

THE CONTINUUM OF CHOICE IN SANĀTANA DHARMA

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Introduction

Right choice in Hinduism exists relative to two essential concepts¹: *Dharma* and *sva-dharma*. *Dharma* is defined as absolute, eternal truth. *Sva-dharma* is the absolute truth contained and particularized in the context of an individual life in a unique context, and therefore represents a unique perspective. Liberation is a balancing of the principles of *Dharma* and *sva-dharma*. *Sva-* means self and therefore *sva-dharma* refers to an individual's true path in relationship to the great truth whose shape is the entire universe. This paper examines the intersection of *sva-dharma* and *Dharma* by laying out some critical tools for understanding one's *sva-dharma*.

Ignorance is the resistance that separates *Dharma* from *sva-dharma*. The ultimate goal of Hinduism is liberation from ignorance. Ignorance is defined as, "...the seeing of [that which is] eternal, pure, joyful and the Self in [that which is] ephemeral, impure, sorrowful and the non-self."² The belief that our life begins and ends with the life of the body, or that a particular life-stage is permanent are two examples of the kind of ignorance that becomes very relevant to the subject of choice. Liberation is achieved by the repeated exercise of conscious choice and the cultivation of memory regarding those choices. Memory of choice and consequence is crucial because wise choice can only occur in the light of self-knowledge (*svā-dhyāya*)³ and knowledge of the laws of nature (*karma and causality*)⁴. Every human life is characterized by at least four simultaneously existing cycles: 1) the cycle of rebirth and re-death is the major cycle binding us to the earth; 2) the cycle of *rasas*, or desire, individuates us as distinct personalities;⁵ 3) the cycle of the *guṇas*⁶, or qualities of mind, determines the conditions under which we make a decision; 4) the *purushārthas*⁷, legitimate aims of existence, determine the rightness of a choice at a given time in the unending flow of existence.

These four cycles converge in a unique way in each individual human life. This is how unlimited consciousness becomes particularized and limited. It is by understanding the convergence of these four cycles that we establish whether an action is conducive to growth. By the very nature of our limited perspective we know that our choices will be flawed, however it is the experience of life and the memory that we cultivate that will lead us slowly but inevitably towards liberation.

Understanding our place in the cyclic order of Life and the continuum of infinite choice

*Sanātana Dharma*⁸, the original name for Hinduism, means the unending cyclic order of Life. Hinduism holds that life is without beginning or end. Consequently life does not begin at conception or end with the death of the body. In the oldest texts of Hindu philosophy, the *Vedas*,⁹ this cycle is called re-death (*punar mṛityuh*)¹⁰ emphasizing the idea that human beings acquire experiences through living and then die in order to manifest a new body more suited to the fulfillment of their new dreams and desires.

The existence of this cycle is central to the matter of reproductive choice. The moment of reproductive choice is just one of countless moments in a continuous stream of existence. Human life is marked by two critical moments: the final breath breathed at the moment of death, and the initial one breathed in a new body. It is the breath that links a soul to a body.¹¹ With the life of the body, there is a slavery to the breath cycle, the heart cycle, the digestive cycle and more spiritually important, to grander cycles that impel us towards the fulfillment of our desires.

The doctrine of karma and rebirth or re-death

Karma, whose root word means to act or to create, is the name for the cycle of cause and effect that propels us into existence and towards the pursuit of our desires. In the philosophy of *Sanātana Dharma*, the beginning of a new life cycle is found in the end of the preceding one. The

*Upanishads*¹² say that when a man outgrows his body the mind disconnects from the senses, but subtle impressions remain on the mind as it leaves the body and continues on its journey. At the moment of death, the senses turn inward and disconnect in a progressive manner. As vitality wavers and the senses lose their grip, sense perceptions are superceded by deeply habituated thoughts and memories. These thoughts, revealed prior to the last breath, indicate the shape of the life to come. With the final breath, these thoughts are locked into the soul as it leaves the body. The connection between the soul and the body is broken.¹³

What follows is the state of dreaming and becoming.¹⁴ The unlimited soul is confronted with endless possibilities of being. The entire play of time exists in a panoramic view. Whether these experiences are joyful or fearful depends upon the habitual thoughts of the soul. Personality, habit, and memory cause the soul to look for things that are familiar and comfortable. The soul begins to focus exclusively on preferred activities becoming blinded to other possibilities, beginning the cycle of limitation. Limitation creates the body. In other words, *the soul conceives*—prior to its conception by parents--a (mental) body to fulfill its desires. This body enters the womb of the mother at the moment of conception, responding to a beacon of spiraling light generated by two people having sex who resonate to that soul's dreams and desires.¹⁵

The desire nature leading to and perpetuating cyclic existence.

Desire is the pull of the consciousness downward and outward towards the senses resulting in individuation. This desire principle is the cause of incarnation. The unlimited soul is attracted to life—and by implication to death—by unfulfilled desire. This process is continual until the soul cultivates the desireless state called *moksha* or liberation.¹⁶

To incarnate, the soul abdicates a tremendous amount of free will and creative choice. Most importantly it is now subject to the desires of other beings with whom it synergistically exists,

primarily the parents. If the embodied soul survives gestation, it will breathe its first free breath, detached from the umbilical cord and with that breath, the desires and habitual thoughts of the previous lives will impress themselves on the brain and nervous system. What the soul has done by choosing limitation is to concentrate its desires through the lens of time in order to form a body, just as the sun concentrated through a magnifying glass forms a fire. These concentrated desires will inform the circumstances of birth into a new life.

Despite the tremendous forces of the material universe which operate on the human mind and body at this point, free will does exist.¹⁷ Free will (*agami* or *kriyamāṇa karma*)¹⁸ is the conscious movement away from the force of habit and desire, towards liberation. It is characterized by the ability to act with detachment and to operate in a balanced, non-emotional state of mind. Any choice made in desperation and emotionality is not a choice but a karmic compulsion that will lead to further constriction. Most of the seeming choices a soul makes are in fact the working of the desire nature.

According to Hindu philosophy, there are twelve categories of desire called *rasas*.¹⁹ These categories are: 1) *raudra*, the desire to cause or experience anger; 2) *adbhuta*, the desire to cause or experience wonder; 3) *śṛṅgāra*, the desire to experience conjugal love; 4) *hāsya*, the desire to cause or experience laughter; 5) *vīra*, the desire to experience bravery or heroism; 6) *dāya*, the desire to give or experience mercy; 7) *dasya*, the desire to experience servitorship; 8) *sakhya*, the desire to experience fraternity; 9) *bhayānaka*, the desire to cause or experience horror; 10) *vibhatsa*, the desire to cause or experience shock; 11) *sānta*, the desire to cause or experience neutrality; 12) *vātsalya*, the desire to cause or experience parenthood. From the synergistic understanding of all these *rasas*, the soul arrives at a thirteenth *rasa* called *karuṇa*, or enlightened compassion. In order to grow and move towards liberation a soul must come to this final place of compassion by way of experience. The *rasas* can be

experienced individually or in different combinations. These combinations are the basis of human individuality. Our desires make us unique.

The connection of the desire principle to a body is called *nāma-rūpa*. *Nāma* means name, *rūpa* means form and together they form the personality and create a sense of individuality. The oldest school of Hinduism, called *śaṅkhyā-yoga*,²⁰ privileges the concept of *nāma-rūpa*²¹ because although all humans live in the same world, their journey to enlightenment and liberation is ultimately an individual one. There is no moment of rapture, no en masse enlightenment in this paradigm, and no moral redemption or judgment which comes from some external force. Rather, it is the experiences an individual acquires by way of *nāma-rūpa* that create a basis for liberation of the consciousness.

The three guṇas: qualities of consciousness in the material universe

There is a cyclic flow in nature which influences our ability to make expansive choices and describes different qualities of mind under which decisions are made. This cyclic flow is described in terms of *guṇas* or qualities. Hinduism holds that mind and matter have a three-fold nature: *tamas*, dark heavy inertia, ignorance and inactivity; *rajas*, passionate activity; and *sattva*, luminous, compassionate activity. All things on earth—including bodies, minds and other objects—are in various stages of *tamas*, *rajas* or *sattva* at any given time in the cycle of manifestation.²²

Guṇas are subject to the material law that like attracts like. This attraction includes the attraction of a soul to the souls of two potential parents. The manner of conception, and the degree of consciousness involved in conception are things that must be taken into consideration. Generally the *guṇa* which describes the conception, and thus the state of mind of the parents, will also describe

the predominating *guṇa* of the incoming soul carried over from the moment of death.²³ A conception springing from *sattva* is one that involves a socially sanctioned marriage or committed long-term monogamous relationship where both people conceiving the child share an equal desire to conceive in the context of societal and familial support. A conception based on *rajas* involves two people who have sex out of a heavy desire, sometimes wanting a child, sometimes not. Finally, a conception which is based in *tamas* is one where someone who is physically, mentally or spiritually poverty stricken in a non-socially accepted, non-monogamous relationship in the improper time or improper place conceives a child. These conceptions are very dark and because they have no social structure to support them, they are fraught with difficulty.

When a human exercises choice or acts in any way, the predomination of a particular *guṇa* becomes evident. A mind predominated by *sattva* will not find itself in a position of experiencing an unwanted pregnancy. Where *sattva* predominates, choice is exercised in more malleable stages of the cycle—such as abstinence and/or deeply conscious choice of a sexual partner or proper use of birth control. However, by the very nature of enslavement to physical existence, all choices made under the predomination of the *guṇas* are flawed. Further, most minds are not predominated by *sattva-guṇa* most of the time. Most humans are, to a greater degree, identified with their bodies and minds and therefore in a state of *rajas* or *tamas* where the consciousness is pulled downward to earth and outward towards the objects perceived by the senses. Because of this incorrect identification with the body and mind, most humans very often find themselves in situations that they are unconscious of having attracted. In these situations, a great deal of reflection is required in order to exercise right choice. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*,²⁴ Arjuna asks Kṛishṇa, “Kṛishṇa, what is it that makes a man do evil

even against his own will under compulsion as it were?” Kṛishṇa answers, “The *rajo-guṇa* has two faces, rage and lust; the ravenous, the deadly. Recognize these, they are your enemies.”²⁵

The need for Spirit to complete itself: the four legitimate aims of life

Choice (*kriyamāṇa karma*) does exist in the Hindu cosmo-conception and there is a very pragmatic approach to establishing whether a choice is right or wrong. If a choice is constrictive to the soul’s evolution, it is wrong. If it is conducive to growth, it is right. It is a matter of context. The context of a choice consists of the cycle of *karma* and causation, the interplay of the *rasas* that form the *nāma-rūpa* (individual personality), the *guṇas* which characterize the mind at the time of a choice and finally, the aim of an individual’s life at that particular time.

In order to grow, souls must experience all twelve *rasas*, ultimately coming to the synergistic thirteenth—*karuṇa*, enlightened compassion. Likewise, in order to achieve a state predominated by *sattva-guṇa*, a soul must cycle continually through all the *guṇas*. Life is an experiment in learning where it is crucial to cultivate memory so that we can progress beyond our mistakes rather than continually repeating them. Knowledge and memory gained from human experiences are the gift that leads to the expansion of consciousness and liberation.²⁶ The reason we incarnate is for the soul to come to know itself by experiencing the whole panoply of possibilities. This is what ultimately allows the soul to depart from cyclic existence. Paradoxically, we are freed from the need to experience by way of experience itself.

On this journey towards self-completion there are four legitimate aims in human life: 1) *artha*, the acquisition of material wealth, wealth of power or wealth of memory; 2) *kāma*, pleasure and the enjoyment of human wealth of all kinds; 3) *dharma*, the fulfillment of the good or the ritual that reinforces life; and 4) *moksha*, the pursuit of liberation which is the highest aim.²⁷

The rightness or wrongness of a choice is ultimately relative to the aim of a soul in its particular stage of evolution. To the soul seeking the highest *dharma* or *moksha*, the unconscious use of sex or the use of violence to limit life in any form is simply constrictive. However, to a soul who has not achieved the expansiveness of consciousness to act with great deliberation, the exercise of choice is a spiritual practice by which it cultivates experience, learns and grows. The key component for spiritual growth in this case is the manner in which decisions are made. A decision made from a balanced, non-emotional state will be less productive of difficult *karma* than one made in despair and desperation. The circumstances of the decision will imprint a deep memory on the soul of the mother and the soul seeking incarnation.

Conclusion

The words of Kṛishṇa to his student Arjuna at the conclusion of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* are: “Your own nature will drive you to act. For you yourself have created the karma that binds you. You are helpless in its power. And you will do that very thing which your ignorance seeks to avoid...Now I have taught you that wisdom which is the secret of secrets. Ponder it carefully. Then act as you think best.”²⁸ We are the creators of the *karma* that binds us, therefore we can also un-create that *karma*. This is the basis of choice in Hinduism.

There is no choice where there is no knowledge or instruction. Right choice is an exercise in knowing the self, *svā-dhyāya* or self-study. The terms of choosing are elucidated by consideration of the desires that individuate us, the quality of the mind at the time of choice, and the goal we are

seeking to fulfill in our life. Ultimately, as humans we must act, in fact, our very nature will compel us to act. Our choices will lead us into the basest of human dilemmas and to the realization of our highest nobility. Our choices will be flawed and from those flaws we will move slowly but inevitably towards liberation. As members of a spiritual community, whether we are *swāmīs*, *achāryas* (teachers) or people of faith, our role in the *Dharma* is to aid souls in the exercise of choice by providing information and insight into the nature of consciousness and life. Only the individual soul can free itself. Only the individual soul can choose for itself.

Endnotes

¹ The basis for right knowledge in Hinduism varies according to the *śaddarshana*, or system of classical thought. There are six such systems, grouped together as pairs: *Sāṃkhya-Yoga*, *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, and *Mīmāṃsā-Vedānta*. In these pairings, one element speaks to the theoretical underpinnings, the other to the practices and methodologies for attaining liberation. Further, there are a number of *mārgas*, or paths one can follow in order to attain liberation: *karma*, *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *raja*. For an in-depth exposition on these systems refer to Klostermaier, Part II and III, or Tigunait, *Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy*, both referenced in the bibliography.

² Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtras of Patañjali*, 63. Here “Self” refers not to the individuated self but rather to the eternal and indwelling consciousness common to all of life, the Sanskrit word used in the cited text is *ātman*.

³ Ibid., 58.

⁴ Crim, Bullard and Shinn, eds., *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. “*karma*”, 401.

⁵ Prabhupāda, *Srīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 56-57.

⁶ Crim, Bullard and Shinn, eds., s.v. “*guṇas*”, 286.

⁷ Doniger, Gold, Haberman and Shulman, eds, *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, 48.

⁸ Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 31.

⁹ The oldest of sacred scriptures of Hinduism. These fall in the category of *śruti*, that which has been perceived by hearing. Each of the four *Vedas* has a section of *Upanishads*, a word meaning, “at the foot of” and referring to a tradition of teaching where the student asks a question which is answered by way of illustrative stories and examples.

¹⁰ Radhākṛiṣṇan, trans., *The Principal Upanishads*, 593.

¹¹ Easwaran, trans., “Bṛihad-Āraṇyaka Upanishad” in *Upanishads*, 44.

¹² See note 9.

¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴ Easwaran, trans., “Aitareya Upanishad” in *Upanishads*, 128-129.

¹⁵ Douglas and Slinger, *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy*, 285.

¹⁶ Easwaran, “Katha Upanishad” in *Upanishads*, 96-97.

¹⁷ Tigunait, *From Death to Birth: Understanding Karma and Reincarnation*, 20.

¹⁸ Śaṅkāchārya, *Tattva-Bodha*, 71-74.

¹⁹ Prabhupāda, *Srīmad-Bhāgavatam*, 56-57.

²⁰ See note 1.

²¹ Tigunait, *Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy*, 131-132.

²² Prabhavānanda and Isherwood, *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gītā*, 106-110.

²³ Ibid., 114-116.

²⁴ Part of the scriptures known as the *Itihāsa* comprising the *Ramayāna* and the *Mahābhārata*. The *Itihāsa* are considered to be of the class of scriptures which is *smṛiti*, or what is remembered (cf. note 9). The *Bhagavad-Gītā*, meaning, “Song of God” is a section within the *Mahābhārata* (chapters 23-40) which is often cited. Arjuna and Kṛiṣṇa are the central characters. See Klostermaier, Part I, Chapter 6.

²⁵ Prabhavānanda and Isherwood, *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gītā*, 48-49.

²⁶ See note 5.

²⁷ Klostermaier, 95.

²⁸ Prabhavānanda and Isherwood, 129.

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