Newsletter Archives

Understanding Dharma: The Four Authentic Sources
Whether our goal in life be material prosperity or Moksha, the way lies through Dharma. However, most of the time, let alone follow it, we are not even sure about what our Dharma is, or even how we can come to know about it.

While it is generally known that Dharma has to be understood from the scriptures, due to their almost endless variety and diversity we are unable to get a clear and unambiguous picture of Dharma. However, when we understand that the sources of Dharma have been systematically divided into four simple categories, following a certain hierarchical structure, then not only does it become easier to understand what our Dharma is in a particular situation, but also makes it possible for us to live our life in accordance with it.

It is the great Manu Smriti (2.6) which gives the most clear and unambiguous listing of the sources of Dharma, enumerating the following:

1). The entire Vedas (Akhila Veda)

2). The law books put together by those who not only understand the Vedas but also follow them; these are known as Smritis

3). The conduct of cultured, good people, who understand the Vedas

4). The satisfaction of one’s own conscience
The Entire Vedas

The word ‘entire’ signifies that the whole of the Vedas is a source of Dharma, i.e. there is not even a single word, consonant or vowel in the Vedas which is not a pointer to Dharma.

Objection: There are problems in accepting all parts of the Vedas as authoritative regarding Dharma. This is because the Vedas also contain descriptions of violent sacrifices like the Shyena Yagya where a hawk is sacrificed. This sacrifice is performed to overcome one’s enemies.

Sacrifices like Shyena consist of malevolent mantras and consist of extreme violence like killing. It is the Vedas themselves which stress that all acts of cruelty are to be shunned. In fact, such acts are downright Adharma, because doing non-injury to others is a fundamental maxim of Dharma.

Also, there are statements in the Vedas like: ‘Do not kill a Brahmin.’ This is an injunction against acting. How can it be said to expound ‘what should be done’, because Dharma has been defined as ‘something do be done’. There is nothing to be done here. It is rather a statement against an action.

Resolution: You have said that sacrifices like Shyena etc., because of them involving prohibited actions like violence must be Adharma. This is quite true. But even though such acts are prohibited, in certain cases it so happens that some people may have such strong animosity towards their enemies that the intensity of their emotions may not allow them to follow the general Dharma of non-violence towards all creatures. Such persons derive the pleasure of killing their enemies through the Shyena Yagya. Here we must understand the Vedas are not inducing anybody to perform this sacrifice. Rather, they are saying that if we are so much charged up inimically towards our enemy that we become blinded towards the general Dharma of non-violence, in that case our Dharma is the Shyena Yagya. It is not an unqualified instruction to everybody for performing this Yagya.

As regards the prohibitions (nishedha) mentioned in the Vedas, the acting upto prohibition consists in not ‘doing’ what is prohibited. This desisting from the prohibition is what constitutes the karma, leading to Dharma. Thus all portions of the Vedas are connected to the performance of Dharma, directly or indirectly.
The Law Books (Smritis) Put Together by Those Who Know the Vedas

Assertion: The Smriti texts written by great people like Manu, Yajnavalakya, Gautama, Vasistha, Apastamba etc. are also authoritative sources of Dharma.

Objection: This cannot be correct. Isn’t it unequivocally stated that only the Vedas are the sources of Dharma? See what Jaimini says in his Purva Mimamsa Sutras, the definitive text for understanding Dharma:

‘Dharma is that which is known through injunctions in the Vedas.’ (1.1.2)

Resolution: The same Jaimini Sutras say:

‘The Smritis are authoritative because the performers of both (Vedic and Smriti) karmas are the same.’ (1.3.2)

Here Acharya Jaimini says that Smritis are authoritative because the Dharma propounded by them has always been followed since time immemorial by the same persons who have lived their life according to Vedic injunctions.

Doubt: People might have been led to perform the Smriti karmas by giving them authority mistakenly?

Answer: One man might commit such a mistake. That everybody has been deluded into this mistake, and this error has persisted since time immemorial is certainly a most extraordinary presumption on your part.

Moreover, there are many Vedic Karmas which do not find mention directly in the Vedas but are found only in the Smritis. Additionally, Smritis are totally based on the Vedas themselves. There is always a close link between what is laid down in the Smritis and that what is prescribed in the Vedas. There is generally no difference either in the people who follow them (Smritis and Vedas), or in the nature of the acts enjoined by both. Indeed, the principal criterion for a certain text being labeled authoritarian is its acceptance by persons learned in the Vedas, which certainly is the case for the Smritis.
Therefore, the only reasonable conclusion is that learned persons, who formed definite and authoritative conclusions on all important matters of Dharma, have put together these Smritis, which are but a practical compendium of injunctions scattered around in numerous Vedic texts which otherwise would have been next to impossible for ordinary mortals like us to determine. By doing this great ones like Manu have thrown open to us the gateway not only to material happiness, but also the eventual path to Moksha.

**Resolution:** What happens when there is an apparent contradiction between a Smriti and a sentence in the Vedas?

**Resolution:** Why only between Smritis and the Vedas? There are sometimes contradictory statements in the Vedas themselves. For example, in the case of the daily Agnihotra sacrifice performed by Brahmins, it is said in the Vedas:

1). Agnihotra should be performed before sunrise

2). It should be performed during sunrise

3). It should be performed during early dawn, when the sun has risen

Therefore, the Vedas prescribe three different times for the same act! Regarding this the Manu Smriti says:

‘Whenever there is conflict between two Vedic texts, it means that we have the option of performing the act in either of the ways mentioned. The Agnihotra mentioned above can be performed at any one of the three times.’ (2.14-15)

**Further Doubt:** What about when there is a contradiction between two Smritis? For example, the Gautam Dharma Sutra says:

‘The food into which a hair or insect has fallen is unfit for consumption’ (17.9)

While the Manu Smriti says:

‘A food that has been polluted by hair or an insect fallen into it is purified by spreading a small amount of earth over it.’ (5.125)

How to reconcile them?

**Answer:** In this case too, we have the option of going with either of the two maxims. Remember the golden rule of interpretation:
'When injunctions of equal force are in conflict with each other, it is an option to act either way.' (Gautam Dharma Sutras 1.6)

This means that whenever two Vedic sentences are in contradiction with each other, or two Smritis are in variance, then we can act either way.

However:

‘If there is a contradiction between a Vedic sentence and Smriti, then we have to leave aside the latter and act according to the Vedic injunction only.’ (Jaimini Sutras, 1.3.3)

This is because the Vedas hold a greater force of authority than the Smritis.

**The Conduct of Cultured People, Who Also Understand the Vedas**

A cultured person is defined in the scriptures as having the two qualities of ‘goodness’ and ‘knowledge of the Vedas’. Such a great man is known in Sanskrit as ‘Shishtha’. When we see any action being performed by Shishthas, for which however there is no direct injunction in either the Vedas or the Smritis, then we have to accept that act too as Dharma, and follow it.

**Objection:** We cannot accept the conduct of great men as a source of Dharma because many times we see them transgressing Dharma. For example, Parashurama cut off his own mother’s head at his father’s instructions, without even pausing to reflect for a moment on what he was about to do.

**Answer:** The Apastamba Dharma Sutra gives the answer to this query:

‘Such extraordinary personalities, because of their extraordinary power, do not incur any sin by their actions. However, if people of later times try to emulate them, they perish.’ (2.13.8-9)

Why? Because:
'Men of later times are weak on all accounts. Hence they should not try to emulate the transgressions indulged in by great people.' (Gautam Dharma Sutra 1.4)

In the Shrimad Bhagavatam, when King Parikshit expresses his reservations on Krishna’s Rasa Lila with the gopis, this is what the great Shukadeva Ji says:

‘Those with extraordinary powers are sometimes seen performing exceptional deeds of valor transgressing Dharma. However, such acts do not all affect such luminous personalities, just like the fire which consumes all that is offered into it but is not tainted by any of it. Those who do not possess such powers should not even think of doing such deeds. If they do foolishly jump into such acts, they are destroyed.’

‘Lord Shiva drank the deadliest poison easily. However, if anybody else did the same, he would be reduced to ashes. King Parikshit! Such extraordinary individuals are egoless. They expect no gain from any meritorious action, nor do they experience any loss from a transgression. They are beyond all duality.’ (10.33.30-31)

**The Innermost Satisfaction of One’s Own Conscience (Atmanah Tushti)**

In a particular situation, if there is an absence of any injunction in the Vedas or Smritis, and there is also no precedent of the conduct of ‘Shishthas’ regarding the same, in that case we are to take recourse to that action which appeals to the innermost depths of our conscience.

**Conclusion:**

We thus realize that the primary source of Dharma are the Vedas (Shruti). Next in terms of hierarchy are the Smriti texts, which are scrupulously based on the Vedas. Where there is neither Shruti nor Smriti, there we can follow the conduct of great men, albeit with caution, as described above. Lastly, where there is no other authority on Dharma available, in such a situation we can take the innermost satisfaction of our own conscience as a guide. However, this is the weakest source of Dharma out of the four.
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This article by Nitin Kumar.

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