

Harnessing Conflict in the Age of Physician Burnout

A conceptual framework for navigating moral conflict in clinical practice through Insights from the Bhagavad Gita and Comparative Spiritual Traditions

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Background

Physicians frequently encounter **moral conflict and ethical tension** arising from competing duties, institutional pressures and personal values.

The **Bhagavad Gita** begins with Arjuna’s moral crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra — a moment of ethical paralysis that mirrors experiences of **physician moral distress**.

Across spiritual traditions, conflict is often framed as a **gateway to reflection, discernment and service**.

Aims

- To explore whether insights from the Bhagavad Gita and comparative spiritual traditions can inform a conceptual framework for navigating conflict in clinical practice.
- To examine parallels between Arjuna’s moral crisis and physician moral distress.
- To develop a conceptual model for harnessing conflict as a pathway toward reflective ethical action.
- The project also sought to incorporate perspectives from physicians across traditions and remain attentive to contributions from female scholars and clinicians engaging spirituality and medicine.

Methods

Conceptual reflective analysis drawing on:

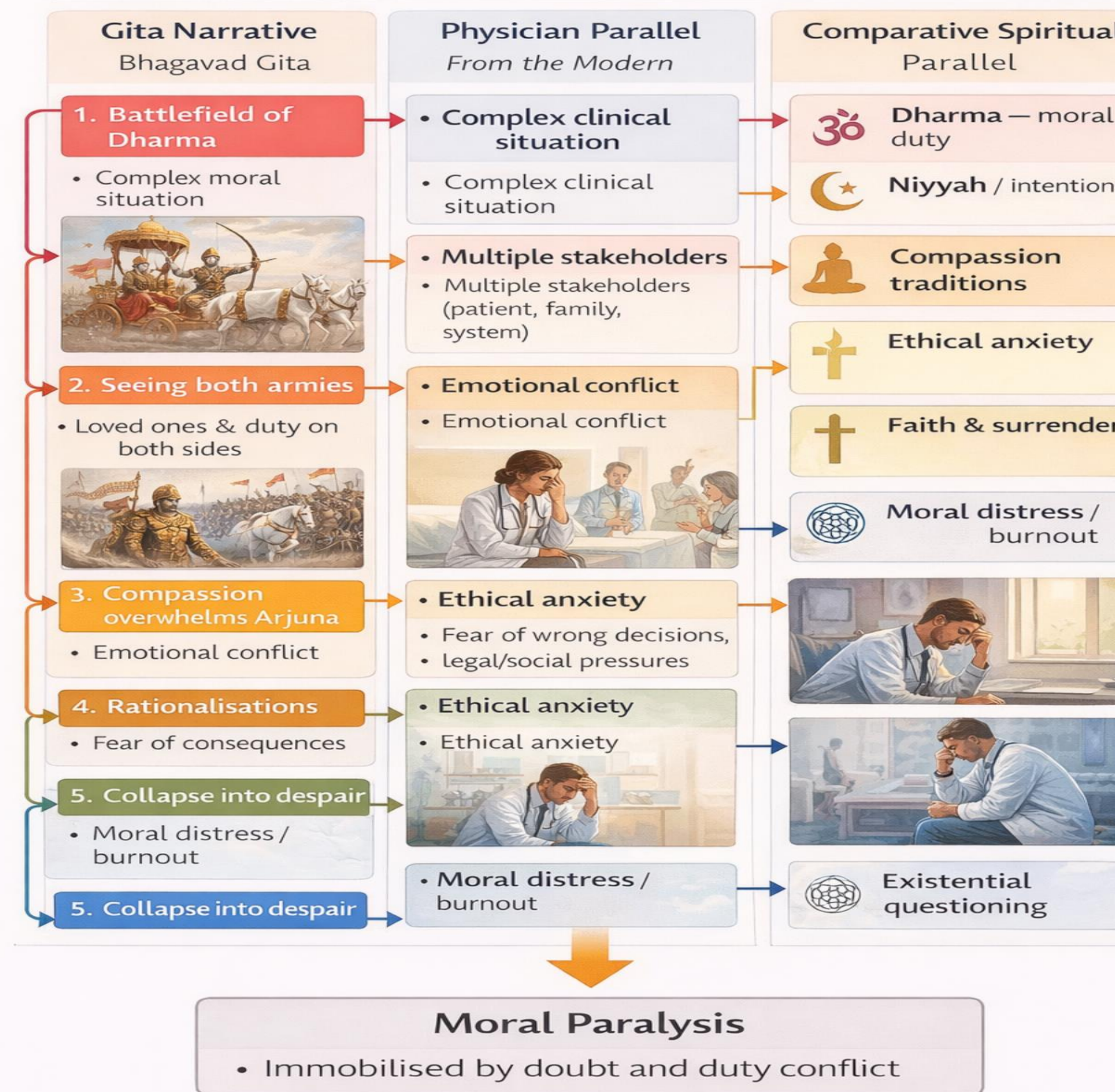
- textual study of the **Bhagavad Gita (Arjuna Vishada Yoga)**
- comparative spiritual literature
- informal dialogue with physicians reflecting on moral distress
- Informal dialogue with physicians across specialties and traditions exploring **suffering, meaning-making and spirituality in medicine**, including attention to perspectives from **female clinicians and scholars working at the intersection of spirituality and care at Harvard School of Medicine**

Declaration of Interest: None

Funding: None

Ethics: Educational reflective scholarship. No patient identifiable data used.

Emergence of Conflict: Arjuna Vishada → Physician Moral Distress



Discussion

Across traditions, suffering and adversity are often framed as **opportunities for reflection and transformation rather than experiences to be avoided**.

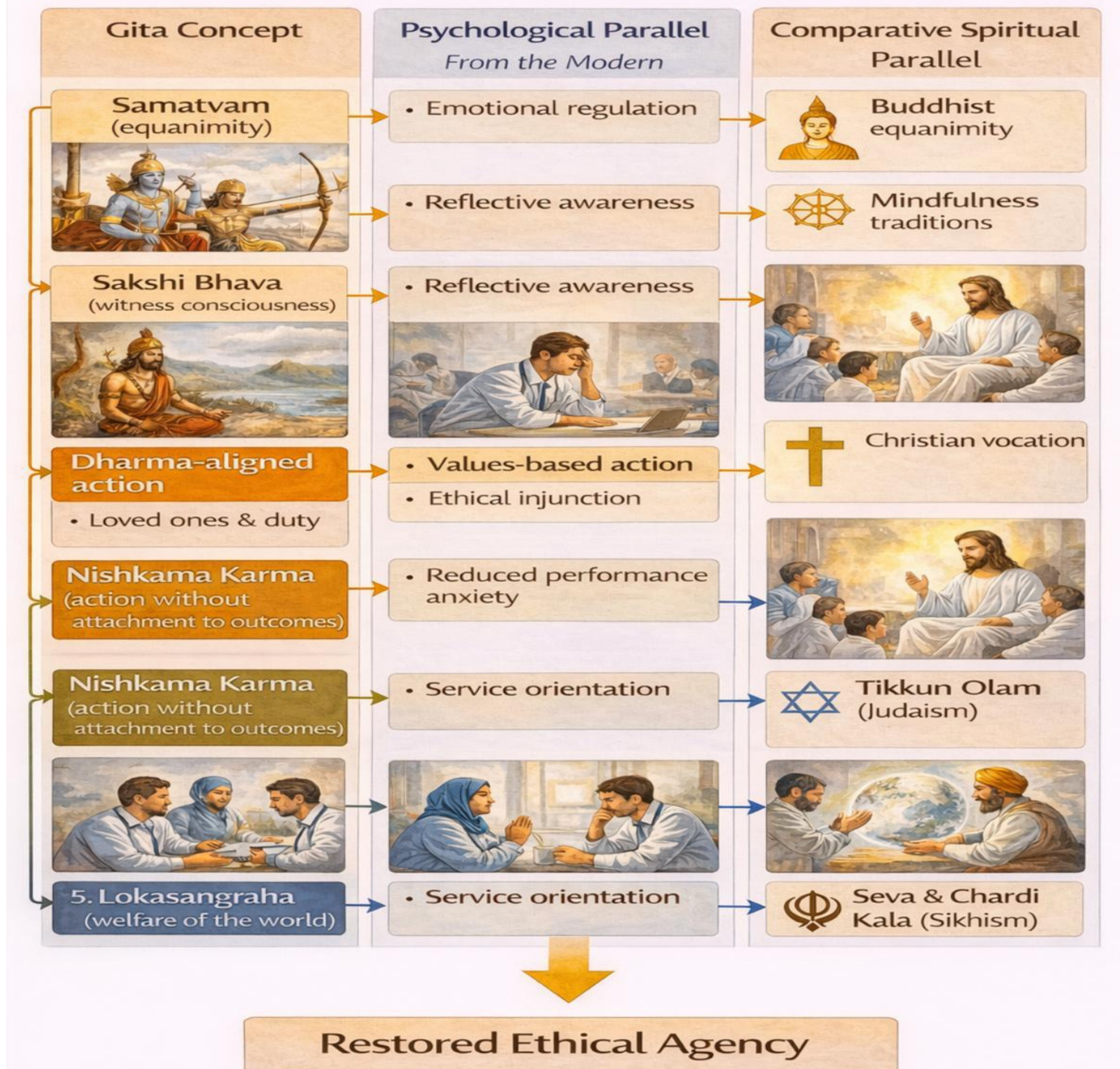
The Bhagavad Gita portrays moral conflict as the **starting point of ethical insight rather than a failure of resolve**.

Perspectives emerging from discussions with clinicians highlighted the importance of including **female voices in conversations about spirituality, care and meaning-making in medicine**, an area historically shaped by male theological and philosophical traditions.

Attention to gendered perspectives within spiritual traditions may enrich future exploration of **clinician meaning-making and reflective practice**.

Transformation of Conflict: Krishna’s Teaching → Reflective Ethical Action

Krishna’s Teaching → Reflective Ethical Action



Conclusion

A comparative spiritual framework centred on **Harnessing Conflict** may support:

- reflective clinical practice
- ethical resilience in physicians
- meaning-making in medicine

Spiritual traditions across cultures suggest that **conflict may become a pathway to insight, clarity and service**.