

CHAPTER 4

PURUSHARTHA: THE GOALS OF LIFE

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The goals that each human being might seek to achieve in his/her life are categorized by Hindu scriptures in four groups:

1. *ARTHA*: the pursuit of material security and prosperity;
2. *KAMA* (pronounced *kaama*): fulfill desire;
3. *DHARMA*: doing the right thing in keeping with one's own essential nature; seeking to sustain, protect, nourish the environment in which one lives;
4. *MOKSHA*: liberation from the cycle of birth and death; freedom from sorrow.

Each of these goals is legitimate, and is even necessary at some stage of life. But leading a purposeful life requires skill in how one defines and pursues each goal and how one finds the right balance among competing goals of life. The first two goals, *artha* and *kama*, appeal to our instincts. They can be simply paraphrased as “making money” and “having fun,” which describes the bulk of the activities of most human beings. But they do also have a spiritual dimension. The other two goals, *dharma* and *moksha* are explicitly spiritual in nature.

ARTHA: Each of us is endowed with a physical body that needs food, clothing, shelter and a minimum level of physical comfort. Providing for these needs is an aspect of *artha*. Without that, it is impossible for anyone to pursue the loftier goals of *Dharma* and *Moksha*. Each human being owes a debt to parents and family for protection, nourishment and support, at least in the early years of life; and each adult feels an obligation to provide these to his/her children and spouse. Thus the pursuit of *Artha* to meet the basic needs of the family is an essential goal of life. By extension, promoting the material prosperity of the community in which one lives is also a commendable human aspiration. However, there are two ways in which the pursuit of *Artha* can come into conflict with the broader goals of life. The first is when we use deceit and exploitation to garner more wealth for ourselves and our families, at the expense of the well-being of others. The second is when we fail to distinguish between “need” and “want,” leading to limitless greedy acquisition and an obsessive pursuit of wealth at the expense of other aspects of a fulfilling life. Recognizing this as a common human failing, scriptures advise a practice of charity as an antidote to an excessive focus on *artha*.⁵

KAMA: The force of desire is one of the deepest forces in nature and has fundamental cosmic significance in Hindu scriptures. Desire is the very source of the creative urge that led to creation of the world and is a prerequisite to the acquisition of knowledge and the motivation to act.⁶ The most basic form of desire in all living beings is the urge to survive, which inspires remarkable feats of courage and endurance. One aspect of the urge to survive is the urge to procreate. In animals, desire

⁵ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 5.2.2

⁶ “Desire entered the One in the beginning; it was the earliest seed...” Rg Veda 10.129.4;

is mostly expressed as instinct—preferring certain foods, the tendency to live in groups, the marking of territory, mating habits etc. In human beings, the force of desire finds more varied expression. Most commonly, it is seeking pleasure by indulging the senses of sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. The scope of such sensory pleasures is vastly greater in human beings than in animals, and is ever expanding. In addition, human beings entertain subtler forms of desire such as ambition for fame and power, a thirst for knowledge and the drive to master nature.

The Upanishads have classified human desire into three broad groups: the desire for wealth, the desire for progeny and the desire to be loved and respected by others.⁷ These categories encompass both *artha* and *kama*. More generally, all these desires may be seen as deriving from a desire to be happy. The issue is whether the pursuit of *artha* and *kama* alone is likely to lead to a fulfilling life characterized by happiness and peace of mind. From this perspective, the scriptures contain strong cautionary remarks. First, the actions in pursuit of *artha* and *kama* must always be in consonance with the principles of *dharma*, the third goal listed above⁸. When actions violate *dharma*, the *karmic* consequences of such wrong actions will inevitably bring unhappiness and agitation in this or in future lives. Second, the scriptures point out that as long as one seeks happiness in external sources—sensory pleasure, acquisition of objects and building relationships with others—happiness is bound to be ephemeral.⁹ Lasting happiness can only be based on sound spiritual practices designed to lead to the fourth goal, *moksha*.

DHARMA: is traditionally stated first in the list of goals, to emphasize that *dharma* should be the ethical foundation for all aspects of life, including the pursuit of *artha* and *kama*. The root meaning of *dharma* is “to sustain or nourish.” A practical interpretation of *dharma* is: those actions that best sustain and uphold our own integrity and that of our surroundings. *Dharma* is not simply a set of laws; it is a highly nuanced set of guidelines whose application requires individual discretion based on one’s particular role and the context of a specific situation. The challenge for human beings is to discern their *dharma* and develop the mental discipline to live by it. Scriptures provide some guidance by explaining the right *dharma* for those at different stages of life: student, householder, retired and renunciate. Another technique used in the scriptures is to define the *dharma* appropriate to different human temperaments. When each person fulfills the *dharma* appropriate to his or her individual temperament, stage of life and role in society, the collective impact is best for the stability and prosperity of society as a whole.

Although there is voluminous literature on *dharma*, it is generally agreed that there are three guiding principles that are most important in guiding actions on the path of *dharma*.

- *Ahimsa*, non-injury: avoiding violent actions, harsh words and hurtful thoughts.
- *Satya*, truthfulness: being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word and deed.

⁷ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.22

⁸ “...I (Supreme Consciousness) am desire unopposed to Dharma” Bhagavad Gita 7.11

⁹ “The contact of senses with objects which cause heat and cold, pleasure and pain, have a beginning and an end; they are impermanent...” Bhagavad Gita 2.14

- *Brahmacharya*, non-indulgence: a disciplined life that abstains from sensory excess.

Recalling that *dharma* is one's own essential nature, enquiring deeply into our own essential nature as human beings is an important aspect of the pursuit of *dharma*. This aspect of *dharma* is known as the fourth goal, *moksha*.

MOKSHA: *Moksha* is liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth known as *samsara*. Those whose lives are consumed by the pursuit of *artha* and *kama* gradually come to realize that their lives are an endless struggle. Driven by likes and dislikes, they lurch between happiness and sorrow, faintly aware that life might have greater meaning and purpose. The pursuit of *moksha* involves study, reflection and practice of a variety of ways to realize the full potential of being a human being. Those who seek *moksha* work to transform their minds so that they become aware of the Divine's presence everywhere at all times in themselves, in every other human being, in the whole of creation. Such a person rises above sorrows and spreads peace and joy.

All four goals—*dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*—have a place in life. Human beings can realize their full potential only when *dharma* is the foundation of their lives and *moksha* the culmination. The relationship among the four goals is dramatically illustrated in the ancient Swastika Symbol: the bottom left and top right arms of the swastika represent *artha* and *kama*, which plateau in the extent to which they confer happiness. The bottom right and top left arms represent *dharma* and *moksha*, whose benefits are unlimited. The pursuit of *dharma* and *moksha* pays far greater dividends in the long run than the pursuit of *artha* and *kama*.