

Satsang with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
More on Duty (3 of 3)

Question

How does one balance one's responsibilities and duties to others with one's own pursuit of happiness?

Answer

This is a subjective judgment. In the Vedic times, they used to specify five obligatory duties or *panca-yajñas*, namely, making offerings to the gods, to the sages and teachers, to one's parents and ancestors, to other human beings, and to other forms of life. They have all contributed to our life and, therefore, we have obligatory duties towards them. The Manusmṛti says that after having fulfilled your duties, you should commit yourself to *mokṣa*, the pursuit of freedom and knowledge.

Now, when can you consider yourself to have fulfilled all your duties? Is there a boundary that determines it? Is there a definition? Well, in the olden days, there was some sort of a definition. There were the prescribed stages of life and, usually, when a householder's son became mature, the householder could retire as a *vanaprastha*. One's duties are there only as long as one is a householder. A student also has his own kind of duties, but the duty to the rest of the world mainly rests on the shoulders of the householder. When your oldest child is old enough to fulfill your responsibilities, you are free. In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad, the father calls his son to him and tells him that he is Brahma, that he is *yajña*, and that he is *loka*. In this context, Brahma means the Vedas. In essence, the father is telling the son that until then, he has been reciting the Vedas and performing the *yajñas*, all the rituals for attaining the various *lokas*, the various ends such as the heavens, and now it is the son's responsibility to do so. This is how the transfer of responsibility took place in those days. The parents were then free to go and live in the forest and devote themselves to their own spiritual pursuit.

Nowadays, we do not have any of these distinct life-stages. For example, there is no such thing as *vanaprastha* or forest dwelling any more. There is no renunciation either. Primarily, there are only two life-stages - the life of a student and that of a householder. Therefore, you have to really examine your responsibilities. On one hand, you can never fulfill your responsibilities because

there is no end to them. At the same time, however, one has to be sensitive to the genuine needs of others. One's responsibility is another's right. If those to whom we are related have genuine needs, we should be sensitive to them. At the same time, we have to be aware that needs have no end and, therefore, what people expect of you may also have no end.

This also depends upon the cultural and social conditions. For example, what is your duty towards your son? In the west, for example, when the son or daughter grows to be 18, or when they go off to college, the duty of the parent seems to be over. If you are a good parent, you might support them financially; otherwise they are supposed to take care of themselves. They see nothing wrong in it; that is their tradition. Very often, the children of Indian parents live with their parents even after finishing college, especially if they are working in that area. Indian parents typically think that it is their duty to get their children not only educated, but also married. Indian children, at least those born in India, also expect this of their parents. In addition, sometimes the children expect that their parents should support them while they are struggling to build their own career. In the beginning they are very busy and have to work very hard. They do not have time to look after their own children and expect their parents to take care of their children. Some grandparents are very happy to do so. Some others have their own agenda. They want to attend classes, or visit somewhere. That is when the conflict arises. So at what point is your duty over? It is very difficult to give an answer that applies to all situations.

Generally, I think that when your son is married, your duty can be considered to be over, even by Indian standards. There is no end to expectations. If fulfilling duties means fulfilling the expectations that others have of you, there will be no end. People in the society have many expectations, e.g., they expect you to support when somebody is ill, when somebody is in hospital, or when somebody is dying. In India, such expectations are endless. At some point, it is okay to let go of these duties. Announce that you will not be attending weddings or social functions any more. In the beginning, people will protest. In course of time, they will recognize that this is how you wish to be. They may respect you, especially if you are using your time properly and are not just shirking your responsibilities, and are, instead, doing something worthwhile. As you grow older, you can slowly disengage yourself from the unnecessary activities and formalities. You can do this only if you are adequately self-sufficient and also don't mind people cutting you off in a way, from their activities. If you are quite happy with yourself, doing what you are doing, you can retire from all these

social activities. This should be a gradual withdrawal. You will get used to it and the world will also get used to it.

You should progressively become free from the need to have company. In the Bhagavad Gita [13-11], Lord Krishna talks of *viviktadeśasevitvamaratirjana-samsadi*, , the disposition of repairing to a quiet place and not longing for the company of people. You should cultivate the habit of living in solitude and becoming free from the need for company. When you feel that you are quite able to study your books, listen to tapes, go to camps, attend study groups, and visit temples, you can begin to live by yourself. When you find that you have acquired a certain amount of emotional independence, you can slowly withdraw from unnecessary activities¹.

¹ Transcribed by Gautam, Jaya Kannan, and Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.