

# Chapter I. What Is Dharma?

People must dedicate themselves to *dharmā* and always be engaged in *dharmā*, so that they may live in peace and the world may enjoy peace. One cannot acquire real peace, nor can one win the grace of the Lord, through any means other than the *dharmic* life. *Dharma* is the foundation for the welfare of humanity; it is the truth that is stable for all time. When *dharmā* fails to transmute human life, the world is afflicted by agony and fear and tormented by stormy revolutions. When the effulgence of *dharmā* fails to illumine human relationships, humanity is shrouded in the night of sorrow.

## God is the embodiment of dharma

God is the embodiment of *dharmā*; His grace is won by *dharmā*. He is ever fostering *dharmā*. He is ever establishing *dharmā*. He is *dharmā* itself. The *Vedas*, scriptures (*sastras*), epics (*Puranas*), and traditional accounts (*itihāsas*) proclaim aloud the glory of *dharmā*.

In the scriptures of the various religions, *dharmā* is elaborated in language familiar to the adherents. The duty of everyone, everywhere, and at all times is to pay homage to the personification of *dharmā* (*Dharma-Narayana*).

The stream of *dharmic* activity should never run dry; when its cool waters cease to flow, disaster is certain. Humanity has reached this stage only because *dharmā*, like the river Saraswathi, flows unseen, below the ground, feeding the roots and filling the springs. Not only humanity but even birds and beasts have to adhere to *dharmā* so that they may be happy and survive in comfort and joy.

Therefore, the waters of *dharmā* have to be kept flowing perpetually and fully, so that the world might enjoy happiness. Disaster now dances madly on the world stage, because right is neglected and there is disbelief in the essentials of *dharmic* life. So, one has to understand clearly the very heart of *dharmā*.

## Dharma is misunderstood

What is meant by *dharmā*? What is the essence of *dharmā*? Can common people lead a happy life and survive if they stick to *dharmā*? Naturally, these doubts confuse the mind in the course of life. Solving them is necessary, even urgent.

As soon as *dharmā* is mentioned, the ordinary person takes it to mean: giving alms, feeding and providing lodging to pilgrims, adherence to one's traditional profession or craft, law-abiding nature, discrimination between right and wrong, the pursuit of one's innate nature over the freaks of one's own mind, the fruition of one's fondest desires, and so on.

Of course, it is a long, long time since the spotless countenance of *dharmā* was tarnished beyond recognition. Beautiful fields and groves run wild with neglect and soon become unrecognizable bushland and thorny jungle; fine trees are hewn by greedy people, and the shape of the landscape is changed. With the passage of time, people get accustomed to the new state of things and don't notice the transformation, the decline. This has also happened to *dharmā*.

Everyone has to acquaint himself with the outlines of *dharmā*, expounded in the *Vedas*, scriptures (*sastras*), and *Puranas*. Misunderstood by incompetent intelligence, unbridled emotion, and impure reasoning, these works

have been grossly diluted, and their glory has suffered grievously. Just as raindrops from the clear blue sky get coloured and contaminated when they fall on the soil, the unsullied message of the ancient sages (*rishis*), the example of their shining deeds, and the bright untarnished urges behind their actions are all turned into ugly caricatures of their original grandeur by uncultured interpreters and scholars.

Books written for children contain illustrations to clarify the text, but the children spend their time with the pictures, forgetting what they are intended to clarify. In the same way, the unwary and the uneducated mistake the rituals, which are designed to illustrate the grand truths, as profoundly real in themselves and ignore the truth that they were meant to elucidate. Travellers moving along the road rest for a while in wayside shelters, but during their stay, they damage by neglect or misuse the very structure that gives them rest. So too, the dull and perverse alter the very face of *Vedic* morality and deceive the world into believing that their handiwork is what the *Vedas* teach!

When such mauling of *dharma* took place, when the face of *dharma* suffered disfigurement at the hands of the enemies of God, the Lord responded to the call of the gods and the godly and saved the world from ruin, by restoring right and truth in the field of *dharma* and *karma*, i.e. in both ideal and practice.

Now, who can cure the present blindness? Man has to slay the six-fold beast of inner enemies (*arishadvarga*) that lead him on to disaster: lust, anger, greed, delusion, pride, and hate. Thus only can *dharma* be restored.

### **Buddha and Sankara adhered to dharma**

The Lord was referred to as *dharma* by the *Vedas* and as highest wisdom (*vi-jnana*) by Buddha. In those days, no one liked the word “*Veda*”. In the times of the demon (*asura*) Somaka, those who followed the *Vedas* desisted from calling them “*Veda*”. While in mortal dread, such behaviour is passable. Yet the Buddha was full of reverence for the *Vedas*; he was ever infused with God. The Buddha is often spoken of as an atheist (*nasthika*)! Well, if the Buddha is an atheist, who then is the theist (*asthika*)? The entire life of the Buddha is a saga of *dharma*.

Sankara is criticized by some people as being opposed to the path of *dharma* and *karma* (action). But Sankara opposed only the *dharma* and *karma* that have fulfilment of desire in view. He was indeed the great teacher who taught the path of *dharma* and *karma*, of endeavour impelled by the understanding of the basic truth.

The adherence of Sankara to *dharma* and *karma* based on truth and the faith of the Buddha in the essentials of the *Vedas* can be appreciated only by one who has the higher vision. Without that, one will be led astray in the interpretation. In order to climb a great height, a ladder as tall as the height is needed, is it not?

### **On the path of dharma**

Whoever subdues egotism, conquers selfish desires, destroys bestial feelings and impulses, and gives up the natural tendency to regard the body as the self that person is surely on the path of *dharma*; that person knows that the goal of *dharma* is the merging of the wave in the sea, the merging of the self in the Over-self.

In all worldly activities, be careful not to offend propriety or the canons of good nature; do not play false to the promptings of the inner voice; be prepared at all times to respect the appropriate dictates of conscience; watch your steps to see whether you are in someone else’s way; be ever vigilant to discover the truth behind all this scintillating variety. This is your entire duty, your *dharma*. The blazing fire of wisdom (*jnana*), which convinces you that all this is Brahman (*sarvam khalvidam Brahmanam*), will consume into ashes all traces of your egotism and

worldly attachment. You must become intoxicated with the nectar of union with Brahman; that is the ultimate goal of *dharmā* and of action (*karma*) inspired by *dharmā*.

“Sacrifice ignorance (*a-jnana*) and ego (*ahamkara*) at the altar of wisdom (*jnana*) and install *dharmā* therein”; this is the message of the *Vedas*. Every single unselfish act that prepares the ground for the merging of the soul with the Over-Soul, that broadens the vision toward the basic Brahman immanent everywhere, is a *dharmic* act. Each such act is a tiny stream that swells the river of holiness rushing toward the sea of knowledge of Brahman. Your acts and activities are all rituals in the worship of the highest *Atma*, which pervades the universe. Whatever is done in an attitude of dedication and surrender is a component of the *dharmā* that leads to realization. The strategy of the Indian (*Bharathiya*) way of life is directed toward the sanctification of every movement and every thought, word, and deed into a step toward that realisation.

### **Symbolic meanings of spiritual terms and acts**

You have to understand ancient pious actions (*dharmā-karmas*) by entering into their symbolic meaning. The spiritual field has many a technical term, with its own special connotation. These terms have to be clearly understood so that you can grasp correctly the teaching of the scriptures (*sastras*).

Take an example. People used to celebrate sacrificial rites (*yajnas*) in ancient times, and they sacrificed animals in these rites. But the animal is only a symbol. It was not the dumb creature that had to be cut to pieces. The animal leads a life of sacrifice, even without its career being completed at the sacrificial pole! The animal that has to be disemboweled and offered is different.

In the spiritual vocabulary, animal means “the body consciousness”, “the I-consciousness”, and this is what has to be slaughtered. The Lord is known as Pasupati or Govinda. *Pasupati* means the Lord of all individuals (*jivas*), *pasu* meaning individual; and *govinda* means the guardian of cows or individuals, “go” meaning individual. The tending of cows is a symbolic play of Krishna to indicate His mission of tending individuals.

The scriptures (*sastras*) have profound inner meanings. The aim of *dharmā* is to make the individual (*jiva*) give up attachment to external nature and the illusion that it causes and to make it realise its reality or rather, un-realise what it has now taken as real so that it may stand revealed in its genuine identity.

These meanings must be learned by young and old. Take, for instance, the Siva Temple. Right in front of the idol of Siva is the image of Nandi, the bull. You are told that the sacred bull is the vehicle (*vahana*) of Siva, and that is the reason for its being there. But, really speaking, the bull (*pasu*) represents the individual (*jiva*) while the *lingam* is the symbol of Siva. “No one should pass between the bull and the *lingam*, the individual and the Siva,” it is said; for they are to merge in one. Siva has to be seen through the two horns of Nandi, they say.

When asked the reason for this procedure, people reply, “Well, it is holier than other methods of viewing the *lingam*.” But the inner meaning is, “You must see the Siva in the individual” —the bull *Pasu* and Siva (*Pasupati*) are one. Nandi and God (*Isvara*) become the Lord of individuals (*Nandisvara*). Both are only two ways of referring to the same entity. When in bondage, it is Nandi; when the bound becomes free and union with God is achieved, it is God. It is worshipped and is entitled to be so honoured. The true sacrifice (*yajna*) occurs when the bull (*pasu*) is offered to the Lord of animals, Pasupati, and its separate identity is cast away. The significance has now been forgotten.

Today, these symbolic acts have changed beyond recognition. The practices of today and the principles of

yesterday are far apart. Even the smallest detail of secular life has to be inspired by the higher ideal of spiritual fulfilment. Then, even simple folk can be led step by step toward the goal. When you do not discriminate the process and purpose of every act, but still go on doing it, it becomes a funny fossilized version. Once, even Prahlada said, “Since it is difficult to destroy egotism, man finds it easy to destroy this dumb animal as a substitute. Animal sacrifice is the manifestation of the quality of inertia (*thamoguna*); it is the path of bondage. The sacrifice of the animal of egotism is the pure sacrifice (*sathwic yajna*) on the Godward path of liberation.”

Thus, the highest goal (*paramaartha*) of those ancient days is turned into the fool’s goal (*paaramaartha*) of these days! Every one of the ancient practices, which were once full of meaning, has grown wild beyond recognition. Branches have shot out in various directions. It is now impossible to pluck the tree by the roots and plant a new one. So, the existing tree has to be trimmed and trained to grow straight. The highest goal has to be constantly remembered and not diluted into the lowest.