

Satsang with Sri Swami Viditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
More on Duty (1 of 3)

Question

What is meant by performing one's duties? Who is a *dhārmic* person?

Answer

Duty is an action that arises when we feel a sense of gratitude. Whenever we feel we are being helped, supported, taken care of, or benefited by an action, there is an urge to respond. For example, we thank someone when they give us a glass of water. It is our pleasure to thank them because there is a sense of gratitude, and we express our gratitude. Duty is an action, which is an expression of our sense of gratitude. When we understand that we are being helped, we have a sense of gratitude. Sometimes we are not very sensitive to all the things done to us; the sense of gratitude does not arise in us naturally. In addition, we always take things for granted, and expect that things should happen for us. When we become more sensitive, we take note of the many ways in which we are being helped, nourished, and supported; then, a sense of gratitude automatically arises in us and we begin to routinely perform appropriate actions. This is the ideal situation for performing our duty.

Duty is what you are required to do in a particular situation. It is an appropriate response to a given situation. Every situation has a certain expectation of me. Therefore, when I respond in a manner that is expected of me, it is called performing my duty. In every situation, there is something expected of me; I enjoy a certain status; I enjoy a certain role, and I have a certain dignity. Performing my duty is handling the situation in an appropriate way, given my situation and role.

Pujya Swami Dayanandaji would say that it is like performing my role according to the script in a play. In every situation, I am required to play a role, and play it properly according to the expected code of conduct and the basic values. Thus, any action performed in keeping with the basic values can also be called duty. My duty, then, is to be truthful, honest, non-violent, and ready to reach out to others.

Thus, duty is an action consistent with the basic values, which is performed out of a sense of gratitude and in response to a situation depending

on my role. When a person lives a life of duty, we call him a *dhārmic* person. Duty itself is *dharma*; it is the right way of living.

Question

How do I identify my 'script' in life and what could I use as a point of reference to define it?

Answer

One simple criterion for deciding one's script is to treat others the way one would like to be treated. Just as I do not want others to hurt, cheat, or lie to me, so also, others do not want me to hurt, cheat, or lie to them. I want others to be kind and accommodating of me and, similarly, others also expect same of me. Thus, I can arrive at my script by asking myself what I expect of others.

Another way to arrive at the script is to understand the concept of duty. I have a certain duty when I am a part of a set-up. I realize that the set-up supports me, and that I have derived certain benefits from being a part of it. I enjoy certain privileges such as being part of a family, a society, a work-place, or any group. In terms of family, colleagues, and friends, I should recognize that I am deriving support from them and am enjoying privileges based on what they do. The set-up functions harmoniously only if everybody pitches in to do their part. Therefore, another criterion for determining the script is to know that it is my duty to respond appropriately to the set-up and return the favor. Thus, parents have a duty towards their children, and the children, in turn, have a duty towards their parents. This is similar to the body; each of our limbs supports our body and is supported, in turn, by our body. Everybody is a recipient as well as a contributor. Thus, duty is the relationship of supporting and being supported.

The script is determined mainly by the spirit. No one can tell you exactly what you should do. You can only be told what the spirit of your action should be; you should recognize the support you enjoy, and have an attitude of contributing with a desire to return the favor. This is the spirit of duty, which defines one's script. You have to acknowledge what is expected of you as a son, father, daughter, mother, employee, employer, subordinate, or superior and think about it. What is your role? How should you act according to your role? How are you supposed to perform? When you think through these questions, you will come up with an appropriate response to a given situation. That would be your script.

Question

What is one's duty?

Answer

Every role in a play or movie has its own demands, whether the role is that of a father, mother, husband, wife, guru, or student. You should play the role only according to your script. You cannot say something else even if you would like to. You must speak and act only according to the script. The script demands different things of each player, and every role is very demanding. Each role has its own pleasures, rewards, benefits, gratification, and demands.

Ideally, a role can be played properly only if you commit yourself to it totally. Only then can the demands of the role be fulfilled. Other players or roles expect you to play your part completely. When I expect everyone else to totally commit themselves to their roles, I also need to fulfill their expectations of me. Typically, we cannot perform our duty in its entirety, but we try to do what we can. Ultimately, if we can give of ourselves totally without an agenda, we can perform our duty in the true sense of the word. You can do that only when you are a person of abiding wisdom, a wise person. When you have discovered total satisfaction within yourself, you become a totally non-demanding person. You are then available to fulfill everybody else's demands, and in that you are performing your duty totally. Ideally, a person who is *dhārmic* and fulfilling all his duties in their entirety is a wise person. Each one of us has wisdom in some measure and, therefore, also has a value for applying ourselves to our roles to some extent. In fact, as we grow in our wisdom, we hold back less and less, and are able to let go more readily. We are available to fulfill the needs of others to the extent that we are able to let go; to that extent, we perform our duty.

Question

Where does our duty end?

Answer

When you analyze all its dimensions, you realize that the demands of a role are never-ending. The more sensitive you become, the more responsible you feel for any pain in the world. Typically, we tend to confine our circle of concern to our immediate family, but ideally, we could extend our concern to include the entire universe. Therefore, the word 'duty' is very inclusive. My family is thus not only the immediate family or the extended family, but also the larger community including every other person and animal and, indeed, the entire universe of

which I am a part. As we know, there are many people who go out of their way to help suffering animals, in serving their community etc. All of this is but part of their duty to the world at large. We are enjoying many privileges, but there are others who are not; we are therefore expected to reach out. It may not be possible for us to reach out to the whole world, but making the effort to reach out is the true spirit of duty.

Question

What is the meaning of *svadharma* as opposed to *paradharma*?

Answer

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says, “It is better to follow your own *dharma* even if it is performed imperfectly, than to perform the *dharma* of someone else well.” In this context, Lord Krishna simply means that *svadharma* is your duty as determined by your caste and stage in life, which is discussed in our scriptures.

Nowadays, we have to decide the nature of our *dharma* by ourselves. It is for me to ponder what the appropriate way for me to respond would be in a given situation, given my status and role. I should recognize that it is a privilege to be what I am, whether father or mother, husband or wife, son or daughter, or whether mother-in-law or father-in-law. While enjoying this privilege, I have to consider how I can return that favor. This will enable me to determine the nature of my own *dharma* in a particular situation. Thus, we have to decide our own *dharma*.

Svadharma is performing an action in accordance with the values. What is *paradharma*? Sometimes, it is tempting to compromise the values for some immediate gain. There are temptations, which prompt us to take short cuts, to bend the values, or even compromise them. That is *paradharma*. An action performed in violation of the values can be called *paradharma*, while an action performed in keeping with the value is *svadharma*¹.

¹ Transcribed by Gautam, Jaya Kannan, and Chaya Rajaram. Edited by Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.