Dharma
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Dharma

Defining dharma is like defining air. So close, it eludes us. Cosmic order and religious duty are good starting points. In the simplest sense, dharma is a blueprint, the orderly fullfillment of an inherent nature or destiny.

What Is Dharma? What Are Its Forms?

Dharma is the law of being, the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature and destiny. Dharma is of four main divisions, which are God's law at work on four levels of our existence: universal, human, social and personal. Aum.

When God created the universe, He endowed it with order, with the laws to govern creation. Dharma is God's divine law prevailing on every level of existence, from the sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws which bind us in harmony with that order. We are maintained by dharma, held in our most perfect relationship within a complex universe. Every form of life, every group of men, has its dharma, the law of its being. When we follow dharma, we are in conformity with the Truth that inheres and instructs the universe, and we naturally abide in closeness to God. Adharma is opposition to divine law. Dharma prevails in the laws of nature and is expressed in our culture and heritage. It is piety and ethical practice, duty and obligation. It is the path which leads us to liberation. Universal dharma is known as rita. Social dharma is varna dharma. Human dharma is known as ashrama dharma. Our personal dharma is svadharma. Hinduism, the purest expression of these four timeless dharmas, is called Sanatana Dharma. The Vedas proclaim, "There is nothing higher than dharma. Verily, that which is dharma is Truth." Aum.

What Is Signified by Universal Dharma?

Universal law, known in the Vedas as rita, is cosmic order, God's rule at work throughout the physical province. It is the infinite intelligence or consciousness in nature, the sustaining cosmic design and organizing force. Aum.

Rita is the underlying divine principle and universal law regulating nature, from the voyage of stars in vast galactic orbits to the flux of infinitesimal subatomic energies. Rita is the Tao. It is destiny and the road to destiny. When we are in tune with universal dharma, and realize that man is an integral part of nature and not above it or dominating it, then we are in tune with God. All Hindus feel they are guests on the planet with responsibilities to nature, which when fulfilled balance its responsibilities to them. The physical body was gathered from nature and returns to it. Nature is exquisitely complex and orderly. The coconut always yields a coconut tree, a lotus a lotus, a rose a rose, not another species. How constant nature is, and yet how diverse, for in mass producing its creations, no two ever look exactly alike. Yes, the Hindu knows himself to be a part of nature and seeks to bring his life into harmony with the universal path, the sustaining cosmic force. The Vedas proclaim, "Earth is upheld by Truth. Heaven is upheld by the sun. The solar regions are supported by eternal laws, rita. The elixir of divine love is supreme in heaven." Aum.

What Is the Nature of Social Dharma?

Social law, or varna dharma, consists of the occupation, duties and responsibilities we must fulfill as a member of our nation, community and family. An important aspect of this dharma is religious and moral law. Aum.

Every human society defines a complex stratification of community interaction. Scholarly, pious souls of exceptional learning are the wise brahmins. Lawmakers and law-enforcers are the guardian kshatriyas. Bankers and businessmen are merchant vaishyas. Laborers, workers and artisans are shudras. In addition to these four classes, or varnas, are hundreds of castes, or jatis. In Hindu societies, class and caste, which dictates one's occupation and community, is largely hereditary. However, these birth-imposed categories can be transcended by the ambitious who enter new careers through education, skill and persistence. Social dharma is fulfilled

in adherence to the laws of our nation, to our community responsibilities and to our obligations among family and friends. A comprehensive system of duties, morals and religious observances make up God's law at work in our daily life. Rightly followed, varna dharma enhances individual and family progress and ensures the continuity of culture. The Vedas say, "When a man is born, whoever he may be, there is born simultaneously a debt to the Gods, to the sages, to the ancestors and to men." Aum.

What Is the Nature of Human Dharma?

Human law, or ashrama dharma, is the natural expression and maturing of the body, mind and emotions through four progressive stages of earthly life: student, householder, elder advisor and religious solitaire. Aum.

The four ashramas are "stages of striving," in pursuit of the purusharthas: righteousness, wealth, pleasure and liberation. Our first 24 years of life are a time of intense learning. Around age 12, we enter formally the brahmacharya ashrama and undertake the study and skills that will serve us in later life. From 24 to 48, in the grihastha ashrama, we work together as husband and wife to raise the family, increasing wealth and knowledge through our profession, serving the community and sustaining the members of the other three ashramas. In the vanaprastha ashrama, from 48 to 72, slowly retiring from public life, we share our experience by advising and guiding younger generations. After age 72, as the physical forces wane, we turn fully to scripture, worship and yoga. This is the sannyasa ashrama, which differs from the formal life of ochre-robed monks. Our human dharma is a natural awakening, expression, maturing and withdrawal from worldly involvement. The Vedas say, "Pursuit of the duties of the stage of life to which one belongs-that, verily, is the rule! Others are like branches of a stem. With this, one tends upwards; otherwise, downwards." Aum.

What Is the Nature of Personal Dharma?

Personal law, or svadharma, is our own perfect

individual pattern in life. It is the sum of our accumulated seed karmas as they relate to the collective effect on us of rita, ashrama and varna dharma. Aum.

:Each human being has an individual, personal dharma. This dharma is determined by two things: the karmas, both good and bad, from past lives; and the three dharmas of this life-universal, human and social. Svadharma, "one's own law," is molded by our background and experiences, tendencies and desires-indicated by astrology-all of which determine our personality,

profession and associations. The key to discovering and understanding personal dharma is the worship of Lord Ganesha, the God of memory, time and wisdom, who knows our past lives and can clarify our most perfect pattern, our right path in life. When we follow this unique pattern-guided by guru, wise elders and the knowing voice of our soul-we are content and at peace with ourselves and the world. Dharma is to the individual what its normal development is to a seed-the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature and destiny. A Vedic prayer implores, "That splendor that resides in an elephant, in a king, among men, or within the waters, with which the Gods in the beginning came to Godhood, with that same splendor make me splendid, O Lord." Aum.