

THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA

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Abstract: In spite of differences in the conditions created by the advancement of science and technology modern man is very much similar to primitive man and animals. He also takes birth and dies like them. He also lives in a particular space and time and feels the forces of emotions. He also weeps and laughs like them. One never takes birth alone. When one is born, he perceives many faces like him. Nature amuses herself by creating variety of same type as well as different types. Modern man also depends on nature like primitive man and animals. So in order to live in harmony with our fellow beings and nature we must conform to certain basic rules as the residents of society and nature. Dharma is the matrix of basic rules. Dharma is not merely understanding of transcendental being in order to cross the river of world. It is also rules for living in the river. Artha (property), kāma (sexual enjoyment) and empirical knowledge etc. are objects found in the worldly river and Dharma also provides basis for realizing them (yatoabhudaya-nihisreyasasiddih).

Traditionally four goals of life have been accepted: dharma, artha, kāma and moksa (liberation). It is possible to demonstrate more than four puru "s" ārthas. That is not an important question. The important question is: Which is the supreme puru "s" ārtha? In our opinion it is dharma. In order to demonstrate the superiority of dharma, let us do a mental experiment. Suppose a person is born alone. Even then in order to realize his goals he must conform to certain rules. He is limited by birth, death, time, and energy. So he can not realize all things simultaneously. His energy is limited and if he wants to maximize the fulfillment of his desires, he must need certain understanding of rules. He must not eat too much or he must not eat the poisonous things, otherwise, the span of his life will be minimized and that would minimize the fulfillment of desires. So in order to maximize other goals in a limited time and space, he must need the understanding of certain basic rules which may be the subset of the basic rules of the dharma. If there is more than one man in our experiment, the superiority of dharma becomes clearer. In order to maximize the goals of individual we must understand the rules which govern the society and nature. If we are rational beings then we must try to avoid conflicts. In order to maximize the goal of individual itself, we have to know to certain rules. Understanding of any type of rules provides power and power is pregnant with realization of desired control. So even from the viewpoint of individualistic tendency, we must observe certain rules and these rules must belong to the category of dharma. If our starting point is non-individualistic goals, dharma automatically becomes the ground for other activities or goals. We have tried to demonstrate the superiority of dharma from the individualistic point of view because there are many Western thinkers who misuse the notion of freedom on the name of individuality. They say that freedom

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means choice and to prescribe any rule for human choice is to destroy very individuality or freedom of man. Man is free even to commit suicide. One should ask to them whether this type of freedom should be allowed to grownup man only or even to child? Should we leave the crying new born- baby in the same state or should we take measures to help him? If we feel that to help a child is to interfere with his basic freedom, then we have become abnormal and need special cure on the ground of dharma. On the other hand, if our instinct forces us to help him, then we are not allowing the freedom of choice in an unconditional way. We are following dharma, without being aware of it. To follow a rule and to be aware of it is not the same thing. What we call freedom of choice may be the result of certain rules operating at deeper level of our consciousness. If freedom of choice is the experience of not only one grownup individual but of all grown up individuals, then it is sanctioned and controlled by the deeper laws of nature. Man's mind is not "tabula rasa" at the time of taking birth. The studies in Genetic field has demonstrated *the storage of information in molecular sequences. One writer comments –"Biology now tells us that Kant was right, and empiricists wrong: we start our lives with great deal of information, which is developed and supplemented by our subsequent contacts with environment"¹

Davis, D. Bernard, "Molecular Genetics and the Falsifiability of Evolution" in "The kaleidoscope of science" vol. I [ed. Margalit, E.U. (D. Reidel publishing company. Dordrecht, Holland 1986) p. 109] realize anything if the fortune does not favor him and the fortune is controlled by dharma. As fate is necessary in order to fulfillment of any desire, so dharma is the helper or obstacle in the realization of every activity. Vyāsa's great statement in the "Mahābhārata" that dharma is the ground of artha and kāma contains the astrological truth also. Dharma is not only necessary in order to realize transcendental truth but also in order to realize empirical goals. The term 'Dharma' has also been used in many different ways. Three different uses of it will be mentioned here: 1) That which holds together all living beings in harmonious order is Dharma (dhāraṇāt dharmah); 2) That which enables to us achieve happiness, here and hereafter is Dharma (yato - abhodayaniḥśeyasasiddiḥ); 3) That which is asserted by the commandment of the Veda as conducive to welfare (Chodanā-lakṣano - arthaḥ dharmah). In his book *the science of religion* a great scholar Late Dr. Bhagvanadas calls the first view as philologist-etymological view, the second as practicalist-pragmatist view and third as jurisprudent's view. He says, "it should be noted, however, that the world which means 'command' here, also means 'inspiration', the inspiring of someone by the energy of the inspirer; an urge from within, of the spirit, as Benevolence, and from without, as law, compare its use in Gāyatrī". (Das, 1917: 24) It means that the above three formulations of Dharma are not contrary to each-other as they can be synthesized. Commands are prescribed in order to make us aware of the goals intimately connected with our desired happiness. The command, for example, that 'one should perform sacrifice, if he is desirous of attaining Heaven', makes us aware of the existence of Heaven where we can enjoy our life after death. We are not aware of the existence of Heaven. Scriptural injunctions play the role of guide in this matter. When a father commands his son of five years to attend school his commandment is very much related to the future happiness of

son of which he may not be aware. The Vedic commands regarding Dharma is analytically connected with the doctrines of sacrifice, gods and offering materials for gods. Sacrifice means expansion of activity for the sake of others. The Sun is doing sacrifice as he is not shining for himself but for other beings also. Sacrifice is the nave of the Universe (bhuvanasya nābhiḥ).

The rules for sacrifices constitute the major portions of the Vedic texts. The Vedic ritual (yāga) is thus defined as 'offering of an article in the name god'. How many gods are? Yāska holds the view that there are only three gods-Agni (fire) on earth. Vāyu (air) or Indra in the aerial region and Sūrya (sun) in Heaven. All others are merely names of these three gods. According to Yāska Etymologists (Nairuktāḥ) believe that there are three main gods, Agni on earth, Vāyu or Indra in the aerial region (antarikṣa) and Sūrya in the heaven. All other gods are simply the names and glory of these three gods. (Chattopadhyaya, 1975:16) Why these gods were taken superior to other gods? It is because these gods are presiding over natural phenomena which are very much essential to maintain the life on the earth. Air manifestly functions as having embodiment relation with not only man but also with other living beings. The embodiment relation, according to the philosophers of technology, is that relation in whom a technological artifact functions by being a part of our body. (Verbeck, 2000: 125) Air also functions as being a part of living beings as they cannot survive in the absence of air. The other two gods Fire and Sun play a role of hermeneutic relation in the interpretation of other natural phenomena or world. Hermeneutic relation is that relation where an artifact is used to interpret the world. (Ibid: 126) Sāyana remarks that there are two types of objects in the world. (Sāyana 1969: 10-11) Some are revealed by others while some objects are revealers as well as revealed. Sun and Fire can be put in the second groups. The post-modern philosophers are very much critical of the dichotomy of subjective-objective developed in the age of enlightenment and modernity. They are not capable of doing justice to nature and artifacts. Most of the living beings are hybrids. We cannot conceive of our life without air. Air is the part of our being. We cannot understand the world in the absence of light. Fire and Sun are the sources of light and heat. That is why they are considered superior to other gods. The Vedic seers have tried to discover the unifying principle in another way. The various gods are asserted as protectors of moral law as well as natural law. In the very first śukta of Ṛgveda Agni is taken as a guardian of Ṛta (goptā ṛtasya). Ādityas in general have been connected with Ṛta and Mitra and Varuṇa belong to the class of Ādityas. That is why they were accepted as protectors of moral law and natural-order. They have placed spies for this purpose. The Sun is their spy in the day while stars are their spies in the night. They can punish the wrong-doers and also pardon those who are penitent or confess their guilt. (Chattopadhyaya, 1975: 49-53) The new direction in the environmental ethics does not support the conception of traditional Western ethics as it is based on anthropomorphic principles. It derives morality only from the conception of man or from human point of view. A need of new type of ethics is felt whose rays also touch the frontiers of natural phenomena. From this point of view Vedic doctrine of Ṛta is commendable. The laws of Ṛta are firm and resistless. For the good of living beings, Ṛta assumes forms infinite and beautiful. (Ṛgveda IV- 23.9)

They are pregnant with required energies for maintenance of social order as well as natural order. Rta plays a measure role in the sustenance of Dharma. Dharma ultimately places us in the field of spirituality. Yāska has remarked that sacrifices are flowers and gods are fruits. Similarly, gods are flowers and spirituality is the ultimate fruit (yājñadaivate puṣpaphale devatādhyātme vā). Spirituality whatever else it may be, but it asks us to search for a unifying principle among the plurality (avibhaktam vibhkteṣu). The concept god has also be used in Vedic literature in a wider sense. Whenever we are offering prayer to someone he is god...The Great seer Vaśiṣṭha composed a hymn in the praise of frog (mandūka). The god of this him is mandūk. The term yajñya is derived from the root 'yaj' which means-worship of god, harmony and charity (dāna). Here worship means paying respect to someone who deserves. Harmony demands efforts from us for maintaining social, environmental and cosmic lives. Charity, according to Manu, is the supreme Dharma in our age of Kaliyuga. Gītā maintains that our action will lead to bondage if they are not performed with an attitude of sacrifice. Sanātana Dharma accepts two forms of life: (i) Life of renunciation (nivṛtimārgīya). (ii) Life of enjoyment (pravṛtti-mārgīya). The triadic formula covers in brief the whole scheme of life in traditional Hinduism: (i) Four goals of life (Puruṣārthas)-dharma (religious, moral and social duties), Kāma sensuous enjoyment), artha (acquisition of property and mokṣa (liberation); (ii) four order of classes (varaṇa-dharma)-Brāhmaṇa (students, learning and teaching class) Kṣatriya (fighting and protecting class), Vaiśya (Business class) and Śūdra (Service class); (iii) Four stages of life- Brahmacharya (Student's life with celibacy), Gṛihstha (Life after marriage as a house-holder), Vānaprastha (Preparing to cut family ties and sanyasa (complete renunciation where one is expected to live alone in the forest and meditate on supreme reality). In ancient times ladies also use to take renunciation along with their husband. The saints who are interested in the life of renunciation do not prefer to go other stages of life. They hold that Dharma is taught (except mokṣa dharama) only for those who are interested in the life of sensuous pleasure and business activities. But those who are not interested in these goals they should follow path of renunciation. Śankaracarya prefers it and many others even modem English educated man like Shri Satish Chandra Mukharjee advocated the view that the life of renunciation is the distinguishing feature of Indian culture. Sanyāsins (those who follow the path of renunciation view this life of birth and death as full of sufferings. Any activity or any good thing in the world causes sufferings for three reasons: (i) its consequences are not source of happiness, (ii) It generates heat (tāpa-it puts us in a state which we don't desire) and (iii) It conditions us to an extent from which it is impossible to get rid of (saṁskāra). A real wise man does not opt worldly life for these reasons. He is interested in attaining nirvāna or mokṣa. These types of persons are not required to perform social service. Such type of persons do not required to live in a group. There is a story in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa which will illustrate this point. A lady was using an old type of stone wheel to grind some wheat-powders to serve her guests. She was very poor. She had ornaments in her hand. Ornaments were causing audible noises, and she feared that guest could guess her poorness due to noise. She took off all the ornaments except two of them on each hand. Even then audible noises where

occurring. Ultimately she decided to have only one of them so that audible sound would absolutely be stopped. Similarly a wise man should live alone. This is the essence of *nivṛtti-margiyajivana*. This type of life is not rooted in social service. Acarya Sankara maintains that the Ultimate Reality (Brahmana) is not the fruit of an act. The fruit generated by an act is one of the four types: (i) Origination (*utapatti*), attainment (*Prāpti*), Modification (*vikāra*) and Purification (*saṃsakāra*). Of these origination, attainment and modification are not possible in respect to Brahman because brahman is changeless. Since brahman is absolutely pure, therefore, purification is also inconceivable. Actions are required to attain something which is near or far in space and time. Brahman or Ultimate Reality is our Inner-Self. Only ignorance has to be removed in this case and for removal of ignorance only knowledge is required. The attainment of brahman is figurative. It is evident from scriptural texts like- “Being already Brahman, he attains Brahman”.

The story described in Old Testament supports this view. Adam was prohibited by the lord to eat the fruits of a tree which was in the middle of the garden. But he ate it due to influence of a snake and his wife. This event brought curse on Adam and the whole humanity coming after him. After this event, he was told by the Lord that he and his offspring had to labor a lot in order to get his livelihood and earth would not produce anything easily for them. The wise man does not want to be a part of the scheme which was brought on the earth due to the curse of The Lord. All other men who are not living the life of non-renunciation in absolute sense are destined to follow the life of *pravṛtti marga*. The egoist may also serve the cause of humanity if he works in a good institution and belongs to the part of a plan which is a beneficial to humanity. A silent researcher, a teacher, a scientist and all others in this way may contribute in welfare of humanity. If Egoism is combined with interest, capacity and duty, it may bring good results for the society. Those who are not interested in following *mokṣa dharma* but interested in the forms of life which rest on making money and involving oneself in sensuous pleasure, they should try to harmonize their lives by evolving a balance equation among morality (*dharma*), property, (*artha*) and sensuous pleasure (*kāma*) for their own benefits, The balance equation is that in which one of them does not disturb the others. *Yoga-sūtra* talks about 4 virtues which are easy to practice irrespective of caste, creed and stages of life. Their practice will minimize the suffering of the man practicing it. These are: 1) friendship (*maitrī*), 2) compassion (*Karuṇā*), 3) happiness in the prosperity of others (*muditā*) and indifferent attitude towards unnecessary matters (*upekṣā*). One could practice friendship at mental level and make protest at the level of action. All these are more fruitful when they are constituents of the internal state of a man. They are called *brahmavihāras* (enjoyment of divine virtues) and praised highly in Buddhism. They are capable of putting any man in Heaven. The rules for conduct are the most important *dharma*s (*achara* “h” *paramo dharm* “h”). From the ordinary perspective it seems that *dharma* puts restrictions on individuality. But from another perspective these rules contain seeds of our freedom. Suppose we are practicing honesty and impartiality. The practice of these virtues means that we are not submitting ourselves to the demands of our local fields. We are not considering the matters from

the viewpoint of individuality or family are village etc. it means that our consciousness is transcending the boundary of family or state or world. Our freedom becomes absolute when considering any matter we think from the viewpoint of absolute universality which may be termed as self or Brahman. If the lower limit of our freedom is individuality upper limit of our freedom is the Brahman. We believe in the Brahman or self or not, that is an immaterial question. The question is: Do we want to realize freedom or not? If we want to realize freedom then we have to transcend the boundaries of local field constituted by family, village, state etc. and we cannot transcend these local fields without identifying oneself with universal self. Consciousness has so many powers. But the most important power is the power of identification. One cannot be absolutely free without increasing this power to an absolute limit. So the management of worldly affairs and liberation is also governed by dharma (daivi sampad-vimok "s" āya).

Dharma is the matrix of rules sustaining the whole world and a rule always implies difference and adjustment of particularity with universality. Nature does not create individual but individuals not object but objects. Whenever life moves, its movement creates variety. Wherever there is variety we must adjust individuality with universality. Maximize the gain of individuals or particulars, either the particularity will be transcended (aham brahmāsmi) or the particularity or individuality will break down against the will of individuals. Suppose a person is given full freedom to enjoy all the ladies of the world. The person would not be able to materialize it with his limited energy, time and space. Nature has limited individuality in order to make room for other individuals. Unless we recognize this truth in our inner being, our personality will be divided and we would become problems for ourselves. What is true for individual is also true for a particular culture or society or the whole human culture. The human society is also limited in space and time. It has also limited energy. If it wants to exploit nature without limitation then it will bring misfortunes for the whole human existence. We are always praising the glory of modern scientific inventions. But 100 years or 400 hundred are nothing from the viewpoint of history of nature. If we try to exploit nature beyond limits, then nature will not leave us untouched. The ecological crisis and degradation of our planet's biosphere are warning of nature to modern man to harmonize their livings in accordance with the permitted rules of nature. Nature is also full of compassion. It provides time as well as lower and upper limits for our activities. There is no hard rules within these limits. That is why we have the sense of the freedom of choice. But if we try to cross the limits then we have to face her angry moods. We, therefore, must adjust the rules of conduct or society with the rules operating behind the nature. We must approach the problems at the human level or individual level from the viewpoint of cosmological level. Perfect harmony cannot be brought at individual, social or human level without living in harmony with the whole world. An individual cannot escape from this responsibility as individual is simultaneously participating in social as well natural orders. If he eats more, he will become ill. He has a body and this body exemplifies the rules of other bodies. It separates us because it is limited in space and time. It relates us because it is governed by rules operating for all the bodies. It is

not the case that individual belongs to society and society belongs to Cosmos; but rather both simultaneously participates in the happenings of Cosmos and governed by the rules operating behind the Cosmos. This creates possibility for the relative freedom of individuals even when the society is not absolutely free. This creates situations for occurrence of saintly persons, great social workers who actualize the great values and do service to society even after death by becoming the ideals. That is why in *Rāmācharitamānsa Gosvami ji* praising the name of Rama more than Rama. Rama's activities ended with his death but his name is doing great service even after his death. What we want to emphasize is that dharma is not limited to only instrumental values. It operates also at the level of ideals. It binds and makes us free from backward as well as forward direction. If we violate the dharma, then we will bring misfortunes for ourselves because everything is ultimately grounded in dharma (Dharmo Visvasya Jagatah Pratisthā).

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