

Duties and Conflicts

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Duties are emphasized in the Vedic society. Any society must have either a written or unwritten constitution, which emphasizes either rights or duties. Constitutions all over the world, including the Indian secular constitution emphasize rights, certain fundamental rights – the right to choose your profession, to freedom of expression, to keep the money you earn, to exercise your vote, and so on. But when the constitution emphasizes rights, it also spells out responsibilities, for one cannot emphasize rights without defining responsibilities and imposing certain restrictions. They are in-built in the very concept of duty. Here then, we can either emphasize duties, or emphasize rights and spell out the duties. Perhaps, only in the Vedic vision of human life is there an emphasis on duty. In fact, if you are a *vaidika*, you have no rights at all, only duties. The concept of duty comes from the Vedic vision. In the West, when people go to work, they do not say, “I have joined duty”, or “just now I have come from duty”. This is “Indian English” used to express an Indian concept which has no English equivalent.

What is Duty?

Let us now understand what duty is. If I am a child, as a son or a daughter to my parents, I have certain duties. If I perform them, my parents get their rights. If they perform their duties, I get my rights. As a husband performs his duty toward his wife, the wife gets her rights. If she performs her duty, the husband gets his rights. If the state performs its duty, the citizens get their rights, and if the citizens perform their duty, the state gets

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its rights. Though one does get one's rights, the emphasis is on duty, not on rights.

They come naturally as an outcome of performing one's duties. This is because everyone is born related to the world. Life itself is symbiotic, a network of mutual dependence. Even our solar system is interrelated. This is how the planets remain in their orbits around the sun. And the system itself is related to the galaxy. Thus, you find the whole universe is held together with a variety of things depending upon each other. Whether it is a cell or a nucleus, there are constituent factors that are interrelated. As an individual, I am not born alone on this planet. Even before I am born, I am related to people. At birth, one person says, "I have a new neighbor," another says, "I have a grandson", another, "I have a new brother". Everybody claims relationship to the child, even though the child does not know them. Thus, I am born related and live related. This being so, if my behavior is controlled purely by a set of instincts I will have no norms of duty, rights, and so on.

All human being are endowed with the faculty of choice and have to choose their behavior. In doing so, one cannot avoid a matrix of norms. This matrix must be universal in nature and not something that must be taught. If the Vedic concept of duty is universal, it should be applicable to all societies. The concept of duty in Vedic society is based upon the vision of the Vedas about yourself and human destiny. In this vision, you have to exercise your will to discover the truth of yourself, a whole, complete person. In other words, a *puruṣa*. Unless we understand this, we will not understand the emphasis on duty rather than on rights.

The word *puruṣa* in Sanskrit has two meanings and both are relevant. One meaning is *purau uṣati, vasati* – the one who dwells in the city. The word *puri*, city, refers to the physical body, and the one who dwells inside this city is called a *puruṣa*. Another meaning for the word *puruṣa* is *sarvam pūrayati* – the one who fills up everything. In other words, a complete being, *pūrṇa*. So the *puruṣa* who is looked upon as subject to varieties of limitations is indeed *puruṣa*, complete, and one who does not require to improve this fact.

All your life, you work hard to improve yourself, to make yourself somebody significant in the society, feeling that you are inadequate, a non-entity. But then the Veda tells you, “You are a complete person”. Thus, there are two different visions. In one you are complete, and in the other, you are not. You cannot, however, accept yourself as an incomplete person. Therefore, the end of the search seems to be the very thing that the Veda talks about. In its vision, since you are a complete person, your whole life should be lived in a manner that helps you discover this fullness.

Inner Growth in the Vedic Vision

The vision of the Vedas, being what it is, advocates a lifestyle that is entirely unique. Since you are already a complete person, the culture is only an aid to help you discover this profound truth. It is a great vision that everybody wants and struggles for in life. Nobody rests content with what he is. In spite of one’s accomplishments and skills, one always has a sense of inadequacy. The adequacy that one is seeking is oneself alone. To discover this, one must be mature. Though physically one may be an adult, emotionally one can remain a child. Adulthood does not assure emotional maturity. One can remain as angry, self-centered, jealous and hateful as one

was in childhood. As a child, if I had these tendencies, I have to grow out of them and become emotionally mature.

The Veda gives us a plan to make ourselves mature. It teaches a lifestyle and value structure which helps us grow so well that we can discover that we are whole. The main essence of this teaching is duty. Because it includes knowledge, it is not confined to a culture or a particular time, nation, or geography. There is no Indian or American knowledge. Knowledge is always true to the object, and no one has a geographical claim over it. Further, the Vedic tradition holds the Vedas as the body of knowledge coming down from generation to generation. Since we cannot trace a beginning for it, we impute its origin to the Lord. Thus, the Vedas are too ancient, even to claim it as Indian.

This is true for any ancient treasure. In Egypt, for instance, there are many pyramids. Suppose the Egyptian government decided to do away with one pyramid and put a housing complex in its place. Do you think that the world community will accept it? Definitely not. This is because the pyramid has outlived time and is no longer Egyptian, even though it happens to be in Egypt. It is too ancient even for Egypt to claim as its own. The Egyptian government can only be a managing trustee which has no right to destroy. Similarly, this Vedic knowledge does not belong to any particular community. It is too ancient. It is the most ancient body of knowledge in humanity and is intact. Further, it is a live tradition coming down from generations so that even Indians cannot claim that it belongs to them. It is too ancient for anyone to claim as theirs. They are fortunate enough to be the current managing trustees. But unlike a pyramid, this body of knowledge has to be managed by a person who has imbibed it.

Gaining knowledge is neither difficult nor easy. It appears difficult if you are not ready, but if you are, there is nothing easier. To know a given thing, you must have a certain preparedness determined by what you want to know. Here, what I want to know is what I want to be. This is unlike any other knowledge. Naturally, you require a unique preparedness which the Vedas prescribe as a life of duties.

Role of Values

The fact that I am born with a faculty of choice makes me a unique living being. As a human being, I can use, abuse, or disuse this faculty. Neither disuse or abuse are proper. In using this freedom of choice, one has no choice whatsoever. Every individual is given a certain set of norms on the basis of which he can exercise his choice. Knowledge of the universal matrix of values, and value-based duties, *sāmānya-jñānam*, is inborn and understood with the help of common sense.

This “common” sense must be common to all. For instance, everybody knows that he should not get hurt. Common sense allows one to appreciate that others also do not want to get hurt. No child, nor any living organism wants to get hurt. Not even a mosquito. That is why, by the time you raise your hand to remove it, it is gone; it returns when you pick up your book again. Thus, not hurting, *ahiṃsā*, is one universal value. Similarly, as I do not want to be lied to, others do not want to be deceived by me. I do not want to be the object of anybody’s hatred, anger, or jealousy. I want everybody to be sharing, loving and friendly. This means that I am absolutely ethical in so far as others’ behavior is concerned. I also know that others expect the same from me.

Even though I have this knowledge, I have conflicts regarding right and wrong and find myself compromising the universal norms. That “something” which makes me cut corners is the lack of assimilation of the *sāmānya-jñānam* which can take place only by one’s own initiation. If *dharma* and *adharma* is not assimilated properly, then you will always have conflicts.

For instance, a person is on his way to an important Rotary dinner where he will meet some industrialists to whom he hopes to sell his product. He is dressed in his only suit. As he is walking, an old man falls into a muddy ditch and screams for help. There is no one else around. This is an unfortunate situation and he now has a conflict. He cannot leave because this fellow is crying for help and he knows what it means to be in that position. *Dharma* comes to him first because it is known to him. But there is a conflict because he is afraid that he will ruin his clothes and not be able to go to the dinner.

If he decides to go to the dinner his self-image is going to be damaged. Since he rubbed against *dharma*, his heart will be conflict-ridden. If I were him, I would help the old man and still attend the dinner. A Rotarian would be proud of such an individual. Since you would not want to be left in a ditch, to do so to someone else is wrong. You cannot rub against *dharma* without getting rubbed in the process, for action and reaction are not only equal, but opposite.

If he immediately helps the man, without a second thought, only later will he notice that his clothes are ruined. His spontaneity in action is because what is to be done, *dharma*, duty, and what is his inclination, both happen to be the same. The word spontaneous can be used as an attribute to

an action only when that action is in conformity with *dharma*, in other words, if it is to be done. What is to be done is duty, and duty means *dharma*. Maturity implies such an assimilation of *dharma* that you cannot do otherwise. If you become incapable of going against *dharma*, then you are mature, grown up. Human interaction becomes very simple for such an individual.

Assimilation of Values

Conflict will remain as long as your assimilation of values is incomplete. It is natural to have a conflict in the beginning. If you act upon your desires which are against *dharma* and *adharma*, there will be conflict before, during, and after the action. And every conflict, every compromise, will add up in your psyche so that by the time you are thirty or forty, you are a personality with varieties of angularities. If you are to have some peace in life, and look back and say you have lived a life of learning and growth, you need to polish off these angularities. This implies assimilation of values. As a human being, we have got to fall back upon *dharma* and then see that our actions carry the approval of *dharma*.

Your life should be such that it helps you to assimilate these values. A certain thinking has to be initiated by your own will. The Lord can only give you the common sense knowledge, which is adequate to start your life, but to make your life free from conflicts, to grow further, you have to use your own will. And there is no *dharma* other than God. God may be more than *dharma*, but *dharma* is not other than God. When there is no discordance between the *dharma* which is the Lord and myself, there is joy, there is beauty, and I need not require to do anything else to enjoy, to bring beauty to my life.

The value of a value is to be assimilated in order for it not to cause conflict. A conflict in terms of value, *dharma*, is due to priorities or likes and dislikes. If they do not conform to *dharma* and *adharma*, I cannot avoid conflict. Therefore, until I assimilate the value of a value, I have to conform to *dharma*, exercising my will. In doing so, there is conflict initially, but not later. For instance, if a person who eats things from the garbage is given a value for hygiene, it is not possible for him to even think of picking up something like that. Once you have assimilated the value of a value, the value is your own. Education lies, not in preaching values, but in teaching the value of a value. The person should be able to see the immensity of the loss he incurs when he compromises a value. The growth of a person or the degree of assimilation of a value is in terms of the enormity of loss he appreciates when he compromises the value.

This is with reference to *sāmānya-dharmas*, which are universal in nature. In the Vedic tradition, we also have *viśeṣa-dharmas*. Since, in the vision of the Veda, human destiny is nothing but self discovery, as a human being one has to grow. This inner growth has to be effected by one's own initiative. To help us, the Vedas have evolved a system of duty, which is understood as *viśeṣa-dharma*.

This is based upon a social requirement. Every human being is born not merely as an observer of the world, but with the faculties to be an active participant in the creation. Since we are living a symbiotic, interrelated life, your contribution may help me live, and my contribution may help you live. We are thus interconnected and the same person cannot and does not do all the jobs. Therefore, the Vedas outlined a beautiful system called *varṇa*. The translation of *varṇa* is not 'caste'. The word does not lend itself to

English translation. If you are truly ready for this journey of inquiry, you will find this *varṇa* to be something beautiful to understand, for which your vision must be clear.

Duty-based Vedic Society

Everybody has duties to perform in society. Tasks in the Vedic society were broadly brought under four heads. Every society must have someone to teach, to officiate at rituals, and not compete in the society. His dedication should be only to the pursuit of knowledge and his job to provide that knowledge for society. Even today, in any society there is a class of teachers, scientists and people who work to gather more knowledge. There is another type of job, which necessarily implies administration, law and order, and defence. This is to protect *dharma* since people abuse freedom. The third type of job deals with commerce and agriculture and is very important in every society. Whether the system is barter or monetary, there should be somebody who makes things available to buy or barter for. The fourth job is to make all these possible. You will find four corresponding types of people in every society.

Everyone has to work towards his self-discovery by neutralizing his likes and dislikes. For this, he must give precedence to *dharma*. When my job is already determined by my birth in my family, I need not compete in the society for another job. I just do what is to be done by me. My father had this job and so did my grandfather; I do the same. But if money is the criterion, the emphasis is different. You have to determine which job market is open and then plan even your education accordingly. If electrical engineering has a glut now, you go to mechanical. If mechanical is also full, you go to computer engineering or law. If there are too many lawyers, then

medicine. Thus, even your education is profession oriented and your outlook competitive.

The Veda gives one a life of duties. It cannot give a life of aggrandizement, hoarding, or success in terms of money, and power. Even a *rāja*, king, only performed his duties. When everyone's duties are defined, they are called *svadharma*. If you choose another profession because of better money, there is a dereliction of duty, in other words, there is no growth because the priority becomes money. Any system is subject to abuse and so is the *varṇa* system. But while the system can become obsolete, the spirit cannot. Even though we do not follow the system anywhere, by birth, there is a *brāhmaṇa*; there is a *kṣatriya*; there is a *vaiśya*; and there is a *sūdra*. But they do not do their respective jobs anymore. From poultry to auto manufacture, they do everything. A *brāhmaṇa* does not do the *agnihotra karmas*, nor does he perform rituals and live on the minimum. He cannot, because there is no state support. Neither can a *kṣatriya* do the *kṣatriya*'s job; nor a *vaiśya* his job; that system is gone. Now we have to understand only the spirit of the system. The spirit is duty.

A form, of course, is necessary, but the spirit is equally necessary. If the form goes away, the spirit will also go away. If the form is retained without the spirit, it is like holding onto a carcass. A form may change, but the spirit must not fade away. Your spirit, your love for yourself does not get old, even though your body is old. With only 30% vision of his vision, a person stands before the mirror every day, looking at himself because the love for oneself, the spirit, is always fresh. The form may change; the spirit cannot change.

So too, the concept of duty cannot change, even though we have changed the forms. Whether one is a *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiṣya*, *śūdra*, or even outside the community, what is one's duty? This is determined by the situation. Every situation warrants an action on my part. And that action is my *svadharma*. If you are able to follow your *kula dharma*, your job by birth, do so. But in duties there is nothing superior or inferior. This must be properly understood.

Every human being, in terms of disposition, is nothing but a combination of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. *Sattva* refers to thinking, *dharma*. When you are thinking or absorbed in music, in devotion, in exploration, in analyzing a problem; when you are sympathetic or loving, *sattva* is predominant. Everybody, including a criminal, has this quality, since he has love. *Rajas* is ambition, energy, desire, activity, and dynamism. *Tamas* is dullness. Everybody is a combination of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. In this, any one can be predominant over the other two giving rise to four dispositions. The first has *sattva* occupying first place; *rajas* occupying second place, and *tamas* occupying third place. The second type has *rajas* occupying first place, *sattva* occupying second place, and *tamas* occupying third place. In the third type, *rajas* occupies first place, *tamas* second, and *sattva* third place. Then the fourth type has *tamas* occupying first place, *rajas* occupying second, and *sattva* occupying third place. The program of the *ṛṣis* is designed to make everyone the first type of person. When the child is born, it sleeps most of the time; *tamas* is predominant. Afterward, it is selfish; then later it is very active, and so on. There should be a time when *sattva* becomes predominant.

Everybody has to become a *brāhmaṇa* by *guṇa*. A person doing a *brāhmaṇa*'s job of performing *pūja* in the temple and using his good voice to worship the Lord with devotion is a *brāhmaṇa* by *guṇa* and also by *karma*. If he is doing the same thing for name or power, he is doing the job of a *brāhmaṇa*, but is a *kṣatriya* by *guṇa*. There is another fellow who looks for money in the plate. He is a *vaiṣya brāhmaṇa*. If he does not even know how to do his job, he is a *sūdra brāhmaṇa*. Similarly, there may be somebody sweeping the floor. This is our culture. Any work, if understood to be duty, is complete for it provides the individual with purification of the mind. If there is someone who is by *guṇa* a *brāhmaṇa*, he has definitely made it as a *brāhmaṇa*. One *karma* is not less efficacious than another in purifying the person as long as it is one's *dharma*, duty.

Even though the *varṇa* system is not viable now, because there is no state support, one needs to understand it. The Vedic spirit embodied in it is, "This is my duty toward the society, my family, my neighbors, the state, humanity, all the living beings, and even the *devatās*. I will do whatever is to be done by me". Our vision does not end with our own community, but covers the entire humanity and all living beings. By doing what is to be done, you will gain the greatest *śreyas*, freedom. The first *śreyas* is growth. You become a *brāhmaṇa* by *guṇa*, and as a *brāhmaṇa* you will discover *Brahman*, the Lord. That *brāhmaṇa* can be from any culture. When one has a mature mind, one enjoys the preparedness for the knowledge of oneself; the self which is non-separate from the very cause itself.

Discovery of the Vedic Vision

In the vision of the Veda, you have to grow up. Therefore, self-growth is the aim which will lead to self-discovery. The method for this is *karma*, duty. Whether you say *dharma* or *karma*, it is one and the same. *Dharma* is in terms of expression. *Svadharmā* is *svakarma*. What is to be done in a given situation becomes *svakarma*. I am not born as a simple witness. If I were born with only sense organs and no hands or legs or stomach etc., I could be purely be an observer and not participate in the world's activity. But fortunately or unfortunately, I am born with hands and legs and the power to create. I am endowed with a threefold *śakti*, power: a power to know and to remember, *jñāna śakti*; a power to will and to desire, *icchā śakti*; and a power to do, *kriyā śakti*. With these, every human being is a participant in the creation. If you look at the other living organisms in the world, you find that each one of them participates without transgressing its limit. It does exactly what is expected of it because it has no free will. A mango tree doesn't yield some other fruit, such as an apple. Similarly, every animal behaves exactly as it should. Each one participates and contributes what it must.

There is a peculiar problem when dealing with a human being, because he has free will. He also has to participate, which necessarily implies interaction. When I relate to the world, I am the invariable person, while objects I relate to are variable in nature. I perceive different objects which have varieties of forms and colors. All of them are variables. Even my personal relationships with people are not always the same. To one person, I am the son; to another person, I am the father; to another, employee; to another, employer; or I am just a citizen of a country. Thus,

every day I have a lot of people to meet with and relate to. While relating, the person who relates is always the same; that is me. I am the father, I am the son. I am the variable. As this same person relates differently, it looks as though the person also undergoes a change is always relevant to the person to whom one is related.

Relating as a father or son, I am invariable, but there is a variable factor with reference to the person I relate to. This 'I' becomes the father; 'I' becomes the son. I am the same and there are these changes. Whether I live in the society or withdraw from it to become a *sannyāsi*, I have to relate to the world. The *sannyāsi* has to relate to his *śiṣyas* as a *guru*; to his *guru* as a *śiṣya*. And there are also friends, *gurubhāis*. No one can avoid relationships. In these relationships, the invariable 'I' is different from the father or the son that I am. In the father 'I' is present, while in the 'I' the father is absent. In the son the 'I' is present; in the 'I' the son is absent. If the son is present in the 'I', I will be an absolute son, meaning I am everyone's son, born of every creature there is. In the 'I', there is absence of father, son, employer, employee. With reference to objects I become a liker and disliker too. If, in the 'I' there is a liker, then I will like every creature in the world. But that is not true. Therefore, in the 'I' there is no liker, but in the liker, there is the presence of 'I'. In the 'I' there is no disliker, but in the disliker, there is the presence of 'I'. It is very clear, even in all these varieties of changes I undergo, the invariable seems to be free from the attributes of those changes. This is the very essence of the Vedic vision of the Bhagavad Gita.