

On Svadharma – The Individual Dharma

By Sri S S Goswami

Dharma is the spiritual regulatory principle. When things go towards dissolution there is *dharma*, but *dharma* also is in creation. Both such cases depend upon the three *gunas*, which operate in both directions in differing combinations like in the case of creation and dissolution.

If, to facilitate our understanding we assume that *dharma* operates at three levels: in *tamas* (inertia principle), in *rajas* (dynamism) and in *sattva* (sentience), we shall also have to accept that none of those forces exist as a separate entity but only as interactive forces. They do cooperate in all created phenomena with one single force predominating.

Equilibrium can only exist beyond creation.

Fire burns; it devours. The burning power of fire is *dharma* - its inner power. Such is the combination of the *gunas* in fire that it burns. In water it is different. Fire releases heat while water will afford coldness, if it is not heated by outside means. Human beings do vary not only individually but also according to circumstances.

Dharma, which induces *rajas*, operates in relation to either *tamas* or *sattva*. In the latter case, which is more unusual within creation, it is combined with strong currents of will-power. Where *dharma* may be altered, it is due not to the whims of *dharma* itself but to that underlying force which makes *dharma* function. It is the direct will of the Infinite, operating in an extraordinary way.

Dharma has been called "*sanâtana*" (eternal). It is not an artificial, created something. Man cannot create himself. He does not even know himself. How could he then be able to create a new *dharma*? However, we find traces of *dharma* in everything we experience. It functions according to its own laws in the things or phenomena belonging to *prakriti**.

Man is a congregation of desires of various types. These desires, before coming to the stage of manifestation, pass through the I. It is the I that creates the desire. The I desires because it is forced to do so; it cannot do otherwise. However, the I has a certain amount of freedom in that it can either restrain the desire or use it in a such a way that we may call excessive. That is, the tone of the desire can be partially altered by the will of the I.

It is but natural that man's desires are, to a great extent, connected with various physiological needs. Man needs food for carrying on the business of living. Above and beyond simply meeting his needs, man may also strive for a certain amount of pleasure, although the results may not meet anticipated expectations. When the body's inherent power of making itself heard is ignored, man is often beguiled into excesses to which the body can no longer adapt itself. In this way, excesses of different kinds (sex, alcohol, drugs, etc.) will deplete the body's innate power and result in disease.

This running after pretended "natural" tendencies is not to be confused with *dharma*. Indeed, such tendencies may be caused by *dharma*, but then become degraded into the realm of *samskaras*. *Dharma* stands on a higher level, though it also has the power to regulate those *samskaras*.

As an example, consider the topic of nutrition. One may need certain foods in certain combinations and amounts. Yet one may also like other foods and consume those foods purely for the purpose of enjoyment. This may lead to overconsumption of such pleasure foods. Here *dharma* intervenes and tries to regulate those excess tendencies in order to protect the individual. This is *svadharma*.

Svadharma is qualified by "sva," which means "own." This refers to *dharma* which is characteristic to an individual, not the vast *dharma*. It functions in all human being and, in a broader sense, in all living beings and all created things. When *dharma* operates in relation to the I in connection with the world consciousness, it is always *svadharma*. But this is not the whole form of *svadharma*; the hidden part remains hidden.

Man is a combination of *jati-âyu-bhogâ* (body, duration of the body and experiences), the latter being due to *raga* and *dvesha*, which are pleasure and pain. All this is expressed by the birth of a human being and is connected with former experiences. *Jâti* and *âyu* are related purely to the body while the mind relates to *bhoga* – the many experiences we are having under various conditions and circumstances. These are the *samskaras* that make up man as a whole, while man also accumulates during his lifetime other sub-tendencies due to his actions and reactions. Initially human life emerges as a manifestation of *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*, while the body and mind accumulate their own *samskaras* in cooperation with organs, cells, etc. All this makes a separate combined cosmos below higher forms.

Body and mind cooperate to some extent and are independent to some extent. Hunger, for instance, is the manifestation for want of food in the body, which is felt automatically through the organs of digestion. The body then depends upon the assistance of the mind for the actual acquisition of food. Man has to work for food, collect it, prepare it and ultimately ingest it. Thereafter it goes to the involuntary level. This is how mind and body become interdependent. Usually mind is not conscious of the body, but sometimes the body signals to the mind. When the heart does not function satisfactorily, we become conscious of it through a particular sound, palpitations or pain. Inversely, the body also depends to some extent upon mind, and thus the cells and organs go on sending their vitalizing essence to the mind.

Your *bhoga*, those experiences which are meant to satisfy you (more or less successfully), modify the body's actions. The sum of all human experiences are gathered in the consciousness as *samskaras*, where they await an opportunity to come forth. Our *dharma* is the regulatory principle, which makes it possible for our *samskaras* to come to the fruition state. When a particular group of *samskaras* dissipates, new *samskaras* take form with the prototype of those which have just gone.

All these things end in experiences and the experiences go back and remain as *samskaras*. In this way the vicious circle goes on indefinitely.

It seems impossible for man to come out of the cycle of birth and death, yet there is also another kind of desires. We may sometime have the longing for things unknown, not yet fathomed. Along with that feeling, we find that we have to begin to walk new paths. However, to do this we'll have to change the order in our *samskaras*. Awareness in *svadharma* enables the right regulation of the desires in which we are immersed, so as to prevent obstacles in our future spiritual life. *Dharma* does not destroy the tendencies – this is not possible – but *dharma* exercises a controlling function.

If our *samskaras*, which at any given moment are coming from the recessive stage, inspire us to think and feel in a particular way, then they will also force us to act in a particular way. The whole thing looks quite impossible, yet those who have managed to ascend to the top of the ladder say that by *svadharma* it is actually possible to reach liberation. *Dharma* is quite true and living. Who says that *dharma* is dead!

There are two possibilities: to restrain a desire, which is quite possible for some time but then it will recur with much more force, or to use a specific inclination in excess until it is automatically exhausted. This is the *dharma* way, while to mould it according to one's own character is *svadharma*.

So long as man thinks that he himself can swim through the vast oceans to the coast, playing with the ocean's big waves and cheating all the fish in the waters, the regulating principle will remain only in seed form. But as soon as man begins to experience the ebbing of his faculties, the insecurity of his future, his smallness and the paucity of his existence, a special type of helplessness and loneliness will set in. At this point, a holding signal may buoy up his body and his mind, thus initiating a salutary change.

*Nature – corresponding approximately to the Greek φύσις (*Translator's note*)