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The Marksman: As Jim Hanson, Liam Neeson Plays The Role Of A Karma Yogi

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Abstract

This paper explores the character of Jim Hanson in the 2021 film *The Marksman*, played by Liam Neeson, as an embodiment of the Karma Yogi—a concept rooted in the Bhagavad Gita. Unlike traditional Western action heroes who are driven by personal vengeance or glory, Jim Hanson emerges as a man of duty, detached from personal gain, and committed to protecting the innocent. Drawing on classical Indian philosophy, especially the Gita's teachings on selfless action (karma yoga), the article demonstrates how Hanson's journey aligns with the path of the Karma Yogi—one who acts with intention but without attachment to the fruits of action. Through close cinematic analysis and philosophical interpretation, this study situates *The Marksman* within a broader discourse of spiritual archetypes in global cinema. The article argues that Jim Hanson's ethical clarity, stoic demeanour, and unwavering performance of duty resonate deeply with the Gita's vision of disciplined action and moral responsibility, thereby suggesting that ancient Indian ideals continue to find subtle expression in contemporary narratives of heroism.

Keywords: *Karma Yoga, Bhagavad Gita, Liam Neeson, Jim Hanson, The Marksman, Cinematic Spirituality, Dharma, Selfless Action*

Introduction

In a cinematic landscape increasingly populated by morally ambiguous heroes and explosive spectacles, *The Marksman* (2021), directed by Robert Lorenz, offers a restrained yet profound character study through its protagonist, Jim Hanson. Played by Liam Neeson, Hanson is a former Marine who lives on the Arizona-Mexico border and inadvertently becomes the protector of a young Mexican boy fleeing from cartel violence. At first glance, the film appears to follow the conventions of the lone savior trope common in American action cinema. However, a deeper reading reveals a layered narrative—one that aligns Hanson's choices with the principles of *Karma Yoga* as expounded in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Karma Yoga, the path of selfless action without attachment to results, is a central tenet of Indian philosophy. In the Gita, Lord Krishna exhorts Arjuna to act according to his dharma (duty) without desire for reward, emphasizing that "To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits" (Bhagavad Gita 2.47, trans. Easwaran). This ideal finds an unexpected but compelling parallel in the character of Jim Hanson, whose actions are neither impulsive nor ego-driven, but rooted in a quiet moral clarity. As the narrative unfolds, Hanson evolves into a cinematic Karma Yogi—an individual who, despite personal loss and societal disillusionment, chooses to uphold a code of duty, protect the innocent, and relinquish attachment to outcome.

This article analyzes how *The Marksman* serves as a contemporary narrative of Karma Yoga, using cinematic elements, character development, and philosophical alignment to present a hero who transcends cultural boundaries. It also examines how the Karma Yogi archetype, traditionally associated with Hindu spiritual practice, finds resonance in Western storytelling. By foregrounding the ethical framework guiding

Hanson's actions, the paper argues that the film redefines heroism in a spiritual and philosophical light, presenting a protagonist not just as a fighter, but as a seeker of righteousness.

The Concept of Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga, as delineated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, is the path of liberation through **selfless action**. Unlike action motivated by personal ambition, greed, or emotion, Karma Yoga emphasizes performance of one's duty—*dharma*—with **detachment from the results**. In Chapter 3 of the *Gita*, Krishna asserts: "The world is bound by action, except when it is performed as a sacrifice. So perform your duty well, without attachment" (3.9, Easwaran). Here, "sacrifice" refers not to ritualism, but to **dedicated, conscious, and egoless action** that contributes to the larger good.

Central to Karma Yoga are four intertwined principles:

1. **Svadharma (personal duty)**
2. **Nishkama karma (action without desire)**
3. **Vairagya (detachment)**
4. **Samatvam (equanimity)**

Unlike the Bhakti or Jnana Yogis, whose paths emphasize devotion and knowledge respectively, the Karma Yogi **acts in the world without being of the world**. His or her **internal stillness remains untouched by external turbulence**, much like a lotus leaf untouched by water (*Gita* 5.10). Swami Vivekananda notes that "the Karma Yogi does not seek pleasure or pain, success or failure, but only the fulfillment of his dharma" (*Karma Yoga*, 1896).

The Karma Yogi ideal is neither passive nor fatalistic. Rather, it demands **deep engagement in the world**—a life of fearless, ethical action, guided by the wisdom that true control lies only in action, not its consequences. As Eknath Easwaran observes, "Karma Yoga teaches us to make life itself a spiritual practice, where every act becomes an offering, and the self is steadily effaced" (Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living* Vol. 1).

This framework provides the lens through which Jim Hanson's character in *The Marksman* can be interpreted—not merely as a reluctant hero, but as one who aligns with the Karma Yogi by **acting without seeking personal benefit**, by **protecting the innocent without being driven by revenge**, and by **upholding dharma even when it demands personal sacrifice**.

The Marksman: A Narrative of Dharma

The Marksman (2021) unfolds against the desolate yet morally charged landscape of the Arizona-Mexico border, a space where law, order, and justice blur into ambiguity. In this setting, Jim Hanson, a weathered ex-Marine and widower, lives a life of resignation. He patrols his ranch for trespassers and listens to a police radio, not out of duty but habit, surviving paycheck to paycheck while coping with the loss of his wife and the looming threat of foreclosure. Yet, it is precisely this ordinariness—this lack of ideological posturing—that makes Hanson's eventual transformation so philosophically profound.

When he encounters Rosa and her son Miguel, fleeing from a ruthless Mexican drug cartel, Hanson's initial response is pragmatic. However, Rosa's death and her final plea to protect her son awaken in him a dormant sense of *dharma*—a moral obligation to act rightly, even at personal risk. Despite legal hurdles, cartel danger, and his own financial precarity, Hanson chooses to escort Miguel across the country to the boy's relatives in Chicago.

This act is neither heroic in the conventional sense nor reactive in a melodramatic manner. Rather, it is **an act of quiet conviction**, free from attachment to reward or recognition. His decision reflects the *Gita*'s core instruction: "Establish yourself in yoga, and then act... abandoning all attachment, and remaining even-minded in success and failure" (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.48, Easwaran). In this sense, Hanson's journey is one of **rediscovered purpose**, shaped not by external validation but by an inner moral compass.

Throughout the film, his actions grow increasingly aligned with the Karma Yogi's temperament. He neither seeks vengeance nor personal redemption; he accepts hardship as part of his chosen path. Even when he confronts the cartel assassins, he does so not out of rage but out of duty—to protect Miguel, and to uphold a moral code against injustice. His restraint, his endurance, and his willingness to act without anticipating gratitude, all reflect a deeply spiritual undertaking disguised within a modern thriller.

Furthermore, Hanson's engagement with Miguel becomes a catalyst for inner transformation. Initially a silent, brooding guardian, he begins to open up emotionally, not out of sentimentality but out of **shared humanity**. This movement toward **selfless relationality** is integral to dharma in Karma Yoga—not merely performing isolated duty but recognizing and embracing one's role in the broader cosmic order.

In this context, *The Marksman* becomes more than a genre film; it becomes a narrative of dharma. Jim Hanson is not simply a protector of a child, but a man who, having nothing left to lose, chooses to live meaningfully through **disinterested action**. As Krishna reminds Arjuna, “Performing one’s own dharma, even if imperfectly, is better than doing another’s perfectly” (Gita 3.35). Hanson’s dharma may not be as a soldier, or a lawman, but as a human being acting in the service of another.

Jim Hanson as a Karma Yogi

Jim Hanson’s character in *The Marksman* resonates powerfully with the archetype of the **Karma Yogi**—a person who performs righteous action with no attachment to its fruits. Throughout the narrative, Hanson transitions from a disengaged ex-Marine to a purposeful protector, embodying a spiritual discipline that mirrors the Gita’s vision of **selfless action (nishkama karma)**. His decisions are not motivated by revenge, personal gain, or emotional catharsis; instead, they emerge from an inner commitment to **duty (dharma)** and **moral responsibility**, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

In the early scenes, Hanson appears emotionally numb and existentially fatigued—a man whose best years seem behind him. His only companion is his dog, Jackson; his relationship with his stepdaughter, a Border Patrol agent, is strained and distanced. When Hanson first encounters Rosa and Miguel, his instinct is not compassion but legality—he calls the authorities. However, Rosa’s tragic death and her final words—entrusting her son to him—act as a turning point. What follows is not a dramatic shift but a gradual alignment with a **higher ethical principle**. Hanson assumes responsibility not as a savior, but as one who recognizes the moral imperative of action.

This shift in Hanson mirrors the Gita’s exhortation: “Let your concern be with action alone, and never with the fruits of action” (Bhagavad Gita 2.47, trans. Easwaran). Hanson accepts the arduous journey to Chicago not because it offers reward or redemption, but because it is **the right thing to do**. His silence, stoic demeanor, and refusal to make emotional appeals reflect the Karma Yogi’s temperament—he acts, not for show, not for praise, but because he must.

Several scenes underscore Hanson’s yogic detachment. He parts with personal possessions, remains calm under pressure, and never exploits the situation for sympathy or gain. Even in his confrontation with the cartel leader, Mauricio, Hanson chooses *measured violence* as a last resort, not out of wrath but necessity. In true yogic fashion, he remains **focused on his purpose**, never allowing emotion to distort his clarity. As Krishna teaches: “He who is unaffected by the dualities of pleasure and pain, and remains steady, is indeed a yogi” (Gita 6.7).

Moreover, Hanson’s relationship with Miguel becomes a silent pedagogy in **non-attachment**. He does not attempt to become a surrogate father, nor does he cling to the boy emotionally. Instead, he creates a space of trust, offers protection, and ensures Miguel’s safe arrival—all without expectation of reciprocation. When Miguel is finally reunited with his family, Hanson walks away alone, wounded but peaceful. He neither lingers for acknowledgment nor seeks closure. This withdrawal—**after the completion of dharma without desire for its fruit**—marks the culmination of Hanson’s karmic journey. Hanson’s path is, in essence, a modern interpretation of the Karma Yogi: he fulfills his dharma in silence, guided by **inner ethics**, not external validation. His solitude, restraint, and unwavering sense of justice offer a compelling cinematic articulation of spiritual ideals often relegated to ancient texts. In a world driven by spectacle and self-promotion, Hanson emerges as a rare figure—a **yogi with a gun, navigating violence with compassion, and duty with detachment**.

Cinematic Techniques and Symbolism

The spiritual undercurrent of *The Marksman* is not only carried through narrative and character but is also **subtly encoded in the film’s cinematography, mise-en-scène, and symbolic choices**, which collectively underscore Jim Hanson’s identity as a Karma Yogi. Through careful visual and auditory techniques, the film reinforces themes of solitude, detachment, moral clarity, and inner transformation—echoing the very essence of yogic action described in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

1. Landscapes and the Journey as Inner Quest

The visual composition of *The Marksman* often frames Jim Hanson against vast, empty deserts and winding roads. These expansive landscapes emphasize not only physical isolation but also **spiritual inwardness**, a journey into the self as much as across the country. The open road becomes symbolic of the Karma Yogi’s path—unpredictable, lonely, and filled with moral tests. Like Arjuna in the Kurukshetra battlefield, Hanson too travels through a moral terrain, with each mile posing a deeper philosophical question about duty and action.

2. Silence as Yogic Discipline

Hanson is a man of few words, and the film capitalizes on his **silences** to develop his moral gravitas. His restrained speech mirrors the yogic discipline of *mauna* (vow of silence), which is often practiced by seekers for cultivating **internal clarity and detachment**. As Swami Sivananda observes, “Control of speech brings control of the mind.” Hanson’s silence is never passive; it is reflective, purposeful, and indicative of his growing inner resolve.

3. The Gun as a Tool, Not an Identity

While firearms dominate many Western films as symbols of power and masculinity, *The Marksman* subverts this trope. For Hanson, the gun is never a symbol of dominance, but merely a **means to protect**. His handling of violence is deliberate, minimal, and devoid of theatrical aggression—evoking the Gita’s teaching that **action itself is not impure, but its intention determines its spiritual worth** (Gita 18.11). Hanson uses his weapon only when dharma demands it, and never for self-serving ends.

4. The Dog Jackson: Symbol of Bhakti and Loyalty

Jackson, Hanson’s loyal dog, can be interpreted as a silent emblem of **devotion and fidelity**, values upheld by Karma Yogis in their actions toward the world. Jackson’s presence, his quiet companionship, and his ultimate death add emotional texture to Hanson’s detachment. Even when mourning Jackson, Hanson does not collapse into despair—he grieves, then moves forward. This illustrates *vairagya* (non-attachment), the capacity to love without clinging.

5. Lighting and Colour Tone

The film’s colour palette—dominated by muted browns, greys, and natural light—creates a **visually ascetic atmosphere**, devoid of excess or distraction. This understated visual world mirrors Hanson’s own internal landscape: **bare, honest, and unadorned by ego**. The restrained use of music and the lack of dramatic visual flourishes reflect the inner quietude of a Karma Yogi, one who acts without performance.

6. The Final Scene: Renunciation and Resolution

Perhaps the film’s most profound yogic moment occurs in the final sequence. After ensuring Miguel’s safety, Hanson, bleeding and alone, walks away, leaving behind the child, the mission, and the need for acknowledgment. The camera lingers not on a triumphant return but on **a wounded man dissolving into the landscape**, suggesting the ultimate yogic act—**renunciation**. Having fulfilled his dharma, he fades without attachment, much like Krishna’s counsel to act and let go.

Comparative Analysis

To fully appreciate Jim Hanson’s portrayal as a Karma Yogi in *The Marksman*, it is instructive to situate him within a broader cinematic and cultural framework. While the Karma Yogi is a distinctly Indian philosophical archetype, its thematic essence—selfless action, moral duty, and detachment—is not confined to Eastern narratives alone. This section explores how Hanson’s character compares with both traditional Karma Yogis and Western cinematic figures, thereby highlighting the translatability of yogic ethics across cultural boundaries.

1. Gandhi in *Gandhi* (1982)

Perhaps the most direct representation of a Karma Yogi in cinema is Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi*, where Ben Kingsley’s portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi aligns closely with the Gita’s ideals. Gandhi, like Hanson, acts not for personal gain but in service of dharma—truth, nonviolence, and national self-realization. Unlike Hanson, Gandhi’s path is nonviolent and overtly political, but the two share a spiritual kinship in their **detachment from personal rewards and commitment to selfless duty**. As Gandhi himself wrote, “The Gita is not only my Bible or my Koran; it is more than that—it is my mother” (*Gandhi: An Autobiography* 173). While Gandhi’s Karma Yoga is grounded in collective transformation, Hanson’s is intimate and interpersonal—yet both manifest the same yogic core.

2. Arjuna in the Mahabharata

Hanson’s moral dilemma echoes Arjuna’s conflict on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Arjuna, overwhelmed by the burden of killing his kin, hesitates, until Krishna reminds him of his **duty as a warrior** and the necessity of action without attachment. Like Arjuna, Hanson initially resists engagement. He prefers solitude and disengagement. But when dharma calls—when Miguel’s life is entrusted to him—he

transcends personal loss and acts with resolve. As Krishna instructs, “One should not abandon one’s own dharma... even though it may be fraught with imperfection” (Gita 18.47). This parallel frames Hanson not only as a modern Karma Yogi, but as a **Western Arjuna** of sorts, reimagined for a secular audience.

3. **Contrasting Figure: John Rambo in *First Blood* (1982)**

Unlike Jim Hanson, John Rambo in *First Blood* represents the **traumatized warrior archetype** common in American cinema. Rambo acts out of vengeance, alienation, and a sense of betrayal, and his violence, though justified, is deeply reactive. Hanson, in contrast, does not act from personal trauma; he transcends it. His use of force is never impulsive, and his inner peace, though subdued, remains intact. While both characters are ex-soldiers burdened by the past, Rambo is a figure of chaos, while Hanson is an agent of **measured dharma**—a distinction that sets the Karma Yogi apart from the anti-hero.

4. **Echoes in Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* (2008)**

Another closer analogue to Hanson is Walt Kowalski, the protagonist of *Gran Torino*. Like Hanson, Kowalski is a grizzled loner who finds redemption through an unexpected relationship with a young immigrant. His eventual self-sacrifice for the good of another mirrors Hanson’s spiritual trajectory. Both characters undergo **moral rebirth** through service to others. Yet, where Kowalski’s arc ends in **martyrdom**, Hanson’s ends in **renunciation**—he lives on, not to celebrate victory, but to fade into the quiet anonymity of the Karma Yogi.

Jim Hanson

In drawing these comparisons, we see that Jim Hanson’s journey is part of a larger cinematic tradition—yet distinct in its spiritual framing. He is not a crusader, not a martyr, and not a savior in the Western sense. He is a **yogi in disguise**, acting with purpose, detachment, and inner stillness. Through Hanson, *The Marksman* becomes a rare convergence of **Eastern metaphysics and Western realism**, proving that the ethics of Karma Yoga need not be confined to temples or ashrams—they can travel dusty highways, bear arms, and still uphold dharma.

Conclusion

The Marksman offers more than a tale of survival or borderland justice—it presents a profound character study of a man who walks the path of **Karma Yoga** without naming it. Jim Hanson, through his quiet resolve, moral clarity, and selfless action, transcends the conventional image of the American action hero. Unlike those driven by personal loss, vengeance, or triumph, Hanson emerges as a figure of **ethical restraint and spiritual depth**, whose choices resonate deeply with the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

By interpreting Hanson through the lens of Karma Yoga, we uncover a cross-cultural narrative of **dharma performed without desire**, action undertaken without ego, and detachment practiced not through withdrawal but through purposeful engagement. His journey reflects the core message of Krishna to Arjuna: to live in the world without being enslaved by it, to act without clinging, and to protect righteousness without attachment to outcome.

Moreover, *The Marksman* demonstrates that spiritual ideals like those found in the Gita can find meaningful expression even in secular, Western cinematic forms. The yogic path is not limited to the renunciate or the sage; it can manifest through a gun-bearing, grief-stricken rancher who chooses to do what is right, not what is easy. As such, Liam Neeson’s portrayal of Jim Hanson not only humanizes the Karma Yogi for contemporary audiences but also redefines heroism in terms of **inner discipline, ethical action, and detachment**.

In a world saturated with spectacle, noise, and moral ambiguity, Jim Hanson offers an unexpected glimpse into **the quiet heroism of the spiritual warrior**—a man who walks alone, not to escape the world, but to serve it with humility and unwavering purpose. Through this lens, *The Marksman* becomes a cinematic articulation of Karma Yoga in action—timeless, resonant, and profoundly human.

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