as eternal and indestructible, unlike the existentialist view of the self as being defined through lived experience (Bhagavad Gita, 2.20). Existentialism serves as a reflection of human's mood in a turbulent era, offering valuable insights into individual existence and the human condition, while also posing significant questions about freedom, choice, and responsibility (Dung, V. V., 2020).

The Self-realization in Bhagavad Gita, emphasising its core theme of awakening and understanding one's true self (Atman). It discusses the importance of meditation, self-awareness, and the eradication of ego for achieving self-actualization. The text compares these concepts with western psychological theories, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Carl Rogers' self-actualization, as well as eastern Philosophies like Mindfulness and Taoism. The comprehensive approach of Bhagavad Gita offers valuable insights into personal development and its educational implications (Ramani, P., 2024).

Whipple and Tucker (Vieth, 2013) identify what they call the "Four Givens" of existentialism: freedom (or responsibility), meaningless (or absurdity), isolation, and death. These concepts are deeply interconnected, as the understanding of one often leads to the recognition of another. Many existential thinkers argue that despite our instinctive desire to escape the pain and anxiety associated with these existential tenets, true authenticity can only be achieved by confronting them head-on.

The Bhagavad Gita offers profound wisdom as Sri Krishna imparts his teachings to Arjuna. One of the central themes Krishna addresses is the eternal nature of the soul and the inescapable reality of death. In this context, Krishna encourage Arjuna, who is facing a moral dilemma as a warrior, to embrace his duty and find purpose in life rather than succumbing to doubt and fear. By emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one's responsibilities, Krishna instills in Arjuna a sense of meaning and purpose that transcends the uncertainties of mortal existence. This could be quoted in the following verses:-

na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin  
nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ  
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato 'yaṁ purāṇo  
na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre (Chapter 2, verse 20)

The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed. (Mukundananda, 2014)

karmaṇy-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana  
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stvakarmaṇi (Chapter 2, verse 47)

You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction. (Mukundananda, 2014)

śhreyān swa-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt  
swa-dharme nidhanaṁ śhreyaḥ para-dharmo bhayāvahaḥ (Chapter 3, verse 35)

It is far better to perform one's natural prescribed duty, though tinged with faults, than to perform another's prescribed duty, though perfectly. In fact, it is preferable to die in the discharge of one's duty, than to follow the path of another, which is fraught with danger. (Mukundananda, 2014)

evaṁ pravartitaṁ chakraṁ nānuvartayatiha yaḥ  
aghāyur indriyārāmo moghaṁ pārtha sa jīvati (Chapter 3, verse 16)

O Parth, those who do not accept their responsibility in the cycle of sacrifice established by the Vedas are sinful. They live only for the delight of their senses; indeed their lives are in vain. (Mukundananda, 2014)

mātrā-sparśhās tu kaunteya śhītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkha-dāḥ  
āgamāpāyino 'nityās tāns-titikṣhasva bhārata (Chapter 2, verse 14)

O son of Kunti, the contact between the senses and the sense objects gives rise to fleeting perceptions of happiness and distress. These are non-permanent, and come and go like the winter and summer seasons. O descendent of Bharat, one must learn to tolerate them without being disturbed. (Mukundananda, 2014)

na hi jñānena sadṛīṣhaṁ pavitramiha vidyate  
tatsvayaṁ yogasansiddhaḥ kālenātmani vindati (Chapter 4, verse 38)

In this world, there is nothing as purifying as divine knowledge. One who has attained purity of mind through prolonged practice of Yoga, receives such knowledge within the heart, in due course of time. (Mukundananda, 2014)

aham ātmā guḍākeśha sarva-bhūtāśhaya-sthitaḥ  
aham ādiśh cha madhyaṁ cha bhūtānām anta eva cha (Chapter 10, verse 20)

O Arjun, I am seated in the heart of all living entities. I am the beginning, middle, and end of all beings. (Mukundananda, 2014)

jātasya hi dhruvo mṛityur dhruvaṁ janma mṛitasya cha  
tasmād aparihārye 'rthe na tvaṁ śhochitum arhasi (Chapter 2, verse 27)

O Arjuna, Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable. (Mukundananda, 2014)

Swa- dharmam api chāvekṣhya na vikampitum arhasi  
dharmyāddhi yuddhāch chhreyo 'nyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate (Chapter 2, verse 31)

Besides, considering your duty as a warrior, you should not waver. Indeed, for a warrior, there is no better engagement than fighting for the upholding of righteousness. (Mukundananda, 2014)

yadṛichchhayā chopapannaṁ swarga-dvāram apāvṛitam  
sukhinaḥ kṣatriyāḥ pārtha labhante yuddham iḍṛiśham (Chapter 2, verse 32)

O Parth, happy are the warriors to whom such opportunities to defend righteousness come unsought, opening for them the stairway to the celestial abodes. (Mukundananda, 2014)

uddhared ātmanātmānaṁ nātmānam avasādayet  
ātmaiva hyātmano bandhur ātmaiva ripur ātmanaḥ (Chapter 6, verse 5)

Elevate yourself through the power of your mind, and not degrade yourself, for the mind can be the friend and also the enemy of the self. (Mukundananda, 2014)

dehino 'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanaṁ jarā  
tathā dehāntara-prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati (Chapter 2, verse 13)

Just as the embodied soul continuously passes from childhood to youth to old age, similarly, at the time of death, the soul passes into another body. The wise are not deluded by this. (Mukundananda, 2014)

## DISCUSSION

The Bhagavad Gita, resonates deeply with existential philosophy, offering profound insights into human existence, purpose, and self-realization. This part of the paper discusses the psychological intersection between the Bhagavad Gita and Existentialism, structured around key shlokas that illuminate existential themes such as Freedom, Meaninglessness, Isolation, and Death. The selected shlokas provide a framework for understanding human existence and its purpose. Lord Krishna, as the first counselor in history, delivers his wisdom with unparalleled clarity and depth, guiding Arjuna through his existential crisis and providing solutions that transcend time and culture.

Verse 2.20 of the Gita has gone a step further with a strong articulation of the nature of self (Atman) - unchanging and eternal-enabling us to take the extreme position of being and nothingness. The Gita, however, transcends these anxieties by asserting the eternal essence of self, suggesting that the fear of death is a false belief. In the same way, verse 2.47 and 3.35, focuses on the importance of work without any kind of expectation for the results. Sartre highlights freedom and responsibility as central themes of human existence. The Bhagavad Gita's act without any expectation of results aligns with Existential thought suggesting that freedom lies in fulfilling one's responsibility without any kind of external validations or outcomes. And choosing one's own path, even if it's not smooth, resonates with the existential idea on individual authenticity over conformity to societal norms and expectations.

Verse 3.16, shows the interconnectedness of existence, reflecting the existentialist recognition of human embeddedness in a larger cosmos. It represents how to ethically and meaningfully participate in the cycle of life. Verse 2.14 acknowledges the transient nature of worldly experience, encouraging composure. Existentialism often grapples with the fleeting nature of life and the challenges of deriving meaning from transient moments. The Bhagavad Gita's suggest the individuals to transcend these dualities and build resilience. Verse 4.38, suggests how knowledge of self, aligning with existentialist themes of self-discovery and transcendence, is not only intellectual but experiential, leading to liberation from ignorance and existential despair, that can be interpreted as freedom.



The Bhagavad Gita's verse 10.20, it is seen how assertion of universal self reflects the existential quest for authenticity and search for an ultimate ground of being. It suggests that self-realization is the path to existential fulfillment. Verse 6.5, suggests how one can elevate themselves by the power of mind, rather than affected by the external world. Encouraging self-mastery and personal responsibility as the foundation of existentialism. The Bhagavad Gita's insistence on self-reliance aligns with embracing one's freedom and taking charge of own actions of existentialism. Verse 2.27, 2031, and 2.,32 reflect the inevitability of death and despite how embracing one's duty is necessity in that situation also. It showcases duty as an opportunity for transcendence, representing the existentialist core theme of finding meaning in one's role and responsibilities, without getting affected by external circumstances. Verse 2.13, reflects the dynamic nature of existence, growth and evolution, aligning with the existential view of life as a process of becoming rather than a fixed state.

## CONCLUSION

The Bhagavad Gita offers an outline for existential philosophy by addressing basic issues like what it is to exist, whether people enjoy free will, what free will implies in man and how man overcomes it. The practical aspects of metaphysical and vice-versa, are developed so that the individual can deal with existential problems, find realness, and developed so that the individual can deal with existential problems, find realness, and have self-actualization. Arjuna's "first counselor", Lord Krishna has a message that guides every man faced with difficulties. As we look at the two fields together, this is the area where we may work to evolve therapeutic processes that are more Indian, and can reach out to more Indian clients. Krishna's teachings convey concepts of meaning, choice, and death, which are relevant to newer perspectives of existential therapy. The Gita also has a strong emphasis on self-awareness, social responsibility, and attaining mental balance that can be applied within a contemporary framework for increasing one's sense of meaning and strength.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to authorship or publication.

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