

By Basile Catoméris

Dharma

Beside a shameful military rearmament worldwide in both poor and rich countries, much effort and considerable amounts of money are being spent on exploring ancient ruins in order to restore historical monuments and buildings and to delve into the remaining inheritance of extinct civilizations. Behind these significant capital investments there is the desire to both satisfy intellectual curiosity and to understand who our ancestors were, how they lived and to explore their customs and life values. But there is a rather unbalanced humanitarian relief if we consider the dire reality that almost 10 million children die every year - over 26,500 children today according to UNESCO!

From a rational point of view, it is clear that inherited traditions often constitute an important link to existing generations. Traditions can help us sustain the present cultures, nurture and help people to assert national and religious identities - for better or worse! - and, to some extent improve our understanding of the differences that exist in the world of diversity we live in. When so much effort is put forth to rediscover and preserve ancient heritage from the grip of time erosion, how important will it be that these precious things be interpreted correctly!

There are, sadly enough, countless examples of scriptures whose translation or interpretation have led to outright fallacy with conclusions often based on erroneous premises.

The term '*dharma*' is an important key word that originates from India's cultural heritage. In modern times, the word has been subjected to strictly

academic interpretations presented by sympathetic, but often "uninitiated" commentators. It can be argued in defense of these commentators, that *dharma*, like *karma* and other technical terms of India's spiritual terminology, has no semantic counterpart in the West.

The restricted statement that follows is based on a most reliable source, namely Sri Goswami's life-long Yoga research. It merely aims at better highlighting the term at stake with no claims to be exhaustive.

The Indian term *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pali language) offers a wide spectrum of applications in all possible fields. The word is used in metaphysics, cosmology, as a social life *vade mecum* (mostly as a law book - *dharma shastra* - and more generally, in all kinds of human affairs.

An Indian folk legend presents *dharma* as the name of a wise man who married Dakshas' thirteen (or perhaps ten) daughters, with whom he had an extensive offspring.

Symbolically, the children refer to different human characteristics, virtues and religious rites intended for the use of pious people. Its contents display a large collection of guidelines for Hindu life-style, inclusive of a regulatory framework for ethics as well as important instructions on justice and penance.

As a universal, governing principle *dharma* is free from the grip of Time..

Krishna, the protagonist of the Bhagavad Gita, asserts that *dharma* is not bound to be born or subject to death. The Sanskrit-root *dhri* (= to maintain, to support, being) in the word *dharma* generally refers to the essence and existence in entities' essence such as cosmos, society, or individuals.

Dharma is the support of, among other elements, the cosmos and its frame - Time. *Dharma* is Nature's *lex primus*, the evolutionary force which maintains the balance between creation, which is bringing about that which as yet does

not exist, and its continuous destruction, something seemingly negative that in fact, is called for by the necessary changes that enable Life's perpetual cycle.

Already on these grounds, it will be readily understood that dharma does not identify a particular institutionalized creed which akin to other religions has its historical origin in a human being or an incarnation of God.

Contrary to existing monotheistic religions dharma claims no monopoly on Truth, nor has it the ambition to convert other people to join its faith.

There is in India, the country which is considered to house the world's oldest profession of faith relation, a deeply anchored concept that all existing religions represent but different forms of expression for an eternal, common original Power : it is this universal key principle that is called dharma.

In his classic work "Layayoga" Sri Shyam Sundar Goswami reports his Guru's own interpretation of the term Dharma as the ever recurring principle.

"... Dharma - you may call it religions if you like - is perpetual. It is not made by man but remains as an intrinsic part of the cosmos and in the lives of all beings - eternally. It is the grand support of the universe and all beings. It is Brahman - God who sustains everything... "

The sage Yoga master goes on to describe dharma's divine origin:

"... (Dharma) is the natural spiritual principle, divine in character, which operates along with the principle of 'cosmosity' in which the original creativity is manifested. It is the spiritual aspect of the Supreme Power, which is all God.

Until the time Alexander the Great coined the word Hinduism, it was the

expression *Sanatana Dharma* that characterized India's prevailing faith. It is that faith with no founder which is called *Sanatana Dharma*. This has identified India's outstanding millennia as old and rich multicultural life of the original along with the original contents of Nature's law - the doctrine of eternity. However, it has, like established religions, its own set of ethic rules reverberated in the ten rules, Yama-Niyama, that constitute the basis of four main Yoga doctrines identified as Mantra-, Laya-, Hatha-, and Raja Yoga.

In general terms, dharma is the main principle that accounts for the underlying forces and subordinate principles that cause all occurring events and movements in the manifestation of life. In a larger context that embraces the whole world, the word dharma points also to Mankind's seemingly inevitable decline of moral standards and the subsequent ensuing spiritual dissolution. The recovery of lost values explains the periodic intervention of *avatars* (incarnations of God) in the tragic history of humanity.

The text of the Baghavat Gita, one of India's most sacred scriptures refers to a work called Dharma Shastras and its rules. These differ from the moral codes of monotheistic religions. Here, Hindu ethics reflect the believer's own faith (*svabhava*):- that is a belief in the individual Self, the "self - becoming" of man endowed with an independent existence which beside include a full appreciation of life. And where faith in the Self is the core of Man's real essence, in the inner truth he possesses.

Interestingly, seen from this perspective it is our faith that makes us what we are and make us to determine our course of action.

You are then what you believe and love - Your faith is You, your Self - your everything!

Hindu tradition then, regards *dharma* as a law of Nature whose obedience might save Mankind from decay and suffering. To individual seekers of Truth, *dharma* becomes instead an instrument that enables one to establish a contact with and get knowledge of what is supporting the universe.

There is also a negative counterpart to *dharma*. Fitted with the negative prefix "a-", the word *adharma* has, alike *dharma* equally many significances and implications.

Yoga Dharsana teaches that *dharma* is a means to reach an ultimate union with That - which is God. A God who is represented through symbolic figures called Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra (or Shiva) to respectively create, maintain and incessantly change the world. Man's personal *dharma* is called *svadharma*. In this word, there is a collection of specific characteristics that govern our *samskaras* ("seeds" to future action) as well as an interaction of the three operational principles (*gunas*). These are known as *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* and correspond respectively to principles of sentience, energy and inertia.

Historically, the term *svadharma* in the sense of indicating an individual's governing principle, has been given different names. See e.g. Socrates' reported consulting of his "*daemon*" - inner voice). Man's spiritual development, entails the possibility for his *svadharma* to gradually merge into cosmic *dharma*. Nevertheless, Man's human goal to be one with That - which we usually call God - is impossible lest the genuine seeker of Truth has been successful in having his perception of the world - which includes *dharma* and *adharma* - to completely dissolve.