

What is Dharma?

Ram (James Swartz)

2011-01-03

If you cannot see inaction in action and still take yourself to be a doer, it pays to understand as much as you can about action. Because the results of action are uncertain, you might be tempted to believe that if you refrain from action, you will not get bad karma. Although the non-performance of an action does not create unhealthy tendencies, it creates a vacuum which may be filled with wrong actions, which do create negative tendencies. When you fail to do what is right, it will not be long before you will find yourself doing something wrong, because it is impossible to remain inactive.

Therefore it is necessary to do the right thing. The right thing differs from one situation to the next, assuming that dharma, universal values, is not contravened. Universal values are abstractions that are always in play on a higher level. Non-injury is an example of a fundamental dharmic principle. But what does non-injury mean? How am I to interpret this value? My wife and I have different opinions with regard to the value of her mother. She wants her mother to come and live with us but I do not. I am definitely not going to attack her with a knife to get my way, but should I say something hurtful to win the argument? There is a universal value for truthfulness and I will definitely not lie to rob my rich friend of his money. But what do I say when he badly wants me to go fishing on the weekend and I have nothing to do, but I do not want to fish? Should I hurt his feelings with the truth, or tell a white lie and spare them?

Common sense should be enough to tell you what to do and what not to do, assuming your goal is clear, but many do wrong things even though they know what is right. A thief knows that stealing is wrong or he would not use stealth, nor would he care if someone takes his belongings. He knows what he wants and the risks involved. Even if he knows that he loses peace of mind, he will keep stealing if his value for peace is not as great as his value for security. When you fail to do the right thing, the mind is disturbed and inquiry is necessary.

We cannot escape the consequences of our actions because free will and the law of karma go together. Free will presupposes a set of values that determine which actions we do. I can steal, or I can give money to charity. I can hurt or I can heal. I can tell a lie or I can tell the truth. Once choice is there, what values inform it? What is the right choice and what is the wrong choice?

I am never sure of the outcome of my actions but the appropriateness of my actions depends on my knowledge of the laws operating the field into which my actions are offered. Just as everything in the field that is not endowed with the faculty of choice follows its nature, humans have a built in appreciation of right and wrong. Without the knowledge of gravity, even a baby monkey knows that it will fall to the ground if it lets go of its mother while she is swinging through the trees.

Dharma, the moral order, is the control system that greases the wheels of life and free will exists within it. Without it, people would act without considering others and life would be completely chaotic. Failure to consider dharma accounts for the global financial collapse that is presently underway. Because dharma is created by the self, it is not separate from the self. By following dharma, my small life blends seamlessly into the whole.

If I choose an action in keeping with or against the law of dharma, the impact will be appropriate. If I violate the law I will suffer and if not, not. If an object is dropped from a certain height, it will fall at a predetermined rate. There is no way to escape natural law, unlike man made laws. You can always purchase a radar detector and avoid arrest when speeding, but you cannot avoid the result of an action which is against a natural law. If you have any doubt, stick your finger in a flame.

The law of karma depends on the law of dharma and is connected to one's sense of doership. Free will can be a blessing, if dharma is taken into account, because it allows human beings to create new karma or exhaust karma. All other beings can only experience the karma that results from their programming, but they cannot change their circumstances at will. The freedom to create or destroy karma means that I can improve my lot, materially and spiritually.

Sometimes an individual feels so spiritually incomplete that he or she suffers an uncontrollable desire for objects, like love, money or status. Or the sense of incompleteness creates so much anxiety, it leads to mind-numbing habits drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, junk food and excessive sex, for example. In the first instance, the mind is too distracted by its cravings to be sensitive to dharma and to interpret it correctly and in the second, it is too dull. Consequently, such people's lives fall completely into the hands of karma, an unfortunate situation because freedom is the core value of everyone. If you feel that you are stuck in a particular situation, running on habits, striving hard to keep life interesting or reacting emotionally to everything that happens, your life is controlled by karma. To be controlled by karma when you are actually the ruler of karma is painful.

As long as you only take the doer into account and ignore all the other factors, you will be bound by karma. You will be a slave to your likes and dislikes and you will feel like you are a doer. 'I am a doer' is a very heavy uncomfortable thought, entailing endless duties, obligations and responsibilities. The lion's share of our sense of existential exhaustion does not stem from the many activities we perform. They happen automatically because awareness illumines the body/mind/sense complex. It stems from the weight of doership.

When you understand that doing is not possible without the contribution of all the factors in the field, you no longer take full responsibility for what happens or does not happen, and the weight of doership is lifted. Karma only stands in the way of enlightenment when it is dictated solely by an individual's likes and dislikes. It can also be dictated by dharma, by what is right and what is wrong. If conformity with dharma is the standard for action, likes and dislikes are neutralized. Neutralized likes and dislikes are an indirect means for enlightenment, because a mind that is free of them naturally turns inward and contemplates the self. Conformity with dharma means that when you are confronted with a situation that involves a choice between what you want personally and the demands of the situation, you sacrifice what you want for the sake of the situation. It is an appreciation of the debt you owe to the total.

When your likes and dislikes motivate your actions, you will experience anger, frustration, depression, resignation and so forth because they will often put you in conflict with dharma. But when you take dharma into account, you are in harmony with the self, since dharma is the self operating the creation. This is the reason why there is a sense of satisfaction when you do the right thing.

On one level, dharma is the eternal web of universal psychological and moral forces that make up the whole of existence. It is rooted in the universal mutual expectation of individuals. What I want or do not want from others is the same as what others want of so not want from me. Everyone wants to be treated with love and respect, for example. Nobody wants to be injured. Most of us, particularly spiritually inclined individuals, respect these forces automatically. We do not lie, cheat, steal or injure others because our desires and fears are not so strong that they cause us to break the rules.

But on an everyday level, we do not always follow dharma. Dharma, on the day to day level, could be defined as making the appropriate response to the situations life presents to us. I play a number of roles to accomplish my goals. My values determine my goals and my goals determine which responses are appropriate. If my goal is freedom, certain actions will facilitate the realization of my goal and certain others will not. The actions that do facilitate it are right and the ones that do not are wrong for me. For instance, when I get home from work I can sit down and meditate, or I can have a beer. Drinking beer is certainly not morally wrong, but it does make my mind dull. A dull mind is incapable of inquiry. I can switch on the TV and watch the news, or I can study scripture. Watching the news is not contrary to any universal norm and I will not be punished for it, although it will not be an appropriate action, considering my goal, because it will reinforce my media habit. A well informed person makes a good citizen, but an informed person is not an enlightened person. Scriptural knowledge on the other hand, facilitates inquiry. So karma is only opposed to enlightenment when it is used solely for the purpose of fulfilling likes and dislikes.

Allowing dharma to guide your actions and accepting the law of karma, indicates a high degree of maturity. When you keep dharma in mind, suffering is kept to a minimum. True, following dharma does not guarantee the result you envisage. Achieving specific results often requires many actions done in a particular sequence, in environments with many variables. It is easy to omit a particular action or to be ignorant of important but hidden factors, that are necessary to bring about the desired result. Or the action may be done incorrectly and produce an undesirable result. But if you know you are the self, it will not matter if you do not get what you want, because the result of any action is always a satisfied self and the self is never dissatisfied.