

Samanya Dharma and Spirituality

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HINDU DHARMA SPEAKS ABOUT four-fold goals of human life termed as the four *purusharthas*. *Purusha* means a human being and *artha* means object or goal. This framework of life wherein each human being has an obligation to pursue the fourfold goal in her or his life is a unique and very important contribution of Hindu philosophy. Human life is considered very precious because when compared to plants, animals, and other organisms, humans alone have a fully developed faculty of intellect. All organisms except humans are invariably driven by natural instincts. Though these naturally developed instincts help organisms in their survival, they also bound and limit them. Humans alone are not limited by natural instincts and hence can exert their discrimination and free-will. It is to regulate and provide guidance for the exertion of this free will in a righteous and meritorious way that the scriptures have advised the framework of fourfold goal that a human should strive to attain.

The four goals of human life are dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. Kama refers to all kinds of worldly desires. Every person has some desires that she or he wants to attain. It may be to look beautiful, earn money, or have a relationship. Every kind of desire can be called kama. Similarly, all wealth and objects that are acquired in order to fulfil one's desires and enjoy a comfortable life is artha. In short, kama and artha refer to enjoyment of worldly pleasures and worldly objects respectively. But, it is not desirable to lust after all kinds of desires and objects.

If a person does so, it would surely lead to one's fall. A person who kills someone for money may end up in prison. Similarly, a person who is unable to control the sexual urges may end up assaulting a member of the opposite sex and may also end up in prison. It is dharma or the sense of righteousness and duty that should decide whether an action is desirable or not, whether a desire or property must be acquired or not. Without the principle of dharma, the world will end up in chaos. Hence, the principle of dharma must act as a guiding force in the pursuit of kama and artha.

Moksha refers to the ultimate liberation from the bondage of the world and being established in knowledge and bliss. All spiritual paths are aimed at achieving this goal alone. But, moksha cannot be achieved by a person who is completely attached to worldly pleasures. Srinivasa Rao states: 'Achieving moksha becomes possible only when a life pursuing desires (kama) and wealth (artha) has been led consistently within the framework of dharma. Dharma thus plays a very crucial role in not only ensuring a good life here and now, but also in enabling one to attain the state of supreme good or liberation, from which there is no lapsing back to karma and re-birth.'¹ That is, only such a person who adheres to dharma in all actions will eventually develop the purification of mind and dispassion towards worldly pleasures and will be able to turn the mind towards supreme emancipation. Hence, the practice of dharma becomes inevitable for attaining moksha.

Definition of Dharma

The term 'dharma' can be variously understood to mean ethics, morality, law, justice, duty, and righteousness depending upon the context. In the context of an individual, dharma refers to the duties and the righteousness of actions. In the context of society, dharma refers to social harmony and morality. In the context of governance, dharma refers to law and justice. And in the cosmic context, dharma refers to cosmic order and balance. But, none of these terms individually capture the width and depth of the meaning of the term 'dharma'. S L Pandey writes: 'Dharma is a unique and colorful concept that cannot be adequately translated into any other language and cannot be equated collectively or separately with faith, religion, Bhakti, morality, law, duty, customs or *mores*, because of its synthetic unity on one hand and its transcendence on the other.'²

Literally, dharma means that which upholds. The *Mahanarayana Upanishad* states that dharma supports the whole universe and removes all sins.³ Sri Krishna says in the Mahabharata that dharma is that which sustains.⁴ The *Vaisheshika Sutra* describes dharma as that which causes material and spiritual attainment in everyone.⁵ From the *Isha Upanishad* we can gather that Brahman has ordered the whole universe by allotting to each object their respective duties based on their inherent qualities.⁶ It is through these allotted duties that Brahman supports the universe. Hence, these duties, these allotted actions that sustain the universe by causing material and spiritual attainment in each being constitutes dharma.

Once the definition is clear, the next question would be: What are the means by which one can determine what constitutes dharma? The *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* says that dharma and *adharma* do not reveal themselves on their

own.⁷ Further, each person will have a different opinion regarding what actions constitute dharma and what actions constitute *adharma*. Hence, if logic and individual opinions alone were to be taken into account, then everyone will defend their own actions as righteous no matter how unrighteous they may have been. Hence, Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavadgita that 'the scriptures is your authority as regards the determination of what is to be done and what is not to be done.'⁸ The *Manu Smriti* states that the Vedas are the very root of dharma and that the Smritis, the conduct of the virtuous people who practise dharma and self-conscience are integral to understanding dharma.⁹ The *Yajnavalkya Smriti* elaborates the list and includes Puranas, Nyaya, and Mimamsa texts as essential to understanding dharma.¹⁰ Hence, a person can determine whether an action is according to dharma or not by first verifying whether such an action is stipulated or prohibited or allowed by the scriptures, the Vedas and the Smritis. And Swami Vivekananda says: 'And the law is that wherever these Puranas and Smritis differ from any part of the Shruti, the Shruti must be followed and the Smriti rejected.'¹¹ So, the Smritis are to be followed only so far as they do not contradict the Vedas. While following the scriptures one should note if any related injunction of the scripture is relevant to the present situation. If there is no clarity, then the advice of saints, teachers, and elders can be sought. And finally, one must consider whether one's own conscience is satisfied or not. Only such a process in which the intellect is guided by the tenets of the scriptures and the purity of mind can arrive at a proper conclusion regarding the righteousness of any action.

Classification of Dharma

The scriptures elaborate on the tenets of dharma

that different people must follow in different situations. It is said that the tenets of dharma that lead to the ultimate good are different for different *yugas*.¹² Similarly, they speak about different duties for people with different temperaments and in different stages of life, and duties at the time of calamity or sorrow. Yet, scriptures also speak about certain tenets of dharma that are common to every person. These universal tenets of dharma like truth and non-violence applicable to every person irrespective of his class, gender, or station in life are called 'samanya dharma' or the general dharma. And the duties and obligations that are unique to every individual depending on the time, place, class based on one's quality and station in life are considered 'vishesha dharma' or special dharma. An individual's *svadharm*a or personal dharma is a combination of both common and special duties. In fact, without an adherence to *samanya* dharma, a person can never do justice to one's practice of special duties. For example, a brahmana priest who becomes greedy and asks a hefty amount as the *dakshina* or fees for conducting a ritual becomes ineligible and incompetent to conduct such ritual due to the violation of one of the basic tenets of common dharma, the control of the senses. So is the case with a businessperson who cheats the customers for earning more profit. Hence, the practice of both *samanya* dharma and *vishesha* dharma are vital for the overall well-being of an individual and without performing the general duties, one becomes ineligible to perform the special duties.

Tenets of Samanya Dharma

Various scriptures speak about universal tenets. The *Manu Smriti* gives a list of five such tenets.¹³ The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya mentions six tenets;¹⁴ the *Yajnavalkya Smriti* mentions nine;¹⁵ the Mahabharata also mentions nine;¹⁶

the Vamana Purana mentions fourteen tenets;¹⁷ and the Bhagavata mentions thirty tenets¹⁸ as *samanya* dharma that are applicable to every person. It is important to understand what tenets constitute *samanya* dharma before understanding their role in spirituality. Hence, we will take up a few important tenets which are common to many texts.

Abimsa: It literally means non-violence or non-injury. But, here the violence or injury referred to is not applicable only to bodily injuries. *Abimsa* should be practised in action, speech, and thought.¹⁹ *Himsa* or violence in action refers to causing physical harm to others. It may be harm to a human, animal, insects, plants, or any other living organism. Any physical action that causes harm or imposes pain on any living being is considered violent action. Similarly, words that cause mental agony to others or words that are intended to act as curses that create imbalance in the surroundings are violent speech. And finally any thought about harming others either physically or mentally is violent thought. Hence, the practice of *abimsa* includes non-injury to other living beings through action, speech, and thought.

The question that often arises is: if *abimsa* is non-injury to every organism and every living being, then is it pacifism? The answer is an emphatic no. The practice of non-violence and non-injury refers to not causing harm or violence for selfish purposes. It does not include the use of violence for the purpose of dharma.

A soldier's special duty is the protection of one's country from attack by hostile enemies. Hence, the soldier does not fight and kill in a war for fulfilling some selfish desires, but lays down one's life for the sake of the country. Such selfless violence committed in wars is considered as dharmic *himsa*, righteous violence, and hence does not violate the tenet of

ahimsa. Similarly, the sacrifice of certain animals in some of the yajnas is also not considered to be violence.²⁰ The purpose of the yajna is the well-being of society. The priests who conduct them do not do so for their selfish desires, instead it is done for the spiritual and material welfare of society. Hence, such violence cannot be called *adharma*. Hence, *ahimsa* as an absolute duty is not applicable to every person. Only the sannyasins who have renounced all desires and actions, take the vow of practising absolute non-injury because they have renounced the world to attain self-realisation. For sannyasins all activities that involve even a little of violence are prohibited. For all other people, though absolute non-violence is the ultimate goal, they are permitted the limited use of violence during the performance of their special duties as prescribed in the scriptures.

Satya: The practice of *satya*, truthfulness as a dharma entails truthfulness in thought, speech, and actions. A person must practice what one preaches and preach what one practises. A person must speak only that which one knows to be the truth. Thought, speech, and action must be in line with the truth. 'Truth is to align thought, speech, and action with reality and speak the reality for the welfare of living beings.'²¹ 'Abusing (others, speaking) untruth, detracting from the merits of all men, and talking idly, shall be the four kinds of (evil) verbal action.'²² Another important aspect of the practice of *satya* is that truth must be spoken in a pleasant manner. 'Let one say what is true, let one say what is pleasing, let one utter no disagreeable truth, and let one utter

no agreeable falsehood; that is the eternal law' (4.138). If some unpleasant news must be conveyed to someone, it should be done at a proper time and in a subtle way so as to minimise the pain to the listener. Such an austere practice of truth in every word uttered, in every action performed, and in every thought that crosses the mind constitutes *satya* dharma.

Asteya: Any thought, speech, or action that amounts to stealing or misappropriation by force or fraud is *steeya*. *Asteya* is the opposite of that. Therefore, a person practising *asteya* should never take away anything that belongs to another. Further, one must not even desire to possess them. One must never speak about something which is not one's own understanding. One must never steal or misappropriate other's ideas and discoveries and claim them as one's own. *Steeya* does not refer only to the stealing of other's property. It may even refer to kidnapping other's family members. Hence, the practice of *asteya* involves a strict control of mind and senses such that one does not entertain even any ideas of stealing other's ideas, property, or family members.

Ramana Ashrama, Thiruvannamalai



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Shaucha: It refers to both external cleanliness and internal purity. External cleanliness constitutes cleanliness of the body through bathing and the like, cleanliness of various objects of use with water, mud, and other materials, and cleanliness of the surrounding environment including keeping the ground, water, and air clean. Internal cleanliness refers to the purification of the mind by removing impurities like lust and anger.

Indriyanigraha: It refers to the control of the mind and the senses. A person who is in the grip of the senses is ever running behind worldly pleasures and hence will end up committing mistakes that result in sorrow. For such a person it is said: ‘Neither (the study of) the Vedas, nor liberality, nor sacrifices, nor any (self-imposed) restraint, nor austerities, ever procure the attainment (of rewards) to a person whose heart is contaminated (by sensuality)’ (2.97). Hence, without controlling the mind and the senses, there is neither material happiness nor spiritual bliss.

The question is: how should a person restrain the mind and the senses? The Smritis answer: ‘Desire is never extinguished by the enjoyment of desired objects; it only grows stronger like a fire (fed) with clarified butter’ (2.94). However, proper restraint cannot be achieved merely by suppression of desires. Restraint of the senses is possible only through constant awareness and vigilance. ‘Those (organs) which are strongly attached to sensual pleasures, cannot so effectually be restrained by abstinence (from enjoyments) as by a constant (pursuit of true) knowledge’ (2.96). One should practise constant monitoring of one’s thoughts, speech, and actions. Every object towards which the mind or the senses get attracted must be observed and examined by the intellect. The intellect must question whether the object is useful, whether possessing it has any real benefit for

oneself and the others, whether possession of such an object is according to dharma or not. It is only by the practice of constant awareness and restraint that a person will be able to attain complete *indriyanigraha*.

Daya: The *Shandilya Upanishad* defines *daya* as ‘kindness to all creatures at all places.’²³ Hence, a person who has *daya* is always kind and compassionate towards all beings. Such a person will never do anything that can harm any being and will never utter anything that would cause pain to someone. Such a person would not even think of hurting others. That person’s thoughts, speech, and actions will be full of kindness for everyone and would be aimed at achieving the well-being of everyone.

Danam: It refers to the act of charity. The *Shandilya Upanishad* says that *dana* means the giving away of ‘ethically earned money, grains, and the like’ (1.2). The Gita speaks of three kinds of charity—the sattvic, the rajasic, and the tamasic:

That gift is referred to as born of *sattva* which gift is given with the idea that it ought to be given, to one who will not serve in return, and at the (proper) place, (proper) time and to a (proper) person. But the gift which is given expecting reciprocation, or again, with a desire for its result, and which is given grudgingly—that is considered to be born of *rajas*. That gift which is made at an improper place and time, and to undeserving persons, without proper treatment and with disdain, is declared to be born of *tamas*.²⁴

Sattvic charity is the best form of charity and tamasic charity must be completely avoided. *Anasuya*: *Asuya* means jealousy and *an-asuya* means the absence of jealousy. A person must never be jealous of another person’s knowledge, wealth, or prosperity as jealousy leads to frustration and anger that in turn leads to various wrongdoings. A jealous person thinks of

stealing other's wealth or causing some harm to the other. Hence, jealousy will result in mental confusion and social discord and ultimately take a person to spiritual fall. Therefore, the tenet of *anasuya* has been prescribed as one of the common tenets of dharma.

Kshama: It means 'forgiveness'. The *Shandilya Upanishad* describes *kshama* as 'forbearance of everything, the pleasant and the unpleasant, praise and insult'.²⁵ A person whose mind is unsteady and is affected by praise or criticism, will bear grudge when not praised or when criticised. Such a person can never forgive those who appear to cause real or imagined harm. This holding of grudge gives rise to frustration and anger which in turn deludes the intellect.

Svadyaya: It refers to the study of various scriptures and contemplating upon them. 'The study of Vedanta, the chanting of *Rudraprasna* a hundred times, and the repetition of Om and other mantras, and that which makes one attain *sattva*, is called *svadyaya* by the wise.'²⁶

Those who are not competent to study Vedanta can read the Puranas and the epics like the Mahabharata. *Brahmacharya*: It refers to a practise of celibacy. The *Shandilya Upanishad* defines brahmacharya as 'the renunciation of sexual intercourse at all times in thought, word, and action'.²⁷ Brahmacharya leads to control of the mind and the senses and ultimately results in the cessation of desires.

Samanya Dharma and Yoga

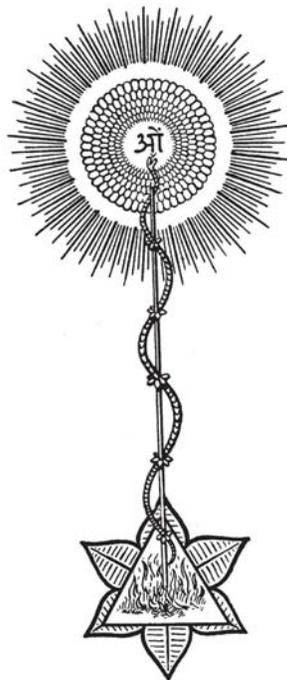
Patanjali describes yoga as 'the cessation of the impressions in mind-stuff'.²⁸ Yoga is a state of samadhi, wherein the Atman is realised, free from the limitations of the non-self.

This state is achieved by stilling the mind by stopping all thoughts.

Thoughts can be stopped and the mind can be stilled only by the constant practice of dispassion. The mind is continuously distracted by various factors like sickness, apathy, doubt, carelessness, laziness, overindulgence in worldly pleasures, delusion, lack of progress, and instability and such a person is exposed to pain, depression, trembling, and difficulty in breathing. These distractions can be removed by various methods that include friendliness, compassion, delight, and equanimity.

Patanjali has systematised these methods and has chalked out an eight-limbed process that slowly leads a person towards the ultimate state of samadhi. These eight limbs are: *yama*, external discipline; *niyama*, internal discipline; *asana*, *pranayama*, breath control; *pratyahara*, withdrawal of the sense organs; *dharana*, steadfast concentration; *dhyana*, meditative absorption; and samadhi.

Yama and *niyama* are foundational without which the practice of *asana* or *pranayama* will never bear fruit. The tenets of *yama* and *niyama* are the tenets of *samanya* dharma and are universal and apply to everyone. *Yama* includes non-violence, truth, non-stealing, brahmacharya, and *aparigraha*, not holding more than what is necessary. *Niyama* includes cleanliness, cheerfulness, austerity, *svadyaya*, and surrender to God. The practice of these tenets of *samanya* dharma will regulate one's lifestyle, build character, remove mental distractions, and purify the mind. The purification of mind leads to stillness of the mind. Hence, when a person established



in *yama* and *niyama* practises *asana* and *pranayama*, she or he will be able to withdraw the senses and attain one-pointed concentration which will ultimately lead to *samadhi*. Therefore, *samanya* dharma is an inseparable aspect of yoga, without which any practice of yoga would be fruitless.



A Bell Hanging Near the Pond at the Thousand Pillar Temple, Hanamakonda

is brought about only by the practice of the tenets of dharma. The *Narada Bhakti Sutra* says: 'Non-violence, truthfulness, purity, compassion, piety, and other essentials of good life, should be maintained.'²⁹ Even in bhakti, a constant practice of *samanya* dharma is inevitable.

Samanya Dharma and Bhakti

Every person has loved someone or experienced love in one form or the other. Almost every time love between two people creates an attachment. Bhakti is not normal love. It is the ultimate form of love because it creates no attachment. Instead it is liberating. It liberates a person from this never ending cycle of happiness and sorrow and birth and death.

The path of bhakti is the path of service to and of taking refuge in God. A devotee may consider God as a master, a parent, a lover, or even as an offspring. A devotee may also worship God in one's heart as one's own innermost Atman. Whatever may be the manner of worship, a devotee aims to first attain nearness and finally attain complete oneness with one's chosen ideal. But, this complete absorption in God is possible only when a person renounces one's ego and attachment to the body and the mind. But, renouncing one's I-ness and mine-ness is not easy as one is hindered by the internal impurities like lust, anger, and pride. Hence, a person can attain true bhakti only when one is able to purify one's heart by destroying these inner impurities. And this destruction of inner impurities

Samanya Dharma and Jnana

The tenets of *samanya* dharma are very vital in the path of knowledge as well. The word 'Vedanta' literally means the end of Vedas. The indirect meaning is the culmination or the last word of the Vedas and it refers to the Upanishads that teach the end goal of all spiritual practices, the attainment of moksha, liberation, through the knowledge of the unity of jiva and Brahman. The liberation from the cycle of birth and death results from the direct knowledge of Atman, the innermost Self, which is realised as Brahman itself. At the dawn of knowledge, all the objects of the universe which were previously perceived as being different from Brahman are realised as being non-different from Brahman in reality. This direct knowledge of the reality that Atman alone exists, liberates a person from the bondage of birth and death because bondage itself was rooted in ignorance about the true nature of Atman.

The Upanishads lay down the requisite qualifications for a person to become eligible to practise Vedanta. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: 'Having taught the Vedas, the preceptor imparts this post-instruction to the students: "Speak the truth. Practise righteousness. Make

no mistake about study.”³⁰ In *Vivekachudamani*, Acharya Shankara enumerates the basic qualifications necessary to practise Vedanta called the *sadhana-chatushtaya*, fourfold spiritual practice: discernment, dispassion, control of the internal organs, control of the external sense organs, forbearance, withdrawal of the mind from external sense objects, faith in the guru and scriptures, one-pointed meditation on Brahman, and an intense desire for moksha. These are also either the tenets of *samanya dharma* themselves or those that are attained through the practice of *samanya dharma*.

Conclusion

The importance of *samanya dharma* in spirituality irrespective of the chosen path is in that it leads to the purification of the mind. The mind is afflicted with various impurities that are generally classified into the six passions: *kama*, lust; *krodha*, anger; *moha*, delusion; *lobha*, greed; *mada*, pride; and *matsarya*, jealousy. These impurities lead a person to commit various mistakes which in turn tighten the karmic bondage. As long as a person is under the influence of these mental passions, she or he cannot make any spiritual progress. Hence, purification of the mind by the destruction of these internal enemies is the very first stage in spirituality. And this is possible only by a constant practice of the various tenets of *samanya dharma*. That is why *Manu Smriti* says: ‘Austerity and sacred learning are the best means by which a Brahmana secures supreme bliss; by austerities he destroys guilt, by sacred learning he obtains the cessation of (births and) deaths.’³¹

The role of *samanya dharma* in any spiritual path is foundational in nature. It is a basic discipline that imparts the required qualities to a spiritual aspirant that makes one fit to practise any spiritual discipline that leads to moksha. 

Notes and References

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3. See *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*, 79.7.
4. See Mahabharata, Karna Parva, 69.58.
5. See *Vaisheshika Sutra*, 1.1.2.
6. See *Isha Upaniṣad*, 8.
7. See *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, 1.7.20.6.
8. Gita, 16.24.
9. See *Manu Smriti*, 2.6.
10. See *Yajñavalkya Smriti*, 1.3.
11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.229.
12. *Manu Smriti* 8.349 says: ‘In their own defence, in a strife for the fees of officiating priests, and in order to protect women and brahmanas; he who kills in the cause of right, commits no sin.’
13. See *Manu Smriti*, 10.63.
14. See *Arthashastra*, 1.3.13.
15. See *Yajñavalkya Smriti*, 1.122.
16. See Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, 60.7–8.
17. See Vamana Purana, 11.23–4.
18. See Bhagavata, 7.11.8–12.
19. Kurma Purana, Uttarabhaga, 11.14.
20. According to the Kurma Purana, Uttarabhaga, 11.15, violence committed according to the injunctions of the scriptures, for instance in a *yajna*, is considered *ahimsa*.
21. *Shandilya Upaniṣad*, 1.1.
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