

The Concept of Dharma and its Significance in the Mahabharata

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*The soul is said to be imponderable, unmanifested, and unchangeable. Therefore, knowing it to be such, thou shouldst not lament!*¹

Paramahansa Yogananda: *The Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter II, Verse 25)

Abstract

As the title suggests, the theme of this article is the concept of dharma and its significance in the *Mahabharata*. After a general introduction, the concept of dharma is looked at in terms of Hinduism, followed by some background information about the Mahabharata as seen in the context of dharma. This is followed by a sampling and discussion of a selection of verses from the *Bhagavad Gita* in which the god Krishna delivers his sermon to Arjuna before the commencement of the battle of Kurukshetra. Lastly dharma is looked at in its specific sense known as Raja dharma, or the dharma of kings, in which Bhishma, a key figure of the *Mahabharata* instructs King Yudhishthira in making the right choice by assuming his responsibilities as king. The two sermons, one delivered by Krishna, the other by Bhishma, are not only looked at in the historical context in which they took place, but also examined from our modern day perspective, and how they can possibly impact our present day lives.

Introduction

Human life, in a general sense, is a constant engagement with our fellows and our environment, and the success or failure of this engagement in most cases is dependent on those specific skills which we develop to make our lives sustainable. Many will agree that life is fraught with sufficient challenges and problems, not to mention disasters and tragedies, to be compared to an ongoing battleground. In this sense, all of us can be considered warriors

of a sort, and this simile applies whether we are prepared to fight fair or foul.

The intention with the above simile is not to propagate an attitude of aggression as regards life, but simply to encourage an attitude of collectedness and one-pointedness, which in the ideal and spiritual sense of the word “warrior” simply refers to the Soul. In *Light on the Path* by Mabel Collins, this simile is beautifully expressed by the following teachings: “1. Stand aside in the coming battle, and though thou fighest, be not thou the warrior. 2. Look for the warrior and let him fight in thee. 3. Take his orders for battle and obey them,” and finally: “4. Obey him not as though he were a general, but as though he were thyself, and his spoken words were the utterance of thy secret desires; for he is thyself, yet infinitely wiser and stronger than thyself.”²

The *Mahabharata* is an epic that deals with warriors and, in a specific sense, the dharma of warriors, thus all those issues which define the expected integrity in a warrior’s life. An exhaustive study of such a subject would most likely run into several volumes, especially if

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if we take into consideration that even a fraction of the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, has given rise to endless analyses and appraisals ever since it has been in the public domain.

The intention of this article is to focus on four characters in the *Mahabharata*, namely Arjuna, a warrior and hero of the battle of Kurukshetra; King Yudhisthira, who is one of Arjuna's brothers; the god Krishna who expounds the *Bhagavad Gita* to Arjuna; and Bhishma, a ruler of the Kurus, who preaches his deathbed sermon to Yudhisthira.

Both the *Bhagavad Gita* and Bhishma's deathbed sermon have dharma as their theme, in the first instance, as a divine injunction from Krishna to Arjuna to take up arms and fight, in the second instance, as an appeal by Bhishma to Yudhisthira not to choose the life of an ascetic, but rather follow his higher destiny of king. In both cases it is not the deliberate shirking of responsibility that is at the heart of the problem, but the overwhelming issues related to them, even to the point of questioning their moral legitimacy, such as taking up arms against ones kin, and allowing masses of people to die for the sake of a kingdom. It is by means of the lengthy sermons of Krishna and Bhishma that Arjuna's and Yudhisthira's minds are set at rest, assuring Arjuna's competence and heroism in the ensuing battle that finally will lead to victory, and ensuring Yudhisthira's decision to assume his responsibilities as king.

Applied on an individual and personal level, and taken in its most basic sense, dharma simply means "duty" or "responsibility". When applied to warriors and kings, dharma can have several and diverse ramifications. It is the intention of this article to examine and evaluate some of these ramifications, and then validate their importance not only in the context of the *Mahabharata*, but how they might be relevant in the context of our own lives.

The Meaning of Dharma in Hinduism

To fully appreciate the concept of dharma, it needs to be seen in the right context, i.e. not only in terms of religion and philosophy,

but against the backdrop of a rich culture reaching back to the times when the first Vedic Hymns (1500-1000 BCE) were composed, all the way up to modern day India.

Subhamoy Das, a journalist and multimedia editor involved with the *Hindustan Times* and the *India Today Group*, says the following about dharma in his essay *What is Dharma*: "Dharma is the moral law combined with spiritual discipline that guides one's life. Hindus consider dharma the very foundation of life. It means 'that which holds' the people of this world and the whole creation. Dharma is the 'law of being' without which things cannot exist."³ Further on Das explains the relationship between karma and dharma, by pointing out that good dharma results in good karma, while adharmā, or a disregard of dharma, results in bad karma.

From a Western point of view dharma was deemed important enough to be listed in *Collins Concise English Dictionary*, where it is defined as follows: "**1:** *Hinduism* social custom regarded as a religious and moral duty. **2:** *Hinduism a:* the essential principle of the cosmos; natural law **b:** conduct that conforms with this **3:** *Buddhism* ideal truth as set forth in the teaching of Buddha."⁴ Although the expert will agree with this, the layman will most probably still be left in the dark, unless he or she take the trouble to extend the search, and thereby try to arrive at a more comprehensive meaning of the concept.

Shankara Bharadwaj Khandavalli and Krishna Maheshwari are somewhat more specific in their basic definition, and defines dharma as follows: "The Sanskrit word *Dharma* has no direct translation into English. Among other things, it can be thought of as righteousness in word and action. It comes from the root *Dhr*, which means to uphold, sustain, or uplift. Thus another interpretation of the word in English would be 'the collection of natural and universal laws that uphold, sustain or uplift.' (Also) 'Law of being; law of nature; individual nature; prescribed duty; social and personal duties; moral code; civil law; code of conduct; morality; way of life; practice; observance; justice; righteousness; religion; religiosity; harmony.'⁵

The above definitions in their totality manage to broaden the concept of dharma, while singularly they manage to clarify some of the particular meanings of it. The terms “prescribed duty,” “code of conduct” and “righteousness” are closely related to what is expected of a responsible individual, and can in turn be grouped under “morality,” which is but another aspect of the same thing.

In her lecture on *Dharma*, delivered at the Theosophical Society in Benares on October 25-27, 1898, Annie Besant said the following:

Dharma may now be defined as the ‘inner nature of a thing at any given stage of evolution, and the law of the next stage of its unfolding’ – the nature at the point it has reached in unfolding, and then the law which brings about its next stage of unfolding . . . Take those two thoughts together, and then you will understand why perfection must be reached by following one’s own Dharma . . . I must know the stage of my growth, and I must know the law which will enable me to grow further; then I know my Dharma, and by following that dharma I am going towards perfection.⁶

Yet another view, and perhaps the most succinct for the purposes of this article, is expressed by Paramahansa Yogananda in his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Dharma . . . is often translated as ‘religion’ or ‘duty.’ It is a comprehensive term for the natural laws governing the universe and man, inherent in which are prescribed duties applicable to given circumstances. Broadly speaking, man’s *dharma* is to adhere to that natural righteousness that will save him from suffering and lead him to salvation.⁷

A Brief Overview of the Mahabharata as seen in the context of Dharma

The *Mahabharata* is the great Indian epic which contains as its central theme the narrative of the conflict leading up to the battle of Kurukshetra, followed by the great battle

itself, and lastly the resolution after the battle and its aftermath. If we take into account that the unabridged version of the *Mahabharata* is roughly ten times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined, we realize that it is a work of immense proportions.⁸

The translator of the Penguin Classics version of the *Mahabharata*, John D. Smith, in his introduction to the work, has the following to say about its scope: “A narrative on such a scale, especially one centered round a war involving the entire known world of the day, inevitably boasts a large cast of characters; thus, to add one more statistic, S. Sørensen’s *An Index to the Names in the Mahabharata* runs to 807 two-column pages.”⁹

What also substantially contributes to the bulk of this epic are the numerous narrative digressions, additional stories and lengthy sermons that are woven into its text. In Book 18, or final book of the *Mahabharata*, entitled *The Ascent to Heaven*, the narrator justifies the scope of his narration with the following words:

What is found here concerning *dharma*, the proper making of wealth, pleasure and final release, is to be found elsewhere too, O bull-like heir of Bharata; but what is not found here is to be found nowhere. This history is named the Tale of Victory; it should be heard by him who hopes to prosper, and by kings, the sons of kings, and pregnant women. He whose desire is heaven shall gain heaven; he whose desire is victory shall gain victory; a pregnant woman shall gain a son, or a highly favored daughter.¹⁰

The origin of the conflict which finally leads to the battle of Kurukshetra is to be found on those subjective levels on which gods and demons have their existence. These two groups, in their fight for supremacy, find it necessary to incarnate as humans who form the two opposing groups in the battle, as the conflict can only be resolved on the level of concrete manifestation, or the plane of physical existence. As such, the human beings who are caught up in this conflict are only of secondary importance, and hence the mere playthings of the gods.¹¹

On the human level, the two opposing armies consist of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, both groups being descended from a common ancestry, the Kuru clan. The Pandavas and the Kauravas are in fact cousins, the principle players among the Pandavas, who fight on the side of the gods, being the five sons of Pandu: Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. At the core of the Kauravas is the wicked king Duryondhana and the hundred sons of Dhartarastras. In this sense the Pandavas represent dharma, while the Kauravas represent adharma.¹²

Apart from the main plot of the *Mahabharata*, as indicated above, the theme of the epic is very much concerned with the dharma of the Kshatriya, or warrior caste. Although dharma in a general sense condemns violence and the taking of life, the specific dharma of the warrior demands that he be responsible for the safety of a kingdom, and thus considers the martial arts and the destruction of the enemy as his duty and prerogative.

Nevertheless, even Arjuna, warrior and hero, wavers and succumbs to doubt before the battle, asking Krishna, who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu, why he is expected to fight against his kinsmen and cousins, who are facing him from the opposite side of the battlefield. It is this dilemma which is answered by Krishna and which is extensively treated in the sermon known as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

A similar doubt after the battle, this time more to do with the austerities demanded of kings when ruling their subjects, is expressed by Yudhisthira when consulting Bhishma, the grand old man of the Kurus. It takes a person of Bhishma's stature and wisdom to convince him that as a king there is a higher destiny awaiting him, and that any other option, no matter how well-intentioned, in Yudhisthira's

case, would be considered as selfish or as adharma. Choosing the life of an ascetic Yudhisthira would simply be thinking of his own salvation, while as a king his dharma would be closely linked with the dharma of his

subjects, because the proper fulfillment of the dharma of his subjects is dependent on the proper fulfillment of his own dharma as a king.

Lastly, from an esoteric point of view, both Arjuna's and Yudhisthira's dilemmas are characteristic of the dilemma of disciples before they are able to make their pledge to set their feet upon the Spiritual Path and commence with a life of deliberate and conscious service. It is appropriate

to quote in full what the Tibetan has to say on this matter in Alice. A. Bailey's *A Treatise on White Magic*:

The first field of knowledge receiving illumination might be described as comprising the totality of forms to be found in the three worlds of human endeavor, etheric, astral and mental. The would-be disciple, through this process, becomes aware of his lower nature and begins to realize the extent of his imprisonment and (as Patanjali puts it) 'the modifications of the versatile psychic nature.' The hindrances to achievement and the obstacles to progress are revealed to him and his problem becomes specific. Frequently then he reaches the position in which Arjuna found himself, confronted by enemies who are those of his own household, confused as to his duty and discouraged as he seeks to balance himself between the pairs of opposites. His prayer then should be the famous prayer of India, uttered by the heart, comprehended by the head, and supplemented by an ardent life of service to humanity.

'Unveil to us the face of the true spiritual sun,

Dharma... is often translated as 'religion' or 'duty.' It is a comprehensive term for the natural laws governing the universe and man, inherent in which are prescribed duties applicable to given circumstances. Broadly speaking, man's dharma is to adhere to that natural righteousness that will save him from suffering and lead him to salvation.

Hidden by a disc of golden light,
That we may know the truth and do our
whole duty
As we journey to Thy sacred feet.¹³

The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna speaks to Arjuna

The *Bhagavad Gita* is one of those scriptures that will keep on inspiring spiritual seekers as long as there is a need for humanity to seek out and establish contact with the Soul. It is general knowledge that its popularity is as widespread among Hindus as the *New Testament* is among Christians. A close comparison between the two actually reveals that their teachings are in fact of the same impeccable ethical standard. A statement by the Tibetan reinforces the above in Alice A. Bailey's *The Light of the Soul*, where it reads as follows: "There are three books which should be in the hands of every student, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *New Testament*, and the *Yoga Sutras*, for in these three is contained a complete picture of the Soul and its unfoldment."¹⁴

The reader might rightfully ask, if the subject under discussion is dharma, then why digress on how Krishna attempts to convey to Arjuna so much information about the Soul? If it is kept in mind that dharma, among other things, also means "code of conduct," "righteousness" and "morality," then any serious investigation regarding the Soul, when seen as the source of inspiration for righteous or moral behavior, seems to be justified.

The scope of this article only allows a sampling of select verses from the *Gita*, and their discussion aims to illuminate the verses in such a way that they can be of benefit to the modern day disciple. For this reason the commentary of various commentators will be looked into, including the Tibetan; Alice A. Bailey in her own right; and Paramahansa Yogananda, who has made a new translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and supplied it with his own commentary.

Great Teachers: The Upholders of Dharma

Perhaps one of the most encouraging statements made by Krishna, who is considered as an incarnation of Vishnu, or the second person of the Hindu Trinity, and thus the equivalent of the Christ principle, is summed up in Chapter IV, verses 7-9 of the *Gita*, and quoted in Bailey's *From Bethlehem to Calvary* as follows:

Whenever there is a withering of the law (i.e. adharma) . . . and an uprising of lawlessness on all sides, then I manifest Myself.

For the salvation of the righteous and the destruction of such as do evil; for the firm establishing of the law I come to birth in age after age.

He who thus perceives My birth and work as divine, as in truth it is . . . he goes to Me, Arjuna.¹⁵

Bailey justifies the validity of the above verses by affirming that repeatedly throughout history mankind's needs were met by various teachers who have come forth, and by means of their teachings "determined the culture and the civilization of the peoples, and then passed on their way, leaving the seed sown, to germinate and bear fruit."¹⁶

Yogananda's commentary on the above three verses, however, takes up 12 pages in which he explains the nature of an Avatar, and how Spirit incarnates in the successive strata of creation. For the former he uses the example of Jesus, who in *Matthew*, 19:17 said: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God." This, Yogananda says, "Jesus said to distinguish himself, an Avatar, from God the Father, the Absolute, the Formless."¹⁷

In relation to how Spirit incarnates in the successive strata of creation, Yogananda rephrases the above three verses of the *Gita* as follows:

Whenever there is a distortion of My Spirit . . . through the action of My delusory *maya*, then My Infinite Oneness is divided into finite waves of creation, colliding with one another in the evil of pain and disharmony. In order to bring back the harmonious goodness of My One United Being and to destroy the ominous evils of seeming rela-

tivities, My Spirit...continuously incarnates Itself in repeated evolutionary influxes until, by dissolving the unsalutary clashing dualities, all recover the eternal blissful state of oneness.¹⁸

The above rephrasing by Yogananda is quite a mouthful, and will most likely either evoke a frown or a smile from a first reading, but once it is broken down into its component parts, reflected upon, and then put together again, it can simply be rephrased by saying that God's creation and the ideal of perfection is achieved by the evolutionary process. This process whereby old and outmoded forms are discarded in favor of new and more fitting forms allows for the manifestation of spirit and is thereby brought into conformity with the envisioned ideal which is expressed by the words "as above, so below."

Dharma and the Individual

Another verse from the *Gita* (Chapter III, verse 35), one that has often puzzled people and given rise to renewed debate, reads as follows:

One's own duty (svadharma), though deficient in quality, is superior to duty other than one's own (paradharma), though well accomplished. Better it is to die in svadharma; paradharma is fraught with fear and danger.¹⁹

In the introduction of John D. Smith's version of the *Mahabharata*, Smith says the following about individual dharma: "A person's *dharma* is what is right for that person to do, but one person's *dharma* is different from that of another. It may be wrong for you to have sex, but right for me; it may be right for you to take up a life of asceticism in the forest, but wrong for me. A range of factors combines to determine what constitutes *dharma* for any given individual."²⁰

In Bailey's *Discipleship in the New Age, Volume I*, the Tibetan's view does not differ from the above, but applies this truth more specifically to the life of the disciple:

It is hard for intelligent men and women to see others closely associated with them dealing with life and problems from a total-

ly different angle of their own...Yet, brother of old, why are you so sure that you are right and that your point of view is necessarily correct? It may be that your slant on life and your interpretation of a situation needs readjustment and that your motives and attitudes could be more elevated or purer. And even if they are – for you – the highest and the best that you can achieve at any given time, then pursue your way and leave your brother to pursue his. 'Better a man's own dharma, than the dharma of another.' Thus does the *Bhagavad Gita* express this truth, telling the disciple to mind his own business.²¹

The above commentary by the Tibetan is very clear and to the point. Perhaps the only thought that can be added to it is the acknowledgement that each disciple's constitution is governed by his or her individual and personal combination of rays, and will thus influence the working method of his or her service in a unique way. Although all disciples are united by working for the same spiritual ideals, each should be allowed to do this as he or she sees fit.

Action and Detachment

Two pivotal verses in the *Gita* emphasize the fact that although we cannot avoid actions in our daily lives, these actions should be performed in the spirit of yoga, namely detachment (*Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter II, verses 48 – 49):

O Dhananjaya (Arjuna), remaining immersed in yoga, perform all actions, forsaking attachment (to their fruits), being indifferent to success or failure. This mental evenness is termed yoga.²²

Ordinary action (performed with desire) is greatly inferior to action united to the guidance of wisdom; therefore, O Dhananjaya (Arjuna), seek shelter in the ever-directing wisdom. Miserable are those who perform actions only for their fruits.²³

Yogananda's comment on this is as follows:

'O Winner of Wealth!' intoxicated with the joy of divine union, perform dutifully all your actions without being attached to the outcome, whether of success or failure. Just

as an invisible river beneath undulated tracts of sand glides smoothly and silently, so should mental equilibrium flow rippleless beneath all successful or unsuccessful activities. To remain ensconced in evenmindedness during all states of activities is yoga; he who can preserve in himself this mental balance in every kind of changeable circumstance is a yogi.²⁴

Detachment remains one of the keywords for the disciple in his right attitude towards the phenomenal world, and it is as valid in its application to one's actions as to everything else on the lower three planes, including one's personality as well as that of others. Detachment is the magic word which allows us to interact with our environment, without getting entangled in the worlds of maya, glamour and illusion, and thus an important quality that needs to be developed on the Path to Liberation.

The Self as True Performer of Dharma

An interesting comparison is made by Bailey in *From Intellect to Intuition* between a verse in the *Gita* (Chapter VI verse 6) and the words of St. Paul in *Romans* (Chapter VII, verses 18, 22, 23, 24). The *Gita* verse reads as follows:

Self is the friend of self for him in whom the self is conquered by the Self; but to him who is far from the Self his own self is hostile like an enemy.²⁵

The words of St. Paul read as follows:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not . . . For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me (the real Self) from the body of this death?²⁶

Bailey's comment on the above reads thus: "This real Self is God – God the triumphant, God the Creator, God the Savior of man. It is,

in the words of St. Paul, 'Christ in us, the hope of glory.'" This becomes a fact in our consciousness and not simply a much hoped for theory."²⁷

In other words, what the above comparison between the *Gita* verse and the words of St. Paul illustrate, is the age old conflict between the Soul and the personality, as it is experienced by all disciples before that final victory when the Soul is able to control the personality, and thereby gain continuity of consciousness so that it can carry out the will of God. It also clearly illustrates that the teachings of the *Gita* and the teachings of the *New Testament* are, in fact, identical in their aims as far as spiritual objectives and the way to salvation or liberation are concerned.

Meditation and the Self

The method to achieving Soul consciousness is meditation, and Bailey continues in *From Intellect to Intuition*, as follows: "Meditation calls for self-control in all things, and unless the work of meditating is itself accompanied by the other requirements under the 'ordered process' (such as self-control and active service) it will fail in its objective. Fanaticism is not required. This is made clear in the Bhagavad Gita:"

There is no meditation for the man who eats too little or for the man who eats too much, or for him whose habit is to sleep too much or too little. But for him who is regulated in food, in work; regulated also in sleep and in waking, meditation becomes the destroyer of all suffering.²⁸

Yogananda's commentary on the above verse says practically the same thing: "Unbalanced states are obstacles for the yogi. The beginner should fulfill all the normal conditions of healthful bodily existence; otherwise, physical troubles will entangle the mind and preclude the deep meditation upon which spiritual progress is dependent. The *sadhaka* should thus abstain from all excesses, lest his body become an obstruction in the path of divine progress."²⁹

The necessity for meditation, and how to go about it, is continued in the *Gita* Chapter VI, verses 34-35, and Chapter II, verses 52-53:

The mind wavers, Krishna, turbulent, forceful; I think it is hard to hold as the wind.

Without doubt . . . the wavering mind is hard to hold; but through assiduous practice . . . it may be held firm.

When thy Soul shall pass beyond the forest of delusion, thou shalt no more regard what shall be taught or what has been taught.

When withdrawn from traditional teaching, thy Soul shall stand steadfast, firm in soul vision, then thou shalt gain union with the Soul.³⁰

Bailey comments on this by saying: “The first step. Therefore, is mind control. This means the power to make the mind do as you want, to think as you choose, to formulate ideas and sequences of thought under direction.”³¹ The last two of the above verses, however, hold out the promise to the disciple that, once Soul consciousness has been attained, the need to rely on traditional teachings disappears, because it has been replaced by the authority of one’s own Soul.

The Nature of the Self

In *The Soul and its Mechanism*, Bailey explains the nature of the Soul, or the Self, as it is understood in the Orient: “Eastern psychology deals with that which it claims lies back of the form. It is spiritual and transcendental. It assumes a Soul and a spirit and all its deductions and conclusions are based on this premise . . . From time immemorial this has been the thought of the East, and it is clearly pictured in that venerable scripture of India, *The Bhagavad Gita*:

The supreme Spirit, here in the body, is called the Beholder, the thinker, the Upholder, the Taster, the Lord, the Highest Self.

Illuminated by the power that dwells in all the senses, yet free from all sense-powers, detached, all supporting, not divided into powers, yet enjoying all powers.

Without and within all beings, motionless, yet moving, not to be perceived is That, because of its subtlety, That stands afar, yet close at hand.” (XIII: 22, 14, 15.)³²

In the above three verses is thus summed up the nature and splendor of the Soul, and each intuitional insight, moment of inspiration, or true feeling of oneness with the whole, no matter how fleeting, is an affirmation to the disciple that he or she is in the process of discovering the power and reality of their Inner Christ, the Ego, the Soul.

Summary of the Teaching

In Bailey’s *A Treatise on White Magic* the Tibetan says the following: “If there is one factor aspirants recognize it is the need of freeing themselves from the Great Illusion. Arjuna knew this, yet succumbed to despair. Yet in his hour of need, Krishna failed him not, but laid down in the *Gita* the simple rules whereby depression and doubt can be overcome. They may be briefly summarized as follows:

- a. Know thyself to be the undying One.
- b. Control thy mind, for through that mind the undying One can be known.
- c. Learn that the form is but the veil which hides the splendour of Divinity.
- d. Realise that the One Life pervades all forms so that there is no death, no distress, no separation.
- e. Detach thyself therefore from the form side and come to Me, so dwelling in the place where Light and Life are found, Thus illusion ends.”³³

In conclusion, all that remains is to quote the *Gita* at the end of the final chapter where Krishna asks:

Hast thou heard these words, Arjuna, in the silent communication of thy Soul? Has the darkness of thy delusion been dispelled by thine inner Light?³⁴

And Arjuna replies:

By thy grace I remember my Light, and now gone is my delusion. My doubts are no more, my faith is firm; and now I can say ‘Thy will be done.’³⁵

Given such a clear exposition as is contained in the *Bhagavad Gita* on salvation and the nature of the Soul, all that the earnest seeker needs to do is to acknowledge its importance and significance and then strive to live up to its

ideal with fiery aspiration and uncompromising earnestness.

The Dharma of Kings: Bhishma Speaks to King Yudhisthira

With the commencement of the book entitled *The Dharma of Kings*, the fierce battle that had been fought at Kurukshetra is over. The Pandava brothers and their allies have emerged as the victors, and the eldest of the brothers, Yudhisthira, is expected by all to assume his responsibility as king. Yudhisthira, however, surveys the devastation of the battlefield, and is overcome with despair and grief. If a king can be held responsible for such a slaughter, then he wants to renounce his kingship, and rather become an ascetic in the forest and practice austerities. His closest friends advise him against it, but he remains unconvinced. Finally it is Krishna who advises him to go and see Bhishma, the grand old man of the Kurus, who is lying on his deathbed of arrows on the battlefield, and seek out his advice. Although Bhishma is mortal, he had long ago received a boon from a god which granted him the favor of being able to choose the time of his death. It is for this reason that the *Dharma of Kings* is also known as Bhishma's deathbed sermon. As long as Bhishma chooses to speak he stays alive.³⁶

The concept of the dharma of kings, or Raja Dharma, as it is known in the Orient, is still very much in vogue in the present day Indian consciousness, because it is not restricted to monarchs alone, but to any high placed person in politics. This becomes apparent when one considers a typical article such as *Rajdharmā Then and Now*, by Bulbul Roy Mishra, which was published in *BJP Today* dated August 1-

15, 2002. In his opening paragraph Mishra writes the following:

During the recent riot in Gujarat, Prime Minister Vajpayee made a loaded statement that the ruler of the state must discharge his Rajdharmā, far above any sectarian consideration or narrow mindset, by implication. What Vajpayee had in mind was undoubtedly the glorious tradition of over five

[D]harma is a multifaceted concept, which in the context of a hierarchical structure embraces in its scope all gradations of being, whether they are the laws governing the universe, or the prescribed conduct for specific groups or individuals. An understanding of its significance makes dharma equally relevant whether it is applied in the Orient or Occident.

thousand years when the precept of Rajdharmā was elaborately expounded by Grand Sire Bhishma of Mahabharata fame to his grandson Yudhisthira after the latter won the battle of Kurukshetra. Bhishma then was lying on the deathbed of arrows, awaiting the onset of Uttarayana for his final departure from this earth.³⁷

The remainder of Mishra's article highlights the main virtues and duties of kings as expounded by Bhishma to Yudhisthira, and concludes with Bhishma's summary of

Rajdharmā, which emphasizes the four main virtues as "nonviolence (to the ruled ones), pursuit of truth, non-cruelty to subjects, and charity." Mishra's brief concluding paragraph reads as follows: "It should be the aim of the BJP to stand collectively on the lofty ideal of Rajdharmā of the glorious past in order to make a lasting impact on Indian polity."³⁸

Although in a general sense Bhishma's sermon on *The Dharma of Kings* is of a high moral quality, and can most certainly even in our present times act as a guide for good governance, there are a few passages in the text which can be distinctly identified as ethically questionable. These passages (*The Mahabharata*, Book 12, Sections 69, 81, 86, 90, 104)³⁹ encourage kings to use spies when dealing with other kings; to appear trustful towards others, while in fact mistrusting them; the killing of the worst offenders by means of torture; to feign

friendship and dupe enemies into falling under one's sway; and generally speak the truth, but resort to lies when necessary. But once these dubious methods have been identified and taken note of, the wisdom and insight of the rest of the sermon can definitely serve as an inspiration for present-day leaders.

A closer look at a selection of specific sections from *The Dharma of Kings* will make the above statements obvious:

O son, thou shouldst always exert with promptitude, O Yudhisthira, for without promptitude of exertion mere destiny never accomplishes the objects cherished by kings. These two, viz., exertion and destiny, are equal (in their operation). Of them, I regard exertion to be superior, for destiny is ascertained from the results of what is begun with exertion. Do not indulge in grief if what is commenced ends disastrously, for thou shouldst then exert thyself in the same act with redoubled attention. This is the high duty of kings.⁴⁰

In the absence of royal protection, men would snatch other people's wealth from their very hands, and all wholesome barriers would be swept away, and everybody, inspired with fear, would seek safety in flight. In the absence of royal protection, all kinds of injustice would set in; an intermixture of castes would take place; and famine would ravage the kingdom. In consequence again of royal protection, men can everywhere sleep fearlessly and at their ease without shutting their houses and doors with bolts and bars. Nobody would hear the evil speeches of others, far less actual assaults, if the king did not righteously protect the earth.⁴¹

A modern day reader might well respond to the above two examples by saying that it is nothing more than common sense advice, but if we consider the disastrous consequences of the lack of good government throughout the ages, then common sense advice can never be taken for granted.

Concerning an ideal king's moral character Bhishma advises Yudhisthira with the following words:

The king who is devoted to Truth finds happiness both here and hereafter. As regards Rishis also, O king, Truth is their greatest wealth. Similarly, as regards kings, there is nothing that so much inspires confidence in them as Truth. The king that is possessed of every accomplishment and good behavior, that is self-restrained, humble, and righteous, that has his passions under control, that is of handsome features and not too enquiring never loses prosperity. By administering justice, by attending to these three, viz., concealment of his own weaknesses, ascertainment of the weaknesses of foes, and keeping his own counsels, as also by the observance of conduct that is straightforward, the king, O delighter of the Kurus, obtains prosperity.⁴²

The concluding section (128) of *The Dharma of Kings* is summarized by John D. Smith in his translation of the *Mahabharata* as follows:

Yudhisthira now asks Bhishma how a king should behave whose rule has fallen into utter ruin. Bhishma answers that this is a great mystery, and that Yudhisthira will have to apply his own judgment to it. Expedients for survival are in accord with dharma even when they cannot be approved in absolute terms: there is one dharma for the strong, another in times of trouble. Self-preservation takes precedence over everything else, and one in distress may live other than by his regular dharma. However, even in famine a king should maintain his treasury, his rod, his army and his allies. Nothing can be achieved without wealth, and a king should use any means to obtain wealth for sacrifice: he will not incur sin. The poor are weak, the rich strong. The man with wealth can achieve anything: dharma, pleasure, this world and the next.⁴³

Conclusion

Even such a relatively concise and selective investigation as the above reveals that dharma is a multifaceted concept, which in the context of a hierarchical structure embraces in its scope all gradations of being, whether they are the laws governing the universe, or the prescribed conduct for specific groups or individ-

uals. An understanding of its significance makes dharma equally relevant whether it is applied in the Orient or Occident. Dharma plays a prominent part not only in the *Mahabharata*, but in the entire literature of Hindu sacred texts, whether they are *The Vedas* composed by the ancient seers, or *The Dhammapada*, the most widely read of Buddhist scriptures.

For the purpose of this article *The Mahabharata* was singled out because it contains two important sermons on dharma, one expounded in *The Bhagavad Gita*, the other in *The Dharma of Kings*; the former with specific significance to a timeless and ever growing group of spiritual seekers, the latter of equal relevance to present day as well as future political leaders.

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- ¹ Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, (1995; first edition, second printing; Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1996), 224.
 - ² Mabel Collins, *Light on the Path* (1888; reprint: Pasadena, California: Theosophical University Press, 1971), 9-10.
 - ³ <http://hinduism.about.com/od/basics/a/dharma.htm> (accessed April 2, 2012).
 - ⁴ *Collins Concise English Dictionary* (1982; reprint; Glasgow; HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 452.
 - ⁵ <http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Dharma> (accessed January 31, 2012).
 - ⁶ <http://www.anandgholap.net/Dharma-AB.htm> (accessed January 14, 2012).
 - ⁷ Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 158.
 - ⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata>, (accessed February 7, 2012).
 - ⁹ John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata* (2009; New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 2009), xxi.
 - ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 790.
 - ¹¹ *Ibid.*, xv.
 - ¹² John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata*, xv.
 - ¹³ Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic* (1951; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1980), 58.
 - ¹⁴ Alice A. Bailey, *The Light of the Soul* (1955; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1978), xii.

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- ¹⁵ Alice A. Bailey, *From Bethlehem to Calvary* (1965; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1981), 58.
 - ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.
 - ¹⁷ Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 439.
 - ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 445.
 - ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 402.
 - ²⁰ John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata*, xviii.
 - ²¹ Alice A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age, Volume One* (1972; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1976), 48.
 - ²² Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 287.
 - ²³ *Ibid.*, 289.
 - ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.
 - ²⁵ Alice A. Bailey, *From Intellect to Intuition* (1960; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1978), 73.
 - ²⁶ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁷ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.
 - ²⁹ Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 621.
 - ³⁰ Alice A. Bailey, *From Intellect to Intuition*, 100.
 - ³¹ *Ibid.*
 - ³² Alice A. Bailey, *The Soul and Its Mechanism* (1965; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1976), 27.
 - ³³ Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic* (1951; reprint; New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1980), 308.
 - ³⁴ *The Bhagavad Gita* (1962; reprint; London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), 86.
 - ³⁵ *Ibid.*
 - ³⁶ John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata*, 597 – 606.
 - ³⁷ <http://www.hvk.org/articles/0802/123.html>, (accessed February 7, 2012).
 - ³⁸ *Ibid.*
 - ³⁹ <http://www.sacredtexts.com/hin/m12/index-.htm>, (accessed February 1, 2012).
 - ⁴⁰ <http://www.sacredtexts.com/hin/m12/index-.htm>, (accessed February 1, 2012).
 - ⁴¹ <http://www.sacredtexts.com/hin/m12/index-.htm>, (accessed February 1, 2012).
 - ⁴² <http://www.sacredtexts.com/hin/m12/index-.htm>, (accessed February 1, 2012).
 - ⁴³ John D. Smith, *The Mahabharata*, 620.