

The contribution of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and
Madhva on social cohesion

by

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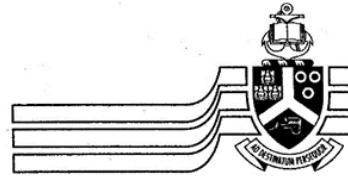
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Yours sincerely

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FOREWORD

My passion for the study of religion led to several points of interest in deciding on my PhD topic. When my journey began, I was uncertain of what religion and theme I would choose. Fortunately, after several discussions, Prof. Sukdaven advised that I investigate the concept of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva.

Over the years Prof. Sukdaven has mentored me in my journey through post-graduate studies in religion. For the exposure to the study of religions, sound guidance, thorough supervision, mentorship, and patience as I embarked on this PhD journey. Over these years Prof. Sukdaven has taken on the role of not only being my supervisor but also that of a guide and mentor that has helped me in several spheres of my life. I am highly grateful to Prof. Sukdaven for supervising me and for being a guide to me in all spheres of my life.

My journey with the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria began in 2015. Over the years the faculty and university at large became my second home. To all the admin, academic, support staff, colleagues, and friends who were always available to assist me and lend a helping hand, I am truly thankful.

The faculty itself has played an immensely important role in my journey from undergraduate studies, to postgraduate, and now to my PhD. It need not be said that this research and my development as an individual and scholar, would not have been possible without the vast investments that the faculty and university at large have made toward me.

My heartfelt thanks extend to my family. My family made great efforts in ensuring that I was fully equipped to work efficiently toward my dream of an academic career in religious studies. My parents, who never lost faith and always supported me in my endeavours, words cannot express the extent of my gratitude.

My mother, Nirvana Veda Shunmugam, left me with a lifetime of memories and valuable lessons that I will always cherish and value. My father, Muthukrishnan Shunmugam, has never failed to do everything in his power to support me and ensure that my university journey was made simpler. My father remains my role model, a beacon of hope, and someone that inspires me to strive for greatness in all that I do. Thank you, mum and dad.

The journey to completing my PhD came with many difficulties. I believe that overcoming those difficulties is a testament of the human spirit to persevere toward achieving our goals. My hope is that this achievement inspires others like me to believe in themselves and strive for greatness, even when it seems impossible. Set goals and work toward them, seek help if needed but don't quit. Hard-work and dedication does go a long way. These were some of the 'pieces' of wisdom' that I received over the years that helped me in all my achievements.

Lastly, I am grateful for the opportunity to study at a prestigious institution like the University of Pretoria and for the ability to successfully complete my PhD.

I dedicate this thesis to my father, Muthukrishnan Shunmugam, and in honour of my late mother, Nirvana Veda Shunmugam, who passed away on the 25th of March 2003.

MATHIAS YUVAN SHUNMUGAM

APRIL 2022

SUMMARY

Nishkama Karma literally translates to ‘desireless action’ and is the Hindu concept of desireless, selfless, and detached action. This concept is best articulated in the Bhagavad Gita 2.47, which speaks of the performance of prescribed duties without attachment to the fruit of those actions. Nishkama Karma is a prominent concept of the Karma yoga spiritual path of Hinduism. As such, Nishkama Karma is of great significance in understanding Hindu concepts of spirituality and salvation.

Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, and Madhvacharya are commonly referred to as the guru-trio- of South India. These three acharyas are well known due to their profound contributions to the Vedantic school of Hindu philosophy. The three acharyas, although living in different periods, engaged the philosophies of one another and made significant contributions to Hindu philosophy and Indian communities at large. Their contributions to Hindu philosophy and the development of Indian societies make them persons of interest when exploring the broad spectrum of Hindu philosophy.

This thesis examines the concept of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of the three acharyas toward assessing the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to advancing social cohesion. This thesis conducts a pre- and post- commentary (by the three acharyas) comparison of Nishkama Karma in the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita (the Prasthanatrayi). Therefore, evaluating the contribution of the three acharyas to the development of Nishkama Karma.

The principles of desireless-ness, selflessness, and the performance of prescribed duties in Nishkama Karma are examined in the commentaries of the three acharyas on the Prasthanatrayi. The comments made by the three acharyas contribute to the understanding of the development of Nishkama Karma as a practice that enhances liberation, promotes community involvement, and advances social cohesion.

This thesis draws on the principle of selflessness in the concept of Nishkama Karma toward developing a link between Nishkama Karma and altruism and empathy. The principle of selflessness in Nishkama Karma is evaluated as an altruistic and empathetic concept that relates to similar concepts found in other religious traditions. This contributes to the existing discussion on the role of Hinduism in interfaith discussions about the role of religion in social cohesion and sustainable community

development. Furthermore, this research recommends the formation of policies that enable the practical application of Nishkama Karma toward enhancing the role of Hinduism in interfaith discussions about the role of religion in social cohesion.

KEYWORDS

Hinduism, Buddhism, Nishkama Karma, Karma Yoga, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Altruism, Empathy, Social Cohesion, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, Vedanta philosophy, Desireless Desire, Selflessness, Detached Action.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BG – Bhagavad Gita

BGB – Bhagavad Gita Bhashya

BS – Brahma Sutras

NK – Nishkama Karma

Rig – Rig Veda

SB – Sri Bhashya

UP – Upanishads

VS – Vedartha Sangraha

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அறம் செய விரும்பு
Desire to do good deeds

- Avvaiyar, Aathichoodi, 300 BCE

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to investigate how the following prominent Hindu philosophers, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva understood Nishkama Karma and how their understandings of the concept can contribute to social cohesion.

Nishkama Karma is understood as a Hindu concept of selflessness and a strong advocator for the practice of desireless action. As such, the researcher was intrigued with this Hindu notion of selflessness and sought to explore the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to society. Through the process of understanding Nishkama Karma's contribution to society, the question of Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion developed.

Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva are regarded as three of the greatest Hindu philosophers. In considering the contribution that Nishkama Karma may make to social cohesion, the researcher is of the understanding that Nishkama Karma within the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva may further establish Nishkama Karma as a socially cohesive concept. As a result, the fundamental question that initiated this research was: did Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva understand Nishkama Karma as a socially cohesive concept?

This chapter briefly introduces some important themes that will be discussed further in this research. Nishkama Karma, Social cohesion, and the rationale behind the three acharyas are explained in this chapter before engaging the research questions.

Important to note, that Nishkama Karma is a concept within Karma Yoga¹ and is an important practice in Hindu philosophy. This thesis explores the concept of Nishkama Karma as expressed by the Hindu (Vedantic) scholars Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, toward understanding the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion.

¹ See chapter 3.3.3, Paths to Moksha

1.1.1 A brief introduction to Hinduism

As this thesis explores the concept of Nishkama Karma within the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, a brief introduction to Hinduism is provided. The introduction to Hinduism is merely to understand the grand religious tradition that Nishkama Karma is a part of.

Hinduism has often been referred to as the oldest religion and the “fountain-head of all religions” (Sivananda 1997:1). Despite its renowned history as one of the most ancient religious traditions, there are numerous mysteries of Hinduism that remain unknown to this day.

According to Sukdaven (2013:1), there is much speculation about the origin and historical development of Hinduism. Peetadhipathi (2009:97) argues that the term Hindu, derived from the Sanskrit “Sindhu²”, is one that was given to the native inhabitants of the Indus River and is an identity marker rather than referring to the followers of Hinduism.

Hinduism became known to the west as the religion of India however to many living in India the term Hindu marked you as a native to the country. This meant that what the west recognised as Hinduism, traditional Hindu religious leaders describe as Sanatana Dharma³.

The term Hinduism is then best understood as a branch term that refers to several different religious beliefs⁴ that are followed by the native people of Hindustan⁵. These religious beliefs are believed to have originated within the Indus valley, including other parts of South Asia, and are based or connected to the Vedas.

The origins of Hinduism, according to Shunmugam (2019:24), are often traced back to the writing of the Vedas, around 1500 BCE. Across the different sects of Hinduism, there is a general understanding that the Vedas are the oldest and most sacred literature from which all Hindu philosophy and teachings are derived.

² Sindhu, being a word that was also used to refer to the Indus River, became a word to describe people who lived along the Indus river (Peetadhipathi 2009:97)

³ Meaning “The eternal law”

⁴ Such as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism

⁵ Hindustan being a term used by the British to refer to India (Sukdaven 2013:3)

As the Vedas are recognised as the most authoritative texts in Hinduism, chapter [4.2.1](#) illustrates verses in the Vedas that allude to Nishkama Karma.

An important theme of Hinduism is that of pluralism. Hinduism is an entire universe of its own with different ways of perceiving the phenomenon popularly known as God. During a discussion on the BBC live show “The Big Questions,”⁶ Lakhani (founder of the Hindu Academy) is famously quoted as saying: “Hinduism is often misunderstood as being polytheistic” instead “Hinduism has always been a very mature, pluralistic tradition. Not many Gods but many ways to relate to the idea of spirituality.” Hinduism can incorporate “monotheistic, non-theistic and non-religious approaches for making spiritual progress”. In doing so Lakhani describes Hinduism as a spiritually democratic tradition that promotes “religious pluralism”, in response a member of the discussion responded that she felt as if she was “a Hindu”.

For Lakhani pluralism in Hinduism means that there is a “principle” that manifests itself in the known world resulting in many ways to understanding one God⁷. In explaining the idea of God Sundaram (1954:2) states:

The Universe as a whole undergoes change. For every change, there must be a cause. Therefore, there must be a cause for the change in the Universe. This cause must be something different from the Universe. That which causes this is called God.

In doing so, Sundaram (1954:2) asserts that God is the initiator of change within the universe and, as a result, is not a product of the universe. Furthermore, God (as the cause of change) has been identified as a supernatural force that has different faces and names by different people. The argument put forth by Sundaram (1954:2) is shared with other Hindu philosophers such as White (2002:4) and Fisher (2017:190), who add that nothing within the universe exists without the knowledge and approval of God (as everything exists to maintain the cosmic balance).

The understanding of God in Hinduism is then a simple one where individuals are encouraged to explore and define for themselves what constitutes ‘god’. This qualifies the Hindu faith as pluralistic as it accepts all religious understandings as one. Due to the plurality of Hinduism, philosophical concepts and religious teachings are designed

⁶ See Campbell (2008).

⁷ See Campbell (2008)

and taught in a way that anyone (irrespective of religious beliefs) can relate to, as Hinduism considers itself a guide to spirituality that is relevant to everyone. Understanding Hinduism as a pluralistic tradition is vital to understanding the contribution that Nishkama Karma can make to social cohesion in Hindu communities and multi-faith and multi-cultural societies. In later chapters,⁸ this is argued by linking Nishkama Karma to altruism and empathy – concepts that are prevalent in all communities.

1.1.2 A brief introduction to Hindu philosophical schools

According to Sukdaven (2013:53), orthodoxy in Hindu philosophy is difficult to define however Hindu thought has been divided into 2 main branches; *astika* and *nastika*. The *astika* school of thought recognises the Vedas as authentic holy texts and the foundation of Hindu spirituality whereas the *nastika* school of thought rejects the Vedas as an authentic spiritual text whilst also denouncing the existence of Atman. Furthermore, in contemporary Hinduism, as well as several Indian languages (such as Hindi, Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, and Kannada) the term “*nastika*” is often translated as “atheist” and refers to people without religious beliefs or values further establishing that *nastika* does not contribute to this research.

Due to the nature of this study and Nishkama Karma being a concept found in the Prasthanatrayi, understanding the different philosophical schools contributes to this research in displaying the broader spectrum of Hindu philosophy that Nishkama Karma finds itself within.

Sukdaven (2013:53) states that there are 6 *astika* (or orthodox) philosophical schools:

- 1) *Nyaya* (school of logic): this school focuses on bringing an end to human suffering through knowledge of the true nature of reality. Gautama Akshapada (200-300 CE) is recognised for producing the *Nyaya-sutras* which led to the founding of this school. Sukdaven (2013:53) explains that *nyaya* means the total sum of information that guides the mind to a conclusion through argument and reasoning. Notably, the *Nyaya* school of philosophy emphasises the need for studying and acquiring knowledge.

⁸ See chapter [9.2.1](#) and [9.2.4](#)

- 2) *Vaisheshika* (school of atomism): the *Vaisheshika* school of thought is often understood in unison with the *Nyaya* school due to similarities that exist between the two. This school focuses on understanding the nature of reality by focusing on six objects of experience; substance, attribute, action, genus, species, and combination, with a seventh object - non-existence - later being added. The *Vaisheshika* school is based on the *Vaisheshikasutra*; a book that was written by the Indian philosopher Kanada (200 - 300 CE) to characterise one thing from another.
- 3) *Samkhya* (school of dualistic discrimination): recognised as one of the oldest Hindu philosophical schools, *Samkhya* philosophy is attributed to Sage Kapil Muni (600 – 700 BCE) and his *Samkhyasutra*. *Samkhya's* philosophy teaches a dualistic reality where two ultimate realities exist independently to one another.
- 4) *Yoga* (school of classical Hindu yoga): Based on the *Yogasutras* written by Sage Patanjali (200 BCE), *Yoga* philosophy maintains that everyone has a transcendent self that they have lost the connection with due to the illusions of the material world. As a result, *Yogic* philosophy is designed to reconnect individuals with their transcendent self, which is believed to guide a soul into re-entering the original state of pure consciousness.
- 5) *Mimamsa* (school of Vedic exegesis): *Mimamsa* philosophy is attributed to the *Purva-Mimamsasutra* of the Sage Jamini (400 BCE) and is based on Vedic ritualistic teachings. There are two major philosophies under *Mimamsa*, namely *Purva-Mimamsa* meaning a primary investigation and *Uttara-Mimamsa* meaning a latter investigation. Both aspects of *Mimamsa* focus on the essence of this philosophy, to investigate and reflect Vedic scripture. *Mimamsa* philosophy focuses on investigating the teachings of the Vedas to understand the duty and laws (or dharma) of the Vedas.
- 6) *Vedanta* (school based on the Upanishads): *Vedanta*, meaning the end of the Vedas, was initially regarded as *Uttara-Mimamsa* as it investigated the Upanishads. The *Vedanta* school has several different traditions that accept the Upanishads, *Brahma Sutras* and *Bhagavad Gita*. *Shankara* (and his *Advaita Vedanta* – non-duality), *Ramanuja* (*Visishta-Advaita* or qualified non-dualism), *Madhva* (*Dvaita* – dualism), *Nimbarka* (*Dvaitadvaita* – dual-non-dualism), and *Vallabha* (*Shuddhadvaita* – ‘only’ non-dualism) are some of the popular

teachers than contributed to Vedanta philosophy. Vedanata's philosophy focuses on studying the philosophical concepts found in the Upanishads that relate to understanding the relationship between the human Atman and the ultimate principal Brahman.

Reflecting on Pruthi (2004:69) and Sukdaven (2013:53-68) the different *astika* schools view the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita differently. They interpret, understand, and teach different concepts that are derived from the abovementioned texts.

As this research explores the position of Nishkama Karma within the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, Nishkama Karma is studied within the Hindu school of Vedanta.

1.2 Introducing Nishkama Karma

On the word 'Nishkama Karma', Datta (2019:18) explains that the term NishKama is derived from two terms in the Sankrsrit language: "*nih*" meaning denial and "*Kama*" meaning desire. Karma means action. Therefore, Nishkama Karma's literal translation is "desireless action".

From the literal translation of "desireless action", Nishkama Karma developed as a concept that was applied to Hindu philosophy. The application of Nishkama Karma to Hindu philosophy led to the development of principles that are strongly associated with it, even though these principles are not the literal translation of the term "Nishkama Karma"⁹.

Singh (1999:25) defines Nishkama Karma as desireless action inspired by the idea of detachment and responsibility.

Nishkama Karma as central teaching to Karma Yoga is understood as the practice of emotionally detaching oneself from the emotional connections to a task. When performing a task, a Nishkama Karma Yogi is to be oblivious to the effects of their task and any reward that completion of the task may hold. Sivananda (2001:5) explains that the practice of Nishkama Karma is necessary for the attainment of Moksha. The problem then is that one would have to desire to attain no desire to attain Moksha.

⁹ See chapter [2.3](#)

This contradictory nature of desire is what this research aims to investigate by answering the following questions; How was Nishkama Karma initially understood? How should 'desireless desire' be understood? And can Nishkama Karma advance social cohesion?

Sharma (2018:50) explains that society is continuously developing however despite great technological advancements social relationships are degenerating. Sharma (2018:51) states:

The degradation of society is the result of unprofessional practices in every field. Contemporary man, who has become a misanthrope, is ready for destruction due to the chaos of [the] modern world.

The statement made by Sharma (2018:51) depicts people as oblivious to the consequences of their actions, Man is driven by the goal of making money to the point that unprofessionalism and a disregard for other people are prioritised over the common good.

To solve this problem, Sharma (2018:51) reflects on the Bhagavad Gita and uses Nishkama Karma to emphasise the importance of selfless action. In this context, selfless action is the solution to unprofessionalism and global selfishness. Sharma (2018:51) proposes Nishkama Karma as a principle that speaks to the importance of selflessness.

Toward defining Nishkama Karma, a literal translation from Sanskrit means 'desireless action' (Pal, 2001:26). However simple the translation may be, Nishkama Karma as desireless action is not a simple concept. In addition to 'desireless action', Nishkama Karma also refers to the performance of "a duty without desire", "action done with no regard to its fruit", "disinterested action", and "selfless action" (Pathak, 2015:129). The practice of Nishkama Karma enables one to detach from the material world and escape the bondage of the samsara cycle allowing for the attainment of moksha. Nishkama Karma promotes the attainment of Moksha by promoting the diligent performance of duties "without attachment and without expecting reward"¹⁰ (Gowda, 2001:86).

¹⁰ That is detached action.

This research defines Nishkama Karma as desireless action (Pal, 2001:26), selfless action (Pathak, 2015:129), and detached action (Gowda, 2001:86).

1.3 Defining social cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the process where all members of society unite in contribution to a more peaceful and harmonious society (Braak, 2015:1). Social cohesion has been recognised as an important concept by governments across the world. According to Burns (2018:2-3), social cohesion is important as it contributes toward:

- 1) Stable democracies – by advancing social participation in policy development and implementation.
- 2) Productivity and growth – in contributing to a stable economy with sustainable growth and opportunities.
- 3) Inclusivity and tolerance – by accommodating people from diverse traditions.
- 4) Conflict management and resolution – promoting unity across political, racial, cultural, and religious divides.
- 5) Better health outcomes – in promoting equal access to quality health care and social support systems.

According to Jenson (2010:3) and Mekoa (2018:108), there is a unique relationship between social cohesion and social development¹¹. Without social cohesion, development stagnates. The European Committee for Social Cohesion (Council of Europe, 2004:10) states:

Economic growth makes it easier to achieve social cohesion... and ... since the Johannesburg Summit, it has been increasingly recognised that sustainable economic development depends on sustainable social development as well as a sustainable environment. For these reasons, economic policy and social policy need to be brought into a much closer relationship with one another...

Social cohesion rests on the development of other sectors (such as economic and environmental). Social cohesion as a concept that aims to reduce wealth disparities and create an equal, peaceful society rests on social development. Markus (2021:72)

¹¹ Within the context of Jenson (2010:3) and Mekoa (2018:108), social development pertains to economic development (employment opportunities and standard of living), cultural development (individualism verses communalism and cultural identity), and political development (politics of identity and racialism).

refers to the paper ‘Social Cohesion in Canada: Possible Indicators’ (2000) that was published by the Canadian Council on Social Development which discusses:

conditions favourable for inclusive social cohesion, including economic conditions, life changes and quality of life, alongside ideational and behavioural aspects of cohesive activity.

The limited access to resources affects the question of human development as an inclusive and equal process or as one that contributes to inequalities and exclusion (Browne and Millington, 2015:1). One of the purposes of social development is to address inequalities. The discussion of equality is described by the Council of Europe (2004:6) as “highly relevant to the social cohesion strategy”.

The relationship between social cohesion and social development is mutually beneficial as the two overlap in their objectives of contributing to an equal and just society.

Due to the important role of social cohesion in development, Jenson (2010:4) claims that after the rise of neoliberalism there was a rise in the importance of social cohesion with governments implementing laws to enforce it.

Jessop (cited in Stigendal, 2017:2) defines neoliberalism as a “political project that is justified on philosophical grounds and seeks to extend competitive market forces, consolidate a market-friendly constitution, and promote individual freedom”.

Coburn (2000:135) argues that neoliberalism “produces both higher income inequality and lowered social cohesion”. Through its effect on the economy, neoliberalism has a substantial role in social development and social cohesion. As a result, the need for social cohesion in a post-neo-liberal world is highly necessary. The Council of Europe on ‘Security through social cohesion’ (2004:38) demonstrates this in stating that the “new economy” is “economically progressive” but “socially regressive”. The solution is then redistribution through reduced working hours and progressive changes to the basic income policies (Council of Europe, 2004:38).

In defining social cohesion, Jenson (2010:5) refers to the Council of Europe (2001:5):

a concept that includes values and principles which aim to ensure that all citizens, without discrimination and on an equal footing, have access to fundamental social and economic rights.

In agreement with Jenson (2010:5), Palmary (2015:64) adds that social cohesion extends beyond social and economic rights. According to Palmary (2015:64), social cohesion also investigates “building” strategies that move away from racial, ethnic, and religious divisions.

Reflecting on the challenges that South African society faces, Njozela (2017:30) defines social cohesion as:

... the glue that binds us together, forging a common sense of identity and sense of belonging. It speaks to a willingness to extend trust to outsiders, to respect fellow citizens and uphold their dignity, and to be moved to action in the face of persistent inequality on behalf of those who are marginalised. Its very essence is a common humanity as embodied in the notion of *Ubuntu*. As such, it is at the heart of nation building, which in turn, is critical in being able to project a positive nation brand.

Njozela (2017:30) approaches social cohesion similarly to Jenson (2010:4) who engages social cohesion as social inclusion. Social inclusion refers to a process of generating equal opportunities for all members of society irrespective of their background. Social inclusion is a multi-dimensional process that aims to enable members of society to reach their full potential in life by creating opportunities that promote full and active participation for all members of society (Yadav, 2018:878).

Social inclusion is then a central objective of social cohesion¹². Social inclusion as social cohesion is challenged by communities with diverse identities (ethnic, religious, and linguistic). To address this Njozela (2017:33) refers to Langer (2016) in stating that:

- 1) Equality and social inclusion are central themes of social cohesion.
- 2) Affective bonds and inter-personal trust between individuals with diverse identities are essential to social cohesion.
- 3) Measures of social cohesion must include elements of trust, identity (adherence to national identity in relation to their group (or ethnic) identity), and awareness of inequality.

¹² See Jenson (2010:4) and Njozela (2017:32-33)

Therefore, social inclusion as central to social cohesion (Jenson, 2010:4) does not overlook group identities (that of ethnicity, language, or religion) nor does it attempt to create one, generic, national identity to be adopted by a community (Njozela, 2017:33). Social inclusion is vital to social cohesion and acknowledges the different identities in attempting to form a common identity that can be shared by individuals within a community.

In the discussion of social inclusion and social cohesion, there is also the concept of social exclusion. Social exclusion refers to a process that excludes individuals or groups from full participation in their society (Rawal, 2008:164). Social cohesion aims to diffuse social exclusion through social inclusion – by ensuring full and active participation by all members of society.

This research defines social cohesion as the following:

Social cohesion is a process that citizens, sociologists, and governmental policies undertake to integrate different (cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic) individuals (or groups) within a society (Larsen, 2014:2). Social cohesion is the ‘glue’ (Larsen, 2014:2) that binds group identities to national identity (Njozela, 2017:33). As such, social cohesion aims to unite people in addressing societal challenges such as crime, racism, xenophobia, state performance, institutional and interpersonal trust, gender-based violence, and community trust¹³.

Furthermore, social cohesion is a multi-dimensional concept that draws on different aspects to promote peaceful relations between citizens and the broader community (Fenger, 2012:43). Four dimensions of social cohesion that are of vital importance are (1) economic, (2) cultural, (3) social, and (4) political (Fenger, 2014:43). The four dimensions are discussed in the following section.

1.3.1 Economic dimension

In any community, the disparity between the rich and the poor is visible. From grocery stores to recreational facilities and even schools, the rich and poor communities can

¹³ See the ‘PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT PRO-POOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA’ (Policy Brief 4 of December 2011) issued by the Presidency of South Africa in partnership with the European Union - <https://repository.hsrc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/20.500.11910/3391/7290.pdf?sequence=1>

be easily identified. Economic cohesion refers to ‘bridging the gap’ between the rich and poor to counter the ‘rich get richer and poor get poorer.’

According to Ritzen (2000:4), applying and measuring the success of socially cohesive policies within a community or a nation requires an in-depth investigation into “pro-poor economic growth strategies”. Ensuring strategies that ensure economic growth in poor communities is a pro-social cohesion measure to ensure that division along economic status is prevented.

Nunez (2004:2) notes that the product of the disparity between rich and poor is classism. Classism refers to the discrimination of people based on their social class. The social class that one is a part of is often based on their job and the income they make. The five social classes based on wealth are upper class, upper-middle-class, lower middle class, working-class, and lower class.

According to Nunez (2004:3) endorsement of the class, system occurs when employers prefer employees from a particular class. Endorsement of the class system extends beyond that of employer and employee, people are more likely to befriend or support people from a middle or upper class than they are to someone from a lower class.

Failure to address the class system prevents poorer people from escaping poverty, credible education, and good healthcare. As a result, one of the issues that social cohesion aims to engage is that of economic inequality.

1.3.2 Cultural dimension

Helly (2002:23) claims that in addition to society being divided based on class, cultural identities are another divisive tool. Helly (2002:23) asserts that, beyond the divisions caused by skin colour, simple individual factors are used to divide communities. Individual factors such as one’s hometown, school, university even football team have been known to fuel egocentrism and incite violence or hostile emotions toward those considered as the “other”.

From social activities to employment opportunities, Helly (2002:24) claims, that people have been known to favour members of their cultural community rather than someone who is not. Fenger (2012:43) agrees with Helly (2002:24) by adding that it is attached to a physical location and identity that leads to division amongst cultural groups.

Culture as a social construct develops around shared understandings and interpretations, for this reason, religion is a contributing factor to the development of a culture. Cultural communities that base themselves on a particular religion construct an identity based on a shared space of worship and a similar understanding of the divine. The different cultures fostered around different understandings of religion have led to numerous conflicts between different religious groups and even members of the same religious groups that have different cultural identities.

While culture is an integral part of forming an identity and unifying communities, it often is used to cause division in a community where more than one ethnic, religious, or linguistic group may exist. As a result, bridging the gap between different cultural groups is an objective of social cohesion.

1.3.3 Social dimension

The social dimension of social cohesion, according to Fenger (2012:43), refers to a sense of “social order and social control”. The social dimension of social cohesion refers to the level of efficiency in completing tasks within a micro-community. Members within a small community, within close distance to one another, can identify social, political, and economic challenges faced within their community at a faster rate than higher levels of government (municipality, district, and provincial governments). The ability to identify immediate threats within the community and adapt to address the matter accordingly is the definition of the social dimension of social cohesion.

The social dimension simply refers to the ability of a community to look beyond its differences by looking toward skill sets, qualifications, and other similarities to address a social dilemma. As such, the social dilemma focuses on small scale community engagements to assess the different factors that either cause unity or division.

1.3.4 Political dimension

The political dimension refers to social engagements and mobilisation centred around political activity. Novy (2012:10) explains that the political aspect of social cohesion refers to; (1) disputes and divisions caused due to political ideologies and (2) governmental and political policies on social cohesion. The focus of the political dimension is to explore the contribution that political structures make to social cohesion. Under this dimension, the following questions are asked: how do political

parties mobilise people? How do political structures promote cohesion amongst its members and members of other political schools? Are there teachings on social cohesion that are made available by political structures to its members?

Politics and governance play a pivotal role in the structure and maintenance of order within a community. History stands as a witness to the conflict and unity that comes with political structures. More importantly, political parties govern the policies that pertain to social cohesion – understanding the stance of a political party on social cohesion is, therefore, necessary as it determines the extent to which a government is willing to go to either promote or obstruct cohesion within a community.

The economic, cultural, social, and political dimensions of social cohesion cover the different objectives that social cohesion aims to address. Noy (2012:10) agrees with Fenger (2012:43) that while the four dimensions present a structured approach to understanding the tenants of social cohesion, social cohesion is multi-disciplinary and extends beyond the four dimensions to address contextual issues.

According to Schiefer (2016:5), social cohesion is important as it unites communities within a community¹⁴ or a nation toward achieving a specific goal. Schiefer (2016:5-6) argues that with the promotion of social cohesion, societal ailments such as violence and crime will diminish. Additionally, over time the gap between rich and poor will begin to decrease along with more attention being paid to the importance of quality health care systems and educational structures within a community.

Social cohesion is more than a philosophical doctrine¹⁵, the ability to unite communities toward a common goal can be both a positive and negative weapon. In a positive sense, social cohesion has the potential to alleviate poverty, address gender-based violence and reduce crime rates. In a negative sense, social cohesion unites a community against what is seen as the “other”. A typical example of this is xenophobia.

¹⁴ Social cohesion as bringing together different cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic communities that are within the same geographical location.

¹⁵ Social cohesion extends beyond diplomatic discussions to general members of the public, in terms of application. Further to defining and discussing the extent and parameters of social cohesion, it extends to the practicality of social life by encouraging members of society to promote a more accepting and accommodating society. As such, social cohesion is not just a concept that is discussed but also one that governments, institutions and organisations attempt to practically implement.

Most scholars and social reform/welfare institutions consider social cohesion as a positive tool. When social cohesion is discussed in public forums it is usually to unite communities that are diverse in their cultural, ethnic, and religious population.

1.3.5 The need for social cohesion

According to a survey published in 2013¹⁶, by the office of the special representative of the secretary-general on violence against children: “Every year, between 500 million and 1.5 billion children worldwide endure some form of violence.”

Violence against women and children has been an ongoing pandemic in global communities for the past 100 years. In addition to the plight of women and children, the recent events of 2020 call for social cohesion now more than ever. After a few months into the rise of Covid-19, May 2020 saw the death of George Floyd – a name that reverberated through the world as members from around the world united behind the call of “Black Lives Matter”. August 2020 saw the start of the farm protests in India, with over 18 million protesters, news and other related platforms labelled it as the world’s largest protest. Within the South African context, protests arose over police brutality after the death of Nathaniel Julius, a 16-year-old from Eldorado Park in Johannesburg in August 2020. Additionally, the South African population was conflicted as protests in October 2020, marched under the banner of “Boer lives matter” – aiming to create awareness of what was labelled as the targeted killings of Afrikaner farmers.

Movements such as the Black Lives Matter (2013) and Fees Must Fall (2015), protests on the racial, social, political, and economic inequalities have remained a constant. The lessons gathered from the numerous protests that have been witnessed within the past decade shed light on common disparities visible in international communities. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, and class still serves as divisive tools – causing tension and often violent conflict amongst groups that identify as significantly different from one another¹⁷.

¹⁶ By the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2013:1) on ‘Toward a world free from violence: Global survey on violence against children’.

¹⁷ See chapter [9.2](#) on how social cohesion addresses these challenges, considering the findings of this research.

Furthermore, the need for social cohesion in a time when global communities suffer from the economic blows of covid-19 is necessary, now more than ever, to address the severe poverty, and economic and mental distress caused.

Reflecting on this section, social cohesion aims to cultivate peaceful relations between individuals with the hope that, through the individuals, different societies transform into becoming more accommodating to one another – ultimately contributing to a diverse, peaceful community.

Social cohesion undoubtedly plays an important role in ensuring successful growth and development in any given community. Investigating the contribution that the three acharyas made to the principles of NK not only contributes to studies on the philosophies of the three acharyas but also to social cohesion. This further contributes to academic studies in Hinduism and its position within the global community.

1.4 Importance of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva in Hindu philosophy

Hindu philosophy and religion are a vast pool of knowledge stretching thousands of years with hundreds of different texts and teachings explaining phenomenal understandings and concepts on the material and immaterial reality. Many different Hindu sages and gurus have sought to explain the Hindu religion in a way that the world could relate to and understand resulting in a pool of commentaries on the Vedas and its subsidiary texts.

The Vedas in their entirety are comprised mainly of hymns to Vedic deities such as Indra, Rudra, Surya, Agni, and Varuna. Apart from the hymns many Hindu sages and gurus have interpreted and written on philosophical concepts embedded in the Vedas, the result of their Vedic studies resulted in the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and countless other texts.

Prasad (2011:v) acknowledges that all Hindu sages, gurus and teachers serve an important role in explaining Hindu philosophy however he names “Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva” as the “Guru-trio of South India”. Prasad (2011:v) further states:

By virtue of commenting on the three basic texts of Vedanta [Upanishads, Brahman Sutras and Bhagavad Gita], these great masters themselves originated three major schools within Vedanta-fold.

Prasad (2011:v) shares this view of the “Guru-trio” with Mahadevan (1965:88/107) who describes Shankara as “the repository of all wisdom that is contained in the sacred texts, and in the incarnation of grace” and Ramanuja as a Vaishnavite saint who is responsible for “consolidating and systematically expounding the philosophy of southern Vaishnavism” through his philosophy of qualified non-duality. On Madhva Prasad (2011:v) agrees with Sharma (1986:17) who describes Madhva’s philosophical works as exceptionally marvellous in exploring human nature, destiny and the search for peace, prosperity, and bliss.

Additionally, Viswanathan (2018) describes Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva as the “three great Hindu saints” who were “primarily responsible for propagating” their respective Vedantic schools. Although there are other Vedantic teachers, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva are regarded as the most prominent Vedantic scholars.

Hebbar (2002) states:

Sri Shankaracharya from Kerala, Sri Ramanujacharya from Tamil lands, and Sri Madhvacharya from Karnataka, expounded the advaita, vishishtadvaita and dvaita philosophies respectively. In a span of five hundred years three great Acharyas from the South arose to change the direction of Hindu religion...

Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva are arguably among the most influential Hindu philosophers due to their contribution to Vedanta philosophy by way of their commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita¹⁸.

Due to Nishkama Karma weaving itself into the framework of the Prasthanatrayi, the extensive study and commentaries provided by the “Guru-trio of South India” contribute largely to understanding the Hindu concept of selfless action. This section serves as an introduction to the three acharyas before engaging each of their contributions to Nishkama Karma in later chapters.

¹⁸ The Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita are also known as the Prasthanatrayi of Vedanta. Due to explanatory nature of Vedanta contained within the texts they are authoritative Hindu texts.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides a brief introduction to this thesis. The objective is to set the scene for the methodology and findings of the research in later chapters. Notably, Pratap (2009:45) defines Nishkama karma as the centre of Karma yoga that teaches practitioners to perform desireless actions. The goal is therefore to aid practitioners to achieve the stage where they have no desire. Reaching this stage is important as it will allow them to attain moksha. The attainment of moksha, according to Karma yoga, is when the practitioner reaches a point where desire no longer exists.

How should one be under 'a point where desire no longer exists'? Is that even possible? What are the implications of such a concept? What exactly is this concept and how does it contribute to social cohesion? These are some of the questions that are engaged in this research by engaging the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to study the concept of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva to assess Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion. This chapter explicitly states the objectives of this research and the research methods used to achieve said objectives. In addition to the research methods applied to this thesis, this chapter introduces the principles of Nishkama Karma, which are important when engaging the commentaries of the three acharyas. This is due to the nature of Nishkama Karma's conceptualisation and references in sacred Hindu literature. Understanding the principles of Nishkama Karma are vital to understanding the research methods and their application to this thesis.

This chapter provides a problem statement and explains the principles of Nishkama Karma. The principles of Nishkama Karma are vital to the application of the research methodology when engaging the commentaries of the three acharyas. This chapter also provides a brief literature review which illustrates the research gap and subsequent hypothesis. Thereafter, the methodology applied to this research is explained (where phenomenological and deductive theory are qualified as the qualitative research methods applied to this research). This chapter provides an exposition and value of the study prior to the conclusion.

2.2 Problem statement

Krishnan (2009:6) explains that in Hinduism there isn't a constant, as Hinduism itself is not constant. Everyone is encouraged to form their understanding of God and the paths to Moksha. The problem then is, to what extent is Nishkama Karma, as a Hindu concept, constant? The three acharyas with their different philosophies understand the paths to moksha differently. Does their understanding of Nishkama Karma vary based on their philosophies? How then does one go about understanding and practising the concept of Nishkama Karma?

Is Nishkama Karma understood as simply performing one's duty without concern for the reward or is it the path where one needs to forsake all desires to attain moksha?

Pratap (2009:45) explains that whilst Bhakti yoga has the largest number of followers, there is a significantly large number of Hindus that choose to follow Karma yoga. Nishkama Karma is a fundamental principle that guides the practitioners of Karma yoga to moksha. Therefore, understanding the concept of Nishkama Karma contributes to comprehending how the practitioners of Karma Yoga envision the attainment of moksha.

To understand and apply Nishkama Karma contextually, it is important to investigate (1) the historical meaning of the concept, (2) when it was first conceptualised, and (3) how it developed. The result of this investigation could determine how the concept of Nishkama Karma can contribute to social cohesion and how it aids in the understanding of the contribution that Hinduism makes to ethical behaviour.

2.3 Principles of Nishkama Karma

The term 'Nishkama Karma' is rarely explicitly mentioned in the sacred texts (Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita). As a result, the principles that pertain to Nishkama Karma are engaged in Hindu texts to form an understanding of this concept.

For example, Vijayaraghavan (2018) says:

The Bhagwad Gita tells us, "You have right only to action, never to the fruits." Nishkama karma or karma yoga, working without expecting results, is mentioned in several verses of the Gita.

The verse mentioned by Vijayaraghavan (2018) is Gita 2.47. Prabhupada (1989:134) provides a transliteration and translation of Gita 2.47¹⁹:

Karmany evadhikaras te

Ma phalesu kadacana

Ma karma-phala-hetur bhur

Ma te sango 'stv akarmani

Translation: You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty.

¹⁹ Also see Mukundananda (2014) for a similar transliteration and translation of Gita 2.47

In the transliteration and translation, there is no mention of the term ‘Nishkama Karma’ and yet, this verse is often associated with Nishkama Karma. On Gita 2.47, Joglekar (2010:vi) adapts Easwaran (2007:30):

Mahatma Gandhi encapsulates the central message of Gita in one phrase: *nishkama karma*, selfless action, work free from selfish desires. Desire is the fuel of life; without desire nothing can be achieved. *Kama*, in this context, is selfish desire, the compulsive craving for personal satisfaction at any cost. *Nishkama* is selfless desire. *Karma* means action. Gita counsels – work hard in the world without any selfish attachment and with evenness of mind.

Similarly, Kumar (2020) writes on “Verses In Gita Mentioning Nishkama Karma” and refers to Gita 2.47-48 and 5.11. Both of which, neither the transliteration nor the translation, make mention of the term ‘Nishkama Karma’.

There is no error in this. Instead, when studying or examining Nishkama Karma, one evaluates the principles that pertain to the concept of Nishkama Karma as desireless desire or as selfless desire²⁰.

As a result, this research engages the principles of Nishkama Karma as found in Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva’s commentary on the Prashthanatrayi.

As Nishkama Karma is not an independent concept, but one that rests on principles that constitute its definition, the principles of Nishkama Karma that will be examined in this research are:

- 1) Desire – that is righteous and unrighteous desire, including the state of being without desire (selfish or materialistic desire) (Pal, 2001:216).
- 2) The performance of actions and the performance of no action (complete renunciation) (Pal, 2001:216).
- 3) The performance of one’s duty without the concern for rewards (Gowda, 2001:86).
- 4) Selflessness/sacrificial actions (Chopra, 2018:143).
- 5) Detachment (Pathak, 2015:135).

The abovementioned constitute the central principles of Nishkama Karma. These principles are the point of departure for this research when engaging the works of the

²⁰ See Joglekar (2010:vi) and Easwaran (2007:30)

three acharyas. The comments of the acharya that relate to these principles aid in understanding Nishkama Karma in their philosophies. This further contributes to assessing the possibility of Nishkama Karma advancing social cohesion.

2.4 Literature review

Nishkama Karma is a prominent theme in Hindu teachings. In Hinduism the concept of Nishkama Karma is referred to in the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita.

In understanding the concept of Nishkama Karma, the commentaries on the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva become of the utmost importance. Reflecting on Prasad (2011:13-14) the three acharyas make the most academic contribution to understanding Indian philosophy in their commentaries.

Behura (2017:50) and Chopra (2018:142) suggest that the practice of Nishkama Karma improves the workplace environment through the principles of detachment and selflessness. Sivananda (2001:5) represents the spiritual aspect of understanding Nishkama Karma. According to Sivananda (2001:5), Nishkama Karma and Karma yoga are the key to moksha. Performing actions to glorify God and not oneself is the aim of Nishkama Karma. It is the glorification of God through Nishkama Karma that enables one to attain moksha.

As a result, Nishkama Karma contributes to professionalism in the workplace (Behura, 2017:50) (Chopra, 2018:142). Nishkama Karma is also a practice that aids in the attainment of moksha (Sivananda, 2001:5). Nishkama Karma can contribute to professionalism and the attainment of moksha due to its emphasis on the performance of one's duty without any regard for the outcome/rewards of performed actions (Christopher, 2013:160).

As illustrated in the previous paragraph, Sivananda (2001:5), Christopher (2013:160), Behura (2017:50), and Chopra (2018:142) provide different understandings of Nishkama Karma. Whilst they provide different interpretations, they agree that Nishkama Karma can be understood as selfless action. The above-mentioned sources will serve as a guide through the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva to provide a clear and concise definition of Nishkama Karma.

In investigating the contribution of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva to an understanding of Nishkama Karma their commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita will form a large part of the research.

Apart from the works of the three acharyas, sources such as Sharma (1986:473-498), Leggett (2006) Prasad (2011:13-14), Sukdaven (2013:71-77) and Sundaram (2018:1-14) will aid especially to the understanding of the life and work of Shankar, Ramanuja and/or Madhva. These sources will be consulted to assist in providing background and coherence in understanding the commentaries and philosophies of the three acharyas.

The concluding chapters of this research²¹ reflect on whether the philosophy of Nishkama Karma according to Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva may advance social cohesion. Social cohesion refers to the extent of social integration where inclusivity is adopted when a particular community encounters another community with alternate social, ethical, moral and/or religious beliefs (Schmitt, 2000:1). Social cohesion is a vast topic that is often best understood within a particular context. Braak (2015:1) explains that the discussion of social cohesion is one where all members of society (politicians, academics, religious leaders, etc.) need to come together to discuss the way forward for harmonious and peaceful living.

Whilst social cohesion is a multi-disciplinary and intercultural phenomenon understood within a particular context, there are certain tenets of social cohesion present in any given community (Braak, 2015:1). Shared values, spaces, feeling of a common identity and trust amongst community members are some of the aspects of social cohesion that are consistent irrespective of the context (Schmitt, 2000:5).

Although Schmitt (2000:5) and Braak (2015:1) agree on the definition of social cohesion, they differ when reflecting on context. Schmitt (2000:5) looks at aspects of social cohesion that are applicable on a global scale, irrespective of religion, culture, tradition, language, and history whereas Braak (2015:1-197) looks at how social cohesion functions within specific religiously and culturally diverse communities.

The purpose of this research is not to study social cohesion by focusing on a particular context, as Braak (2015:1) would argue. Instead, this research studies how the

²¹ See chapter [8](#) and [9](#)

understanding of Nishkama Karma, as described by the three acharyas, can contribute to the main tenets of social cohesion as explained by Schmitt (2000:5).

The approach by Schmitt (2000:5) explains that different factors come into play when discussing social cohesion amongst different communities (such as religious, cultural, political, economic, and social differences). Despite different standards for social cohesion, concepts such as peace, tolerance, and selflessness promote social cohesion on a global scale.

Braak (2015:1) and Schmitt (2000:5) differ in their approach to social cohesion as Braak (2015:1) looks at one community (with its contextual issues that require cohesion) and how socially cohesive actions can promote peace within that community. Whereas Schmitt (2000:5) explores concepts that promote peace irrespective of contextual differences.

While Nishkama Karma can be seen as the Hindu concept of selflessness, the concept of selflessness exists in every community (irrespective of geographical location and religious and cultural differences). Selflessness as a globally cohesive concept allows this research to align with Schmitt (2000:5) as the aim is to investigate how Nishkama Karma can contribute to social cohesion in any given context.

Furthermore, assessing the contribution of Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion on a global scale requires the application of Nishkama Karma in an areligious manner. Nishkama Karma's application in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, might contribute to social cohesion in Hindu communities that know of these philosophers. However, what then is the contribution of Nishkama Karma to non-Hindu communities?

Chapter [1.2](#) provides a literal translation of the term "Nishkama Karma", which is desireless action in Sanskrit. Desireless action is then understood as selfless action Pathak (2015:129). To apply the concept of Nishkama Karma, through its literal translation of 'desireless action', an areligious term is required. This areligious term is to encapsulate the essence of Nishkama Karma's 'desireless action' without the religious connotations that were applied to it by Hindu religious leaders. This enables Nishkama Karma to contribute to social cohesion in communities that are not Hindu.

The term that best encapsulates Nishkama Karma's 'desireless action' is Altruism. Mathew, Deepa, Karthich, and Sakshi (2016:45) define altruism as:

... selfless behavior with the concern of others wellbeing. It is a very essential behaviour with regard to the existence and survival of various species in the world including humans.

Nishkama Karma, as desireless/selfless actions (Pathak,2015:129) is reflected in Altruism, an areligious term that describes selfless behaviour (Matthew, Deepa, Karthich, and Sakshi, 2016:45).

Altruism, like selflessness, is embedded in every religion (Roser, 2022:10) and, as an areligious term, provides neutral ground for every religion (and non-religious groups) to discuss their contribution to society. On Religion and altruism, Bennett (2017:11) states:

... the positive role of religion in helping strangers is consistent with the theory that religion may truly motivate prosocial behaviour through the promotion of altruistic norms.

Additionally, Bierhoff and Rohmann (2004:351) suggest an empathy-altruism model of prosocial behaviour that contributes to overall communal well-being. The suggestion placed by Bierhoff and Rohmann (2004:351) is that altruistic behaviour is conducted from a place of empathy – understanding the pain of another and wishing to end it. Through empathy, individuals perform selfless, altruistic acts, to contribute to communal well-being (Bierhoff and Rohmann, 2004:351).

Whilst a wide variety of sources will be consulted during the research, the abovementioned sources represent the mainstream thought on the main and subsidiary questions that this research aims to investigate. Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that research into Nishkama Karma has mostly been conducted by Hindu religious leaders to enlighten their followers on selfless action resulting in a limited pool of academic works attributed to it.

2.4.1 Translations

This research is conducted in English. Due to the Prasthanatrayi being written in Sanskrit, English translations for the three acharyas commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi are consulted. This research also makes use of transliterations where

necessary. Although the translations may be regarded as ‘old’ sources, members of the Hindu community regard them as authentic translations resulting in few recent translations by credible sources. These translations are consulted due to their relevance in studying Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva’s understanding of Nishkama Karma – as found in their commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi. A comprehensive reference list of the translations consulted is attached to the bibliography.

2.5 Research Gap

The research gap of this thesis refers to the investigation of Nishkama Karma, in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, in contributing to social cohesion. Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, as prominent Hindu philosophers have extensively been researched. Social cohesion, as an important concept for nation-building, has also been researched extensively by academic and governmental institutions.

Reflecting on the literature review, the concept of Nishkama Karma, in the philosophies of the three acharyas, and its relation to social cohesion is a gap that has not been researched before. This was identified when studying the existing literature on the three acharyas concerning social cohesion and Nishkama Karma. The principle of selflessness in Nishkama Karma, although well-articulated, was not identified as an altruistic principle in the philosophies of the three acharyas that may contribute to social cohesion. Nishkama Karma is an important concept that contributes to the Hindu belief in salvation. Through its principle of selflessness, Nishkama Karma also contributes to altruistic, pro-social behaviour. As a result, investigating Nishkama Karma, in the philosophies of the three acharyas contributes to research on Hindu philosophy and its contribution to social cohesion. This research is also relevant to interfaith platforms on social cohesion as the research gap outlines the connection between Nishkama Karma, three prominent Hindu philosophers, and social cohesion.

As a result, this research contributes to the research gap in understanding Nishkama Karma, the philosophies of the three acharyas, and its contribution to social cohesion.

2.6 Hypothesis

According to Kilby (2014:1), violence in society continues to grow each day with people across the globe being subject to crime, hate speech, murder, and rape. To address

the problem identified by Kilby (2014:1), Sharma (2018:51) proposes that professionalism in the workplace can address the issue of violence in society. To enhance professionalism Sharma (2018:51) refers to selfless action as found in Nishkama Karma in the Bhagavad Gita.

The argument set out by Sharma (2018:51) identifies Nishkama Karma as the solution to violence and therefore an advocator for social cohesion. This research seeks to explore the phenomenon of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva to understand the desireless desire and how desireless desire can contribute to social cohesion.

Ultimately this research aims to uncover the original understanding of Nishkama Karma and track how it was understood and used by different communities over time to promote a more cohesive society. In doing so this research aims to provide a new approach to understanding and practising Nishkama Karma, to promote a more peaceful and cohesive society. The hypothesis suggests that an understanding of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva advances social cohesion.

2.7 Research questions

This research aims to deduce Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva's understanding of Nishkama Karma and how their understanding of Nishkama Karma contributes to social cohesion. To ensure that the focus of this research maintains relevance to the topic, the major problem that this research aims to investigate is: How can Nishkama Karma advance social cohesion? The subsidiary questions will be:

- I. What is Nishkama Karma?
- II. How did Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva understand Nishkama Karma?
- III. Has the understanding of Nishkama Karma undergone a metamorphosis over time?
- IV. How does Nishkama Karma relate to altruism and empathy in enhancing and contributing to social cohesion in a global community?

2.8 Methodology

Research refers to the process of generating new information by conducting scientific research. Research Methodology then refers to the process and necessary steps that are undertaken to acquire the desired information (Kumar, 2011:23). Research Methodology is an important aspect of all research conducted as it aids the researcher in understanding the necessary steps to be taken to attain credible information. Research methodology also allows readers of the information to assess how valuable the information is by reviewing the steps undertaken to attain the information (Kumar, 2011:23).

2.8.1 Quantitative and Qualitative research method

According to Herubel (2008:144), there are two main types of research; qualitative and quantitative research. Quantitative research refers to the collection and study of data that aids in the process of testing a hypothesis (Herubel, 2008:144). Quantitative research focuses largely on statistical data and data collection methods to form an argument and contribute to research.

Qualitative research on the other hand refers to working with theoretical information to contribute to research (Herubel, 2008:144). Whilst quantitative research looks at numerical data, qualitative research refers to the usage of existing theoretical work to construct an argument.

This research aims to investigate the understanding of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva and how their understandings can advance social cohesion. The investigation is researched according to the standards of qualitative research. Books, articles, journal entries, book sections and commentaries will be the point of reference that will guide the investigation. No statistical or numerical data in the form of graphs, surveys or questionnaires will be used throughout this investigation.

2.8.2 Phenomenological approach

As this research depends on qualitative research and is theoretically based, phenomenological research is applied to understand Nishkama Karma (in the philosophies of the three acharyas) and its contribution to social cohesion.

Phenomenological research refers to the objective of attaining detailed information on the qualities of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013:77). In this research, the phenomenon that will be investigated is Nishkama Karma. The objective is to understand how Nishkama Karma was understood and described in the philosophical works of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva.

The phenomenological method refers to chapter [2.3](#), the principles of Nishkama Karma. The principles of Nishkama Karma constitute detailed information on the different themes that are attributed to Nishkama Karma. The principles of Nishkama Karma are then applied to the commentaries of the three acharyas to develop new data that explores the understanding of the three acharyas on the principles of Nishkama Karma. This is achieved by gleaning Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva's comments on detachment, desireless-ness, and selflessness toward understanding their conceptualisation of Nishkama Karma.

Chapters [2.3](#), [3.4](#), and [4.6](#) provide a detailed account of the underlying principles related to Nishkama Karma. Through the collection of information on Nishkama Karma in chapters [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#) – chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) are equipped with further evaluation of the phenomenon of Nishkama Karma within the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva.

2.8.3 Deductive theoretical approach

In addition to the phenomenological theoretical approach, this research applies deductive theory as a qualitative research method. Deductive research is the 'testing' of a theory (Streefkerk, 2019). As a result, deductive research begins with a theory and hypothesis and aims to provide insight into a particular concept by rigorously testing the hypothesis (Malhotra, 2017:173).

According to Pearse (2019:264):

Deductive qualitative research takes as its departure point, the theoretical propositions that are derived from a review of the literature and applies these to the collection and analysis of data.

In applying deductive qualitative research, the point of departure for this research is the theoretical proposition of Nishkama Karma as desireless action (Pal, 2001:26), in the philosophies of the three acharyas, as a concept that advances social cohesion.

The propositions derived pertain to Nishkama Karma as desireless, selfless, and detached action. This is deduced from the review of the commentaries (on the Prasthanatrayi) of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva²². The three acharyas focused on expanding their philosophies in their commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi. As a result, there is limited academic research on the understanding of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of the three acharyas that offer critical discourse on the nature and understanding of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of the three acharyas. Due to the limited research on Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of the three acharyas, this research applies deductive theory to extract the three acharyas understanding of Nishkama Karma. The deductions of Nishkama Karma in the commentaries of the three acharyas are then applied, in chapter 9, to social cohesion. This research adopts the definition on deductive qualitative research, as proposed by Pearse (2019:264), and applies it to understand the three acharyas conceptualisation of Nishkama Karma and social cohesion.

Furthermore, Pearse's (2019:264) statement on deductive qualitative research outlines three major stages for deductive qualitative research:

- Stage 1: The theoretical propositions
- Stage 2: A review of literature
- Stage 3: Application to the collection and analysis of data

Applying these stages to this research entails:

- Stage 1: The theoretical proposition – Nishkama Karma, is desireless, selfless, and detached action.
- Stage 2: A review of literature – Reviewing the understanding of the three acharyas on Nishkama Karma. This is achieved by deducing their understanding of Nishkama Karma from the comments that pertain to the principles of Nishkama Karma²³.
- Stage 3: Application to the collection and analysis of data – This research utilises this stage to evaluate the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to

²² In chapters 5, 6, and 7.

²³ See chapter 2.2

social cohesion by applying the understanding of Nishkama Karma as found in the commentaries of the three acharyas.

In the analysis of data in qualitative research, Wong (2008:14) states:

Analysing qualitative data entails reading a large amount of transcripts looking for similarities or differences, and subsequently finding themes and developing categories.

Considering Wong (2008:14), the reading of transcripts refers to this research engaging the commentaries of the three acharyas (chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#)). The similarities or differences pertain to the contribution of the three acharyas to understanding Nishkama Karma. Chapter [4](#) provides an understanding of Nishkama Karma before engaging the commentaries of the three acharyas. Chapter [8.2.4](#) reflects on chapter [4](#) to assess the similarities, differences, and development of Nishkama Karma. This contributes to understanding the contribution that the three acharyas make to Nishkama Karma and how Nishkama Karma fits into their philosophies as a socially cohesive concept.

Elaborating on the deductive qualitative research methods applied to this research – the theory of Nishkama Karma is engaged in chapters [1.2](#), [3.4](#), and [4](#) where Nishkama Karma is defined as desireless, selfless, and detached action. Then, in chapter [2.6](#), the hypothesis suggests that Nishkama Karma, in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, can contribute to social cohesion. The data collection refers to chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) where the commentaries of the three acharyas are examined. In chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#), the principles of Nishkama Karma (chapter [2.3](#)) are applied to the commentaries of the three acharyas to deduce their understanding of Nishkama Karma. Thereafter, chapter [8](#) ties together the three acharya's thoughts on Nishkama Karma. Chapter [9](#) builds upon chapter [8](#) in examining Nishkama Karma, as found in the commentaries of the three acharyas, as a concept that contributes to social cohesion. Chapter [10.2.1](#) revisits the research questions (chapter [2.7](#)) and the hypothesis to evaluate support or disapproval of the hypothesis. Thereafter, the hypothesis is reflected upon in chapter [10.2.1.1](#).

Applying qualitative, phenomenological, and deductive methods this research will investigate how the three acharyas understood Nishkama Karma and how their understandings can contribute to social cohesion. This research will provide an

overview of what Nishkama Karma is, as it is understood and described by contemporary Indian philosophers to further evaluate the metamorphic development of Nishkama Karma.

2.8.4 Research design

Khan (2014:226) outlines a structured table that notes the characteristics of phenomenological and grounded theory research methods – like approaches to qualitative research. This research adapts the table set out by Khan (2014:226) to provide insight into the nature of this research. This research adapts the table so that it outlines the characteristics of this research in its usage of Phenomenological and Deductive theory methods.

Characteristics	Phenomenology	Deductive theory
Focus	Understanding Nishkama Karma.	Nishkama Karma in the commentaries of the three acharyas on the Prasthanatrayi
Type of problem	Can Nishkama Karma (as desireless action) promote a peaceful and harmonious society?	The lack of usage of the term 'Nishkama Karma' replaced with the usage of the principles relating to Nishkama Karma, such as desirelessness, detachment, and selflessness.
Discipline background	Drawing on philosophy, psychology, and education to understand Nishkama Karma.	Drawing on the commentaries of the three acharyas and the conceptualisation of Nishkama Karma as desirelessness, detachment and selflessness.
Unit of analysis	Studying Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva's understanding of Nishkama Karma.	Extrapolate the three acharyas' understanding of Nishkama Karma based on their comments of desirelessness, detachment, and selflessness.
Data collection forms	Use of Books, journals, commentaries, and other	Use of Books, journals, commentaries, and other

	documents (qualitative research).	documents (qualitative research) in addition to the three acharyas commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.
Data analysis strategies	Analysing existing data (that is the comments of the three acharyas that pertain to the principles of Nishkama Karma) to fully conceptualise Nishkama Karma as a socially cohesive concept.	The application of deductive theory in comparing the comments of the three acharyas to the principles of Nishkama Karma. This is to extrapolate their understanding of Nishkama Karma from their commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi by using the principles of Nishkama Karma as the reference guide for understanding Nishkama Karma.
Written report	Reflecting on the understanding of Nishkama Karma by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva – to describe Nishkama Karma’s contribution to social cohesion.	Theorising the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion – by deducing the three acharyas’ understanding of Nishkama Karma from their commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita.

Through the usage of deductive theory in this research, the ‘Data analysis strategies’ referred to in the table above require special attention in this research. As mentioned in chapter [2.3](#), the term ‘Nishkama Karma’ is seldomly, explicitly, mentioned. As a result, the data analysis strategy applied to this research involves the critical comparison between the principles of Nishkama Karma (as mentioned in chapter [2.3](#)) and the comments of the three acharyas in the Prasthanatrayi that relate to Nishkama Karma. Chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#), closely study the comments of the three acharyas in the Prasthanatrayi and relate those comments to the principles of Nishkama Karma in chapter [2.3](#). This enables this research in drawing out the salient features of Nishkama

Karma, as understood by Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, in their commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi.

Considering the characteristics of this research using phenomenological and deductive theory methods, chapters one to four rely on primary and secondary sources to set the scene of Nishkama Karma toward understanding the historical development of Nishkama Karma. For the historical development of Nishkama Karma, the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita are consulted to understand the definition of Nishkama Karma before the commentaries of the three acharyas²⁴.

Chapters five to seven rely on reviewing the commentaries attributed to Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva on the Prasthanatrayi. This is due to the nature of the investigation in seeking to explore and understand how the three acharyas understood and explained Nishkama Karma. Chapters five to seven refer to chapter [2.3](#) in comparing the comments of the three acharyas to the principles of Nishkama Karma. This enables this research in deducing the three acharyas' understanding of Nishkama Karma. Chapters eight to ten review relevant sources and reflect on the previous chapters to provide a concise understanding of Nishkama Karma to exhibit the contribution of Nishkama Karma to social cohesion.

Despite the commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi, by the three acharyas, being an archaic, reference to the three acharyas' work is relevant and necessary to the discussion of this research. Furthermore, recent commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi are scarce as the existing commentaries offered by the three acharyas and other sages are recognised as authoritative. Despite the age of the material, it is necessary to reflect on the material to understand Nishkama Karma in the Prasthanatrayi and the philosophies of the three acharyas. The challenge of finding recent material on the three acharyas and their contribution to Nishkama Karma is one such challenge that this research aims to address.

2.9 Exposition of the study

This thesis will be structured in the following manner:

²⁴ In Hindu traditions, the term "acharya" is used as a means of identifying Hindu philosophical teachers. This term is frequently added to the end of a name, i.e., Shankaracharya

Chapter 1: [Introduction](#) – introduces the important themes of this research that is Hinduism, Nishkama Karma, Social Cohesion, and the three acharyas.

Chapter 2: [Research methodology](#) – provides the problem statement, the principles of Nishkama Karma, the literature review and other important information pertaining to the research methods.

Chapter 3: [What is Nishkama Karma?](#) – provides an in-depth definition of Nishkama Karma amidst other relevant and important concepts.

Chapter 4: [Hindu texts that allude to Nishkama Karma](#) – collects information on Nishkama Karma from the Vedas and the Prasthanatrayi.

Chapter 5: [Shankara and his understanding of Nishkama Karma](#) – extracts Shankara's understanding of Nishkama Karma from his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.

Chapter 6: [Ramanuja and his understanding of Nishkama Karma](#) – extracts Ramanuja's understanding of Nishkama Karma from his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.

Chapter 7: [Madhva and his understanding of Nishkama Karma](#) – extracts Madhva's understanding of Nishkama Karma from his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.

Chapter 8: [Summation of the salient understanding of NK in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva](#) – compares the different understandings of Nishkama Karma and summarizes the major contributions that the three acharyas made to understanding Nishkama Karma.

Chapter 9: [Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion](#) – uses the three acharyas understanding of Nishkama Karma to assess the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion.

Chapter 10: [Conclusion](#) – reflects on the thesis and provides recommendations for further research.

2.10 Value of the Study

The term *kama* as desire has been extensively studied and researched by philosophers, historians, and theologians to understand the nature and role of desire and action in Hindu philosophy. While *kama* has been a term of interest in studies of

Hinduism, Nishkama Karma is a 'no-desire' or 'desireless' action and the contribution it makes to society has little research conducted on it. Furthermore, Nishkama Karma within the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, and the contribution to social cohesion is a study that generates new information in Hindu studies. This new information is relevant and necessary as it ties together three important themes of Hinduism: (1) Nishkama Karma, (2) Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of the three most famous Vedantic teachers – Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, and (3) social cohesion.

As a result, this research provides an understanding of Nishkama Karma within Hinduism and assesses its contribution to social cohesion on a holistic level - contributing to understanding the Hindu concept of selflessness and its contribution to cohesion amongst different communities.

Simply, Nishkama Karma is a pivotal concept to understanding the Hindu notion of desire and selfless action very little work has been done on investigating the contribution made by the three acharyas to Nishkama Karma and Nishkama Karma to social cohesion. The main contributions of this research will be:

1. to provide insight into the historical development of Nishkama Karma
2. to investigate how Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva understood Nishkama Karma.
3. to assess how the understanding of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of the three acharyas can advance social cohesion. This is achieved by drawing on the comments of the three acharyas that relate to the principles of Nishkama Karma (as listed in chapter 2.2). The comments of the three acharyas that relate to the principles of Nishkama Karma are then engaged with altruism and empathy toward weighing the contribution of Nishkama Karma to social cohesion.

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodology that this research adheres to. The principles of Nishkama Karma were discussed in illustrating the importance of deductive theory in

extrapolating the three acharyas' understanding of Nishkama Karma. This chapter also provided a brief literature review that contributes to understanding the scope of existing research on Nishkama Karma. Thereafter, the concept of Nishkama Karma, in the philosophies of the three acharyas, as contributing to social cohesion was mentioned as a gap in the existing research on Nishkama Karma, three acharyas, and social cohesion.

The hypothesis is that Nishkama Karma, in the philosophies of the three acharyas, may contribute to social cohesion. To ensure that the hypothesis is adequately engaged in this research, this chapter outlined the research questions that guide the researcher in engaging with the subject material. This chapter also noted that Phenomenological and Deductive theory, as qualitative research methods are applied to this research.

The following chapter provides the researcher with sufficient information on Nishkama Karma before studying Hindu texts and engaging the three acharyas.

Chapter 3: What is Nishkama Karma?

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a concise understanding of Nishkama Karma before investigating the historical development of Nishkama Karma and how the three acharyas understood it.

The Hindu understanding of Nishkama Karma is embedded within the understanding of Moksha (“salvation”) and Nirvana (“heaven”). The concept of Nishkama Karma falls under the branch of Karma Yoga, which is one of three paths that one can follow to attain Moksha and attain Nirvana.

To capture the essence of Nishkama Karma and provide a brief definition of it, understanding Moksha and Nirvana as the ultimate purpose of *nishKama* are imperative. Hindu philosophers (in addition to Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva) agree that the practice of Nishkama Karma leads one to Moksha and Nirvana. The three acharyas that this research reflects on agree that Nishkama Karma is a liberative practice that leads one to Moksha and Nirvana. Therefore, Moksha and Nirvana are essential concepts in the investigation of Nishkama karma. In the quest to know what Nishkama karma is, this section delves deeper into these liberative concepts as understood in Hinduism.

3.2 Nirvana

The belief that death is not the end, and that the human soul transcends above and beyond the material world to a paradise of joy, peace and rest is found in many different religious groups across the world. The most common term for this paradise of eternal bliss is heaven.

According to Butchvarov (2006:2), immortality is one of the greatest spiritual needs of man, the need to live forever, to make a lasting impact that gives them a sense of purpose and belonging. Death and the process of losing someone dear to you is a painful process that can take people years to deal with, Stanislav (2002:2) explains that death is one of the most personal and catastrophic events in the life of an individual which impacts their mental, physical, and social wellbeing.

Death leaves several questions in its wake, what happened to my loved one? Where will he/she go? Will I ever be reunited with them? Historically, religion rose to the occasion to address the deep despair that death caused.

Lancet (2005:682) claims that most Hindus gather their understanding of life and death from the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita which teaches that the Atman passes through all living beings. Atman can be understood as an extension of the ultimate soul Brahman that transmigrates from one body to another, passing through all living beings: from trees to plant life, humans, and animals.

According to the Hindu understanding of life and death, the samsara cycle offers humans another chance to atone for their sins and live a life worthy of Moksha. In explaining the concept of death in the Bhagavad Gita Prabhupada (1989:722) states:

At the time of death, the consciousness created by the living being carries him to his next body. If the living being has made his consciousness like an animal's, he is sure to get an animal's body.

The notion set out by Prabhupada (1989:722) is that the samsara cycle shows humans that there are consequences for their actions. Prabhupada (1989:89) and George (2008:89) agree that while Hindu communities understand heaven and hell (Bhuva lok and Naraka) the samsara cycle serves as an intermittent phase where humans are given another opportunity to attain Moksha.

George (2008:89) explains that Naraka is the place where the Hindu God Yama lives and is an inescapable hell where souls are tormented and punished, on the other hand, Bhuva lok is the realm of the Gods where humans take care of all the needs of the Gods.

Reflecting on Prabhupada (1989:722) and George (2008:89) it is important to note that even Bhuva lok and Naraka play a role in the samsara cycle. Depending on the sins committed in a lifetime a soul will be punished in Naraka for a period before returning to the earth and the good deeds committed during one's lifetime determines how long they will spend in Bhuva lok before returning to the earth. Therefore, the samsara cycle determines, upon death, whether (1) a soul is immediately reincarnated, (2) a soul goes to Naraka for punishment before returning or (3) a soul spends time in Bhuva lok before returning to earth.

The transmigration of Atman from one material body to another provides a sense of comfort to loved ones that their soul will at some point be reborn onto the earth however the idea of being reincarnated onto the earth is not the objective. Hinduism teaches us to surpass through this repetitive cycle that a soul is trapped in and to ascend beyond that.

Stanislav (2002:21) claims that Hindus understand the concept of Nirvana²⁵ as freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. As such, the Hindu faith maintains that Nirvana can only be attained through enlightenment²⁶.

Most Hindus understand Nirvana as escaping the cycle of reincarnation and being reunited with Brahma, the eternal universal life force. Sukdaven (2013:95) explains that the reunion with Brahman is only attained when “all forms of appearances are dissolved through real knowledge”. The Hindu concept of Nirvana is then a reality where one is freed from the samsara cycle and reunited with Brahman (the universal life force) through true knowledge.

George (2008:90) mentions that historically the caste system played a role in the attainment of Nirvana; Hindus believed that you were reborn until you reached the highest caste (Brahmin) after which you would attain Nirvana and that your deeds determined whether you moved up or down on the caste system. The caste system refers to a hereditary hierarchical system whereby the duty status of an individual is derived from the role that their parents play in society.

Sonawami (2017:2) lists the 5 different castes as:

- 1) Brahmins: Priestly class made up of Rishi's, Guru's, and Sages. The highest caste system is believed to be the holiest. This caste is believed to be made from the forehead of Brahma to symbolise supremacy, wisdom, and piety.

²⁵ Derived from Sanskrit meaning “to disappear” or “vanish”, this term was used about a state of mind where pain, suffering and materialistic desire vanished or disappeared. The disappearance of desire meant the disappearance of suffering and the appearance of peace and satisfaction. To be at that point of consciousness where only peace and satisfaction existed was known as nirvana (Stanislav, 2002:21).

²⁶ According to Deo (2017: iv): “The attributes of God in Hinduism and realisation of Nirvana in Buddhism are essentially the same.” Deo (2017:67) further adds: “In Hinduism, the terms moksha, nirvana, and mukti (liberation) are used synonymously to describe release or freedom from the cycles of birth and death (samsara).” Additionally, Madhva (Bhagavad Gita 1:66) says that “...Peace, Deliverance, Nirvana have similar meanings...”. This research adopts the same approach as Deo (2017:iv & 67) and Madhva by understanding Moksha and Nirvana as interchangeable concepts between Hinduism and Buddhism.”

- 2) Kshatriyas: The warrior caste is often viewed as the same level or slightly less than the Brahmin caste due to Kshatriyas being the leaders and rulers of communities. Kshatriyas are believed to have been created from the biceps or chest area of Brahma symbolising strength and power.
- 3) Vaishyas: This caste is made up of traders and farmers and is seen as performing tasks that contribute to the sustenance of the community. The Vaishya caste is typically seen as being created from the bosom of Brahma symbolic of their role in providing for the community.
- 4) Shudras: Labourer caste believed to have been made from the thighs of Brahma performs the hard labour tasks in the community such as construction.
- 5) Dalits: Commonly referred to as the untouchables this caste performs the tasks seen as menial to the rest of society. Sweeping the streets and cleaning the toilets are often tasks given to members of this caste.

Reflecting on George (2008:90) and Sonawami (2017:2) it is evident that the lower castes are assigned tasks that are lowly and unimportant to society. This is due to the belief that people of a lower caste were placed there because of a sinful lifestyle, this mentality has led to many atrocities and crimes against humanity in the name of religion resulting in legislation being drawn up to abolish the caste system.

According to Sonawami (2017:4), Hindus believed that only Brahmins could attain Nirvana and that one should perform good deeds to rise to a higher caste however in the 19th century influential philosophers initiated what is known as the Hindu renaissance.

Prajapati (2015:392) states that due to British influence on India in the 19th century a renaissance period that changed Indian historical, social, cultural, and religious contexts began. One of the many things that the Hindu renaissance changed was the process required for one to attain Nirvana.

George (2008:90) notes that after the 19th century Hindus started to teach that your caste was no longer a deciding factor for the attainment of Nirvana. Any individual who lived a pious life, abstaining from material desires, focusing only on attaining the absolute truth would attain Nirvana.

The Hindu renaissance brought about a new interpretation and understanding of Nirvana, one where any individual who aspired for eternal bliss and peace could attain

it. Understanding Nirvana as the object of Hindu religious aspiration contributes to studying Nishkama karma. Nishkama karma, as the focal teaching of Karma yoga, is described as one of the fundamental practices that prepares one for Nirvana (liberation from the samsara cycle). The motivation for the practice and strict adherence to Nishkama karma principles is for the attainment of Nirvana. As such, studying Nirvana equips this research with understanding the fundamental and broader aspects of Nishkama karma.

3.3 Moksha

Despite the Hindu renaissance bringing a new dogma that sought to abolish the caste system and allow everyone the opportunity to attain Nirvana, the difficult task of escaping the samsara cycle remained constant.

Hinduism is a branch term for religious belief systems in India that align themselves with Vedic literature. Due to the number of different belief systems under Hinduism, there are many ways in which the concept of Moksha is understood.

The term Moksha appears in its root form “moc” in the Vedas and Upanishads and refers to the liberation and release from bondage. According to Anderson (2012:11), the usage of “moc” in the Vedas and Upanishads is to be understood as the chains of a slave being opened or cattle being removed from their yoke.

According to Sinha (2015:12), the Vedas teach that the Atman and Brahman are synonymous terms as several references allude to Atman being an extension of Brahman. Sinha (2015:12) claims that considering the Vedic understanding of Atman and Brahman being one Moksha refers to the unification of the human soul or Atman with that of the Supreme Being Brahman. The place of Atman in the Vedas is one where an aspect of Brahman was placed onto the earth and disconnected through illusions of the material world. Due to the displacement between Atman and Brahman, the Vedas attempt to encourage a process where Atman undergoes a journey to reconnect with Brahman. The journey can be understood as a process of self-realisation where the Atman realises its existence in Brahman and is therefore defined as Moksha; being set from material illusions and suffering to reconnect with Brahma.

The Upanishads were conceived to build upon and explain concepts found in the Vedas. As a result, the Upanishads do not differ from the Vedas in explaining Moksha.

Moksha in the Upanishads is referred to as bondage, being tied to the earth and the cycle of reincarnation because one has not yet identified their true nature in Brahman.

Reflecting on the Brahma sutras, the Indian philosopher Swami Krishnananda (1922-2001 CE) refers to the Brahma sutras as the Moksha shastras or the guidelines to attaining Moksha (Krishnananda, 1977:10). Krishnananda (1977:10) claims that the Brahma sutras are “scriptures on the liberation of the soul” and that one does not merely attain Moksha simply by thinking they are one with Brahman but by practising meditation and yoga to manifest the essence of Brahman in the material world.

The approach taken by Krishnananda (1997:10) emphasises the role of individual karma in the attainment of Moksha. The Brahma Sutras are more elaborative in explaining Moksha as it teaches that thinking and knowing your Atman is a part of Brahman is not enough to attain Moksha, it is the first step. To attain Moksha, one must practice yoga and meditation so that their daily life serves as proof of their self-realisation.

Anderson (2012:13) explains that although Moksha refers to freedom the Bhagavad Gita uses the term about the realisation of Atman in all living entities. The Bhagavad Gita has a general theme of oneness and unification therefore Moksha is seen as recognising the Atman in oneself and every living being on earth. In recognition of the Atman found in all living beings, one is then taught to respect, love, and nurture all to appease the Supreme Being, which in the Gita is the Hindu God Krishna.

Reflecting on the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma sutras, and Bhagavad Gita – it is evident that Moksha refers to the process of Atman being unified with the Supreme Being (either Brahman in the case of Vedas, Upanishads, and Brahma sutras or Krishna in case of the Bhagavad Gita). Moksha is also used in the abovementioned texts synonymously with the term’s liberation, salvation, and freedom.

Like Nirvana, Hindu philosophy holds moksha as the motivation for practising Nishkama karma. The following section explains moksha as understood in the Vedantic philosophical school. This contributes to this research as the practice of NK, as found in the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva (that are Vedantic scholars), is described as a process that supports the attainment of moksha.

3.3.1 Moksha in Vedanta philosophy

Sukdaven (2013:67) explains that Vedanta and the Upanishads are used as synonymous terms because:

The conviction that the knowledge of the Supreme Being of Self and other related objects is the highest wisdom to which all other kinds of knowledge, those regarding sacrifices, rituals and worship... are the lower rungs of the ladder leading to acme, the gnosis contained in the Upanishads.

The term Vedanta refers to the end of the Vedas and focuses on philosophical concepts in the Upanishads. According to Sukdaven (2013:68), all Vedanta schools agree that the central teaching of the Upanishads is that Brahman is the ultimate Supreme Being through which the universe and all Atman exist.

Three branches in Vedanta philosophy seek to explain the relationship between Brahman and Atman; (1) Advaita (non-dualism) proposed by Shankara which claims that Brahman and Atman are one, (2) Dvaita (dualism) proposed by Madhva which considers Brahman to be an independent entity to Atman and (3) *Vishishtadvaita* (qualified dualism) proposed by Ramanuja which claims that Brahman and Atman are united. Although, Brahman has two forms, one of consciousness and one of matter.

These three branches of Vedanta, as listed above, seek to explain the relationship between Brahman and Atman by engaging questions such as is the individual Atman/jiva²⁷ the same as Brahma? What causes them to be separate? How do they unite/come together?

Despite arguments on the nature of the relation between Atman and Brahman, Atman is believed to have come from Brahman and will one day return to Brahman. The Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.11-13) alludes that knowledge of Brahman leads one to attain "*purusha*" (*purusha* as the purest form of consciousness).

Reflecting on the Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.11-13) liberation of the soul from the material world (Moksha) is attained through knowledge of Brahman. Despite arguments on the relationship between Brahman and Atman Vedanta philosophy

²⁷ Term used to describe the individual soul.

agrees that Atman is the creation of Brahman and through knowledge of Brahman one attains *purusha*.

The position of Moksha in Vedanta philosophy is then a process of attaining knowledge of Brahman which then allows one to see the true nature of reality resulting in the liberation of the soul.

3.3.2 Paths to Moksha

The role of Moksha in Hindu thought is to liberate Atman from the samsara cycle, suffering and/or desire. Yogeshwar (1994:262) explains that there is four Yogas leading to the attainment of Moksha:

- 1) Jnana yoga – one who seeks Moksha through philosophy and knowledge. According to Jnana Marga²⁸, the path to Nirvana (Moksha) is only achieved through true knowledge. Different Hindu sects that follow this yoga dispute as to what true knowledge is; the Shaivite sect would argue that knowledge of Shiva leads to Moksha whereas the Hare Krishna sect would argue that knowledge of Sri Krishna as the Supreme Being leads to Moksha. Irrespective of the sect, followers of this path study the Vedas, Upanishads, Brahma sutras, Bhagavad Gita, and other sacred Hindu texts to find true knowledge and attain Moksha.
- 2) Bhakti yoga – one who seeks Moksha through love and devotion. The most popular example of Bhakti yoga is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) founded by Srila²⁹ Prabhupada in 1966. Despite emphasising the need to study the Bhagavad Gita and be mindful of one's Karma, Srila Prabhupada is known to strongly emphasise the importance of chanting the Hare Krishna mahamantra³⁰:

“Hare Krishna Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama

²⁸ Sanskrit term meaning: “path”. The term “Marga” is used interchangeably with the term “Yoga”, as the term yoga can be understood as a discipline, union, path, and study in Hinduism.

²⁹ This is a respectful term, given to Hindu teachers, meaning: “one who has studied the Vedas”.

³⁰ Sanskrit term meaning: “great mantra”. Mahamantra is often used as a term to allude that chanting this mantra fulfils the purpose of chanting all other mantras. Followers of ISKCON believe that chanting the Hare Krishna mahamantra once is equivalent to chanting the name of Vishnu a thousand times.

Rama Rama Hare Hare”

Black (2008:26) states that “Hare” refers to the attributes of God, “Krishna” refers to the deity Krishna as the Supreme Being, and “Rama” refers to the incarnation of Krishna as described in the Ramayana.

According to Yogeshwar (1994:264), a key feature of Bhakti yoga is the strong emphasis on worship and chanting. In the ISKCON revered book: “Chant and be Happy: The power of mantra meditation.” a dialogue between Srila Prabhupada and the musician George Harrison is documented. In this record of the conversation between the two Srila Prabhupada is often quoted as saying: ‘chant the names of the lord and be free’ (p17) and ‘there is nothing higher than chanting the Hare Krishna mahamantra’.

The excessive emphasis on the chanting of the Hare Krishna mahamantra and devotion to Krishna is a distinguishing characteristic of Bhakti yoga. Bhakti yoga emphasises a strong sense of devotion, love and worship that is manifested through chanting and singing bhajans³¹.

- 3) Karma Yoga – the one who seeks Moksha through work/action. Karma Yoga, like Mimamsa philosophy, places a strong emphasis on the actions of man. According to Kumar (2018:150), the term “Karma” is derived from the Sanskrit term “kri” meaning “to do”. As a result, all actions and the effects of actions are Karma. A disciple of the Indian Sage Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda states that:

Every mental and physical blow that is given upon the soul to strike out the fire, to discover its own power and knowledge, is Karma, Karma, being used in its universal sense; so we are doing Karma all the time. I am talking to you; that is Karma. You are listening; that is Karma. We breathe; that is Karma. We walk; Karma. We talk; Karma. Everything we do, physical or mental, is Karma, and is leaving its marks upon us (Vivekananda, 1901:15-16).

³¹ devotional songs

According to Sivananda (2001: x): “The doctrine of Karma forms an integral part of Vedanta. It expounds the riddle of life and the riddle of the universe. It brings solace, satisfaction, and comfort to one and all. It is a self-evident truth.”

Karma Yoga is then the practice of right action, resulting in at the end of futile action and the fulfilment of self-realisation. Karma, as proposed by Vivekananda, is then the essence of an individual as merely existing is karma. As a result, Karma Yoga as a path of Moksha focuses on guiding every action towards attaining salvation.

- 4) Raja yoga – one who seeks Moksha through mysticism. Yogeshwar (1994:261) claims that up until the 1800s Hindus believed that each Astika school and Hindu sect fell under one of the three paths to Moksha; Jnana, Bhakti and Karma Yoga. This means that before the 1800s, any Hindu philosophical school or religious sect would be found teaching that either; Jnana, Bhakti or Karma Yoga was the path to salvation.

The unanimous belief that one could either follow the path of Jnana, Bhakti, or Karma Yoga to achieve Moksha changed in the 1890s when Swami Vivekananda proposed a fourth path – Raja yoga.

According to Yogeshwar (1994:261), Raja yoga is the “method of mental concentration”. Raja yoga teaches that due to the nature of the material world the mind deals with an innumerable number of distractions, these distractions flood the mind whenever the mind tried to focus and concentrate on an object.

These distractions lead to unhappiness, depression and suffering, Raja yoga is then designed to help the mind focus and surrender itself to the process of being unified with the Supreme Being. Raja Yoga can be understood as the path of Moksha that unifies Atman with Brahman through the process of one controlling their thought processes.

Although the four Marga promotes different ways to attain Moksha they rarely dispute with one another. Jnana yoga teaches that once one has attained knowledge one falls

into a deep sense of devotion and love for Brahman (Bhakti) and one is no longer attached to the outcome of the action (Karma) due to the knowledge that has been attained.

Bhakti yoga teaches that because of deep devotion to Brahman, one acquires true knowledge (Jnana) and is no longer attached to their work (Karma). Karma Yoga teaches that through indifference regarding the outcome of work one attains knowledge (Jnana) and through knowledge develops devotion and love (Bhakti) for Brahman. Raja yoga as a new inclusion includes the other paths by teaching that through mastering one's mind and being able to focus on one object, an individual receives knowledge (Jnana) resulting in them being indifferent to their actions (Karma) and developing love and devotion (Bhakti) for Brahman. Sivananda (2001:ix) acknowledges that the paths do not exclude one another by stating: "Karma Yoga leads to Bhakti Yoga which in its turn leads to Raja Yoga. Raja Yoda Jnana".

Despite the different paths acknowledging the importance of each Marga, each one believes itself to be the fulfilment of all. Nishkama karma as a practice of Karma yoga is viewed as fulfilling yoga, the path that other paths (Jnana, Bhakti, and Raja) lead to. Understanding the different paths to moksha concludes this section on studying the purpose and motivation of practising Nishkama karma. Additionally, many great Hindu teachers have proposed different practices that guide one to the attainment of moksha. An example of this is found in the latter chapters of this research, where Madhva proposes a 'hybrid' version of Nishkama Karma that unites the different marga's.

3.4 Nishkama Karma

In explaining Karma Yoga Yogeshwar (1994:262) states:

Karma Yoga teaches us how to work for work's sake, unattached, without caring who is helped, and what for. The Karma Yogi works because it is his nature, because he feels that it is good for him to do so and he has no object beyond that.

The notion of being indifferent to one's actions is a central theme in Karma Yoga. The unattached approach to action is known as Nishkama Karma. Mulla (2006:26) claims that there are 2 ways in which Nishkama Karma can be approached:

- 1) Performing one's duty to society.
- 2) the absence of desire for rewards

As the central theme of Karma Yoga, Nishkama Karma teaches that one should understand their role in society and perform that responsibility to the best of their ability, irrespective of what the task may be and what reward or outcome the task may have.

In defining Nishkama Karma, it is important to investigate the Hindu understanding of desire and attachment, as these two qualities are central to Karma Yoga and the practice of Nishkama Karma.

3.4.1 Desire and Attachment

The Sanskrit term for desire is “*Kama*”, this term can also mean “to wish for”, “too long for” and “to deeply crave”. It has also been used to refer to love and pleasure. The term “*Kama*” as defined in this research refers to (1) romantic desire (such as love)³², (2) materialistic desire (such as wealth), and (3) the state of being without (romantic and materialistic) desire. In the Hindu faith, the Bhagavad Gita is recognised as providing explanatory texts delving deep into the nature of desire. The position of desire in the Gita is the root cause of suffering, chapter 2 (text 16) illustrates this:

dhyayatah visayan pumsah
sangas tesupajayate
sangat sanjayate Kamah
Kamat krodho 'bhijayate

Literal translation (Prabhupada, 1989:151):

In contemplating the objects of the senses
A person develops attachments for them
From such attachment lust/desire develops

³² Although Kama as romantic desire constitutes materialistic desire (as it ceases to exist upon the attainment of moksha), it is important to note that the usage of kama as romantic desire is often distinguished from that of materialistic desire. Simply, the desire for romance and the desire for wealth have different positions in Hindu philosophy. Furthermore, the focus of this research is on the state of desireless-ness in the philosophies of the three acharyas and the contribution thereof to social cohesion. As a result, in this thesis, little attention is given to the usage of kama as a romantic term. Although it should be noted that the position and usage of ‘nishkama’ refers to the state of utter and complete desireless-ness for things of the material world (which includes the desire for romance and materialistic gain). The differentiation of desire and the desire which is qualified in Nishkama Karma, as deduced from the commentaries of the three acharyas, is discussed later in chapter [8.3](#) and [8.4](#).

From lust comes anger

In translating *Kamah* and *Kamat* Prabhupada (1989:151) uses the terms lust and desire interchangeably. Lust and desire are synonymous terms in the Gita as the two are the cause of attachment to the material world resulting in suffering.

Further reflecting on the Gita 2:62, 2:71, 3:19 and 12:12 it is evident that the Gita maintains a general understanding of desire being the cause of evil and suffering.

Dobia (2007:61) states that the problem with desire is attachment: “classical yogic and Buddhist treatises warn against the pursuit of pleasure-seeking, which they point out only leads to escalating desire and continual dissatisfaction”.

The explanation of desire by Dobia (2007:61) claims that ancient Hindu teachings portray desire as an addiction. One desires an object and will search to attain it for as long as possible, once the object of desire has been attained the individual is satisfied only for a limited time after which they find themselves desiring something, they believe will bring even greater satisfaction. In this way, a person finds themselves addicted to an endless cycle of, what Dobia (2007:61) calls, pleasure-seeking.

Despite desire generally being understood as negative, the Purushartha³³ lists *Kama* (desire) as one of the 4 objectives of human life, with the other three being Dharma (law), Artha (wealth and prosperity) and Moksha.

According to Sarkar (2017:48) desire is not something that should constantly be negative as desire leads to pleasure and ultimately happiness, what corrupts desire is attachment. To illustrate desire as a positive experience Sarkar (2017:49) quotes the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

Man consists of desire,
As his desire is, so is his determination,
As his determination is, so is his deed,
Whatever his deed is, that he attains.

Upon reflecting on this quote Sarkar (2017:48) argues that despite desire (*Kama*) being a concept usually affiliated with sexual desire it has developed into a term that

³³ Sanskrit for “aim of human life” and explains four objectives that fulfil, give meaning and purpose to an individual’s life.

refers to will and perseverance, which then concludes that one needs to desire salvation to attain it.

Desire can be understood in two ways; (1) as a notion that allows one to live freely, enjoying the pleasures of life and (2) as a consuming addiction where one is attached to the sensation of pleasure resulting in one being enslaved to their impulses.

Dobia (2007:61) explains that when one is consumed by their desire, they focus on things that they want (to experience pleasure) and become blind to the things that they need and how their actions may affect society. For example, a politician (in desiring to win the elections) is consumed with the idea of having power to the extent that he uses force, bribery, and corruption to secure his victory.

The action of the politician is then one of an individual so consumed by their desire that the effect and damage on society and themselves are ignored. Using this same example, *Kama* in a positive light would simply refer to a politician desiring to win the elections to have a positive impact on society by addressing issues such as crime, violence, and inequality.

Desire is then a positive experience that becomes sinful when one gets attached to the pleasure caused by desire. The notion set out by Sarkar (2017:48), based on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, asserts that *Kama* as one of the Purushartha is essential to attaining Moksha. The argument of desiring Moksha to attain it is what has presented Nishkama Karma as a contradiction.

Nishkama karma as 'desireless desire' is contradictory in the sense that one is required to desire moksha to attain liberation whilst simultaneously aspiring for a state of desirelessness. Exploring the desire for moksha and the desirelessness of Nishkama Karma is an endless discussion that this research briefly reflects on, as the purpose of this research is on Nishkama Karma and its contribution to social cohesion.

Toward understanding selfless action in Karma Yoga Datta and Jones (2019:17) list six different understandings/dimensions of selfless action in Karma Yoga that developed between the years 2003 and 2014, where different Hindu philosophers contributed to understanding selfless action. According to Datta and Jones's (2019:17), the six different dimensions are:

- 1) Two dimensional: as proposed by Narayanan and Krishnan in 2003, where Nishkama Karma referred to (1) performing one's duty and (2) having no attachment to the outcome of one's actions.
- 2) Two dimensional: as proposed by Mulla and Krishnan in 2006. Nishkama Karma was described as a "sense of obligation towards others" without the desire for reward.
- 3) Three dimensional: as proposed by Mulla and Krishnan in 2009, described Nishkama Karma is duty orientated without desire for a reward with a sense of calmness.
- 4) Four-dimensional: as proposed by Singh and Singh in 2010. Nishkama Karma to be selfless action, duty orientated, detachment from rewards and calmness under environmental influences.
- 5) Five dimensional: proposed by Pradhan in 2011. This understanding of Nishkama Karma emphasised; (1) the process rather than the outcome (2) a sense of obligation to others (3) the importance of diligent work (4) working with calmness and (5) work as an offering to God.
- 6) Two dimensional: proposed in 2014 by Rastogi and Pati. Selfless action should be devotion to serving others and working towards contributing to society rather than individual gain.

Datta and Jones (2019:17) illustrate different approaches to understanding Nishkama Karma and practising selfless action. The qualities in dimensions three to five (calmness, working with perfection, diligence) are added onto duty orientation and detachment to reward. The addition of calmness, perfection and diligence illustrate the influence and importance of one's attitude when performing a task.

Furthermore, upon reflection on dimensions three and four, the approach toward the desire for reward and attachment to the reward is seemingly different. Dimension three teaches no desire for the reward (simply oblivious to any kind of reward) whereas dimension four teaches detachment from the reward (desiring and receiving a reward but not being attached to the idea of receiving the reward or even the reward itself).

Individual attitude toward practising Nishkama Karma is emphasised in the fifth dimension where one is taught to work diligently and with perfection despite seeking no reward. Upon reflection on the 6-dimensional model of selfless action by Datta and

Jone's (2019:17) Nishkama Karma is the strong emphasis on performing one's duty without desire for the reward however the attitude and approach to performing one's duty are also important (as completion of the task should reflect the individual's interest and joy in performing the task).

Nishkama Karma is built on two pillars: performing one's duty and expecting no reward. In this sense Nishkama Karma is desireless action, without any sense of emotion or regard for the task one is about to perform or the consequences of that action the task must be completed.

3.4.2 Sakam Karma

Contrary to NishKama is Sakam Karma derived from "*sah*" which is 'to accept' and "*Kama*" meaning desire (Datta, 2019:18). Therefore, Sakam Karma is often understood as the opposite of Nishkama Karma as it refers to working for selfish purposes – performing actions for the fruits of actions.

According to Chakraborty (2014:194), Sakam Karma is performing work with the result in mind. Sakam Karma is best understood as people performing tasks to receive the fruit of that task, working, and completing one's duty for the sole purpose of the benefit and reward waiting at the end of the task. Chakraborty (2014:194) claims that Sakam Karma "...binds us to the wheel of death and rebirth" as a result of attachment to "Material desires, expectations, emotions..." and that most work performed by humans is Sakam Karma.

Sakam Karma is best understood as an attachment to the fruits of action. Under the system of Karma Yoga, detachment is of utmost importance to attain Moksha. Sakam Karma, as the opposite of Nishkama Karma, is the Karma (or action) performed by individuals who work for the reward, this includes fulfilling one's duty to society. A gardener may fulfil his task of keeping the neighbourhood gardens neat and clean however if he performs this task focusing on the reward accompanying successful completion then he has performed Sakam Karma.

Karma Yoga teaches three main categories of action: (1) *sattva* – the path of pureness, (2) *rajasika* – the path of self-indulgent and (3) *vikarma* – bad, wicked, evil action. Whilst *rajasika* (selfish path) is frowned upon it is deemed a lesser evil in comparison to *vikarma* which refers to violent and destructive actions such as theft, kidnapping, murder, and rape.

Sakam Karma falls under the rajasika path whereas Nishkama Karma falls under the sattva path. The path of vikarma is reserved for the worst of criminals as most Hindus are followers of the rajasika path due to their selfish desires. Sakam Karma, by bringing self-pleasure is discouraged in Hindu sacred texts, this is evident in the proposal of Nishkama Karma as the preferred course of action. As a result, Nishkama Karma counters the selfish nature of Sakam Karma by teaching people to fulfil their duties without any attachment to the reward or effect of their actions.

3.4.3 The major challenges of Nishkama Karma

Nishkama Karma literally translates to desireless action³⁴. As a result, two important principles of Nishkama Karma³⁵ are desireless-ness and selflessness. The state of being without desire and performing actions selflessly is seemingly contradictory. Furthermore, being without desire and performing actions selflessly, has been the topic of several scholarly debates. The two major questions that challenge the principles of Nishkama Karma are (1) Is it possible to be without any desire? and (2) are selfless actions truly selfless?

This section presents these challenges to Nishkama Karma before investigating the three acharyas contribution to Nishkama Karma in their commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi. Thereafter, chapter [8.3](#) (on desireless-ness) and [9.2.1](#) (on selflessness), reflect on these challenges considering the comments of the three acharyas that allude to Nishkama Karma.

3.4.3.1 The problem of desireless-ness

Nishkama Karma is mostly translated as desireless action however delving into the philosophical nature of Nishkama Karma it is seen as a state of no desire, upon which Moksha is then attained. For this reason, Nishkama Karma has popularly been referred to as “desireless desire”; the desire to reach a state of no desire.

³⁴ See chapter [1.2](#)

³⁵ See chapter [2.3](#)

Krishnananda (2017:98) explains that Hindu philosophy teaches of “*mumukshutva*”, derived from “*mumukshu*” and “*tva*” and describes an earnest desire for liberation from the samsara cycle. Upon translating verse 29 of the Viveka chudamani, the Sage Shankara is quoted as saying:

Only when he forsakes everything and deeply desires freedom, will he become calm, and his actions be fruitful.

Mumukshutva is described as a deep sense of desire that is accomplished after one adheres to:

- 1) Viveka: a sense of discernment. The ability to differentiate between an illusion and reality.
- 2) Vairagya: a sense of detachment. Freeing oneself from all sorts of attachments to the material world.
- 3) Shatsampatti: the development of six virtues that cleanse the soul. These virtues are (1) Sama – inner peace, (2) Dama – self-control over emotions and desires, (3) Titiksha – perseverance and composure, (4) Uparati – having no regard for one’s emotions, maintaining the ability to rise above conflict and challenges, (5) Shraddha – being trustworthy, honest, and loving, (6) Samadhana – dedication, focus and the ability to meditate and be at one with the self. Hindus are taught to begin with the first virtue and work their way up to the sixth virtue, a process that can take up to a lifetime but results in the purification of the soul.

After one works through Viveka, Vairagya and the six virtues of Shatsampatti, they are required to deeply desire liberation from the samsara cycle. This deep desire for Moksha, *mumukshutva*, is then attained due to the ability to discern between the material and immaterial world, having no attachments and the purification of the soul.

Mumukshutva is not to be an alternate path to Nishkama Karma. Instead, most Nishkama Karma yogis emphasise the importance of deeply desiring Moksha to attain Moksha. However, if Nishkama Karma is a state of no desire how is one expected to desire Moksha?

This thesis explores the different ways in which Nishkama Karma was defined and understood, to provide clarity on what desireless action means and how that can

contribute to social cohesion. On the problem of desireless-ness, contemporary social science scholars challenge the idea of being without any selfish motives. Selflessness, being a principle of Nishkama Karma, is then challenged and questioned from a social scientific perspective. The following section explores Nishkama Karma's usage in the contemporary era along with the tension that exists between social scientists and the three acharyas on the notion of selflessness.

3.4.3.2 Current social science trends on selflessness – tensions with the three acharyas

Nishkama Karma is an important concept in the current era, it influences and inspires world leaders toward cultural heritage and effective community development on a global scale. According to Ians (2020)³⁶, on the International Day of Yoga (21 June 2020), Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi said the following on Nishkama Karma:

Nishkama Karma – serving everyone without any selfish motive – has also been called in our tradition [that is Hinduism] as Karma Yoga. This Indian thought, embedded in our culture, has been experienced by the whole world whenever in need.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi displays an important aspect of Nishkama Karma which is the relevance of Nishkama Karma in the contemporary era. Despite the ancient roots of Nishkama Karma, it remains a relevant concept that continues to shape the global community.

Websites such as 'INDIAFREENOTES'³⁷ and 'wellnessbuddhainfo'³⁸ define Nishkama Karma as selfless and desireless action, in stating that Nishkama Karma teaches one to live within the present, unaffected by the mistakes of the past or the uncertainty of the future. Vivekavani (2020) agrees that Nishkama Karma is selfless and desireless action by adding that it promotes a harmonious lifestyle where individuals have a sense of fulfilment rather than constant longing.

Reflecting on the above-mentioned sources, the position of Nishkama Karma in the contemporary era is one of adding value and a sense of fulfilment to an individual's life. Lessons on Nishkama Karma (such as Gita 2.47) are referred to in promoting

³⁶ See <https://www.sify.com/news/yoga-helps-confidently-negotiate-challenges-madi-round-up-news-national-ugvd4wihadjdd.html>

³⁷ See <https://indiafreenotes.com/karma-meaning-importance-of-karma-to-managers-nishkama-karma/>

³⁸ <https://www.wellnessbuddhainfo.com/karma-yoga-helps-you-to-lead-a-stress-free-life/748.html>

selfless actions. The position of the abovementioned sources is one of faith and belief. The idea that the lessons of Nishkama Karma (that is being without desire and performing selfless actions) are achievable is adopted by the abovementioned sources. This position on Nishkama Karma, as deduced in this research (chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#)), is also argued for by Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva.

As a result, Hindus maintain that the sincere practice of Nishkama Karma enables an individual to be without desire and perform selfless actions. This view is adopted by several Hindu teachers and philosophers. Additionally, the three acharyas support this view³⁹. Therefore, within the Hindu community, Nishkama Karma is widely accepted as the practice of selfless and desireless, actions.

Although the position of Nishkama Karma as desireless and selfless actions is accepted by the Hindu community, social science scholars find the concept of 'selflessness' difficult to accept.

According to Vlerick (2021:2397), selflessness (or altruism) is differentiated between the "vernacular sense" and "scientific literature". The "vernacular sense" referred to is simply actions performed (usually at a cost) for the benefit of others without any "ulterior selfish motive". The "scientific literature" referred to is divided into (1) Psychological altruism and (2) Biological (or evolutionary) altruism (Vlerick, 2021:2397).

Psychological altruism refers to "preference structures" whereas biological altruism refers to "reproductive success (fitness)" (Ananth, 2005:218). Psychological altruism refers to actions performed for the wellness of others without any self-interest whereas biological altruism refers to self-sacrificial acts (which are qualified as altruistic) that benefit the survival of the group (Taylor, 2010). The position of scientific literature on altruism suggests that selfless behaviour might not entirely be selfless.

On Evolutionary (or biological) altruism, Sesardic (1999:458) explains:

an organism is behaving altruistically in the evolutionary sense if and only if the effect of A's behaviour is an increase of fitness of some other organisms at the expense of its own fitness. If this kind of altruistic behavioural disposition is selected for, it must be the product of group selection.

³⁹ See chapter [8.2.4](#)

The position that Sesardic (1999:458) adopts is one of suggesting that altruistic behaviour, in an evolutionary sense, is for group selection. In this sense, it is survival of the fittest group rather than survival of the fittest individual⁴⁰. Within the group setting, altruistic/selfless behaviour is viewed as prosocial behaviour that benefits the survival chances of the group. Wilson (2010:ii) agrees that altruistic behaviour, on an evolutionary scale, is best understood on a group level. According to Wilson (2010:ii):

When individuals within a group compete, **selfish individuals** will produce the most offspring and come to dominate the group.

When groups compete, groups with more **selfless individuals** will beat groups of **selfish individuals**.

So the proportion of **selfless individuals** increases in the overall population even though it decreases within groups.

After extensive research on the nature of biological and psychological altruism, Caine (2020:104) proposes the following definition for biological altruism:

... a trait *possessed by the focal individual*, that causes it to benefit others at a long-term cost to itself, resulting in negative selection on the focal individual and positive selection on the recipient(s).

Caine (2020:104) suggests, that in understanding altruism, a longer time frame is required. The longer time frame enables researchers to examine the effects of the altruistic actions performed and determine the extent to which it is altruistic.

Reflecting on Sesardic (1999:458), Ananth (2005:218), Wilson (2010:ii), and Caine (2020:104), the position of scientific literature on altruism is one that seemingly disapproves of 'true' selflessness. 'True' selflessness refers to self-sacrificial acts that have no ulterior motives – not even that of survival of the group. The scientific literature available on altruism suggests that altruistic actions are usually for group survival or are actions that are caused through learning pro-social behaviour within a group (Wilson, 2010:ii).

Additionally, Jaeger and van Vugt (2022:130) state:

⁴⁰ See Wilson (2010:iii)

While many people engage in altruistic acts to benefit others, an emerging body of research suggests that people's altruism is surprisingly ineffective.

Jaeger and van Vugt (2022:131-132) do not aim to disapprove or discourage altruistic acts instead, they aim to outline three motives that may have encouraged altruistic behaviour in humanity's ancestral past that are seemingly irrelevant today. Jaeger and van Vugt (2022:131-132) list the following three as hindrances that limit the "effectiveness of altruistic acts":

- 1) Parochialism: prioritising close relatives over distant relatives and when helping distant relatives, lower levels of interaction on assessing the effectiveness of contributions made.
- 2) Status: lack of recognition for altruistic actions that are effectively 'good', resulting in the punishment of "altruists who rely on deliberate reasoning" and the rewarding of altruists "who rely on emotions".
- 3) Conformity: the performance of altruistic actions (even if ineffective) simply due to the influence of what "others do" and the "conformist tendency" of wishing to copy others (usually influential individuals).

On a seemingly negative approach to altruism, Oakley (2013:10408) defines what is termed 'pathological altruism' as:

... a person who sincerely engages in what he or she intends to be altruistic acts but who (in a fashion that can be reasonably anticipated) harms the very person or group he or she is trying to help; or a person who, in the course of helping one person or group, inflicts reasonably foreseeable harm to others beyond the person or group helped; or a person who in [a] reasonably anticipatory way becomes a victim of his or her own altruistic actions.

Upon reflection, altruism, like all concepts, can be the demise of an individual or group. Nevertheless, the social scientific approach to altruism creates a tension between scientific literature and the three acharyas on altruism. Where this research deduces that the three acharya endorse altruism (through the principles of selflessness in Nishkama Karma), scientific literature questions the rationale behind it. The fundamental question between scientific literature on altruism and Nishkama Karma as deduced from the commentaries (on the Prasthanatrayi) of the three acharyas is then; how does one conceptualise Nishkama Karma as a positive altruistic practice

that can contribute to social wellness? Chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) explore the commentaries of the three acharyas on the Prasthanatrayi to deduce their understanding of the principles of Nishkama Karma. Thereafter, chapter [9.2.1](#) revisits this discussion toward understanding Nishkama Karma, as found in the commentaries of the three acharyas, as socially cohesive.

3.5 Summary

This chapter sought to narrow down on concepts directly relating to Nishkama Karma. In doing so Nirvana was defined as a state of eternal peace and bliss, variant definitions describing it as reunification with Brahman, the Buddha, and other Hindu deities perceived as the Supreme Being was also discussed. This chapter also looked at the concept of Moksha, the paths to attaining Moksha, and the position of Moksha within the Vedantic school of philosophy.

Studying Nirvana and Moksha allowed for a broader understanding of Nishkama Karma as a practice that is encouraged so that one may attain liberation. Nirvana and Moksha, as the object of aspiration in practising Nishkama Karma, contribute to this research's definition of Nishkama Karma within its broader context of critique and question. This further contributes to a wholesome definition of Nishkama Karma that this research engages with the comments of the three acharyas, in assessing the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion.

Last, this chapter provided a brief definition of Nishkama Karma, describing it as performing one's duty to society without expecting a reward, therefore desireless (and selfless) action. The problem of understanding Nishkama Karma as desireless action was introduced by Sarkar (2017:48), who noted that desire is needed for the attainment of Moksha. Furthermore, the problem of understanding Nishkama Karma as desireless action was extended to the problem of selflessness as perceived by social scientists. This chapter introduced the tension between the social sciences and the three acharyas on the understanding of selflessness and performing actions without concern for the effect of those actions. The question posed by social scientist experts is that of reasoning with the authenticity of selflessness actions. After the introduction to this tension, chapters [8.3](#) and [9.2.1](#) revisits these challenges to provide more insight on the topic after engaging the commentaries of the three acharyas on Nishkama Karma.

The objective of this chapter was to provide a general understanding of Nishkama Karma before looking at its conception, initial understanding, and development over the years.

Chapter 4: Hindu texts that allude to Nishkama Karma

4.1 Introduction

To establish authenticity most teachings in Hinduism claim their origin from the Vedas or the Prasthanatrayi. With most Hindu texts and teachings basing the validity of their message on the Vedas, one is led to believe that teachings based on the Vedas, existed since 1500 BCE when the Vedas were first written (Bharathadri, 2015:1). Studies of the Vedas illustrate that before it was written in 1500 BCE it was part of an oral tradition that could have begun around 5000 BCE (Bharathadri, 2015:1). This means that most concepts in the Vedas or derived from the Vedas could have been a part of a tradition that existed before the writing of the Vedas in 1500 BCE, a common tradition amongst ancient cultures used for the transmission of culture, beliefs, and practices (Das, 2021:122).

Before reflecting on Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva it is important to first understand the origin and historical development of Nishkama Karma. This chapter investigates the initial understanding of Nishkama Karma⁴¹ to illustrate the change in understanding leading up to the acharya. The texts used in this chapter are:

1. Vedas (Rigveda)
2. Upanishads (Isha, Katha, Kena, Mundaka, and Chandogya)
3. Brahma Sutras
4. Bhagavad Gita

By referring to Hindu texts, this chapter constructs an understanding of Nishkama Karma that is not influenced by the three acharyas philosophy. The commentaries and literature used in this chapter conceptualise Nishkama Karma before assessing the contributions made by the three acharyas. As themes⁴² of Nishkama Karma existed before the three acharyas, it is important to understand Nishkama within Hindu holy texts. This enables the research to compare and track the development of Nishkama Karma on a 'pre' and 'post' acharya scale.

⁴¹ Hereafter referred to as NK

⁴² Selflessness, desirelessness, and the performance of duties without expecting a reward.

4.2 Hindu holy texts referring to Nishkama Karma

The search for the origin of religious teachings has always remained a difficult task as most religionists, historians, and archaeologists alike maintain that religion developed as humans developed. Most religions place their origin with the creation of mankind and believe that their religious dogma has existed ever since. Similarly, Hindus believe that Sanatana Dharma existed for all eternity.

4.2.1 The Vedas

The Vedas are often seen by Hindus as the essence of Sanatana Dharma. The Vedas are believed to have initially been conceptualised around 3000 BCE, then through an oral tradition between guru and disciple was passed down until 1500 BCE when it was first written (Shunmugam, 2018:21).

There are four Vedas, the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. The Rigveda is the oldest of the Vedas and is famously known for its hymns. The Samaveda is best known for its chants and songs, the Yajurveda for the rituals around sacrifices and the Atharvaveda for a variety of mantras and magical techniques.

The oldest of the Vedas, the Rigveda, provides the first textual reference to the principles of selflessness and desirelessness. As selflessness and desirelessness are fundamental to NK's conceptualisation, the Rigveda is the oldest textual reference to NK. This is based on Rigveda 5.46.1

*hayo na vidvan ayuji svayam dhuri tam vahami prataranimavasyuvam | nasya
vashmi vimucam navrtam punarvidvan pathah pruaeta rju nesati |*

Well knowing I have bound me, horselike, to the pole: I carry that which bears as on and gives us help. I seek for no release, no turning back therefrom. May he who knows the way, the Leader, guide me straight. (Fergus, 2017:80):

Reflecting on the verse it teaches that a person is tied up in a situation much like a horse tied to a pole. In this situation, the individual states that they desire neither to be freed from their bondage nor for a reward, all that is desired is to be guided on the correct path. Looking at the Rig 5.45.11 a plea to the Gods is made for them to help the human soul be freed from affliction. In Rig 5.46.2 reference is made to the Gods Agni, Indra, Varuna, Mitra, and Vishnu. Thus, the interpretation of "Leader" in 5.46.1,

pertains to one of the Gods answering the plea to guide the human soul beyond affliction.

Rig 5.46.1 can be understood as the first appearance of selfless action in Hindu literature. Studies of the Vedas illustrate that this is one of the very few verses that refer to selfless action. Rig 5.46.1 illustrates the essence of NK as putting aside all sense of wishes, desire, or individual needs to solely focus on performing one's duty.

Due to the oral tradition of the Vedas, the concept of selfless action as taught in Rig 5.46.1 could likely extend as far back as 3000 BCE however due to the writing of the Vedas around 1500 BCE it is scientifically correct to place the essence of NK originating around 1500 BCE.

Diebels (2018:1) explains that selfishness is an inherent characteristic as people are predisposed to be "self-focused, egocentric, and egoistic." Diebels (2018:1) further explains that through evolution and natural selection people learnt that focusing on their needs (and occasionally the needs of their family) was pivotal to survival.

Self-focused should not always be seen as a negative quality. Often, an individual will always have their best interest in mind however self-focus, as seen through NK, becomes a negative, blinding quality when the line between want and need is blurred. Through self-focus people are consumed in their desire for the thrilling and comforting sensation of pleasure in this way they desire a material object with such deep devotion that they forget what their needs are resulting in their soul forming attachments to the material world rather than focusing on Nirvana.

The destructive nature of self-focus or selfishness often ends with harmful results for the individual and the individual's intimate circle. Crocker (2017:313) states that:

Selfish motivation is clearly related to poor psychological well-being, physical health, and relationships. For example, materialism is associated with the lower psychological well-being both cross-sectionally and over time.

Crocker (2017:314) further explains that selfish behaviour further results in "poor physical health outcomes" with a strong association with "risky health behaviours" such as drug and substance abuse. Due to the strong connection between selfishness

and destructive behaviour, humans would have taught a sense of selfless behaviour for over 30 000 years, since modern humans⁴³ first appeared.

As a result, the selfless teachings found in the Vedas serve as guiding Vedic society toward understanding and fulfilling the individual role within the community. Rig 5.46.1 (around 1500 BCE) serves as a prototype definition and teaching of NK, with the full understanding of desireless desire yet to be further developed.

Since the initial teachings of NK in 1500 BCE, revolving around selfless action, it developed into desireless action and performing one's duty and responsibility to society more prominently in the following years leading up to the writing of the Bhagavad Gita.

Chopra (2018:144) notes that the Bhagavad Gita gave NK the most important place in Karma yoga as it described NK as "the Yoga of Selfless Action" and the path to realise the truth and attain Moksha. The Bhagavad Gita, written around 200 BCE, places roughly 1300 years between its initial conceptualisation as selfless action and a more advanced description where it is the path to realisation.

Mulla (2006:30) places the Bhagavad Gita as the most important text for understanding NK, as NK is explicitly described as the path to Moksha. The most popular quote on NK in the Bhagavad Gita is found in chapter 2:47/48:

47 karmany evadhikaras te, ma phalesu kadacana, ma karma-phala-hetur bhur, ma te sango 'stv akarmani. 48 yoga-sthah kuru larmani, sangam tyaktva dhananjaya, siddhy-asiddhyoh samo bhutva, samatvam yoga ucyate.

47 It is your right to perform your prescribed duty but you are never entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never think that you cause the result of your actions and never be attached to not doing your duty. 48 Perform your duty evenly O Arjuna, forsaking all attachment to success and failure, such as state is called yoga. (Mulla, 2006:30).

⁴³ Henshilwood (2003:627) defines the modern human as an advanced homo sapien species originating around 30-35 000 years ago when signs of artwork, stone tools and symbolic behaviour first appeared in the archaeological record. Modern human behaviour as understood in Archaeology proves a heightened communal sense where hazardous behaviour to the community would result in one being removed or severely punished.

Based on the above verses it is evident that the Bhagavad Gita⁴⁴ teaches NK to be the completion of one prescribed duty (with devotion) without any regard for a reward or the outcome of the task.

Comparing Rig 5.46.1 and BG 2:47/48 it is evident that the BG is more explanatory in its teachings of NK than the Vedas. Reflecting on Crocker (2017:314) selfish behaviour as hazardous to communal life meant that selfless behaviour became the favoured characteristic amongst early human civilisations.

Rig 5.46.1 is then a verse that encourages one to perform their duty without regard for the reward or outcome instead they are to trust that the one leading them will guide the individual so that the task is completed. It is then highly possible that the concept of selfless action existed in ancient India before the writing of the Vedas and was part of the Vedic oral tradition as selfless action in the Vedas and Hindu philosophy is a virtuous quality.

NK as selfless action is first mentioned in the Rigveda around 1500 BCE, since its initial writing, it then developed into the path to Moksha mentioned in the BG. The next section provides more clarity on the development of NK through the Prasthanatrayi, reflecting on how it developed since its first mention in Rig 5.46.1.

4.3 Nishkama Karma in the Upanishads

The Upanishads⁴⁵ are the oldest of the Prasthanatrayi and were written to elaborate on concepts found in the Vedas. According to Warrier (2006:8), the Upanishads are often seen as a part of the Vedas as they have the sole purpose of explaining and elaborating concepts found within the Vedas.

The Upanishads are believed to have been written between 800 and 200 BCE with Hindu folklore teaching that some of the Upanishads were written at the same time as the Vedas (Paramananda 1919:12).

⁴⁴ Hereafter referred to as BG

⁴⁵ Hereafter referred to as UP

The term Upanishad is derived from Sanskrit and translates to “one who sits near to”, suggesting a line of discipleship where a guru would sit with his student and explain key concepts derived from the Vedas (Warrier 2006:8).

Gottstein (2014:99) explains that the Upanishads provide insight into the minds of ancient Hindu philosophers who grappled with concepts relating to consciousness, truth, illusion, and immortality. The Upanishads can be understood as textual evidence of discourse between gurus and the Vedas, and, at the very least, provide insight into how ancient Hindu philosophers understood and interpreted the Vedas.

In addition to explaining concepts found in the Vedas Gottstein (2014:90) notes that the Upanishads seemingly seek to provide insight into a relationship between the soul within humans and Brahman. The Upanishads seek to provide explain the concept of Atman⁴⁶ as Brahman in a way that people could relate to.

The nature of the Upanishads, as teaching and provoking spiritual thoughts amongst Hindu philosophers, is pivotal in the historical development of Hinduism as it gave rise to the development of Hindu dogma. The Upanishads revolve around themes such as the human soul and its relation to the universe, the eternal nature of deities, karma, and rebirth. The explanation and discussion relating to karma are what makes the Upanishads relevant to the investigation of Nishkama Karma.

NK as a philosophical concept is rarely cited in its Sanskrit form of “*nis-Kama karma*” instead teachings that maintain a sense of detachment from the material world and selfless action are attributed to it.

Like Rig 5.46.1, NK is not explicitly mentioned in UP instead countless verses teach lessons of selfless action, detachment and reaching a state of no desire; these verses make up the teachings of NK. Rig 5.46.1 is seen as the only mention of selfless/detached action in the Vedas whereas UP is more explicit in the teaching of selfless action and detachment from materialistic objects.

Paramananda (1919) and Nikhilananda (2008) are widely respected commentaries on the UP. Recent commentaries on the UP refer to Paramananda (1919) and Nikhilananda (2008) as reliable English translations of the UP. A good example is Sharvananda’s (1943) translation and commentary on the Isa-UP resembles mirrors

⁴⁶ Sanskrit for “soul” or “spirit”

Paramananda's (1919) translation and commentary. The reason for this common occurrence in Sanskrit to English translations of Hindu texts is simply that, most Hindu leaders attempt to translate as 'literal' as possible. The 'literal' translations are intended for the reader to develop their insight into the religious text.

Amongst many other translations of the UP, Paramananda (1919) and Nikhilananda (2008) are preferred in this section as they offer a translation that is solely to explain the Sanskrit – as opposed to translating the text to endorse a particular Hindu ideology. Alternate translations of the UP are used in chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) when studying the different Acharya. In those translations, it is clear to see the 'unbiased'⁴⁷ translations offered by Paramananda (1919) and Nikhilananda (2008). As this section interprets texts alluring to the concept of NK, this research makes use of literal translations for this section, to later track the differences in understanding NK.

The Isa-UP II, as translated by Swami Paramananda (1919:26), reads:

If one should desire to live in this world a hundred years, one should live performing Karma. Thus, thou mayest live; there is no other way. By doing this, Karma will not defile thee.

In his commentary of the verse, Swami Paramananda (1919:27) notes that: "Karma here means the actions performed without selfish motive, for the sake of the Lord alone. When a man performs actions clinging blindly to his lower desires, then his actions bind him to the plane of ignorance or the plane of birth and death; but when the same actions are performed with surrender to God, they purify and liberate him."

Swami Paramananda contributes to NK by terming 'actions without selfish motive' as "Karma-Nishta". As previously mentioned⁴⁸, the term "Nishkama Karma" is not explicitly mentioned in any of the UP instead teachings of selfless actions or any verse about the renunciation of material desire is attributed to right action, which Swami Paramananda calls "Karma-Nishta".

As a result, understanding NK in the UP requires focusing on teachings of selfless action and desireless motive (or the desire to please "the Lord" instead of the self). Swami Paramananda (1919) and Nikhilananda (2008) provide a reputable

⁴⁷ Unbiased in the sense of solely translating the text rather than translating the text from a particular point of view.

⁴⁸ See chapter [2.3](#)

commentary on the Upanishads and are frequently consulted in this section. Academic commentaries on the UP are scarce with other widely respected commentators being Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, who will be engaged further on in this thesis. The following verses illustrate the teachings of selflessness, desire, and detachment in the UP.

Isa-UP 1.7:

He who perceives all beings as the Self, for him how can there be delusion or grief, when he sees this oneness [everywhere]?

In Swami Nikhilananda's (2008:207) commentary of this verse, he notes that when one connects with the self and realises the connection between Atman and Brahman there is no longer delusion, grief, or selfish motive instead there is a sense of oneness that promotes communal development. Swami Paramananda (1919:29) explains that grief and delusion lead to "all forms of selfishness". This verse, within its broader context, encourages one to begin a process of self-realisation where the oneness between an individual and all creation is understood. Through understanding the self, grief and delusion disappear which in turn destroys selfish behaviour. The removal of selfish motive removes the desire for a reward and is thus NK.

Isa-UP 1.11:

He who is aware of the unity of *Vidya* and *Avidya* crosses over death by *Avidya* and attains immortality through *Vidya*.

According to Timalina (2009:368), *Avidya* refers to ignorance and *Vidya* refers to knowledge. Nikhilananda (2008:211) explains that text is somewhat obscure as *Avidya* is often the nemesis of *Vidya*. As a result, within this context, *Avidya* should be seen as ignorant of materialistic attachment and knowledge of false knowledge to attain immortality (Nikhilananda, 2008:211). False knowledge is often understood as knowledge gained through illusion, this false knowledge encourages one to fulfil their desire and seek constant pleasure (Paramananda, 1919:31). In this way knowledge of one's desires is required so that one can break the attachment and perform desireless action.

Katha-UP 1.2.11:

O Nachiketas, thou hast seen the fulfilment of all desires, the basis of the universe, the endless fruit of sacrificial rites, the shore where there is no fear, that which is praiseworthy, the great and wide support; yet, being wise, thou hast rejected all with firm resolve.

In this passage, Yama (God of death) is having a conversation with Nachiketas (a character in the story who is believed to be the son of the Sage Vayashravas). Paramananda (1919:56) explains that Yama praises Nachiketas as he (Nachiketas) refused heavenly and earthly pleasures as his only desire was to realise the ultimate truth. Reflecting on Paramananda's (1919:56) commentary desire for the truth is a noble cause, one that is worthy of praise. This verse teaches that the desire for earthly and heavenly pleasures is not as noble as the desire for truth (which ultimately liberates the soul whereas earthly/heavenly pleasures only attach one to the cycle of rebirth).

Katha-UP 1.2.16/17:

This Word is indeed Brahman. This Word is indeed the Supreme. He who knows this Word obtains whatever he desires. This is the best support, this is the highest support; he who knows this support is glorified in the world of Brahman.

Nikhilananda (2008:139) explains that the "Word" refers to the three letters: "A, U, and M, pronounced in combination as Om..." The Om symbol is seen as a sacred chant within Hinduism, Dwivedi (2017:2) states: "It [Om] refers to Atman and Brahman."

According to Paramananda (1919:59), Om is the most sacred sound of the Supreme and that chanting this sacred sound unites Atman and Brahman resulting in the fulfilment of all desires. Interestingly Paramananda (1919:59) claims that all desires are fulfilled once the "glory of God" is "realised", desire in this sense is seeking truth, the reunification of Atman and Brahman through chanting the holy sound. All righteous desires (desire to realise truth) are then fulfilled as one does not have wicked desires (desire for materialistic pleasure) and chant the sacred symbol of the divine, Om.

Katha-UP 1.2.20:

The Self is subtler than the subtle, greater than the great; it dwells in the heart of each living being. He who is free from desire and free from grief, with mind and senses tranquil, beholds the glory of Atman.

Nikhilananda (2008:141) notes that the self is Atman and that Atman is in all living creatures, to connect with the inner Atman, one must free themselves from desire and grief. Connecting with the inner Atman then unifies Atman with Brahman upon which the glory of Atman is realised; the glory of Atman is then the ability to recognise the Atman that resides within all living creatures.

Paramananda (1919:60) explains that Atman cannot be “perceived by the senses” instead “a finer spiritual sight is required”. The finer spiritual sight required to identify Atman and perceive its existence within all living creatures is attained by freeing oneself from desire and grief. Perceiving Atman within all creation occurs when the Atman is reunited with Brahman, to reunite with Brahman Moksha is attained through the detachment from desire; thus, NK in this verse is understood as freedom from material desire which allows one to identify Atman in all living creatures.

Katha-UP 1.2.24:

He who has not turned away from evil conduct, whose senses are uncontrolled, who is not tranquil, whose mind is not at rest, he can never attain this Atman even by knowledge.

Evil conduct stems from selfish desire, one obsessed with their own gain and benefit is willing to go to any extent to attain what they deeply desire. This verse illustrates that even if one is knowledgeable regarding the philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads, they will never be able to attain Moksha if they are of evil conduct and selfish behaviour. Paramananda (1919:63) states: “He must conquer the impure selfish desires which now disturb the serenity of his mind.” Selfish desire in this context corrupts the mind leading to further evil conduct, therefore, to attain Atman and Moksha one must rid all selfish desire from the mind. To do so one must perform NK.

Katha-UP 2.3.14:

When all desires dwelling in the heart cease, then the mortal becomes immortal and attains Brahman here.

This verse is straightforward in relating to NK by saying that the end of desire allows one to attain Brahman. The attainment of Brahman is the attainment of Nirvana and freedom from the material world. This verse is one of the popular UP references when defining NK, the end of all desire allows one to attain liberation. Nikhilananda

(2008:188) claims that this verse, in retrospect of the previous verses, emphasises that it is “desirelessness” which “...which reveals the immortal nature of Atman...”

Kena-UP 1.2:

It is the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of the speech, the life of the life, the eye of the eye. The wise, freed [from the senses and mortal desires], after leaving this world, become immortal.

Like the previous verse, this verse teaches that the wise are those who are freed from their senses and mortal desires, such freedom makes one immortal and therefore in Nirvana. Paramananda (1919:100) explains that what is of the material realm remains in the material realm, the wisdom of this allows one to understand that Atman is immaterial and therefore eternal. The state of immortality is attained when one is freed from mortal desire and the attachment thereof. NK plays into this verse by teaching and guiding people as they journey away from the attachment of mortal desires.

Mundaka-UP 1.2.12:

Let a Brahmana [God-seeker], after having examined all these words attained through Karma-Marga [sacrifices and good deeds], become free from all desires; realising that the eternal cannot be gained by the non-eternal...

In this context, Paramananda (1919:100) and Nikhilananda (2008:276) agree that the term “Brahmana” or Brahmin does not endorse the caste system. The term Brahmin, according to Vedic tradition, distances themselves from the pleasures of the material world in pursuit of knowledge. Nikhilananda (2008:276) asserts that whoever is a devoted seeker of knowledge, truth and Brahman is “entitled to be called a Brahmin.” Therefore, one who seeks God follows the path of Karma Marga and frees themselves from all desire (through NK), in doing so they attain Moksha. In stating “the eternal cannot be gained by the non-eternal” this verse teaches that desiring objects of pleasure from the material world will only attach one to the samsara cycle however one who frees themselves from all earthly desires focuses only on that which is eternal (truth and knowledge) attains the eternal. In doing so, this verse endorses NK as a practice guiding one to eternity.

Mundaka-UP 3.1.6:

Truth alone conquers, not untruth. By Truth the spiritual path is widened, that path by which seers, who are free from all desires, travel to the highest abode of Truth.

According to this verse, those who are freed from all desires can travel the path of truth and attain the highest level of knowledge and truth. This verse simply explains that through the process of freeing oneself from all desire and the attachment thereof (as NK teaches), one is then freed from all forms of illusions (“untruth” according to the text) and attains eternity through the attainment of ultimate truth.

Mundaka-UP 3.1.10:

Whatever worlds the man of purified mind covets, and whatever objects he desires, he obtains those worlds and those objects...

In understanding desire within this verse Nikhilananda (2008:303) states: “Since the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman, a prayer to him is a prayer to Brahman Itself.” In this context Brahman is used as the Sanskrit version of the English word “God”, in knowing the self, one knows God and therefore is God. With the assertion that one is then God whatever is desired is then obtained. Desire in this context is understood as noble, righteous, and divine which contributes to cosmic harmony and sustenance of the natural order (Paramananda, 1919:148).

Mundaka-UP 3.2.1/2:

...Discerning men, without desire, by serving reverently such a knower [of Self] go beyond the seed. He who broods on objects of desire and covets them, is born here and there according to his desires; but he whose desires are fulfilled and who has known the Self, his desires vanish even here. A selfish man, who is identified with the flesh, clings to the small and finite; and however covetous of a larger life he may be, he cannot attain it. A man may wish to go to the other shore; but if he does not pull up the anchor, his boat will not move.

Nikhilananda (2008:305) notes that Atman reveals its true nature (unity with Brahman) to those who truly seek it; Atman cannot be attained through study of the Vedas or any form of learning and intelligence.

Therefore, the realisation of Atman is gained by one who sets aside all material desires in pursuit of the knowledge and truth of the self. “...the seed” mentioned in the verse

refers to the process of birth (and its relation to the Samsara cycle) and teaches that men filled with wisdom are free from desire and transcend beyond the cycle of reincarnation into Nirvana. Desireless (of materialistic assets) as an essential quality to attain Moksha is repeated as the verse illustrates that a selfish man cannot attain Moksha irrespective of how knowledgeable he may be or how much he wishes.

Paramananda (1919:149) states: “Every desire is a seed from which spring birth, death and all mortal afflictions. Illumination alone will destroy the seed.” Illumination in the context that Paramananda (1919:149) uses refers to the realisation of Atman as one sees beyond the maya of the material world. This verse emphasises that one should be freed from all desires to attain Moksha.

Mundaka-UP 3.2.5:

The Rishis [wise Seers], after having attained It [self], become satisfied through knowledge. Having accomplished their end and being free from all desire, they become tranquil. The self-possessed wise ones, realizing the all-pervading Spirit present in all things, enter into all.

Similar to the previous verses, knowledge is a noble desire that, after the renunciation of all desires, results in the attainment of the self and therefore enters Nirvana (state of tranquillity). Nikhilananda (2008:307) explains that desire fools the mind into believing the idea of individuality (that is associated with the body, senses, mind, and ego), resulting in ignorance while “Brahman, or Pure Consciousness, alone is real.”

This verse further emphasises the destructive nature of desire in covering Atman and the path to Moksha by enticing one with material, temporary pleasures.

Chandogya-UP 3.14.2/3:

He who consists of the mind, whose body is subtle, whose form is light, whose thoughts are true, whose nature is like the akasa⁴⁹, whose creation in this universe, who cherishes all righteous desires, who contains all pleasant odours, who is endowed with all tastes, who embraces all this, who never speaks and who is without longing – He is my Self within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice, smaller than a grain of barley, smaller than a mustard seed, smaller than a grain of millet;

⁴⁹ Akasa or Akasha in Hindu philosophy refers to the cosmos, universe, and space. In this context it explains Brahman as Akasa, being within everything that is in the universe and therefore being the universe.

He is my Self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the mid-region, greater than the heaven, greater than all these worlds.

The Chandogya-UP is often cited in Hinduism as a vital text for understanding desire. The “Self” mentioned in this verse refers to Atman and illustrates that one with “righteous desires” attains Atman, which is within everything both minuscule and grand. This verse agrees with Katha-UP 1.2.11 and Mundaka-UP 3.1.10 by illustrating that desire should be divided into two branches, a good and a bad. Applying this verse to NK would mean that the desire to have no desires refers to the righteous desire (pursuit of truth, knowledge, and Atman) of detachment and disinterest in materialistic desires (wealth and fame).

Chandogya-UP 8.1.5:

The he [the teacher] should say: ‘With the old age of the body, That (i.e. Brahman, described as the akasa in the heart) does not age; with the death of the body, That does not die. That Brahman and not the body is the real city of Brahman. In It all desires are contained. It is the Self-free from sin, free from old age, free from death, free from grief, free from hunger, free from thirst; Its desires come true, Its thoughts come true. Just as, here on earth, people follow as they are commanded by a leader and depend upon whatever objects they desire, be it a country or a piece of land so also those who are ignorant of the Self depend upon other objects and experience the result of their good and evil deeds.

This verse explains that Brahman is not contained by the limitations of the body (birth and death) instead the Atman as a part of Brahman is Brahman. Upon the attainment of Brahman all righteous desires (to be freed from the samsara cycle) are contained however one who is ignorant of the Atman within them is deluded in the pursuit of earthly desires (such as land or power). In the end, one is judged based on whether they had a righteous or wicked desire.

This verse further illustrates the Chandogya-UP explaining that desire should be understood as a tool that can either liberate one or attach one to the cycle of rebirth.

Chandogya-UP 8.7.1:

Prajapati said: The self which is free from sin, free from old age, free from death, free from grief, free from hunger, free from thirst, whose desires come true and whose thoughts come true – That is which be searched out, That it is which one

should desire to understand. He who has known this Self from the scriptures and a teacher and understood it obtains all the worlds and all desires.

This verse teaches that one should seek to understand the desire and guide Atman to be free from sin, old age, death, and birth (the cause of grief, hunger, and thirst), ultimately the samsara cycle. According to this verse, understanding desire means that one acknowledges the important role desire plays in attaining Moksha. Furthermore, this verse defines desire as the pursuit of Moksha (as one understands the self from learning the scriptures), which ultimately guides one to attaining oneness with all creation.

Conclusion

From a brief, almost discreet, mention of selfless behaviour in the Vedas the concept of desireless action developed more elaborately in the UP where it became an essential factor in attaining Moksha. With over hundreds of different texts making up the UP, there is no shortage of teachings on selfless behaviour. The verses chosen above are namely from the Isa, Kena, Katha, Mundaka and Chandogya UP, these five were specifically chosen the central theme of the UP is encapsulated within these texts. Furthermore, in understanding the characteristics and nature of NK in the UP these four texts illustrate, in detail, the important role of detachment and selfless action in attaining Moksha.

Since the first mention of selfless behaviour in the Vedas which was seen as identifying the harmful nature of selfishness and correcting it, NK developed into a fundamental practice of Moksha. With the completion of the UP being around 200 BCE⁵⁰, it took approximately 1300 years for NK to develop from the teaching of desirelessness in the Vedas to the path leading to Moksha in the UP.

The abovementioned verses illustrate the importance of desirelessness in attaining Moksha. Although most of the verses illustrate a negative view of desire, Katha-UP 1.2.11, 1.2.16/17 and Mundaka-UP 3.1.6 argue that there are two ways in which desire can be understood; desire for noble causes (such as the pursuit of truth and Atman resulting in the attainment of Moksha) and desire for pleasure (wealth and fame resulting in attachment to the samsara cycle).

⁵⁰ See **Error! Reference source not found.**

The different ways of understanding desire, as seen in the UP, aids in clarifying the practice of NK as desirelessness. The UP endorses the practice of NK as desirelessness by teaching that it is only through detachment from the desire for earthly pleasure that one attains Moksha. The desire that requires detachment is seen as wicked desire (searching for materialistic gain that brings pleasure to the senses), as the UP teaches that desiring Brahman, truth, and knowledge is noble and leads one to Moksha.

4.4 Nishkama Karma in the Brahma Sutras

The second book of the Prasthanatrayi is the Brahma Sutras which was designed to further elaborate, discuss, and explain philosophical and religious dogma found in the Vedas and UP. The UP was written between 800-200 BCE and the Brahma Sutras between 500-400 BC, resulting in many Hindu philosophers maintaining that the latter part of the UP was completed around the same time that the Brahma Sutras were written.

Siva (2008:5) states that the Brahma Sutras⁵¹ cannot be understood independently from the Vedas as it reiterates philosophical concepts found in the Upanishads and Vedas. Sage Vyasa is the widely accepted author of the Vedas and whilst the oldest surviving text of the Brahma Sutras dates to around 400 CE, it is traditionally believed to have been composed as far back as 500 BCE (Bhattacharya 2012:13).

The Brahma Sutras is comprised of four chapters with 16 different sections that cover 223 topics and 555 sutras that build upon, explain, and clarify philosophical concepts found in the Upanishads. Rao (2012:8-12) explains that the four chapters cover the themes; of interpretation, reconciliation, spiritual practice and accomplishment, these themes aim to provide an understanding of Brahman and Atman as described in the Upanishads and Vedas.

The objective of the Brahma Sutras is like that of the Upanishads as it seeks to explain concepts found in the Vedas. Although the objectives might be similar, the Brahma Sutras are more explanatory and easier to understand than the Upanishads (Krishnananda 2006:5). As the Brahma Sutras are regarded as one of the Vedantic

⁵¹ Sutra from the Sanskrit term for “law” or “rule” thus the Brahma Sutras translating to the laws of Brahmas

texts (of which the three acharyas commented), this research uses the Brahma Sutras to study the development of Nishkama Karma

NK had developed from selfless action in the Vedas to the path to Moksha in the UP, since the writing of the Brahma Sutras began after that of the UP this section explores the nature of NK in the Brahma Sutras and the contribution it made to the historical development of NK. Due to the conceptualisation of selfless action and non-attachment in the UP NK had developed by the time the Brahma Sutras were written however, much like the UP, NK is not explicitly referred to in the Brahma Sutras.

As a result, studying the nature of NK in the Brahma Sutras entails investigating its approach to teaching selfless action and detachment from desire and materialistic objects. Furthermore, studies into the Brahma Sutras (in comparison to the Vedas, UP and Bhagavad Gita) have not been a topic of interest in recent years due to most concepts engaged in the Brahma Sutras having been discussed in more popular texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. As a result, there are limited academic resources that offer a commentary on the Brahma Sutras resulting in old sources, that are relevant to this study. The following verses illustrate the concept of desire, selfless action, and detachment in the Brahma Sutras.

Samanvaya Ashyaya 1.1.1:

Now, therefore, the enquiry into Brahman.

During a religious discussion on the Brahma Sutras Sri K.S. Varadacharya noted that this verse illustrates the desire to understand the knowledge of Brahman. Sivananda (2008:13) agrees by acknowledging that the first verse of the Brahma Sutras⁵² expresses a deep desire to know the true nature of Brahman. The general theme of the BS is that Atman is merely a manifestation of Brahman and that the process of Moksha reunifies Atman and Brahman therefore seeking to know Brahman and the knowledge thereof is due to the desire to realise Atman and Brahman. This verse is understood as the desire to enquire about the true nature of Brahman supports the Upanishads in defining desire as both constructive and destructive.

Kamadyadhikaranam 3.3.39:

⁵² Hereafter referred to as BS

True desire [as in the Chandogya-UP] is on account of the abode

Sivananda (2008:408) explains that this verse refers to the Chandogya-UP 8.1.1-5 to explain that true desire comes from the unity of Atman and Brahman. The “true desire” as described by Sivananda (2008:408) seeks to free the Atman from sin so that it may be united with Brahman, upon the realisation of Brahman the desire remains pure by seeking to maintain the cosmic balance.

Kamyadhikaranam 3.3.60:

Vidyas yielding particular desires may or may not be combined according to one’s liking

Vireswarananda (1936:403) explains that Vidya refers to knowledge of the soul gained through the desire for self-realisation furthermore it illustrates that knowledge of the self produces different desires that are of noble intentions (which contribute to personal growth and development which, in turn, contributes to communal prosperity), which an individual then chooses to follow. Knowledgeable desire inspires one to contribute to society by way of social work, political activism or religious teachings that help society develop.

Asramakarmadhikaranam 3.4.32:

And the duties of the Asramas [are to be performed also by him who does not desire emancipation] because they are enjoined [on him by the scriptures].

According to Sivananda (2008:454), this verse teaches that the duties of an individual are required to be fulfilled whether they seek Moksha or not. This verse illustrates the importance of karma in society; one’s responsibilities and duties are to be performed irrespective of whether one seeks Moksha or not. NK emphasises the importance of performing one’s duties without the desire for rewards, this verse teaches that irrespective of one practising selfless action (to attain Moksha) or not, the duties required of him need to be completed as per the teachings of the scriptures (the Vedas and UP).

Na cha kary pratipattyabhisandhih 4.3.14:

And the desire to attain Brahman cannot be with respect to the Saguna Brahman.

Saguna Brahman refers to an anthropomorphic (where Brahman is seen as omnipresent, omnipotent, loving, and compassionate) and an infinite (where Brahman is seen as indescribable) understanding of Brahman. Nirguna Brahman refers to an understanding of Brahman without shape and attributes where Brahman is seen as the infinite universe without being anthropomorphised

Sivananda (2006:520) notes that the desire to attain Brahman is only fulfilled through Saguna Brahman and not through Nirguna Brahman. Saguna Brahman teaches that whilst Brahman is infinite in principle, qualities and attributes are ascribed to Brahman to guide people to self-realisation. As Nirguna Brahman teaches that Brahman has no qualities, qualities ascribed to Brahman through Saguna inspire people to desire living out their lives following those attributes. Furthermore, Saguna Brahman allows one to personalise Brahman understandably.

Although Saguna Brahman allows the personalisation of Brahman this verse claims that the desire to realise Brahman is met when one understands that the nature of Brahman extends beyond the finite, human qualities that are ascribed. This verse further illustrates the importance of desire in attaining Brahman.

Closing remarks

The BS consists of 191 topics encased in four chapters:

- 1) Samanvaya Adhyaaya – reflects on the UP to understand the nature of Atman and Brahman
- 2) Avirodha Adhyaaya – engages different philosophical problems with understanding Brahman
- 3) Saadhana Adhyaaya – this chapter explains in great detail the path and requirements of attaining Moksha
- 4) Phala Adhyaaya – explains what liberation entails and describes Nirvana

The BS, in its entirety, is far smaller than the UP as it focuses mainly on explaining the relationship between Atman and Brahman, the process of reuniting the two and describing what the unity with Brahman entails. As a result of constant reference to the UP and the focus of the BS, selfless action in the BS is briefly touched on. Desire in the BS, as seen in *Kamadyadhikaranam* 3.3.39, is mostly referred to in a positive

light where one is encouraged to aspire to live by the qualities affiliated with Brahman (Knowledge, compassion, truthfulness, and love).

The BS contributes to understanding desire as twofold, which in turn aids the concept of NK in explaining that false, wicked, and materialistic desire should be disassociated whereas the desire for noble causes (such as truth and Moksha) is encouraged.

4.5 Nishkama Karma in the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is seen as the central point of reference by Hindu philosophers when discussing NK. Sivananda (2001:6) explains that the height of NK is found in the BG as it merges the paths of Karma and Bhakti yoga. NK, as desireless and selfless action, is most explicitly engaged in the BG with most Hindu religious teachers recognising the BG as the most authoritative text for teaching NK.

The Bhagavad Gita⁵³, also known as the Gitopanishad⁵⁴, is one of the most world-renowned texts of Hindu literature. Originally written in Sanskrit, the Bhagavad Gita was written around 200 BCE by the sage Vyasa (Prabhupada 1989:3). Today the Gita has been translated into other languages, such as English, French, Russian, Japanese, Zulu, and Afrikaans, as communities around the globe demand access to the Bhagavad Gita.

Fosse (2007:10) explains that under the strong critique of Hinduism during the British rule of India, Hindu apologists used the Gita as the “embodiment of the essential spirit and deepest truths of Hinduism”, making the Gita become the core of the Hindu faith to the western world whilst being the words of Sri Krishna to Hindus.

The essence of the Gita is a conversation between Sri Krishna and Arjuna where Sri Krishna is deemed as the embodiment of the supreme Godhead⁵⁵. The Gita is set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra (Gita 1:1), a city in north India, amidst a battle between two powerful families, the Pandavas and Kauravas (Gita 1:1-13). Arjun, a Pandava prince, was exiled alongside his family, by his uncle the Kaurav King Duryodhana who

⁵³ from the words “Bhagavan” meaning God and “Gita” meaning song, translating to “the song of God”

⁵⁴ Gitopanishad being a combination of the words “Gita” and “Upanishad” to link the Bhagavad Gita to the Upanishads to depict the Gita as the essence of Vedic knowledge (Prabhupada 1989:3).

⁵⁵ The Supreme Godhead or the Supreme personality of Godhead is understood as the embodiment and material form of the Trimurti – Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (Prabhupada 1989:3).

won the kingdom from Arjun's brother Yudhishtira through a gambling game called pachisi.

Behura (2017:51) agrees with Sivananda (2001:6) by describing NK as “Geeta’s message for the decaying humanity” as it teaches people to serve one another without any expectations which will “result in a balanced society.” For Behura (2017:51) the BG contains the essence of NK and therefore symbolises the peak of its historical development.

Sivananda (2001:6) and Behura (2017:51) acknowledge the importance of the Vedas, UP and BS in the historical development of NK however they proclaim the BG as a fundamental text for understanding NK. According to Muniapan (2013:182), the BG “promotes the concept of Nishkama Karma” and has a vital role in the understanding of NK.

The previous sections highlighted that NK was part of an oral tradition before its first mention in the Vedas thereafter, through analysis of different texts in the UP and BS, teachings about desireless action and non-attachment developed into a path to Moksha where desire was seen as both good and bad. The BG, 200 BCE, was written just as the UP and BS were completed. By the time the BG was written, NK had already developed into a path to Moksha (as seen in the UP) furthermore based on the UP stressing the importance of NK, this section seeks to explore in what manner the BG emphasised the role and importance of NK.

The BG has 18 chapters and 700 verses; one could easily study NK as there are over 300 mentions of desire, desireless action, selfless action, and detachment. On the importance of the BG in understanding NK, Gowda (2001:86) reflects on Swami Vivekananda’s understanding of the BG and describes Nishkama Karma as the “Moral foundation” of the BG. Gowda (2001:86) states:

For Vivekananda, *Nishkama karma* or non-attachment is the core teaching of the *Bhagavadgita*. It is central to the text as ‘sacrifice and love’ are central to Buddhism and ‘service and love’ to Christianity

Furthermore, chapter [2.3](#) illustrated that the BG (2.47) provides the standard for defining NK. This makes the BG essential to understanding NK. As a result, the

following verses have been carefully selected to illustrate the central understanding of desireless action in the BG.

BG 1.44:

Alas, how strange it is that we are preparing to commit greatly sinful acts. Driven by the desire to enjoy royal happiness, we are intent on killing our own kinsmen.

Prabhupada (1989:70) explains that desire leads one to selfish motives, of which one would even commit the sinful acts of killing “one’s brother, father or mother” to satisfy their temporary pleasure. Sangraha (2002:19) agrees with Prabhupada (1989:70) in stating that this verse teaches one to transcend beyond the limitations of their physical bodies, humans are not animals that seek only to fill their bellies so they should aspire to transcend beyond the desire to constantly please themselves.

The context of the BG is set as part of a broader discussion between Sri Krishna and Arjuna on a battlefield, where Arjuna seeks to defeat the Pandavas (his uncle) and reclaim the throne. This verse illustrates that the desire to attain royalty (and all the wealth associated with it) blinds one from perceiving the full extent to which they are willing to go to attain it (killing their own family).

BG 2.47-49:

You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty. 48 Perform your duty equipoised, O Arjuna, abandoning all attachment to success or failure. Such equanimity is called yoga. 49 O Dhananjaya, keep all abominable activities far distant by devotional service, and in that consciousness surrender unto the Lord. Those who want to enjoy the fruits of their work are misers.

According to Prabhupada (1989:70), the BG segments action into three branches:

- 1) Prescribed duty – activities designated to a person based on their skillset
- 2) Capricious work – acting without authority
- 3) Inaction – performing no action

In verse 48 Krishna explains to Arjuna that he is to perform his prescribed duty without any attachment to the result, as he is entitled to perform his duty but not to the fruit of his actions. This verse is frequently cited by Hindu philosophers in explaining NK as it encapsulates the essence of selfless action.

To Algeo (2000:8), this verse illustrates the dilemma that people are often faced with when performing their duty; who will it affect? And how will this action affect me and my family? These were some of the questions running through the mind of Arjuna before he fought his family; to answer those questions Algeo (2000:8) notes that Krishna explains to Arjuna that he should only focus on his duty.

Verses 47 and 48 provide the most popular definition of NK; performing one's duty without any attachment or desire, being solely objective and dedicated to performing the prescribed task at hand. Verse 49 teaches that in performing desireless action one is performing devotional service unto the Lord (Krishna). Furthermore, verse 49 defines those who are attached to their task and the reward thereof as misers and greedy people who are performing abominable acts, therefore not gaining the favour of the Lord.

Reflecting on Rig 5.46.1, heeding the advice of Krishna, Arjuna would have completed surrendered all desire for reward hoping that his actions would please the Lord, who in turn would guide him to Moksha. This verse signifies the height of the development of NK, providing the final definition and understanding that would be cited for generations to come.

BG 2.50-51:

A man engaged in devotional service rids himself of both good and bad reactions even in this life. Therefore, strive for yoga, which is the art of all work. 51 By thus engaging in devotional service to the Lord, great sages, or devotees free themselves from the results of work in the material world. In this way they become free from the cycle of birth and death and attain the state beyond all miseries [by going back to Godhead].

The previous verse described selfless action and detachment as devotional service, therefore when performing NK, one is freed from their emotions which in turn frees them from the samsara cycle. Krishnananda (2014:38) explains that ignorance blinds one to the suffering and pain within the world and that ignorance is caused by the

constant desire to fulfil one's urges. These verses teach that for one to "attain the state beyond all miseries" (Nirvana), one must perform devotional services to the lord (desireless action).

These verses further emphasise the importance of NK in attaining Moksha by describing it as devotional service; one should work without selfish intent as if they are working for the Lord.

BG 2.55-59:

The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: O Partha, when a man gives up all varieties of desire for sense gratification, which arise from mental concoction, and when his mind, thus purified, finds satisfaction in the self alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness. 56 One who is not disturbed in mind even amidst the threefold miseries or elated when there is happiness, and who is free from attachment, fear, and anger, is called a sage of steady mind. 57 In the material world, one who is unaffected by whatever good or evil he may obtain, neither praising nor despising it, is firmly fixed in perfect knowledge. 58 One who is able to withdraw his senses from sense objects, as the tortoise draws its limbs within the shell, is firmly fixed in perfect consciousness. 59 The embodied soul may be restricted from sense enjoyment, though the taste for sense objects remain. But, ceasing such engagements by experiencing a higher taste, he is fixed in consciousness.

In verse 55 Prabhupada (1989:144) comments that one who practices NK is deeply rooted in Krishna consciousness or devotional service to the Lord and "has all the good qualities of the great sages" whereas one who does not practice devotional services has no good qualities. The principle of NK is evident in verse 55 as it explains that after one has given up all their desires their minds are purified, and they attain transcendental consciousness (or Nirvana).

Verses 56-57 provide a depiction of what a practitioner of NK would look like; one who is unaffected by the turmoil of the earth. Verse 58-59 further emphasises the importance of detachment from the material world, focusing only on knowledge of the divine to attain Moksha. Verses 55-59 provide a more elaborate explanation of NK when compared to verses 50-51, within the broader context of the narrative, Arjuna (in verse 54) asks Krishna what the characteristics of one who has forsaken all desire are, to which Krishna responds in verse 55-59.

BG 2.61-62:

One who restrains his senses, keeping them under full control, and fixes his consciousness upon Me, is known as a man of steady intelligence. 62 While contemplating the objects of the senses, a person develops attachment for them, and from such attachment lust develops, and from lust anger arises.

Control is more than a necessity; it is a characteristic of intelligence. Verse 61 claims that a person who can control his senses (the cause of desire) is then able to focus on Krishna (The Supreme Personality of Godhead), allowing him to attain knowledge and Moksha. Verse 62 explains the process of attachment and how it results in destructive behaviour due to the addiction to materialistic objects, which is a result of the inability to control one's senses.

These verses explain the logistics around practising NK, as well as explaining the importance of desireless action.

BG 2.63-64:

From anger, complete delusion arises, and from delusion bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost one falls down again into the material pool. 64 But a person free from all attachment and aversion and able to control his senses through regulative principles of freedom can obtain the complete mercy of the Lord.

The “material pool” refers to the process of rebirth where one is attached to the earth, the cause of this begins from anger; a violent/aggressive response as a result of an emotional attachment to a specific activity or outcome. Verse 64 explains that to be completely free; one needs to obtain the favour of the Lord. To obtain favour from the Lord, a person needs to be free from all forms of attachment that arouse emotions (emotions which result in destructive behaviour and a loss of intelligence therefore, binding one to the cycle of rebirth).

Detachment in verse 64 further emphasises the importance of practising NK to attain salvation.

BG 3.30-32:

Therefore, O Arjuna, surrendering all your works unto Me, with full knowledge of Me, without desires for profit, with no claims to proprietorship, and free from lethargy, fight. 31 Those persons who execute their duties according to My injunctions and who follow this teaching faithfully, without envy, become free from the bondage of fruitive actions. 32 But those who, out of envy, disregard these teachings and do not follow them are to be considered bereft of all knowledge, befooled, and ruined in their endeavours for perfection.

In verse 30, NK is seen as performing all actions as if it was work for the Lord. Religious leaders and elders of the Krishna consciousness movement cite these verses in teaching members of the community to contribute to the development of the movement without expecting any rewards as their sole desire should be to please the Lord (Prabhupada, 1989:12). Krishnananda (2014:47) explains that it is only through the practice of selfless action that one can attain perfection and Moksha, irrespective of how hard one works. These verses portray NK as service unto the Lord, service unto the Lord is an important part of Bhakti as it displays the amount of devotion that disciples have furthermore service unto the Lord results in the attainment of Moksha.

As a result, all tasks performed should be seen as work performed unto the Lord; in this way, one is detached from the action and outcome of the action. Furthermore, verse 32 indicates that it is only tasks performed without attachment that are perfect, those who do not practice selfless action will always fall short of completing the task due to wicked intentions.

BG 4.18:

One who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among men, and he is in the transcendental position, although engaged in all sorts of activities.

Antonov (2008:6) explains that those who practice NK are freed from the consequences of action. This verse posits that the ability to be desireless in performing a task is the mark of an intelligent and enlightened individual, the ability to understand but not be attached to action and inaction while being engaged in activities is a characteristic of a person filled with divine discernment. This verse contributes to understanding NK as not only desireless action but also disconnected activity,

whereby one performs the task without any sense of comprehension, focusing only on completing the task. The ability to be transcendental amidst performing activities refers to a state of oblivion where one is unaffected by the task that they perform as they are solely focused on the Lord. The state of being transcendental refers to the consciousness of an individual being in a state like Nirvana, where the mind is unaffected by the events of the material world.

BG 5.3:

One who neither hates nor desires the fruits of his activities is known to be always renounced. Such a person, free from all dualities, easily overcomes material bondage and is completely liberated, O mighty-armed Arjuna.

According to Sangraha (2002:21), a “fully realised yogin is free from attachment because of the experience of the highest reality.” Sangraha (2002:21) asserts that because a yogi has experienced the highest form of consciousness (through meditation) earthly pleasure no longer appeases him. Experiencing the highest form of consciousness enlightens one to universal wisdom, after which temporary, materialistic objects are no longer satisfactory.

The state of being renounced refers to one who is not concerned with the outcomes of the activity, this verse (like previous verses) then illustrates that a ‘renouncer’ is freed from all desirable objects and dualities resulting in liberation. This verse is often repeated in variant forms throughout the BG, this repetition is the general understanding of NK in the BG; perform your actions without attachment to attain salvation.

Closing remarks

NK sees the peak of its development as a fundamental principle to attaining Moksha in 200 BCE when the BG was written. Comparing the texts on NK in the BG to the Vedas, UP and BS, it is evident that the concept of desireless action is far more elaborative in the BG.

NK in the BG can be seen as:

- 1) the right to perform one’s duty but not to the fruits of that action
- 2) state of being desireless

- 3) state of transcendental consciousness where one who practices NK possess the best qualities of all the great sages
- 4) service unto the Lord
- 5) state of being content
- 6) sign of wisdom and the path to Moksha

Algeo (2000:7) describes the BG as God (Krishna) guiding Arjuna to victory over the wicked Pandavas however Arjuna is emotionally perplexed as he is to fight and kill his family, friends, teachers, and spiritual guides. The moral dilemma of Arjuna, according to Algeo (2000:7), is a challenge that he wrestles with throughout the BG.

Arjuna is stuck between defending his family (by reclaiming the throne) and fighting his relatives and friends to attain the throne. Krishna, under the guise of Arjuna's charioteer, constantly provides Arjuna with words of wisdom. To help Arjuna understand the importance of him performing his duty as a warrior without concern for those he is fighting against; Krishna uses the concept of NK to teach Arjuna how to focus only on the will of Krishna (as performing service to the Lord) rather than on his actions and their effect.

With the writing of the BG in 200 BCE, NK reached the peak of its development. As the BG is the final book of the Prasthanatrayi, its teachings of desireless action drew closure to the historical development of NK. The BG, based on the abovementioned verses illustrating the nature and importance of NK, proves itself as the most elaborative of the Prasthanatrayi in explaining NK. The BG contains the understanding of NK from the Vedas, UP and BS, with further additions to the concept to guide practitioners in fully understanding NK.

Last, chapters 3, 5 and 18 are solely dedicated to Karma yoga (NK), Karma yoga (Surrendering acts to the Lord) and mastering renunciation, respectively. Due to 3 of its chapters focusing on explaining selfless action, the BG is the most profound, elaborative, and important Hindu text when studying NK.

4.6 Conclusion

Investigations into philosophical concepts found in the Vedas often produce the same outcomes; NK, like many other concepts in the Vedas, forms part of an oral tradition that extends up to 3000 years before the writing of the Vedas in 1500 BCE.

Due to the destructive nature of selfish behaviour, teachings of selflessness are likely to have first appeared around 30 000 years ago (when modern humans first appeared in the archaeological record). Despite the high probability of selflessness being taught as far back as 30 000, NK as taught in the Vedas only appeared in Indic societies around 3000 BCE (1500 years before the writing of the Vedas).

Rigveda 5.46.1 and BG 3.30-32 exemplify NK as more than mere selflessness; it is the path to awakening, self-realisation, the attainment of ultimate consciousness and Nirvana/Moksha.

Reflecting on the development of NK from the Vedas and through the Prasthanatrayi, there is little to no deviation in the definition of NK. NK remained selfless action, detachment, and a state of desirelessness that either unites Atman with Brahman (as seen in the UP and BS), allows the attainment of knowledge and favour of the Lord/Krishna (as seen in the BG) or clears the mind, allowing it to attain Nirvana/Moksha.

The unification of Atman and Brahman, favour of Krishna and clearing of the mind are all recognised as the attainment of salvation and freedom from the Samsara cycle. Therefore, NK is the process of detachment from a desire that results in the attainment of salvation; as seen in the Vedas and the Prasthanatrayi.

This chapter further illustrated that the BG marked the epitome of the historical development of NK as it contains detailed accounts of practising and understanding selflessness, detachment and desireless action.

Although Singh (1999:25), Pathak (2015:119), Behura (2017:49) and Chopra (2018:141) recognise the origin of NK in the Vedas, they name the BG as the best source for understanding NK.

Table 1 below illustrates the development of NK as discussed in this chapter:

Vedas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NK seen as serving the Lord without concern for rewards
UP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NK described as desireless, selfless, and detached action • NK recognised as a path to Moksha by uniting Atman and Brahman • Desire divided into 2 branches; NK seen as righteous desire
BS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NK described as desireless, selfless, and detached action • NK recognised as a path to Moksha by uniting Atman and Brahman
BG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NK described as desireless action, detachment and selflessness • NK recognised as a path to Moksha • NK recognised as service to the Lord • NK seen as the attainment of true wisdom and knowledge • NK described as performing ones duty without attachment to the rewards

Table 1: The development of Nishkama Karma as found in Hindu texts.

Reflecting on Table 1, the BG provides a consolidated description of NK, by bringing together different facets of it found in the other authoritative texts of Hinduism. The usage of the BG in understanding NK by modern and post-modern scholars (such as Singh (1999:25) and Chopra (2018:141)) further emphasises the BG as the epitome of NK. Since the writing of the BG, the understanding of NK has remained constant, with the latter teachings of NK emphasising the importance and significance of the BG in practising selfless behaviour.

Chapter 5: Shankara and his understanding of Nishkama Karma

5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a synopsis of the life of Shankara. Understanding the background (birth, childhood, and key influencers) of Shankara is pivotal to understanding the development of his ideology and contribution to Advaita Vedanta. Thereafter, four prominent themes relating to Shankara's philosophy (namely Advaita Vedanta, Maya, Brahman, and Moksha) are briefly reflected upon. Although these themes attest to the depth of Shankara's thought, they contribute to this research by broadening the scope in which Nishkama Karma finds itself within.

Understanding Shankara's thought on Nishkama Karma requires mention of his philosophy as Shankara intricately weaves them together; recognising maya leads to realising Brahman – the realisation of Brahman being Moksha. This is the premise of Advaita Vedanta. As such, Shankara's comments that allude to Nishkama Karma find themselves within the broader spectrum of Shankara's conceptualisation of Advaita Vedanta, Maya, Brahman, and Moksha.

The above mentioned is then displayed in this chapter⁵⁶ where Shankara's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi are studied. After a close analysis of Shankara's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi, this chapter summarises his main points by referring to specific comments relating to Karma. As Nishkama Karma is the fundamental principle of Karma Yoga, this contributes to the research by drawing on specific mentions relating to selflessness and desirelessness – two vital themes that describe Nishkama Karma.

Acharya Adi Shankara⁵⁷ is often regarded as one of the most influential teachers of Hindu Philosophy. Since his death, Shankara developed into a renowned historical figure with Hindus revering him as an avatar of Shiva. Sukdaven (2013:71) notes that the life and work of Shankara are so vast that many books attributed to him are apocryphal.

⁵⁶ 5.3

⁵⁷ Also known as Shankaracharya, Sankara, Samkara and Shankara. This research makes use of Shankara except where quotes refer to a variant form.

Sukdaven (2013:71) states that the history of Shankara is “half-historical” and “half-legendary”. Irrespective of the questionable tenets of Shankara’s life, Kinkhabwala (2018:96) explains that Shankara is a “great logician” who brought “radical transformation” to Indian society with his work on Advaita philosophy.

Upon examining the life of Shankara, Prasad (2011:21) exalts Shankara as a defender of Hinduism by explaining that in the 8th century CE, Buddhism was growing at an astronomical rate threatening to usurp Hinduism.

Shankara advanced studies into Hinduism by engaging Hindu philosophical concepts and re-establishing the Hindu faith. Shankara is believed to have been well versed in the Vedas and Prasthanatrayi resulting in many commentaries being attributed to him.

Of all the commentaries and legendary tales of the journeys of Shankara, he is well known for his work on Advaita *Vedanta*. Kinkhabwala (2018:96) agrees with Sukdaven (2013:83), that Shankara was not the founder of Advaita *Vedanta* but is rather the most popular “more profound” of Advaita *Vedanta*.

Shankara’s propagation of Advaita *Vedanta* brought a wide-scale reformation of the Hindu faith. Furthermore, Shankara is recognised as a great sage who understood and practised the doctrines found in the Prasthanatrayi. For this reason, Shankara is an important Hindu historical figure whose work, undoubtedly, contributes to understanding NK.

5.2 Synopsis of the life of Shankara

5.2.1 The Birth of Shankara

In the foreword of ‘The Myths and Gods of India’, Daniélou (1991:IX) notes that the study of Hinduism is merely an “attempt at explaining the significance of the most prominent Hindu deities in the way in which they are envisaged by the Hindus themselves.”

Popular Hindu deities such as Durga, Krishna, Ram, and the Tamil Madurai Veeran are believed to have been historical figures that brought radical change to their communities. Over time, the character of these individuals was deified, as the stories of their lives inspired hope of a better future.

Ordinary people doing extraordinary actions, bringing about change, transformation and development in ancient Hindu societies often had their life stories transformed

over time into tales of them being avatars of popular gods. The birth of Shankara is an example of such deification.

Prasad (2011:21) narrates:

It is believed that Sankara was born in 788 CE, at the village of Kaladi, in the present day state of Kerala, India. Both his parents were orthodox Hindu Brahmins in faith and lineage. Though dearly wanting a child, they remained childless for many years. Then, allegedly, Siva decided to reward this loyal and faithful pair by granting them the boon of Sankara's birth, who was none other than Siva incarnate Himself.

Pathak (2016:1) suggests an alternative story to Prasad (2011:21). In Pathak's (2016:1) version, Shankara's mother prayed to Shiva, who then visited her in a dream telling her that he would incarnate as her son.

Although Prasad (2011:21) and Pathak (2016:1) agree that the Shankara was born in 788 CE, Sukdaven (2013:72) offers different dates in disagreement.

Sukdaven (2013:72) explains that the historical accounts of Shankara should be regarded as medieval legends; archaeological records and historical accounts suggest that Shankara was born either between 788-820 CE, 700-750 CE or 650-700 CE. Due to the difficulty of finding an exact date, Sukdaven (2013:73) proposes that the 8th century CE be used as an approximate time for the birth of Shankara.

5.2.2 Shankara's childhood

The childhood of Shankara has fused with mythology, much like the narratives of his birth. Mishra (2015:41) describes Shankara as a Hindu prodigy who, at the young age of two was fluent in Sanskrit.

Legend has it that by the age of three, Shankara had read all the sacred texts and would engage Brahmins in spiritual debates. Sukdaven (2013:73) recounts, that at the age of five Shankara had "mastered the Vedas and the six Angas"⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ The six Angas are: Siksa (Phonetics, Vyakarana (grammar), Nirukta (lexicon etymology), Kalpa (manual of rituals), Chandas (prosody), Jyotisa (astronomy/astrology) (Sukdaven, 2013:73).

According to Hindu legends, Shankara displayed wisdom, knowledge and understanding beyond his age, these qualities proved to those around him that he was, indeed, an avatar of Shiva.

Prasad (2011:22) suggests that during Shankara's adolescent stage, he was particularly fond of teachings in the UP and that it was the teachings of the UP that inspired him to become a *samnyasi*⁵⁹.

Legend has it that one day, Shankara and his mother visited the Purna (now Periya) river. While bathing a crocodile grabbed his leg. However, despite his mother's cry, Shankara felt no pain. Shankara nevertheless used this opportunity to declare that the crocodile would free him if his mother would permit him to become a *samnyasi* (as she did not want him to live the difficult life of an ascetic). After agreeing, miraculously, the crocodile freed Shankara and it returned to the river.

The very same day, Shankara decided that he would not return home with his mother. Instead, he travelled north of Kerala in search of a guru.

5.2.3 Influence of Sri Govindapada on Shankara

After leaving his home in Kerala in search of a guru, Shankara walked for many days, through forests, jungles, and small villages until he reached the Narmada River in modern day Madhya Pradesh.

It was on the banks of the Narmada River that Shankara met Sri Govindapada, a disciple of Gaudapada. After a series of discourses between the two, Shankara was accepted as a disciple of Govindapada and began the journey of becoming a *samnyasi*.

It was not long after studying the Vedas that Govindapada recognised the profound knowledge and understanding that Shankara possessed. Once Govindapada was convinced that Shankara was ready for the next stage of his training, he sent Shankara to Varanasi⁶⁰ where he would study the Prasthanatrayi under the supervision of other great sages.

⁵⁹ an ascetic

⁶⁰ Sukdaven (2013:75) says that Govindapada sent Shankara to Varanasi (also known as Benares) because during that time, Varanasi, was "the major seat of Hindu learning."

Upon recollecting the highlights of Shankara's life, Prasad (2011:22-23) narrates that, after a visit to the Ganges, Shankara was on his way to visit the Visvanatha temple. On his way, Shankara encountered an "outcaste, ambulating with his dogs and a pot of liquor atop his head" (Prasad, 2011:22-23). Seeing this, Shankara asked the man to not come near him, to which the "outcaste" replied: "Who do you bid to keep away, consciousness or the body?" (Prasad, 2011:22-23). Hearing this, Shankara realised the problems with social constructs and orthodox systems. This led him to apologetically prostrate "himself before this outcaste" (Prasad, 2011:22-23).

Shankara often recalled the incident in his writings with great remorse. Prasad (2011:23) explains that this incident (along with Govindapada's guidance) nudged Shankara into making a positive contribution to society by recognising the importance of all people irrespective of their caste.

According to Sukdaven (2013:75), Shankara greatly respected Govindapada and the two were fond of one another. Shankara is also known to speak highly of Govindapada in his writings however, Govindapada and his works, are limited in nature. Sukdaven (2013:75) notes that no works of Govindapada have been found; as a result, Govindapada is recognised in Hindu philosophy only when one studies the work of Shankara.

Although Govindapada is overshadowed by Shankara, his influence and guidance had an important role in the development of Shankara as a Hindu philosopher. On this, Sukdaven (2013:75) notes that it was Govindapada who taught Shankara the Brahma Sutras and Advaita Vedanta as it was to him by Gaudapada. Before Shankara's journey to Varanasi and the attainment of his Acharya title, Shankara's knowledge was entirely accredited to the lessons (on non-dualism) that he learnt from Govindapada.

5.2.4 The influence of Gaudapada on Shankara

As the guru of Shankara, Sri Govindapada had an impact on Shankara's philosophy. The impact and influence of Sri Govindapada on Shankara did not begin and end with Sri Govindapada but extends further to Sri Gaudapada, the guru of Sri Govindapada.

With only one generation (that of Govindapada) between Gaudapada and Shankara, the influence of Gaudapada on Shankara is unmissable. Isayeva (1997:13) notes that

Shankara refers to Gaudapada as “parama-guru⁶¹”. Additionally, “passages from the Mandukya-Karika” are cited almost verbatim in Sankara’s commentary on the Brahma-Sutra (Isayeva, 1997:13).

Nikhilananda (1949:xiii) affirms this by saying that Gaudapada is the teacher of Shankara’s teacher and, as a prominent teacher in Vedantic philosophy, contributed to the establishment of Shankara’s philosophy. Mahadeva (1968:24) supports Nikhilananda (1949:xiii) by listing the succession list of the teachers of Advaita. Beginning with Narayana, the lotus-born Brahma, and Vasishtha, Mahadeva (1968:24) also names: “Sakti, his son Parasara, Vyasa, [and] Suka” before naming “the great Gaudapada” followed by Govindapada and Shankara.

Gaudapada was not only revered by Shankara but also made contributions to several of Shankara’s commentaries. King (1997:15) notes that in Shankara’s Brahma Sutra Bhasya (1.4.14), he refers to the Gaudapadiya-karika (III.15).

Several other works of Gaudapada are quoted by Shankara. Isayeva (1997:13) notes that there is also a reference to Gaudapada in Shankara’s commentary on the Svetasvatara Upanishad.

Anandagiri⁶² engaged Shankara’s commentary on the Mandukya-Karika. In doing so, Anandagiri wrote the oldest available biography of Gaudapada. The story goes that after a long penance in the Himalayas, Lord Narayana was pleased with Gaudapada and received permission to teach Advaita as he learned it from the “legendary sage” Suka⁶³.

Evidently, before Shankara, the great scholar and teacher of Advaita Vedanta were Gaudapada. Furthermore, Gaudapada’s knowledge and propagation of Advaita led to Shankara’s reverence for Gaudapada.

Gaudapada is attributed with (1) the authorship of the Gaudapada-Karika⁶⁴, (2) a commentary on sage IsvaraKrishna’s Sankhya-karika and, (3) a commentary on the

⁶¹ Translated as “great teacher” or “teacher of [his] teacher” (Isayeva, 1997:13).

⁶² Anandagiri was a Hindu philosophical thinker and follower of Shankara that lived in the 14th century CE.

⁶³ Sage Shuka (narrator of the Bhagavata Purana) is believed to be the son of the great Sage Veda Vyasa (who narrated many Hindu literature and is believed to have composed Hindu texts such as the Puranas, he is also regarded as the guru of guru’s by Hindus).

⁶⁴ Oldest available work on Advaita Vedanta (Sukdaven, 2013:77).

Uttara-gita. Although other literature is attributed to Gaudapada, Isayeva (1997:16) states that there is “no evidence to substantiate” them.

The influence of Gaudapada on Shankara is best articulated by Pande (1994:149) who says:

Of all the pre-Sankara masters of Vedanta, Gaudapada remains the most significant not only because he was the grand-teacher of Sankara but also because his works have survived and hence have continued to exert influence on posterity.

Sukdaven (2013:76) refers to Potter (1981:103)⁶⁵ and Pande (1994:149) in claiming that Gaudapada “greatly influenced the thinking of Shankara with regard to Advaita Vedanta.”

To establish this claim, Sukdaven (2013:80) lists verses from the Gaudapada Karikas that contribute to Advaita Vedanta. Three of these verses are sufficient in displaying Gaudapada’s contribution to Advaita and the subsequent influence on Shankara⁶⁶:

I,16. When the empirical self (jiva) is awakened from the sleep of beginningless illusion (maya), it realizes the unborn, sleepless, dreamless non-dual (reality).

I,17. If the phenomenal world were (really) existing then it ought no doubt to disappear. But this (whole universe of) duality is mere illusion: the absolute truth is that of non-duality.

III,48. No individual is born, for there is nothing to cause (its birth). This (Brahman) is that highest truth – where nothing is born.

Although there is no substantial evidence of Govindapada having written any texts⁶⁷, the influence of Gaudapada and Govindapada on Shankara is illustrated in Shankara’s philosophy of Advaita.

5.2.5 The philosophy of Shankara

Prasad (2011:55) translates the Sanskrit term “*darsana*” as “vision” and explains that “*darsana*” is the Hindu equivalent term for philosophy. Prasad (2011:55) further notes

⁶⁵ Potter (1981:103) is quoted in stating that the earliest text on Advaita Vedanta is attributed to Gaudapada.

⁶⁶ Extracted from Sukdaven (2013:80-82)

⁶⁷ Sukdaven (2013:75)

that *darsana* is to be understood as having a vision for understanding truth; it is the “pursuit of truth”.

Therefore, in studying the *darsana* or philosophy of Shankara, one is studying how Shankara envisioned, understood, and described the truth. After Shankara departed from Govindapada, he arrived at Varanasi where he studied the Prasthanatrayi and wrote his commentaries on it. After his commentaries were accepted Shankara gathered disciples of his own and became an Acharya. Prasad (2011:22) adds that after becoming an Acharya, Shankara also taught at the Mukti-Mandapa (Hall of Liberation).

Through his investigation of Advaita *Vedanta*, Shankara engaged the concepts of Maya, Brahman, and Moksha. Sukdaven (2013:156) notes that the complete works of Shankara cannot be discussed in one investigation as he engaged concepts such as “Desireless Desire (Nishkama Karma), Nature of Consciousness, the Nature of the Ego, the Nature of Moksha, the Doctrine of Jivanmukti, the role of Bhakti, etc.”

Due to the nature of this research in investigating NK in the philosophy of Shankara, the following concepts have been carefully selected to confine the research into Shankara’s philosophical exposition of NK.

5.2.5.1 Advaita *Vedanta*

In Sanskrit, Advaita translates to non-dualism and refers to the self-being of one instead of two. *Vedanta* translates to “end of the Vedas” and initially referred to the UP however, over time, the Prasthanatrayi became the foundational texts of *Vedanta* philosophy.

In discussing Shankara’s philosophy of non-dualism, Sankaranarayanan (1999:1) defines Advaita *Vedanta*:

Advaita is the Truth about the nature of the Supreme Reality, of Man and of the Universe...”, “It also denies the disparateness of the Universe and Man from that `Reality...”, however, it does not deny existence but only reality as “They are forms in which Reality appears; but they are not real in the manner in which they appear.

Swartz (2003:9) provides a simpler understanding of Advaita *Vedanta* by stating: “The vision of *Vedanta* is an equation of the identity between the individual and God. God is defined in *Vedanta* as everything that is.”

Swartz (2003:9) and Sukdaven (2013:83) agree that Advaita *Vedanta* refers to understanding everything in God. By rejecting duality, Advaita *Vedanta* teaches that Brahman is the only constant. Only Brahman exists and everything within the universe only seems different to Brahman because of Maya (illusions). Once an individual sees through Maya, they realise that Atman, along with the entire universe, is Brahman.

Abhayananda (1997:10-11) describes *Vedanta* as:

an expression of the direct knowledge of Unity. *Vedanta* may be expressed in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism; but it is none of them. It is the essence and guiding principle of them all. It is the heart of each of them, the string on which the pearls of all religious traditions are strung.

The description of *Vedanta* provided by Abhayananda (1997:10-11) suggests that at the heart of every religion is the deep desire to be unified with God. To have the belief that God is within in as much as creation is within God. The idea of *Vedanta* being an expression of unity found in all religions is supported by Emmons (2003:384). In providing a psychological study of religion, Emmons (2003:384) states that the connection between religion and emotion is a long and intimate one. One where spiritual experience is characterised by the display of love, gratitude, and thankful joy toward a god (Emmons, 2003:384). The expression of unity in all religions as defined by Abhayananda (1997:10-11) is then supported by Emmons (2003:384) in looking at religion as a search for emotional satisfaction and belonging.

Advaita *Vedanta* explains the relationship between humans and the universe, it teaches that beyond the illusions of the material world, at a fundamental level; everything is because of Brahman and therefore is Brahman.

Sukdaven (2013:83) stresses that Shankara was not the founder of Advaita *Vedanta* despite the philosophy of non-dualism strongly being attributed to him. Veeraiah (2015:5) affirms Sukdaven (2013:82) by saying that the “non-dual view of reality [is] derived from the Upanishads and elaborated into a system of philosophy.”

By *Vedanta* referring to the end of the Vedas (the UP), the philosophy of Advaita *Vedanta* fundamentally refers to the concept of non-duality in the UP. Historically Advaita *Vedanta* can be traced back to the 1st century BCE although traditionally, Hindus believe that the concept of non-duality was pre-vedic as ancient Gurus attempted to understand Brahman and the world around them.

In its development philosophical schools, such as Nyaya and Mimamsa, and Hindu philosophers contributed to understanding the non-duality of the UP. Although Sukdaven (2013:83) and Veeraiah (2015:5) highlight that Shankara was not the founder of Advaita *Vedanta*, Deutsch (2004:161) calls Shankara the “real founder of the school”.

Deutsch (2004:161) argues that Shankara should be seen as the founder of Advaita *Vedanta* because of his transformative, revolutionary teachings on the nature of Brahman which, his success, was “nothing less than phenomenal.”

Advaita *Vedanta* is undoubtedly older than Shankara however credit must go to Shankara for consolidating and advancing studies into the nature of Brahman. The following verse summarises Shankara’s explanation of the Self in the *Upadesasahasri*:

The Self is not an object. There is neither change nor manyness (*sic*) in it. It can neither be received nor rejected either by itself or by anyone else. He who knows that he is the Self which is within and without, which is beyond birth and death, decay and age-why should he have even the least fear?

In explaining the verse Mahadevan (1965:105) states: “Fear results from the erroneous cognition of plurality. Fearlessness is attained when the non-dual Absolute is realised. Advaita and abhaya, non-duality and fearlessness, are but two names for the same experience.”

Fear arises from misunderstanding and delusion. As a result, Shankara urges people (through his writings) to realise the truth.

In celebrating Shankara’s contribution to humanity, Mahadevan (1965:106) proclaims:

I salute Sankara-bhagavatpada, the bestower of blessedness on the world, the repository of all wisdom that is contained in the sacred texts, and in the incarnation of grace.

This salutation displays the high regard in which Shankara is held. Contemporary Hindu philosophers held Shankara in high regard due to his exposition of Advaita *Vedanta*. Shankara is solely responsible for the fame, importance, and contribution of Advaita *Vedanta* to eastern and western philosophies. Advaita *Vedanta* extends beyond Hindu philosophy with religions such as Christianity exploring the contribution that non-duality can make to understanding the doctrine of the trinity.

Non-duality engages many different philosophical topics with different schools (such as the Advaitic tradition and the Samkarite tradition) and investigations into Advaita *Vedanta* continue to astound the theological and philosophical worlds. Shankara will always be revered as the philosopher who made the grandest contribution to understanding Advaita *Vedanta*. Additionally, Advaita *Vedanta* will remain the epitome of Shankara's philosophical work.

5.2.5.2 Maya

The term "Maya" is derived from Sanskrit and translates to "illusion/mirage". Sukdaven (2013:110) notes that "The concept of Maya has its roots in the Rig Veda." and that, in the Rigveda, it has two meanings; "power and deception".

The concept of Maya is embedded in the different perceptions of God within the different religious systems of Hinduism. A popular Shaivite story explains the concept of Maya in understanding the different forms of God:

There once lived a man in the town of Musiri. This man was a devotee to Narayana (Vishnu) and would regularly perform large pooja's in honour of Lord Vishnu. What made this man popular was that he hated Shiva. His hate for Shiva ran so deeply that the very mention of Shiva would infuriate him. One day Vishnu and Shiva looked down and wondered how they would deal with this situation. After watching the man for some time now they decided to visit him in their HariHara⁶⁸ form. The next day, after praying to Narayana, the man opened his eyes and saw that the murti had changed; it was now half Vishnu and half Shiva. Dismayed, the man tried to offer prasada (food offerings) only to the half that looked like Vishnu and block the nostril of Shiva so that the incense would only go to Vishnu. Seeing this Vishnu and Shiva laughed at the naivety of the man. They then asked him: "Why do you hate Shiva and love Vishnu? Do you not see, as all the gurus and wise

⁶⁸ "Hari" meaning "the beautiful one" and referring to Vishnu and "Hara" meaning the fearful one, refers to Shiva. The HariHara form is the depiction of a united Shiva and Vishnu, symbolising their oneness.

men do, that we are the same? If you pray to Vishnu, you are praying to Shiva. If you love Shiva, then you love Vishnu. It is only those enslaved by Maya that perceive us to be different, but the enlightened ones know that we are one.

Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions use the concept of Maya to explain the different avatars of the Trimurti.

The important role of Maya in Hindu philosophy is evident in Shankara's philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta*. Narain (2003:203) says:

The concept of Maya with its different meanings and nuances is the central pillar in the philosophical edifice of the *Vedanta* of Samkara and his followers which explains the phenomenalisation of the unborn (aja), everlasting, undifferentiated, transcendental Absolute or Brahman.

Although contemporary translations of Maya define it as an illusion, the usage of Maya in the Vedas suggests a definition of creative, cosmological magic.

According to Sukdaven (2013:118), Shankara's understanding of Maya is most visible in his commentary of the BS where he describes Maya as:

- 1) Appearance
- 2) Ignorance (Avidya)
- 3) Superimposition (Adhyasa)
- 4) Power
- 5) Deception
- 6) Illusion
- 7) Falsehood

Sukdaven's (2013:118) conceptualisation of Maya agrees with Oldmeadow (1992:4) who adds:

It's locus is Brahman but Brahman is in no way affected by maya. Maya is beginningless (anandi), for time arises only within it; it is unthinkable (acintya), for all thought is subject to it; it is indescribable (anirvacaniya), for all language results from it.

Oldmeadow (1992:4) and Sukdaven (2013:118) suggest that the concept of Maya is inexplicable and undefinable, with the human mind not being able to fully comprehend the nature of Maya.

Shankara's philosophy suggests that he understood Maya as an extension of Brahman. In a contradictory and paradoxical manner, Shankara understood Maya as a manifestation of Brahman that is real and unreal, dependent, and independent of Brahman.

The following statements in the Vivekachudamanai⁶⁹ (108-109) illustrate Shankara's view of Maya:

108. Avidya or Maya, called also the Undifferentiated, is the power of the Lord. She is without beginning, is made up of the three *gunas* and is superior to the effects [as their cause]. She is to be inferred by one of clear intellect only from the effects She produces. It is She who brings forth this whole universe.

109. She is neither existent nor non-existent nor partaking of both characters; neither same nor different nor both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. She is most wonderful and cannot be described in words.

Shankara thought that because Atman exists within Maya it is impossible to comprehend that which is not of Maya. In verses, 108-110 Shankara explains that Maya is simply everything and nothing at the same time. Furthermore, the only way to be released from the illusory power of Maya is to realise the "pure Brahma". Due to Shankara's Advaita *Vedanta* philosophy, the realisation of the pure Brahman happens when one realises the Self.

Shankara, in verse 569, further explains that one is bound to the samsara cycle through Maya and that liberation from rebirth is also a creation of Maya. Rebirth cannot contain Atman; as Atman is Brahman and therefore the creator of the Universe, it is only because of Maya that one thinks that Atman is contained in the samsara cycle - in need of liberation.

Sukdaven (2013:119) mentions that the "combined state of Maya and Brahman appears as the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe. Similarly, Atman appears as jiva and that from the cosmic point of view Maya is one, but from the individual point of view it is many."

⁶⁹ Religious text attributed to Shankara that seeks to introduce his view of Advaita Vedanta.

Maya as a concept of magical power existed from the time of the Vedas. In Shankara's Advaita *Vedanta*, Maya serves as an explanation for how there are many different manifestations of the universe with, essentially, one Brahman.

5.2.5.3 Brahman

An important aspect of Shankara's understanding of Brahman is his distinction between Nirguna and Saguna Brahman. The fundamental difference between the two is simply that Nirguna Brahman is Brahman without qualities whereas Saguna Brahman is Brahman with qualities.

According to Sukdaven (2013:121-122), Shankara viewed Saguna Brahman as a "conditioned" or "lower" Brahman that is worthy of meditation but is associated with Maya. On Nirguna Brahman, Shankara believed it to be "devoid of all conditioning factors" and the state that is "pure bliss", "absolute consciousness", and "free from all adjuncts and attributes" (Sukdaven, 2013:122).

The classification of Saguna Brahman as a "lower Brahman" as suggested by Sukdaven (2013:121-122) is supported by Shankara's commentary on the BS (4.8.10)⁷⁰. In BS (4.8.10) Shankara explains that, if, by following "the path of the gods" a soul reaches Saguna Brahman it does not stay there permanently. Shankara (in BS 4.8.10) talks of the "dissolution of Brahmaloaka" upon which the souls attain knowledge and attain "what is higher than Saguna Brahman, i.e., the Supreme Brahman" or Nirguna Brahman.

Shankara's thoughts on Nirguna and Saguna Brahman are not one contradictory statement. This is evident in Shankara's commentary of BS (4.3.14) where he suggests that the only difference between Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman is ignorance.

Important to note, that Shankara's Advaita philosophy does not support the notion of a 'relationship' between Nirguna and Saguna Brahman. As Brahman is the sole, independent, entity that exists, Saguna Brahman is one such stage that a jiva can attain before, or on the journey of, realising Nirguna Brahman.

⁷⁰ See Vireswarananda (1936:491)

This is important for understanding NK as described in Shankara's philosophy as a practice of complete denial of selfish desire. The denial of selfish desire is replaced by the righteous desire to realise Brahman.

Toward expanding on Shankara's understanding of Brahman, in BS (1.1.1) Shankara describes Brahman as:

That omniscient and omnipotent source must be Brahman from which occur the birth, continuance, and dissolution of this universe that is manifesting through name and form, that is associated with diverse agents and experiences, that provides the support for actions and results, having well-regulated space, time, and causation, and that defiles all thoughts about the real nature of its creation.

In engaging Shankara, Sukdaven (2013:93) explains that Brahman is perceived as the origin of the universe, omniscient and the birthplace of all knowledge. In the UP and BS, Brahman is not simply a deity that is revered. To Shankara, the only infinite reality is Brahman. All that exists is Brahman, which is seen differently due to the illusory magical power of Maya.

Oldmeadow (1992:5) explains that the UP describes Brahman as "immortal" and "the whole universe". Fatma (2014:557) supports Oldmeadow (1992:5) in stating that:

(1) Advaita declares that "the universe is a manifestation of one undifferentiated reality, expressed as Brahman..." and,

(2) Shankara understood Brahman as:

...that which permeates all, which nothing transcends and which, like the universal space around us, fills everything completely from within and without, that Supreme non-dual Brahman- 'that thou art'.

Shankara's commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi seek to firmly establish the concept of Advaita *Vedanta*. In constructing the argument of non-duality, through the Prasthanatrayi, Shankara proclaimed that only one reality exists: Brahman.

The material world is both real and unreal; it is unreal as there is seemingly no ultimate spiritual objective to attain and real due to the ignorance of people that prevents them from seeing beyond Maya and realising Brahman.

Shankara further saw Maya as a part of Brahman. In understanding Brahman as the only reality, Shankara explained that ignorance causes the true nature of Brahman to be hidden by Maya. In this way, Maya was a part of Brahman, but Brahman was not affected by Maya as Brahman transcends beyond the limitations of Maya.

Shankara's view of Brahman is consistent with the general theme of the UP and BS where Atman is seen as a manifestation of Brahman upon which, through realisation, Atman is united with Brahman and is returned to its initial state of transcendental consciousness.

Nirmalananda (2003:76) attributes the following song to Shankara and explains that; the poetic song highlights the major points of Shankara's philosophy by bringing together concepts in the material and immaterial world to exemplify Advaita *Vedanta*.

This song illustrates Shankara's non-dualistic view of Atman being none other than Brahman and summarises the essence of his thought on the Self. It also aids in understanding his view of NK, as it explains the Self as having neither duty nor desire:

I am not the mind, intellect, thought, or ego;
Not hearing, not tasting, not smelling, not seeing;
I am not the elements-ether, earth, fire, air:
I am the form of Conscious Bliss: I am the Spirit!"

The song continues to say that "I" is not the body nor the "organs of action". Of particular interest, the song also says that "I" have no "duty" or "purpose", nor "desire" or "freedom". In being "untouched" by the senses the song ends by saying that "I" am "all-pervading" and "omnipresent", "I am the form of Conscious Bliss" that is the 'Spirit'.

In addition to this song Shankara's famous "*neti, neti*" is of particular importance. Dura (2013:89) calls Shankara's "*neti, neti*" an "Apophatic Theology" that approaches the idea of Brahman as the Supreme reality by defining terms that may not be said concerning Brahman. *Neti, neti* can be translated as "not this, nor that" or simply, "not this, not this".

According to Rambachan (1984:149), interpreting Shankara's *neti, neti*, alludes to the "rejection of Brahman as a known objectified entity, and a positive hinting of Its nature as the Knower." Through *neti, neti*, Shankara proposes the "only option" for describing Brahman as "free from all known and finite specification" (Rambachan, 1984:149).

Dura (2013:89) supports Rambachan (1984:149) in saying that *neti, neti* is “not a total negation, but rather is a negation that also says something positive in the sense that *Brahman* is the existence *par excellence*”.

Rambachan (1984:149) and Dura (2013:89) contribute to Shankara’s song (as found in Nirmalananda (2003:76)) by illustrating the unbound, untainted, unknowable Brahman. This state of Brahman that Shankara called “Conscious Bliss”⁷¹ contributes to understanding NK in Shankara’s philosophy by illustrating the desireless state of consciousness attained through the realisation of the Self as Brahman.

5.2.5.4 Moksha

Shankara’s understanding of Moksha revolved around the concept of *Jivanmukti*. *Jivanmukti* is made up of two words: (1) “*Jivan*” the Sanskrit term for “life” and (2) “*mukti*” the Sanskrit root for the term Moksha, referring to “salvation” from the Samsara cycle. *Jivanmukti* is understood as the attainment of salvation in this lifetime.

Shantananda (2002:7) states:

The philosophy of Non-dualism [*Advaita Vedanta*] preached by the Upanishads as also sages like Dattatreya and Adi Sankara promises liberation while still alive and not necessarily only after death. This liberation while living is called *Jivanmukti* and those who have attained it are called *Jivanmuktas*.

Historically, liberation from the Samsara cycle was important and people questioned how they would know if one attained liberation, since liberation was only attained after death. Shantananda (2002:7) provides the concept of *Jivanmukti* as the answer to those questions.

Moksha promises liberation from the Samsara cycle, it provides hope that the afterlife will be pleasurable – where one can be freed from suffering. Freedom from the Samsara cycle happens after one dies, Moksha guides the soul, so that instead of being reborn on earth it transcends to Nirvana.

The problem with Moksha, as posited by *Jivanmukti*, is that no guarantee performing certain actions or living life by certain values leads to the attainment of Moksha as there is no way to assess whether a soul has achieved salvation.

⁷¹ Nirmalananda (2003:76)

Jivanmukti is an essential concept to Advaita *Vedanta* as it endeavours to guide one to self-realise Brahman within them. Vachatimanot (2005:47) explains that humans experience the world because of ignorance; “Avidya [ignorance] causes desire-filled actions (karma) which continually binds people to samsara.”

Jivanmukti then unveils one’s eyes, so that they are no longer blinded by their desire resulting at the end of their suffering during their lifetime. Mukhyananda (2006:83) says that Shankara believed that one becomes a *Jivanmukta* through the path of Jnana (knowledge).

Knowledge of the cosmos is gained when knowledge of the self is attained; the self is Brahman and Brahman is the Universe. Through knowledge of the Self, one becomes Brahman and therefore attained freedom from suffering during their lifetime.

According to Mukhyananda (2006:80):

He [Shankara] does recognize their [Karma, Bhakti and Raja Yoga] efficacy to lead to their respective dualistic goals envisaged by them. But he holds that final Moksha is identity with the Infinite Non-Dual Absolute, beyond time, space and causation, where there is no ‘other’ to limit it [*ekameva advitiam*], the original state beyond and before the creation of the universe.

The abovementioned quote suggests that Shankara understood Moksha, not as a process of attainment but rather as a process of realisation. Moksha is often understood as being attained due to positive Karma and the desire to escape the Samsara cycle. Shankara argues that it is not Karma that allows one to attain Moksha instead it is knowledge of the self that liberates one, performing good actions will cleanse Atman but realising the Self liberates the Atman.

Shankara further argued that ignorance of the Self was the root cause of suffering. If one was able to realise knowledge of Brahman within them and all creation, they would attain moksha; by moving past their ignorance (caused by desire) one attains knowledge of the Self therefore, realising salvation in their lifetime.

Shankara, in his commentaries of the BG (5.7, 6.30, 11.55, 12.2⁷²), illustrates that he believed that the practice of NK freed one from all activity. NK frees practitioners from

⁷² In BG 5.7 Shankara addresses purity of mind and the untainted Self being free from action. In 6.30 Shankara speaks on the unity of the Self with Brahman through the attainment of knowledge. In 11.55 Shankara addresses Brahman as the supreme goal, therefore encouraging people to perform actions in search of

their desires and futile actions; once an individual was freed from selfish actions/motives they are at liberty to perform services to the Lord. Desireless action allows one to fully devote their existence to the will of the Lord, by directing all their actions to serving the Lord.

In Shankara's Advaita *Vedanta*, Moksha and *Jivanmukti* refer to realising and returning to the Absolute State of consciousness. For Shankara attaining salvation meant that one realised Brahman and understood that nothing exists and that everything (except Brahman) that seems to exist is a creation of Maya. The realisation of Brahman meant that one was freed from their ignorance allowing them to return to their original state of consciousness⁷³ that is free from the illusory powers of Maya.

This section briefly touched on Advaita *Vedanta*, Maya, Brahman, and Moksha in Shankara's philosophical works. These topics were specifically chosen to introduce Shankara as a profound Hindu philosopher and to contribute to the discussion of Shankara's view of NK.

Shankara's philosophical work extends beyond the contents of one book. In his lifetime, Shankara engaged concepts ranging from the nature of consciousness, ego, Noumenal Reality, Isvara⁷⁴, Bhakti, truth, and metaphysic. In many ways, Shankara contributed to redefining Hindu philosophical concepts and advancing the Hindu faith, in doing so he contributed to understanding the role of NK in the attainment of salvation and in inspiring humans to live better lives. The following section investigates Shankara's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi to gauge further his understanding of NK.

5.3 Nishkama Karma in Shankara's commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi

After studying under his guru, Sri Govindapada, Shankara journeyed to Varanasi where he became an Acharya himself. In Varanasi, Shankara became a teacher at the renowned Manikarnika-Ghat writing his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.

Brahman as opposed to actions for the acquisition of wealth. In 12.2 Shankara explains that the devotees who "fix their mind on Brahman are freed from evil passions as their sole desire and motivation for action is fixated on Brahman.

⁷³ That is Nirguna Brahman

⁷⁴ An alternative form is "Ishvara", Sanskrit for "Lord" and refers to the Supreme being through whom everything exists.

Shankara's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi form the foundational texts for studying his life, work, and philosophical beliefs. According to Gangoli (1983:1), the teachings of Shankara can be found in his commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi as Shankara wrote his commentaries "exclusively for the benefit of such genuine aspirants" who seek to learn Hindu spirituality.

Gangoli (1983:1) further notes that Shankara adopted 'easy to read language', in his commentaries, as he was dedicated to educating Hindus and preparing them for "emancipation".

Academics, studying the philosophy of Shankara, rely on his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi to fully understand key concepts in his teachings. In chapters [4.3](#), [4.4](#), and [4.5](#), this research illustrated the importance of the Prasthanatrayi in understanding NK. Similarly, to understand Shankara's thoughts on NK, his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi are of utmost importance. The next section engages Shankara's commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and Bhagavad Gita that contribute to understanding his conceptualisation of NK.

5.3.1 The Upanishads

Shankara's focus in his commentary on the UP is on broadening the understanding of the Self. In the introduction to his commentary on the Isa-UP, Shankara states:

... all the Upanishads exhaust themselves simply by determining the true nature of the Self...

For Shankara and his Advaita *Vedanta* philosophy, determining the true nature of the Self meant realising Brahman and transcending beyond the illusory veil of Maya. NK is expressed in Shankara's belief as identifying the material world as a creation of Maya by forsaking trivial actions. By forsaking trivial action, Shankara proposes that one should surrender their actions solely unto the Lord so that their only desire is for a noble cause.

Katha-UP 1.2.11 (Gambhirananda, 1957:144):

O Naciketa, you, on becoming enlightened, have rejected (them all) by examining patiently the highest reach of desire, the support of the universe, the infinite results of meditation, the other shore of fearlessness, the extensive course (of *Hiranyagarbha*) that is praiseworthy and great, as also (your own) state.

Katha-UP 1.2.11 praises Nachiketas for rejecting earthly pleasures and only desiring the fulfilment of desire; knowledge and truth. Shankara comments that Nachiketas has achieved *Hiranyagarbha*⁷⁵ through his detachment from the material world. Shankara explains that *Hiranyagarbha* is not the end; it is the stage before reaching full enlightenment. In this stage the highest form of desire is attained, to Shankara, this means *Kamasya aptim*, the end of desire. To attain *Hiranyagarbha*, one requires desire but to transcend beyond *Hiranyagarbha* one needs to forsake all desire, this is evident as Shankara comments “here [*Hiranyagarbha*] indeed all desires end.”

For Shankara, to attain *Hiranyagarbha* Nachiketas needed to detach from all desires (of the earth or as Shankara calls it, “worldly enjoyments”) except the desire to attain *Hiranyagarbha* of which Shankara says “O! what an unsurpassable quality you are endowed with!”

The Prasthanatrayi approach desire as a noble and wicked aspiration. Shankara’s commentary illustrates that he agrees with defining desire as good and bad by praising Nachiketas for rejecting earthly desires by desiring only the “Supreme One”, that is Brahman.

Katha-UP 1.2.20 (Gambhirananda, 1957:153):

The Self that is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great, is lodged in the heart of (every) creature. A desireless man sees that glory of the Self through the serenity of the organs, and (thereby he becomes) free from sorrow.

Shankara expands on the idea of desire being segmented as good and bad in Katha-UP 1.2.20 by defining a desireless man as one “whose intellect has been withdrawn from all outer objects, seen or unseen; and when this [detachment] takes place, *dhatavah*⁷⁶, the organs, such as the mind etc. become composed.”

For Shankara, the Self is difficult to be known by “people who are possessed by desire” In Katha-UP 1.2.20 Shankara defines a desireless man as one who has withdrawn from “outer objects”, in his explanation one cannot attain the Self through desiring objects outside the Self.

⁷⁵ *Hiranyagarbha* translates to “the golden egg” and refers to the source of the Universe. *Hiranyagarbha* is attained through meditation and is a state of complete serenity, likened to that of deep sleep where there is no activity.

⁷⁶ Sanskrit term for “the body”

Therefore, desiring “outer objects” (outside of the Self) prevents liberation whereas desiring ‘inner objects’ (attributes of the Self-discovered through introspection) one attains the Self. Shankara then encourages one to desire knowledge of the Self rather than desiring worldly objects.

Desiring outer objects is seen as a lack of resistance and control over one’s body. Shankara (Katha-UP 1.2.24⁷⁷) defines this as “sinful works [which are] either prohibited or not sanctioned by the Vedas and the Smritis”

“Sinful works” according to Shankara, are actions performed by people who cannot control their senses. The inability to control one’s senses results in the mind being scattered and unable to concentrate; it is a mind that is not “at rest”. Shankara explains that to gain control of the mind one must desist from the “lures of the senses” which result in futile action and rather desire only to attain the Self.

Katha-UP 2.3.14-15 (Gambhirananda, 1957:228):

14. When all desires clinging to one’s heart fall off, then a mortal becomes immortal (and he) attains Brahman here. 15. When all the knots of the heart are destroyed, even while a man is alive, then a mortal becomes immortal. This much alone is the instruction (of all the Upanisads).

Shankara (Katha-UP 2.3.14) further states that:

... the desires which; clung to the heart of that man of knowledge, before his enlightenment – the intellect, and not the Self, being the seat of the desires. and ... he who was before enlightenment [a mortal being] becomes immortal, after enlightenment – by virtue of the elimination of death constituted by ignorance, desire, and deeds; death, which causes departure, having been destroyed, there remains no possibility of departure, and hence, here itself; owing to the cessation of all bondage, like the blowing out of a lamp, [one] attains Brahman, i.e. [one] becomes Brahman Itself.

In this verse, Shankara segments between the intellect and the Self; the intellect being the seat of ‘wicked’ desire (as categorised in Katha-UP 1.2.24) whereas the Self possesses ‘righteous’ desire by only aspiring to realise Brahman.

⁷⁷ Katha-UP 1.2.24 (Gambhirananda, 1957:158): “One who has not desisted from bad conduct, whose senses are not under control, whose mind is not concentrated, whose mind is not free from anxiety (about the result of concentration), cannot attain this Self through knowledge.”

In the following verse (Katha-UP 2.3.14) Shankara explains that the Self only desires to realise Brahman whereas the intellect (or heart) develops “knots” of desire that cause a sense of entitlement resulting in statements such as ‘I am this body’, ‘This wealth is mine’, ‘I am happy and unhappy’, etc.”

The desires of the Self surpass the desires of the heart (what Shankara calls “knots of the heart”) as the desire to realise the Self is an eternal reward whereas desires of the heart only attach one to the suffering of the Samsara cycle. Furthermore, Shankara (Katha-UP 2.3.15) claims that after the “knots of the heart” fall away an individual “attains Brahman here”. This supports Shankara’s argument that the practice of NK (forsaking desires of the intellect/heart) allows one to attain *Jivanmukti*.

Chandogya-UP 3.14.2 (Gambhirananda, 1992:210):

(He) appears like the mind, has Prana as the body, has the form of consciousness, is of true resolves, is of the nature like space, is the performer of all actions, is possessed of all good desires, is possessed of all good smells, is possessed of all good essences, pervades all this, is devoid of speech, is free from hankering.

The Chandogya-UP 3.14.2 clearly explains the general notion of desire being twofold. Shankara explains:

Since the whole cosmos is a creation of God, therefore, He who has this whole universe as His work is *sarvakamah*. The Sruti says, ‘He is the maker of all. *Sarvakamah*, he who has all faultless desires [one possessed of all good desires]. This is supported by the Smrti, ‘In all the beings, I am desire that is not opposed to virtue’.

Shankara explains that one should understand the term “*karmadharaya*”⁷⁸ as “*bahuvrihi*”⁷⁹ when understanding Brahman as the fulfilment of desire. The Self, according to Shankara, is the fulfilment of desire; this desire is virtuous, faultless, and ultimately pure - this definition of desire Shankara claims to gather from the Vedas. Maganlal (2012:18) agrees, adding that some of the virtuous qualities in the Vedas are *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Seva* (servitude), tolerance, compassion, respect, celibacy and the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

⁷⁸ “He is all desires”

⁷⁹ “He who has all faultless desires”

Chandogya-UP 8.1.5 (Gambhirananda, 1992:578):

He should say, This (Brahman) does not become deformed through the decrepitude of this (body), is not killed on the killing of this (body). This is the true city which is Brahman. Desires are located in it. This is the Self which has no sin, no decrepitude, no death, no sorrow, no hunger, no thirst, has unfulfilling desires, unfulfilling will. In the very same way as here (in this world) people follow the command of their own king, and whatever neighbourhood, province, or whichever piece of land they are desirous of having, they accept those very ones for their livelihood (so also ignorant people, depending on others, enjoy the fruits of their actions).

Desire, according to Shankara, can also be understood as the pursuit of the righteous virtues found in the Vedas. Shankara further elaborates on this reinterpretation of desire in Chandogya-UP 8.1.5 by explaining that the “true city of Brahman” that has “desires [located]” within it, does not have lustful, sinful, and wicked desires.

Shankara (Chandogya-UP 8.1.5) states:

He whose desires are true is *satyakamah* – It has unfulfilling desire. Desires of worldly people are indeed false. God’s [desires] are opposite of that. Similarly, He whose will for desirable things is also true is *satyasamkalpah* – It has unfulfilling will. Wills and desires of God are caused by the limiting adjunct of pure *sattva*...

The abovementioned verses illustrate that Shankara had a dualistic understanding of desire; desire can be good (*satyakamah*) and bad (*na aviratah duscaritat*⁸⁰).

The following table⁸¹ documents note-worthy comments on NK by Shankara, these comments reiterate his view of desire being twofold⁸²:

Kena-UP 1.2	Shankara describes the practice of NK ⁸³ as <i>satyakamah</i> by renouncing the world in pursuit of the realisation of Brahman.
Mundaka 1.2.12	Shankara notes that everything in the material world is temporary so

⁸⁰ “One who has not abstained from bad/sinful works”

⁸¹ Table 2

⁸² As illustrated in Katha-UP 1.2.20/24, 2.3.14/15, Chandogya-UP 3.14.2, 8.1.5

⁸³ Shankara’s description of NK is based on his comments on desirelessness and selflessness, that are two important themes of NK.

	performing karma is “pointless”. Therefore, one should practice actions that have eternal effects; instead of desiring wealth that will last a certain period, desire to attain truth as truth is eternal.
Mundaka-UP 3.1.6	Shankara claims “an untruthful man is defeated by a truthful man”, similarly wicked, materialistic desires are defeated by true, noble desires.
Mundaka-UP 3.1.10	Here Shankara states that a “desirer of prosperity” is a “knower of the Self”. For Shankara, one who realised the Self has noble desires and practices selflessness.
Mundaka-UP 3.2.2	Shankara explains that one who desires materialistic objects will be reborn in the material world whereas one who desires the Self has all “longings” of the flesh (such as food, water, sleep, etc.) fade away.

Shankara’s understanding of NK in the UP includes the following terms:

- 1) *Karmadharaya*
- 2) *Bahuvrihi*
- 3) *Satyakamah / Sarvakamah*
- 4) *na aviratah duscaritat*

According to Shankara, Brahman in the UP is *Karmadharaya*. The desire that Brahman is, isn’t sinful or wicked intentions (according to the standards of virtuous behaviour set out in the Vedas⁸⁴) instead it is *bahuvrihi*; righteous, faultless virtues. NK in the UP, Shankara argues, is not the removal of all desires but rather the removal

⁸⁴ Such as modesty, purity, truthfulness, self-restraint, renunciation, detachment, and absence of anger (Kaushal, 2017:7).

of *arishadvargas*⁸⁵. Since Brahman is seen as *Karmadharaya*, Shankara's Advaita *Vedanta* posits that an enlightened individual is *Karmadharaya* (by realising Brahman). Therefore, the removal of all desire is not possible unless the desire that Shankara speaks of is *na aviratah duscaritat*.

Tenzin (2006:32) describes the spiritual quest that Shankara teaches as the “giving up of desire for worldly pleasure and restoring to the meditation” of Brahman. The concept of NK, if understood solely as relinquishing desire, is seemingly contradictory. How is it possible for a person to desire the realisation of Brahman when desire itself binds one to the cycle of rebirth?

The contradiction of desire as a part of NK is posed by Singh (2021) in response to Tenzin (2006:32). Tenzin (2006:32) suggests the “giving up” of worldly desires in “restoring to the meditation” of Brahman. Singh (2021) responds to this by pointing out that the action of “restoring to the meditation” requires desire – the desire to meditate on Brahman rather than on worldly pleasures.

Singh (2021) asks:

How do we find inaction in action? And how do we do anything selflessly without any expectation? We are humans, right?

The approach taken by Singh (2021) illustrates that the desire to meditate on Brahman is for realisation and liberation – as liberation is on an individual basis, even the desire to realise Brahman can be seen as selfishly motivated.

To address this, Shankara on the Yoga Sutras (Sutra II.3⁸⁶) further endorses the concept of *na aviratah duscaritat* in saying that there is no contradiction. Legget (1990:178) notes that illusion is “a mental process” and that mental processes are “divided into tainted or pure”.

Considering Shankara's commentaries on the UP, this research agrees with Legget (1990:178) in response to the questions posed by Singh (2021). Desire can be likened to illusion in the sense that it is a mental process. As a mental process, desire is then

⁸⁵ That is, the six enemies/passions of the mind: *kama* (lust), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *mada* (pride), *moha* (attachment) and *matsarya* (jealousy) (Satpathy, 2021:1744).

⁸⁶ See Legget (1980:177-178).

divided as either tainted or pure. This is in alignment with Shankara's comments, in NK being the removal or abstinence of evil (tainted) desire in the pursuit of pure desire.

Furthermore, Tenzin (2006:32) supports this in response to Singh (2021) as the desire of meditating on Brahman is not the same as desiring materialistic pleasures. This is evident simply by the difference between the two; desiring materialistic pleasures results in rebirth whereas desiring Brahman enables realisation and Moksha.

Shankara's view of NK in the UP is, therefore, not the removal of all desire⁸⁷ but rather the removal of *na aviratah duscaritat kama* so that one can pursue *satyakamah*. Shankara further argues that NK is the pursuit of *satyakamah* so that one can attain Moksha by realising Brahman as desiring Brahman is noble and in fulfilment of the Vedas.

5.3.2 The Brahma Sutras

According to Krishnamurthi (2005:1), Shankara's commentary on the BS is the most important text of *Vedanta* as it is: "a comprehensive treatise on the philosophical and theological elucidation of this Dharma. For its clarity and brevity, it has no parallels in the world literature..." and that the "Sarvamatasamarasya [reconciliation of all religions] cannot be better summarised through his [Shankara's] own words; 'the teaching of *Vedanta* is that although Brahman is one, it has to be meditated upon or known with or without the relationship of the adjuncts respectively.'"

Vireswarananda (1936:ix) and Krishnamurthi (2005:1) agree that Shankara's commentary on the BS contributes significantly to his argument of non-dualism. Vireswarananda (1936:xiv) states that Shankara's exploration of the BS seeks to provide clarity on the nature of Brahman, in doing so Shankara's commentaries argue that Brahman is "attributeless", "immutable" and "Pure Intelligence".

Holistically, the BS seeks to expand on the discussion of the nature of Brahman as found in the UP. The focus of the BS is primarily on clarifying the nature of Brahman and the relationship of Atman with Brahman. Therefore, Shankara's commentary on the BS is centred on supporting his argument of Advaita *Vedanta*, this further results in Shankara's briefly referring to the concept of NK in the BS.

⁸⁷ As that would require one definition of *kama*; where it is only evil.

Although Shankara focuses on explaining the nature of the relationship between Brahman and reality in the BS, he implicates the practice of NK by describing the creation as an illusion.

Vireswarananda (1936:4) states that the entirety of Shankara's philosophy may be summarised as:

The Brahman of the Upanishads is the only Reality, and everything else—this world of manifoldness—is unreal, is a mere appearance; the individual soul (Jiva) is identical with Brahman, the One without a second, which the scriptures define as Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute.

If Brahman is the “only Reality” and everything else is merely an illusion then one could easily ask why Karma is important, if nothing (except for Brahman) is real; why do our actions on earth (which do not exist) matter? If one were to realise Brahman and become Brahman, then surely their actions in a world that does not exist have no eternal effect.

According to Vireswarananda (1936:13), Shankara answers the abovementioned questions by stating:

Objects are twofold, “real and unreal”. That which is “real” is identified based on its dependencies on an object. That which is “unreal”, Shankara calls “the unreal appearance” and explains that it “depends on some other thing for its manifestation”. Shankara adds that “In a mirage, the rays of the sun are a reality, but their appearance as water is unreal and depends on something else, the impressions [Samskaras] produced by seeing water elsewhere before.”

As a result, Shankara suggests that Brahman remains unchanged whilst Maya (and that which exists within Maya) is continuously changing.

Shankara explains that irrespective of reality or illusion, individual experience is not something that can be ignored. Shankara explains the process of experience as momentous and life-changing, a process that ultimately shapes the path to liberation. Individual Karma, according to Shankara, determines the stage of realisation that one is embarking on. Although the earth is a product of Maya, individual karma on earth determines whether an individual will transcend beyond Maya; one cannot transcend above Maya if their conduct is with the desire to obtain the illusions of Maya. Shankara

states that to transcend beyond Maya one Karma is required to exhibit detachment from the allures of Maya and a deep desire for the realisation of Brahman.

The following comments made by Shankara on some of the verses in the BS illustrate the importance of practising NK and contribute to understanding Shankara's view on NK:

- i. Samanvaya Ashyaya 1.1.1 (1.) (Vireswarananda, 1936:21):

Now, therefore, the inquiry (into the real nature) of Brahman.

Shankara explains that the Self is “free from all limiting adjuncts and is infinite, all-blissful, all-knowing and One without a second”. Shankara explains that an enquiry into Brahman is merely an enquiry into oneself, for the Self and everything else does not exist without Brahman. Through an enquiry into the nature of Brahman, by studying the Self, one liberates the Self from the Samsara cycle. Shankara notes that to fully liberate the Self from the Samsara cycle one needs to renounce the “enjoyment of fruits of action in this world”. Therefore, Shankara argues that, for the realisation of Brahman and the attainment of liberation, one needs to detach from their actions (and the fruit of their actions) focusing only on realising Brahman.

- ii. Kamadyadhikaranam 3.3.39 (Vireswarananda, 1936:334):

(Qualities like true) desire etc. (mentioned in the Chhandogya are to be inserted) in the other (i.e. in the Brihadaranyaka) and (those mentioned) in the other (i.e. in the Brihadaranyaka are also to be inserted in the Chhandogya), on account of the abode etc. (being the same in both).

Shankara refers to the Chandogya-UP (3.14.2/3, 8.1.5, 8.7.1) and elaborates on his commentary of how “*kama*” should be seen as twofold – (1) Brahman being the fulfilment of all righteous desire and (2) the discarding of unrighteous desire.

- iii. Kamyadhikaranam 3.3.60 (Vireswarananda, 1936:402):

But Vidyas for particular desires may be combined or not according to one's desire on account of the absence of the reason (mentioned in the) previous (sutra).

Shankara explains that desires “distract the mind” and prevent the realisation of Brahman. In this verse, Shankara maintains that desire is twofold and elaborates on the destructive nature of ‘evil’ desire. Additionally, Shankara argues that one can choose between good and bad desires and that the decision of one determines the journey that the Self undertakes – either one that is attached to the Samsara cycle or one that realises Brahman.

iv. Asramakarmadhikaranam 3.4.32 (Vireswarananda, 1936:428):

And; the duties of the Asrama (are to be performed) also (by him who does not desire Liberation), because they are enjoined (on him by the scriptures).

The importance of performing one’s responsibility to society is frequently emphasised throughout the BS and BG. In this verse, Shankara stresses the need for one to fulfil their responsibilities irrespective of whether one seeks liberation or not. Shankara explains that performing one’s duty to society aids in acquiring knowledge, which in turn, aids in the process of attaining liberation. According to Shankara, irrespective of the desire to perform duty or attachment to the fruit thereof, performing one’s duty begins the process of attaining knowledge that will later liberate the soul. This verse illustrates the importance of performing one’s duty in attaining liberation.

v. Na Cha Kary Pratipattyabhisandhih 4.3.14 (Vireswarananda, 1936:493):

And the desire to attain Brahman (which an Upasaka has at the time of death can) not (be with respect to) the Saguna Brahman.

Commenting on this verse, Shankara states:

“What is called the realization of the Supreme Brahman is nothing but the removal of ignorance about It.” In his commentary, Shankara argues that the removal of ignorance happens only when one detaches from all earthly desires and focuses only on realizing Brahman. At the point of which only the desire to realize Brahman remains, Shankara says that ‘ignorance is removed [and] Brahman manifests Itself’.

Shankara's view on NK in the BS centres on the role of detachment in guiding an individual to realising Brahman. Reflecting on the abovementioned verses, Shankara illustrates the importance of NK in the process of liberating the Self by highlighting important aspects of NK such as detachment, performing one's duty and deeply desiring to realise Brahman.

5.3.3 The Bhagavad Gita

Shankara's commentary on the BG is arguably one of the most well respected and revered Hindu texts. In his commentary of the BG, Prabhupada (1989:3) names Shankara as one of the greatest Acharyas of "Vedic knowledge in India". Prabhupada (1989:876) further describes Shankara as: "an incarnation of Lord Siva who appeared in the Eighth Century to propagate an impersonal philosophy to erase Buddhism from India and re-establishing the authority of the Vedas." and as one who "specifically stated that Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead."

According to Sastry (1977:i), Shankara's commentary on the BG is the oldest surviving commentary and is of high value to Hindu studies. Sastry (1997:i) further notes that before beginning his commentary, Shankara states:

This famous Gita-Sastra is an epitome of the essentials of the whole Vedic teaching; and its meaning is very difficult to understand. Though, to afford a clear view of its teaching, it has been explained word by word and sentence by sentence, and its import critically examined by several commentators, still I have found that to the laity it appears to teach diverse and quite contradictory doctrines. I propose, therefore, to write a brief commentary with a view to determine its precise meaning.

Sastry (1977:i) and Prabhupada (1989:3) agree that Shankara's commentary on the BG is highly profound and is widely recognised as authoritative as it guides other, later, commentaries on the BG.

BG 2.47 is seen as a central verse to NK. Upon commenting on this verse, Shankara says:

You are qualified for works alone, not for the path of knowledge. And then, while doing works, let there be no desire for the results of works under any circumstances whatever. If you should have a thirst for the results of works, you will have to reap those fruits. Therefore, let not your motive be the fruits of your

action. When a person performs work thirsting for the results of those works, then he will be subject to rebirth as the result of action. Neither may you be attached to inaction, thinking ‘of what avail are these painful works if their fruits should not be desired?’

In his commentary of this verse, Shankara echoes the performance of action without the desire for the results of the action. Shankara cautions that, if one desires the fruit of their actions, they are subject to rebirth. As such, NK is a practice through detachment and the lack of desire for the fruit of the action that enables one to be free from the cycle of rebirth. Although Shankara supports desireless action, he cautions against inaction. Shankara closes his commentary on this verse with the following question:

If a man should not perform works urged by a desire for their results, how then are they to be performed?

To answer this question, Shankara comments on BG 2.48. Shankara’s answer is simply to perform actions for the sake of pleasing God. He comments:

Steadfast in devotion (Yoga) perform works merely for God’s sake, casting off even such attachment as this, “May God be pleased,” and being equanimous in success and failure.

Shankara then defines success as the “attainment of knowledge (jnana) and failure as “the opposite course”. Furthermore, Shankara argues that jnana is attained through the “sattva” (purity) of the mind which is a result of acting “without longing for their fruits”.

According to Shankara, NK is then the performance of action without desiring its results. Should one struggle without desireless action they are to think that the action being performed, is devotional work performed for the sake of pleasing God. Additionally, Shankara argues that failure to perform actions in a desireless and detached manner results in rebirth whereas desireless and detached action results in the purity of mind. Which, in turn, enables the attainment of jnana and liberation.

BG 3.8-9 teaches that “work done as a sacrifice for Visnu has to be performed; otherwise work causes bondage in this material world.” This verse clearly illustrates the central theme of NK; perform selfless action by surrendering all your actions and

desires unto the Lord, for the pleasure/delight of the Lord – by doing this one attains liberation.

In his commentary of this verse, Shankara explains that “Action is superior to inaction in point of result. By inaction you cannot attain success in the life’s journey.” and that it is also “wrong to suppose that actions lead to bondage and that they should not therefore, be performed.” For Shankara, the difference between action and inaction is “individual experience” therefore one cannot merely attain liberation simply by restraining from all action, nor from performing action that is not prescribed in the Vedas that leads to a specific result.

Shankara explains that action should not be seen as binding one to reincarnation instead he states that “The world is not bound by action done for the Lord’s⁸⁸ sake. Perform action without attachment.” In this statement, Shankara asserts that all action performed without attachment is service rendered unto the Lord and that service unto the Lord does not bind one to the Samsara cycle. Shankara further encourages service unto the Lord by explaining that the action of serving the Lord is greater than performing no action at all and therefore performing action guides one to liberation whereas complete renunciation of action is seemingly futile.

Shankara elaborates on this point in BG 3.13 where he states:

Those who, after performing sacrifices to the Gods, etc., eat the remains of the food—which is called *amrita*, *ambrosia*—are freed from all sins committed at the five places of animal-slaughter (such as the fireplace), as well as from those whose sins which result from involuntary acts of injury and other causes. But as to the others, who are selfish and cook food for their own sakes, what they eat is sin itself, while they themselves are sinners.

Shankara’s explanation of BG 3.13 is that performing the action of eating food is not sinful, what is sinful is the motive and practices involved in the making of the food. As the food is offered first as a sacrifice unto the Lord, all sins are cleansed. This food that is prepared is made with the intention offering it unto the Lord is holy as the action

⁸⁸ See 5.2.5.3. When Shankara speaks of the “Lord” he speaks on a Saguna Brahman level. This is not contrary to his philosophy as Shankara does not reject the followers of Saguna Brahman. Instead, Shankara says that by following “the path of the gods” one reaches Saguna Brahman. After attaining Saguna Brahman, ignorance is dispelled, and Nirguna Brahman is attained. As a result, when Shankara encourages or utilises the concept of “service unto the Lord” it is for those on “the path of the gods”.

and the motive/desire thereof is surrendered unto the Lord, whereas food that is not sacrificed is solely made due to the desire to sate one's hunger.

Shankara's explanation of motive/desire in BG 3.13 is consistent with his argument of desire being twofold in the UP. Although Shankara in BG 3.13 speaks more of action rather than desire, it is evident that all action (and desire) surrendered unto the Lord is noble and deems one worthy of liberation whereas those who perform actions for their benefit are seen as "sinners".

Prabhupada (1989:184) comments on BG 3.18-20 that a self-realised man is "no longer obliged to perform any prescribed duty" therefore performing his responsibility to society without being attached to the results as his only objective is to educate the general populous. Prabhupada (1984:186) explains this by stating: "Although one who is situated in Krishna consciousness may not have any interest in the world, he still works to teach the public how to live and how to act."

Prabhupada's (1989:184) explanation of BG 3.18-20 agrees with Shankara's commentary. Shankara argues that a man "rejoicing in the Self" sees no purpose in acting, this does not mean that inaction is a sin but rather that this man does not seek anything profit from his actions. Shankara further states that "Performing action, without attachment, for the sake of the Isvara, man attains Moksha, through attaining the purity of mind."

Throughout Shankara's commentary of chapter 3, he seems to argue between action and inaction; which is better, and which leads to Moksha? Reflecting on the previous quote Shankara explains that it is detached action that purifies the mind and leads one to attain Moksha. Shankara (3.20) elaborates on this by stating:

The wise Kshatriyas of old, such as Janaka and Asvapati tried by action alone to attain moksha. If they were persons possessed of right knowledge, then we should understand that, since they had been engaged in works, they tried to reach moksha with action, i.e., without abandoning action, with a view to set an example to the world. If, on the other hand, such men as Janaka were persons who had not attained right knowledge, then, [we should understand], they tried to attain moksha through action which is the means of attaining purity of mind.

Shankara explains that one is not required to completely renounce acting to attain moksha instead one should aspire to perform detached action. Shankara repeats a

previous point on the importance and role of detached action, purifying the mind and guiding one to moksha.

According to Shankara (3.20), performing detached action does not only purify one's mind but also acts as a model for the entire community to follow. Shankara argues that as respected and knowledgeable members of society, leaders on their path to attain Moksha, have the responsibility to perform detached action by guiding others to attain liberation.

Shankara (3.25) further notes that anyone who knows the Self desires nothing other than to seek the "welfare of the world". At this point, Shankara argues that one who seeks Moksha should not abstain from action but rather perform selfless action that is dedicated to pleasing the Lord and shows concern for the welfare of the world.

Shankara (3.26) explains that people often interpreted selfless/desireless action as not acting. To prevent action with motive people opted to rather renounce all forms of action. Shankara (3.25-26) engages this belief by referring to ancient wise men (the *Janaka* and *Asvapati*) in saying that, instead of renouncing all forms of action, devote all energy and action to contributing to the development of their respective communities.

On the notion of developing communities, Abhinavagupta (2004:94) explains that the reason for "performing acts by such a person who has already attained perfection" is "to educate people". According to Abhinavagupta (2004:94), if people who "attained perfection" were to abstain from performing actions "chaos would prevail in the society". Therefore, actions are duties that are to be performed without anticipation of their fruit (Abhinavagupta, 2004:94). The actions performed are not only done without any expectancy for rewards but are also actions that would never "harm ordinary people" (Abhinavagupta, 2004:94). In doing so, Abhinavagupta (2004:94) explains that these actions are "so that the minds of ordinary people don't become unstable". Simply, they have informed actions that educate people and ensure stability in society – supporting the notion of developing communities through selfless actions.

Expanding on Abhinavagupta (2004:94), Swami Mukundananda (2013:202) comments on BG 3.25 that the term "*loka-sangraham evapi sampashyam*" was used in verse 3.20 where Lord Krishna used it to express "a view to the welfare of the masses". This term is like the one found in BG 3.25 where a more holistic approach is

adopted. Mukundananda (2013:202) expresses that in BG 3.25 the term “*loka-sangraham chikirshuh*”, meaning “wishing the welfare of the world”, is used.

In Mukundananda’s (2013:204-205) comments on BG 3.26, he agrees with Shankara (3.25-26) in saying that no action is not what the text encourages. Instead, it teaches of actions performed for the welfare of others, these actions are duties inspired by “Vedic knowledge” that “inspire the ignorant to perform their duties with “attentiveness and care” (Mukundananda, 2013:205). The “attentiveness and care” expressed by Mukundananda (2013:205) is to ensure that actions are performed for the welfare of the world rather than selfish gain.

Considering Abhinavagupta (2004:94) and Mukundananda (2013:205), Shankara’s comments on BG 3.25-26 use the notion of community development (as the purpose of NK) to encourage the reader to support his conceptualisation of karma.

Shankara’s commentary on the BG portrays NK as multifaceted, in 3.29-30 he notes:

The foolish believe ‘we do actions for the sake of its result’. These men who are attached to action look only to the result of their actions. The man who knows the All – the man who knows the Self – should not of himself unsettle such men, i.e., he should not disturb their conviction.

According to Shankara (3.30), those who perform actions for the result shall never attain liberation and those who seek liberation must surrender all their actions unto the Lord:

To me, Vasudeva, the Divine Being, the Supreme Lord, the Omniscient, the Self of all, surrender all actions, with the wise thought that ‘I, the agent, do this for the Isvara’s sake as His liege.

In BG 3.29-30 Shankara provides a definition of NK that is consistent with his understanding of selfless action in the UP and BS; inaction alone does not liberate one instead performing actions that have been surrendered unto the Lord and that contributes to the welfare of the world liberates Atman.

In introducing his commentary on the BG, Shankara claims that there are a few seemingly contradictory notions in the BG, which he aims to clarify. Apart from commentators on the BG noting, what may seem like, contradictions – the BG identifies and attempts to clarify such notions.

An example of this is in BG 5.1 where Arjun says to Krishna:

O Krishna, first of all, You ask me to renounce work, and then again You recommend work with devotion. Now, will You kindly tell me definitely which of the two is more beneficial?

Arjuna highlights one of the contradictions found in the BG that pertain to NK; should one completely renounce work or perform devotional service? Shankara comments that it is “impossible” to renounce action and perform devotional service therefore, to attain liberation, one needs to choose and follow it diligently. In this way, whichever path is chosen and diligently followed guides the practitioner toward jnana yoga and subsequently liberation. Shankara further states that not acting is an ignorant approach to liberation as one neither pleases nor upsets the Supreme being and is therefore seemingly non-existent.

To answer Arjuna and clarify this contradiction Krishna (5.2-3) responds:

The renunciation of work and work in devotion are both good for liberation. But, of the two, work in devotional service is better than renunciation of work. One who neither hates nor desires the fruits of his activities is known to be always renounced. Such a person, free from all dualities, easily overcomes material bondage and is completely liberated, O mighty-armed Arjuna.

Krishna (5.6) adds that “Merely renouncing all activities yet not engaging in the devotional service of the Lord cannot make one happy. But a thoughtful person engaged in devotional service can achieve the Supreme without delay.”

Upon reviewing BG 5.2-3 Shankara interprets the verses as; performing action and renunciation being the same however performing detached action exemplifies true knowledge as one is not concerned with the action. Shankara adds that practising renunciation is an action within itself therefore the goal of renunciation and detached action is the same, liberation.

According to Shankara, detached action is favoured by the Lord because all action is surrendered unto the Supreme being⁸⁹ and one still upholds their responsibility to society whereas one who renounces action does not contribute to the growth and development of society. Shankara (5.6) further explains while one may practice

⁸⁹ That is Brahman

renunciation of actions, all actions dedicated to “Isvara” are “entirely free from motives” and therefore achieves the same goal of renunciation, while simultaneously contributing to society.

Shankara (5.6) illustrates that he supports the idea of NK being actions surrendered unto the Lord by stating “Wherefore, I have said that Karma-Yoga is better”. Shankara explains that renunciation purifies the mind and that one can renounce the world once the “self has been realised” and argues that performing actions/service unto the Lord is the same as renunciation as; (1) service unto the Lord purifies the mind and (2) because the only motive behind the action is to serve the Lord, the individual is free from selfish desire and therefore free from mundane action.

Shankara (5.8-9) states:

The duty of the man who, thus knowing the truth and thinking rightly, sees only inaction in actions – in all the movements of the body and the senses – consists in renouncing actions; for, he sees the absence of action... Karma-Yogin is untainted by the results of his action.

Shankara’s understanding of NK is; therefore, a practice whereby one renounces all actions that are conducted with a selfish motive, choosing only to perform actions that are surrendered unto the Lord. These actions that are surrendered unto the Lord have no individual selfish motive that may arouse desire for the fruit of that action instead the action is solely performed for the delight of the Lord resulting in contributing to the welfare of society.

Shankara, in chapters 5.8-9, subtly notes that one cannot practice renouncement of all actions – as that would be an action itself. Shankara aligns his thought with BG 18.11-12, which reads:

It is indeed impossible for an embodied being to give up all activities. But he who renounces the fruits of action is called one who has truly renounced. For one who is not renounced, the threefold fruits of action – desirable, undesirable and mixed – accrue after death. But those who are in the renounced order of life have no such result to suffer or enjoy.

Shankara comments on the abovementioned verse that it is not possible for one to “abandon actions completely” instead “the abandonment of all actions are possible for

him alone who, realising the Supreme Reality, is not a 'body-wearer' i.e., does not regard the body as the Self" and is therefore not attached to the fruits of actions.

According to Shankara, renunciation of all action is not the favoured path to liberation as, fundamentally, it is not possible. The only way to fully renounce all action is to practice NK; detach from all fruits of action – have no desire or concern for the effect of action.

The BG explores in depth the path of Karma yoga and elaborately engages the phenomenal practice of NK in chapters 3, 5 and 18. Understanding Shankara's conceptualisation of NK in the BG is summarised in chapters 5.8-9 where Shankara explains how, by knowing the truth, a man sees inaction in his action as he does not desire the fruit of his actions.

Shankara's comments throughout the BG repeat this definition of NK; as is evident in the following verses of Shankara's commentary on the BG; 3.25-27, 3.30, 5.15, 5.27-28, 18.2-3, 18.5-12.

5.4 Karma according to Shankara

Due to NK being the fundamental concept of Karma yoga, Shankara's view of Karma yoga is directly tied to his understanding of NK. Rambachan (1984:315) states:

With Shankara, there hardly seems to be any distinction between karmayoga and bhaktiyoga. The form of detached activity Shankara conceives is that which is possibly by the dedication of all actions to Isvara, and the calm acceptance of results as coming from Him. Karmayoga is therefore, not possible without an appreciation of Isvara, and of him as the dispenser of the fruits of action.

Reviewing Shankara's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi, it is evident that Rambachan (1984:315) makes this statement considering Shankara's comments on NK as surrendering all actions unto the Lord.

Narain (2003:268) agrees with Rambachan (1984:315) by describing Shankara as one who believed Jnana Yoga to be the superior path, with Karma and Bhakti yoga guiding one to Jnana Yoga. Narain (2003:268) states that Shankara believed that the realisation of Brahman was due to knowledge of the Self and is therefore Jnana Yoga as the path of knowledge of the Self is the cause of liberation.

Upon commenting on Shankara's view of Karma, Narain (2003:268) states:

He unequivocally emphasises in his *Vivekacudamani*⁹⁰, 'Neither by yoga, nor by Samkhya, nor by work, nor by learning, but by the realisation of one's identity with Brahman is liberation possible, and by no other means.

According to Narain (2003:268), the attainment realisation of Atman as Brahman is through Jnana Marga which causes the immediate "removal of ignorance and the consequent attainment of liberation."

Reflecting on Rambachan (1984:315) and Narain (2003:268); Shankara is an avid devotee of Jnana Marga although he holds Karma and Bhakti Yoga in high regard.

Prasad (2011:256) says that, because Shankara stood firmly in Jnana Marga he rarely spoke of Karma Marga. Shankara's understanding of Karma, according to Prasad (2011:256), is summarised in a verse from his *Vivekacudamani*:

Sancita (accumulated karmas of the past) and *agami* (future karmas) are destroyed by the fire of wisdom. *Parabdha* (karma already begun but not yet fruited) indeed is very powerful; its exhaustion in the wise is by their cheerful endurances.

Shankara's view of Karma posits that the actions of one are superficial as all actions disappear with the attainment of wisdom. Shankara consistently displays an understanding of Karma within that of Jnana; past and future actions are destroyed once one realises Brahman (attains wisdom).

Regarding NK, Shankara (*Vivekacudamani* v. 462-63) states:

If the effects of ignorance are completely destroyed by wisdom, how can the present body exist? Only intending to clear up this doubt of the ignorant do the scriptures speak of *parabdha* from a superficial point of view, but not intending to teach that body continues to be real for the attainers of wisdom.

According to Shankara, one of the characteristics of ignorance is attachment to the fruits of action. Reflecting on his statement mentioned above, if ignorance is "destroyed" then an individual understands that Atman transcends beyond the material world, this knowledge inspires detachment from actions.

⁹⁰ A Hindu religious text attributed to Shankara that explains Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

Boliaki (2012:327) explains that with the realisation of Brahman, *Jivanmukti* is attained and, due to the liberation of Atman, one is no longer concerned with performing actions in the material world resulting in the renouncement of all actions. Although the renouncement of all action was seen to attain liberation, Shankara's commentary on the BG (5.8-9) and Boliaki (2012:327) agree that performing actions that are surrendered unto the Lord is more virtuous than renouncement.

Shankara argues that, because all Karma is destroyed upon the attainment of wisdom, one should not focus on the fruits of their action. However, should one practice total renouncement, performing no actions, then they are isolated from the world in totality and make no positive contribution to society?

Therefore, Shankara displaying a sense of concern for the well-being of society explains that one who has attained wisdom can perform actions while being completely renounced from the attachment that stems from acting.

Shankara's comments on BG 18.11-12 supports this argument as Shankara states that one who has attained wisdom, detaches from the results of his action by surrendering all karma as service unto the Lord – who in turn directs that karma to contributing to global welfare.

Shankara's understanding of Karma can be summarised as:

- (i) Karma disappears at the attainment of wisdom and is therefore not worthy of attachment
- (ii) Until one is released from the body, Karma is inescapable

Due to the ultimate inevitability of Karma, Shankara teaches instead of attempting to not act, while waiting to leave the human body, one should make the most of their time on earth by surrendering their actions to the Lord.

By surrendering one's actions unto the Lord, all Karma performed achieves the same objective of not acting; detachment from the material world, advancing the attainment of liberation.

In doing so, Shankara suggests that one should practice NK. NK being selfless action (and devotion unto the Lord as Shankara argues in his commentary of the Prasthanatrayi), is then seen as the same as renouncement from the action.

As Shankara argues that surrendering actions unto the Lord is detachment from the fruits of action - NK is proposed as Karma that one willingly partakes of, which ultimately, detaches one from the fruit of their actions and the material world while contributing to the betterment of society (and role modelling noble behaviour that inspires and guides members of society on their path to liberation).

5.5 Conclusion

Studies into the life and works of Shankara often focus solely on his contributions to *Advaita Vedanta*, as his commentary on the *Prasthanatrayi* and other writings compose the most elaborate teachings of *Advaita Vedanta*.

Although enquiries into Shankara portray *Advaita Vedanta* as his most important work, he contributed to understanding many other Hindu philosophical concepts. Previous chapters noted the problem of investigating NK, understanding NK as a state of desireless desire. Understanding NK as desireless desire is like Shankara's understanding of renouncement (as seen in the BG) – it is unattainable.

To address the contradiction NK presents, with its proposal of desireless desire concerning *mumukshutva*⁹¹, Shankara explains that NK should not be seen as desireless desire but as the removal of wicked desire in the pursuit of righteous desire.

In the Chandogya-UP 8.1.5 Shankara explains that Brahman (and the true nature of the Self, which is Brahman in his *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy) is *Kamadharaya*. As illustrated in previous chapters, Shankara is not oblivious to the evil nature of desire – his commentary on Katha-UP 1.2.11 is proof that Shankara is fully aware that desire causes ignorance and therefore attachment to the material world, preventing liberation.

Ironically, at first, it seems as if Shankara contradicts himself to explain the contradiction of NK. How can Brahman, the pure, holy, and righteous being, through which everything exists, be *Kamadharaya*, when desire causes attachment to the samsara cycle?

⁹¹ See Chapter [3.4.3.1](#) for definition

In the very same sentence that Shankara calls Brahman *Kamadharaya*, he notes that this desire that makes Brahman *Kamadharaya* is *satyakamah* by describing *Kamadharaya* as *bahuvrihi*; one with faultless desire.

Shankara elaborates on this point in his comments on Chandogya-UP 8.1.5 by explaining that desire should be understood as; *satyakamah* and *na aviratah duscaritat*.

According to Shankara, the practice of NK is *satyakamah*. NK, as *satyakamah*, is therefore not the practice of desireless desire but rather the prevention of one being *na aviratah duscaritat* by abstaining from desires of the material world, with the only desire being of righteous nature as one seeks to realise Brahman.

Simply put, Shankara teaches that; desiring objects of Maya (temporary objects of the material world such as fame, wealth, and power) is discarded in the practice of NK as one solely desires to realise Brahman. NK is therefore not the pursuit of a state of complete desirelessness but rather the pursuit of *satyakama*; a noble, righteous desire that liberates Atman.

Although the focus of Shankara's commentary on the BS focuses on explaining the nature and relationship of Brahman and Atman, he briefly mentions the concept of NK in BS 3.3.39.

In his commentary of BS 3.3.39, Shankara refers to the Chandogya-UP 8.1.5 and reiterates that desire should be understood as two-fold. Thus, emphasising that NK should not be understood as desireless desire but rather as desireless action – as one has no concern for accumulating anything that is of the material world, action is performed without selfish motive. Due to there being no concern for the material world and performing actions for the fruit they may bear; one exhibits that the only desire they have is to realise Brahman.

Shankara's Advaita *Vedanta* posits that, for the realisation of Brahman, one is required to follow the path of Jnana Marga and deeply desire, only. For Atman to realise Brahman and transcend beyond Maya one needs to have only one desire; to realize Brahman.

Adding to his comments on the UP and BS, in BG 5:2-3 Shankara explains that complete renunciation of all activity (to liberate Atman) is good however practising devotional work, by surrendering all actions unto the Lord is the better choice.

Shankara (BG 5:2-3) explains that although complete renunciation of action is noble and due to one abstaining from the material world entirely, liberation is attained. However, more praise-worthy than renunciation is practising NK, which Shankara (BG 5:2-3) explains as “surrendering all actions unto the Lord”.

Shankara argues that surrendering all actions unto the Lord is the same as practising complete renunciation. Because all actions are committed for the delight of the Lord, one has completely detached from the fruit of their actions.

Shankara argues that NK is better than renunciation because: (1) one is completely detached from the fruit of their actions and therefore practices renunciation as they renounce the effects of their action, (2) one practices Bhakti by choosing to offer service to the Lord and (3) one contributes to global wellbeing by modelling detached, selfless, altruistic behaviour.

To conclude Shankara’s contribution to NK it is imperative to note that Shankara never saw NK as “desireless desire” but as “desireless action”. This desireless action, Shankara argues, is fuelled by the desire to realise Brahman. Furthermore, Shankara explains that desire should be understood as two-fold with NK being the pursuit of righteous desire. Last, just like complete renunciation, Shankara teaches that a state of complete desirelessness is unattainable. Therefore, one should practice NK – the noble desire to realise Brahman by renouncing all temporary, materialistic desires and performing service unto the Lord (which in turn contributes to global wellbeing).

Chapter 6: Ramanuja and his understanding of Nishkama Karma

6.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the second of the three acharyas that this research investigates, Sri Ramanuja. Beginning with the life of Ramanuja (birth, adulthood, and Guru) this chapter introduces Ramanuja before looking at his philosophical works.

The five themes relating to Ramanuja's philosophical work (Vishishtadvaita, Maya, Brahman, Atman, and Moksha) were specifically chosen to display the thought processes of Ramanuja in constructing a vivid picture of his conceptualisation of NK.

After an introduction to Ramanuja and his philosophical work, this chapter delves into Ramanuja's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi. Ramanuja's commentaries on the Upanishads (Vedantha Sangraha), Brahma Sutras (Sri Bhashya), and Bhagavad Gita (Bhagavad Gita Bhashya) are engaged as pivotal texts in understanding Ramanuja's understanding of NK.

This chapter concludes by evaluating Ramanuja's commentary on the Prasthanatrayi in relation to his ideology of Bhakti and Karma yoga. Ramanuja's philosophy, comments on the Prasthanatrayi, and conceptualisation of Bhakti and Karma yoga are vital to understanding his understanding of NK.

This chapter demonstrates how Ramanuja used NK, as a concept of Karma yoga, to contribute to his Bhakti philosophy in support of Vishishtadvaita.

Sri Ramanuja⁹² is the second of the three acclaimed Vedantic philosophers. Recognised as a theologian, teacher, guru, spiritual guide, and philosopher, Ramanuja advanced the philosophical school of thought known as *Vishishtadvaita*.

On Ramanuja, Mahadevan (1965:107) says:

"There have been many saints in all the cult-traditions of Hinduism." Shaivism and Vaishnavism are the two largest. In South Indian Vaishnavism "a distinction is made between *Alvars* and *Acaryas*." The Alvars were twelve saints known to wander between temples singing praises of Vishnu. The Acharyas were "philosophers as well as saints." Ramanuja belongs to the Acharyas. Additionally, Mahadevan (1965:107)

⁹² Also known as "Ramanujacharya" and "Ilayaraja" (to the Tamil's), this research makes use of "Ramanuja" except for quotes that may use a variant form.

mentions: “Although there were Vaisnava teachers before him, such as Nathamuni and Alavandar, the credit for consolidating and systematically expounding the philosophy of Southern Vaisnavism known as *Vishishtadvaita* goes to Ramanuja.”

Ramanuja was known as “Yati-Raja”, the King of Ascetics because of his profound commentaries, writings and teachings that touched the hearts of people (Prasad (2011:17).

According to Veliath (1993:30):

Both religious and scholarly traditions give us excellent reasons to believe that Ramanuja was deeply influenced by the *Alvars*, those poet saints of the Sri Vaisnava lineage who are generally considered to be twelve in number.

Mahadevan (1965:107) and Veliath (1993:30) mention that, although it is difficult to trace the time in which the *Alvars* existed, Ramanuja was influenced by their Bhakti Yoga philosophy. According to Tamil tradition, the *Alvars* were famous religious poets who praised Vishnu and all his avatars. Veliath (1993:30) states that the word “*Alvar*” translates to “one who goes down into the depths” and refers to those who went “down deeply and experienced the love of God”, resulting in them being practitioners of Bhakti Yoga and adoring Vishnu’s Avatar Krishna.

The *Alvars* were believed to be non-discriminatory, as their only objective was to spread the love of God to everyone. The *Alvars* are recorded as having been casteless; having no regard for the caste system as they believed that the love of Vishnu transcended beyond caste and that anyone who experienced this love was qualified to teach it to others.

Without knowing the era that the *Alvars* existed in, Hindu theologians and historians agree that there is no direct link between the *Alvars* and Ramanuja. However, due to the strong emphasis that Ramanuja places on love and devotion, it is evident that he was influenced by the doctrine and practices of the *Alvars*.

Ramanuja, in his lifetime and even today, is famously known for his writings on *Vishishtadvaita*, which was written to counter Shankara’s *Advaita Vedanta*. Hindu theologians, philosophers and religious leaders believe that, although he frequently sought to counter Shankara’s *Advaita Vedanta*, Ramanuja ultimately aimed to promote love and devotion to Vishnu and all of creation.

Ramanuja's philosophical work influenced the Bhakti movement, ultimately redefining how Hindus understood love and devotion. As an influential Hindu philosopher, Ramanuja's work and teachings contribute to understanding *Vedanta* philosophy and the Vaishnavite sect. Thus, his writings on NK are relevant to this study as they contribute to understanding the contribution that NK can make to social cohesion.

Prasad (2011:28) notes that:

Ramanuja's life was an eventful one" as his explanations and teachings of *Vishishtadvaita* made him famous for uniting the "prehistoric Bhagavata cult with the non-dualist philosophy of the Upanisads.

The following section provides clarity on the life of Ramanuja, aiding in understanding why he is a well renowned Hindu philosopher.

6.2 Synopsis of the life of Ramanuja

6.2.1 The birth of Ramanuja

Ramanuja was born in 1017 AD in a Tamil town called Sriperumbudur (Bharadwaj, 1958:2). Mahadevan (1965:107) says:

His parents were Asuri Kesava Somayaji and Kantimati, sister of Srisaila-puma, a grandson of Alavandar also known as Yamunacarya. Srisaila-puma was spending his life, with the consent of his grandfather, on the Tirupati Hill in the service of Lord Venkatesvara. It was he that gave his sister in marriage to Asuri Kesava. And, when a son was born to the pair, it was he that gave to the new arrival the name Laksmana (or Ramanuja: in Tamil, Ilaya Perumal).

In reverence of Ramanuja, the Sriperumbudur community constructed a temple in the Kanchipuram district. This temple is believed to have been built on the birthplace of Ramanuja and is dedicated to Vishnu and Lakshmi. To the Sriperumbudur community and the Vaishnavite tradition, Ramanuja is recognised as the most important Hindu philosopher who emphasised devotion to Vishnu.

6.2.2 Ramanuja's adulthood

Tamil tradition does not account for much of Ramanuja's childhood. It is believed that he lost his father during his teens and was raised by his mom and extended family members. During his childhood, Ramanuja grew particularly fond of his cousin

Govinda Bhattar. Accounts of Govinda Bhattar and Ramanuja describe their relationship as brotherly – with several historical records referring to them as brothers.

Being a part of Ramanuja's close family, Govinda was integrated into the Vaishnavite tradition at a young age however he converted to the Shaivite tradition in his mid-20s. All his family members attempted to return him to the Vaishnavite tradition without success.

After watching the rest of the family attempt to bring Govinda back to the Vaishnavite tradition, Ramanuja approached his cousin. According to tradition, Ramanuja and Govinda travelled to a temple that was a few days away. During this journey, and at the temple, they engaged in a variety of debates that touched on the different religious texts, philosophy, and social issues.

After this journey, to everyone's surprise, Govinda returned to the Vaishnavite faith accrediting Ramanuja for explaining to him why this tradition was the path that he should adhere to. After this, Ramanuja and Govinda went to Kanchi to study Hindu philosophy under the sage Yadavaprakasa.

Ramanuja was married at the young age of 16, which at that time, was not unusual. According to Mahadevan (1965:111): "The domestic life of Ramanuja was rather an unhappy one". On one occasion, Ramanuja's wife was responsible for the departure of Ramanuja's guru resulting in Ramanuja sending his wife away and becoming a *sannyasa*.

After practising renunciation and detachment, Ramanuja was named Yatiraja, the prince of the ascetics. Ramanuja's personal life was rather uneventful with much of his focus being on his contribution to society rather than personal gain or development. After accepting *Sannyasa*⁹³ Ramanuja devoted himself to studying the scriptures and expounding the teachings of Vishishtadvaita.

⁹³ According to the Hindu faith, *Sannyasa* (renunciation) is the final of four stages of life; *Brahmacharya* (student), *Grihastha* (family life) and *Vanaprastha* (retirement). To Hindus, the four stages are called "*Ashrama*". Those who take the *Sannyasa* oath are referred to as *Sannyasi's*.

6.2.3 Ramanuja's Guru's

According to historical records, Ramanuja had made enemies throughout his life resulting in him having many gurus. On his first journey to Kanshi, with his cousin Govinda, Ramanuja met Yadavaprakasha who first taught him *Vedanta*.

By the time Ramanuja became his student, Yadavaprakasha was a famous teacher. Being a popular teacher in the Kanshi area, Yadvaprakasha was one of the most well renowned philosophical teachers who would be frequently consulted to address societal issues.

Yadavaprakasha is widely speculated as being a devoted follower of Advaita *Vedanta* with some traditions describing him as a monk. During his time as a guru of Ramanuja, they frequently disputed the interpretation of different scriptures. A popular story recollects a possessed child who Yadavaprakasha was asked to save. After many failed attempts by Yadavaprakasha, the family called Ramanuja to exorcise the demon.

Ramanuja successfully saved the child by removing the demon. This event, coupled with hermeneutical disputes, marked the beginning of a contentious relationship between Yadavaprakasha and Ramanuja. Prasad (2011:31) notes that the climax of the conflict between Yadavaprakasha and Ramanuja was with the teachings of the Taittiriya-UP.

Prasad (2011:31) explains the conflict:

The teacher, reiterating Sankara's interpretation, explained that it [Taittiriya-UP] denoted the content of Brahman [The Absolute] and not its specific qualities. Ramanuja objected to this meaning and contended that the Supreme God [Bhagavan] should be understood to possess realness, awareness, and infiniteness for his divine qualities, and that God was not to be understood as the Reality, the Knowledge and the Infinite.

It was this dispute that was the last straw for Yadavaprakasha, after which he plotted to kill Ramanuja while he bathed in the Ganges. Fortunately, Govinda came to Ramanuja's aid and, after rescuing him, took him to a friend named Kancipurna.

Prasad (2011:31) states that Kancipurna was a *sudra* (low caste) however, despite the discrimination against people based on their caste, was famously held in high

regard as he was a “simple, devout man, well respected by everybody for his character and devotion to Visnu”.

Kancipurna is believed to have served as a spiritual guide for Ramanuja, while he (Ramanuja) looked for a new guru after his constant disputes with Yadvaprakasha. It was through Kancipurna that Ramanuja met Yamunacarya. Yamunacarya was an acclaimed teacher and philosopher who was impressed by Ramanuja’s thinking, after hearing of the dispute he had with his previous guru.

After meeting with Ramanuja, Yamunacarya quickly accepted him as his student and taught him all that he had known of Hindu philosophy and the sacred texts. However, Yamunacarya’s life did not last very long and soon Ramanuja was left without a guru again.

At this point, Ramanuja approached Kancipurna to be his guru. However, strongly Ramanuja pleaded and begged, Kancipurna chose to not accept the role of being Ramanuja’s guru due to his caste, rather opting to guide Ramanuja through his studies. Irrespective of Kancipurna’s refusal to be Ramanuja’s guide, Hindu theologians recognise Kancipurna as an influential guide on Ramanuja’s spiritual journey.

Ramanuja would later become a student of Periyambadi and Tiruvarangan before establishing his school of thought, where Prasad (2011:34) says that “his former teacher Yadvaprakasa became his disciple.”

Ramanuja’s variety of gurus allowed him to study different philosophies from different people that would later influence him in having a broader view of Hindu philosophy. Amongst Hindu philosophers, Ramanuja is considered as being who had the opportunity to study under several different great minds, allowing him to become a great Hindu philosopher.

6.2.4 Ramanuja’s philosophical work

Carmen (1974:1) describes Ramanuja as “one of the most important medieval Hindu theologians.” This is often a popular description of Ramanuja, used by theologians and historians reflecting on Indian philosophical thought and the Vaishnavite tradition.

Ramanuja's philosophical thought often brings together concepts from different Hindu sects. According to Adluri (2015:1), "While he [Ramanuja] was certainly not the first Brahmin thinker to be influenced by the devotional puranas, he was the first to incorporate such traditions into *Vedanta* philosophy."

Ramanuja's variety of gurus could be seen as the reason for his attempting to bring in new ways of understanding existing philosophies. Dasji (2010:127) notes that the renowned *Vedanta* philosopher Bhagawan Varadaraj was the one who initiated Ramanuja as a *Sannyasi*, and guided him to other great teachers, from who learnt some of the most sacred and powerful mantras.

It was after becoming a *Sannyasi* that Ramanuja became recognised as a teacher, as he would travel through towns teaching people of Vaishnavism, the sacred texts and mantras. A famous tale of Ramanuja tells of a famous priest, Goshtipurna, who was well versed in the secret mantras of Vaishnavism. These mantras were heavily guarded and it is believed that Goshtipurna was the only person who knew those mantras.

After being acquainted with one another, Goshtipurna believed that it was time to pass on the secret mantras to Ramanuja who had proven that he was highly devoted to Vishnu. After teaching the mantras to Ramanuja, and as Dasji (2010:127) narrates:

He [Goshtipurna] told Sri Ramanujacharya not to reveal the secrets of these Mantras to anyone else." However, Ramanuja learnt of the "powerful effect of these mantras", in that anyone who chanted it would attain moksha. As a result, Ramanuja climbed the Gopuram of the temple and began teaching this mantra. When Goshtipurna learnt of this, he was enraged and cursed Ramanuja to hell. However, Ramanuja believed "if thereby thousands of people could secure the joy of moksha, he was quite willing to go to Hell all by himself.

This story is indicative that Ramanuja not only contributed to NK in his teachings but also in his daily life. Ramanuja was not concerned with the punishment of hell if it meant that he performed his duty as a religious leader by guiding his people toward Moksha. By ensuring that the sacred mantras, that could deliver even the most "sinful" person, were taught to everyone (at the cost of his salvation), Ramanuja displayed selflessness and a deep sense of concern for the eternal wellbeing of all people.

Ramanuja was one who not only taught Bhakti but also ensured that he lived by its principles. Furthermore, he engaged a wide variety of different Hindu concepts⁹⁴ attempting to redefine them in a way that was easier to understand and contextual to the needs of the people during that time.

Ramanuja's understanding of the following concepts contributes to the discussion of his contribution to NK. This is due to his understanding of NK complimenting his Vishishtadvaita philosophy.

6.2.4.1 Vishishtadvaita

Like other concepts in *Vedanta* philosophy, Vishishtadvaita explores the nature and concept of God with the world of humans. Although Ramanuja is popularly recognised as the founder of Vishishtadvaita, Prasad (2011:17) says that Ramanuja accredits Swami Nathamuni (1000 CE) as the “originator of Visistadvaita” – despite there being no remains of his work.

Ramanuja's argument for Vishishtadvaita can be seen as a response to Shankara's Advaita *Vedanta*; Ramanuja rejected Shankara's philosophy by proposing the realisation of Brahman through Bhakti. According to Sukdaven (2013:114): “... Ramanuja criticises Sankara's concept of Maya”. Ramanuja perceives the world and soul as true yet imperfect, a real but flawed picture of Brahman. Sukdaven (2013:114) adds that the Brihadaranyaka Ramanuja “expresses how the soul and the body are related to Brahman and why therefore Maya cannot be conceived as an explanation of this relationship.”

Whitehead (2019:88) notes:

Ramanuja is a non-dualist like Sankara, however he believes that we are one with Brahman and the rest is an illusion. Ramanuja believes that Maya is the power in which Brahman used to create the world and universe.

Where Shankara argued that the individual soul is an illusion, as Brahman alone exists, Ramanuja argues that the soul and Brahman are true with the rest of the world and universe being creations of Maya.

Whitehead (2019:88) acknowledges that Ramanuja challenged Shankara by “saying that if Brahman is both cause and effect then there can be no illusion due to ignorance.

⁹⁴ Such as the nature of Isvara (God) in relation to Cit (soul) and Acit (matter), the avatars, and reincarnation.

His [Ramanuja] idea of illusion is outside of Brahman which is everything else except the souls which are one with Brahman.”

As such, the difference between Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta and Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita comes down to an argument on the relationship between the body and soul with Brahman. In Shankara’s absolute non-duality Brahman is one alone, without a second. Whereas for Ramanuja, Brahman is one with the inclusion of the body and soul being a part of Brahman. This makes Ramanuja’s philosophy a qualified non-dual approach. Where Shankara is absolute in his argument of Brahman, Ramanuja agrees on non-duality but qualifies it by arguing that the body and soul are a part of Brahman. Thus, allowing for Brahman to have certain qualities – such as the body and soul. This is the fundamental difference between Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta and Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita.

Ramanuja’s school only received its name (Vishishtadvaita) in the sixteenth century CE when traditional Vaishnavite scholars attributed it to Ramanuja. According to Veliath (1993:35):

The usage of the “the term Visista, which has been applied by scholars to describe his [Ramanuja] philosophical and religious tradition...” must be considered. “The term visistadvaita was used for the first time by Sundarsana Suri who appeared after Ramanuja, in the course of his commentaries on the Sribhasya, and the Vedarthasamgraha, namely the Srutapradipika, and the Tatparyadipika”. Furthermore, scholarly research has established that Vishistadvaita “does not make its appearance in the works of writers of the same tradition, who followed immediately after Ramanuja”. As a result, “it was only in the second half of the sixteenth century that the school of Ramanuja received this [Visistadvaita] name”.

The Vaishnavite tradition initially saw Ramanuja’s philosophy as a fusion of the Vedas, Upanishads, and the teachings of the *Alvars*. Although Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita is frequently translated as “qualified non-dualism” Veliath (1993:35) argues that it can also be understood as Theistic Monism, Qualified Monism and Modified Non-Dualism because: “it explains the ultimate relationship between the two entities, the finite and the infinite, and insists on total self-surrender on the part of the finite as a means to attain salvation”.

Sukdaven (2013:126) explains that this “school of philosophy does not make a distinction between levels of reality” instead “Brahman is the souls while the jivas and the world are said to be the body. Therefore, in this relationship, God is independent, and souls and matter are dependent on God”.

Pskhu (2019:200) says that the basic doctrine of Ramanuja’s philosophy is represented in the Sanskrit phrase “*sarira-sariribhava sambandha*” which includes “three different essences [God-world-souls] in their invisible unity [aprthaksiddhi]”. This doctrine of Vishishtadvaita, as described by Pskhu (2019:200), posits that God is made of three forms: the highest principle that is endless, a bodily form that makes up the different worlds and the Inner Ruler who lives within every living creature.

Paramahansa (2012:5) claims that Vishishtadvaita as a philosophy of religion: “not only interprets metaphysics in terms of religion, and religion in terms of metaphysics, but equates the two by the common designation *darsana*”.

In Vedantic philosophy, *darsana* is commonly understood as a physical representation of Brahman that allows one to perceive the unperceivable. It is making use of spirituality to create a physical representation of a divine entity that is supposedly beyond the physical.

For Paramahansa (2012:5) the origin of the universe and reality to Brahman is engaged in Vishishtadvaita philosophy. Paramahansa (2012:5) and Sukdaven (2013:127) note that the essence of Vishishtadvaita explores the nature of Brahman with the material world.

Sukdaven (2013:127) explains that Vishishtadvaita is simply that “although Brahman is independent [non-dual], soul and matter are dependent on him.” Vishishtadvaita describes Brahman as the only universal consistency that is, although independent of the universe, comprised of the universe.

According to Paramahansa (2012:5), Vishishtadvaita is important because it:

...reconciles the extremes of reason and faith by the sublime truth that the Brahman is the ultimate explanation of the world of *cit*, the sentient and *acit*, the insentient. It is the supreme end of spirituality, and outside the Brahman there is no reality. The more the *jiva* is spiritual, the more *brahmanized* it is. Visistadvaita

avers that the *sattvata* religion of the Pancaratra is the word of God promoting godliness, and is, therefore, true.

Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita is deeply embedded within the Vaishnavite tradition. Furthermore, this philosophy argues that although Brahman is the only constant – the rest of creation is not a mere illusion instead, all that exists is a reality that dependent on Brahman.

6.2.4.2 Maya

Maya is widely accepted as an illusion, a magical force through which the universe exists. Goswami (1992:5) explains that, although Shankara understood Maya as a creation that needed to be escaped, Ramanuja saw Maya as the link between Brahman and the world.

Ramanuja rejected the idea that ignorance was the cause of Maya. Maya, as seen by Ramanuja, was not merely an illusion but a reality that served as evidence of the multiple attributes of Brahman. Shankara argued that ignorance caused Maya and if one were to attain Moksha, they first needed to be liberated from Maya.

Ramanuja disagreed with Shankara by arguing that Maya is not an illusion but rather a manifestation of Brahman. Ramanuja argued that due to Nirguna Brahman being formless and attribute-less, Maya is Saguna Brahman. The universe, stars, suns, planets, moon, earth, plant, animal and all other forms of sentient beings and insentient objects – are all manifestations of Saguna Brahman.

According to Ramanuja, Maya connects the world to Nirguna Brahman through realising Saguna Brahman in all the creations of Maya. Veliath (1993:92) says that Ramanuja saw the universe as *Paramarthika* (a real universe) rather than a “figment of our imagination” that was caused by ignorance.

The following verses from the Brihadaranyaka-UP highlight Ramanuja's understanding of Maya:

3.7.3-5: He who inhabits the earth but is within it, whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, and who controls the earth from within, is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self. He who inhabits water but is within it, whom water does not know, whose body is water, and who controls water from within, is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self. He who inhabits fire but is within it, whom

fire does not know, whose body is fire, and who controls fire from within, is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self.

3.7.15: He who inhabits all beings but is within them, whom no being knows, whose body is all beings, and who controls all beings from within, is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal self...

The entirety of Brihadaranyaka-UP 3.7 describes Brahman as the “Internal Ruler”, who is unknown by creation despite being controlled and inhabited by him. It describes Brahman as being every aspect of the body (the nose, “organs of speech”, eye, ear, mind, etc.) and all other objects of the universe (the sky, air, heaven, sun, moon and stars, light and darkness, etc.).

Brihadaranyaka-UP 3.7 is important as Ramanuja’s understanding of Maya derives from it. According to the New World Encyclopedia⁹⁵:

Ramanuja taught that souls and matter are utterly dependent on Brahman for their existence. Brahman is the supreme Soul who is present in all finite souls and matter. Brahman dwells in the souls unrecognized and unknown until liberation [moksha] is reached.

Whitehead (2019:91) notes that for Ramanuja, Maya “does not affect the relationship between Brahman and the souls and therefore does not deduce Maya as ignorance”. Hence, Ramanuja’s understanding of Maya differs from Shankara’s as Ramanuja argued that illusion is “outside of Brahman which is everything else except the souls which are one with Brahman” (Whitehead, 2019:92).

Maya, according to Ramanuja, should not be understood as a challenge or test that one needs to pass to realise Brahman. Ramanuja argued that choosing to see the world and Maya as an illusion denied Brahman of the glory and grace that is manifested in all creation. To Ramanuja, realising Brahman means realising Saguna Brahman within all of creation.

6.2.4.3 Brahman

On Ramanuja’s understanding of Brahman, Veliath (1993:47) states:

⁹⁵<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Ramanuja&oldid=795055>

Even an individual who possesses just a casual knowledge of the works of Ramanuja, will realize at once that it is Brahman who forms the principal object of his focus and attention.”

Hindu philosophers that study the Vedas, Prasthanatrayi and other sacred texts often interpret the word “Brahman” according to the sect of Hindu beliefs they subscribe to. The term “Brahman” can often be seen as the Hindu equivalent of the term “God” with Shaivite and Shakti devotees interpreting “Brahman” in the UP as Shiva and Shakti/Durga respectively.

For Ramanuja, the term Brahman refers to Vishnu, the Supreme Deity of the Vaishnavite faith who was revered by Ramanuja. Veliath (1993:47) further claims that, to Ramanuja, the term Brahman can be:

...applied to anything that possesses the quality of magnificence [*Brhattva*, a word springing from the root *Brh*], but primarily denotes that which possesses greatness of essential nature as well as of qualities in unbounded wholeness, and he goes on to declare that such a one is only the Lord of all [*Sarvesvara*].

According to Veliath (1993:47), Ramanuja views Brahman on the same level as God, meaning that Brahman and Vishnu are equally the same to him⁹⁶.

Sydnor (2008:9) notes that Ramanuja attributes five fundamental characteristics of Brahman:

- 1) *Satya* – Reality
- 2) *Jnana* – Knowledge
- 3) *Ananda* – Bliss
- 4) *Amalatva* – Purity
- 5) *Anantatva* – Infinitude

Sydnor (2008:9) remarks that these five attributes are derived from Ramanuja’s commentary on the Sri Bhashya and are accepted by the Vaishnava community.

Therefore, Ramanuja portrays Brahman as the epitome of everything noble, righteous, and just, while, simultaneously, being distant about everything wicked.

⁹⁶ Also see Sydnor (2008:4) and Whitehead (2019:93).

Sydnor (2008:8) notes that the five characteristics of Brahman are attributed to two forms: *Svarupa* and *Divya Rupa* Brahman.

Svarupa Brahman, according to Ramanuja, is the opposite of everything evil. This form of Brahman translates to “Supreme Brahman” and is understood as Vishnu by Ramanuja. According to Ramanuja, *Svarupa* Brahman is far too vast and majestic for the human mind to comprehend.

Choosing to perform karma under the five fundamental characteristics of Brahman enables one to develop a minuscule amount of knowledge of Brahman, with humanity only being able to understand Brahman as “pure bliss” due to Brahman's infinite nature. *Svarupa* Brahman is often understood as taking on a physical, material body that is relatable and perceptible to humans.

To Ramanuja, *Divya Rupa* refers to the formless nature of Brahman. Ramanuja explains that, like the universe, the different manifestations of Brahman are separate entities from Brahman however due to their dependence on Brahman, form a part of Brahman.

According to Sydnor (2008:13), Ramanuja anthropomorphises *Divya Rupa*, so that this divine form of Brahman, can be used for the “meditative benefit of devotees”. Ramanuja teaches that *Divya Rupa* is the form of Brahman that is unaffected by time, space, and matter. Because *Svarupa* Brahman manifests on earth, this form is subject to the laws of the material world whereas *Divya Rupa* transcends beyond the laws of the physical world.

The most common term used by Ramanuja to refer to his faith of Vishnu as Brahman is “Narayana”. Mishra (2007:27) defines “Narayana” as the “other name of Vishnu which is ‘Nara’ [man] and ‘Ayana’ [shelter place] i.e., the shelter place of souls”.

Mishra (2007:27) further notes that:

When we meditate ‘Narayana’ we imagine Him inside the Sun’s disc. Such as:
‘Om Dhyeya Sada Savitru mandala Madhyabartee Narayana Sarasigasana Samibistah.’ That is, ‘Naryana is always to be meditated in the middle of the Sun’s Disc, seated on Padmasana [lotus posture].

In Vaishnavism, this understanding of Narayana extends from Vishnu merely being within the sun to being within all of creation. Ramanuja understands Narayana as the

fulfilment of the Vedas and the Supreme Deity through which everything exists. To Ramanuja, Brahma, Shiva, Shakti, and Indra are all manifestations of Narayana, who is the all-pervading Lord of the Universe.

According to Sydnor (2008:18):

Ramanuja continues to argue that Narayana is the sacred letter “A” in the sacred syllable “AUM”, the beginning and end of the Vedas. Narayana is the Purusa [Cosmic Person] who is the Great Lord [Maha Ishvara].

Ramanuja teaches that Narayana is the central theme of the Prasthanatrayi and is the creator of all. According to Ramanuja, Narayana is also the unification of Saguna and Nirguna Brahman, as all manifestations of divine beings are caused by different perceptions (by humans) of Narayana.

Ramanuja attributes the different Avatara as Narayana reaching out to creation as its creator. Narayana⁹⁷ as Brahman serves as the creator, protector, and pro-creator of the universe, ensuring that the cosmic order is maintained.

Veliath (1993:47) summarises the role of Brahman according to Ramanuja in the following, dedicatory, verse of his *Sribhasya*:

May my mind be filled with devotion
Towards the Highest Brahman, the abode of Lakshmi;
Who is luminously revealed in the Upanisads;
Who in sport produces, and reabsorbs the entire universe;
Whose only aim is to foster the manifold classes of beings
That humbly worship Him.

6.2.4.4 Atman

Ramanuja views Atman as an individualistic representation of Brahman that is dependent on Brahman for its existence. Veliath (1993:127) notes that just as the “souls and matter form a part [*amsa*], body [*tanu*], or form [*rupa*] of the Brahman, in the same way, they also constitute his *vibhuti*”.

⁹⁷ Narayana is attributed to Svarupa Brhman however is seen just as “equal” and “legitimate” to the formless (yet Saguna) Brahman and *divya-rupa* (Sydnor, 2008:14).

Adding to Veliath (1993:127), Sukdaven (2013:101) states that to Ramanuja; “Brahman, the world and the soul are eternally related with the world and soul existing with Brahman and therefore also dependent on Brahman.”

Ramanuja believed that the human soul was bound by matter to the samsara cycle and that, upon the attainment of Moksha, the soul transcended to the abode of Brahman. Despite the realisation of Brahman, the individual souls do not merge to become one instead they maintain their individuality, due to the souls inhabiting different bodies on earth.

According to Ramanuja, the true nature of Atman was to be freed from the samsara cycle which bound a person to a world filled with evil. Ramanuja taught that the pursuit of Brahman meant guiding one’s Atman toward pureness and knowledge. Through realising the attributes of Brahman Atman realises Brahman.

When studying Ramanuja’s view of Atman it is imperative to note his distinction between *cit* and *acit*. To Ramanuja *cit* refers to all sentient beings; all forms of life that was capable of emotional responses whereas *acit* refers to insentient objects; inanimate objects that are incapable of emotional responses.

According to the Vishishtadvaita thought, *cit* and *acit* create the known universe and depend on Brahman. Although *cit* is used synonymously with Atman and *jiva*, it is not believed to contain consciousness outside of Brahman. *Cit* develops into consciousness, making it the same as Atman, only through Brahman’s power.

Considering Ramanuja’s philosophy, Prasad (2011:70-77) lists eleven characteristics of *cit*:

- 1) Although contained within the body, *Cit* is distinct from the organs, mind and intelligence.
- 2) *Cit* is self-realised through personal experience.
- 3) *Cit* is *ananda-svarupa*, eternal bliss. This bliss is contained within everyone, irrespective of their karma or the attainment of Moksha.
- 4) *Cit* is eternal. According to Ramanuja *acit* existed within Brahman before the creation of the universe, Prasad (2011:71) notes that “it [*acit*] had no specific qualities of its while in that state of emergence.” *Cit* existed as knowledge

(*jnana*) before the creation of the universe, after which it acquired qualities per the souls it developed with.

- 5) It sits on the heart and leaves the body through the eye. Thereafter *cit* transcends to Nirvana or re-enters the earth depending on the karma of the body.
- 6) *Cit* can be understood as the soul of the body that is unimaginable even though thoughts, understanding and knowledge acquired by the body ultimately shape it.
- 7) It transcends beyond the comprehensive abilities of the sensory organs.
- 8) The soul is *niravayava* – without limbs
- 9) It is *nirvikara* – unchangeable.
- 10) Essentially, *cit* cannot exist without *jnana*, making it completely dependent on Brahman.
- 11) *Cit* (as the soul) and *Acit* (as the body) form the body of Brahman and exist only within Him, fully dependent on Brahman for its existence.

Ramanuja's view of *cit* adds to his philosophy of Vishishtadvaita – individual beings solely dependent on Brahman.

Kalita (2018:23) notes that Ramanuja distinguishes Atman into three groups; bound, liberated and eternal.

Bound souls refer to souls that remain within the samsara circle due to their attachment to the material world and their karma thereof. Liberated souls are those who have detached from the action, resulting in freedom from the cycle of rebirth and the attainment of Nirvana. Unlike liberated souls that once lived on the earth and attained Moksha, eternal souls existed with Brahman before creation; serving as His devotees who are constantly found in devotional service.

Toward understanding Ramanuja's view of Atman, Mahmoodi (2017:35) states:

The soul and Brahman are not identical. Rather, their relationship is like that of the body and the soul or the whole and its part. Brahman is the Soul of souls and guides them from inside.

Therefore, Ramanuja views Atman as a manifestation of Brahman that exists only within Brahman.

6.2.4.5 Moksha

The Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism emphasises Bhakti yoga; complete love and devotion to Lord Vishnu. By being a follower of the Vaishnavite faith, Ramanuja emphasises the importance of Bhakti to attain Moksha.

Ramanuja firmly believes that a liberated soul is freed from the earth, he sees no reason why a soul that has realised Brahman should continue to live in the material when the eternal abode of eternal bliss is made available.

Ramanuja's commentary on *Vedanta-Sutra* 3.3.3 exhibits his view on Moksha (Prasad, 2011:34):

We do not maintain that all those who have reached true knowledge divest themselves at the time of death of all their good and evil works; we limit our view to those who immediately after death attain moving on the path, the first stage of which is light. Persons like Vasistha, on the other hand, who were entrusted with certain offices, do not immediately after death attain to moving on the path beginning with light, since the duties undertaken by them are not completely accomplished. In the case of beings of this kind, who owing to particular deeds have been appointed to particular offices, the effect of the works which gave rise to the office does not pass away before those offices are completely accomplished; for the effect of a work is exhausted only through the complete enjoyment of its results.

Veliath (1993:139) translates Ramanuja's comment⁹⁸ on Mundaka-UP III.ii.3 and Katha-UP III.ii.3 as: "He who is elected by the Self, by him the self can be gained."

On Ramanuja's comment, Veliath (1993:139) explains that an "Aspirant" is "chosen" or "drawn" separately from other people by Brahman. This individual is of great character and has invoked Brahman through "wholehearted and inestimable love for the Brahman" (Veliath, 1993:139). Therefore, Moksha is attained by those that have displayed a deepened sense of devotion to Brahman. By the devotion of one, the attention of Brahman is received, and moksha attained.

⁹⁸ Ramanuja made the same comment in Mundaka-UP III.ii.3 and Katha-UP III.ii.3 (Veliath, 1993:139).

Additionally, in Ramanuja's commentary of the Gita he makes the following statements that relate to both Moksha and NK⁹⁹:

- 2.41: "Rituals should be performed with the understanding that liberation – moksha, is their sole purpose..." and "... goal-orientated works (*karma-karmas*) should be performed according to one's capacity, after relinquishing all motivation for rewards and with the conviction that when performed in this way, they are a means to attain moksha." In this verse, Ramanuja demonstrates that actions performed only with the desire for Moksha leads to Moksha. Any actions performed with any other motivation are condemned.
- 3.10: Here Ramanuja is encouraging the performance of sacrifices to Sri Krishna and says: "May this institute of sacrifice fulfil your supreme desire of liberation (Moksha) and also the other desires that are in conformity with it." To understand the 'good' desire for Moksha and the other desires that support it, Ramanuja comments on Gita 3.11.
- 3.11: "... by the means of sacrifice, you should propitiate the gods who are my manifestations and Me as their inner-Self..." and "Propitiated by sacrifices, may these gods, nourish you with food, drink and other such items which are also required for their worship. Thus, supporting each other, may you attain the highest good called Moksha (Liberation)."
- 4.17: "... the primary goal of Scriptural Teaching is Moksha alone."
- 6.3: "In the case of one who aspires for Moksha, who desires Self-realisation, Karma-Yoga is declared to be the preferable means..."
- 8.3: "Both these (doctrines of the *aksara* – the quintessential state, and the *adhyatma* – conjunction with material nature) should be learnt by the aspirants for liberation (*Kaivalya-Moksha*)." And "... acts associated with procreation should be assiduously avoided by the aspirants after moksha."

Ramanuja's comments display his understanding of Moksha as that which is attained through the favour of Brahman. In turn, the favour of Brahman is attained by those who aspire for Moksha - Mumukshutva. Ramanuja believed that a person can attain *Mumukshutva* and still not be freed from bondage, in doing so he divides liberation

⁹⁹ As translated by (Rama, 2013).

into 2 parts: (1) reaching a state of what Prasad (2011:349) calls, “God-intoxication” and (2) freedom from bondage.

Ramanuja argued that if liberation was not first experienced on earth, it would not motivate one to aspire to Vishnu’s abode. As a result, the attainment of “God-intoxication” results in one experiencing the eternal bliss of Nirvana while being bound to the samsara cycle.

The joys of Nirvana were then experienced by one who aspired for *Mumukshutva* while they were still on earth. This bliss that they experienced, according to Ramanuja, was meant to inspire them to draw closer to Vishnu – it was designed to make the *Mumukshutva* practitioner fall deeply in love with Vishnu.

The first stage of Moksha is then the attainment of bliss on earth with the final stage being the realisation of Vishnu and attainment of His presence.

Mahmoodi (2017:33) explains that the eternal bliss experienced on earth by *mukta*¹⁰⁰ is only attained through devotional service. Devotional service rendered solely unto Vishnu (for His glory and pleasure alone) provides one with an overwhelming divine bliss that further inspires them to attain the presence of Vishnu.

Ramanuja’s belief of *Mumukshutva* is gathered from the understanding he acquired after studying the sacred texts. Prasad (2011:353) notes that the Puranas influenced Ramanuja’s belief of *Mumukshutva* and that Ramanuja commented on the Upanishads to support this view.

Ramanuja believed that ignorance of Brahman, Saguna, and Nirguna, bound one to the Samsara cycle. For one to be freed from the cycle of rebirth it was important to understand the qualities of Brahman made visible in the material world, so that the ultimate Nirguna Brahman may be realised – freeing one from the cycle of rebirth.

Furthermore, Ramanuja believed that the eternal bliss of Nirvana was first experienced on earth before Moksha was fully attained. This eternal bliss of Nirvana inspired one to seek the highest abode of Vishnu, resulting in complete surrender to performing devotional service unto Vishnu. The devotional service to Vishnu, is, for Ramanuja, the Practice of NK.

¹⁰⁰ Practitioner of *Mumukshutva*.

6.3 Nishkama Karma in Ramanuja's commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi

According to the Vaishnavite tradition, there are nine texts (called the *Navaratna*, meaning 9 gems) attributed to Ramanuja:

- 1) *Vedartha Sangraha* – Meaning “the essence of the Vedas” this text is a discourse between Ramanuja and his disciples, where Ramanuja focuses on explaining the UP. Although this text is entitled the “essence of the Vedas”, it does not discuss the Vedas. It is entitled as such due to Ramanuja believing that the UP was a synopsis of the Vedas.
- 2) Sri *Bhashya* – One of the most famous texts attributed to Ramanuja, this text contains his commentary on the Brahma Sutras. In this commentary, Ramanuja explains his understanding of Brahman, Atman/*Cit* and *Acit* considering Vishishtadvaita.
- 3) Bhagavad Gita *Bhashya* – most commentaries of the BG represent Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy with a few, Tamil, commentaries representing Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita. In Ramanuja's Bhagavad Gita *Bhashya*, he provides a simpler, easier to read version of the Sanskrit text, to encourage everyone to read the BG.
- 4) *Vedanta Deepa* – A minor text of Ramanuja, these writings elaborate on the Sri *Bhashya*. It focuses on emphasising the Vishishtadvaita interpretation of the BS.
- 5) *Vedanta Sara* – This text expands upon concepts found in the UP. It also critiques Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy.
- 6) *Gadya Trayam* – Ramanuja wrote this poetic text that contains songs of praise to Vishnu and Lakshmi. Embedded within these songs are also important lessons on moksha and bhakti that Ramanuja wished to convey to his audience.
- 7) *Saranagati* and *Sriranga Gadyam* – The *Saranagati* and *Sriranga Gadyam* are often read in unison. The *Saranagati Gadyam* is recognised as one of the first written prayers that emphasise the importance of Bhakti (love and devotion) to Vishnu. Just like the *Saranagati Gadyam*, the *Sriranga Gadyam* contains a list of Bhakti hymns dedicated to Vishnu. The *Saranagati* and *Sriranga Gadyam* are mostly popular amongst Tamil communities found in the South Indian city of Tiruchirappalli.

- 8) *Sri Vaikunta Gadyam* – This text contains a list of devotional hymns in reverence of Lord Vishnu’s counterpart, the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi.
- 9) *Nitya Grantham* – According to the Vaishnavite tradition, Ramanuja wrote this text to guide Vaishnavites through the religious practices mentioned in the Vedas. In writing this text, Ramanuja brings together a variety of different teachings (made by affluent gurus before and during his time) that teach the importance, meaning and symbolism of ritualistic practices.

There has been much debate regarding the *Navaratna* of Ramanuja. Scholars such as Veliath (1993), Prasad (2011) and Pskhu (2019) question the credibility of all nine of the texts, agreeing that the only authentic texts of Ramanuja are the *Vedartha Sangraha*, *Sri Bhashya* and *Bhagavad Gita Bhashya*.

Ramanuja’s understanding of NK in the Prasthanatrayi requires an investigation into his writings of the *Vedartha Sangraha*, *Sri Bhashya* and *Bhagavad Gita Bhashya*. The following section furthers this discussion.

6.3.1 Vedartha Sangraha

Hinduism is undoubtedly a tradition embedded in the culture of people; it emphasises an individualistic understanding of God that is based on personal experience. As a result, the Hindu faith does not place a strong emphasis on reading the sacred texts instead one is simply encouraged to live a peaceful lifestyle.

Generally, many Hindus go through their lifetime rarely reading the sacred texts with most of them never even owning one of the texts. A popular quote in Hindu literature says: “If you ask any religion for their holiest scripture, they’ll hand you a book. If you ask a Hindu, he will take you to a library.”

This statement exhibits the vast pool of Hindu literature that exists. The result of this vast pool seemingly confuses Hindus as to which text to read further resulting in the dismissal of reading any texts as most opt to simply “live good and peaceful lives” as guided by their spiritual leaders.

The effect of such practice results in little to no recent resources available that comment and critique Hindu literature. The *Vedartha Sangraha*¹⁰¹ is a victim of such

¹⁰¹ Literally meaning: “summary of the meaning of the Vedas”.

practice, with limited commentaries and translations available there has not been an increase in academic interest in the *Vedartha Sangraha*.

The limited interest in Ramanuja's *Vedartha Sangraha* can also be explained by the popularity of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta in India. Due to Shankara's philosophy being the dominant school of thought in Hindu communities, most translations and commentaries reflect Advaita philosophy resulting in limited access to Ramanuja's *Vedartha Sangraha*.

Despite an archaic translation, Adidevananda (1978) provides a reputable and well-respected translation of the *Vedartha Sangraha*. Due to the respect and reverence given to Adidevananda's (1978) translation, this research will rely on his translation. In addition to Adidevananda's translation, Raghavachar (2010) will also be consulted. It must be noted that Raghavachar (2010) is merely a latter reprint of Adidevananda's (1978) translation. Essentially the two are the same, with Raghavachar (2010) not having the foreword of Swami Adidevananda and being a later reprint.

Toward understanding the lack of English translations of the *Vedartha Sangraha*, Adidevananda (1978:xiii) states that the only available literature at that time was:

- 1) The edition in Telegu characters published by the Saraswati Bhandara, Madras, in 1883.
- 2) The Devanagari edition of Pandit Rama Misra Sastri published by Messrs. E. J. Lazarus & Co., Benares, in 1924.
- 3) The Devanagari edition in the Sri Vaishnava Sapradaaya Granthamala, published by T. T. Devasthanams, Tirupati, in 1953.

This research faces the same challenge as Adidevananda did in 1978; a lack of recent English resources about the *Vedartha Sangraha*.

Although there is no definitive date for the writing of the *Vedartha Sangraha*, it is estimated to have been written around 1100 CE in India, towards the latter stage of Ramanuja's life.

Toward understanding *Vedartha Sangraha*¹⁰², Adidevananda (1978:i) claims that:

¹⁰² Hereafter referred to as VS, except for direct quotations.

Sri Ramanuja wrote nine works in Sanskrit on the philosophy of Visistadvaita. Of these, the *Vedartha Sangraha* occupies a unique place inasmuch as this work takes the place of a commentary on the Upanisads, though not in a conventional sense or form. The work mirrors a total vision of the Upanisads, discussing all the controversial texts in a relevant, coherent manner. It is in fact an independent exposition of the philosophy of the Upanisads.

As this research aims to explore the concept of NK in the philosophies of the acclaimed three acharyas, their commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi served as an important contributor. Although the VS does not serve as Ramanuja's explicit commentary on the UP, it does provide insight into how Ramanuja understood its concepts. As a result, this research utilises the VS as a guide to understanding Ramanuja's conceptualisation of NK.

The following verses from the VS illustrate Ramanuja's view of NK:

VS 1: ... He is the inner self of all creatures, free from imperfections, the divine, the sole God Narayana..., 'The Brahmanas desire to know this one, through the study of the Vedas, through sacrifices, charity, austerities and fasting.'

The first verse of the VS repeats a point previously mentioned; the concept of desire in Hindu philosophy is to be understood as both good and bad. Although Ramanuja does not explicitly engage this point in this verse, he explains that the Brahmanas study the Vedas and its rituals because they desire to know "the sole God Narayana". This relates to NK in displaying the difference between (1) desire for the divine and (2) desire for materialistic objects. NK then is the desire for the divine through the rejection of desire for materialistic objects.

VS 6: ...Brahman's authorship of these processes, countless auspicious attributes of surpassing perfection like omniscience, omnipotence, universal overlordship, the possession of all entities as its modes, the negation of the superiority and equality of everything else to it, and the power of realising all desires and will and the effulgence that illuminates the whole universe.

The realisation of "all desires" portrays Brahman as "all desires"; realising all desires is to realise Brahman. On this point, Ramanuja teaches that the realisation of Brahman as all desires is to fulfil all desire leaving one in a state of desirelessness. This desire that Brahman is attributed to should be understood as righteous and noble desire, as

Ramanuja sings Brahman's praises in the rest of the verse. This echoes Shankara's comments on NK as found in Mundaka-UP 3.1.10 and 3.2.2¹⁰³.

VS 81: The one eternal Spirit who fulfils the desires of the many eternal selves (Sve. 2:5:13), he is the Master of the primordial nature and of the individual selves. He is the Lord of [all] qualities (Sve. 6:33).

Ramanuja quotes the *Svetasvatara*-UP¹⁰⁴ (Sve.) to describe Brahman as the essential force within all individuals; the primordial, innermost, fundamental essence of an individual is Brahman. Therefore, making Brahman the "Lord of all qualities", the one who fulfils all "desires". In this passage Ramanuja further illustrates the importance of distinguishing between good and bad desire; the fulfilment of desires refers to the fulfilment of a righteous desire that the eternal souls have rather than the wicked/evil desires of souls bound to the cycle of rebirth.

VS 112: There is another class of Shrutis which denies of Brahman everything that is cognised as evil in the world and predicates of it infinite and surpassing auspicious attributes, omniscience, omnipotence, the authorship of differentiations of all names and forms and the attribute of being the support of all..., He has all desires fulfilled and his will comes true.

In this verse, Ramanuja refers to the Mundaka-UP, *Purusa-sukta*, Mahanarayana-UP and Chandogya-UP to explain that Brahman being all desires refers to righteous desire as Brahman is not everything evil. Brahman as the fulfilment of all desires is then the fulfilment of all righteous desires. This explanation by Ramanuja continues the argument that desire/kama should be interpreted as twofold in Hindu philosophy.

Adding to his argument of *Kama* being twofold and Brahman being the fulfilment of righteous *Kama* Ramanuja notes in VS 116:

The passages speaking of Brahman 'as different from all, as the Lord, as the Supreme Ruler, as the ocean of perfections, as having all desires fulfilled and as having a will that comes true' have been sustained by the admission of the affirmed attributes as ultimately real... and that Brahman is the faultless and the immutable¹⁰⁵ and the soul of all.

¹⁰³ See [5.3.1](#).

¹⁰⁴ Consisting of 113 mantras, this text is embedded within the Yajurveda and engages the concept of the Self and universe. This text is mostly popular for its strong emphasis on the importance of reverence to Shiva.

¹⁰⁵ That is unchanging, ever constant.

In VS 116 Ramanuja explains that Brahman is “faultless” and yet is the fulfilment of all desire. This research illustrated that desire results in fault which further results in a soul being bound to the samsara cycle. Therefore, the only way Brahman is to be understood as both “faultless” and the “fulfilment” of all desires is if, desire is two-fold, with Brahman being the fulfilment of all faultless desire.

VS 128: ...Bhakti leads to the attainment of Brahman..., Bhakti is that particular kind of knowledge, which is a state that elicits absolute love towards itself, which is an end in itself, and eliminates the desire for everything else.

This verse confirms Ramanuja’s faith in Bhakti Yoga as a part of the other paths to Moksha. Furthermore, Ramanuja alludes that the desire for Brahman results in the attainment of “absolute love” and the elimination of all other desires. Ramanuja says; the desire for Brahman (a state of absolute love) eliminates all other desires. This means that Ramanuja would understand NK as the desire to only desire Brahman.

VS 157: He assumes by his own desire a multiplicity of bodies. Thus, he accomplishes the good of the world.

Ramanuja writes this verse considering his Vishishtadvaita philosophy where the different Avatars and deities are manifestations of Brahman (Brahman being Vishnu according to Ramanuja’s philosophy). Ramanuja notes the noble and righteous desire of Brahman to accomplish good in the world by assuming a “multiplicity of bodies”.

VS 175: ...What is desired has two forms. In the first place, it is an object of desire. In the second place, it is what prompts effort on the part of the agent. This latter is the meaning of ‘being aimed at by an act’..., Our argument is this; By this property of ‘prompting effort’ can be meant only ‘the impossibility of what is conceived as an object of desire coming into existence, without the agent’s effort to bring it about. It is the consciousness (of the unattainability of an object of desire without one’s own exertion) that starts all action.

VS 176: A further attempt at the clarification of ‘being aimed at by action’ may be made. ‘An object is desired because it is agreeable. To be agreeable is to be aimed at by action’. We dismiss the explanation. Pleasure is what is agreeable. Pain is what is disagreeable. Therefore, nothing other than pleasure can be agreeable. You may object by saying that the removal of pain, which removal is different from pleasure, is also found to be agreeable. It is not so, we reply. That which is agreeable to the self is pleasure. That which is disagreeable is pain. This is the

difference between pleasure and pain. Pleasure, which is agreeable to the self, comes to be desired. Pain, which is disagreeable to the self, comes to be disliked. Therefore, as the conjunction with pain is unendurable, its elimination also comes to be desired. Therefore, as there is similarity in being desired, the elimination of pain is also wrongly conceived as agreeable.

Toward understanding NK considering VS 175 and 176; the practice of NK aims to end pain, suffering and ultimately rebirth therefore, making NK desirable to the Self. The object of desire is then the end of suffering and liberation from the material world, with the motive for action being the same and the action itself being the practice of NK. NK provides the agreeable pleasure of eternal bliss and liberation by removing the disagreeable pain caused by an action performed with attachments to the results. Attachment to action binds a soul to the samsara cycle as one continually searches for materialism again; to this Ramanuja (VS 175 and 176) explains that just as the elimination of pain can be “wrongly conceived as agreeable”, the pleasure of attachment to results of action is also wrongfully conceived as agreeable.

One might think that because the fruit of their action contributes to the betterment of the physical state, it is pleasurable to the soul. However, attachment to the fruit of action is rightly, wrongfully conceived as agreeable as, while the fruit of action may be enjoyable, it binds one to rebirth which is not favourable to the soul.

According to Ramanuja, the practice of NK can be summarised as both the object of desire and the motive to act as it detaches one from their actions (which causes pain and suffering) and guides one to performing detached action which liberates the soul.

6.3.2 Sri *Bhashya*

Ramanuja’s Sri *Bhashya* is one of his most popular works. According to Vaishnavite tradition, it was written after Ramanuja had turned 100 years old (1117 CE) and interprets the Brahma Sutras according to Vishishtadvaita philosophy. The tradition notes that the Vedanta *Sara* and *Dipa* are introductory texts to the *Bhashya* and that, after its completion, the Goddess Saraswati¹⁰⁶ read it and was so impressed with it that she named it the “Sri *Bhashya*”.

¹⁰⁶ Hindu deity of knowledge, wisdom, art, and learning, she is also the wife of Brahman and a part of the *Tridevi* (trinity) that includes Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth and prosperity, the counterpart of Vishnu) and Parvati (Goddess of fertility, love and beauty, the counterpart of Shiva).

Rangacharya (2019:i) notes that the Sri *Bhashya*¹⁰⁷ is an exposition of Vishishtadvaita within the Vedanta school of philosophy and that it deserves the same amount of appreciation and fame as the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of Shankara.

Ramanuja believed his philosophy, embedded in his commentary of the SB, to end reincarnation and liberate the souls of men. The SB became the most famous text of Ramanuja as his Vishishtadvaita philosophy is in-depth discussed and propagated in its commentary.

The following verses, with Ramanuja's commentary, from the SB provide insight into Ramanuja's stance on desire, detached action, and karma; ultimately contributing to understanding the place of NK in his philosophy:

- i) Samanvaya Ashyaya 1.1.1 (1.): Ramanuja notes that the “then” denotes something yet to immediately happen and the “therefore” is something that has already happened. These two used next to one another in the first verse of the BS indicate that the enquiry into Brahman is an ongoing process; something that is, yet to happen, happening and has happened.

Furthermore, in agreement with other translators and commentators, the “enquiry into” in Sanskrit means the “desire to know”. Ramanuja defines Brahman in this verse as “the highest Person (Purushottama), who is essentially free from all imperfections and possesses numberless classes of auspicious qualities of unsurpassable excellence.” According to Ramanuja, the enquiry into Brahman is therefore, the desire to know unsurpassable excellence. In this context, the term “desire” is of good and noble qualities as it inspires one to act upon obtaining knowledge of “the highest Person”.

- ii) Kamadyidhikaranam 3.3.39: Ramanuja quotes the Chandogya-UP in saying “Those who depart from hence, after having cognised the Self and those self-realising desires, move about at will in all those worlds...” Ramanuja states “Thus he who desires the world of the father..., realises Brahman.” On this Ramanuja also notes that Brahman is *satyakama* and only has true desires, the desire for self-realisation and the betterment of the world. The important

¹⁰⁷ Hereafter referred to as SB

words in these verses are the “self-realising desires”, “*satyakama*” and “true desires”, which, contribute to the argument that “*kama*” (in Nishkama) should be understood as having two meanings.

- iii) Kamyadhikaranam 3.3.60: On BS 3.3.60, Ramanuja argues that a state of “special qualification” is required for one who “acts”. The special qualification is correct knowledge (Vidya) which detaches one from their action. The failure to attain knowledge and detach from action results in the inability to “claim independence” from the effects of action further resulting in attachment to the Samsara cycle. Ramanuja’s comment clarifies the position of NK in performing actions without the desire for materialistic objects. When actions are performed with Vidya, the individual is detached from the fruits of their actions. In this comment, Ramanuja displays the importance of knowledge in the practice of NK. Actions performed with knowledge (Vidya) are performed with detachment. Therefore, allowing for liberation from the samsara cycle.
- iv) Asramakarmadhikaranam 3.4.32: Ramanuja claims that “sacrifices and other works are auxiliary to the knowledge of Brahman. The doubt now arises whether those works are to be performed by him who merely wishes to fulfil the duties of his *asrama*¹⁰⁸, without aiming at final Release, or not.” These statements begin Ramanuja’s discussion on the contribution of performing prescribed duties to attaining salvation.

Ramanuja explains that the performance of work is often deemed null and void upon the attainment of Brahman, therefore, is it necessary to act? To answer this question Ramanuja states: “The works belonging to each *asrama* must be performed by those also who do not aim at more than to live according to the *asrama*..., this implies a permanent obligation dependent on life.” and “These works are to be performed also on account of their being co-operative towards knowledge in so far, namely, as they give rise to the desire of knowledge.”

¹⁰⁸ As in *Ashrama*; the four stages of life.

According to Ramanuja, the performance of prescribed duties aids in the attainment of knowledge. Furthermore, the performance of one's ascribed duties gives rise to the noble desire for knowledge. Considering this verse, NK, as the desire to perform one prescribed duty and detached action, gives rise to the desire for knowledge and the attainment of moksha.

- v) Na cha kary pratipattyabhisandhih 4.3.14: In this verse, Ramanuja adds to his previous notes by reiterating the importance of the desire to attain Moksha.

In Ramanuja's commentary of the SB, the concept of desire being twofold is reiterated. Despite acknowledging the attachment to the samsara cycle caused by desire, Ramanuja stresses the importance of the desire to realise Brahman and attain Moksha. In Adhikaranam 5.12 Ramanuja notes that in Brahman "all desires are contained" and that "the Self is devoid of sin, is free from old age, free from death, free from sorrow, free from hunger, free from thirst, and desires the truth, and will the truth."

These statements by Ramanuja repeat that the desires contained within Brahman are devoid of sin. Therefore, the practice of NK is the renunciation of wicked desire in the pursuit of noble desire. Ramanuja in the SB argues that, because Brahman is free from sin and evil but also the fulfilment of all desires, NK is the desire to be free from wicked, sinful desires.

6.3.3 Bhagavad Gita *Bhashya*

The Bhagavad Gita *Bhashya*, according to Ram (2013:3), has only been recognised by Tamil or Sanskrit scholars, as Shankara's commentary (that promotes Advaita Vedanta) was more "well propounded and perpetuated through the centuries" in Hindu communities.

Ram (2013:3) states that there are only two English versions of Ramanuja's Bhagavad Gita *Bhashya*¹⁰⁹; "One by M.R. Sampatkumara, published by Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute in January 1985. The other is by Swami Adidevananda published by the Ramakrishna Math", which was reprinted in 2009.

Due to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta being still being favoured amongst Hindu communities, English academics focus more on Shankara's philosophy as opposed

¹⁰⁹ Hereafter referred to as BGB

to Ramanuja's. Van Buitenen (1968: i) confirms this by mentioning the: "comparative neglect of Ramanuja and Visistadvaita in modern scholarship" and that the importance and fame of the SB "has led modern scholars to neglect the study of his other writings".

Although Van Buitenen writes in 1968, his statements are still relevant in the contemporary age. Since Van Buitenen's notes on the BGB in 1968, Advaita Vedanta grew exponentially – outshining Vishishtadvaita and Ramanuja's commentary on the BGB. This resulted in studies into Hinduism and Vedanta philosophy focusing largely on Shankara's philosophy or Ramanuja's SB whilst the BGB remained in communities that maintained the traditional, Vaishnavite-Vishishtadvaita, reading of the BGB.

Unlike other commentaries on the BG, Ramanuja's BGB offers an easier to read version of the Sanskrit; his focus is more on making the BG easier to read rather than an in-depth commentary. This resulting in some inconsistencies with verse numbering.

Ramanuja's BGB begins with an introductory phrase that pays respect to his Guru Yamunacharya, who led him to enlightenment. Ramanuja then explains the nature of the Supreme being, who to him is Vishnu. Ramanuja states that "The nature and qualities of Sriman Narayana transcend all thought and words. He dwells in the divine and imperishable supreme Realms which abounds in the manifold, wondrous and countless objects, means and places of enjoyment."

After describing the transcendent and supreme nature of Vishnu, who he calls Narayana, Ramanuja¹¹⁰ explains that:

The Supreme being, Sriman Narayana, projected the entire universe, beginning with Brahma (the creator) down to plants and minerals. Being inaccessible in His transcendental form for meditation and worship by sentient beings including Brahma, gods, humans, etc., and being an ocean of compassion and loving condescension, maternal affection and generosity – He took forms in the likeness of various kinds of beings. In this act of self-embodiment His own transcendental nature was not in any way compromised. Thus, the Supreme Lord took birth in the world in order to receive the worship of devotees and in order to grant them their desired goals comprising of *Dharma* (righteous duty), *Artha* (material prosperity), *Kama* (sense gratification) and *Moksha* (Liberation), each in accordance with his/her individual desires.

¹¹⁰ In his introductory remarks to the BGB.

Ramanuja often describes Naryana as magnificent due to his desire to take on many different forms that people can relate to for meditative and spiritual purposes. Furthermore, Ramanuja explains that the “desired goals” of Nayarana’s “devotees” are solely to fulfil the *Purushartha* to attain liberation.

Ramanuja further states that the desired goals of the *Purushartha* are aligned with individual desires; in this context, Ramanuja sees the concept of desire as a good thing – the fulfilment of sensory purpose and the will to attain Moksha.

Before 1.1 of the BGB, Ramanuja notes that Narayana manifested in the form of Sri Krishna to relieve the earth of its burdens and to “make Himself available for us (frail humans) to take refuge in Him”.

Ramanuja further states that while being on the earth, Sri Krishna “revealed the teaching of *Bhakti* (devotion) directed at Himself. This Yoga of Devotion was promulgated together with the subsidiary disciplines of *Jnana* (Meditation of knowledge) and *Karma* (Selfless works).”

According to Borah (2020:1089), Ramanuja saw two methods for liberation, (1) Bhakti (devotion) and (2) Prapatti (surrendering unto God). For Ramanuja, “wholehearted self-surrender to God” is a form of Bhakti that is just as necessary as Bhakti itself (Borah, 2020:1094). Ramanuja believed that Bhakti yoga liberated a soul when Prapatti (as a central theme of Bhakti yoga) was practised (Borah, 2020:1094). This means that Ramanuja saw Jnana and Karma yoga as “subsidiary disciplines” that aid in the process of liberation.

Unlike other commentaries of the BG, Ramanuja first engages the concept of Karma and desireless action in chapter 2.13 where he states:

The eternal jivas being conditioned by beginningless Karma, become endowed with bodies according to their particular Karmas¹¹¹. To overcome this bondage [of transmigration caused by Karma], embodied beings should perform their duties like war and other vocations and rites prescribed by the Scripture, and which are

¹¹¹ Ramanuja believed that the current situation people found themselves in was a result of the Karma of their previous lives.

appropriate to their social circumstances without attachment to the results of those actions.

In this comment, Ramanuja explains that one may think that the complete renunciation of action is freedom from the “transmigration caused by Karma”. However, Ramanuja says that performing one’s duty to society also frees one from Karma as no fruit is generated because one is simply fulfilling their duty.

Ramanuja further notes that there are “Karmas, which cause bondage” and that these “Karmas” need to be destroyed for one to attain liberation. Until this point, this research illustrated how the concept of *Kama* should be considered twofold; good and bad. Ramanuja contributes to the discussion by saying that not only should *Kama* be understood as twofold but also the system within which it falls, Karma.

According to Ramanuja, Karma constitutes all human action, both good and evil. Karma Marga is then the philosophy that teaches one to aspire for good Karma, rather than performing Karma which causes bondage. Understanding *Kama* considering this teaching requires the acknowledgement that desire is fundamental to human existence and motive. The desire within humans is just as unavoidable as inhalation contributes toward the accumulation of Karma.

Therefore, as Karma Marga is the conscious decision to perform liberating Karma (instead of Karma that causes bondage); NK is Karma that favours desire which liberates the soul rather than desire which attaches a soul to rebirth.

In BGB 2.13 Ramanuja introduces the concept of NK without defining it. To firmly establish this understanding of Karma (and NK), Ramanuja in BGB 2.40 says:

In this practice of Karma yoga there is no loss of initial effort. ‘*Abhikrama*’ means invested effort. ‘*Nasa*’ means the loss of potential to succeed. In the practice of Karma yoga, if some activity is begun and left unfinished, and the continuity is thus broken, it does not remain fruitless, as in the case of works undertaken expressly for their rewards. There is no negative result if the work is not continued. Even a little of this practice known as Karma yoga or *Niskama Karma* (actions done without desire for any reward) gives protection from the great fear, i.e., the fear of [the continuation of] transmigratory existence.

Interestingly, Ramanuja uses the terms “Karma yoga” and “*Nishkama Karma*” interchangeably. In doing so, Ramanuja reasserts his argument of understanding Karma in a dual sense.

Furthermore, Ramanuja (BGB 2.40) clearly states that NK is “actions done without the desire for any reward”, with the focus being on the desire for rewards rather than a state of desirelessness. Ramanuja explains that a guiding factor to human life is the fear of “transmigratory existence” – rebirth. To escape the cycle of rebirth, Ramanuja teaches that one should perform actions that do not have a negative result.

Performing action without concern for the rewards and performing fruitive action is how Ramanuja views NK. According to the BGB 2.40, fruitive action does not refer to performing actions solely for the rewards and self-benefit it may bring but rather to providing a lasting, positive contribution to the overall development and wellbeing of the community.

Ramanuja elaborates on this point in BGB 2.47 where he states:

As regards obligatory, periodic and desiderative acts taught in the Vedas are associated with some result or other, you, the aspirant established in Sattva, have the right only to perform them [as duty]. You have no right to the rewards known to be derived from such acts. It is works done with a motivation for some reward which is the cause of bondage. But acts done without motivation are a form of worship and a means for Liberation. Do not initiate works with the idea of reaping their fruits. Even when you, who are established in pure Sattva and are desirous for Liberation, perform acts, you should not look upon yourself as the agent. Likewise, you should not regard yourself as being the cause of even appeasing your own hunger and other such physical necessities. Later on, it will be taught that both the idea of being an agent and the results of action, should be considered as belonging to the Modes of Material nature (*Gunās*) or to Me who am the Lord of All – This is the attitude one should have towards all work.

With regard to inaction, i.e., abstaining from the performance of duties, let there be no attachment to such inaction.

Reflecting on the abovementioned verse, Ramanuja reiterates that one is only entitled to the responsibility of performing one’s duty to society and that any act, whether it be

for duty or other, that is motivated by rewards causes bondage. To escape bondage, the cycle of rebirth, one is required to ensure that they do not perform actions that are motivated by rewards however in doing so it can be argued that performing such an act (of not desiring rewards) is motivated by the idea of attaining the ultimate reward, salvation.

To address what may seem like a contradiction, Ramanuja (BGB 2.47) explains that even when you are “desirous for liberation”; “you should not look upon yourself as the agent”. According to Ramanuja, one should completely surrender all their will and motivation for action solely unto the Lord of all; do not act for what you may gain instead perform services as a form of worship unto the Lord of all. In doing so, Ramanuja argues that one should desire liberation, not because of the benefits of heaven but rather only to serve the Lord.

Ramanuja (BGB 2.47) also makes mention of the three *gunas*¹¹², which he argues, are fundamentally natural moods that determine action and to whom the result of action belongs. Ramanuja understands the three *gunas*, not only as all-pervading in the material world but also as entities to which the result of action in the material world belongs.

To summarise Ramanuja’s (BGB 2.47) claims; the fruit of all activities performed in the material world belongs to the *gunas* and the fruit of the action that pertains to the eternal realms (such as Moksha), belongs only to the Lord of all. Ramanuja explains that this teaching needs to be understood by one who performs any sort of action; by understanding that one is not entitled to the fruits of their action (even concerning their salvation), one is free from self-motivated action.

In BGB 2.40 and 2.47, the practice of NK is seemingly to remove selfish motives so that efficiency in task completion and peace of mind may be attained. In BGB 2.71 Ramanuja says:

The person, who wants peace must abandon all sense-objects. He should have no craving for them. He should not entertain the sense of ‘mine-ness’ regarding them, and should not love the body – these concepts of possession and ego arise

¹¹² In BGB 2.47

from the misconception that the body, which is really non-self, is the Self. One who lives in this way attains peace after realising the Self.

In performed attached action, one can be found as having a sense of entitlement that convinces one that they are one with Brahman and that the material world is all there is to existence. However, it is only once one detaches from the material world that peace is attained, and the Self realised. Ramanuja (BGB 2.71) supports this view by arguing that:

The *Brahmi-state* which is characterised by immutable wisdom, is defined as the state of performing actions without motivation for rewards, which is preceded by the [theoretical] knowledge of the eternal atman. It is the *Brahmi-state*, which secures the attainment of *Brahman* (the atman). After attaining such a state, one is not deluded, that is, will not again enter into the cycle of transmigration...

Performing actions without motivation are now characterised as “immutable wisdom” by Ramanuja. Furthermore, it is actions without motivation for rewards that lead to the attainment of Brahman and freedom from rebirth.

Ramanuja’s commentary on the following two verses adds to the abovementioned points on NK:

BGB 6.1: One who performs actions without motivation for their rewards such as heaven, etc., with the conviction that it is one’s duty, and sole aim, because they are forms of worship of the Supreme being who is one’s friend in every way and one’s only goal – such a person is a real *Sanyasin* (a practitioner of Jnana Yoga), and also a Karma Yogi, (practitioner of Karma yoga). And not one who is disinclined to perform the enjoined works such as sacrifices, etc., nor one who is devoted to mere knowledge alone [without any practice].

BG 6:36: Yoga of equality of vision can be attained by proper means, by one who constantly practices, whose mind is subdued by Right Actions (Karma yoga) as taught before.

Ramanuja’s commentary on these two verses adds to his argument of NK by explaining that: (1) The practice of NK (action performed without rewards being the motivation) is conducted because of the conviction that it is one’s duty rather than the

motivation of heaven and, (2) Karma yoga is seen as consciously choosing to perform right action while “bad” Karma simultaneously exists.

Although motivation and desire can be seen as synonymous terms in the light of NK, Ramanuja (BGB 6.1 and 6.36) sees them as opposing concepts. The motivation for rewards can destroy the desire for heaven whereas the desire for heaven can remove the motivation for rewards.

Ramanuja argues that NK shouldn't be understood as a state of desirelessness but rather a personal conviction that awakens one to their responsibilities within society. Ramanuja's BGB indicates that the practice of NK can be seen as the desire to uphold one's responsibilities to society, which can only be practised once one performs actions without rewards being the motivator.

6.4 Bhakti and Karma yoga

The followers of the Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism are mostly Bhakti Yoga practitioners. This, coupled with Ramanuja's writings of the VS, SB and BGB make it evident that he was a practitioner of Bhakti Yoga too.

According to Prasad (2011:257), Ramanuja believed that:

upon reaching the world of Narayana, liberated souls enjoyed eternal service before Narayana, from where they return not. Conversely, bound souls reach the world of *pitrs* (the souls of ancestors), wherefrom they will afterwards return to this earthly world in accordance with their *karma*.

Bhakti Yoga is easily recognisable through its emphasis on deep love and devotion towards individuals, personal deities as well as spiritual leaders. Reflecting on Prasad's comment (2011:257), it is evident that to Ramanuja, Bhakti Yoga meant the enjoyment of “eternal service before Narayana”. This statement places the concepts of Bhakti and Karma yoga as one practice; the enjoyment of love and devotion toward Narayana is manifested in the practice of eternal service by devotees. In this sense, love and devotion (Bhakti) for Narayana are seen in the Karma of eternal service.

Veliath (1993:138) agrees that it is through Bhakti that one is liberated, by saying:

when Brahman is propitiated by the devout meditation of the worshiper, he evokes in him a knowledge of his own true nature, and bestows on him release from the bondage of *Karman* and *Samsara* in which the individual is enmeshed.

Veliath (1993:138) also notes that Ramanuja saw an individual as entangled with the Samsara cycle by their own Karma. The only way to escape such bondage was to surrender oneself to complete devotional service to Brahman, through meditation. In this statement Bhakti, Jnana, Karma and Raj yoga is manifested; Bhakti through devotion to Brahman, Jnana through the attainment of one's true nature, Karma through the propitiation of Brahman and Raj through the meditation (yoga) of the practitioner.

Boliaki (2012:328) notes that Ramanuja claims that

the Gita affirms the *bhakti* doctrine of the Upanishads. Yet, since all scriptures are equally authoritative, and all conflicting statements are only apparently so and can be reconciled and integrated into one coherent, he [Ramanuja] suggests a combination of *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti*, practiced at the same time.

To Ramanuja, Bhakti yoga was the favoured path to Moksha. As a result, Ramanuja commented and interpreted the Prasthanatrayi in a way that reflects Bhakti Yoga as the best path to attaining Moksha. Although Ramanuja believed strongly in Bhakti Yoga, he did not discredit Jnana and Karma yoga.

Ramanuja believed that once a devotee was deeply devoted to Narayana, he would attain knowledge which, in turn, changes a person's Karma from fruitless, vain activities to performing services unto the Lord – which would have a positive effect on society.

In the SB (2.2.41) Ramanuja says:

Therefore the Supreme Brahman, who is called Vasudeva, whose body is full of good qualities and who is distinguished from the various subtle manifestations and evolutions, is properly attained by the Bhakti Yogi's who revere him with rituals preceded by the desire to attain knowledge according to their responsibilities.

Ramanuja's statement in the SB (2.2.41) agrees with the BS (1.1.1), which reads:

The word Bhakti defines a continuous memory of God, since the word Bhakti is synonymous with contemplation. Therefore Bhakti allows ritualistic practices to guide one to realization.

Upon reflecting on these two verses, Freschi (2017:6) says that to Ramanuja “the fact that Bhakti is the way to God does not mean the end of all other religious obligations. Bhakti represents the culmination of both Karma- and the jnana marga but does not eliminate them.”

Ramanuja saw Karma and Jnana Marga as pre-requisites to attaining the salvation that Bhakti Yoga promised. In simple terms, Ramanuja believed that through Jnana, one would forsake the pursuit of material objects to escape rebirth. The act of forsaking interest and desire for materialistic objects is then an act of Karma yoga, which encourages one to perform actions that contribute to the eternal wellbeing of the Self. Once these two were accomplished, one could be found consumed by devotional service to Narayana – which they ought to do in addition to their societal responsibilities until Narayana is pleased with their Bhakti and liberates the soul.

Freschi (2017:7) further notes that:

Bhakti is the (only) way to make sense of the previous obligations taught in the karma- and in the jnanamarga, which it therefore subsumes.

According to Freschi’s (2017:7) argument, Ramanuja viewed Karma and Jnana as a part of Bhakti Yoga. This meant that, although Bhakti Yoga led one to salvation, Bhakti Yogi’s were still encouraged to perform their duties to society. Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita philosophy saw the attainment of salvation through Bhakti Yoga. However, Ramanuja maintained that one could practice Bhakti Yoga all their life but still not attain salvation. This is simply because salvation was not self-realised but a gift from Brahman.

Unlike Shankara’s belief in self-realisation leading to salvation, Ramanuja argued that a Bhakti Yogi needed to wait for the grace of Narayana to be freed from rebirth. A Bhakti Yogi could meet all the requirements of liberation but remain on the earth because Narayana had a much grander plan, which at that time, requires the devotee to remain in the material world.

This belief of Ramanuja emphasised the importance of Karma in the process of attaining salvation. As a Bhakti Yogi would remain on earth, they are encouraged to devote themselves fully to performing services in temples. These devotional services are not performed for anything the Yogi might desire (as an experienced Bhakti Yogi only desires to be freed from the material world so that he may serve Narayana eternally) but rather solely for the joy and delight of the Lord.

To Ramanuja, the act of devotional service is NK. Therefore, NK according to Ramanuja is a subsidiary discipline under Bhakti Yoga¹¹³ that guides one to performing Karma that bears witness to their love and devotion to Narayana. Ramanuja did not see NK as ridding one of all desires but rather as a discipline whereby one forsook actions that were of selfish motive – choosing to perform actions that only displayed their deep love and devotion to God, irrespective of the consequences of such actions.

6.5 Conclusion

Prasad (2011:17) rightly calls Ramanuja “*YatiRaja*” – King of Ascetics, as Ramanuja’s contribution to studies into Vedanta, the Prasthanatrayi, Vaishnavism and Bhakti Yoga remains a priceless and profound text that continues to shape Hindu dogma and philosophy.

Ramanuja’s commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi contribute to the understanding of Hindu philosophy and NK. However, unlike most commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi, Ramanuja took an unorthodox approach by summarising and simplifying the texts into an easier to read and understood version.

The equivalent to the UP was the VS. In the VS Ramanuja argued that the practice of NK is the object of desire and the reason for Karma. In explaining this, Ramanuja noted that NK should not be seen as a contradiction of practising desireless desire but rather the practice of purifying one’s Karma. NK is therefore the righteous desire that teaches one to practice Karma that is not attached to the fruit of action. Instead of being completely desireless, NK is a practice that aims to liberate a soul by detaching it from reward-seeking actions by focusing attention on actions of spiritual, divine service.

¹¹³ Due to the assimilation of Bhakti, Karma, and Jnana Marga in Ramanuja’s philosophy

Ramanuja adds to this argument in the SB where he repetitively argued that Brahman is the fulfilment of desire therefore desire should be understood as good and bad; since Brahman is all pure, He is the fulfilment of all righteous desires. Ramanuja also argued that the practice of NK is the pure and righteous desire to be free from all evil desires; it is not a state of complete desirelessness but rather a state without evil desires.

The BGB was the last text consulted in the investigation of Ramanuja's understanding of NK. In BGB 6.1 and 6.36, Ramanuja described NK as "one who performs actions without motivation for their rewards" and "right actions". After describing NK as a practice that purifies and frees one from evil attachments, Ramanuja in the BGB adds that Karma yoga and NK should be understood only as right action, while bad action exists, choosing to follow the path of NK is a choice to commit oneself to perform right actions. These right actions are characterised by disinterest in the fruits of action, with the only motivation behind the action being to perform one's duty.

Reflecting on Ramanuja's work, it is evident that he did not see NK as a state of complete renunciation and detachment. Furthermore, Ramanuja believed that the attainment of Moksha was not self-realised; one could live as an ascetic and practice complete renunciation but remain on the earth, as it is only by the "grace of Narayana" that one is liberated.

Because the grace of Narayana liberated a soul, Ramanuja argued that NK should be practised. One only leaves the world when Narayana is pleased with them and employs them to his eternal service. As a result, Ramanuja teaches that one should completely devote themselves to Narayana – practice Bhakti Yoga by ensuring that all Karma performed is NK, which Ramanuja describes as "devotional service".

Ramanuja viewed the practice of NK as a subsidiary element to Bhakti Yoga; one practices actions that were not for selfish gain but to practically display their love and devotion by surrendering all fruits of action unto Narayana.

Chapter 7: Madhva and his understanding of Nishkama Karma

7.1 Introduction

The last of the three great teachers of Vedanta philosophy is Sri Madhvacharya¹¹⁴. According to Hindu tradition, Madhva is most popular for his arguments on Dvaita philosophy which he described as being from a “realistic viewpoint”.

Prasad (2011:40) notes that the biographical sketches of Madhva are primarily derived from poetic tales and folklore which are mostly likely “exaggerated, twisted and even fanciful”. Prasad (2011:40) adds that most of the life of Madhva has been documented in the *Madhva-Vijayam* (The Victory of Madhva), the *Mani-manjari* (cluster of gems) and other texts that were supposedly written by his disciple Narayana Bhatta.

Prasad (2011:40) echoes Char (1909:4) on the difficulty of developing a complete biographical sketch of Madhva. Char (1909:4) acknowledges the *Madhva-Vijayam* by Narayana Pandithacharya as “almost the solitary fountain of information” on Madhva’s biography. Although many of Madhva’s disciples kept journals of their experiences with Madhva, these texts are no longer available (Char, 1909:4). As a result, much of Madhva’s biographical information (that is not in the *Madhva-Vijayam*) is supported by traditional beliefs rather than any textual information.

According to Rao (2019:4), Madhva’s work focused on ‘organising Hinduism’ due to the “growing influences of Jainism and Islam” in Hindu communities.

Kavindra (2008:40) describes Madhva as “a man of powerful physique, a champion wrestler, who could eat hundreds of bananas in one sitting”, “a guru who was observed to lead his students into a river, walk them across the bottom and out onto the other side”, an “unparalleled Sanskrit Scholar” and a “powerful debater”.

The stories of Madhva’s life are nothing short of legendary, tales of walking on water and multiplying food are some of the reasons why theologians draw a comparison between Jesus and Madhva. With many ardent followers, Madhva developed a sect of Hinduism that emphasised the importance of Bhakti to escape eternal suffering.

¹¹⁴ Hereafter referred to as Madhva, with other variations being Madhvacharya, Madhva Acharya and Sri Madhva.

Madhva's teachings influenced the development of Hinduism, ultimately reshaping how Bhakti and Vaishnavism would be understood. Govindacharya (1997:7) states that Madhva is a unique personality in Indian history as he was a "matchless scholar in philosophy" and contributed not only to understanding the astronomy, rituals and phonetics of the Vedas but also Karnataka music. Govindacharyas (1997:7) praise of Madhva is echoed in the works of Kavindra (2008:40) and Subindra Rao (2019:4).

Due to the importance of Madhva's philosophy not only within the Vedanta philosophical system but also in Vaishnavism and Hinduism at large; his conceptualisation and contribution to the development of NK are required to further understand whether NK can advance social cohesion.

7.2 Synopsis of the life of Madhva

7.2.1 The birth of Madhva

Scholars agree that Madhva was born in 1238 CE in Pajaka, Karnataka. His father, Mahageha Bhatta sent Madhva to study under Sri Acyuta-Preksa at an early age. Under Acyuta-Preksa Madhva learnt Sanskrit and Vedanta philosophy. Through his training as a *Sannyasi*, he earned the names Purna-Prajna (abundant wisdom) and Ananda Tirtha (sacred happiness).

In his childhood, Madhva was also known as Vasudeva. Madhva had many tales of his childhood which, over time, turned him into a legend and an incarnation of Vayu (the wind god, a form of Vishnu) (Char, 1909:23-24).

Some of these tales include one where Madhva killed the snake demon Maniman with the toe of his left foot whilst others include saving a boat, fighting off bandits and a tiger (Sarvothvamatva, 2009:8). Madhva is revered as a strong, fit, agile man who, through his devotion to Vishnu, was able to attain wisdom and take the *Sannyasi* pledge at a young age (Sarvothvamatva, 2009:11). One of the most popular stories of Madhva's childhood is where he would disappear for long hours when his mother would call out to him, he would magically appear before her instantaneously (Sarvothvamatva, 2009:8).

Madhva's intellect and physical fitness made him an attractive individual who had grown to attain the favour of people even before he argued for Dvaita philosophy.

7.2.2 Madhva's early life

According to Hindu tradition, at the age of 12 Madhva began his studies under Acyuta-Preksa. Tales of Madhva¹¹⁵ say that not much time had passed before Madhva had excelled in his education and began with his commentary on the BS.

Prasad (2011:41) notes that during his studies an Advaita Vedanta scholar had met with his guru, during their meeting Madhva was intrigued by the scholar and entered a debate with him. Recounts of the debate say that Madhva defeated the scholar and went on to other towns (such as Visnumangalam, Dhanuskoti, Ramesvaram and Anantapuram) where he would further win more debates with Advaitic scholars.

Vidyabhusana (2013:7) records that as young Vasudeva was growing into the transitional phase of becoming Madhva, he studied Nyaya, Vedas, UP and BS. Throughout his adulthood, Madhva focused on two things; studying and fitness. Numerous stories of Madhva reiterate how he would study in the mornings and then go out to play in the fields. Whenever he asked about this he would simply reply "for the mind to be strong the body must be strong".

According to Sharma (2003:13), after having studied the sacred texts and winning numerous debates, Madhva decided to enter a deep state of meditation to realise his life's purpose. The story says that Madhva remained in a state of deep meditation for many days, in this state, he allegedly had conversations with God where he realised his purpose (Sharma 2003:13).

At the end of his meditation, Madhva was certain of his life purpose - to be a *Sannyasi* and completely renounce the world and all materialistic objects affiliated with it. Vidyabhusana (2013:13) states that after this revelation Madhva declared war on "false knowledge and ignorance".

During his lifetime (1238-1317) non-Indian religions, such as Christianity and Islam, were well established in India. Madhva's social activity motivated him to engage in discussions and debates not only with Advaita and Vishishtadvaita scholars but also with Christian and Islamic theologians.

Due to the establishment of Abrahamic religions in India at the time and his frequent discussions with them, Char (1909:264) suggests that Christian and Islamic dogma

¹¹⁵ See (Sarvothvamatva, 2009:18-19)

influenced Madhva's philosophy, ultimately motivating him to develop Dvaita philosophy¹¹⁶. Sarvothvamatva (2009:15) suggests that the inspiration behind Madhva's establishment of Dvaita philosophy was to prevent the spread of "alien religious influences" amongst the Indian people.

7.2.3 Madhva's philosophical work

On Madhva's philosophy, Muniapan (2013:184) states:

Madhva was the chief proponent of *Tattvavada* (True Philosophy), popularly known as *dvaita* or dualistic school of *Hindu* philosophy. It is one of the three most influential *Vedanta* philosophies. Madhva was one of the important philosophers during the *Bhakti* movement. He was a pioneer in many ways, going against standard conventions and norms. Madhvacharya is believed by his followers to be the third incarnation of Vayu after Hanuman and Bhima.

Madhva's philosophy played an important role in his understanding of NK. Like Shankara and Ramanuja, the purpose of Madhva's commentaries (on the Prasthanatrayi) was to expand on his Dvaita philosophy. As a result, Madhva's comments that allude to the principles of NK are embedded within his propagation of Dvaita philosophy and, subsequently, his understanding of Moksha and Bhakti yoga.

The following section discusses Madhva's Dvaita philosophy and the position of Brahman, Atman, and Maya within his philosophy. Thereafter, his thought on Moksha and Bhakti yoga is explored before his comments that allure NK. This provides this thesis with an understanding of NK in the philosophy of Madhva, toward exploring the contribution that NK makes to social cohesion.

7.2.3.1 Dvaita philosophy

Investigating Madhva's understanding of NK requires an understanding of his Dvaita¹¹⁷ philosophy, as most of his surviving work supports his arguments of duality.

Prasad (2013:113) notes that as Ramanuja's life ended, Madhva's philosophy saw significant growth – one that would also change the philosophy of Vaishnavism and the broader Hindu faith. Today, Dvaita philosophy is the smallest philosophical school

¹¹⁶ Also see Sarvothvamatva (2009:15).

¹¹⁷ In the Hindu tradition, Dvaita philosophy is also known as: Bhedavada, Tattvavada and Purnabrahmavada. Although Madhva's philosophy may be called by different names, they all refer to the duality of two separate realities.

of Vedanta with very few followers mainly amongst South Indian and European Indian communities.

Explaining the position of Madhva and Dvaita philosophy in Vedanta, Prasad (2013:113) claims that “Both Ramanuja and Madhva were proponents of the *bhakti* cults and both were Vaisnavites. Moreover, both regarded Shankara as their chief proponent” and that “Their chief philosophical difference lies in the matter of how a concept should be defined.” Ramanuja “relied on mythological ideas to define the concepts of his system” and Madhva “relied chiefly on reason”.

Science and reason are terms that are often used interchangeably. The scientific method is a carefully navigated process that explores the authenticity of matter within the physical world. Similarly, reason refers to the process of applying the mind logically to form a calculated opinion on a particular subject.

Sangha (1999:24) states that the distinguishing feature of Madhva’s philosophy that sets him apart from other Vedantic philosophers is the “remarkable consistency of approach and clarity of thought”.

To simply define Dvaita philosophy by considering Sangha (1994:24) and Prasad (2013:114), Madhva’s Dvaita philosophy is a treatise of religion and science as Madhva sets out to discover logical explanations for religious phenomena.

Madhva endeavoured to produce a philosophy that realistically saw the world. Madhva saw Dvaita philosophy as a way of bringing together religious beliefs and a realistic outlook on life. This is evident in Madhva naming his philosophy *Tattva-Vada* – literally meaning “principles of the basic reality”¹¹⁸. This was to counter Shankara’s argument that the world and souls of mankind are illusions. Madhva countered Shankara by saying that the world and souls are not mere illusions but are real. In doing so, Madhva relied on sensory experience as a way of perceiving the world around him while considering the Hindu faith. By relying on sensory experience Madhva makes use of sense-derived experience as a way of bringing the materialistic world into his religious beliefs.

On Dvaita philosophy, Govindacharya (1997:17) states:

¹¹⁸ See Prasad (2013:114)

In the philosophical system of the Acharya [Madhva], *tattvas* or categories of reality are primarily two: *svatantra-tattva* and *asvatantra-tattva* (i.e. Independent reality and dependent reality). God who creates the universe is the Independent reality; the entire universe created by him is the dependent reality.

Sukdaven (2013:102) agrees with Govindacharya (1997:17) by stating that according to Madhva:

Brahman is the thing denoted by all worlds; and this one object has various differences imposed upon it according to each particular form; but the conventional variety of the differences produced by these illusory conditions is only the result of ignorance. Non-duality is the true state; but through the power of 'concealment' [exercised by illusion] at the time of the conventional use of words a manifold expansion takes place.

Madhva argues that while Brahman is the sole cause of the cosmos, the souls of man exist independently from Brahman. Simply, the soul exists because of Brahman but is not Brahman. Brahman is the creator of the universe and is greater than His creations.

Madhva's commentaries on the Vedas, UP, BG, Mahabharat and Ramayana testify that his philosophy of Dvaita is based on an alternate interpretation of these authoritative Hindu texts. Contrary to Shankara, Madhva argues that the material world is not an illusion but is real with Brahman existing outside of the material world.

According to Sundareswaran (2009:47) *parantantra* (same as *asvatantra* – dependent) draws its existence from *svatantra* (independent Brahman) who is “*gunapoornabrahman*” – “the totality of all virtuous attributes” and “devoid of all blemishes”.

Sundareswaran (2009:47) displays a dispute with Shankara and Madhva; where Shankara characterised Brahman as Nirguna and Saguna, Madhva argues that Brahman cannot be impure and is therefore, an independent entity from His creations.

According to Madhva, the senses are not merely distractions that deter one from moksha instead the senses provide one with experiences of the material world. In turn, these experiences confirmed that the material world was not an illusion but a physical reality.

For Madhva the reality of the universe served as evidence for the existence of Brahman. According to Paramahansa (2004:1-2), Madhva argues that:

If the external world is the framework of illusion, and the distinction between the Supreme Spirit and the finite selves is unreal, the affirmation of God stands jeopardized. As a result, the realism and pluralism are supplements to the unqualified assertion of God. His splendour is the ultimate metaphysical concern, and it requires the reality of the cosmos and the fact of God transcending the finite self

Madhva explains that if the physical world was an illusion, as Shankara argued, then the ultimate reality of Brahman is meaningless – for the ultimate reality of the supreme nature to exist, the plurality and reality of the material world need to be acknowledged.

Prasad (2013:115) says “Madhva corrects Shankara” by determining “what is real and unreal starting with the observer's cognition as the frame of reference.” Where Shankara argues that emotions and sensory experience are meaningless due to the illusion of Maya, Madhva counters that the sensory experience is the evidence of the reality of the material world.

Additionally, Madhva argues that the material world that is filled with nature and mankind is real and that, separate from this reality, there is another reality – one where Brahman the Creator exists.

According to Prasad (2013:116), this reality in which Brahman exists is what “controls all phenomena”. Simply, the material world is a reality that exists because of Brahman, Brahman is an independent entity that created the material world and exists in a reality that exists outside of the material world. While the material reality exists in a diverse, pluralistic nature, the reality of Brahman exists as a supreme cosmic entity where Brahman is the sole reality upon which all other realities depend for their existence.

Madhva worked tirelessly to expound his Dvaita philosophy. Madhva argued that all living and non-living entities were a part of the dependent reality. This meant that the cosmos along with the heavens and all the deities were a part of the dependent reality while Brahman alone was the sole reality. As a Vaishnavite, Madhva understood “Brahman” as Vishnu and argued that of all the creations in the dependent reality Sri Lakshmi is the most important as she sits beside him as his consort.

Peter (2017:3) notes that:

Madhva advocates pluralistic theism. To maintain the unity, sovereignty and independence of the Supreme being, dualism of Madhva upholds that the dependent reals are not despite the Lord, but because of Him.

For Brahman to be the Supreme reality and creator of the universe, He needed to be an independent entity from His creations. Madhva believed that if the material world was an illusion and the sensory experience was not a reality, then the only reality would be illusory meaning that Brahman would be a creation of Maya.

To address this Madhva argues that all beings that are subject to nature (*Prakrti*) are part of a reality that is dependent on Brahman. Brahman on the other hand is not subject to the laws of nature. Madhva taught that all of the known world, all of the cosmos, including the devas were subject to Prakrti and therefore confirmed Dvaita.

Madhva believed that all realities that may exist in the cosmos are dependent and that the only independent reality is Brahman. Sangha (1999:23) and Prasad (2013:121-122) explain that, according to Madhva, these realities are united by five fundamental differences¹¹⁹:

- 1) The difference between *Jiva* (one soul) and other souls.
- 2) The difference between *Jiva* and Brahman.
- 3) The difference between Brahman and matter.
- 4) The difference between one inert matter and another.
- 5) The difference between *Jiva* and inert matter.

According to Madhva, the sum of all souls and all matter existed in reality while Brahman existed in another. Madhva emphasised the importance of acknowledging the realism of the plurality of the material world and the dependency of these realities. Madhva's concept of non-duality explores Vedanta philosophy and the sacred Hindu texts from a point of realism; while acknowledging the existence and importance of Brahman in the creation of the universe Madhva argues that the natural world occurs on its own accord.

In his understanding of the creation of the cosmos, Madhva explains that whilst Brahman is the sole cause the universe has taken on a path of its own. Brahman

¹¹⁹ Or as Madhva called it, "*Pancha Bheda*"

initiated creation however through the natural process the material world developed natural causes that facilitate the creation, sustenance, and destructive cycle of life.

Consequently, Madhva's understanding of Maya is simply that, Maya is the creation of Brahman, which is dependent on Brahman (Sharma, 1986:267). Madhva believed that the dependency of Maya on Brahman and the consequential interchange between Maya and Brahman led to the creation of the material world (Sharma, 1986:267). As the concept of Maya is illusory, Whitehead (2019:75) states that: "... it stands to reason that Madhva will reject the concept of *Maya*". Madhva fervently argued for the 'realness' of the material world, the atman, and Brahman. As such, Madhva holds the position of Maya as a point of exchange with Brahman that led to the creation of the material world.

According to Nidamboor (2020:12), Madhva argued that if the cosmos was made from Brahman's matter it means that God is not eternal and unchangeable. As a result, Madhva makes a clear distinction between the materials of the universe and Brahman, noting that the matter of the universe is also eternal however unlike Brahman, the matter may change its form.

Madhva's argument for Dvaita Vedanta was largely based on his emphasis on Brahman (who he interpreted as Vishnu) being a Supreme deity that is comprised of all virtuous qualities. Due to Brahman being all virtuous, a duality with man would result in Brahman having imperfections. Dvaita philosophy argues that because Brahman cannot have imperfections, Jiva and Brahman are distinctly two separate entities.

The Dvaita school of philosophy grew for a significant amount of time after the death of Madhva however the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara and Vishishtadvaita of Ramanuja remained the preferred doctrines amongst Hindu communities.

Today, while few Dvaita schools exist in European and African Hindu communities, the largest gathering of followers of the Dvaita philosophy can be found in the Karnataka state of India, Udupi. The Udupi Sri Krishna Matha is the most famous temple in the region as the locals believe that it was founded by Madhva, subsequently, this temple teaches and promotes Dvaita philosophy. Due to Madhva aligning his Dvaita philosophy with Vaishnavism, the Bhakti marga became a central factor in worshipping Vishnu. Madhva's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi were written with the intent of promoting Vaishnavism through a Dvaitic interpretation.

Understanding Dvaita philosophy allows for the understanding of his commentaries subsequently enabling his view of NK to be visible. Madhva's Dvaita philosophy also influences the way he understands and projects NK as a liberative practice.

7.2.3.2 Moksha

NK has been described as a liberative practice, a practice where one surrenders all their actions unto God, seeking no reward for performing their duties. As a result of such a noble act, the practitioner of NK is liberated from the material world and its cycle of rebirth. Exploring Madhva's understanding of Moksha provides insight to the discussion of NK, through selfless action, contributing to social cohesion.

Due to Madhva's Dvaita philosophy, Moksha is not the realisation of Brahman - as Shankara would have argued. Grinsell (2010:200) agrees with Nadkarni (2003:4783) that during the time of Madhva, the caste system was the most common belief relating to Moksha. One was born in a lower caste and over time (different lifetimes) transitioned to a Brahman, after which Moksha was attained.

Nadkarni (2003:4783) states that although the caste system was strictly enforced, many Hindu philosophers did not emphatically support it. Much like his Vedanta predecessors, Shankara and Ramanuja, Madhva believed that a person's caste was determined more by their characteristics and intellectual capabilities rather than by birth. Despite this belief, Prasad (2013:134) claims:

Madhva, like Sankara and Ramanuja, believes that sudras are not fit to learn the Vedas. It is enough for them to read or hear from the Itihasas and Puranas. But Madhva does not disqualify women from the knowledge of Brahman.

Madhva believed in the misconception that people could decide their caste, resulting in members of the Sudra caste choosing to live an "unorthodox lifestyle". Madhva argued that a Sudra would not be able to attain Moksha unless his lifestyle changed, if the lifestyle changed subsequently the caste would change.

According to Madhva, Dvaita philosophy posits that the relationship between Brahman and mankind is one of a parent and child relationship; one is independent whereas the other is dependent. Therefore, Moksha is not the realisation of an illusion that creates a distinction between Brahman and His creations (as Shankara would argue) but rather a liberative process where one realises their eternal dependency on Brahman.

Bhuvanewari (2007:6) claims that:

Ignorance of the nature of self is the cause of bondage according to Dvaita. The *jiva* is ignorant about its relation to God and it is known as *svabhava-ajnana-vada*, the theory that bondage is because of the ignorance of the true nature of self as being dependent on Brahman, the independent reality.

Much like other schools of thought, Madhva believed that the removal of ignorance is the cause of liberation. Where Shankara would argue that the removal of ignorance results in realising oneness with Brahman, Madhva argues that the removal of ignorance is the realisation of one's dependency on Brahman.

Madhva disagreed with Shankara that knowledge of Brahman is the only way to attain liberation. Instead, Madhva emphasised the importance of meditation to remove ignorance.

According to Kavindra (2008:51), Madhva argued that there are many different paths leading to liberation, however, what is most important is realising the "transcendental form of Bhagavan [Vishnu] face to face and then to render loving service".

Madhva's understood Moksha as realising the duality of Brahman and His creations resulting in extensive worship (Bhakti) of God. For Madhva, to be liberated is to recognise the glory of God and be in constant worship.

Lazar (2017:6) notes that in promoting meditation as the key to unlocking liberation Madhva also encourages the practice of "*dharana, asana, pratyahara* and *yama*", practices that are affiliated with yoga and meditation.

Madhva believed that the different paths to attain Moksha (Jnana, Karma, and Bhakti.) were united in the practice of meditation. According to Sirdharan (2015:38), Madhva taught that the best way to practice Bhakti was through *upasana* – worship in meditation.

Prasad (2013:138) claims:

In the *Nyaya-Sudha* of Jayatirtha, a detailed account is given of how God veils the true nature of the soul. Considering motives, *kamas* (desires) or *karmas* to be because of bondage is unreasonable. The soul is beginningless but its desires and actions are not so. It might be said that the motives, desires and actions

existing at one time will produce further motives, desires and actions during another.

According to the Laws of Karma, there are three actions (Karma's) that prevent a soul from liberation; (1) Karma of past lives, (2) Karma yet to happen and (3) Karma that has been left unfinished.

Madhva taught that *Kama* and Karma do not prevent liberation but are rather obstructions on the path to liberation. A person develops *Kama* naturally and this may be used constructively or destructively depending on the nature of the individual. Furthermore, the accumulation of Karma acquired in one's lifetime (and past lives) creates causal effects that may hinder, deter, or slow progress on the process of liberation however not preventing wholly.

Madhva strongly believed that the practice of meditation caused devotion thus resulting in a growth of knowledge. The combination of devotion (Bhakti) and knowledge (Jnana) resulted in a change in one *Kama* subsequently removing the effects of Karma as one's actions began to progressively develop.

Toward understanding how this relates to NK, Prasad (2013:140) states:

When a liberated soul performs activities and propitiations (*upasana*), they are not to be considered as any kind of means (*sadhana*) towards any kinds of ends (*sadhya*). Rather, such acts and propitiations are merely the natural expressions of the liberated soul.

According to this statement, Madhva believed that *Jivanmukti* was a reality. A soul, through devout meditation, attains liberation and therefore performs actions without motive for the results. The performance of actions without motive for results means that Madhva envisioned NK as a characteristic of a *Jivanmukta*.

Madhva also brings in a new angle to NK by relating it with the terms "*sadhana*" and "*sadhya*". Tagore described *sadhana* as "The realisation of Life" ultimately explaining it as a scientific discipline that focuses on strategic methods that guide an individual to achieving a particular goal (Tagore, 1915:10-15). *Sadhya*, on the other hand, is a transliteration of the Sanskrit term "*Satya*" meaning "that which is essentially true and pure".

Madhva's usage of "*sadhana*" and "*sadhya*" meant that he believed that meditation enabled an individual for liberation. Furthermore, Madhva argued that liberation could be attained in one's lifetime through the practice of NK (which he describes as *Sadhana* and *Sadhya*).

Madhva argued that the practice of meditation removed ignorance, allowing one to understand the duality of Brahman and His creations. One who was then a *jivanmukta* would live the rest of his life practising NK whereas one who passed on would return to eternal service and worship of Vishnu.

7.2.3.3 Bhakti

The Vaishnava sect of Hinduism often favours Bhakti Marga above the other paths. Like Ramanuja, Madhva saw the practice of Bhakti as vital to the process of attaining moksha (as evident in his explanation of *upasana* meditation).

According to Kunkoliker (2017:2), Madhva aligning Dvaita philosophy with the Bhakti movement meant that he subscribed to the following principles:

- 1) God is one with different names,
- 2) To worship God, man must serve humanity,
- 3) All humans are equal,
- 4) Worshipping God with devotion is better than rituals and pilgrimage,
- 5) Caste distinction along with other discriminative practices is to be forsaken.

Kunkoliker (2017:2) suggests that Madhva's Dvaita philosophy promoted the worship of Vishnu as an independent reality (distinct from His creations) and that Vaisnava devotees are to serve people to please Vishnu and attain His grace.

According to Bennett (2016:46), Bhakti for Madhva is: "knowledge of Brahman through an unflinching recollection of the supreme Lord, a constant meditation on Him that develops into a direct perception of Him mostly through the performance of obligatory ritual."

In this way, Madhva combined all paths to moksha through Bhakti. By practising devout meditation, one's karma was focused on attaining knowledge (*Jnana*) of the

supreme nature of God. Upon the attainment of knowledge of God, duality was realised resulting in the devotee pledging eternal worship and reverence unto God.

Prasad (2013:136) adds:

His *bhakti* characteristically aims at a unified and mutually supportive balance between emotion and understanding. He also prescribes that devotees strive to live a perfectly pure and moral life.

Madhva was undoubtedly a supporter of Bhakti yoga. However, how he taught Bhakti was distinctly different from other Vaishnava Bhakti sects. Up until the time of Madhva, the practice of meditation and yoga was popularised by devotees of Karma yoga.

By emphasising the role of meditation in Moksha, Madhva introduced the practice of meditation and yoga to the Bhakti movement. Through this Madhva is accredited as having a vital role in the founding of the Haridasa¹²⁰ devotional movement that began in Karnataka and spread throughout India and the globe.

The three great saints of the Haridasa movement (Sripadaraya, Vyasatirtha and Vadirajatirtha) are commonly referred to as the “trinity of Vaishnavism” as they composed many devotional narratives, poetic short stories, and music to spread Madhva’s teachings of duality and Bhakti.

The Haridasa movement popularised Dvaita Vedanta and, due to their emphasis on Bhakti, grew to become one of the largest Vaishnava movements. The musical components of the Haridasa movement influenced other Vaishnava sects as their songs of praise to Vishnu were well respected and received by communities across India.

Despite subtle enforcements of the caste system, Madhva’s Dvaita philosophy taught Bhakti in a way that inspired social change. According to Subindra Rao (2019:71), Madhva challenged the status of women in society by retelling popular narratives of women (such as Ram and Sita) where he deified women rather than supporting the notion that women had to prove their chastity.

¹²⁰ See Rao (1966:22) and Devarushi (2013:97).

Madhva advocated that devotees of Vishnu and Dvaita Vedanta were required to live reputable lives; abstain from alcohol, violence and disruptive behaviour. He taught that once duality was realised an enlightened individual would identify Vishnu as the only supreme reality – thus all other individual souls were equal in their worship and devotion to Vishnu.

Madhva taught that while man was free he also has the responsibility to serve and care for all of God's creations. Madhva believed that a mutual intimacy between Brahman and all the souls of humans always existed. Brahman would extend his grace and love to humans, who would not acknowledge and be grateful for it unless they had attained Moksha.

Prasad (2013:136) notes that, according to Madhva, Bhakti was divided into three groups:

- 1) Bhakti – devotion
- 2) *Pakva*-Bhakti – mature devotion
- 3) *Parioakva*-Bhakti – perfectly mature devotion

According to Madhva, the journey to liberation meant that one needed to transition through the three stages of Bhakti. The first stage is open to anyone (as Madhva believed that every individual had a basic understanding of God). The second stage was attained when one began the journey of studying religion, consciously deciding to learn about God. Last, the final stage was attained after years of dedicated devotion to God, one realised duality and their dependence on God resulting in them pledging devotional service and worship for all eternity.

NK is often affiliated with Bhakti yoga as a devotional service to God that includes performing selfless services unto fellow human beings. Madhva supported this idea as he encouraged his followers to live moral and ethical lives – as set out by Dvaita philosophy and Vaishnavism¹²¹.

¹²¹ See Sharma (1986:309, 379-380, 392)

Much of the tales of Madhva's exploits describe him as a socially active Bhakta, one who was concerned with the well-being of people to the extent that some tales describe him as having performed miracles for the well-being of society.

Madhva's Dvaita philosophy is often understood as being a promoter of Vaishnavism and Bhakti yoga. Today, temples that maintain the Madhva tradition are adherents to Bhakti yoga, teaching *upasana* and yoga to attain liberation. This sect of Vaishnavism has grown to have a large following, earning the name "*Madhvaism*".

Bhakti yoga forms a central tenant of Madhvaism and Dvaita philosophy. Madhva's view of practising meditation as *upasana* (along with his views of *sadhana* and *sadhya*) proves that he made a direct contribution to NK by advocating for selfless action.

7.3 Nishkama Karma in Madhva's commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi

Although Shankara and Ramanuja popularised Advaita and Vishishtadvaita (respectively), they were not the founders of these philosophies. Unlike Shankara and Ramanuja, Madhva is accredited as being the founder of Dvaita philosophy. To establish Dvaita philosophy as a relevant and necessary counter-arguments to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, Madhva needed to ensure that his arguments were supported by the sacred texts.

According to Sharma (1962: xii):

Madhva left thirtyseven (*sic*) works in all. They include (i) *Dasa-Prakaranas* or ten philosophical monographs expounding his logic and metaphysics; (ii) Commentaries on the Ten *Upanisads* (iii) *cc*¹²², on *Gita*¹²³ and *Brahmasutras*; (iv) a brief c. on the first three *Adhyayas* of the *Rg*¹²⁴ *Veda*, and epitome of the *Mbh*¹²⁵. In verses and brief notes on the *Bhagavata*; and (v) miscellaneous works comprising Strotras, poems and works on worship and ritual. His greatest work is the *Anu-Vyakhyana*, a critical exposition of the philosophy of the *Brahmasutras*. It is a metrical work. It is his masterpiece.

¹²² Usage of "cc" and "c" refers to "commentaries".

¹²³ That is BG

¹²⁴ Rig Veda

¹²⁵ Mahabharat

Madhva's extensive work sought to establish Dvaita Vedanta not only as a philosophical school that would counter Shankara but also as a statement of social reform. The next section explores Madhva's commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi and will include the *Bhagavata* and *Anu-Vyakhyana* of Madhva as they serve as supplementary texts to his commentaries on the BG and BS respectively. Madhva's commentaries on these texts are examined to assess his contribution to understanding NK.

7.3.1 The Upanishads

Vidyabhusana (2013:23) summarises Madhva's commentary on the UP with the following:

He has substituted a Brahman-centric view for the ego-centric interpretation of Upanisadic thought. It is a pity that missing this distinction of Madhva's philosophy, sine historians of Indian philosophy should have tried to dismiss him as belonging 'more to the religious history than to the philosophical development of India'! He [Madhva] has shown that if we are to avoid playing tricks with *evidence*, the only satisfactory synthesis of the conflict between 'dvaita' and 'advaita' Srutis, in the Upanisads, would be in the adoption of the idea of the One Independent Transcendent-cum-Immanent Reference of all phenomena. He has no sympathy with the reckless monism of Samkara which is indifferent alike to the hopes and aspirations of man and reduces the panorama of creation to a random illusion. At the same time, he is not for ascribing false perfection of any kind to the world of matter and souls. It is given just what is its due and nothing more. The world and the souls are real in that they are Anaropita,-not the effect of any superimposition or Adhyasa, or personal delusion. *Independent* they *are not*, and God is greater than His creation; and immanent in it.

According to Vidyabhusana (2013:23), the abovementioned passage summarises Madhva's philosophical thought as present in the UP. Reflecting on the passage by Vidyabhusana (2013:23) it is evident that Madhva's Dvaita philosophy attempted to shift the focus from Brahman to mankind. Madhva focused on emphasising the reality of sensory experience; through the engagements of the human senses with the environment around it – the material world is confirmed as a true reality.

The idea that the material is an illusion is considered “delusional” by Madhva, as it completely ignores the reality of experience derived from individual realities. Furthermore, Madhva argues that the idea of the material world being an illusion places an unrealistic pressure (or “superimposition”) on people of a perfect utopia that might exist outside of the material world. Instead of the perfect utopia, Madhva suggests that the current reality could be utopia itself as *jivanmukti* could be achieved by a devotee of Vishnu who realises duality.

For this reason, Madhva is often described as a scientist as he carefully and methodically attempts to provide an explanation of the material world around him, which he argues is a reality as it is confirmed by sensory experience. Madhva achieves this by arguing for the authentic ‘realness’ of the material world as it can be engaged by the senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing). Due to the fundamental difference between Madhva and Shankara on the reality of the material world, Madhva’s commentaries on the following verses in the UP explore his understanding of NK considering Dvaita philosophy.

Isha-UP 1.1-2: The first two verses of the Isha-UP speak of acknowledging the supreme nature of Brahman, not coveting someone else’s wealth, and selflessly performing one’s duty. On Isha-UP 1.1 Madhva comments:

[man] cannot by themselves perform actions with their own inherent power, only when they are energized by the power of the Lord, dwelling within them. Only then can they perform even those actions which are ordained for them, because they are *Dependent Real* while the Lord alone is *Independent Real.*”, and that one who has realized this should “enjoy what has been ordained for him (without coveting what has been ordained for other). No one else (other than the Lord) need be approached...

According to Madhva’s commentary on Isha-UP 1.1, the only action man should be concerned with is his prescribed (or “ordained”) duty. This prescribed duty cannot be completed by man’s only innate ability instead it can only be completed once a man has the blessings of the Lord who dwells within all. As a result, man should consider his prescribed duty (and his ability to complete it) as a blessing of Vishnu and should not be concerned with the prescribed duties of others.

Madhva adds to this in his commentary of Isha-UP 1.2 when he says:

There is nothing like that non-performance of actions does not attach to oneself. A person of no-wisdom gets attached to his actions if such actions are not performed as conformity to the Lord. Even men of wisdom often enjoy bliss, with inherent imperfections. For such persons there is imperfection of Bliss, if not the imperfection of actions.

In the first sentence of the quotation, the translator attempts to say: 'There is nothing like the non-performance of actions, which prevents attachments.' Madhva argues that even by performing 'no actions' one can become attached to 'inaction'. The attachment to action cannot be avoided by inaction as the attachment is caused by a lack of wisdom. Therefore, Madhva teaches that one can only be freed from the attachment of action if the sole purpose of the action is to perform service unto the Lord.

In Isha-UP 1.7 Madhva names Vishnu as the Supreme Deity and argues that one who "becomes aware that *Vishnu* is the one who pervades everything manifest as the creation" is free from delusion and lamentation. Madhva expands upon this in Isha-UP 1.8 where he further describes Vishnu as:

He is radiant – ever pure without any lamentations or blemishes, being ever auspicious. He is of pure form, devoid of any marks. Having no gross body, He is without sinews. Even then, being omniscient He is spoken as a seer. He is the natural substance of the mind of Brahma and all of the divinities. Because of His superiority of mind, He surpasses all beings. He is known as self-evolved, not being dependent on no one else. As existence, he eternally flows in the world, like the river flowing without any beginning or end. Wisdom and Bliss are his head, Wisdom and Bliss are his shoulders, Wisdom and Bliss are his body and Wisdom and Bliss are his feet. Thus constituted is seen Vishnu as supreme in the world. From beginning to the end of time, He is the supreme cherished Lord.

Madhva continues to praise the glory and magnificence of Vishnu and explains that anyone who becomes aware of Vishnu's supremacy attains wisdom and bliss and is free from all kinds of suffering and desire. The freedom from suffering is therefore the realisation of Vishnu as the only independent reality that has self-evolved and given birth to all of creation.

In Isha-UP 1.11 Madhva claims that one who is aware of knowledge and can discern between what is and what is not knowledge will worship no one other than Vishnu. Madhva further notes: “Those who despise improper worship, which is of the form of misery and ignorance, transcend to the form of pleasure and wisdom. Being aware of the form of proper wisdom, they reach the form of happiness and wisdom. This relates to NK in the distinction between “improper” and ‘proper’ worship. NK being the selfless performance of worship is then the proper form of worship that leads to happiness and wisdom.

In his commentary of Isha-UP 1.14, Madhva explains that only those who accept Vishnu as the Supreme are “freed from the bondage of the human body. With the joyful knowledge and worthy actions, he becomes liberated from the bondage.” Based on his comments Madhva asserts that one who accepts Vishnu attains Moksha.

The theme of Madhva’s commentary on the Isha-UP focuses on glorifying Vishnu as the supreme deity and emphasising that the correct worship of Vishnu as the supreme, sole independent reality allows for one to attain true knowledge, wisdom, and bliss. The attainment of this true knowledge results in the release from bondage and suffering allowing one to ascend to the eternal realm of Vishnu where only eternal bliss exists. This relates to NK, as one of the correct forms of worship of Vishnu is NK, which, ultimately, leads to liberation.

In Kena-UP 1.1-2, Madhva comments:

The inquiry in the creative cycle of the Prime Existence, therefore, though leads one to the Prime Existence; the success of such inquiry will not be fruitful unless one becomes pure in mind and perfect in his resolve. This is possible only when one is without desires, having renounced all transitory means and ends, as the result of the attributes and inclination from performance of actions in earlier life.

To rephrase Madhva’s commentary; an investigation into the Supreme led to the Supreme being. However, this is only possible if one remains dedicated to renouncing all actions that are performed for selfish (materialistic) gain. This is achieved by maintaining purity of thought and detachment from desire. The requirement for realisation is not merely the study of the Supreme but is also a pure mind which comes from the detachment from desire. Madhva teaches that one who succumbs to the

desires of the senses pursues materialistic objects, as the desires of the sensory organs are materialistically inclined rather than spiritually inclined.

In Kena-UP 4.6 Madhva elaborates on the desires of the sensory organs seeking materialistic objects – Madhva claims that the lack of control over one’s sensory organs prevents one from seeking the divine. The desires of the senses cloud the judgment of people resulting in an endless search for materialistic objects.

In Katha-UP 2.1.2 Madhva adds that “simple minded people go after external desires” while the wise desire for the “eternal abode of Brahman. Madhva further states in his commentary on this verse that

...this city of Brahman is an abode, like a small lotus flower; with which there is a small place. What is there within, that should be sought, and for that assuredly is what one should desire to understand.

This statement by Madhva is important as it contributes to the discussion of understanding NK as the removal of all desire or the removal of wicked desire in the pursuit of noble desire. Madhva’s commentary on Katha-UP 2.1.2 seemingly addresses this debate is arguing that one should not desire “external desires” but rather desire the “eternal abode of Brahman” which can be found within. In this case, Madhva defines external desires as the desire for objects that are not in the eternal abode – that is the dwelling place of Brahman, where there is eternal bliss. The desire for the city of Brahman and all within it is the only desire that one should possess.

Madhva expands upon this thought in Katha-UP 2.3.14 where he mentions that only once all the “desires of the heart are renounced” will enlightenment be achieved. In stating that the desires of the heart be removed Madhva suggests that the desires of the heart are uncontrollable and are caused through ignorance. Therefore, Madhva argues that the elimination of ‘unconscious’ desires of the heart (caused by the insatiable search for sensory pleasure) is a result of the ‘conscious’ desire to only serve Vishnu.

Madhva claims that the positive state of “non-Being” is where the individual Self desires only to be in the company of the Lord. Madhva elaborates this idea in the Mandukya-UP 2.3 by quoting Sarasvati’s statement to Vishnu¹²⁶:

O Supreme among the gods! Praising the noble attributes of the Lord is my ceaseless desire. Any desire other than this appears to me something contradictory. Therefore, my purpose would be nothing else. Therefore, I constantly recollect his attributes.

By quoting Sarasvati, Madhva re-establishes his argument of a devotee consciously choosing to have one desire; to serve Vishnu. Madhva then emphasises the importance of desiring Vishnu in Mandukya 2.9:

... in life one tends to believe that everything that comes to be is the result of what he desires. As Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita (3.27), such one, being an ignorant fool under the influence of I-sense, comes to believe that he himself is the creator.

Madhva explains that one who is consumed by the desires of the sensory organs is consumed by their ego and has no wisdom of “action nor of renunciation, neither purity nor good conduct nor any truth in them”¹²⁷. According to Madhva, desire can be good only if one chooses objects of desire that support the service and worship of Vishnu.

In Chandogya-UP 3.1.6 Madhva claims that Vishnu is the “one whom all the Vedas desire to attain” thus showing Madhva’s agreement of desire being bad when one longs for materialistic objects but good when one seeks to attain the abode of Vishnu.

Madhva explains in Chandogya-UP 7.1.2 that desire is a powerful tool, if one desires sons and cattle then he attains it, if one can focus the mind toward attaining an object of desire then that object will most certainly be attained. Madhva agrees with the Chandogya-UP that the “Mind is indeed the self, mind is indeed the world, mind is indeed Brahman” and that only determination is greater than the mind.

Madhva’s statements in Chandogya-UP 7.1.2 shows consistency of thought as it agrees with his commentary on Katha-UP 2.3.14. In Chandogya 7.1.2 Madhva notes

¹²⁶ As found in the Maha-UP.

¹²⁷ Mandukya 2.9

that the “divinity presiding over the mind” is a “cascading outburst of grace” from Vishnu.

Madhva believed that through the grace of Vishnu all desires that come from the mind are premeditated and, due to the influence of Vishnu’s purity, are righteous desires that seek only the betterment of society and the glory of Vishnu.

Madhva (Chandogya-UP 7.1.4) also notes that for one who meditates on Vishnu, “his desires are, verily, fulfilled” and his prayers are never left unanswered. Additionally, Madhva (Chandogya-UP 7.1.6) teaches that:

If one does not desire to end up in obscure dark worlds and rather desires deliverance, then one must perform actions that would please the Supreme being, if this there are no doubts...

Reflecting on Chandogya 7.1.4-6, Madhva claims that Kama should be understood in a dual sense; one can have good or bad Kama. Madhva teaches that one inherently has bad Kama as it is part of the natural order that one desires objects that bring pleasure to the sensory organs. According to Madhva, the pursuit of objects that please the sensory organs is never-ending and only leads one to destruction –to escape this cycle, one needs to consciously shift from allowing the senses to dictate the desire to use the mind to desire the Supreme.

NK is evident in Madhva’s comment (Chandogya-UP 7.1.6) where he notes that for one who aspires for deliverance performing “actions that would please the supreme being” is undoubtedly the path to follow. The contribution of this statement to NK is simply: one who desires liberation should perform devotional acts of service for the supreme being.

The following comments from Madhva’s commentary on the Brihad Aranyaka-UP contribute to understanding the Madhva’s conceptualisation of NK in the UP:

- *Avyakruta Braahmana* v7: ... the misery consequent to unfulfilled desires, which is not in reference to Braahmana and others. Because they are not subject to desires, thus it is established. Those who are students of scriptures being eligible for fruits thereby, renunciation of the misery consequent to unfulfilled

desires brings them for deliverance. Since they desire the Self they are the renouncer of the misery consequent to unfulfilled desires.

- *Saptanna Braahmana* v2: Therefore those who desire to be devoted to Vishnu should make their mind receptive towards Him. They should incline their receptivity to conform to the enrichment of his attributes. They should be disinclined from correlating Him with others or assuming gross form of nature. They should be steadfast in rejecting things which revile Him, should be ashamed in rejecting Him or devotion towards Him, experience fondness for the sense of discrimination in respect of Him and fear in being ignorant in respect of Him.
- *Maitreyi Braahmana* v1: The Self is Narayana. For him alone all through desire become beloved, neither husband nor wife become beloved for their own sake. It is by divine will these things come to be, otherwise wife would be loved as an object of desire. Since the supreme Self is the primary objective of all desires, the importance of the desire for the supreme Self is highlighted.
- *Shadhacharya Braahmana* v5: Dwelling the quarters [abode of Vishnu] he [Vishnu] fulfils the desires of the devotees...
- *Jyoti Braahmana* v19: ... detachment and desirelessness are the distinctive attributes in deliverance... and The one who does not desire is said to be the one who is detached from desires. Therefore both (the one who desires nothing and the one who is detached from the objects of desire) are spoken as those who are delivered ones.
- *Sharira Braahmana* v5: Therefore wise ones aver that the human being is ever under the control of the Supreme Self's desire. As desired by the supreme Self does the individual Self desire. According to the individual Self's desire the fruits of such become available to him. Therefore, human being desires in accordance with those desired by Vishnu.
- *Sharira Braahmana* v6: Distancing oneself from improper desire is said to be detached desire..., ...one who desires nothing else other than Vishnu is said to be detached..., Therefore one who has no desires could only be he who is delivered from all desires. Since delivered self gains whatever he desires he is said to be, one whose desire is the awareness of one's self. For the delivered one's consciousness and bliss becomes desirable aspiration.

- *Sharira Braahmana* v7: On deliverance the individual self enters and departs entirely at his own will, experiencing the bliss of being in the proximity of the supreme Self. This indicates that even in deliverance desire is a potent force in the heart..., ...however all desires from their heart are not terminated..., However since the delivered ones have no heart how could therein be desires? It is only in the mind of his subtle form that desires come exist, not the desires which end in suffering – those would never arise in his mind.

Madhva's comments on desire in the Brihad Aranyaka-UP prove that he did not see desire as a concept that only led to the suffering of man instead Madhva agreed that desire must be understood in a dual sense. While Madhva argues that suffering and rebirth are caused by unfulfilled desires, he adds that Vishnu fulfils the desires of those performing devotional acts of service.

To summarise Madhva's view on NK as per his commentary on the UP – Madhva differentiates between the desires of the heart and the desire of the mind, he argues that the desires of the heart are the cause of unfulfilled desire and suffering whereas the desires of the mind are the same as the desires of the Supreme Vishnu. According to Madhva, the desires that reside in the mind are placed there by Vishnu and are therefore in line with the will of Vishnu.

As a result, NK is the removal of desires of the heart for the desires of the mind so that one may always be performing devotional acts of service for Vishnu.

7.3.2 Vedanta Sutras

Madhva's commentary on the Brahma sutras¹²⁸ is often referred to, by Hindu scholars, as the "Vedanta Sutras by Madhva". Vedanta sutras refer to the BS due to being envisioned as the culmination of all Vedic thought within Madhva's philosophical school of Dvaita philosophy.

¹²⁸ Due to the popularity of Advaita and Vishishtadvaita philosophy, not many English translations of Madhva's commentary on the BS are readily available in South Africa. The most popular and readily available English translation of Madhva's commentary on the BS is graciously provided for by Nagesh D. Sonde – an experienced Hindu philosopher who has translated many Sanskrit Vedantic texts into English. This section relies on the translation of Madhva's BS as translated by Sonde.

Madhva's commentary on the Brahma sutras focuses on promoting Vaishnavism considering Dvaita philosophy. As a result, Madhva pays little attention to NK in his commentary of the BS.

The following comments expand the study of Madhva's view on NK:

1.1.1: In the first verse of the Brahma Sutras, that is: "Then therefore, enquiry into Brahman." Madhva comments extensively on the term Brahman as referring to the "Supreme Vishnu" and as an expression of the "all-pervading Lord". Madhva proclaims his strong devotion to Vishnu throughout his commentary on this verse. Two comments of particular interest are:

1) He is said to belong to the lowest class who is only devoted to the highest Lord and has mastered scripture; he is of the middling class who markedly unites unto these the qualifications of tranquillity, and he is accounted to be of the highest class who, in addition, perceives the futility and the perishable character of all things from the four-faced Brahma down to the clump of grass, and who, thus rising above desires, resigns himself to the feet of the Lord Vishnu, and in Him sees all his works secure.

In this comment, Madhva illustrates that the perception of Vishnu results in the "rising above desires". This relates to NK as Madhva repeats throughout his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi that those who commit themselves to Vishnu rise above selfishly motivating desires. This pleases Vishnu and ensures that actions performed are done without selfish motivation. Therefore, relating to the principle of NK is performing actions that are not selfishly motivated.

2) He that is fit to attain the knowledge of Brahman shall, consider well and realise the futility of the other worlds to be reached in virtue of (good) deeds, and shall subdue his desires ; [sic] for the eternal world (of bliss) is not attainable by deeds (which can only yield results that are not eternal).

In this comment of Vedanta Sutras 1.1.1, Madhva illustrates that the subjugation of desires and the performance of good deeds results in liberation (the attainment of the eternal world of bliss). Madhva explains that actions (deeds) that produce fruit that is not eternal (that are materialistic, such as wealth and fame) do not prepare one for liberation. This relates to NK as Madhva encourages the subduing of desires and the performance of virtuous deeds.

1.4.22: In the case of him who seeks to depart, i.e., who seeks final release (or knowledge), there must be Karma and other things as the means of attaining to knowledge which is the immediate means of salvation; wherefore Audulomi holds that the scripture speaks of sacred duties, etc.

In this comment, Madhva asserts that knowledge is not the only means of salvation (release). Madhva refers to the sage Audulomi who refers to the performance of sacred duties as an alternate means to attaining salvation. Providing clarity on the nature of sacred duties, Madhva states that the scriptures (the Vedas) explain the nature of sacred duties. Furthermore, in his commentary of the previous verse (1.4.21), Madhva explains that actions performed for worldly gain lead to “perishable fruit”. This contributes to Madhva’s argument of performing sacred duties, as defined by the Vedas, that is solely to please Vishnu. This relates to NK in encouraging the performance of actions that are aligned to the sacred duties as prescribed by the Vedas. These actions are not for self-gain or profit but rather are solely for fulfilling one's duties as prescribed by the Vedas.

2.1.36: It may be stated that the thing in consideration of which the Lord dispenses the fruit cannot be the action (of souls) for even the action proceeds from (caused by) Him. And this is supported by the Sruti, ‘The Lord only makes him do righteous deeds whom the Lord chooses to lift, and He (Hari) only makes him do unrighteous deeds whom the Lord chooses to hurl down’. (Kaushitaki. III. 8.)

Madhva’s comment contributes to NK in saying that, not only the fruit, but the desire for the action itself comes from Vishnu. Madhva’s intent in this comment is built upon the *Bhagavadgita Bhashya* (3.8-9), where Madhva argues that actions are to be performed solely for the pleasure of Vishnu. As the fruit and the action come from Vishnu, an individual is to focus solely on performing actions that are pleasing to Vishnu rather than performing actions for rewards.

3.1.7: ... works may mediately lead to immortality in the case of those who perform them with the knowledge of Brahman, that is by enabling the performers to see Brahman. The same is distinctly declared in the (following) Sruti, ‘that Lord [Vishnu] if not known, does not permit him (the ignorant) to enjoy bliss, just as either the Vedas not duly studied under the preceptor or the duties not (properly) performed are not productive of fruits; or if he who does not know the Lord, even performs any great and meritorious deed, that does become ultimately decayed

(futile); therefore, let him meditate on the Lord as (his) abode and guide; he who meditates on the Lord only, as his abode and light, has his works (rendered) undecaying; and through the grace of that Lord, his work creates for him whatever he desires' (Brihadaranyaka-UP 3.4.15).

Madhva refers to the Brihadaranyaka-UP (3.4.15) in declaring that any action performed must be done so only as an addition to meditating on Vishnu. Madhva argues that any action performed that is done without the knowledge of Vishnu is deemed futile. This relates to NK in the performance of actions being an addition to meditating upon Vishnu. In all that one does, Madhva encourages that the meditation of Vishnu only, be the priority. As the focus rests only upon meditating on Vishnu, the desire for materialistic gain is to be set aside. The desire for materialistic gain is to be replaced by the desire to meditate upon Vishnu.

3.2.38-42: 38 Since the dispensation of fruit rests upon Karma or action, it should not be supposed that Karma itself bestows the fruit. Why? 39. Only hence, (that is, from the Lord alone) the fruit is obtained; for it cannot be from the inanimate Karma, which is incapable of independent activity. 40. Madhva quotes the Brihad Aranyaka-UP (9.28): Thus: Brahman is perfect wisdom, perfect bliss, the gracious donor of rewards to him that makes offerings to Him [Brahman]. 41. Only that Karma springs from the Lord which is the cause of fruit. Thus Gaimini thinks, from the scriptural statement, Indeed He only causes the soul to do the righteous deed... 42. Though the Supreme Being and Karma (action) are both the cause of fruit, Karma does not guide the Supreme Being; on the other hand it is the Supreme Being that guides and rules (our) action..., ... He [Vishnu] leads the soul to the world of happiness in consideration of his righteousness, or the world of misery in consideration of his unrighteousness... and The mere instrumentality of Karma has already been spoken of in the text, Matter, Action, Time, etc. exist or cease to exist at the pleasure of the Lord.

Madhva's comments highlight key aspects of NK which argue that the fruit of actions, although caused by Karma (action), is not the result of said action. Instead, the fruit of actions belongs to the inspiration behind the action. In the case of the righteous, it is Vishnu whereas, for the unrighteous, it is the selfish motivation that leads to rebirth. Madhva adds that only action, which is inspired by Vishnu, leads to eternal fruit (such as liberation). The fruit of actions belongs to Vishnu and is awarded to an individual if they have pleased Vishnu. This relates to NK in explaining that any action performed

must be done according to the will and for the pleasure of Vishnu. NK as the performance of selfless actions and desireless desire is evident as Madhva encourages one to perform actions that are not selfishly motivated but rather for the pleasure of Vishnu. To summarise the key aspects mentioned by Madhva that relate to NK:

- The one who performs actions is not given the desired fruits of said action by the Lord.
- All fruit of actions performed become available only at the will of Vishnu.
- Just like the fruit of action, wisdom, and bliss (Moksha) are given graciously and willingly by Vishnu – even if one lives a pious life, Vishnu is under no obligation to grant Moksha, Moksha is attained only by the graciousness of Vishnu.
- Since Vishnu is the source of all noble actions and deeds, the source of the fruits of action is Vishnu.
- The motive for action, the action performed and the effect of said actions belong to Vishnu.
- Vishnu inspires noble deeds, not for the fruit of action but for the positive and/or negative effect that it may have – this effect is due to the divine will of Vishnu manifesting in the material world as part of a grand plan.

3.4.7: He who wishes to live a hundred years shall live doing the sacred duties appropriate to him; and to a person who thus does his duties, sinful action does not cling; but on the other hand, if thou omit to do, though possessed of knowledge, karma (the sin of omission) cannot but cling to thee.

In this comment, Madhva quotes the Isa-UP in clarifying that one should not abstain from performing actions. Instead, one is to perform the duties that are required. In doing so, the person does not generate karma that will bind the soul to rebirth. Madhva encourages the principle of NK which is to perform prescribed duties by clarifying that no “sinful action” can be created thereof.

3.4.19: ... the wise is equally wise whether he may be doing or not doing (what is permitted). Madhva then quotes Krishna (Gita 3.17): He has nothing to do, who has attained to the bliss arising from the direct perception of the Supreme Being,

who is satisfied with (the grace of) the Lord and feels no longing for other objects,
and who finds the highest pleasure in the uninterrupted sight of the Lord.

Madhva explains that those who have perceived the Supreme Being (that is Vishnu) and understands the duality thereof (between the soul and the Supreme) has attained all that is required (“is satisfied with (the grace of) the Lord”). The satisfaction of the grace of Vishnu, according to Madhva, leads to no desire for any other objects (that may be materialistic). This is due to the only desire being for the “highest pleasure” that is the “uninterrupted sight of the Lord”. This relates to NK as a principle of NK is to be without desire for materialistic gain. Madhva asserts that after perceiving Vishnu, the desire for any object unrelated to Vishnu is no longer relevant. For NK, this means that the sole desire an individual is left with is for Vishnu.

The abovementioned verses encapsulate the essence of Madhva’s view on desire and desireless action in the BS. In the BS, Madhva defines NK as the practice of desiring the desirable – a pure and noble desire to attain Vishnu. Additionally, NK is the practice of detached desire to attain the abode of Brahman. Madhva claims that there is no greater desire than the sole, pure, desire of Vishnu therefore, NK is the desire to perform the desired actions of Vishnu. Madhva also defines NK as “sacrificial performance” and teaches that the desire to perform sacrificial acts is desired by Vishnu. The fruit of actions performed through sacrificial acts are made available by Vishnu and are part of His divine plan.

Madhva also emphasises the importance of understanding desire as pure and impure. Pure desire is formed in the mind, is inspired by Vishnu and the fruit of those actions is pleasing to Vishnu whereas unrighteous desire arises in the heart and leads to attachment and suffering. Last, Madhva stresses that self-desire to perform NK pleases Vishnu – one must willingly choose to desire the performance of actions that are for the glory of Vishnu rather than choosing to perform actions that bear materialistic fruit.

7.3.3 Bhagavad Gita

Sangha (1999:25-26) and Subindra Rao (2019:31) attribute two commentaries on the BG to Madhva:

- 1) *Bhagavadgita Bhashya* – The *Bhagavadgita* Bhashya is traditionally believed to be the first commentary by Madhva. Unlike other commentaries on the Gita, Madhva explains “to about 250 to 300 stanzas, starting with the 11th sloka of chapter 2. His sentences are pregnant with meanings which only masters like¹²⁹ Jayatirtha, Vyasaraaja, Raghavendraswamy, Shrinivasatirtha could explain to ordinary sadhakas¹³⁰” (Sangha, 1999:26).
- 2) *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* – Sangha (1999:26) states: “This supplements his gita-bhashya. In fact, this work by itself can give us the true import of the gita. It supplements points given in the bhashya and also gives some additional ones. The benedictory verse itself contains the main import of the gita that Narayana whose greatness is intended to be extolled in this work is full of auspicious qualities and does not have even an iota of a flaw. All other principles stated herein are subservient to this knowledge of the supreme Lord.

To ensure that the essence of Madhva’s thought on NK in the BG is captured, this research studies both of his commentaries on the BG.

Bhagavadagita Bhashya

Due to Madhva explaining the content of the BG, the numbering in his *Bhagavadgita Bhashya* is not coherent with the listing of the chapters and verses in the BG. As a result, the verses below refer to Madhva’s comments relating to NK as found in the Bhagavadagita Bhashya.

Chapter 2: Sankhya Yoga

47. Therefore, even for the wise, the desire for fruits is not advisable. How then (could it be) for others!..., Only those actions (prompted by desire for fruit) are prohibited because fruits are independently ordained by the Lord. It is not that the fruits of actions are possible by one’s own efforts alone. Similarly, desire for fruits of actions is also provided even though not aspired. Therefore, non-performance of any actions may bring opposite results. The fruits are available neither through Wisdom nor through Desire. Persons are entitled only for performance of action. Such, verily, is the way of action. Neither by having desire nor by avoiding the

¹²⁹ The names listed are prominent leaders in the Dvaita philosophical school.

¹³⁰ Sadhaka’s refers to devout followers of a particular Sadhana (Hindu philosophical school of thought).

means of wisdom, does one gain the fruits..., Therefore, do not become bound by the desire for fruits. He performs desire-bound-action whose actions are performed with the corresponding fruits as his objective. You do not become like him..., Do not have an attachment to the fruits, this is the meaning. Other desires for fruits are also the result of My grace. All desires as ordained appear according to Divine Will. And Therefore, all desires should be given up except that for the Lord...

In this comment, Madhva took time to explore the meaning and relationship between desire and action. Madhva elaborately explains that the desire for the fruit of action is unwise and that any action motivated by the desire for fruits should not be performed. Madhva also claims that the fruit of action is not made available by the wisdom or effort of an individual but rather by the grace of Vishnu; it does not matter how hard one works or how wise one is, the benefit of acting is made available only by the will of Vishnu. As a result, people only have a claim to the performance of their duties within society and not the benefits of said action.

The message that Madhva tried to communicate is that the fruit of action is made available by pleasing Vishnu therefore, whether it be performing one's duty or performing no action, one must always aspire to please Vishnu by adhering to his divine will. Madhva also explicitly claims that all desires should be given up except for the desire of Vishnu – subtly noting that the desires of the heart lead to attachment while the desires of the mind are “ordained” by Vishnu and part of a divine plan.

50. If the man of wisdom desires the world of the ancestors, by his very wish, the ancestors stand before him...

Madhva emphasises the importance of ‘self-desire’ in attaining the divine by noting that even “the impossible things” can be achieved by one who deeply desires it. This comment emphasises the importance of self-desire in the process of attaining salvation.

Up until this point, Madhva emphasised the importance of separating the desires of the mind from the desires of the heart. His comment on BG 2.55 is interesting as it engages the BG which claims that:

...when a man gives up all varieties of desire for sense gratification, which arise from mental concoction, and when his mind, thus purified, finds satisfaction in the self alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness.

For those who are wise Madhva says: “Desires are secreted in mind and only Wisdom confronts, contradicts, and destroys them...” and “It is not that people refraining from desires are perceived as spiritually transcendent, for desires may hide within as special attributes...” (*Bhagavadgita Bhashya* 2.55).

Madhva claims that for the wise when desires arise in the mind, the wisdom of an individual engages the desire to determine if it is pure or impure and whether performing the action motivated by that desire would please Vishnu or lead to bondage. Madhva further adds: “The Wise ones, the knowers of That Truth desire communion with your feet, saying thus they seek You, the Lord” (*Bhagavadgita Bhashya* 2.55).

Madhva maintains that the desires arising in the mind are Vishnu inspired and that, to differentiate between impure and pure desire, one must be wise and engage their wisdom with their desire. According to Madhva, the “undesirable desires” are those that arise for materialistic gain whereas the ‘desirable desire’ is to seek “the Lord”. Madhva also notes that one can't refrain from desire as desire can be concealed as “special attributes”. As a result, one should reject unrighteous desires and focus on the pure desire of seeking Vishnu.

62-63. One who has unrighteous desire incurs forgetfulness of scriptures. Then due to defective perception and performing erroneous actions, he goes to lower worlds.

In this comment, Madhva defines unrighteous desire as those who forget the scriptures (Vedas, UP, BS, BG, etc.) and as a result of their forgetfulness, their actions lead to attachment and suffering. Based on this comment, righteous desire would constitute one who studies the scriptures and adheres to their message in all aspects of their life – in doing, according to Madhva, one would realise the duality of the Supreme Vishnu and the individual self¹³¹ and prostrate themselves before the supreme being.

¹³¹ *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* 1:19 – the wise accept the “duality or difference between the Lord and His creation”.

71. He who enjoys the desires of sense-objects without attachment to them, he who when enjoying has no sense of Me and Mine, he verily is the real person. He alone attains deliverance, this is the meaning.

Madhva claims that the meaning of BG 2.71 is not the complete removal of desire, but rather the enjoyment of the desires of sense objects without attachment. Madhva further explains that one who can enjoy the desires of the senses without being attached to them attains deliverance. This comment presents a new angle to NK, where instead of practising NK to remove all desire, the practice of NK aims to teach one to enjoy the sensory desires without being attached to them.

Chapter 3: Karma yoga

Madhva's comment on verse 4 of chapter 3 is extensive as he attempts to explain action and inaction amidst desire and salvation. Despite the length of his comment, the following summation is necessary as this comment contributes to understanding Madhva's view on NK:

4. In this verse Sri Krishna refers to the ordained Action. By abstention of action like battle etc. or by non-Action or by renunciation of the ordained Actions, one does not attain deliverance. Wisdom alone is the means (for deliverance) not abstention of Actions. This is the purport..., ...because Jiva is ever enclosed in subtle as well as in gross body. If by non-Action deliverance was possible then it would have been available to the inanimate things as well. Neither by non-Action nor by absence of the consequential effect of Action, deliverance would come about. (The effects in the present life are) because of the innumerable actions in the previous lives. Not that all the prior actions have been burnt. Because the Jiva is capable of performing many actions, even in one single life. And each of these actions can result in many of the future lives. By performing even one single action, he can acquire the human life as the culmination of the remaining lives. He acquires many lives as effect of all these (past) actions. Thus accumulation of actions can never end indefinitely. The male at the end of fourteen years and a woman at the end of ten years of their lives complete the life span consequent to the effect of prior actions. The Primordial World is eternal; so are (the effect of) the Actions. Therefore, how can there be release from Actions without realization of the Supreme Lord, thus in Brahma Puraanalf the primordial world is the result of the actions performed, then liberation would only be with performance of action without any desires including the desire for liberation. Actions performed without

desires but steadfast through wisdom are said to be those contributing to fulfilment. By fulfilment of such actions, one attains the Eternal State of Brahman..., By actions performed without desires and with purified heart and wisdom, liberation comes about. Therefore it has been said in Bhagavat Puraana that for the one who has become luminous purified by actions, renunciation comes about in the heart. Only he who is free from attachment is known as the man of wisdom thus in Bhagavat Puraana. The state of being liberated comes about by not being bound by desires, which are known as 'appropriate and inappropriate actions'. Indeed absence of desires inaction results in the fruit of Liberation..., Not by mere absence of the fruits (of actions), nor even by the absence of the actions themselves, for renunciation of the actions by themselves cannot be the means of deliverance... And The Gods and many well known princes, even though were ever engaged in actions, did not have their minds wavering from Sri Vishnu. Therefore, even when they were engaged in pleasures, Sri Vishnu was pleased, thus, in Padma Puraana...

Madhva's comment highlights the importance of "ordained action" and that by abstaining from said action or even by performing it, one is not entitled to deliverance. Madhva claims that action (the performance or abstinence) does not qualify one for deliverance instead wisdom alone is the means for deliverance.

Furthermore, Madhva notes that action and the consequences of action are not limited to one lifetime but are intertwined with the actions performed in past lives. As a result, Madhva teaches that desireless action alone does not guide one to deliverance instead it is desireless action combined with the wisdom of Vishnu. Desireless action alone could lead one to inaction, without wisdom, inaction can lead one not performing their duty and divinely "ordained actions". The consequence of not performing ordained tasks results in the disapproval of Vishnu and the failure to attain Moksha.

Madhva presents the solution by referring to the "Gods and many well known princes" who would be engaged in performing numerous tasks, however, they maintained focus on Vishnu. Due to their focus on Vishnu, the gods and princes were able to perform actions that were "engaged in pleasures" without developing attachment – the ability to do so pleased Vishnu allowing them to attain his favour and salvation.

In his comment, Madhva agrees that the “absence of desires in action” causes liberation however he follows that comment by mentioning that neither the “absence of the fruits (of actions)” nor the “absence of actions themselves” bring deliverance. Madhva does this to emphasise that it is only through wisdom and the performance of actions that pleases Vishnu, that one attains Moksha.

In verses 8-9, Madhva notes that “no sacrifice should be performed with the intent for fruits”. Madhva repeats this comment at numerous points in his commentary of the *Bhagavadgita Bhashya* as he wishes to emphasise that all actions performed should only be actions that please Vishnu. The intention and motivation behind all action (even inaction) should only be to please Vishnu and that one’s mind should focus on nothing other than the will of Vishnu.

Chapter 4: Jnyaana Yoga

14-16. Sri Krishna says that actions do not bind Him since he does not have craving for the fruits of His actions. But there is desire (for the good of the people), which is not craving (similar to those of human beings). Therefore it is said even though the Supreme Being has interest in the fruits of His action, he has no craving like human beings. There is no intensity in such desires. The knowledge of the Lord removes misconception; even his desires do not turn into cravings.

Contributing to his argument of pure and unrighteous desire, Madhva explains that Krishna has pure desires within himself. What separates the pure desire in Krishna from the unrighteous desire in humans is that Krishna’s desires are for the “good of the people”, furthermore Krishna is not attached to his desire. The desire that humans have is intertwined with attachment, due to attachment an unnatural “craving” develops, and the individual is consumed by the desire to fulfil the demands of their sensory organs. Madhva teaches that “knowledge of the Lord” aids in the process of learning to have pure desire as the Lord himself has a desire that does not turn into cravings.

Chapter 6: Atmasamyama Yoga

3. How long should actions be performed? By fulfilling and performing the intended actions. For one who desires fulfilment, the very performance of action is the ultimate communion...

Madhva makes this comment in response to complete renunciation of action, he claims that by performing and completing one's duty and responsibility to society (without any expectations) one will attain Moksha ("fulfilment"). Madhva's comment argues in support of performing action rather than encouraging complete renunciation of all action.

This comment is to be read considering his previous comments (as mentioned above) as it encourages one who desires Moksha to act. The action that Madhva encourages one to perform is to be understood as the action mentioned in Chapter 3v4; action performed (including action that brings sensory pleasure) with one's mind being solely focused on Vishnu rather than the fruit of the action performed.

Chapter 7: Jnyaana vijnyaana Yoga

8-11. On the renunciation of desire, Madhva comments: All inherent natural tendencies are as ordained by the Lord. There is nothing whatsoever without My essence inanimate or the inanimate creatures. Also, thus has been spoken. For the sake of spiritual practices desires which are not contrary to Dharma, renunciation of desires and attachments have been recommended..., The desires, not contrary to Dharma, should be sought by the aspirant Strength, without the powerful influence of desires and attachment, should be sought then by His will alone the awareness will be attained..., Being devoid of desire and attachments He is eternally endowed with strength. Since He does not use it in wrong places, His strength is non-passionate... and Primarily, sensual desire causes decrease in righteousness but does not cause any harm if attuned to Dharma. Sri Vishnu abides in all desires which are not contrary to Dharma. Therefore, Sri Vishnu even when abiding in everything, yet remains distinct from them all and as the Lord of all of them.

In his comment, Madhva explains that desire and the performance of an action that is not contrary to Dharma and the sacred scriptures are permitted whereas those (desire filled actions) that are contrary to Dharma are prohibited.

Realising that his statement was relatively vague Madhva mentions that sensual desires (that are not in accordance with Dharma) are a deterrent to righteousness. Furthermore, Madhva explains that Vishnu resides within desires that are in line with Hindu Dharma. In his comment, Madhva stresses that desire must be understood as a desire within the bounds of Dharma and those out of the bounds of Dharma. A desire

that remains in line with Dharma is therefore encouraged as they are pleasing to Vishnu whereas a desire that contradicts (and goes against) Dharma causes a decrease in righteousness, resulting in attachment and suffering.

The last sentence in Madhva's comment (as mentioned above) explains that while Vishnu resides in all, his supremacy remains to interact. As a result, Vishnu is in all and the Lord of all whilst simultaneously being independent (different) from all. This sentence supports Madhva's Dvaita philosophy and encourages NK as the practice of renouncing desire that contradicts desire in the pursuit of desire that is in line with Dharma.

Summarising Madhva's thought on NK in the Bhagavadgita Bhashya:

- Madhva prohibits action that is motivated by the fruit.
- Self-desire is an integral aspect of salvation; through self-desire, one can achieve the "impossible".
- By engaging one's desire with wisdom (that is acquired by the sacred texts) one can differentiate between pure and unrighteous desire.
- It is possible to enjoy the desires of sensory organs so long as one is not attached to those desires or the actions thereof.
- When deciding between action and inaction, one must always choose the will of Vishnu. The ordained actions of Vishnu are to be performed should one desire Moksha.
- The essence of practising NK lies in fully devoting all of one's actions to the will of Vishnu and trusting in His divine plan.
- Last, Madhva explains the difference between pure and unrighteous desire by reflecting on the desire of Krishna. According to Madhva, pure desire is the desire the Krishna has; for the betterment of the world whereas the desire that humans have are for self-gain. As a result, Madhva contributes to NK in stating that one should be like Krishna; instead of having desire that would benefit oneself, one must desire action that benefits the world.

Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya

Like the Bhagavadgita Bhashya, Madhva's commentary on the *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* does not, in its entirety, correspond with the chapter and verse structure of the BG. In his commentary of the *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya*, Madhva frequently comments on groups of verses that he believes have corresponding messages. The verses below are selected from his commentary on the *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* that, in addition to his commentary on the Bhagavadgita Bhashya, contribute to studying Madhva's conceptualisation of NK.

Chapter 2 Sankya Yoga

40-41. This does not mean denying the need to acquire or possess things, but only the desire (for such acquisition and possession)

Madhva explains that one is not required to give up all material objects but only the desire for it; one should not focus on deeply obsessing about obtaining material objects. Madhva further claims that if one were required to surrender all materialistic objects concepts such as equanimity become "meaningless". Therefore, Madhva claims that obtaining possessions without being attached to them or the desire to obtain possessions aids in character development.

47. For actions alone are you and other Jivas entitled. The fruit, however, is within My power to give, this is the purport. Do not be governed by the desire for the fruits. Do not have the feeling that you are the Lord...

The fruit of action belongs only to Vishnu, "Jivas" or humans are entitled only to performing their responsibility to society. Madhva claims that those who perform actions for the fruit are "governed by desire" and he advises against it.

55. Renouncing inappropriate means having no desire.

Adding to his belief in pure and unrighteous desire, Madhva claims that renouncing inappropriate thoughts and motives is having no desire. Madhva explains that although inappropriate desire may arise (even amongst the wise), it is the duty of those who desire Moksha to renounce and reject all inappropriate thought, desire, and action. Within the context of his comment, inappropriate refers to actions that contradict Vishnu's teachings (as documented in the Vedas, UP, BS, and BG).

70. Therefore, one whose desires are self-centred, he is said to be selfish one. All desires are not contrary to deliverance nor are they opposed thereto. In the absence of any desires, living a normal life is not possible.

In this comment, Madhva articulates the importance of desire in the daily life of a person by claiming that without desire, living a “normal life” is not possible. Furthermore, as the concept of desire is set out in the sacred texts, it is not designed to oppose deliverance or prevent it instead desire is an integral part of human life and salvation. When does desire prevent deliverance? When one’s desire is for selfish purposes. When does desire aid in deliverance? When one practice NK and (putting aside selfish desires) desires the will of Vishnu and the betterment of society.

Chapter 3: Karma yoga

38-41. In his comments on these verses, Madhva likens desire to fire by describing it as a “great devourer”. Madhva explains ...Sri Krishna clarifies again, even after realization the desire could still be an impediment. Therefore, desire being more powerful than even fire, it never says: ‘enough of this’.

Madhva explains that desire is inescapable, unlike fire that has an end, desire continues to grow within the minds of even those who have attained “realisation” or Moksha. As a result, Madhva emphasises that one must not be influenced by self-centred desires. To avoid the arrogance and evil intentions that accompany selfish desires, one must constantly train the mind to focus on Vishnu – surrendering all aspects of one’s actions and thoughts unto the divine will of Vishnu.

Chapter 5: Karma Sanyaasa Yoga

6. Deliverance is said to be the state of equanimity, and its form is renunciation. That which is renounced for the pleasure of Sri Vishnu alone is done well, not otherwise... and Without renouncing fruits of the action, for the pleasure of Sri Vishnu, all other forms of renunciation are in essence similar to the pleasures of hell.

Contributing to NK, this comment explains the importance of acting only for “the pleasure of Sri Vishnu”. Merely renouncing action is likened to participating in actions that prevent liberation. In this sense, one could practice NK for selfish reasons (attaining Moksha) rather than practising NK for the pleasure of Vishnu. The performance of action or inaction must be decided based on the will and pleasure of

Vishnu. This comment, much like his other comments, emphasises the importance of focusing on the will of Vishnu in all aspects of one's livelihood and decision-making processes.

Chapter 7: Jnyaana vijnyaana Yoga

8-11. On renouncing desire, Madhva comments: All inherent natural tendencies are as ordained by the Lord. There is nothing whatsoever without My essence inanimate or the inanimate creatures. Also thus has been spoken. For the sake of spiritual practices desires which are not contrary to Dharma, renunciation of desires and attachments have been recommended...., The desires, not contrary to Dharma, should be sought by the aspirant Strength, without the powerful influence of desires and without attachment, should be sought then by His will alone the awareness will be attained...., Being devoid of desire and attachments He is eternally endowed with strength. Since He does not use it in wrong places, His strength is non-passionate... and Primarily, sensual desire causes decrease in righteousness but do not cause any harm if attuned to Dharma. Sri Vishnu abides in all desires which are not contrary to Dharma. Therefore, Sri Vishnu even when abiding in everything, yet remains distinct from them all and as the Lord of all of them.

In his comment, Madhva explains that desire and the performance of an action that is not contrary to Dharma and the sacred scriptures are permitted whereas those (desire filled actions) that are contrary to Dharma are prohibited.

Realising that his statement was relatively vague Madhva mentions that sensual desires (that are not in accordance with Dharma) are a deterrent to righteousness. Furthermore, Madhva explains that Vishnu resides within desires that are in line with Hindu Dharma. In his comment, Madhva stresses that desire must be understood as a desire within the bounds of Dharma and those out of the bounds of Dharma. A desire that remains in line with Dharma is therefore encouraged as they are pleasing to Vishnu whereas a desire that contradicts (and goes against) Dharma cause a decrease in righteousness, resulting in attachment and suffering.

The last sentence in Madhva's comment (as mentioned above) explains that while Vishnu resides in all, his supremacy remains to interact. As a result, Vishnu is in all and the Lord of all whilst simultaneously being independent (different) from all. This sentence supports Madhva's Dvaita philosophy and encourages NK as the practice of

renouncing desire that contradicts desire in the pursuit of desire that is in line with Dharma.

Chapter 8: Aksharabrahma Yoga

14-16. Madhva expands upon his comment in chapter 5v6 by stating:

Deliverance from Samsara and attaining the supreme Lord is possible only through exclusive devotion or Bhakti. Those whose desire is to enjoy the heavenly pleasures free from disease, degeneration and old age will soon return to the samsara again without reaching the goal, whereas the devotees of the lord reach the goal.

According to Madhva, the practice of NK (and desire to attain Moksha) will be unsuccessful if the motive for practice is for the heavenly pleasures. For one who desires the heavenly pleasures, he will remain bound to the samsara cycle. The desire to practice NK must not be for the heavenly pleasures or to escape suffering on earth (disease, degeneration, and old age) instead the desire to practice NK must be “exclusive devotion or Bhakti” to Vishnu. For one who desires Moksha and chooses to practice NK, the motive for practising NK must be for the pleasure of Vishnu. Madhva explains that Vishnu desires all to attain Moksha and this is evident in His grace toward mankind by making known the path to Moksha. As a result, one should not fear that Vishnu will subject a devout person (seeking only the pleasure and delight of Vishnu) to the suffering of the samsara cycle. Madhva’s message is simple, surrender all thought and action unto Vishnu and aspire only for His pleasure – that is how one attains Moksha.

Chapter 12: Bhakti Yoga

17-18. He who does not desire anything besides devotion, wisdom and detachment is for the one who renounces merits as well as demerits.

Simply, one who only desires devotion, wisdom and detachment has completely renounced the desire for the fruit of action. Therefore, such a person is free from the result of the action, attachment, and the samsara cycle, enabling eligibility for Moksha.

In many aspects, Madhva’s commentary on the *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* adds to his understanding of NK as mentioned in the Bhagavadgita Bhashya. In addition to

his Bhagavadgita Bhashya, Madhva's commentary on the *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* contributes the following to understanding NK:

- For the attainment of Moksha, it is not necessary to give up material objects only the desire of it.
- The performance of action is one's responsibility, duty, and the only thing that a Jiva can be entitled to. The fruit of all actions performed is a blessing from Vishnu.
- One who only has pure desire and renounces "inappropriate" desire is said to be without desire.
- A life without desire is not possible. For one who desires Moksha, a life with desire means abstaining from selfish, self-centred desire and desiring for the betterment of society and the will of Vishnu.
- Desire arises in the minds of all, even those who have attained realisation. To manage one's desire and ensure that it does not cause attachment and suffering, one must train the mind to constantly focus on the pleasure of Vishnu.
- Practising NK for the sake of escaping the samsara cycle will only result in further bondage to the samsara cycle. The practice of NK must be solely for the pleasure of Vishnu. Any action or inaction performed that is not for the pleasure of Vishnu is likened to performing actions that are for the "pleasures of hell".
- Madhva differentiates desire as (1) desire that is in line with Dharma and (2) desire that contradicts Dharma. Desire that is following the Dharmic teachings is encouraged additionally, Madhva claims that within 'Dharmic desire' resides Vishnu. Alternatively, desire that is not in accordance with Dharma leads to bondage and suffering.
- Desires that support the attainment of Moksha are: (1) the desire to be devoted to Vishnu, (2) the desire for wisdom and (3) the desire to be detached.

7.4 Karma

Due to Madhva's dedication to Vaishnavism, the relationship between Vaishnavism and Bhakti yoga along with Madhva's encouragement of devotion to Vishnu, it is

evident that Madhva strongly advocated for Bhakti yoga¹³². Despite his emphasis on Bhakti, the relationship between Jnana, Karma, Bhakti, and Raja yoga meant that Madhva made significant contributions to understanding Karma yoga. Madhva's views on Karma yoga directly influence his conceptualisation of NK (as NK is a sub-discipline of Karma yoga).

According to Sharma (1962:282-283), Madhva rejected *Jnanakarmasamuccaya*¹³³ and his rejection was “not due to any under-estimation of Niskama-Karma as such, but to the unique place which Aparoksa-Jnana¹³⁴ or direct vision of God occupies his philosophy.”

Madhva did not reject the concept of NK to liberation however he favoured the concept of Aparoksa-Jnana as Aparoksa-Jnana supported Dvaita philosophy. Madhva's view of Aparoksa-Jnana being superior to NK in no way undermines or nullifies NK instead it offers a 'better' path to Moksha.

Additionally, Sharma (1962:283) claims:

Madhva resolves this apparent conflict between the so-called Karma and Jnana Margas by enlarging the scope of Karma-Yoga as understood by Samkara¹³⁵ and raising it to the level of a way of enlightened action (*niskamam jnanapurvam karma*¹³⁶). He makes a vigorous plea for enlightened spiritual activity by all, which cannot be binding in its consequences. There can be no true wisdom without such activity, at least for all of us, mortals, and no true Karma without enlightenment and devotion to God...

Madhva believed that the relationship between Jnana and Karma was mutual where both were equally dependent on each other. In doing so, Madhva explains that to attain wisdom, the action of acquiring wisdom needs to be performed. Similarly, “true

¹³² Muniapan (2013:184) describes Madhva as “one of the important philosophers during the *Bhakti* movement”.

¹³³ *Jnanakarmasamuccaya* is the theory that, to attain liberation, one must combine the teachings of Jnana and Karma yoga. *Jnanakarmasamuccaya* teaches that independently, Jnana and Karma yoga cannot be a means to liberation – Jnana and Karma yoga can only assist one in attaining liberation when combined.

¹³⁴ A popular Dvaita concept that teaches that Brahman is non-dual and is made visible through knowledge; knowledge of Brahman allows one to see Brahman and recognise non-duality.

¹³⁵ Shankara

¹³⁶ Literally meaning “desireless, complete (full) wisdom action”. In other words, desireless, and filled with wisdom, action.

Karma”, in the sense of Karma that supports Moksha, is non-existent without the enlightenment and devotion that comes with the attainment of wisdom.

On the topic of Karma and action, Sivananda (2001:36) agrees with Sharma (1962:283) in stating that to Madhva “fruit of action – renunciation of fruit in action”. Simply, Madhva believed that the fruit of “true Karma” performed is visible in the renunciation of the motivation for the fruit of action whilst the action is being performed.

Considering Dvaita philosophy and his commentary on the Prasthanatrayi, Madhva did not reject NK. Sharma (1962:285) notes that according to the Madhva:

Even this Niskama Karma which is, strictly speaking, the only kind of Karma that is philosophically admissible or effective – is not to be admitted as anything more than an accessory to spiritual realization. It is to be pursued for the purpose of acquiring the necessary mental purification... and the reason why Karma cannot be treated as an independent means of release is that it is by nature, irrepressibly found to be inexhaustible by the enjoyment of fruits. It breeds like bacteria. It is estimated that on an average, it takes at least ten future births for an individual to work out the amount of Karma accumulated by him from the fourteenth year of his life, in one birth...

Madhva viewed Karma as a counterproductive concept; every action performed in the current lifetime adds to the list of actions that need to be atoned for in the previous lives. Madhva argues that without knowledge, an individual will repeat ‘bad karma’ creating an endless cycle of rebirth with an endless list of Karma that needed to be atoned for. In the next birth, without knowledge, instead of rectifying the Karma of past births, one only adds to his Karma therefore, requiring another rebirth – thus the cycle repeats.

To counter the endless cycle of ‘knowledge-less’ Karma, Madhva proposes “*niskamam jnanapurvam karma*” – combining Karma and Jnana so that NK is practised knowledgeably. Knowledge removes the ignorance that causes Karma to accumulate, therefore accounting for the Karma of past lives without accumulating any new Karma.

Due to the combination of Jnana and Karma, Madhva viewed NK as the only concept within Karma yoga that has the potential to enable spiritual realisation. As a result,

Madhva defines NK as an “enlightened activity”¹³⁷ that enables Karma yoga to remain a path to liberation by merging with Jnana yoga.

Within the broader spectrum of Madhva’s philosophy, he believed that in all past lives Karma was cleared, and that wisdom was attained through ultimate and exclusive devotion (Bhakti) to Vishnu.

7.5 Conclusion

Sri Madhvacharya is undoubtedly one of the greatest philosophers of Hinduism and, as found in his commentary of the Prasthanatrayi, has made significant contributions to NK.

In the UP, Madhva’s comments on NK centre on 2 key principles: (1) Desire is twofold, desires of the mind are inspired by Vishnu and desires of the heart are caused by the need for sensory pleasure. Desires of the mind, as inspired by Vishnu, leads to Moksha whereas desires of the heart are the cause of unfulfilled desire resulting in attachment and suffering. (2) Suffering and bondage to the Samsara cycle are caused by unfulfilled desire. To be freed from the Samsara cycle one must desist from “improper desire” and surrender all desires to Vishnu.

Building on his commentary on the UP, Madhva notes the following in the Vedanta Sutras:

- The desirable desire is the holiest of desires, the desire for Vishnu. Therefore, NK is the practice of desiring the desirable, holy, and pure Vishnu.
- There is no greater desire than the desire for Vishnu.
- The practice of NK is the surrendering of all individual, sensory desires in the pursuit of one desire – the desire for Vishnu. For this reason, Madhva defines NK as “sacrificial performance” – the act of sacrificing individualistic, selfish desires for the divine desires of Vishnu.
- Self-desire is a foundational motivator for the practice of NK and Moksha.

The last two commentaries of Madhva that this chapter studied were that of the BG. Madhva’s thought on NK, as is in the UP and BS, is discussed in detail in his

¹³⁷See Sharma (1962:286).

Bhagavadgita Bhashya and *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya*. Madhva's two commentaries on the BG serve as the pinnacle of his thought on NK.

In the Bhagavadgita Bhashya, Madhva teaches that wisdom allows one to differentiate between pure and unrighteous desire. He then expands on his comments from the Vedanta Sutras in the Bhagavadgita Bhashya in stating that: (1) Self-desire enables one to achieve the impossible. (2) One may enjoy the desires of the sensory organs if one remains detached. (3) NK is surrendering to the will of action by only performing actions that please Vishnu.

In the *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya*, Madhva claims that for one who desires Moksha, he must desist from the desire for materialistic objects without giving up the objects – desist from the desire to attain materialistic objects, not the object itself. Madhva believed that life without desire was impossible, therefore, to live a life that is pleasing to Vishnu one must abstain from selfish desires by only desiring the one pure desire that is Vishnu.

Madhva further explains that desire is to be understood as: (1) desire that agrees with Dharma and (2) Desire that contradicts Dharma. Desire that agrees with Dharma is desire that supports Moksha and involves the desire to be devoted to Vishnu, the desire for wisdom and the desire to be detached.

Madhva's commentary on the Prasthanatrayi is evidence that Madhva saw NK as "enlightened activity". Madhva believed that NK was the sum of all Karma yoga teachings, as the purpose of NK is solely for spiritual realisation. Madhva argued that Karma yoga on its own created an endless, inescapable loop. The only way that Karma yoga can guide someone to Moksha is if it was combined with the principles of Jnana yoga. When action is performed with wisdom, the Karma of past lives is atoned for without creating 'new' Karma that would require rebirth.

Due to the combination of Karma and Jnana yoga, Madhva modifies the understanding of NK by describing it as "Niskamam jnanapurvam karma", literally meaning "desireless, enlightened activity". Last, Madhva believed that one who focused his mind on the only desire for Vishnu was considered desireless and that the desire for Vishnu came with wisdom to discern which actions please Vishnu. Madhva believed that an individual was 'liberated' and 'enlightened' only when he desired one thing; the desire to perform actions that are pleasing to Vishnu.

Chapter 8: Summation of the salient understanding of NK in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva

8.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a reflection on the three acharyas and their comments that relate to NK. It provides a summary of chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) by looking at the comments made by the acharya on the Prasthanatrayi that relate to NK. Thereafter, this chapter describes the vital principles of NK (parameters of NK) as deduced from examining the works of the acharyas.

This chapter also reflects on the notion of NK as a self-contradictory practice and the contribution made by the acharya in discussing that. In conclusion this chapter reflects on the historical development of NK and documents the contribution made by the three acharyas to understanding NK.

By providing a summary of chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) this chapter covers point 2 of the research question (as found in chapter [2.7](#)). Headings [8.2](#) and [8.3](#) of this chapter engage the question of how the three acharyas understood NK.

Then, heading [8.4](#) of this chapter engages the third research question on the metamorphosis of NK over time. This is achieved by reflecting on table 1 in chapter [4.6](#), considering the comments made by the three acharyas that pertain to NK.

To assess the contribution that NK makes to social cohesion, a consolidated summary of NK (that tracks its development from the Vedas to the contribution that the three acharyas made) is required.

Therefore, this chapter reflects on the concept of NK as found in the Vedas, Prasthanatrayi and the commentaries of the three acharyas. This chapter also engages chapter [3.4.2](#)¹³⁸ (Sakam Karma) and [3.4.3.1](#)¹³⁹ (The problem of desirelessness) to conclude with a comprehensive understanding of NK before assessing its contribution to social cohesion.

¹³⁸ Pg 64

¹³⁹ Pg 65

Before reflecting on the three acharyas, it is important to note that despite fundamental differences in their philosophical understanding of the relationship between Brahman and Jiva, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva agreed that selfless and detached action was a noble and worthy of liberation practice. This section compares the understandings of NK, by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, to conclude with an inclusive and relevant definition of NK.

8.2 Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva on NK

8.2.1 Shankara

Shankara's definition of NK is *satyakamah* – unfulfilling desire that leads to the attainment of Brahman, not to be mistaken with a materialistic desire that causes bondage. NK is also a concept that guides one on their spiritual journey to realisation. Due to Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, he envisions NK as a liberative practise that contributes to the realisation of Brahman.

To summarise Shankara's thoughts on NK, the following comments taken from his commentary on the Prasthanatrayi, encapsulate his thought on NK.

UP

In Kena-UP (1.2), Shankara proposes the idea of '*satyakamah*'. He explains that desire can be both good and bad and that one should distance themselves from 'bad' desire by pursuing *satyakamah* – true desire. Shankara elaborates on this in Mundaka-UP (3.1.10) where he asserts that one who pursues "noble" desire attains desirelessness from the material world therefore, attaining realisation and liberation.

Shankara proposes that, when studying NK, the following concepts must be included: *Karmadharaya, Bahuvrihi, Satyakamah/Sarvakamah* and *na aviratah duscaita*¹⁴⁰.

BS

Shankara's thought on NK is summarised in his comment on Samanvaya Ashyaya 1.1.1 (1) where he teaches that, for one to be detached from the action performed and the fruit of action thereof, one must train the mind to focus only on Brahman. NK is

¹⁴⁰ See 5.3.1 for definitions.

therefore the practice of detaching from action and the fruit of action by directing all thought to Brahman and His will.

BG

In BG 3.13 Shankara explains that eating food that is offered first to Brahman is not sinful. In doing so, Shankara teaches that anything that is first offered to Brahman cannot be sinful and cause bondage to Samsara. The same applies to desire; by surrendering all desire unto Brahman, one allows Brahman to guide one onto the path of noble desire (chapter 5.3.3). As the BG engages Brahman on a Saguna Brahman level, Shankara's comments in the BG refer to actions that pertain to Saguna Brahman. Shankara's philosophy and ideology largely depend on Nirguna Brahman. However, as the BG presents Brahman on a Saguna level, Shankara's comments on the BG are to be understood as relating to Saguna Brahman rather than Nirguna Brahman.

Shankara claims in BG 3.20 that detached action not only purifies one's soul but, a detached individual, is also a role model for other individuals within a community. A community that practices NK and is detached from action is what Shankara would label as an 'ideal' society.

Shankara's message on NK, as found in the BG, is simply: purity of soul is attained by surrendering all action and desire unto Brahman and, a community that practices NK is cohesive and progressive.

Additional comments made by Shankara that contribute to this discussion are: (1) past and future karma are destroyed when one practices NK (wisdom-filled action) in the current lifetime and (2) until one is freed from their mortal body, Karma is inevitable.

8.2.2 Ramanuja

The central theme of Ramanuja's commentary on NK centres on surrendering all action unto Brahman by practising Bhakti. In his comments, Ramanuja proclaims NK as a liberative practice that has the potential to radically transform society for the better.

UP

In his commentary on the UP, Ramanuja's comments contribute to understanding NK as a practice that is aligned with pure desire. Ramanuja does this by articulating that the motive for practising NK detaches an individual from the desire for materialistic objects. Ramanuja also encourages the performance of duties (as prescribed by the sacred texts – that is the Vedas) and notes that NK detaches individuals from these actions and the fruit thereof. As a result of the detachment from performing actions, NK enables the soul to attain liberation.

Ramanuja's commentary on the Vedartha Sangraha is his commentary on the UP. In VS 116 Ramanuja differentiates between pure and impure desire by describing Brahman as "faultless" and the "fulfilment" of all desire. Because Brahman is faultless, the fulfilment of desire referred to can only be a righteous desire that is for the betterment of the world.

Adding to his promotion of pure desire, in VS 157 Ramanuja provides an example of the faultless desire that is Brahman. In VS 157 Ramanuja claims that Brahman visits the world in many different forms because He desires humanity to know Him and because He desires to do good in the world.

BS

In his Sri Bhashya (Kamadyidhikaranam 3.3.39), Ramanuja discusses the important practices that contribute to enlightenment, in doing so he notes the important role of self-desire in the journey to attain Moksha. His comment allows for a new angle to desire, self-realising desire. Because Ramanuja emphasises the importance of self-desire for the attainment of Moksha, desire is not only described by Ramanuja as "faultless" and impure but also as self-realising.

According to Ramanuja, self-realising desires are desires that encourage knowledge of Brahman and the attainment of knowledge and reject desires to objects of the material world.

In Kamyadhikaranam 3.3.60, Ramanuja states that the performance of righteous (correct) action requires "*Vidya*" (wisdom). The performance of action with wisdom, according to Ramanuja, destroys past and future Karma. In this sense, the practice of NK as faultless desire utilises wisdom to clear all past and future Karma – qualifying the practitioner for liberation.

BG

Ramanuja believed that the sacred texts were given to humanity, by the gods, as lessons on how liberation could be attained. In his *Bhashya* of the BG (2.13) Ramanuja asserts that, for one to attain liberation and be freed from bondage, all actions performed, and desires though must be prescribed by scripture. Any action or desire performed that is supported by scripture leads one to Moksha. Therefore, those who seek Moksha must ensure that they are well versed in the sacred texts and live by its laws.

In BGB (2.40) Ramanuja defines NK, not as the complete renunciation of all desire but, as actions performed without any desire for rewards. Ramanuja understands NK as the wilful performance of one's prescribed duty (either as set out by the needs of the community or by the sacred texts) without desiring any benefit. Simply, perform the actions that are prescribed to you without wanting anything in return. Ramanuja asserts that one should perform their actions without paying attention to the rewards because everyone has an ordained task, which upon completion, contributes to the divine plan of Brahman and the constructive development of society.

In his life and through his commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi and other literary works, Ramanuja repeated the importance of Bhakti. Ramanuja taught that the only guaranteed way to escape bondage to the samsara cycle was to completely surrender all aspects of one's existence to Brahman by performing devotional service. Ramanuja defines devotional service as actions that were prescribed by the scriptures (BGB 2.13) and as actions that bring joy and glory to Brahman. As a result, practising NK is surrendering all action and desire unto Brahman, so that all action and desire performed is for the glory and joy of Brahman. Simply, NK is an action performed without any desire for material rewards, the desire is only to perform devotional acts of service to Brahman.

8.2.3 Madhva

The last of the Vedantic philosophers that this research investigates, Madhva tied together with an array of different ideas in his conceptualisation of NK.

UP

In the Kena-UP 4.6 Madhva differentiates between the desires of the mind and the heart. The desires of the mind have the potential to engage with wisdom and knowledge to discern which actions will please Vishnu and which cause bondage. The desires of the heart are for sensory pleasure thus leading to bondage and suffering. Madhva explains that Vishnu plays an integral role in the desires of the mind by inspiring desires that lead to liberation.

In Chandogya-UP 7.1.6, Madhva claims that for the one who desires Moksha, all activities performed must be done for the pleasure of Vishnu. Madhva then recommends NK as a practice of renouncing all worldly desires for the sole desire to please Vishnu.

BS

The theme of Madhva's commentary on NK in the Vedanta Sutras centre on establishing Vishnu as the supreme being that is Brahman. Madhva's comments that relate to NK are often found in his praise of Vishnu as the highest lord. In Vedanta Sutra 1.1.1. Madhva comments that those who identify and devote themselves to Vishnu as the supreme lord rise above the desire for the material world. This contributes to the notion of NK as being without desire. Madhva suggests that Vishnu fulfils all the needs of the devote resulting in a state of desireless-ness. Additionally, in Vedanta Sutra 1.1.1. Madhva mentions that knowledge of Vishnu (as Brahman) results in the realisation of the futility of the material world and the subduing of desire for objects of the material world (which are temporary).

In Vedanta Sutra 2.1.36, Madhva claims that the fruit of action and the inspiration for action comes from Vishnu. Adding to this, Madhva's comment on Vedanta Sutra 3.1.7 refers to the Brihadaranyaka -UP (3.4.15) to argue that any action performed must be done in addition to meditating on Vishnu. Madhva asserts that upon meditating on Vishnu, the desire for anything else is renounced.

Furthermore, Madhva argued that the fruit of action (and actions that generate fruit/rewards) is made available at the will of Vishnu. As a result, all actions performed should be solely for the pleasure of Vishnu. This relates to NK as Madhva encourages actions that are not for selfish gain but the pleasure of Vishnu. Therefore, according to Madhva, NK (as desireless desire) is the desire for the pleasure of Vishnu by being desireless toward materialistic objects.

BG

Madhva's 2 commentaries on the BG centre on the following:

1. Bhagavadgita Bhashya 3.4: One may be engaged in desire filled action and remain pure by focusing the mind only on Vishnu. Madhva teaches that neither desire nor desirelessness, action nor inaction, liberates a soul instead only the grace of Vishnu liberates a soul. Madhva also clarifies that one should not practice NK to escape suffering on earth. NK is to be practised for the sole reason of pleasing Vishnu.
2. Bhagavadgita Bhashya 2.50: With self-desire and wisdom one can achieve the impossible. In his, commentary Madhva teaches that desire can be both destructive and constructive however when desire is combined with wisdom it will always be constructive. In this sense, NK is therefore wisdom-filled, self-desire to please Vishnu.
3. Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya 2.40-41: Madhva teaches the need for possession does not need to be refuted instead the selfish desire for materialistic objects must be denied. Madhva acknowledges that it is impossible to live a normal life without desire and material objects. To address this, he proposes that one attains only the possessions that are essential for living while managing one's desires so that in all actions performed, the desire to please Vishnu remains constant.
4. Bhagavad Tatparya Nirnaya 7.8-11: According to Madhva, desire can liberate a soul and bind it to the samsara cycle. Madhva teaches that the ability to discern which desire is righteous versus unrighteous is to reflect on the sacred scriptures and the Dharma thereof. For one who seeks liberation and has desires that are following Dharma, he is said to be practising NK.

Madhva's understanding of NK was having a noble desire that was supported by Dharma and the sole desire to perform actions that please Vishnu. Despite his understanding of NK, Madhva believed that the only way to attain liberation was by surrendering completely to devotional service (Bhakti) to Vishnu. Karma and Jnana yoga could not independently guide one on their path to liberation. As a result, Madhva suggests a new approach to NK, one that combines Bhakti, Karma, and Jnana yoga; *Niskamam jnanapurvam karma*. Madhva argued that *Niskamam jnanapurvam karma* was enlightened action, actions performed with the desire to attain wisdom and please Vishnu. Due to the performance of enlightened action one's actions becomes more "devotional service" centric as enlightened action motivates devotional service to Vishnu.

8.2.4 Parameters of NK

This section is entitled the parameters of NK as it ties together the comments of the three acharyas that allude to NK. Parameters is used to refer to the scope of NK as deduced from the commentaries of the three acharyas.

All Hindu concepts are vast, different contexts and traditions interpret and understand Hindu dogma differently. A good example is that of the Vedas; the Vaishnavite tradition interprets the Vedas and the usage of words denoting Brahman and God as Vishnu whereas the Shaivite tradition will interpret it as a form of Shiva.

NK as found in the commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi by the three acharyas is subjected to their philosophy. To Shankara, the practice of NK contributes to the realisation of Brahman. As a result, Shankara describes NK as one of the practices that supports the realisation of Brahman. To Ramanuja, NK encourages and teaches devotional service. Like Shankara, NK is a process leading to Moksha however to Ramanuja Moksha means realising dependency on Brahman. To Madhva. NK means realising the supremacy, independence, and difference between Vishnu and all His creation by performing enlightened actions of devotional service.

Despite their differences on the nature of the relationship between Brahman and Jiva, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva agree that NK is a spiritually enlightening practice that leads to Moksha. The differences between the three acharyas come in on the discussion of what Moksha means not the importance of NK and its relevance to spiritual enlightenment.

Considering chapters [5](#), [6](#) and [7](#), Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva agree on the following:

- Brahman is pure, faultless and the fulfilment of all desires.
- Desire is to be understood as: (1) Pure Desire (or righteous desire that is aligned to Dharma) and (2) Impure Desire (or unrighteous desire that contradicts Dharma). Therefore, NK is the Pure desire of seeking to please Vishnu and the abstinence of desires that contradict Dharma.
- Detachment from the fruit of action and action itself by focusing on Brahman is how one can attain Moksha.
- Any action or thought that is surrendered unto Brahman first and is blessed by Brahman cannot cause bondage.
- Self-desire is important in practising NK – one must truly desire to perform devotional service to Brahman for NK to be successful.
- NK is also training the mind to focus only on Brahman.
- NK does not deny the physical and materialistic needs of people, it merely suggests that, for liberation, one must direct all desire unto Brahman instead of material objects.
- NK purifies the soul and contributes to a sustainable community.
- Wisdom and NK combined clear past, ongoing, and future Karma.
- NK is the pinnacle of all liberative practices within Karma yoga.
- NK is merely the practice of performing one's ordained duty and social responsibility without any regard for rewards. The motive for performing those tasks is solely to please Brahman by contributing to community development.

The differences in thought on NK arise only in two points:

1) Brahman? – due to the respective Vedantic philosophical schools the interpretation of Brahman by the three acharyas varies. Shankara is understood as interpreting Brahman as Shiva¹⁴¹ whereas to Ramanuja and Madhva (two prominent leaders in

¹⁴¹ This understanding is developed by Shaivite followers that interpret Shankara's bhashya on the Vishnu Sahasranama Bhashya in light of their philosophy. In the Vishnu Sahasranama Bhashya by Shankara, on the thousand names of Brahman, number 27 is "The Pure (Sivah)". On this, Shankara comments: "He is Pure, being free from the three qualities. Hari alone is praised by 'Siva' and other names, there being no difference between him [Siva] and them [the other names of Brahman, that is Vishnu in this text]. So says the Sruti (Nara.

the Bhakti movement), Brahman is interpreted as Vishnu. Their interpretation of Brahman, considering the philosophy and religious sect, in no way distorts their understanding of NK. Brahman, like many other philosophical concepts (such as Jiva, Moksha, and Maya) differs according to the philosophical thought that Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva were promoting. Because each of the three acharyas agrees that NK is detachment from wicked desire and a liberative practice, the differences they do have (in terms of Advaita, Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita) do not affect or influence their understanding of NK.

2) Moksha? – The second aspect that may be considered a point of conflict is Moksha. Due to the description of NK as a liberative practice, Moksha, as gained through NK, is understood differently by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva. To Shankara, NK means realising oneself as Brahman. To Ramanuja, NK is realising dependency on Brahman with the potential to assimilate with Brahman. For Madhva, NK is realising the supremacy, independence, and difference between Brahman and Jiva.

Each of these notions, (1) realising Brahman, (2) realising dependency on Brahman, and (3) realising the difference between Brahman and Jiva, are understood by the three acharyas as Moksha. Their understanding of Moksha does not create a dispute amongst the acharyas as they all agree that NK is one of the practices that support the attainment of Moksha. On the definition of Moksha itself, the three acharyas disagree. However, on NK being a guide to Moksha – the acharyas agree.

3) Nishkama Karma? – According to Sharma (1962:283), Madhva believed that Karma Yoga (by itself) cannot lead one to liberation. Sharma (1962:283) adds that Madhva enlarges the “scope of Karma-Yoga as understood by Samkara...” Sharma (1962:283) shows that Madhva does not contradict, disagree or challenge Shankara on NK instead, Madhva adds to Shankara’s understanding. As a result, Madhva’s proposal of *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* is not a contradiction or disagreement with Shankara and Ramanuja. Madhva, as the last of the three acharyas, after having studied the work of Shankara and Ramanuja proposes a new perspective of NK that

Up., 13): “He is Brahma, He is Siva.”” (Sastri, 1927:37). Shankara’s reference to “He is Brahma, He is Siva” forms the foundation of the Shaivite argument that Shankara proclaimed Shiva as Brahman.

he believed would contribute to spiritual realisation and cohesive social engagements¹⁴².

Sreedhar (2009:104) refers to Madhva's proposal of *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* as a "synthesis" of Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga in Shankara's philosophy. Madhva's *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* is founded on the argument for "enlightened activity". *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* is simply Madhva's combination of NK and wisdom/knowledge. To further elicit that there is no dispute or contradiction between Madhva and Shankara, Madhva simply provides a term to Shankara's statement in the *Vivekacudamani*: past and future Karma is destroyed by wisdom¹⁴³. Madhva's *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* agrees with Shankara's statement in his *Vivekacudamani* that wisdom combined with NK qualifies one for liberation. (Sreedhar, 2009)

8.3 Nishkama Karma: A self-contradictory practice?

In Chapter 3 of this research ([3.4.3.1](#)) NK as a means of desirelessness was presented with the question: How does when practicing NK considers *mumukshutva*?

To answer this question, chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) investigated the contributions made by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva to assess the validity of NK as desirelessness considering *mumukshutva*.

Considering *mumukshutva* as the desire for liberation, NK may seem as contradictory as, to a certain extent, it teaches one to be desireless. The following points on NK, as investigated in this research, address concerns that may arise over the 'desirelessness' of NK:

- NK is not the renunciation of all desire. NK is the opposite of Sakam Karma (desires that motivate selfish actions) therefore NK is the renunciation of all Sakam Karma.
- Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva agree that practising NK leads to spiritual enlightenment.

¹⁴² Sreedhar (2009:104) states that Madhva resolved Shankara's conflict with Karma and Jnana Yoga by "enlarging the scope of Karma-Yoga as understood by Sankara". Madhva enlarged Shankara's understanding of Karma Yoga by proposing enlightened action – that is *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma*.

¹⁴³ See page 129-130

- The three acharyas agree that there are desires supported by Dharma and desires that contradict Dharma. NK is the desire to reject Sakam Karma and to obtain Brahman and wisdom.

Mumukshutva as the deep desire for liberation is therefore synonymous with NK. For one who deeply desires Moksha, he rejects Sakam Karma and undertakes the path that leads to Brahman and knowledge of Brahman – thus practising NK. As a result, one who follows the path of *mumukshutva* is indistinguishable from one who adheres to NK.

The following table¹⁴⁴ shows the coherence between the three fundamental principles of *mumukshutva* and aspects of NK as investigated in this research:

<i>Mumukshutva</i>	NK
(1) <i>Viveka</i> – discernment	<i>Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma</i> – Madhva argued that through wisdom one was able to discern between liberative and binding actions.
(2) <i>Vairagya</i> – detachment	In BGB 2.40, Ramanuja describes NK as ‘actions done without the desire for any reward’. The performance of action without the desire for rewards is detachment.
(3) <i>Shatsampatti</i> – (a) <i>Sama</i> , (b) <i>Dama</i> , (c) <i>Titiksha</i> , (d) <i>Uparati</i> , (e) <i>Shraddha</i> , (f) <i>Samadhana</i>	(a) According to Shankara’s commentary on Mundaka 3.1.10, one who practices NK is liberated. To attain liberation is to attain eternal bliss and inner peace. (b) In his Bhagavadgita Bhashya (3.4), Madhva explains that one who trains their mind to focus only on Vishnu can partake of any action without being attached to it. Therefore, Madhva advocates for the sole desire, emotions and focus of the mind to be controlled and directed only toward the thoughts of Vishnu. (c) In BGB 2.13, Ramanuja notes the importance of training one’s mind to persevere and maintain composure as one desires and performs actions that align with the scriptures. (d) In the Bhagavadgita Bhashya, Madhva emphasises the

¹⁴⁴ Table 3

	<p>importance of ‘ordained action’ thus emphasising the disregard for self-profit, self-gain, and emotions by desiring only to fulfil the commands of Vishnu. (e) Shankara comments on BG 3.20 that the practice of NK purifies the soul. Amongst others, trustworthiness, honesty, and love are characteristics of a pure soul. (f) <i>Samadhana</i> is addressed in Ramanuja’s BGB (2.13) – focus and train the mind to perform actions that please Vishnu.</p>
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Therefore, NK and *mumukshutva* do not contradict one another but are merely two doctrines teaching the same message: the attainment of Moksha by devotion to Brahman and performing socially constructive and progressive actions that are in line with the will of Brahman.

In addition to *mumukshutva*, Pal (2018:244-245) raises a potential contradiction in questioning the motive of NK. Considering NK enables enlightenment and freedom from the Samsara cycle, one may practice NK for the selfish desire to be freed from the cycle of rebirth. In this sense, NK is motivated by the self-desire to be freed from suffering therefore contradicting itself as the removal of selfish desires.

The motive for practising NK as the selfish desire to escape the suffering of Samsara is addressed by Madhva in his commentaries of the BG. In Bhagavadgita Bhashya (3.8-9) Madhva explains that no sacrifice or action must be performed to attain fruits. Performing NK and adhering to the sacrifice of selfish desires, according to Madhva, means that one practices NK not for any reason other than worshipping Brahman. Madhva expands on this in the Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya (5.6) where he teaches that performing NK for any reason other than pleasing Vishnu (Madhva’s interpretation of Brahman) is the same as the pleasures of hell. Therefore, if one’s motive for practising NK is selfish (solely to attain Moksha and be free from suffering), the practice of NK is then deemed void as the selfish motive invalidates NK as selflessness. Madhva (Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya 5.6) states that the motive for NK must solely to be please Vishnu, any other motive is the same as leading a sinful life and not practising NK at all.

Datta and Jones (2019:17) list six dimensions of Karma yoga that clarify the different approaches to understanding Karma yoga and NK. Considering the engagement of *mumukshutva* and NK, this research proposes a seventh dimension that addresses any uncertainty of NK being the complete renunciation of all desire. Like Pradhan S (2013)¹⁴⁵, this research proposes a 6-dimensional model of NK and Karma yoga as:

- 1) Action performed as devotional service to Brahman.
- 2) Rejection of Sakam Karma.
- 3) Desire to only perform actions that please Brahman and aid in developing knowledge.
- 4) Desire is twofold; Pure (supported by Dharma) and Impure (contradictory to Dharma). The path of NK is chosen by desiring and performing actions that are in alignment with Dharma and, rejecting all desire and action that is contradictory to Dharma.
- 5) Enlightened activity that enables spiritual enlightenment and contributes to peaceful social engagements through selflessness and detachment.
- 6) The desire to practice NK must solely be to please Brahman, any other motive for NK (including emancipation) disqualifies one's practice of NK.

Thus the 6-dimensional model mentioned above constitutes the definition of NK as the sum of the three acharyas (Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva) thought (as expressed in their commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi) on NK.

8.4 Historical development and metamorphosis of NK

Reflecting on Table 1 in chapter [4.6](#), NK as the concept of desirelessness and selfless action was first mentioned in the Vedas, thereafter it developed into desireless action, detachment, and selflessness in the BG.

Despite studies on NK, no collective investigation into the contributions made to this subject by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva was made. The three acharyas share their agreements with the concept of NK as discussed in the Vedas and the Prasthanatrayi.

¹⁴⁵ See Datta and Jones (2019:17).

In addition to the existing tenants of NK the relatively core contributions made to NK, by the three acharyas, are:

- Shankara: Brahman is realised through noble desire and desirelessness. Brahman is the epitome of all desire (*Karmadharaya*) that is comprised of faultless desire (*Bahuvrihi*) and unfailing desire (*Satyakamah*). For one who desires realisation, he must abstain from all bad thoughts and actions (*na aviratah duscaritat*). Therefore, the practice of NK is restricted to those who solely desire the realisation of Brahman.
- Ramanuja: Ramanuja agrees with Shankara that Brahman is faultless and the epitome of all desire. Ramanuja adds that wisdom (*Vidya*) combined with NK destroys all past, future and occurring Karma. Therefore, NK, when practised according to the prescription by scripture, clears all Karma and liberates a soul.
- Madhva: In agreement with Shankara and Ramanuja, Madhva proposes *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* – the combination of Karma and Jnana to create “enlightened action” that liberates a soul and contributes to societal peace and cohesion. Madhva further notes the importance of wisdom in discerning which desires are aligned with Dharma – this is to ensure that when practising NK, one’s sole desire is always to perform actions that please Brahman.

The concept of NK has developed into a vast, spiritually enlightening doctrine since its first mention in the Vedas. The development of NK through the Prasthanatrayi and the commentaries of the three acharyas do not refute NK. Instead, the development of NK through the ages was made to broaden the scope of NK, enabling it to adapt to the needs of the context it was in. This is further evident in the statement by Sharma (1962:283)¹⁴⁶ who claims that Madhva’s proposal of *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* was not to counter Shankara but to broaden the understanding of NK. The commentaries and development in the conceptualisation of NK were solely to expand knowledge on the subject to guide people in their understanding of desirelessness, selflessness and detachment as per the Hindu scriptures.

¹⁴⁶ See page 222.

8.5 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was to conclude on NK and address any underlying contradictions to the notion of 'desireless desire'. A summary of each of the acharya's thoughts on NK was provided to understand the relationship between the acharya on NK. In doing so, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva agree that the practice of NK is not the complete renunciation of desire but rather the renunciation of Sakam Karma due to the desire for realising Brahman.

Understanding NK considering the contributions made by the acharyas sets the stage for investigating the contribution NK makes to social cohesion.

Chapter 9: Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion

9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to engage the fourth research question¹⁴⁷ in evaluating the contribution that NK makes to social cohesion. Referring to chapter [2.3](#), the principles of NK, this chapter reflects on the principles of NK as presented in the commentaries of the three acharyas. This chapter depends on the 'selfless' principle of NK in evaluating the contribution that NK makes to social cohesion.

This chapter reflects on the definition of social cohesion in chapter [1.3](#) and the different dimensions thereof. Selflessness (as a principle of NK) is evaluated as a socially cohesive concept considering altruism and empathy. The principle of 'selflessness' in NK is also engaged with other religious beliefs toward assessing religious cohesion within the broader context of social cohesion. Toward investigating the contribution that NK makes to social cohesion, this chapter draws a link with the principle of selflessness (as found in the commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi by the three acharyas) and altruism and empathy. In deducting that selflessness (as a principle of NK) shares commonalities with altruism and empathy, this research relates NK to altruism and empathy toward evaluating NK (in the philosophies of the three acharyas) as a socially cohesive concept.

For Nishkama Karma to contribute to social cohesion on a global scale, the principle of selflessness needs to be related to other traditions. Selflessness, an important principle of Nishkama Karma in the commentaries of the three acharyas is equated to the areligious terms of altruism and empathy. Altruism and empathy are concepts that exist in every religion. Based on the commentaries of the three acharyas on Nishkama Karma's principle of selflessness, Nishkama Karma is a Hindu concept of altruism. As a result, relating Nishkama Karma to altruism and empathy displays Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion in a religiously and culturally diverse global community.

This chapter expands on the three acharyas comments of Nishkama Karma as the performance of one's prescribed duty (in performing selfless, desireless, action) to a multi-faith global community. As the global community is religiously diverse, Nishkama

¹⁴⁷ See [2.7](#), Research question

Karma must be perceived as altruism (an areligious term) in relating to other religious traditions in a cohesive manner. Nishkama Karma, as found in the commentaries of the three acharyas, may not be well received by non-Hindu communities who do not recognise the three acharyas as authoritative religious leaders. However, altruism and empathy, are concepts that exist in all religious traditions. Nishkama Karma is a Hindu altruistic practice that is then related to different religious understandings of altruistic practices toward promoting a socially cohesive global community.

9.2 Nishkama karma as socially cohesive

Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva agree that NK is a selfless action and that surrendering to the will of Brahman, above one's desires, contributes to global wellbeing. Ramanuja's comment on VS 157 notes that by Brahman's pure desire, He visits the world in different forms for the good of the world. Shankara and Madhva agree that Brahman desires only good things for the world therefore surrendering one's desires unto the will of desires results in the actions performed contributing to the betterment of society.

Pathak (2014:127-128) defines NK as the moral imperative to perform one's duty to society. Pathak (2014:127) reflects on the BG and Krishna's motivational message to Arjuna to engage in battle, as this was Arjuna's responsibility to society and his duty to perform.

Assessing the contribution that NK makes to social cohesion requires an investigation into NK as a concept that contributes to unifying communities toward a specific goal. In addition to NK contributing to the unification of communities, it is also important to assess the dimensions of social cohesion that NK potentially advances and the impact it has on other dimensions or society.

An example of this is in the commentaries of BG 2.47 by the three acharyas¹⁴⁸. In their commentaries of BG 2.47, the three acharyas rely on the principles of desireless (and selfless) action and detachment. Desireless and detached action contribute to the

¹⁴⁸ See [5.3.3](#) (Shankara), [6.3.3](#) (Ramanuja), and [7.3.3](#) (Madhva)

selfless principle of NK. In turn, through the principle of selflessness, NK can contribute to social cohesion. This is discussed in [9.2.2](#).

9.2.1 Nishkama Karma and Altruism: the tension between the three acharyas and evolutionary theories on altruism

After carefully examining the commentaries of the three acharyas and deducing their thought on Nishkama Karma as selflessness, this section reflects on chapter [3.4.3.2](#) toward understanding Nishkama Karma (as deduced from the commentaries of the three acharyas) as socially cohesive. This section is argued from the point of Nishkama Karma's principle of selflessness. Paolilli (2011:145) describes altruism as problematic in its origins. This is due to the uncertainty of when, how and for what purpose 'selfless' concern for other beings entered the process of human evolution. Performing a selfless action, without expecting a reward in return, baffles biologists, sociologists and psychologists that reflect on the motive behind selfless behaviour. Mifune (2010:3) calls altruism toward unrelated individuals an "evolutionary puzzle".

Preston (2013:3) notes:

Despite such extensive work on altruism and empathy—across fields, species, and levels of analysis—a unified understanding of human altruism remains out of reach.

Warneken (2009:455) adds that Charles Darwin (1871) was aware that altruism was a major problem for his theory of evolution by natural selection. The theories for altruism are (1) kin selection and (2) reciprocal altruism (Warneken, 2009:455). For kin selection, altruism is proposed as helping relatives as a way of promoting one's genes whereas reciprocal altruism (amongst 'strangers') is based on the anticipation of being helped in return (Warneken, 2009:45).

Both of these theories proposed by Warneken (2009:455) explore the origins of altruistic behaviour but neither engage the principles of NK in terms of performing acts of service without expecting anything in return. This is the dispute itself. How is it possible for one to help another without expecting anything in return? How did this behaviour enter the evolutionary timeline where the theory of 'survival of the fittest' is strongly argued? And why?

It is seemingly difficult to posit that living beings (and organisms) would perform actions for no self-gain. Similar to Warneken (2009:455), Preston (2013:3) suggests that it is to “benefit the fitness of a giver’s genes”.

Therefore, the principles of NK development as performing actions without expecting anything in return (not even that of genetic propagation) is difficult to understand from an evolutionary, sociological and psychological perspective.

Irrespective of the disputes on its origin, Paolilli (2011:145) and Ritove (2017:1-2) agree that altruism is when one performs actions out of concern for the wellbeing and happiness of another, without expecting any reward in return.

On altruism, Egilmez and Naylor-Tincknell (2017:66) state:

On one side of the debate, it is suggested that true altruism cannot be observed because there is always expected returns for helping behaviours. The other side of the debate believes that no matter the intention or reward, if helping behaviours are present at any cost, then true altruism exists.

Although Egilmez and Naylor-Tincknell (2017:66) note the ongoing dispute of altruism, Lay and Hoppmann (2015:1) argue that proof of altruism is evident in social psychology studies where altruistic behaviour is seen as prosocial behaviour whereas egoistic motivations are often frowned upon. As a result, Lay and Hoppmann (2015:2) suggest that altruism be understood as the “genuine desire” to perform actions that benefit others with no expectations of any self-benefitting reward or outcome.

Essentially, altruism is visible in social groups where those who perform seemingly selfless actions are rewarded with societal approval whereas egoistic individuals are often treated with mistrust and scepticism.

Paolilli (2011:147) claims that some of the reasons that may cause altruistic behaviour are empathy, familiar individuals (family or close friends) and consideration of the young and elderly. The central motive for altruism is therefore empathy. Individuals are more inclined to feel empathetic when responding to challenges faced by family and friends or the elderly or young within a community.

Lay and Hoppmann (2015:4) suggest that altruism takes on many different forms that centre on selflessness, an alternate yet the similar definition of altruism is:

any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization.

Considering this definition, altruistic acts involve community service activities; devoting time to the local shelter or animal rescue centre, without expecting any payment or reward constitutes selfless, altruistic behaviour.

Considering Paolilli (2011:147), the three acharyas would suggest a third motive for altruism; performing actions to please Brahman¹⁴⁹. NK and altruism not only share a similar definition but also share similar objectives – performance of societal responsibilities without concern or the desire for rewards.

Perumpallikunnel (2013:276) defines NK as the performance of one's duty without desiring its fruit. This definition is in alignment with the comments made by the three acharyas. NK, as investigated in this research, is the performance of a detached activity. Due to the rewards of actions performed not being considered, the practice of NK is often attributed to contributing to communal development.

Responsible performance of one's duty is, within itself, a difficult and daunting task. The desire to make tasks simpler has led to humanity developing a reliance on technology. The reliance on technology is merely one factor in humanity's attempt to escape performing their responsibility, to further counter laziness, incentives are often the motivating factor for the performance of tasks that ensure society's functioning.

The fundamental difference between NK and altruism is that of spiritualism. When a person performs altruistic actions, it is solely to contribute to society without expecting any rewards. On the other hand, when a person practices NK (as the three acharyas teach), it is to perform one's duties to please God, and attain Moksha.

As the Acharya proposes the practice of NK as a way of pleasing God, the altruistic principles thereof seem motivated by self-gain. The self-gain is when the individual pleases God and, in doing so, attains the favour of God. Through the favour of God, Moksha is attained, and the suffrage of rebirth is avoided. Egilmez and Naylor-Tincknell (2017:66) argue that NK cannot be altruistic considering the motive of NK is to please God. To this, Lay and Hoppmann (2015:4) would argue that if the motive

¹⁴⁹ As seen in their commentary of the Prasthanatrayi. For example, Shankara's commentary on BG 2.47, Ramanuja's commentary on the VS 128, and Madhva's commentary on the Bhagavadgita Bhashya 3.8-9.

being to please God does not involve any self-gain it constitutes altruism. Simply: if one devotes time every week to render services at an orphanage and does not seek any material reward or payment, it constitutes altruism.

Contributing to this discussion, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva argue that the desire and motive to please God do not disqualify NK as altruistic¹⁵⁰. Because NK rejects the desire for self-gain and selfishly motivated actions, the desire to please God does not constitute a desire for self-gain or profit. Altruistically, because NK seeks only to please the Lord and for no reason other than devotion, actions performed due to NK constitute altruism as they seek no reward in return.

According to Carlson (2018:36), a faction of philosophers and psychologists have argued that all behaviour (irrespective of how altruistic it may be) is “driven by self-interest”.

Considering that the three acharyas posit NK as a practice that supports liberation, Carlson (2018:36) may suggest that the practice of NK is not entirely selfless. The desire for liberation over the desire for the material world (and the suffrage of rebirth) is driven by the self-interest of eternal bliss. If NK, is the desire to be desireless (for materialistic objects), does selflessness exist?

In defining the differences between altruism and selfishness, Kaufman (2020) states that altruism is “unselfish and beneficial, with minimal trade offs” and selfishness is “bad and glutinous, negatively impacting on others”.

Kirman (2010:309) suggests empathy as a key player in distinguishing the difference between selfish and selfless behaviour. The desire to remove another person from social distress and the action thereof (as an empathetic response to the cessation of pain) is selfless, However, if this is done for any other reason (that is self-motivated, such as fame or popularity), it is then selfish (Kirman, 2010:309).

Rachlin (2002:239) states that from a biological perspective, altruism is distinctly different due to internal mechanisms. In this sense, altruism becomes a “motivator like

¹⁵⁰ Shankara (Chandogya-UP 3.14.2/3, 8.1.5, 8.7.1 and BS 3.3.39), Ramanuja (VS 81), and Madhva (Bhagavadgita Bhashya 62-63) argue for the difference between righteous and unrighteous desire. Unrighteous desire is that of self-gain. Self-gain as a motivator to perform actions disqualifies any action as being altruistic. The three acharyas argue that righteous desire – the motivation to perform actions solely to please Brahman – does not constitute as self-gain. As the only desire in performing NK is that of pleasing God, the three acharyas maintain firmly that there is no self-gain and therefore is the performance of selfless acts.

any other” however, unlike selfishness (that performs actions for admiration in the sight of others), altruism as a motivator is to satisfy the internal mechanisms (internal neural structure) (Rachlin, 2002:239). Simply, altruism is a motivator that leads to an internal sense of goodness.

Barasch (2014:393) distinguishes between altruism and selfishness by characterising altruism as the “motivation to increase another person’s welfare”. However, Barasch (2014:393) argues that emotion is a key factor in altruistic behaviour. Like Rachlin (2002:239), Barasch (2014:394) suggests that altruism is performed for ‘self-gratification’.

Therefore, it might be said that the fundamental difference between altruism and selfishness lies in the difference in motives. Self-gratification for altruism and admiration in the sight of others for selfishness.

The three acharyas contribute to this in their commentary of BG 2.48. BG 2.48 speaks of equanimity. Shankara, in his commentary of BG 2.48¹⁵¹ states that one is “equanimous” irrespective of success or failure. Equanimity¹⁵² refers to the calmness of mind irrespective of distressing situations. In other words, one is mentally steady despite a turbulent external environment.

Applying Shankara’s comment on equanimity to Rachlin (2002:239) and Barasch (2014:394) displays a disagreement. For the selfless and altruistic principles of NK as found in the commentary of the Prasthanatrayi by Shankara (and Ramanuja and Madhva), one is not to perform selfless actions or be in a state of desireless-ness for self-gratifying emotions. Instead, selfless actions are solely the performance of one’s duty, which is to be performed with absolutely no concern for the rewards. The sole motivator to perform NK is to please God.

Although psychologists, sociologists and evolutionary biologists may disagree with the three acharyas on NK being truly desireless-desire and ultimate selflessness (in the sense of no self-gain being achieved – not even that of liberation), this research aligns itself with the position of the acharya.

¹⁵¹ See [5.3.3](#)

¹⁵² See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equanimity>

This research takes the position of the acharya based on their distinction between 'righteous' and 'unrighteous' desires. Furthermore, (1) Shankara's usage of the term *bahuvrihi* (one with faultless desire)¹⁵³, (2) Ramanuja's comment of "righteous and noble desire"¹⁵⁴, and (3) Madhva's comment of desiring to please the Supreme Being¹⁵⁵ are prime examples of the acharya distinguishing between selfless and selfish behaviour.

The acharya posits that those who desire Brahman do not desire anything evil. Furthermore, Madhva lays the matter to rest with his comment on *Bhagavadgita Tatparya Nirnaya* 2.70¹⁵⁶ in stating that "one whose desires are self-centred, he is said to be selfish".

The discussion on the existence of 'true/ultimate' selflessness is seemingly endless. As a result, this research presents the acharyas position on desiring nothing other than Brahman and the performance of one's duties to society (without expecting any reward in return) as selflessness. Upon reflection of the three acharyas and their commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi, it is evident that they understood NK as a selfless practice¹⁵⁷. Furthermore, the objective of this research is to evaluate the three acharyas understanding of NK in assessing the contribution that the principles of NK make to social cohesion. The next section evaluates selflessness, as a key principle of NK, and social cohesion.

9.2.2 Selfless action and social cohesion

Due to the emphasis on selflessness, NK and altruism share the definition of selfless action. Mthenjane (2019:1) describes selflessness as the "third trait of leadership" and defines it as the disregard for self-gain and concern for the wellbeing of others. Mthenjane (2019:1) adds that selflessness is the foundation for building strong lasting, trustworthy relationships. Dambrun and Ricard (2011:144) claim that the major differences between selflessness and self-centeredness are:

¹⁵³ See [5.3.1](#)

¹⁵⁴ In VS 6, see [6.3.1](#)

¹⁵⁵ See Madhva's comment on [Chandogya-UP](#)

¹⁵⁶ See [7.3.3](#)

¹⁵⁷ See Shankara's comment on Mundaka-UP 3.1.10 ([5.3.1](#)), Ramanuja's comment prior to BGB 1.1 ([6.3.3](#)), and Madhva's comment on Isha-UP 1.1-2 ([7.3.1](#)).

1) Selflessness: Self-environment harmony – harmony with oneself and other members within the community, as a result, there is emotional stability and a sense of harmony and peace within one’s mental functioning and one’s relationships with others. Therefore, selflessness contributes to “Authentic-Durable Happiness” that encompasses inner peace, positive community relations and cohesion amongst diverse communities.

2) Self-centeredness: adopts a hedonic principle¹⁵⁸ approach. Self-centred individuals, therefore, avoid certain situations or members of the community instead of building harmonious relationships. As a result, self-centred individuals pursue “stimulus-driven pleasures” causing a fluctuation in their emotions and mental stability.

The argument put forth by Dambrun and Ricard (2011:144) is that selflessness not only contributes to inner peace but also inspires harmonious relationships within a community. This research deduces a shared understanding of self-centeredness between Madhva’s comments on the Prasthanatrayi and Dambrun and Ricard (2011:144). In Kena-UP 4.6, Madhva explains that failure to control the desires of the sensory organs results in an endless search to constantly please the sensory organs. Dambrun and Ricard (2011:144) agree by noting that self-centred individuals enter a “stimulus-driven” pattern where all action and thought are focused on creating pleasurable sensations for the sensory organs.

The support of NK as selflessness by the three acharyas is not only an attempt to expand on NK as a philosophical and spiritually enlightening concept but also an attempt to foster and promote harmony in the mind, home, and community.

Dambrun (2017:2) reflects on Dambrun and Ricard (2011:144) that selflessness promotes a “happiness model” where the amount of happiness experienced by an individual is directly linked to selflessness. Dambrun (2017:2) posits that selflessness contributes directly to an understanding of the ‘Self’. Setting aside the religious connotations linked to the idea of the ‘Self’ as explained by the three acharyas, the usage of the ‘Self’ as used by psychologists and sociologists alike refers to the self-conscious characterisation that one attributes to themselves.

¹⁵⁸ The principle that refers to individuals making decisions that avoid unpleasant emotions, by performing actions that bring them immense amount of joy and other pleasurable emotions.

Barolsky (2016:21) suggests that a decrease in self-centred actions and an increase in the unity of the community aids in combating societal plagues such as gender-based violence and crime. Furthermore, Norton (2013:3) notes that the unity of a community determines the strength of social cohesion.

Mthenjane (2019:1) expands the abovementioned statements by stating that the unity of a community is dependent on selflessness. Acts of selflessness display a sense of concern and love for members of the community; a simple act of aiding in the development of one's socio-economic life builds a sense of trust, unity, and concern for the community. Additionally, Mthenjane (2019:1) suggests that selfless individuals are recognised as leaders within a community. Members of a community are more likely to support a selfless leader as opposed to an egoistic leader, as a selfless leader is envisioned as someone who will advocate change without looking for self-profit opportunities.

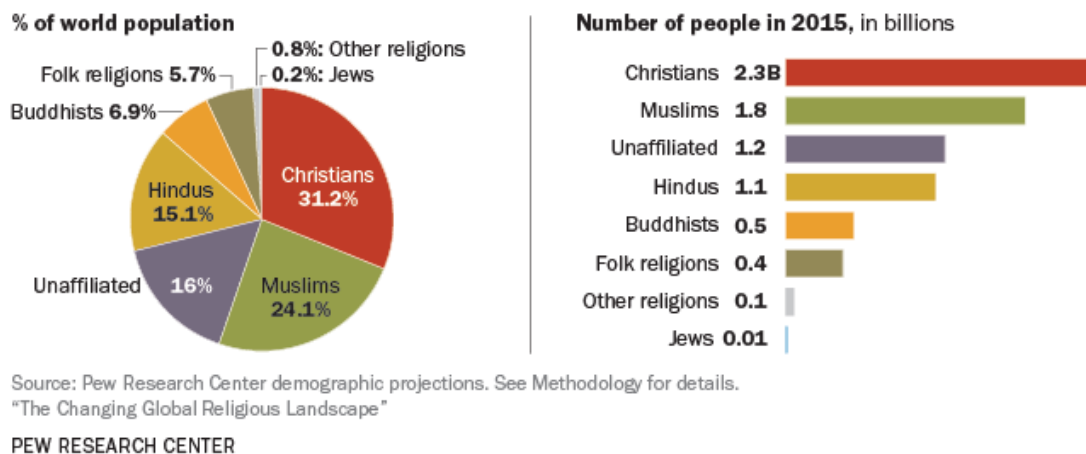
Ritov and Kogut (2017:2) add that within large groups of people, selfless individuals are recognised as individuals who are caring and trustworthy. As a result, selflessness is both an admirable quality within an individual and a promoter of unity and trust within a community. Notions presented by individuals identified as selfless are received by the community as communally beneficial. The endorsement of concepts like social cohesion by selfless members of the community is then well received by the community and more likely to be implemented. In turn, issues such as crime, poverty and violence are more likely to receive the attention due ultimately contributing to a more progressive, welcoming, and developing community.

The contribution of NK (as enlightened and selfless activity) to social cohesion extends beyond creating trustworthy individuals and leaders but also transforming a community toward sustainable development.

9.2.3 Nishkama karma and religious diversity

NK as altruistic and selflessness contributes to social cohesion and societal development. Despite its contribution to social cohesion, NK as profoundly taught and engaged in the Prasthanatrayi is limited as a religious doctrine to Hindu communities that revere the UP, BS, and BG. Thus, raising the question of NK's contribution to social cohesion in religiously diverse communities.

According to PEW Research Centre (2015), out of 7.4 billion people worldwide, 84% subscribe to a religion. PEW Research Centre submits the following illustration of the different religious communities globally¹⁵⁹:



With roughly 2.3 billion followers Christianity is the largest religion in the world. Second to Christianity is Islam with 1.8 billion followers. The PEW Research Centre notes that Islam is the fastest-growing religion and is set to become the world's largest religion between 2060 and 2070.

Hinduism is the fourth largest religion with 1.1 billion followers therefore, finds itself as a smaller religion with most of its followers being in the Asian subcontinent. In European, African, and American countries Hinduism finds itself limited to small communities with little attention given to its religious rites, rituals, and practices.

According to Epafra (2007:1), Religion has been manipulated and degraded to the point where it promotes violence and "inter-communal segregation". The shared message of all religions is to provide an understanding of the divine that fosters moral and ethical behaviour, contributing to wholesome and peaceful relationships. However, over time, all religions find themselves at the mercy of political agendas. History stands to attest to the gross wars and conflicts that arose due to the differences in religious understandings.

¹⁵⁹ See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>

Despite the manipulation of religious teachings for selfish reasons, religion has played a major role in promoting and fostering peace and harmony amongst its followers. Smock (2006:2) writes that while religious leaders on both sides of a dispute have the power to promote peace, they choose to subjectively view their belief as right and just with the 'other' being wrong. This is evident in a religiously related conflict in areas such as Kashmir, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Macedonia. Religious disputes often arise over tensions of sacred land, recognition of Holy days, and differences in identity resulting in a sense of entitlement over space and power.

Although religion can be a divisive tool it has the potential to unite communities in promoting peace, harmony, and cohesion amongst religiously and ethnically diverse groups. Smock (2006:2) adds that religious institutions are recognised as “trusted institutions” that have the ability to “mobilise community, nation, and international support for a peace process”.

To assess the contribution that religion can make to social cohesion (with peace being an additional benefit to social cohesion), recognising the value and importance of every religion is important. As discussed in point [9.2.2](#), NK (as selflessness and altruism) contributes to individual and communal wellbeing. However, NK as a Hindu religious doctrine is limited to promoting cohesion within Hindu communities. As such, assessing NK's contribution to social cohesion requires a brief look into NK's ability to assimilate and relate to other religious teachings on selflessness. The ability to relate to other religious traditions is important as it allows NK to contribute to social cohesion in religiously diverse communities.

Due to NK existing as a spiritually enlightening concept in Hinduism, the following religions will be discussed to assess the likelihood of NK as a Hindu concept promoting religious cohesion: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the Bahai Faith. The concept of selflessness exists in every religion, the question therefore, is the possibility of NK relating to lessons on selflessness in other religions to promote social cohesion. Additionally, with approximately 16% of the global population identifying as atheists, discussing NK's contribution to cohesion amongst religiously diverse communities also requires an assessment of NK's contribution to encouraging cohesion amongst religious and atheist communities.

Furthermore, to assess NK's engagements with different religious traditions it is important to understand NK as one with altruism. The common ground between NK and the teachings of selflessness by the different religions is that of altruism. Important to note, this section relies on NK's principle of selflessness¹⁶⁰. To assess the engagement between different religions (on a socially cohesive level), this section examines the principles of selflessness as found in different religions. The principle of selflessness in other religions is related to the principle of selflessness as found in the commentaries of the acharya on the Prasthanatrayi that relate to NK. In doing so, through the principle of selflessness, NK can resonate with other religious traditions in advancing social cohesion.

Reflecting on chapter [1.2](#), the literal translation of NK is 'desireless action'. Furthermore, chapter [2.3](#) outlines the principles of Nishkama Karma. It is important to note that the principles of desirelessness, selflessness, and detachment are themes that can be found in every religion. However, for effective social cohesion measures in multi-faith communities, an areligious term that embodies the principles of selflessness is required. The following section explores selflessness, as an important principle of NK, that resonates with teachings of selflessness in other religious communities. This section uses selflessness and altruism as an areligious term to identify similarities in other religions with the principle of selflessness in NK, to promote religious cohesion.

9.3.3.1 Judaism

The key term that links NK with selflessness in other religious traditions is altruism. According to Midlarsky (2012:2), Rabbi Akiva (a Talmudic scholar) links altruism to the Jewish commandment "love thy neighbour". Midlarsky (2012:2) further states that Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught that:

Altruism toward humanity leads to altruism expressed to the force behind all giving
– the Creator – and is thus the ultimate goal of creation.

The quote provided by Midlarsky (2012:2) agrees with the commentaries by the three acharyas on NK. Shankara's commentary on BG 5.1 illustrates that one cannot escape

¹⁶⁰ As mentioned in [2.3](#)

performing action (even inaction is the performance of action whereby one abstains from action) therefore, Shankara proposes that one performs devotional services unto Brahman. Additionally, Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy posits that all Jiva are on a spiritual journey to realise their oneness with Brahman.

As a result of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, performing selfless action that benefits another human is performing devotional services unto Brahman. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook therefore, agrees with Shankara that being altruistic toward another human is performing acts of devotion to God. Although there may be differences in understanding who God is, the shared understanding of selfless behaviour towards other people is one that resonates between Judaism and Nishkama Karma.

For Judaic teachings of altruism to agree with the doctrine of NK, the differences in religious teachings and understandings of God need to be set aside. The community is required to set aside their differences by looking toward peaceful and cohesive efforts to address the challenges faced by the community. For this to happen, selflessness and humility play a vital role.

9.3.3.2 Christianity

Christianity is not short of altruistic teachings. The foundation of this religion itself, being the death and resurrection of Christ symbolises the epitome of altruism and selflessness. According to the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ died for the sins of mankind. Christians believe that Jesus sought no personal gain or self-profit through his life and teachings. Christians believe that Jesus came to the earth solely to redeem humanity from their sins. Jesus sacrificed his life for his friends, family and even those who killed him¹⁶¹ and did not believe in his message – to atone for the sins of mankind and reconcile humanity with God.

In sacrificing his life for the sins of humanity, Jesus lived out the definition of selflessness. The three acharyas agree that one of the dimensions of NK is that of surrendering oneself to the will and desires of Brahman. The Christian equivalent to this is in Mark 14:36 where moments before his death, Jesus pleaded with God that he did not want the burden of carrying the weight of humanity's sin. Despite his "take this cup from me", Jesus ends his prayer to God by saying "let your will be done".

¹⁶¹ The gospel of Luke 23:34.

In surrendering to the will of God, Jesus exhibits his devotion to God by performing an action that is required of him despite his hesitance to act. This is mirrored in BG 1:26-29 where Arjuna is hesitant to fight those who he grew up with however Krishna explains the importance of practising one's duty and surrendering to the will of God.

The similarities between BG 1:26-29 and Mark 14:36 exhibit the essence of religion aiming solely to guide humanity toward a more socially cohesive lifestyle. Therefore, BG 1:26-29 and Mark 14:36, as having the same message despite being different religions display the ability and potential to unite in favour of social cohesion. This unity is made possible by the shared belief of surrendering to the will of God – by selflessly performing one's duty to unify a community toward socially cohesive objectives.

9.3.3.3 Islam

Shaltout (2003:2) reflects on Altruism in Islam and the Holy Quran and proposes the following points:

1. Muslims are encouraged not to recognise the “dignity and fundamental rights” of all people, emphasising that all people are equal.
2. “Islam calls for acquaintance and cooperation for the common good as well as for the performance of all kinds of righteous deeds towards all human beings, regardless of their citizenship or religion.”
3. Quoting Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayaa 256, Shaltout (2003:2) claims: “Islam promotes religious freedom for everyone and prohibits any compulsion in this respect”.
4. People are encouraged to live peacefully with one another by abstaining from violence and peacefully resolving conflict.
5. Islam ensures the “protection of human freedom”.

Shaltout (2003:2-3) suggests that the 5 abovementioned points are Islamic teachings that endorse altruism.

According to point 3, Muslims are encouraged to recognise the different religions that people subscribe to without forcing a conversion or an acceptance of Islam. Point 3 is an addition to point 2, where Muslims are taught to look beyond cultural, religious, and ethnic differences by cooperation and acquaintance to ensure the common good for the community.

Point 2 directly endorses social cohesion by encouraging the unification of a community to look beyond their differences to contribute to sustainable development. Additionally, the “performance of all kinds of righteous deeds towards all human beings” is connected to selflessness.

Shankara in BG 3.20 proposes that the practice of NK purifies an individual’s mind and soul. In agreement, Ramanuja in VS 157 describes the practice of NK as righteous desire. NK as a practice of detachment and selflessness encourages one to perform actions that contribute to the wellness of society without seeking any rewards in return.

Shankara’s (BG 3.20) and Ramanuja’s (VS 157) comments agree with point 3 on Islam and altruism as proposed by Shaltout (2003:2-3). Despite the historical conflict between Hinduism and Islam, the current era that religious communities find themselves in requires a sense of tact, patience and understanding.

The teachings of selflessness as taught by Hinduism (through NK) and Islam, if practised daily, has the potential to foster a strong sense of trust between the two religious communities. Selflessness encourages trust and trust builds a sense of unity and comradery that further encourages the unity required for these communities to be socially cohesive and address the difficulties that may exist within their community. Within the context of Hinduism and Islam, and the tension between these two communities, NK (through the principle of selflessness) aids in moving beyond historical conflict and prejudice to ensure that these two communities peacefully and respectfully coexist side by side.

9.3.3.4 Buddhism

According to Jingzong (2018:4) Buddhism is the 4th major world religion after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism with over 450 million followers across the globe. Buddhism is based on the teachings of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, which aims at guiding people towards Nirvana.

Buddhists do not believe in a divine being, instead the belief is that all humans have the essence of the divine within them. This divine being can only be unlocked through self-realization. The term Buddha refers to one who has been enlightened and has attained Bodhi¹⁶². Due to Buddhism teaching the self-enlightenment, followers of

¹⁶² meaning wisdom (Saisuta 2012:3)

Buddhism are encouraged to attain enlightenment and become the Buddha (Saisuta 2012:3).

Buddhism has its origins in the ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kapilvastu where the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, was born in 624 BCE to King Suddhodana and Queen Mahamaya (Vithalrao, 2017:1). As Hinduism adopts Buddhist philosophy, one of the shared concepts between Hinduism and Buddhism is Nishkama Karma.

Harris (1997:2) notes that there are two Pali words pertaining to detachment; *viveka* and *viraga*. These two terms do not denote ignorance of the plight of society instead it should be understood as a legitimate path to salvation.

Harris (1997:2) further states that the Buddha was firm in his resolve that detachment was not an act of “withdrawal” from society; it is a process of “inner purging and mental transformation connected with the destruction of craving.”

Craving, longing, thirst, and hunger are all a part of desire and therefore the cause of suffering. To end suffering, one must therefore remove the objects of their desire to transcend beyond the material world into Nirvana.

Hoang (2019:19) argues that to Buddhists, *Dukkha* (suffering) is a reality of human life, and that happiness is an illusion, “all things will be destroyed and cannot last forever”. Therefore, humans seeking happiness in temporary objects only leads to a cycle of anger, lust, and greed to prolong the temporary pleasure given by material objects.

This cycle results in an attachment to pleasure and the material world, furthermore this destructive behaviour causes radical selfishness. To end this cycle of destructive behaviour Hoang (2019:19) suggests Buddhism’s philosophy of “self-denial” as the solution.

In early Buddhism (4th century BCE) the concept of self-denial centred on detachment from the objects of desire to appreciate the necessities of life. Denial of the self in early Buddhism, Harris (1997:3) notes, was physically withdrawing from situations that clouded the mind by pleasing the senses to a place where one could meditate and appreciate nature without desiring anything of it.

The concept of detachment in early Buddhism can be understood as an attempt to appreciate the natural world without desiring to attain it. Reflecting on Harris (1997:2), the teachings of the Buddha on detachment indicate two types of desire; for good and for evil. As a result of desire being seen as good and bad, teachings of the Buddha promote detachment from wicked desires (such as the attainment of wealth, power, or fame) in the pursuit of righteous desires (such as appreciating the natural environment and searching for knowledge).

This understanding of detachment in Buddhism is like that of the UP, BS, and BG with little to no deviation in definition. As such, Nishkama Karma in the commentaries of the three acharyas resonates with the Buddhist understanding of desire, detachment, and self-denial. This enables Hinduism and Buddhism to align and work with one another on the premise of selflessly performing prescribed duties for the betterment of society. Through some of the shared principles of selflessness and desire, Nishkama Karma works as a unifying theme between Hinduism and Buddhism toward promoting selfless actions that advance social cohesion.

9.3.3.5 Bahai faith

On the Bahai faith and altruism, Badee (2015:130-131) states:

The Bahai view is closer to enlightened self-interest, which argues that the nature of human beings is altruistic and not egoistic. Persons who act to further the interests of others ultimately serve their interests. Human beings should strive to reach this level of consideration. Baha'u'llah deters his followers from egoistic activities and encourages them to pursue behaviours that benefit all. He states: 'Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your interest ... cling unto that which profits mankind.'

Badee (2015:130-131) suggests that the true nature of an individual, according to the Bahai faith, is altruistic. It is through corruption and the "pursuit of evil" that one becomes deluded into following objects of self-interest. Therefore, the Bahai faith encourages individuals to be selfless to be their true selves.

Additionally, in the Foundations of World Unity (pg. 42), 'Abdu'l-Baha (the eldest son of Baha'u'llah), states:

Man is he who forgets his own interests for the sake of others. His own comfort he forfeits for the well-being of all. Nay, rather, his own life must he be willing to forfeit for the life of mankind. Such a man is the glory of the world of mankind. Such a man is the one who wins eternal bliss. Such a man is near to the threshold of God. Such a man is the very manifestation of eternal happiness.

'Abdu'l-Baha's statement of "such a man is the one who wins eternal bliss" mirrors that of the three acharyas. Madhva's proposal of *Niskama Jnanapurvam Karma* was that of enlightened activity which inspires one to perform selfless, detached activity for the pleasure of Brahman. The pleasure of Brahman results in the attainment of Moksha – eternal bliss.

In this way the Bahai faith and Hinduism share a special bond on selflessness, they both view it to attain salvation. Therefore, selflessness is well-rooted in the teachings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, making it simple for Hindu and Bahai communities to be socially cohesive. On the ease of assimilating NK and Bahai teachings, May (1993:17) states:

The Bahai principle of the unity of religions is grounded on this basic conception of reality. This principle, so frequently discussed in the Bahai sacred writings, asserts that a common transcendent truth not only lies above the varying and divergent religious traditions but is in fact, their ultimate source and inspiration.

The Bahai teachings adopt a similar approach to Hinduism in terms of interreligious discussion. May's (1993:17) statement on transcendent truth echoes Ramanuja's comment on VS 157: Brahman (or "a common transcendent truth") visits the world in different forms to do good in the world.

As a result, the teachings of selflessness within the Bahai faith agree with that of NK thus allowing for Hindu and Bahai communities to be socially cohesive.

9.3.3.6 Atheism

Historically the term *Nastika* referred to the opposite of *Astika*, an unorthodox belief¹⁶³. Today, the term *Nastika* is also used to refer to atheism. In Indian communities¹⁶⁴, an atheist is typically referred to as a "*nastik*". Like all religious communities, atheists are

¹⁶³ See chapter [1.1.2](#)

¹⁶⁴ Where an Indian language is spoken. The popular terms used to refer to atheists is "*naastik*" (Hindi) and "*naaththikar*" (Tamil).

often discriminated against and viewed as problematic, godless (and therefore moral-less) people.

McLaughlin (2015:10) defines atheists as “people who lack belief in deities or supernatural forces”. For numerous reasons, atheists choose to not believe in the divine or anything supernatural. Despite NK being a religious concept, this research assesses its contribution to social cohesion. Therefore, understanding the contribution NK can make to advancing social cohesion in communities with atheists is required to understand the adaptability of NK in different contexts.

Additionally, McLaughlin (2015:10-11) notes that there is a misguided view that atheists disregard the moral foundation of society. To establish the argument, McLaughlin (2015:10-11) refers to Psalm 14:11 which refers to atheists as fools who are “corrupt” and perform “vile” deeds.

Gervais and Norenzayan (2012:3) note that “despite the prevalence of negative attitudes toward atheists, the prevalence of atheists worldwide” and the recent popular attention garnered by atheism”, there is limited academic research into the prejudice, discrimination, and mistreatment of atheists.

The unfair treatment of atheists as argued by Gervais and Norenzayan (2012:3) is a call for social cohesion and respect for the atheist community by the global theist community.

Therefore, selflessness, as religious teaching that is connected to the different religions (as discussed in the previous sections), has the moral and divine obligation to ensure that members of the atheist community are treated with the dignity and respect that every human requires.

Gervais and Norenzayan (2012:5) suggest that, if anything, atheists have more of a moral compass than theists; a religious person performs good deeds to please their god/s whereas an atheist performs good deeds simply out of the righteousness of their heart. As a result, selflessness practised by atheists is solely due to the goodness that exists within them. This shared idea of selfless behaviour resonates with NK (as actions are performed for no materialistic reward) therefore allowing for atheists and practitioners of NK to unite under their shared belief of selflessness.

Gervais and Norenzayan (2012:5) in their understanding of good deeds are not wrong. A central theme to NK is that of selflessness when performing good deeds. Irrespective of the discussion on the “why” of good deeds, atheists are (like all other members of society) tasked with the responsibility to contribute to social cohesion and social development.

Within a gathering where atheists are not seen as ‘outcasts’ and ‘untrustworthy’ individuals, atheists are compelled by their sense of morality to be present and contribute to the discussion on social cohesion and development.

Therefore, the responsibility of NK rests on its teachings of detachment and selflessness to foster an environment where everyone (especially atheists) feels welcome and safe. This is to ensure that all members of the community have an equal, fair, and unbiased opportunity to contribute to the discussion of social cohesion.

Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva respectively defined NK as instrumental in the purity of mind, the righteousness of the heart and enlightened activity that contributes to social development. Within communities that consist of atheist members, practitioners of NK are charged with the responsibility to ensure that atheists feel welcome and are not victimised as Gervais and Norenzayan (2012:5) and McLaughlin (2015:10-11) suggest.

This section explored NK contributing to social cohesion within religiously diverse communities. After a careful inspection of the similarities between NK and the doctrines of selflessness within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, the Bahai faith, and Atheism, this section concludes that (through recognition of the similarities): the different religious communities have the potential to unite under their shared understandings of selflessness to advance social cohesion and the development thereof.

9.2.4 Nishkama Karma as empathy

Van Langer (2008:767) defines empathy as an affective state that is caused by the witnessing or observation of another’s affective state. Witnessing a person has a negative experience reminds one of a similar experience thus allowing the ability to ‘relate’ to what the other person is feeling, this is the essence of empathy.

Bierhoff and Rohmann (2004:351) talk of an empathy-altruism hypothesis as prosocial behaviour:

The basic idea is that empathic concern, as a situation-specific response of an observer witnessing another person's plight, motivates altruistic behaviour, which is mainly performed as an attempt to reduce the other person's suffering. Therefore, empathic concern is understood as a truly altruistic motivation, in contrast to egoistic motivation, which is directed towards the reduction of personal distress, another situation-specific response of witnesses of emergencies.

Van Langer (2008:767) agrees with Bierhoff and Rohmann (2004:351) on altruism being a situation-specific response by an observer, with the sole intention to alleviate suffering without any self-profiting motive. In this sense, altruism and empathy are on equal ends of a spectrum with the sole objective being that of providing support for another without seeking anything in return.

The usage of the term "reduce the other person's suffering" by Bierhoff and Rohmann (2004:351) makes the process of comparing NK and empathy simpler. The practice of NK is believed, through detachment and selflessness, to alleviate one's suffering by surrendering all action and desire to Brahman. But how does this fit into the empathy-altruism model of Bierhoff and Rohmann (2004:351)?

Chatainya (2018:1) explains that BG 6.32 is the summation of the BG's teaching on universal empathy. BG 6:32 reads:

He is a perfect yogi who, by comparison to his own self, sees the true equality of all beings, in both their happiness and their distress, O Arjuna!

In BG 1:28-45, Arjuna explains to Krishna his disapproval of going into battle. Krishna's response in BG 6:32 and 6:35 shows an empathetic response by Krishna, whereby Krishna states that he understands the difficulty that comes with focusing one's mind and thoughts on a specific objective.

Additionally, Shankara's comments on BG 3.20 that practising NK role models an ideal society. The BG and Shankara agree that selflessness displays a sense of empathy, love, and care for other beings within a community. The ability to relate, understand and care for another without seeking any reward in return is therefore, adds to understanding NK as empathetic, altruistic, and socially cohesive.

NK as selflessness and altruistic displays empathetic care for humanity and nature. The act of putting the needs of others ahead of one's own is seen as an empathetic act by Bierhoff and Rohmann (2005:351). Thus, allowing for the practice of NK to support Bierhoff and Rohmann's (2004:351) proposal of an empathy-altruism model.

Understanding NK beyond spiritual enlightenment, including altruism and empathy, enables NK to adapt to any community in support of social cohesion. The previous section investigated NK's adaptability considering religious diversity. Religious conflict is one aspect that requires cohesion among many. Some other topics that require NK as a model of social cohesion through altruism and empathy are inclusivity to racially and ethnically diverse communities, reconciling with historical conflict and prejudices, and the inclusion and acceptance of members of the LGBTIQ+ community.

9.2.5 Communal vs Global cohesion

Braak, Wei, and Zhu (2015:1) reflect on social cohesion within the contexts of Europe, South Africa, and China. The depth at which social cohesion can be defined has been mentioned, social cohesion has a broad definition that centres on unifying a community toward a common goal – usually a positive, sustainable development goal.

Each village, town, city, province, and nation have their own set of issues that fall under one or more of the dimensions of social cohesion¹⁶⁵. This research focuses on the holistic contribution of NK to social cohesion rather than focusing on a specific context.

Because concepts like altruism and empathy exist in all communities and all religious traditions, studying NK as socially cohesive to all contexts rather than one allows it to adapt to addressing different issues.

NK as altruism and empathy can relate to the teachings of selflessness within other religious traditions. Through acts of selflessness and empathy, a community has the potential to unite beyond its differences in the fight against whatever social distresses may exist within that community.

Therefore, NK as the Hindu concept of altruism and empathy contributes to social cohesion on a global scale by encouraging selfless behaviour. As discussed in the

¹⁶⁵ See chapter [1.3](#).

previous sections, through selflessness and empathy, sentiments of trust, love, and care arise between community members – promoting unity and peaceful discourse rather than violent conflict.

NK as such is not the solution to all problems that a community may face, it proposes that the solution to solving problems is unity through acts of selflessness. The objective of NK is therefore not one of appealing to one context but that of multiple; to inspire selfless acts irrespective of race, gender, age, or faith. NK's solution to the challenges of a community lies in the willingness of the members of the community to selflessly unite for the betterment of the community.

Therefore, NK suggests selfless acts as an empathetic response to unite a community toward sustainable development.

9.3 Conclusion

For as long as there are different linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic groups, there will be a need for social cohesion. Social cohesion is summarised as a communal unity, this unity is required to address economic, cultural, social, and political issues that may arise within a community.

Different communities will have specific issues that pertain to their context however certain issues (such as political and cultural) are shared challenges amongst diverse communities across the globe. Barolsky (2016:21) suggests that the solution to addressing societal issues is embedded in a community that is willing to unite through selfless actions.

The plurality of Hinduism allows for Hindu concepts, such as NK, to easily adapt to another religion. While NK advances social cohesion through empathetic acts of selflessness, it faces a challenge with religiously diverse communities. Despite teachings that exist in all religions that mirror NK, for a religiously diverse community to unite in support of social cohesion, willingness is required from all members.

Considering the willingness of individuals to be selfless in their support of NK, Ramanuja's comment in his Sri Bashya (kamadyidhikaranam 3.3.39)¹⁶⁶ on self-desire is important. NK, altruism, and empathy as agents of social cohesion require self-

¹⁶⁶ See [6.3.2](#)

desire. The desire to selflessly contribute to social development cannot be enforced. If NK is enforced, it removes the altruistic and empathetic qualities.

As a result, NK as advancing social cohesion requires the ‘self-desire’ of all members of the community to set aside whatever differences that may be, to selflessly unite in contribution to social cohesion. NK, in the philosophies of the three acharyas, contributes to social cohesion by promoting selfless actions to all members of society.

Therefore, NK does not aim or claim to address the economic, cultural, social, and political dimensions of social cohesion. Instead, NK proposes that the solution to societal problems rests on the ability of a society to selflessly unite. Through altruism and empathy, NK fosters trustworthy relationships – ultimately supporting the communal unity required for social cohesion.

Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva agree that practising NK purifies the mind and soul, leading to righteousness. NK as a practice that inspires righteousness and advances social cohesion is articulated best by the 11th President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam¹⁶⁷:

When there is righteousness in the heart, there is beauty in the character. When there is beauty in the character, there is harmony in the home. When there is harmony in the home, there is order in the nation. When there is order in the nation, there is peace in the world.

¹⁶⁷ This quote is from a speech that A. P. J. Abdul Kalam gave when addressing the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France 2007. See: <https://speakola.com/political/dr-a-p-j-abdul-kalam-european-parliament-2007#:~:text=Oh%2C%20European%20Union%20let%20your,That%20is%20my%20poem.&text=Finally%2C%20ofriends%2C%20let%20me%20convey,citizens%20of%20European%20Union%20countries.>

Chapter 10: Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

Hinduism has been defined as a collective term that refers to numerous different religious systems some of which are Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. The vastness of Hindu deities and teachings is to guide different individuals through their understanding of the physical, material world and the spiritual realms.

In recent years, the word pluralism has often been echoed through discussions about the Hindu faith. Accepting different religions and interpretations of the divine is pivotal to the Hindu faith with Hindus often understanding different religious leaders and gods as messengers and avatars of the Trimurti.

As such, the philosophical wisdom of Hinduism was never created with the intent of limiting or using knowledge for political agendas or self-gain. The concept of NK is one such example. First mentioned in the Vedas, NK, as the Hindu concept of desireless action, mention that selflessness leads to salvation. NK developed with contributions from the three acharyas to incorporate more than just selflessness.

Vedanta, as one of the more popular Hindu philosophical schools, was popularised by its three different schools as articulated by Shankara (Advaita), Ramanuja (Vishishtadvaita), and Madhva (Dvaita). The focus of Vedanta is to explore the nature of Brahman concerning the human soul (Jiva and Atman). As authors of numerous books and commentaries, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva made priceless contributions to the Hindu faith – ensuring that it lives up to its name Sanatana Dharma (the eternal law).

Recognised as great philosophers, Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva contributed to understanding the concept of NK as selflessness and desirelessness. Through the lens of their philosophical schools, they contributed to the development of NK as a concept that promotes individual and communal wellbeing. Whilst extensive research exists on the three acharyas and NK, studies comparing and engaging the three on their thoughts on NK are limited.

10.2 Focus of thesis

This thesis focused on investigating how the concept of NK can advance social cohesion considering the three acharyas commentaries on NK. Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva wrote numerous documents and clearly articulated their arguments for their respectful Vedantic schools. However, the focus of this research pertained more to their contribution to NK as found in their commentaries of the Prasthanatrayi.

NK as a Hindu concept of selflessness is also not limited to the Prasthanatrayi, the Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda, Buddhist texts, Mahabharat, Ramayana, and the Aranyaka's are some of the other texts that contain lessons on selflessness, desirelessness and empathy – themes that link to NK.

Other than the popular Sanskrit tradition, the ancient Tamil tradition also contains fundamental lessons on NK. The Tolkapiyum, Thirrukkural and Theveraam contain extensive texts on selflessness, love, and devotional service.

The vastness of Hinduism allows for every tradition and linguistic culture to contribute to NK. To include the contribution to NK by the different traditions and texts would have diverted the focus from the central focus of this thesis; that of investigating NK in the commentaries of the three acharyas and its contribution to social cohesion.

10.2.1 Research questions

Chapter [2.7](#), this research states the objectives of this research. To assess NK's advancement of social cohesion, the following questions were posed:

- I. What is Nishkama Karma? Nishkama Karma translated literally means 'desireless desire'. As engaged in this research, Nishkama Karma refers to the concept of desireless, selfless action. It includes the practice of performing actions (usually one's expected responsibilities/duties within a community) in a detached manner. As a result, Nishkama Karma refers to the performance of actions without expecting any reward or compensation for the performance of said actions.
- II. How did Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva understand Nishkama Karma? Through investigating Nishkama Karma (as desireless desire, selfless and detached action), this research found that the three acharyas complemented one another in their understanding of Nishkama Karma. Shankara understood

NK as unfeeling, pure desire that is distinguished from the selfish desire for materialistic objects. In doing so, Shankara qualifies NK as the desire to be desireless for materialistic objects that lead to bondage to the samsara cycle. According to Shankara, the desire to be desireless toward materialistic objects is due to the desire for the realisation of Brahman and the attainment of Moksha. Shankara argues that the desire for Brahman is not selfish or unrighteous since the desire for Brahman is simply the desire to realise oneself as Brahman. The desire to realise oneself as Brahman is qualified as selfless as one no longer desires materialistic objects and performs actions solely to uphold the duties that are expected of one within their community.

Ramanuja supports Shankara in distinguishing between righteous and unrighteous desire. Ramanuja agrees that NK supports the attainment of Moksha. Furthermore, Ramanuja argues that the practice of NK is a display of Bhakti (devotion). By detaching from the rewards affiliated with performed actions, an individual surrenders their actions and the fruit thereof to Brahman. For Ramanuja, Brahman is Vishnu. Ramanuja believed that the practice of NK was a display of love and devotion to Vishnu. Ramanuja maintained NK as a liberative practice and added that NK is also the performance of devotional service through the performance of one's prescribed duties in a detached, selfless, and desireless manner.

Madhva agreed with Shankara and Ramanuja in distinguishing between righteous and unrighteous desire. Madhva referred to NK as the noble desire to follow the laws of Dharma by solely desiring to perform actions that are pleasing to Vishnu (Madhva's interpretation of Brahman is Vishnu). Madhva agreed with Ramanuja in terms of NK being a display of Bhakti – one uncompromising devotion to Vishnu. As the last of the three acharyas, Madhva ties together Jnana, Karma, and Bhakti yoga, along with Shankara and Ramanuja, in understanding NK. Madhva does this in his proposal of *Niskamam jnanapurvam karma*. That is enlightened (knowledgeable) action that is performed with the sole desire to attain wisdom and please Vishnu. According to Madhva, the performance of enlightened action results in detached, desireless, and selfless actions that please Vishnu.

- III. Has the understanding of Nishkama Karma undergone a metamorphosis over time? Before engaging Nishkama Karma as found in the philosophies of the

three acharyas, chapter 4 examined relevant texts that contribute to assessing the metamorphosis of NK. Since the first mention of NK in the Vedas, through its mentions in the UP, BS, and BG, NK is conceptualised as (1) service to Brahman, (2) desireless, detached, selfless action, (3) righteous desire, (4) a path to Moksha, (5) a path that enhances self-realisation, (6) attainment of true wisdom and knowledge, and (7) the performance of ones duty without attachment and expectancy for rewards.

After tracking the understanding of NK before the commentaries of the three acharyas, chapter 8 provided a summation of the contribution to understanding NK. This enabled the research to note the prominent additions made to NK in understanding its metamorphosis over time. Shankara's contribution to NK's metamorphosis was through the addition of the terms: (1) *Karmadharaya*, (2) *Bahuvrihi*, (3) *Satyakamah*, and (4) *na aviratah duscaritat*. Ramanuja's contribution was on the grounds of combining *Vidya* (wisdom) with the practice of NK to remove all Karma (past, present, and future). As such, Ramanuja reaffirmed and supported NK as a liberative practice. Last, agreeing with Shankara and Ramanuja, Madva's contributed to the metamorphosis of NK in his proposal of *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma*. Madhva also noted the importance of discernment in understanding righteous and unrighteous desire – that which is in alignment with Dharma (such as NK) and that which is against (such as the desire for materialistic self-gain). Additionally, Madhva acknowledges the need for material objects and sustenance but cautions that these need to be engaged in a detached manner.

- IV. How does Nishkama Karma relate to altruism and empathy in enhancing and contributing to social cohesion? In chapter 9, this research relied on NK's principle of selflessness. NK's principle of selflessness was related to altruism and empathy in drawing a connection to similar principles in other religions toward promoting social cohesion. NK (through selflessness) as an altruistic and empathetic concept was argued as enhancing and contributing to social cohesion by (1) developing trust between community members, (2) promoting community transformation and unity (accommodation of multiculturalism), (3) advancing sustainable development (economic opportunities), and (4) reconciliation and reparation of historical conflict and prejudice.

Chapter [3](#) is dedicated to answering research question I. Chapter [3.4](#) engages NK with desire, attachment, selfishness (Sakam Karma), and selflessness. [3.4.1](#) assess the different dimensions of NK and touches on selflessness as one of the prominent themes of NK.

On the principles of desirelessness, selflessness, and detachment, this research engages the three acharyas commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi. Chapters [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), and [8](#) address research question II. Chapters [5.3](#), [6.3](#), [7.3](#), and [8.2](#) are solely dedicated to exploring how the three acharyas understood NK.

In chapter [4.6](#) (Table 1), the development of NK in the Vedas, UP, BS, and BG, is provided. The findings illustrated in Table 1 are a presentation of NK in the Prasthanatrayi before engaging the commentaries of the three acharyas and their contribution to the development of NK. Chapter [8.2.4](#) documents the different contributions that the three acharyas make to understanding NK. Thereafter, chapter [8.4](#) reflects on Table 1 of chapter [4.6](#) in assessing the metamorphosis of NK. This is achieved by comparing the understanding of NK (as found in the Prasthanatrayi) before, and post, the commentaries of the three acharyas. Therefore, chapters [4.6](#), [8.2.4](#), and [8.4](#), engage research question III.

Research question IV is engaged in chapter [9](#). NK's principle of selflessness (which incorporates other principles, such as detached and desireless action) is engaged with altruism and empathy in assessing the contribution that the principles of NK make to advancing social cohesion. This is done in chapter [9.2](#).

As a result, this research engaged all research questions in concluding that:

- 1) Through investigating the commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi by the three acharyas, Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva portray NK as a selfless practise that contributes to a community development¹⁶⁸
- 2) In defining NK as a selfless practice, the three acharyas allow for the application of NK (as a selfless practice) to altruism¹⁶⁹ and empathy¹⁷⁰. Therefore, NK as

¹⁶⁸ See [8.2.4](#)

¹⁶⁹ See [9.2.1](#)

¹⁷⁰ See [9.2.4](#)

a selfless, altruistic, and empathetic practice is theorised to contribute to social cohesion.

NK, through the principle of selflessness, relates to altruism and empathy. Through altruism and empathy, NK, as found in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva advances social cohesion.

10.2.1.1 Review of the hypothesis on Nishkama Karma as socially cohesive

Chapter [2.6](#) formulated the hypothesis that Nishkama Karma, in the commentaries of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, can contribute to social cohesion. Reflecting on the previous section (chapter [10.2.1](#)), this research concludes in support of the hypothesis that – Nishkama Karma, as found in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva, advances social cohesion.

10.3 History of NK

The Rigveda is recognised as the oldest Hindu text, making it the first of a four-layer foundation. The concept of NK was not created by the three acharyas, it was born out of the Rigveda as a devotional service. Thereafter, the UP and BS expanded on this concept, allowing it to be found in numerous other Hindu sacred texts in teachings on selflessness, detachment, and devotional service.

Before reflecting on the three acharyas, this research summarised the concept of NK in the Prasthanatrayi. The intention was to understand NK as it was in the Prasthanatrayi before the acharya commented on it, to assess their contributions. Table 1 (chapter [4.6](#)) summarises the notes on NK as found in the Prasthanatrayi before investigating the contributions made by the three acharyas.

10.4 Defining NK

To define the concept of NK and assess its contribution to NK, this thesis investigated the commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi made by the three acharyas.

While each of the acharya wrote extensively on the principles that relate to NK, the following is a summary of their key contributions to NK:

- Shankara: Desire is twofold, good, and evil, those who desire Brahman have the righteous desire.

- Ramanuja: Vidya and NK destroy all past, present, and future Karma thus preparing one for liberation.
- Madhva: proposed *Niskamam Jnanapurvam Karma* as a combination of Jnana and Karma yoga for liberation.

After concluding on the definition of NK as per the commentaries of the three acharyas, this research reflected on the problems with understanding NK. The fundamental issue with NK was reconciling the state of desirelessness with the desire for Moksha (*mumukshutva*).

NK as desirelessness, with *mumukshutva*, was engaged in this research by examining the three acharyas commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi. The acharyas agree that: (1) the desire for Brahman is righteous, (2) the removal of desire referred to by NK is unrighteous desire (therefore, desire is both righteous and unrighteous as per the teachings of the scriptures), (3) one may have desire so long as it is in line with dharma, (4) a life without accumulating Karma is impossible therefore all action should be NK – selfless, devotional action, (5) the desire for Brahman and knowledge is the only desire people should have.

After addressing the problems with understanding NK, this research reflects on Datta and Jones (2019:17) by submitting a 6-dimensional model of NK¹⁷¹ – that engages *mumukshutva* with the commentaries of the three acharyas.

10.5 Social cohesion

The second objective of this thesis was to assess if NK, as found in the commentaries of the acharya, could advance social cohesion. Reflecting on Paolilli (2011:147), Perumpallikunnel (2013:276), and Chaitanya (2018:1), this research concluded that NK is the Hindu equivalent of altruism and empathy.

After agreeing upon NK is expressed as an altruistic and empathetic practice this thesis proposed that considering Dambrun and Ricard (2011:144) and Mthenjane (2019:1), NK builds a sense of trust and unity that supports social cohesion.

This research concluded that NK could advance social cohesion provided that a community is willing to look beyond its differences by uniting through altruistic and

¹⁷¹ See [3.4.1](#)

empathetic acts. Additionally, NK as a model of altruism and empathy can promote social cohesion amongst the different religious traditions by relating to teachings of selflessness and empathy. Through altruism and empathy, NK appeals to the better nature of people thus enabling it to advance social cohesion in any community.

10.6 Recommendations

This section reflects on the challenges experienced in this research before recommendations on further research.

10.6.1 Challenges

Some of the challenges encountered during this research was that of textual engagement. Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva are known to have written commentaries and books well beyond that their commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi.

The Bhaja Govindam, Saundarya Lahari, Atma Bodha, and Tattva Bodha, are some of the texts attributed to Shankara. The Bhavartha Ratnakara, Gadyatrayam, and Vedantasara are some of the texts attributed to Ramanuja. To Madhva, the Dvadasha stotra, sadachara smruti, Tattva Viveka, and Mahabharata Tatparya Nirnaya, are attributed.

Some of these texts are authentic in terms of their authorship, whereas others are questionable. As such, this research was challenged in selectively using only the commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi by the three acharyas in assessing and comparing their understanding of NK.

Considering this, the principles of NK extend to texts found in many different Hindu traditions beyond the work of the acharyas. Whilst the acharyas contributed to the formation of understanding of NK, this concept requires practical engagement within the current context.

As a result, this research recommends that governments, institutions, religious bodies, and other organisations, consider the findings of this research in contributing to NK (as found in the philosophies of the three acharyas) as a socially cohesive concept. This research recommends further study into the implementation of NK toward contributing to a more progressive, equal, and fair global society. As this research is

theoretically based, this research emphasises the implementation of NK toward testing the theory of this research – as proposed in chapter [10.2.1.1](#).

Furthermore, this research recommends further research on the relationship between the social sciences and Nishkama Karma in Vedanta philosophy.

10.7 Closing remarks

This research investigated the concept of Nishkama Karma in the philosophies of Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva to assess the contribution that Nishkama Karma makes to social cohesion. The contributions of the three acharyas to NK created the foundation for exploring Nishkama Karma's contribution to social cohesion.

The concept of Nishkama Karma, and its contribution to social cohesion, is not limited to Hinduism or Hindu communities only. But is a concept that is for the benefit of the world. Nishkama Karma's message of selflessness, detachment, altruism, and empathy can be taught in any religious tradition without the ulterior motive of conversion. Both the objective of Nishkama Karma and the reason for its existence desire only to contribute to individual and communal wellbeing thus promoting social cohesion.

Nishkama Karma, as a concept that advances social cohesion through altruism and empathy, is for the benefit of the world (irrespective of religion, ethnicity, and culture) is best articulated by the famous Tamil philosopher Kaniyan Poongunranar.

Believed to have been born around 600 BCE, Kaniyan Poongunranar is famous for the following quote:

யாதும் ஊரே யாவரும் கேளிர்

yaadhum oore yaavarum kehlir

Meaning: "the world is my home, and every person is my family"

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TRANSLATIONS

This section provides the references used for the English translations of the commentaries on the Prasthanatrayi by the three acharyas.

SHANKARA

Upanishads – (Gambhirananda, 1992) (Gambhirananda, 1957)

Brahma Sutras – (Sivananda, 2008) (Vireswarananda, 1936)

Bhagavad Gita – (Sastry, 1977) (Ramachandra Aiyar, 1988)

RAMANUJA

Upanishads/Vedantha Sangraha – (Raghavachar, 2010)

Brahma Sutras/Sri Bhashya – (Rangacharya, 1899) (Raghavachariar, 1985)

Bhagavad Gita Bhashya – (Rama, 2013) (Govindacharya, 1898)

MADHVA

Upanishads – (Vidyabhusana, 2013) (Sonde, 2012) (Sonde, 2013)

Brahma Sutras/Vedanta Sutras – (Subba Rau, 1904)

Bhagavad Gita Bhashya and Bhagavad Gita Tatparya Nirnaya – (Sonde, 2011)

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