

## CHAPTER 6

### *DHARMA*

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*Dharma* is commonly understood to mean code of conduct, righteousness or law. But these interpretations are partial. As *dharma* is a central concept not only in Hinduism but also in other religions that originated in India, it is worth enquiring more closely into its meaning. *Dharma* provides the ethical foundation for all aspects of life, not only spiritual, and guides conduct by providing criteria for making good choices in all that we do. Indeed, Hinduism itself is properly known as *Sanatana Dharma*, the Eternal *Dharma*. This note explains what *dharma* is and illustrates how widely the concept is applied in Hindu scriptures to guide life choices.

The Sanskrit word *dharma* has no equivalent in English, which makes this concept more than usually difficult to explain. *Dharma* has the Sanskrit root *dhri*, which means “that which upholds or sustains” or “that without which nothing can stand” or “that which maintains the stability and harmony of the universe.” From these root meanings tradition derives several interpretations. One interpretation of *dharma* is: those actions that best sustain and uphold our own integrity as human beings; the harmony of our family, communities or nations; the ecological balance of our planet; and the future of our civilization. *Dharma* can also be seen as defining our essential nature. Just as the *dharma* of sugar is to be sweet and the *dharma* of fire is to burn, each of us has an essential nature that is our *dharma*. The challenge we face as human beings is to discern our *dharma* and live by it.

*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. Much of Hindu religious literature is aimed at conveying a nuanced understanding of *dharma* through teachings, stories and dialogues on what constitutes appropriate actions and responses in a variety of real-life situations.

Some tenets of *dharma* have wide or even universal applicability. An example is the Golden Rule: “This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”<sup>22</sup> But to a large extent, the practice of *dharma* requires the cultivation of the right qualities and mental discipline to make the right choices appropriate to the situation. Giving guidance on these matters is a major goal of a class of Hindu scriptures known as *Smriti*, to distinguish them from the revealed scriptures such as the *Vedas* that are known as *Shruti*. Whereas *Shruti* deals with universal truths, *Smriti* deals with relative truths that are subject to change in response to

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<sup>22</sup> The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, verse 8; Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993; vol IV pg. 235

variations in time and place.<sup>23</sup> A subset of the *Smriti* literature are texts that deal specifically with *Dharma*, explaining in detail what constitutes right or wrong action in defined circumstances. Many texts provide checklists of qualities to be cultivated in support of *dharma*<sup>24</sup>. An authoritative source, the *Manu Smriti* lists *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (not acquiring illegitimate wealth), *shoucham* (purity), and *indriya-nigraha* (control of senses) as the five qualities that constitutes a universal *dharma*.<sup>25</sup> The two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are rich sources of wisdom on *dharma*, providing exemplars of noble behavior such as equanimity in the face of adversity, obedience to parents, brotherly love, service, devotion to truth, trust in God and many more. The *Mahabharata* illustrates how those who oppose *dharma* can be highly successful and prosper for a while but definitely come to a bad end<sup>26</sup>.

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

- **Ahimsa, non-injury:** avoiding violent actions, harsh words and malicious thoughts. Violence has its roots in ignorance, intolerance, jealousy, greed, anger and fear. Overcoming such negative emotions and cultivating an all-encompassing love and forgiveness is the goal and the means of practicing *ahimsa*.
- **Satya, truthfulness:** being truthful to oneself and to others in thought, word and deed. Speaking only when necessary and adhering to promises are aspects of this practice.
- **Brahmacharya, non-indulgence:** abstaining from sensory excess that dissipates vital energy and causes harm to others. A common translation, celibacy, is too narrow an interpretation. All forms of sensory indulgence drain energy that could otherwise be used for one's spiritual awakening. Disciplining one's senses is therefore an essential element in living a meaningful life.

A relatively simple approach to *dharma* is to consider the need to discharge our debts. Hindu scriptures identify four categories of debt owed by all humans and fulfilling these obligations can be seen as a basic requirement of a *dharmic* life<sup>27</sup>:

- **Debt to God**, the One who creates and sustains the universe. This debt is discharged by maintaining an awareness of God through prayer and worship; and ensuring that we act in harmony with cosmic forces in sustaining creation.

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<sup>23</sup> "When there is conflict between *Shruti*, *Smriti* and the *Puranas*, *Shruti* should be taken as the authority." Vyasa *Smriti* (1-V-4). Further, when a law is offensive it must be rejected. (*Manu Smriti* 4.176).

<sup>24</sup> For one such list of 26 qualities, see *Bhagavad Gita* 16.1-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Manu Smriti* X.63

<sup>26</sup> *Manu Smriti* IV.174

<sup>27</sup> The *Mahabharata*, *Adi Parva*, Section CXX; Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993; vol I pg. 250

- **Debt to the sages** who have preserved ancient wisdom and whose teachings guide us in every aspect of our lives. Study and practice of the scriptures is how we discharge this obligation.
- **Debt to our parents** who have begotten and cared for us. Respecting our parents, preserving their memory and bringing up our children to be good human beings is our obligation to them.
- **Debt to society**, the social environment in which we live. Caring for all living beings with whom we share this world, and supporting the provision of social services are some of the ways in which we meet this fourth obligation.

It is important to note that *dharma* defines an approach to right action; it does not classify a specific action as right or wrong independent of the circumstances. If the action sustains, it is *dharmic*; if it disrupts, it is not *dharmic*. An action that might be *dharmic* in some circumstances might not be *dharmic* in other circumstances. This principle can be illustrated with reference to the physical body. The body is one of the primary means of achieving any goal in life, so actions that help sustain the health of the body are *dharmic*, such as eating, sleeping, bathing, exercising etc. But if a person is sick, these same actions may hurt rather than sustain the body's health. When a person is sick, *dharma* is then defined as rest, fasting, medication etc. Thus the practice of *dharma* does not specify a list of "do's" and "don'ts", but requires the exercise of discrimination and attention to the particularity of each situation. The same approach to the definition of *dharma* can be applied at the mental and emotional levels. The highest *dharma* is non-injury at the physical level as well as in speech and thought. But surgeons need to cut the patient's body in order to heal it. Similarly, even war may be *dharmic* if all attempts fail to solve a major social problem without violence. Shrinking from such a war when strong disruptive forces are at work may create problems for society more severe than the violent consequences of war. It all depends on the motivation and whether sincere efforts have been made to minimize the hurt caused by our actions.

Recognizing the contextual nature of *dharma*, scriptures discuss *dharma* that is appropriate at different stages of one's life. A typical life-span may be viewed in four stages following childhood. The first stage is that of *brahmacharya*, which is the equivalent of being a student; the appropriate *dharma* for a student is to excel at acquiring knowledge. The second stage is *grihastha* which means 'householder,' when an adult goes to work and raises a family; the appropriate *dharma* at this stage is to care for the family and meet obligations to society. The third stage is *vanaprastha* which means 'forest dweller' and may be viewed as equivalent of a retired person; the appropriate *dharma* at this stage of life is to allow the next generation to take charge of affairs, reflect on the deeper issues of life and engage in spiritual practice. The final stage, which does not apply to all persons, might be *sanyasa* which means complete renunciation of worldly attachments; such a person is wholly devoted to spiritual evolution.

Another technique used in the scriptures is to define the *dharma* appropriate to different human temperaments. In any society there are some persons who are intellectuals; others are focused on exercising power and leadership; others are engaged in productive occupations and amassing wealth; and many have no special calling, content to function as workers and followers in society. Based on these four temperaments, Hindu scriptures have traditionally defined four *varnas* and assign tasks and responsibilities to each *varna* so that all people contribute to society in ways for which they are best qualified: the *Brahmana* functions as the priest or intellectual and is required to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; the *Kshatriya* is a ruler of society and is required to use his power to maintain social order and especially to protect the weak; the *Vaisya* is the trader or businessman and is required to support society by funding the state treasury and building social infrastructure; the *Sudra* is required to serve his employers loyally. When each person fulfills the *dharma* appropriate to his or her individual temperament, the collective impact is best for the stability and prosperity of society as a whole.

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 is the subject matter of the *Upanishads*, and is given practical direction in *yoga* philosophy. A life lived according to *dharma* is an essential preparation for spiritual practice leading to Self-Realization.<sup>28</sup>

*Note:* There are numerous texts that address the topic of *Dharma*. Two recommended texts:

1. *Hindu Dharma, The Universal Way of Life* by Pujyasri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati Svami, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1996; ISBN 81-7276-055-8. 828 pages. This book is an extensive treatise by a traditional authority.
2. *Dharma: The Global Ethic* by Justice M. Rama Jois; ebook: [www.vhp-america.org](http://www.vhp-america.org) is a contemporary text drawing on traditional sources including the *Mahabharata*.

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<sup>28</sup> See the author's note on Spiritual Practice.