

DHARMA STHAPAKA: REGULATOR OF RELIGION -GRIHASTHA DHARMA-

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THE word *dharma* in Sanskrit means that which sustains or upholds. Man is sustained not only by what he does to maintain himself and his family, but also by the indwelling Spirit or the Self; for, all beings have this Spirit behind their external form, the body. But for this Spirit, the Atman, nothing would exist. Only the human being is endowed with the intelligence to comprehend this and he alone has the opportunity to realize the Self or God. A time comes, even in the life of a person wholly given to sense pleasures and to the acquirement of material comforts and riches, when he feels that all is not going well with him, that he lacks something, that all the riches and name and fame he possesses do not bestow on him the peace and bliss he hankers after. The sages of India discovered this truth in very ancient times and declared that the happiness and the bliss eternal that man seeks can only be experienced in the Atman and one who really seeks the bliss eternal should tread the path of the Spirit, religion or *dharma*.

The way of the Spirit is hard to tread. It is like swimming against the current; for, the natural tendency of man's sense organs is to go outward, towards their objects. Meanwhile, the Spirit dwells within and is not perceivable by these senses. Those who desire to seek It have to withdraw the senses from their objects and dive inward into their own Self. Again, the general inclination of man is to follow the easy path, and what is more easy than seeking happiness in the external objects? That is why religion or the way of the Spirit, though repeatedly re-established, declines with the passage of time, leaving only its outer forms without its inner depth and extension. When religious decline reaches a frighteningly low-water mark, God himself takes human form to resuscitate and rejuvenate it, to regulate and reform it. And every time a Divine Incarnation appears on the earth, He puts a new stamp of authority on the essentials of religion by practising

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them in His own life, thus proving their validity. His message declared through His life and precepts is a guide for society and mankind as a whole. When in the last century, people in India had generally lost belief in their own religion, and those who professed it were merely paying lip-service to it, there descended a God-man to teach mankind that religion did not consist merely in doctrines and in mere erudition, that religion was no superstition, that God exists and anyone who seeks Him earnestly and sincerely reaches Him, that He can even be conversed with.

Now, religion is not the exclusive property of any group of people or sect. It is the way of communion with God or the Supreme Spirit. Any man, wherever and in whichever station or position of life he is placed, if he but really desires perfection can strive to realize Him. This fact was recognised in ancient India and the sages, from time to time, according to the changes in the living conditions, set out rules and methods so that every individual in accordance with his station or position in society could attempt to realize Him. Formerly, in the Hindu society life was regulated into periods such as Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha and Sannyasa, or the periods of celibacy and studentship, of householding, of retirement to the forest and of total renunciation.

The householder or grihastha, who desired to lead a spiritual life, had certain guide rules to follow, had certain duties to fulfil, as well as certain responsibilities, besides the maintenance of his family. He had three other types of debts to discharge, viz., debts to the Rishis, to the gods and to the ancestors. The study of the Scriptures, with a view to comprehending their meaning and putting their teachings into practice would relieve him of his debt to the Rishis; by the offering of appropriate libations and by adoration at the proper time he discharged his debts to the gods and the ancestors. Besides these he had also the obligation to feed a hungry guest that arrived at his door. He had to be truthful and earn his livelihood honestly.

Sri Ramakrishna, the God-man of this age who later on was to teach mankind, was born of parents who observed these injunctions of the Scriptures throughout their life. His father, Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya, possessed great faith in and devotion to God, and never took any food until he had performed the worship of his Chosen Ideal and other Deities that were installed in his house. Kshudiram's steadfastness to truth was admirable. It is said that when once an unscrupulous landlord of his native village of Dere asked him to bear false witness, he declined to do so and as a result lost all his property due to the machinations of the wicked landlord.

Even under such adverse circumstances his faith in and devotion to God did not waver. He was a picture of contentment and forgiveness. For all these pious qualities of his he was respected and venerated in Kamarpukur, the village to which he moved after suffering the above calamity, and where Sri Ramakrishna was later born. Speaking about his father Sri Ramakrishna once said: "When my father walked along the lanes of the village wearing his wooden sandals, the shopkeepers would stand up out of respect and say, 'There he comes!' When he bathed in the Haldarpukur, the villagers would not have the courage to get into the water. Before bathing they would inquire if he had finished his bath. When my father chanted the name of Raghuvir, his chest would turn crimson²."

Sri Chandramani Devi, the mother of Sri Ramakrishna, too was an ideal partner of her noble husband. When all the people in the family save herself had taken their meals, she would go to the front door to see whether any hungry person was passing by or was waiting outside. And, many a day she would serve such a person with the food that was left, and satisfy her hunger by eating a handful of puffed rice or things like that. Though the family was poor, no person who approached her door went away empty-handed. In this atmosphere of devotion to God, truthfulness, generosity and contentment Sri Ramakrishna was born and brought up. From his childhood he was a keen observer, nothing missed his penetrating eyes. So, he could discern the motive or the motivelessness behind the actions of the people. Having observed the steadfast devotion of his father to God and the exemplary life he led, he arrived at the right conclusion that a householder too could reach God, if he led a life of truthfulness, righteousness and dispassion, and cultivated dependence on God.

Laying emphasis on truthfulness Sri Ramakrishna used to say: "Even those engaged in worldly activities, such as office work and business should bold to truth. Truthfulness alone is the spiritual discipline in the Kali Yuga³." In olden times people used to practise all types of austerities, like the Chandrayana Vrata⁴, Purascharana, etc. But due to the changes in the living conditions in this age, all people do not find time to observe these vows or practise other hard austerities, as a part of their spiritual discipline. Sri Ramakrishna therefore, gave this simple advice which at the same time is

² The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (Tr. by Swami Nikhilananda, pub. by Ramakrishna_Vivekananda Center, New York, 1942), p.408.

³ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴ Chandrayana Vrata is a fast regulated according to the moon's position, the food being diminished every day by one mouthful for the dark fortnight and increased in like manner during the bright fortnight.

one of the fundamentals of spiritual life. He further said: "If a man clings tenaciously to truth, he ultimately realizes God. Without this regard for truth he gradually loses everything. After my vision of the Divine Mother, I prayed, taking a flower in my hand: 'Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love.' I mentioned all these, but could not say: 'Mother, here is Thy truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both.' I gave up everything at Her feet but could not bring myself to giving up truth⁵."

The general trend of opinion, in those days, regarding the dharma or duties of the householder was extremely materialistic in outlook, as is reflected in the reply of a great scholar of the time, to Sri Ramakrishna's question as to what he thought were the duties of man: 'If you ask me about them, I should say they are eating, sleeping and sex-life.' This trend of opinion shows that the sane advice of the ancient Rishis, repeatedly reiterated by successive Divine Incarnations, had either been forgotten or discarded by the educated class as useless for the present age. This was a dangerous tendency especially when it manifested through persons whom the society considered as great scholars. For, it is the scholars that the generality of mankind imitates. Thus, we can perceive to what degree religion had degenerated and how imperative was the need of an Incarnation of God to re-establish it.

One can imagine what reaction such a reply would have been caused in the mind of Sri Ramakrishna, who from his boyhood had thought differently. His answer was sharp: "What you do day and night comes out through your mouth. A man belches what he eats. If he eats radish, he belches radish; if he eats green coconut, he belches green coconut. Day and night, you live in the midst of 'woman and gold'; so, your mouth utters words about that alone. By constantly thinking of worldly things a man becomes calculating and deceitful. On the other hand, he becomes guileless by thinking of God. A man who has seen God will never say what you have just said. What will a pundit's scholarship profit him if he does not think of God and has no discrimination and renunciation? The pundit has no doubt studied many books and scriptures; he may rattle off their texts, or he may have written books. But if he is attached to women, if he thinks of money

⁵ Op. Cit., p. 312.

and honour as the essential things, will you call him a pundit?⁶

The Hindu Scriptures mention four aims of man, viz., *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, i.e., righteousness, money, desire and liberation. This is the order in which they are set out, denoting a great significance: that man should give the foremost place to *dharma* or righteousness, that he should govern his desire for money and sense pleasures according to *dharma*. Actually, the first three of these aims are only means to the fourth, liberation. If a man assiduously adheres to righteousness even in his pursuit of wealth or in his satisfying of his other desires, he develops the faculty to comprehend the real values of life. As regards desire Sri Krishna says in the *Gita*: “In the beings I am the desire which is not against righteousness.”⁷ But the nature of the mind of the common man is such that when one desire is satisfied it projects a hundred new ones and the impulse to satisfy them grows stronger every time a desire is met. In the *Mahabharata* we come across a wise saying: ‘Never can desire be got rid of by satisfying it; it flares up more and more just like the fire in which clarified butter is poured.’

Now the question is how to control desire. Sri Ramakrishna said: “A worldly man suffering from a delirious fever, as it were. Suppose there are pickled tamarind and jars of water in the room of such a patient. Now, can you expect him to get rid of the disease? Just see, the very mention of pickled tamarind is making my mouth water! You can very well imagine what will happen if the tamarind is actually put in front of me. To a man, a woman is the pickled tamarind, and his desire for enjoyment, the jars of water. There is neither end nor limit to this desire for worldly enjoyment. And the things are in the patient’s very room. Can you expect the patient to get rid of the delirious fever in this fashion? He must be removed for a few days to another place where one finds neither pickled tamarind nor water jars. Then he will be cured. After that if he returns to his old room, he will have nothing to fear. ‘Woman and gold’ cannot do any harm to the man who lives in the world after attaining God. Only then can he lead a detached life in the world. But he must be careful at the beginning. He must practise spiritual discipline in strict solitude⁸.” Lust and greed will not be able to raise their heads in the mind of the man who returns to the life in the world after increasing his spiritual strength and developing love for God through the practice of spiritual discipline in solitude.

It may be asked, what then will happen to one’s duties to the family.

⁶ Ibid., p. 669.

⁷ *Gita*, Ch. VII.11.

⁸ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 626.

Sri Ramakrishna never advised the householder to give up his duties. On the other hand, if he heard or came to know of a person who neglected his duties to the family, he would feel disgusted. On a certain occasion referring to a person who had squandered everything in an immoral life and had become indifferent to his wife and children, Sri Ramakrishna said: "He is an unfortunate wretch. A householder has his duties to discharge, his debts to pay: his debt to the gods, his debt to his ancestors, his debt to the rishis, and his debt to wife and children⁹." On many an occasion he advised the householder: "Live in the world but, in order to realize God, hold fast to His Lotus Feet with one hand and with the other do your duties. When you get a respite from your duties, cling to God's Lotus Feet with both hands - live in solitude and meditate on Him and serve Him ceaselessly¹⁰."

In the *Upanishads* we read that we should consider the mother as God, the father as God, the spiritual preceptor as God. Sri Shankaracharya before renouncing the world promised his mother that he would be at her bedside during her last moments and fulfilled this promise. Sri Chaitanya too gave his solemn word to his mother, before he took sannyasa, that he would be by her side whenever there arose a necessity. Sri Ramakrishna when told by Sri Tota Puri, the Vedantic monk, that he would have to give up his sacred thread and the tuft of hair on his head before the scriptural initiation into sannyasa, the former thought of his mother who was living in Dakshineswar at that time and replied that he had not the least objection, if the ceremony could be done secretly and that he would by no means be able to do it publicly as it would deal a terrible blow to the heart of his old grief-stricken mother. Such was his love and consideration for his mother's feelings that he would not do anything that would hurt her. Once when he heard that 'M', the writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in Bengali, had left his ancestral home because of some trouble in the family and had taken up separate quarters for himself, his wife and children, he remonstrated with 'M': "Let me say this to you. Your father and mother brought you up. You yourself are the father of several children. Yet you have left home with your wife and children, and you feel you have become a holy man. Your father doesn't need any money from you; otherwise I should have cried, 'Shame on you!' A man cannot achieve anything without paying the debt he owes to his parents. Are father and mother mere trifles? No spiritual practice will bear fruit unless they are pleased. How worthy of worship one's parents

⁹ Ibid., p.156.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.627.

are!¹¹”

On another occasion Sri Ramakrishna said and to a young devotee of his, who was later on to become a monk and to whom he used to give particular instructions regarding spiritual life: “I feel as if a dark veil has covered your face. It is because you have accepted a job in an office. One must keep accounts there. Besides, one must attend to many other things, and that always keeps the mind in a state of worry. You are serving in an office like other worldly people; but there is a slight difference, in that you are earning money for the sake of your mother. One must show the highest respect to one’s mother, for she is the very embodiment of the Blissful Mother of the Universe¹².” Thus, we see that by his personal example and his precepts Sri Ramakrishna reiterated the necessity of veneration for and care of the parents as a part of spiritual discipline, dharma.

Sri Ramakrishna expressed the view that a householder needed not to give up the world. “He will find it more convenient at home. He may even live with his wife. He will find near at hand all the body needs at different times.” At the same time, he advised the grihastha to seek holy company. Addressing the householder devotees, he once remarked: “Why shouldn’t it be possible for a householder to give his mind to God? But the truth is that he no longer has his mind with him. If he had it, then he could certainly offer it to God. But, alas, the mind has been mortgaged – mortgaged to ‘woman and gold’. So, it is necessary for him constantly live in the company of holy men. When he gets back his own mind, then he can devote it to spiritual practice; but first it is necessary to live with the guru, wait on him, and enjoy the company of spiritual people¹³”. The company of holy persons reminds one of God and if one constantly seeks such company, that helps one to acquire an yearning for God. We all know we are influenced by the thoughts and ideas of persons with whom we associate intimately and for a long time. So, it naturally follows that the company of spiritual persons produces in man love of God. Sri Shankaracharya in *Vivekachudamani* says: ‘Three things are very difficult to get, the human birth, the desire for liberation and the company of a spiritually advanced soul’. The mind cannot think of God if it is always absorbed in the things of the world. So, it is necessary to withdraw it from these things and direct it towards God by prayer, by living in solitude and by holy company.

No person can remain inactive, so, Sri Krishna advises Arjuna that

¹¹ Ibid., p. 424.

¹² Ibid., p. 448.

¹³ Ibid., p. 1019.

by doing ones' own duty as adoration of the Lord one attains perfection. Sri Ramakrishna said to the householders. 'Perform your duties in an unselfish spirit, without desiring any result. All without exception perform work. Even to chant the name and glories of God is work, as is the meditation of the non-dualist on 'I am He'. Breathing is also an activity. There is no renouncing of work altogether. So do your work and surrender the result to God. A householder should feel obliged to do his duty to his wife and children as long as they feel pinched for food and clothing. If a wife is chaste, then her husband should support her; he should also bring up the children until they are of age. But one need not take the responsibility of a son when he is able to support himself'¹⁴. He also made it clear that the goal of life is not the earning of money but service of God. Money is not harmful if it is spent in the service of a religious family and of pious and holy men. Sri Ramakrishna sometimes asked the householder devotees to feed the young men who were later on to become all-renouncing monks, saying that that would do themselves much good.

Now, the question arises: How to live in the world with all the multifarious duties of the householder and yet be not involved in it? 'Offering all actions unto Brahman, one who acts without attachment does not get soiled by their effects just as the lotus-leaf is not soiled by water,' says Sri Krishna in the *Gita*¹⁵. Water that falls on the lotus-leaf does not remain on it and though the lotus-leaf is in the water it does not suffer from the effects of water as other leaves suffer. Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly said: "I tell people that there is nothing wrong in the life of the world. But they must live in the world as a maidservant lives in her master's house. Referring to her master's house, she says, 'That is our house.' But her real home is perhaps in a far-away village. Pointing out her master's house to others, she says, no doubt, 'This is our house', but in her heart she knows very well that it doesn't belong to her and that her own house is in a far-away village. She brings up her master's son and says, 'My Hari has grown naughty', or 'My Hari doesn't like sweets'. Though she repeats, 'My Hari' with her lips, yet she knows in her heart that Hari does not belong to her, that he is her master's son. Thus, I say to those who visit me: 'Why don't you live in the world? There is no harm in that. But always keep your mind on God. Know for certain that house, family and property are not yours. They are God's. Your real home is in God".¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 113-4.

¹⁵ Gita, Ch. V.10.

¹⁶ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p.456.

Sri Ramakrishna also said: 'A boat can be in water but not the water in the boat'. Likewise, a man may live in the world but not the world in the man, that is to say, he must not be engrossed in the things of the world and must not identify himself with them. The more one considers house, property and family as one's own, the more grows one's attachment to them and one sinks deep in the ocean of worries and forgets God completely.

'How long should the householder discharge his duties? One can give up one's duties only after realizing God. Rather, the duties then fall off by themselves just as the flowers drop off when the fruit appears. God Himself reduces the duties of the devotee who earnestly and sincerely seeks Him.

To illustrate this Sri Ramakrishna used to cite the example of a young daughter-in-law. When she is with child the mother-in-law reduces her activities. When she has been pregnant for nine months, she is not allowed to perform any household duty. After the birth of the child, she only carries the child in her arms and nurses it. She has no other duty.

Thus, we see that though the living conditions and the times have changed the essential things remain the same; that the one and only aim of man is to attain God and be liberated from the cycle of births and deaths, in whatever station of life one is placed. The ancient norms to achieve this objective still hold good and Sri Ramakrishna in this age showed the right way by emphasizing the essentials of spiritual life. He also said that in the Kali yuga devotion as taught by Narada is the way to attain God. Prayer, holy company and meditation in solitude are the essential practices even for a householder. A grihastha has to discharge the duties which are incumbent on him in his station, in an attitude of detachment and as service to God. Thus only can he attain peace of mind, and progress towards the Lord.

