## DHARMA, DISCIPLINE, AND DEVOTION: PRIESTHOOD AND THE HINDU TRADITION

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by Swamini Svatmavidyananda

# Leadership in the Hindu Tradition

There is a verse in the Bhagavad Gītā that says: yadyad ācarati śreşṭhaḥ, tattadevetaro janaḥ I sa yat pramāṇaṁ kurute, lokastadanuvartate II 3.21
Whatever a prominent person does, that alone other people do.
Whatever trend that person sets as proper, the world of people also follows.

The word "śrestha" means an important person, a person that everyone looks up to. such as a king, a president, or a religious leader. One often becomes a śrestha by occupying a position that is considered to be respectable and prominent, however, merely occupying a position of a śrestha does not ensure that the person is a śrestha. One has to grow into filling the portfolio connected to the position, for which emotional maturity is needed. Really speaking, a true leader does not become a leader by choice. A person often finds him or herself being seen as a śrestha, because others look up to the person as awe-inspiring or worthy of emulation. In the Hindu tradition, we have a two-tier leadership. First, there are the priests, known as purohitas who are religious people, who handle rituals and liturgical sacrifices. They are married people, and live in the communities they serve. The word "purohita" means the one who is placed at the forefront. They are considered to be śrestha because they are very knowledgeable and their life is committed to worship and devotion. Next, there are the swamis, monastics or renunciants, who take the concept of leadership a step further by renouncing all ties to the world and not needing to lean on anything or anyone except bhagavan. Together, the sannyasin and the purchita represent the two crucial aspects of the Hindu tradition respectively, namely the vision of oneness (known as brahmavidyā), and a committed way of life (karmayoga) conducive to assimilating this vision as the truth of oneself. The priests are experts in matters of ācāra, the conduct and the practices in the tradition, while the swamis embody vicāra, self-enquiry, which is necessary for moksa, freedom from fear and sorrow. Together, these two tiers of leadership work in tandem to inspire and quide people.

### One Who Follows Dharma is a Leader

This two tier leadership underscores a fact that is often overlooked in our tradition --that the means are as important as the ends to be achieved. Therefore, we are not allowed to compromise the means for the sake of the ends. The manner in which one goes

about fulfilling various ambitions is in itself a highly sophisticated pursuit known as dharma. The means in themselves become an end to be accomplished. Dharma is the universal matrix of norms that governs human conduct. It is based on universal expectations of not wanting to be hurt, killed, cheated, defrauded, or deceived. That is why dharma is the first purusartha, something that is sought after by all individuals. Everyone wants dharma, either directly or indirectly. You can ask anyone in the world if they wish to be hurt or stolen from, and the answer, universally, is "no." Even those who constantly trespass over the rights and privileges of others somehow still expect everyone else to be considerate towards them. There was a news item that I came across recently. A man broke into a house in a rich neighborhood and stole a huge plasma television. Since it was very heavy, he dragged the television set and hid it in some bushes the backyard. Then, he phoned a friend to come and help him to load the television into the car. The man then went out to the road to wait for the friend. When the friend arrived, both of them went back into the bushes to retrieve the television. To their horror, it was already gone! Someone else made off with it. The original thieves were so distraught that they impulsively dialed 911 to report the "stolen" television. When the police arrived at the scene, they immediately noticed the broken locks on the door of the house, and swiftly arrested the men.

This is the power of dharma, a need that is so fundamental that it cannot be overlooked even by those who habitually violate it. Dharma is therefore something to be accomplished because the tendency to conform to dharma is always under attack from unmanaged desires, rāga and dveṣa. Some people think that having desire in itself is a problem, but this is not correct. Desire does not trouble anyone so long as one does not come under its spell. The problem, however, is that there is a fine line between managing one's desires, and being managed by them. One can easily cross this line without even sensing it. Bhagavān Krishna declares in the Bhagavad Gītā that he abides in the form of desire, however, only those desires that do not violate dharma have the presence of bhagavān. Desires in the heart must not be given the power to override the means for the sake of gaining the end. Therefore, there is need to let go of those desires that are not in keeping with sāmānya dharma, the universal values of ahimsā, non injury, and truth.

Because everyone looks up to a leader, the śreṣṭha cannot cut corners or trample over the rights and privileges of others. Sometimes we underestimate the power of our actions and forget that the very position we occupy demands both accountability and a high level of transparency. The Chandogya Upaniṣad that says that discipline, charity, uprightness, non-injury, and the speaking of truth constitute the real dakṣiṇā, spiritual wealth, of the person.

yattapo dānamārjavamahimsā satyavacanamiti tā asya dakşiņāķ 3.17.4

Dharma is its own reward. Although it produces punya in the long run, it has dṛṣṭaphala, the immediate result of assuring a life free of strife. Unlike certain theologies that posit dharma as a mandate of God, we say that dharma is the very manifestation of bhagavān. Wherever there is dharma, there is bhagavān. The more one is committed to dharma, the more is the presence of bhagavān in one's life. The more the presence of bhagavān in one's life, the more secure one feels. In the beginning, one has to follow dharma deliberately, but gradually, by mastering the right methods of pursuing one's goals, one grows into a person who is incapable of flouting dharma. That is when one becomes a śreṣṭha, an example to be emulated.

# Discipline is Dharma in Action

Dharma is not a static entity. Since it is based on the *dharmin*, on being enacted by people gifted with free will, it requires constant interpretation and reinterpretation according to place, time, and intentionality. There is, for example, a big difference in the intentions of a knife-wielding attacker, and a scalpel-wielding doctor, performing a surgery. Technically, both cause harm, but in the case of the surgeon, it is with the intention to preserve, rather than destroy, life. This is the dynamic facet of dharma, known as *viśeṣa* dharma. *Viśeṣa* dharma requires the cultivation of alertness in one's life, and the readiness to face new challenges without compromising *sāmānya* dharma. For example, circumstances such as immigration to Western countries, living and serving in a land distant from own's own, can create special challenges in conforming to dharma.

A remarkable feature of ancient Indian culture was the total lack of competition. It was a society that was almost entirely devoted to the ultimate pursuit of discovering oneself as wholly contented and limitless. Therefore, the social infrastructure was one of zero competition, and supported this goal by ensuring that each person would have a ready-made livelihood, and the consequent leisure to discover themselves. As a result of this legacy, even today, every priest is a son of a priest and marries the daughter of a priest. Coming from this kind of a spiritual culture of non-competition, we are ill-equipped to survive in the modern atmosphere of the mad race to get ahead at all costs. Pressure to assimilate, pressure to get ahead in society, pressure to become someone famous, the pressure to amass great amounts of wealth create skewed priorities that inevitably lead to inner conflict and depression. By drawing upon the timeless tenets of the Vedas, we have to forge a new covenant that will empower us, and equip us to face the challenges without succumbing to such pressures. Recognizing the needs of the time, and rising to meet them with cheerfulness and integrity is the essence of leadership.

Sămănya and viśeşa dharma are the general and specific manifestations of dharma at the macrocosmic level. Svadharma, the commitment to one's duty, signifies the way in which dharma is to be enacted at the microcosmic level of one's daily existence. This is perhaps the crucial aspect of being a śreştha --setting an example to others in the day-to-day. Generally, the people are not as inspired by lofty ideas or heavy-duty philosophical discourses as they are by simply seeing how one lives in the every day. Even Arjuna, after receiving the knowledge that the self is free of all afflictions and is limitlessly whole, was curious to know about the manner in which the person who

abides this knowledge leads his or her daily life. He asks Bhagavān Krishna:

sthitaḥ prajñasya kā bhāṣā? Sthitadhīḥ kim prabhāṣeta? kimāsīta? vrajeta kim? How is the person of firm wisdom? How does such a person speak, sit, or walk?

Walking one's talk is svadharma. Following svadharma is not easy, as it demands great self-discipline and perseverance in the performance of prescribed duties. The grass always appears greener elsewhere and, purely based on the feeling that one is missing out on something big, one is often tempted to stray into unfamiliar pastures. Knowing this, the śāstra has prescribed a comprehensive curriculum of duties for each person to follow based on their their occupation and, āśrama, station in life. Ideally, each person plays their part in the cosmic flow, thereby ensuring the relative security and well-being of all. Certain things have to be done daily; certain others things have to be done occasionally, but actions which go against sāmānya dharma must never be done at all. Following this timetable protects one from trap of rāga-dveṣa, while also ensuring steady progress towards self-knowledge that frees one from saṁsāra --a life of endless striving and disenchantment.

In keeping with the view that everything is sacred because it is pervaded by Iśvara, the Hindu tradition does not make an iota of a difference between the so-called sacred and secular duties. All actions --not merely those duties confined to ritual and worship-- are considered sacred. The contemporary culture in the United States and other western countries is drastically different from this ancient view. I have repeatedly heard people describing their day mindlessly, and it is no wonder alienation from oneself and disconnection from the whole appear to be common cultural ailments. When I ask people in this country about their day, the typical answers given contain a litany of violent metaphors. For example, they "throw off the covers" in the morning, and "jump into the shower." After this, they "grab a bite to eat," even as they "hit the road." At the office, they "crunch some data," before "beating the traffic" on the way back. Once home, no one cooks. They just "nuke something from the fridge," and then, finally, "crash" at the end of the day! In this scheme of things, there is no leisure to just enjoy one's being, or to revel in the creative inspiration behind one's actions. By contrast, in our tradition, starting with waking up in the morning, everything for the Hindu is a sacred act. All actions, even mundane ones, such as bathing, dressing, or eating are acts of prayer performed for the sake of the indweller, the bhagavan that abides in all. In this area, the purchita by his very being serves as an invaluable role model. By simply leading his life in accordance to the teaching of the sastra, he can offer a powerful alternative to the disconnected and stressful life to which one can succumb while living in the USA and other western countries.

# Svadharma is Discovering the Devotee Within

In stark contrast to the contemporary capitalist culture, where fulfilling one's desires is

considered to be the hallmark of success in one's life, the *Bhagavad Gītā* redefines success as the prayerful performance of every action, and the joyful acceptance of the result thereof. Although we do possess one of the most sophisticated bodies of liturgical worship and prayers, for the sake of our own self-growth, we are encouraged to look upon all our actions as worship of *Īśvara*:

yataḥ pravrttirbhūtānāṁ yena sarvamidaṁ tatam svakarmaṇā tamabhyarcya siddhiṁ vindati mānavaḥ 18.46 worshipping with one's own actions, the source of all beings, by whom everything is pervaded, the human being accomplishes success.

Each action that is performed is viewed as *arcanā*, a flower placed reverentially at the feet of the Lord. Just as all the items used in worship are purified by the sprinkling of *mantra*-water, so too all our actions have to be sanctified by infusing them with a joyous and mindful attitude. Just as we cannot offer yesterday's leftovers in today's worship, or skip certain steps of the worship because we happen to be in a hurry, so too, when action itself is worship, there is no room for procrastination or carelessness in its performance. Committing to a life of worshipful action insulates one from the inner enemies of *rāga* and *dveṣa*. The performance of *svadharma* with a spirit of devotion and surrender transforms one into a devotee, into a prayerful person. There is a vast difference between person who prays and a prayerful person. For the former, prayer is one among many discrete acts; for the latter, devotion and prayerfulness are attitudes which permeate all actions.

Like viśesa dharma, the performance of svadharma can also vary depending upon the situations in which one finds oneself. One is neither born with an instruction booklet of what one has to do, nor does one have the freedom to always do only what one likes. Therefore, accomplishing svadharma means that one eventually grows into liking all that one has to do. The portfolio of the purchitas in India is very different than those living in North America. Here, it would appear, that one has more duties -- one is not just a performer of rituals, but is the very pillar of the community, to whom many look up to for guidance and inspiration. The purchitas find that a lot more than just worship is expected of them. They are suddenly, among other things, counselors, guides, interpreters of rituals, teachers of Hinduism, speakers, interfaith ministers, and inspirers of youth. Faced with this situation, one has the choice to either feel victimized and burdened by the demands of the time, or to embrace the God-given opportunity to grow and do one's best. The latter course of action alone benefits not only the entire community of people, where the purchita resides, but also blesses the purchita by allowing him to evolve spiritually. It is a win-win situation that facilitates one's growth into a śrestha. To grow into a person committed to dharma requires help from many sources. If language and social interaction skills are required for the performance of svadharma, one has to acquire them. Further, to overcome internal obstacles, such as alienation or discouragement, one has to take recourse to gatherings such as this, where we can come together and help one another in a spirit of sharing and networking.

The primary aspect of the *purohita's svadharma* is to model being a devotee. Who is a devotee? The witness who plays many roles in life effortlessly, the core person, the essential person, is the devotee. The individual who is mindful of his or her connection to the whole, to *Īśvara*, is the devotee. Worship is an act that highlights this connection, where the helpless individual (*jīva*) invokes the total (*Īśvara*) in a spirit of surrender. When the limited surrenders at the altar that is limitless, the limited resolves, and all that remains is the limitless *Īśvara*. The awareness of one's essential identity as the devotee keeps one's connection to the whole at the forefront, thereby erasing alienation and insecurity. If one is mindful of the primary connection to *Īśvara* as a devotee, then the performance of other roles becomes easy. The devotee is the one who performs the role of son or daughter, spouse, friend, father or mother. All roles "roll" into the devotee, and the devotee further resolves into the object of devotion, which is none other than *Īśvara*, the subject, the truth of oneself.

Discovering the devotee within oneself is indeed the master key to spiritual growth, to truly being a *śreṣṭha*. For most people this takes a lot of work, as the complex interlays of various roles tend to obfuscate the core identity of the devotee within. In this regard, I find that the *purohitas* are extremely blessed, because here alone lies a total identity between what one does and what one is. One's job is one's very being, and one is in the covetable position to reflect the devotee that one seeks to invoke within oneself. If I were asked to spell out the primary role of the priests, I would say that it is to invoke the devotee in oneself and also model it for others. Only when the devotee is present in the priest, as the priest, can there be worship. The essence of priesthood is devotion, and the priest is essentially a devotee. It is extremely important to not lose sight of this basic person, the devotee. The temple attendee is a devotee, the temple executive is also a devotee, and the priest, of course, is a devotee. All are devoted to *Īśvara*. The focus of every temple is to help one develop and live this life of devotion, and to provide a conducive refuge for each person to invoke the devotee within himself or herself.

Through the lived practice of dharma, discipline and devotion, one learns to not be affected by the challenges that one faces in life. This is Hinduism in 3 D! This is how one grows to be a *śreṣṭha*. When one occupies a prominent position, there is no other option than to grow to fill the post with grace and integrity. The sacrifice that it takes to do this is not in vain, as it helps one to become an emotionally stable and contented person, secure in the knowledge of one's connection to the whole. When we gather our resources, and come together in a spirit of sharing, even the most difficult tasks can be mastered with ease. Therefore I am very confident that the Hindu priests of North America gathered here for the second time will accomplish great things together. I am happy to see that the numbers have more than doubled since the last meet. I wish this gathering every success. I congratulate the organizers and the volunteers for their dedicated effort in putting this conference together, and pray that the discussions generated here will go a long way in the sustenance and dissemination of *sanātana* dharma in North America. Thank you. *Om tat sat*.