

**Satsang with Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati**  
**Arsha Vidya Gurukulam**  
**More on *Dharma***

***Question***

Is *dharma* absolute or does it need interpretation?

***Answer***

In any given situation we should do what we need to do. Let us take the example of Lord Rama. He is severely criticized for his abandonment of Sita. How do we explain this? After all “*Ramo vighrahavān dharmaha*”, he is the embodiment of *dharma* or righteousness. How could he justify doing that? Rama had many roles to play, such as those of a king and husband. On the one hand, his subjects were criticizing him for keeping Sita in his home. Whether the criticism was right or wrong, this is how it was. On the other hand he had his duty as husband to his wife. If he played the role of a husband knowing that his wife is chaste, and ignored what his subjects said, then he would not be pleasing them. “*Ranjanāth rajaha*”, or the one who pleases his people, is called *raja* or king. Thus, if he wanted to make his wife happy, he had to make his subjects unhappy, and if he wanted to make them happy instead, he had to make his wife unhappy. So he had two conflicting demands.

In fact this happens to all of us. There are many conflicting demands in our life. For example, Pujya Swamiji is teaching a course to 100 students and somebody invites him to give a talk for 2 days. Should he go or not? If he goes to deliver the talks, what happens to the students attending the course? If he doesn't go, what happens to the other people? One has to take a decision. This is where the interpretation of value comes in. Even though there are universal values, e.g., “I should not do unto others what I do not want done unto me”, these rules need to be interpreted in every situation. *Dharma* always depends upon time, place and condition.

Lord Rama interpreted that his duty or demands as a king was more important than his duty as a husband. You can fulfill the demand that you consider most important in a given situation. For example, when you are at work, your duty as an employee becomes more predominant than your duty as a father. When you come home, your duty

as a father becomes more important than your duty as an employee. Thus you will have to determine what, in a given situation, the most important role for that situation is. There is no general rule about it. This is where we have to use our sense of judgment. We can be wrong, but then we can learn. But at least we would have tried to do our best and been sincere. If we are sincere, in time, we will learn whether we were right or wrong, because the result will reveal it.

***Question***

But Rama could have gone out and explained to his subjects!

***Answer***

Yes, he did that. It seems that he sent all his people around. Nobody is fond of abandoning his wife! Do not think that Rama abandoned his wife. He abandoned himself. Nobody sees that. He never lived in the palace again. From that point on, he lived the life of an ascetic. If Sita lived the life of an ascetic, so did Rama. He never enjoyed the pleasures of a king from that point on. The point here is that there are always conflicting demands upon a person.

***Question***

Can a person play two roles at the same time, in a given situation?

***Answer***

You cannot play two roles at the same time. You can play only one role at a time. You can play the other role the next moment. At each moment, however, you can play only one role. Therefore, you should use your judgment.

***Question***

Are you saying that *dharma* is relative and not absolute?

***Answer***

Following *dharma* always requires us to take into account the particular conditions of time, place and situation. Therefore, there cannot be an absolute rule. *Satyam* or truthfulness is an absolute *dharma*. But what truthfulness is, will be determined by the situation. Non-violence is a universal value. But what non-violence is, in a given situation, will have to be determined by the situation.

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**Question**

Was Robin Hood practicing *kausalam* in his actions? Is robbing the rich to help the poor *kausalam*?

**Answer**

*Dharma* is *kausalam*. Following what is right and fair is *kausalam*. It is possible that some peculiar condition can justify some things. But you cannot generalize from that. We cannot say that it is the right thing to do.

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**Question**

Where do *vāsanās* come from?

**Answer**

*Vāsanās* are past impressions. Everything that I do creates an impression. When we do something over and over again, and often enough, it becomes a habit. We have inherited all kinds of habits from our past, such as habits of thinking, judging and concluding, as well as certain behaviors. A *vāsanā* is all these tendencies or habits that have been inherited on account of our having done them repeatedly in the past. So what I do without any deliberation is a result of this *vāsanā* or conditioning. Thus there is conditioned thinking, conditioned responses and conditioned actions. They are all *vāsanās*.

**Question**

Sometimes we are not able to change certain things however much we try. What is the way to get a grip over *vāsanās*?

**Answer**

*Vāsanās* manifest in our life as likes and dislikes, as *rāga-dveśas*. Likes and dislikes are habitual. I like something habitually and I dislike something habitually. Following *dharma* or following universal values is a way to overcome this pressure of *vāsanās* or *rāga-dveśas*. My tendencies or the habits of my past may compel me to act in a certain way. Before acting, I review and see whether this action is in keeping with the values or not. If it is not, I keep my tendencies under check. This is how we slowly

restrain and subdue those tendencies, which may push us away from *dharma*. There may also be many tendencies in me, which propel me towards the path of *dharma*. I encourage such tendencies.

This is where we follow the guidelines given by the scriptures in terms of *dharma* or values. These values give us the guidelines as to what would be a proper way of acting in a given situation. For example, by my commitment to non-violence, I am committed not to hurt others by my words, my actions or my thought. I try to follow this as much as I can. Nobody can follow these values in an absolute way, but we do have a commitment to follow them as best as we can.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Questions and Answers from a satsang with Swamiji, Bridgewater *Gītā Vichara* Group, NJ, Summer 2000. Transcribed and edited by Chaya Raj, Jayshree Ramakrishnan and KK Davey.